Outline: This seminar invites students to consider the representation of the disabled body in the Victorian novel through exploring the portrayal of Dinah Mulock Craik’s saintly Olive Rothesay and Anthony Trollope’s mischief-making Madeline Neroni. Examining the highly various narrative roles they play, we will consider the common assumptions about dis/ability, gender, and (re)productivity which underpin the novels’ treatment of these two apparently very different characters. Why does Craik depict Olive’s professional career as dependent upon her ‘deformity’? Why is Madeline’s disability ‘an additional attraction’ to the clergymen of Barchester? Why and how are their physical impairments imbued with moral meaning? As we explore these questions, we will consider how these two writers’ treatment of the deviant body signals their generic affiliation and shapes their plotting, and what this might reveal about how novels produce – and depend on – hierarchised categories of embodiment.

In addition to providing the opportunity to consider these particular novels in detail, this seminar will also introduce students to some key concepts in disability studies, which will provide them with useful tools for thinking critically about bodies in the texts they encounter in other areas of the course.

Core Reading: Olive, Dinah Mulock Craik (1850); Barchester Towers, Anthony Trollope (1857)

Core Secondary Reading: Lennard J. Davis, ‘Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century’, from Enforcing Normalcy (Verso 1995) and repr. in The Disability Studies Reader (Routledge 2006); Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Introduction to Extraordinary Bodies (Columbia UP 1997)

Further Secondary Reading:


Clare Walker Gore


D.A. Miller, The Novel and the Police (Berkeley 1989), Chapter 4, ‘The Novel as Usual: Trollope’s Barchester Towers’

Tabitha Sparks, ‘Dinah Mulock Craik’s Olive: Deformity, Gender and Female Destiny’, Women’s Writing 20.3 (June 2013), 358-369

Martha Stoddard Holmes, Fictions of Affliction: Physical Disability in Victorian Culture (Michigan, 2004), esp. chapter 2, ‘Marital Melodramas’