

ABSTRACT  
“THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPTIVE PLOT THROUGH EARLY 19<sup>TH</sup>  
CENTURY ENGLISH NOVELS”

Jannea Thomason

Marquette University, 2023

My dissertation, “The Development of the Conceptive Plot through Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century English Novels,” reads these novels through the history of midwifery and reproduction to show how authors developed a coherent set of narrative features to challenge ideas about women’s agency in reproduction. Building on recent explorations of the maternal and feminist aspects of the novels, I further nuance the representations of women and reproduction in the novels. Nineteenth-century authors explored reproductive rhetoric, law, and medical practices, and their explorations appear as what I call “the conceptive plot”: a set of narrative features illustrating how different systems strip women of conceptive agency resulting in their removal from the narrative. The three chapters in the dissertation explore how five different authors across the beginning of the century draw on historical shifts in reproductive care—like the medicalization of gynecology and obstetrics, the criminalization of abortion, and the urbanization of female networks—to create the narrative features of the conceptive plot in order to make an argument about women’s reproductive rights. These features are a one-to-one correlation of sex and pregnancy, concealed pregnancy leading to exposure, the removal of a pregnant woman’s female community, and a focus on the physicality of postpartum. In the conclusion, I explore how these features of the conceptive plot are affected by the popularization of contraception.