

**The Digital (Un)Revolution:
Mapping the Effect of Digital Texts on Scholarly Approaches to Victorian Sensation Fiction**

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After the introduction of the internet in the 1990s, there was something of a tendency toward apocalyptic predictions in the academe. The internet, so the argument ran, would eventually lead to the end of print in much the way that moveable type led to the end of the manuscript era. With the end of print, literary studies would completely change, undoubtedly for the worse, and libraries would become museums that displayed curious little blocks of processed wood pulp called books. Elegies were written for the Gutenberg era, predictions made about the closing date for libraries, and books began to be published with titles like *The End of Print* and *Poetry at the End of Print Culture*. At the same time, websites like Project Gutenberg and Google Books began to spring into existence, offering readers and scholars the tools with which to fulfill these dire predictions.

There can be no doubt that the introduction of online access to the MLA Bibliography, full text of journal articles through subscription databases such as JSTOR and Project Muse, and digital facsimiles of archival materials have altered library research habits among literary scholars; both quantitative surveys and qualitative studies have documented this phenomenon. What, though, of digital access to literary texts? Has the introduction of full text access through projects like Google Books or Gale full-text databases substantially altered scholarly approaches to the novel? While the impact of digital corpora is enormous and well charted in some fields, most notably the early modern period and corpus linguistics, it is less certain in other disciplines, including classical studies, Victoriana, and post-1923 texts. This paper examines the effects of online, full text access to “the big three” Victorian sensation novels -- Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859), Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), and Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1863) -- in order begin an assessment of the influence of digital surrogates on literary scholarship writ larger than the early modern period. In addition to sharpening an understanding of the types of research conducted in a particular field, this investigation invites an exploration of the role of research libraries, digital project managers, and curators in the electronic age.

In order to measure the bibliographic changes brought about by the digital era, this paper employs a comparative textual history of print and electronic editions to inform its history of sensation fiction criticism. In matters bibliographic, the net effect of the digital revolution has been largely conservative: in print, sensation fiction exists in a plethora of formats, each with significant textual and structural variations. Modern print editions, however, have greatly reduced access to the variety of formats, and few libraries provide access to the various states of the novel. Digital surrogates reinforce this paradigm: rather than offering increased access to the wide varieties of textual incarnations that Collins, Braddon, and Wood published and that are difficult to come by in the print world, digital projects instead provide access to very few states of the text. Access to modern editions, edited by bibliographers and scholars in the field, are even scarcer.

The content of recent critical and theoretical studies of sensation fiction underscores the paucity of change in scholarly approaches to the genre, suggesting that digital projects have yet to inspire a revolution in terms of criticism. These readings find their inspiration not in the digital revolution but rather the expansion, championed by Elaine Showalter and Kathleen Tillotson in the 1960s and 1970s, of the Victorian canon to include women writers and popular publications. To quantify these trends, this study examines the shifting representation of Collins, Braddon, and Wood in standard reference works, dissertations, articles, and monographs. While spikes in publication patterns can be traced to Showalter and Tillotson, neither a similar rise in interest nor a shift in the critical paradigm have come about since the digital revolution. At the present moment, in the world of Victorian sensation fiction studies, digital surrogates of novels reinforce long established textual editing practices as well as methods for critical investigation rather than augmenting or supplanting them.

While this paper is sharply focused so as to explore in detail the nuances of the bibliographical and critical implications associated with digital surrogates, the conclusions are arguably more broadly applicable, especially as they relate to the role of libraries. The conservative effect of web technologies on Victorian sensation fiction studies suggests that digital editions alone do not radically alter the end nature of scholarship; instead, in many ways the digital revolution reinforces the legacies of scholarship from the age of print. For the creators of digital corpora, this study suggests the need to examine carefully the types of research engendered by certain texts and to build digitization projects that support these research agendas. It also highlights the increasingly critical need for these corpora to focus on matters bibliographic: of what use are digital surrogates if they stand in for only a small portion of their physical counterparts?