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**Clayton Carlyle Tarr**  
***[Personation Plots: Identity Fraud in Victorian Sensation Fiction]*** New York: State University of New York Press, 2022.

Clayton Carlyle Tarr's *Personation Plots: Identity Fraud in Victorian Sensation Fiction* addresses the pervasive theme of identity fraud, both actual and fictional, and discusses the ways in which the Victorian consciousness was preoccupied with the concerns of identity and the corporeal form. In recent scholarship, there has been a renewed interest in the intersection of identity, embodiment, and power in Victorian literature, particularly in how marginalised individuals and communities are represented in these works. It was marked by a tension between the desire for stable, fixed identities and the reality of the body as mutable and subject to change. The title itself, therefore, evokes the idea of impersonation, deception, and the manipulation of one's identity, which are all central concerns of the book. Tarr highlights the fact that mid-Victorian forensics assigned value to the body as the sole indicator of a person's identity and elevated its importance in determining an individual's personality. However, the 1860s was also a time when sensation fiction increased its popularity – by having suspenseful and mysterious plots, and by frequently featuring characters who employed various forms of deception to conceal their corporeal identities and their true selves. In other words, sensation fiction offers what Tarr terms “personation plots,” which are “narratives

of lost, mistaken, or stolen identities” (13). Therefore, *Personation Plots* argues that these depictions of identity fraud in sensation novels emphasise “the body's incapacity to signify identity” (13) and challenge the idea of the body as the exclusive signifier of the self by employing different ways of deception or imposture.

Tarr divides his analysis into three parts – body, mind, and matter – each focusing on a different aspect of imposture and exploring how impostors in sensation fiction challenge strict bodily definitions of identity. *Personation Plots* provides a meticulous analysis of a selection of sensation novels, drawing attention to certain ways in which sensation authors utilise the theme of identity fraud and stage their personation plots. One of the key contributions of the monograph is Tarr's attention to the concept of corporeality, and how it intersects with issues of identity, personality, and fraud. By exploring the ways in which characters alter their physical appearance through clothing, cosmetics and surgery, he illustrates how the body can be used as a site of identity construction. This focus on corporeality is particularly significant in the context of the mid-Victorian novel, which was often preoccupied with issues of embodiment and bodily experience. Tarr's analysis provides an important lens through which to understand the complex relationship between the body, identity, and social norms in mid-nineteenth-century Britain.

Part One (“Body”) examines the corporeal aspects of impersonation, including how clothing, cosmetics, surgical procedures and blood transfusions can be used to alter not merely one's appearance, but also one's persona. Chapter One, entitled

“Skins to Jump Into,” deals with the use of clothes and cosmetics to imposture and construct a personal identity in Wilkie Collins’s *No Name* (1862–63) and John Cordy Jeaffreson’s *A Woman in Spite of Herself* (1872).<sup>1</sup> Tarr argues that clothing and cosmetics serve as a way for impostors to adopt different identities, and that the act of changing clothes or using cosmetic products can be a powerful symbol of transformation. Through detailed analysis of specific scenes in each novel, the first chapter demonstrates how clothing and cosmetics are employed to mask or reveal impostors’ corporeal identities. The second chapter, “Altered beyond Chance of Recognition,” starts by offering insights into the ways in which surgery and blood transfusion were perceived in the nineteenth century and how the two were used by Victorian sensation authors to personate and disguise identities. Then it delves into the examination of physical transformations through surgery, blood transfusions, and other medical procedures as they are presented in Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Checkmate* (1871) and William Delisle Hay’s *Blood: A Tragic Tale* (1887).<sup>2</sup> This section concludes with the “First Interlude: Alice Grey,” in which Tarr briefly describes the first significant impostor of the nineteenth century: Alice Grey.<sup>3</sup>

In the second part, “Mind,” Tarr shifts his focus to the psychological dimensions of personation plots and identity fraud. This section is divided into two chapters with the addition of a second interlude. In Chapter Three, “That Lost Personality,” first he briefly explains the treatment of madness in Victorian novels, particularly in sensation novels. Then he explores the representations of madness and ep-

ilepsy in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) and *Thou Art the Man* (1894). In his examination of the former, Tarr suggests that Lady Audley’s mental instability prompts her to perpetrate an imposture, resulting in her assuming new identities. Through the analysis of Braddon’s novel, he demonstrates that madness “challenges corporeal definitions of personal identity” (95), suggesting the complexity of human nature and consciousness. Tarr later discusses the theme of epilepsy employed in sensation novels, particularly Braddon’s latter novel, in which the character of Brandon “suffers from hereditary epilepsy” (115) and convinces himself that he is a madman due to his incapable position during epileptic seizures. Brandon “is [later] framed for a brutal murder” (115) by others, and thinks that he is dangerous and capable of murdering because he does not remember what happens during his seizures. The subchapter argues that the portrayal of epilepsy in the novel is used to personate, and to suggest that those with the condition are easily manipulated by those around them.

