

INTRODUCTION: SEX, COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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Hetty had never read a novel [...] how then could she find a shape for her expectations?

George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859)¹

This line from George Eliot's 1859 novel *Adam Bede*, reflecting on the thoughts of young, naïve country girl Hetty Sorrel as she falls in love with the older, wiser and wealthier gentleman Captain Arthur Donnithorne, provides an indicative point from which to begin a discussion of sex, courtship and marriage in Victorian literature and culture, opening up many of the ideological tensions and wider cultural resonances that these terms and their intersections produced. In the naïvety of Hetty's innocent unknowing and shapeless expectations, Eliot signals the problem of ignorance about sex prevalent among young women in the period; in the assertion that 'a novel' would provide Hetty with a guide to understanding, we are reminded of the centrality of courtship and marriage in structuring many novels of the period, as well as the cultural work that literature played in 'shaping' the ideas of its readers. In locating these traits specifically as elements of female experience – Hetty's lack of understanding is unmatched by a similar statement about Arthur Donnithorne's knowledge which we presume, and soon know, to be rather more extensive – Eliot indicates the gender and class inequalities that structure this, and many other, sexual and marital interactions.

Furthermore, these lines gesture towards ways in which literature and other cultural forms did not only shape expectations according to socially acceptable principles but also challenged, critiqued and expanded contemporary discourses around gender and sexuality. With foreknowledge of the rest of *Adam Bede*, the apparent simplicity of this statement and its air of innocent romantic speculation is undercut by a more damning critique of the sexual double standard and the problems it produces: Hetty's story develops not into the romantic courtship of the marriage-plot novel but a narrative in which sexual ignorance leads to the tragic tale of a fallen woman who is punished, more vehemently than her male counterpart, for her sexual transgression. In the subtle allusion of this line towards sex we are reminded of the dubious position that Eliot and other female writers negotiated when writing about such subjects, at risk of trespassing the borders of respectability and thus reliant upon coded signs and symbols to represent sexually and morally precarious content. The novel's wider moral code similarly iterates such competing tensions, ostensibly

¹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 148.

working within the traditional strictures of sex and gender ideologies in punishing Hetty for her sexual transgression, whilst doing so in such a way that enacts a critique of the Victorian sexual economy and women's position within it. Finally, in considering the cultural work of the novel we might also note the play between literature and reality within this phrase, Eliot's attempt to confine Hetty's experience to the playful realm of romantic literature is underscored by our awareness that this narrative had its roots in real experience, based as it was on the story of Mary Voce that Eliot had heard narrated some years before by her aunt.² Although the historical setting of *Adam Bede* provided Eliot with a safer lens through which to discuss the present, the novel nonetheless stands as a critique of its cultural moment, one which continues to resonate today.³

These themes are reiterated, challenged and expanded in the essays that follow: gender and class ideologies come into dynamic new power relations through alternative models of relationships and sexual interactions; notions of female propriety are challenged through transgressive behaviours that push at the borderlines of respectability; the normativity of masculinity is reconceived as rich and problematic ground for critical exploration; concealed expression of sexual desire becomes situated as a more explicitly recognisable and significant narrative force; and a range of sexual practices and activities expand our view of Victorian sex beyond the heteronormativity of the marriage-plot novel. Throughout, we are reminded that while Hetty Sorrel's position as (potential) female consumer of a conventional marriage narrative might remain the normative model of sexual experience in the period, a much wider terrain of sexual experience was being constructed and contested throughout a range of forms of cultural production.

If silence about sex was once the touchstone of critical discussion about the Victorians – as James Eli Adams writes, 'almost from its first wide currency in the late nineteenth century, "Victorian" has been a byword for a rigorous moralism centred on sexual repression' – then literary and cultural criticism has long since contested this view, resolutely ousting any assumptions we might want to make about coy or prudish Victorians.⁴ Steven Marcus's *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (1964) first put sexual desire on the critical map, albeit as an othered, subcultural realm – "foreign",

² On the real and fictional influences that informed the story of Hetty Sorrel, see Josephine McDonagh, 'Child-Murder Narratives in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*: Embedded Histories and Fictional Representation', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 56 (2001), 228-59.

