The Counterfactual History Novel in Nineteenth-Century British Literature

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Abstract
Although scholarship has long since established the history novel’s general course, few critical readings of the history novel address the innovative means through which writers could manipulate the use of history within these novels. Nor, for that matter, have many scholars considered the relationship between the slow decline of this form of literature as a consequence of the combined effect of the rise of historical studies as a serious academic discipline during the 1830s, and the growing trend for the realist novel throughout the following decades. My dissertation explores how Britons’ fascination with history not only shaped the progress of the history novel throughout the nineteenth century, but also directly influenced a specific type of narrative within this developing subgenre: the counterfactual history novel. As the precursor to the alternative history novel, the counterfactual history novel asks readers to consider plausible alternative outcomes to a historical event but goes no further than requesting that act of contemplation.

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