Chapter Four, “This Unclean Spirit of Imitation,” provides an account of the treatment of mesmerism and opium in Victorian sensation novels such as Collins’s *The Moonstone*. It suggests that mesmerism and opium are both known to have an impact on the individual’s sense of self or personal identity,<sup>4</sup> “challenging corporeal definitions of” (125) the self and questioning the idea of “unitary subjectivity” (125). Through an analysis of two novels, Charles Warren Adams’s *The Notting Hill Mystery* (1862–63)<sup>5</sup> and Charles Dickens’s *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), Tarr argues that drugs and various hypno-

tism techniques are used in both novels to create a sense of confusion and uncertainty about the true self and corporeal identity of the characters.<sup>6</sup> This bigger section ends with the “Second Interlude: Mary Jane Furneaux,” in which Tarr again gives short biographical information about the second important impostor of the Victorian era: Mary Jane Furneaux.

Part Three (Matter) examines the role of certain material or physical objects used in identity fraud and personation. Tarr discusses how impostors in Victorian sensation fiction use registers, wills, refuse and photographs to perpetrate acts of deception and disguise. Chapter Five, “A Daring Imposture,” focuses on the use of material objects – registers and wills – in Collins’s *The Woman in White* and Ellen Wood’s *Verner’s Pride* (1863) to show how the law functions as an external arbiter of identity, often at odds with a character’s personal experiences of the self. By examining these themes in the selected novels, Tarr seeks to demonstrate that both novels use legal and financial documents as a means of perpetrating identity fraud, with impostors either manipulating or forging those documents in order to forge new identities or to gain access to inherited wealth. Both novels, Tarr contends, use the legal system as a tool for deception and to underscore the ways in which Victorian society placed significant value on inherited wealth and status.

Chapter Six, “The Mysterious Paper Currency,” focuses on examining the physical objects – refuse and photographs – in Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) and Thomas Sutton’s *The Unconventional* (1866). In his analysis, Tarr shows that refuse is used as a means of imposture, with

one impostor attempting to pass off discarded materials as evidence of wealth and status; while photographs are used to create false identities to manipulate others. Tarr’s analysis of these novels is rich and detailed. He offers a compelling argument for the significance of material culture in Victorian literature and its role in shaping the themes and tropes of sensation fiction. By examining the use of legal documents, photographs, and even refuse, *Personation Plots* illustrates that Victorian sensation authors used various objects and materials to explore the theme of identity fraud.

The concluding chapter, entitled “Afterward: Reverse Personation,” reflects on how the fascination with identity deconstruction that was pursued obsessively in sensation was later “absorbed into the Gothic’s revival” (217). As Tarr notes, late Victorian Gothic became interested in the ways in which personal identity “could be split, transferred, or duplicated” (217) in a supernatural manner. The use of the supernatural was a significant shift away from sensation fiction, in which personation plots were primarily concerned with crimes of body, mind, and matter. In Gothic novels, Tarr suggests, personation was used to delve into the complexities of personal identity, while it “extended the horror of personation to fantastic ends, demonstrating how the modern world split, transposed, and multiplied the self” (217). To underpin his argument, he investigates the representation of personation plots in some classic Gothic novels, such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Through his analysis of each novel, Tarr illustrates

how the late Victorian Gothic revealed the horror and monstrosity of personation, while also demonstrating the power of paperwork in determining personal identity and the potential transition “from a fear of being copied to a fear of being a copy” (224).

