

**Tentative Title of Dissertation:**

“Unlovely, Mechanical Devices”: Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in the Victorian Novel

**Dissertation Abstract:**

This project reveals how disabled characters are an important and overlooked strategy that Victorian writers use to collapse gender binaries, develop unconventional domestic settings, and refigure the novel's stock plotlines. My argument complicates existing scholarly assumptions about the roles that disabled characters play in Victorian novels. Scholars have long contended that disabled characters are usually minor characters, “props” that advance the marriage and domestic plotlines of their able-bodied friends. But disabled characters frequently grate against their marginal roles, and are oftentimes a vehicle through which writers can voice problematic ideologies with impunity. Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* reveals how disabled characters could exploit the sickroom setting to evade masculine responsibilities and destabilize the marriage plotlines of their able-bodied family members. Dinah Craik's *John Halifax, Gentleman* and Charlotte Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe* exemplify how disabled characters could use their “minor” status to critique dominant gender and social mores without repercussions. Finally, Lucas Malet's *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* shows how disabled characters could deploy their roles as “props” subversively to advance their own desires along primary narrative arcs. These novels are important reminders that second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century saw numerous challenges to the Victorian novel's normative plotlines and behavioral codes, as writers found in disabled characters a space to explore alternatives.