



Sean Grass, *The Commodification of Identity in Victorian Narrative: Autobiography, Sensation, and the Literary Marketplace*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 279 pp. Pb. £22.99.
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As its title suggests, Sean Grass's expansive monograph, *The Commodification of Identity in Victorian Narrative: Autobiography, Sensation, and The Literary Marketplace*, has two major aims. The first is to trace, via the rise in the production of life narratives from 1820 to 1860, the discursive, legal and financial processes by which identity became a "textual commodity" and subjectivity "ceased to exist as a thing apart from property and economic exchange" (6). The second is to examine how the sensation novel, which emerged just after autobiography reached its last peak and which Grass understands as a genre "catalyzed by the anxieties surrounding the growing tendency to commodify the self" (21), interrogated these processes. After an introduction that thoughtfully situates Grass's analysis in relation to earlier work by George Landow, David Amigoni, Mary Poovey, Anna Kornbluh, Patrick Brantlinger, Pamela Gilbert and others, the book offers a view of the market in literary commodities in the early to mid-nineteenth century. From there, it turns to literary representations of commodification. The second through sixth chapters focus on identity as property in *Great Expectations*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Silas Marner* and *Hard Cash*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Moonstone*, respectively. A coda addressing the case of the Tichbourne Claimant (1871-74) ties such narratives back to life, arguing that the episode "produc[ed] in the real world of Victorian people and things the very ideological and imaginative problem that had provoked" the sensation novel (213). The result is an intricate, persuasive assessment of the complex relationship between identity, textuality and the economy during the period.

In his comprehensive first chapter, Grass delves into both the economics and the cultural position of Victorian life writing. He traces such writing from its roots in the earlier genres of the spiritual and aristocratic autobiography, discussing its transformation into a commercial product primarily in terms of rising literacy rates and expanding readerships. If its earlier forms had served the aims of authors, he argues, those that began to be formalized around 1825 “served the interests of a widening class of readers finding their places in an evolving capitalist sphere” (23). Using quantitative data drawn from the *Nineteenth Century Short Title Catalogue* and cases from his own database of more than 2,400 autobiographical works, Grass demonstrates concretely how such interests drove a market whose expanding size and influence eventually shaped other genres as well. As he notes with reference to the Brontës, among others, the popularity of autobiographical forms was such that by mid-century, “novelists and publishers had [also] begun to use autobiographical form as a way of adapting fiction to the literary market” (37). Together with the appendix, in which he presents his sources and research method for other scholars to make use of, this capacious orientation to the Victorian publishing market constitutes what is perhaps the most substantial contribution to the field Grass makes via this study.

A similar capaciousness is evident throughout. In the remaining sections of the first chapter, Grass works to position commercial autobiography in relation to the financial sphere and the sphere of Victorian jurisprudence, government and social practice. Like autobiography itself, he contends, both spheres commodified the subject by treating value and identity, respectively, as things that could be contained within exchangeable material texts. He considers this process of textualisation at various scales, first linking autobiography conceptually to copyright and concepts of literary property, and then to such disparate genres as census records and cartes de visite. Later chapters extend this approach. In discussing *Great Expectations*, for instance, Grass frames Pip’s “circulat[ion] like a commodity” through the world of the novel in light of Dickens’s own financially driven embrace of “the author-as-text model of literary production” (85, 89). He reads *Our Mutual Friend*’s critique of finance capitalism’s “automatic and entire” (168), and thus unnaturally naturalised, regime of commodification as an expansion and revision of the earlier book’s concerns about the relationship of self to society. Similarly, Grass treats *The Moonstone*’s oblique presentation of both Franklin Blake and its eponymous diamond as reflective of Collins’s anxieties about his authorial position and his wish to “restor[e] subjectivity to an imaginative position outside the capitalist market” (193).

The breadth of vision Grass offers here sometimes comes at the expense of depth. Some potentially generative lines of argument are opened but not fully pursued. Discussing the “contest over textual ownership” of her identity that occurs between Lucy and Robert Audley in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, for example, he notes that “if men were more likely than women to possess and control texts, they were also more likely to appear in them as textual identities” (107, 119). As a result, he contends, they began to experience masculinity, “wrenched into materiality by the demands of finance capitalism and an evolving textual culture” (119), as a new source of vulnerability. This view of Victorian masculinity merits expansion, as do Grass’s readings of the imperial anxieties he sees as informing both Dickens’s and Collins’s treatments of the individual commodified subject. The emphasis on breadth also occasionally leads to surface readings, as when he argues that *Silas Marner* “works to naturalize and even sacralize the transition to capitalism” (139). Though Grass is far from alone in mistaking Eliot’s

acknowledgement of ideological forces as a validation of them, this assessment seems a rare misstep in an otherwise careful study.

These minor imperfections are perhaps best viewed as opportunities for others to build on Grass's impressive intellectual achievement. Overall, *The Commodification of Identity in Victorian Narrative: Autobiography, Sensation, and The Literary Marketplace* is an engaging, energising work that offers a convincing assessment of nineteenth-century capitalism's "incursions against subjectivity" and the "act[s] of literal and imaginative appropriation" on which the genre that emblematised these depended (77, 39). Given its strong focus on providing a practical orientation to the economic and ideological conditions of the mid-Victorian publishing industry, students and scholars just beginning work in print culture may find it especially useful. It will, however, be of immense value to any readers interested in questions of financialization, literary production and authorship.