Deviance and transgression: “monstrous” bodies in nineteenth century women’s fiction

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Abstract

My project investigates how representation of the disabled body functions in nineteenth century women’s sentimental novels. Since the 1970s, although much research on women’s literature explores how difference and identity are represented in such politicized constructions as gender, race and sexuality, feminist criticism has generally overlooked the corporeal otherness we think of as physical disability that women writers evoke in their works. In fact, in the patriarchic society of the nineteenth century, when the scientific, medical, religious and moral discourses were destined to justify the link between femininity and disability, the representation of corporeal deficiency in women’s fiction has a meaning that is worth exploring in order to understand its cultural, social and literary significance. From a feminist perspective, considering Disability Studies in socio-cultural and literary contexts, I examine four sentimental works of fiction written by French women writers of that period to probe the relation between representation of corporeal difference, gender and women’s writing.

Introduction

Thinking of three bodies…

"Monstrous" body
1. Define the “monstrous” body/disabled body:
   Concept of normal body creates “monstrous” body
2. “Monstrous” body in Western history
3. “Monstrous” body in nineteenth century France

Female body
1. Female body/“monstrous” body
2. Women writers in nineteenth century France: “Monstrous” being
3. Women’s writing and representation of “monstrous” body

Textual body
1. Importance of “monstrous” body in literary texts
2. Existing Disability Studies theories in literature
3. Use Disability Studies theories to analyze literary texts

Corpus

Anatole (1815)
A woman falls in love with the man who had saved her life. Though handsome and charming, possessed of all possible virtues and talents, Anatole remains silent and withdrawn. The hero’s secret, the heroine finally discovers, is that he is deaf and mute.

Oliver ou le Secret (1824)
Olivier doesn’t have the courage to accept his cousin’s love, because of his physiological impotence, a secret that he never reveals explicitly. Even though he sincerely loves his cousin, he has to leave her to hide his secret. This tragic love story ends by the hero’s suicide and his lover’s mental crisis.

Conclusion

The transgressing potential of the disabled body operates as a destabilizing element that challenges the so-called norm in every way. By incorporating in their writing the disabled figure—bearer of corporeal deviance, women writers transfigure the social reality and question the hegemony of the “normate” that entirely excludes disabled people. In this sense, the representation of disability should be considered as a strategy of emancipation that women writers incorporate in their writing activity.

Methodology

Textual analyses

Disability Studies
Gender Studies
Literary theories

Major references