³ For further discussion of contemporary reaction to the novel and its ongoing cultural resonances, see Margaret Reynolds's introduction to the 2008 Penguin edition of *Adam Bede*.

⁴ James Eli Adams, 'Victorian Sexualities', in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Herbert F. Tucker (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 125-38 (p. 125). Adams's essay provides an indicative survey of the field of Victorian sexualities, as does the more recent essay 'Victorian Sexualities' by Holly Furneaux in *Literature Compass*, 8 (2011), 767-75.

distinct, exotic' – of Victorian England.⁵ But it was with Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978) that sex became located as a centre-point of the period: arguing for a 'steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex' from the eighteenth century onwards, Foucault recognised that the Victorian era marked a crucial moment in the transformation of sex into discourses of power and knowledge; in this view, 'the reticences of "Victorian puritanism"' were only 'a digression, a refinement, a tactical diversion in the great process of transforming sex into discourse'.⁶ Foucault's work has opened up a rich terrain for critical exploration of the meanings, practices and attitudes towards sex in the period, many of which are reflected in the essays here.

Perhaps the most prominent site of debate around sex in the Victorian period, and the focus of much subsequent critical attention, is that of Victorian sexual morality, particularly the moral impurity of the prostitute and the fallen woman. As Frank Mort identifies, the intersection of social medicine and moral politics that have produced 'some of the central meanings and power relations around sex' over the last two centuries can be traced back to the 1830s, when social and medical investigations of the urban poor gave rise to a particularly stringent 'moral environmentalism'.⁷ During this time, the various areas of 'sanitary science, social medicine, evangelical religion and philanthropy' staked out 'a specific regime of sexuality' inflected by class and gender politics, one significant result of which was to effect a particularly stringent condemnation, and eroticisation, of working-class women as 'immoral pollutants', both the source of social decline and the site of potential for moral reform.⁸ In the years that followed, discussion over the regulation of prostitution became especially prominent in social and political thought, peaking around the implementation of the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 which solidified the associations between prostitution and contagion and, as Lynda Nead writes, 'effectively created "prostitution" as a distinct and discrete legal category'.⁹

The first essay in this collection, Rachel Webster's "I think I Must Be an Improper Woman Without Knowing It": Fallenness and Unitarianism in Elizabeth

⁵ Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. xvi.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), pp. 18, 22.

⁷ Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 2; see part 1 on 'Moral Environmentalism 1830-1860'.

⁸ Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, pp. 4, 37.

⁹ Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 116. See also Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) and Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992); and Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

Gaskell's *Ruth*, contributes to these discussions in a reading that situates Gaskell's novel within public dialogue about the classification and amelioration of prostitution through the context of its engagement with Unitarian beliefs. Webster identifies that a Unitarian disavowal of Original Sin permeates Gaskell's response to the problem of the fallen woman, asserting that it is environment that leads women to fall rather than a corruptibility inherent in female sexuality. Furthermore, Webster suggests that Gaskell not only asserts female sexuality as untainted but recognises that passion and desire are a necessary and vital part of female existence. Although the novel ultimately returns to a more conventional discourse of sexuality in its resolution, Webster's reading unveils Gaskell's continual frustrations with the limitations of Victorian culture and the ways in which her writing challenged the boundaries of propriety.