The weight of the analyses of the selected novels demonstrates that Victorian sensation authors challenged rigid corporeal definitions of personal identity and traces the stages of what Tarr terms “personation plots.” One more particularly noteworthy aspect of Tarr’s work is his attention to the gendered implications of identity fraud in sensation fiction. By examining the ways in which female impostors, in particular, are often subjected to physical and psychological manipulation in those novels, he provides important insights into the gender politics of the period. Overall, Tarr’s monograph is a well-researched and thought-provoking study of a fascinating aspect of Victorian literature, particularly of sensation fiction, which is often overlooked within critical scholarship. Tarr’s careful examinations and precise observations make the monograph an excellent resource for scholars and students who are interested in this specific period and genre, as well as for anyone interested in the intersections of identity, corporeality, gender, and Victorian sensation fiction.

#### [Notes]

- 1 Jeaffreson’s novel features a plot in which the impostor (Felicia Avalon) is compelled to personate her deceased brother, Felix, to evade Major Tilbury’s wicked plans. The novel uses the trope of “personation by twins” (36) in a unique way compared to other sensation novels by emphasising a combination of Felicia’s “masculinity and Felix’s femininity” (36). According to Tarr’s analysis, the corporeal form of the siblings is so similar that the only way to discern them is through their clothing choices.
- 2 Tarr’s attention to Hay’s novel is particularly noteworthy because the novel effectively “questions corporeal identity through the blood transfusion” (72) by transferring the mind of the deceased friend (Seth) to the ailing niece (Luris) through an experimental blood transfusion arranged by the narrator (Uncle Cornelius Steggall). Despite being a lesser-known work among Victorian sensation novels, Hay’s *Blood* provides a compelling example of the ways in which medical procedures were utilised to challenge and re-imagine prevailing notions of the human body and personal identity in the late nineteenth century.
- 3 Tarr demonstrates that Alice Grey’s position as an impostor and murderess, who had multiple identities and whose noted victims were numerous, is shared by many characters in Victorian sensation novels, notably in Braddon’s *Lady Audley* and Collins’s *Magdalen*.
- 4 While mesmerism refers to a trance-like state in a person through various techniques, opium is a highly addictive narcotic drug that can produce a range of effects, including altered consciousness and a sense of detachment from the self.
- 5 The identity of the actual author has remained a subject of debate among literary critics. While Charles Warren

Adams (1833–1903), a legal practitioner renowned for writing novels under various pen names, has been positioned as a likely candidate, *The Notting Hill Mystery* was published under the pseudonym Charles Felix.

- 6 In *The Notting Hill Mystery*, Baron R\*\* turns to mesmerism in order to eliminate three people who are in line for an inheritance, while in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the character of John Jasper is intoxicated due to the use of opium, completely leaving his actual identity and turning into someone else.

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**Coral Ann Howells, ed.**  
**[*The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*,  
Second edition] Cambridge:  
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Coral Ann Howells's volume brings together a cross-section of Atwoodian scholars to "take account of new developments over the past two decades" (11). Comparing it to the first edition, it replaces several chapters with essays by new contributors (Sarah A. Appleton, J. Brooks Bouson, Gina Wisker) and a new chapter on the TV adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Eva-Marie Kröller. The second edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* maps out Atwood's complex and creative development after 2000 and takes a fresh look at several of her earlier works across all genres, including the recent TV adap-

tations. The chapters of the book cover all the areas of Atwood's work and her Canadian and global political context.

In her Introduction, Coral Ann Howells looks back on the years since the first *Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* was published in 2006 and provides readers with an overview of Atwood's literary production and Atwood criticism since 2000. She suggests that "since *The Blind Assassin* (2000) Atwood has reinvented herself, for there has been a significant shift of emphasis with her increasing engagement with popular fiction genres and her active involvement with digital technology, which has become an important feature of her storytelling and of her social activism" (2). The second edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* offers updated and rewritten chapters as well as new chapters on Atwood's work. The first contribution presents Atwood as a Canadian writer. Although Canada, as David Staines argues, was not a home for "writers in the fifties" (15), Atwood later became a major advocate of Canadian literature. "Atwood has also discovered Canada's cultural traditions, and her writing has examined them, both their follies and their triumphs, in a relentless and ongoing attempt to make Canada a nation of the world and its literature a commanding presence on the world stage" (30).

The following six chapters follow the recurring themes and leitmotifs of Atwood's writing. Pilar Somacarrera examines how Atwood's *oeuvre* deals with all forms of power "from dictatorships to the corporate power of global capitalism, through to the various kinds of personal power exercised in the heterosexual couples" (44). Eleonora Rao discusses the