The rhetoric of sexual moral propriety was not confined to debates over the fallen woman but also formed the foil to a category of morally pure respectable femininity, a narrow norm against which all deviations were construed as dangerous, illicit and immoral: as Nead writes, the category of prostitute 'was accommodating and flexible and could define any woman who transgressed the bourgeois code of morality'.¹⁰ The fine line between respectability and transgression was perhaps most noticeably negotiated on the Victorian stage: as Tracy C. Davis writes, the visibility of female performers 'led to persistent and empirically unfounded prejudices and very real sexual dangers in their work places' despite attempts 'to depict actresses as home-centred, modest, self-respecting females redolent of Victorian middle-class values. Their public existence seemed to preclude private respectability'.¹¹ Jem Bloomfield's "'So Pure and Rational an Attachment": Isabella Glyn's Performance of Social and Sexual Risk at Sadler's Wells' takes up these themes of female sexual propriety in a discussion of Isabella Glyn's performance of the Duchess of Malfi at Sadler's Wells in 1850, highlighting not only the problems but also the potential for female agency within these codes. Glyn's performance entailed the negotiation of sexual and social risk, and contemporary reviews centred around her ability to maintain feminine propriety in a potentially compromising situation. Bloomfield further draws out the ways in which these accounts praised the skill required to perform narratives of social and sexual risk in ways that recast her as a consummate professional woman with agency over her performance.

Whilst sex and sexual morality formed the most problematic discursive site for the Victorians, the apparent certainties of marriage were no less assured; marital reform acts, and the debates that accompanied them, subjected marriage to ongoing reconfiguration throughout the period. On the one hand, marriage seemingly functioned as a stable category within the wider problematic terrain of sex and gender

¹⁰ Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, pp. 94-95.

¹¹ Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. xiv.

debates: marriage and motherhood, as Nead writes, were ‘defined as both social and medical norms; specifically, early marriage, prolific childbearing and breast-feeding [were] seen to ensure female health’.¹² As Mary Poovey further identifies, this served a central social function, upholding ‘an entire social organisation’ that depended upon ‘naturalizing monogamous marriage, a sexual division of labour, and a specific economic relation between the sexes’.¹³ In this schema, single women posed a significant threat to the social order and were the subject of much stigma: as John Stuart Mill recognised, such were the attitudes towards single women that she was ‘felt both by herself and others as a kind of excrescence on the surface of society, having no use or function or office there’.¹⁴

Yet at the same time, not only were a range of possibilities beyond marriage opening up for women, as Martha Vicinus’s collection *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (1980) first demonstrated, but so too was the institution of marriage subject to significant challenge throughout the period.¹⁵ The passing of the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 and the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870 represented significant shifts in women’s legal and financial status within marriage that not only had important legal implications but also widespread cultural ramifications, instigating public debate about the nature and role of marriage: as Sharon Marcus has discussed, the act of resituating marriage as a contractual agreement between individuals involved re-evaluating the meanings of equality and the relations of the sexes within marriage.¹⁶ Furthermore, as Poovey points out, debates about marriage and divorce posed a significant threat to one of the central ideological tenets of society: ‘in acknowledging the fact of marital unhappiness, [the new Acts] inevitably exposed the limitations of the domestic ideal’, and ‘threatened to reveal the artificiality of separate spheres’.¹⁷

Two essays in this collection further our understanding of Victorian debates about marriage. In ‘Madness in Marriage: Erotomania and Marital Rape in *He Knew He Was Right* and *The Forsyte Saga*’, Helen Goodman contributes to discussions of marital unhappiness in the mid-nineteenth century by suggesting that the failed

¹² Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, p. 26.

¹³ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 2.

¹⁴ John Stuart Mill, ‘Early Essays on Marriage and Divorce’, in *Essays on Sex Equality*, ed. by Alice Rossi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 65-88. On debates around marriage reform and unmarried women, see also Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Martha Vicinus, ed., *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (London: Methuen, 1980).

¹⁶ See Marcus, *Other Victorians*, chapter 5. For details on marital reform, see Lee Holcombe, ‘Victorian Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law, 1857-1882’, in *A Widening Sphere*, ed. by Martha Vicinus, pp. 3-28.

¹⁷ Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, p. 52.

marriage plot is apparent in literature of this period much earlier than has previously been recognised. Furthermore, she opens up new perspectives on the subject by framing the failure of marriage as a masculine plot representing a crisis of masculinity that necessitates a reconsideration of the Victorian gentleman's position within marriage. Goodman reads *He Knew He Was Right* within a complex network of debates around marital rape and domestic violence in the 1860s, and positions this as anticipating themes developed later in the century in Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*. Goodman's reading also offers interesting insights into the ways in which literature was not just informed by contemporary scientific writing on sexuality and gender but also worked to shape these studies, identifying evidence of reciprocal cross-currents between literature and psychology in the novels' depictions of monomania.

A reconsideration of the marriage plot is also the theme of Esther Godfrey's 'Victorian Cougar: H. Rider Haggard's *She*, Ageing, and Sexual Selection in Marriage'. Whilst themes of masculinity, race and imperialism are familiar to Haggard scholars, Godfrey's reading considers the intersection of these issues with related articulations of female sexual agency. Godfrey identifies the ways in which *She* is distinguished by its interaction with Darwinian arguments about sexual selection and evolution, finding that contemporary anxieties over these issues converge in the figure of the sensual older woman, Ayesha, who is a potent example of women's power in marriage. By inverting the typical age-gender-power balance of the marriage plot novel, the conventional function of marriage as a stabilising plot device becomes undermined in *She*, instead operating to confront wider anxieties about masculinity, women's power and societal degeneration.

Whilst heterosexual relationships provide the structure for many cultural handlings of sex, courtship and marriage in the Victorian period, a much broader spectrum of sexuality has been recognised as a central facet of the era. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) first identified male homosociality as integral to Victorian social and institutional structures, and more recently Sharon Marcus's *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (2007) has turned our view to the spectrum of female homosocial, homoerotic and homosexual relations that, she argues, were equally significant in Victorian society.¹⁸ Beyond these studies, a broad field of queer theory has provided a significant basis from which to expand readings of sexual identities, interactions and relationships in literature and culture of the period, but in the essay 'Pederasty and Sexual Activity in Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*' Chris Bartle argues that in the case of Oscar Wilde's work this has also proved a restrictive framework. Bartle's essay argues for the importance of reading

¹⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

scenes of sexual activity in Wilde's handling of pederasty, and to this end, Bartle identifies a new instance in 'The Happy Prince' that affords important perspectives on Wilde's articulation of pederastic relationships. Bartle finds that Wilde is ultimately pessimistic about the role of pederastic sexual activity because it is found to challenge a core principle of pederasty, but his reading demonstrates the importance of critical attentiveness to scenes of sexual activity in Wilde's work.

The final essay in this issue also works to locate sexual desire as a dynamic narrative drive. In Colleen M. Kropp's 'The Valences of Desire: The Suspended Eroticism in *Middlemarch*' we return to the apparently familiar ground of hidden sexual desire in the courtship and marriage-plot novel. Yet Kropp unpacks moments of concealed sexual impulse in *Middlemarch* – most notably the moment where a 'vivid flash of lightning' strikes in a scene between Dorothea and Will Ladislaw in the library at Lowick – to argue that these moments represent more than restrained sexual impulse. Working within a framework of philosophical thought, Kropp reads Eliot's notion of desire as strongly informed by Hegel, and argues that Eliot extends Hegelian thought to constitute a new concept of desire that anticipates the later work of Georges Bataille. This not only reinvigorates our reading of individual instances of implied desire in the novel, but further suggests that desire is essential in structuring the realism of Eliot's text, demonstrating that different articulations of desire within the marriages of *Middlemarch* operate to nuance the seemingly restricted sexual economies of the Victorian marriage-plot novel.

Scholarship has long shown us that "Victorian" is no longer a byword for prudish and coy morality, unfolding a broad range of perspectives on the sexual practices, activities and identities available in the period. The essays that follow demonstrate that this remains fruitful ground for a new generation of scholars, providing lively and insightful contributions that continue to expand our ideas of the who, what, when, where and how of Victorian sex, courtship and marriage.

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