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Sex, Courtship and Marriage in Victorian Literature and Culture



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

Charlotte Mathieson  
(University of Warwick)

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

George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859)<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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",

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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*.

<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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'.<sup>6</sup> 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'.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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'.<sup>9</sup>

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

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

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

<sup>7</sup> 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'.

<sup>8</sup> Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, pp. 4, 37.

<sup>9</sup> 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'.<sup>10</sup> 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'.<sup>11</sup> 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

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<sup>10</sup> Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>11</sup> 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’.<sup>12</sup> 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’.<sup>13</sup> 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’.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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’.<sup>17</sup>

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

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<sup>12</sup> Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, p. 26.

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

<sup>14</sup> 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).

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

<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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

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<sup>18</sup> 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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## **‘I THINK I MUST BE AN IMPROPER WOMAN WITHOUT KNOWING IT’: FALLENNESS AND UNITARIANISM IN ELIZABETH GASKELL’S *RUTH***

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### *Abstract*

This article draws on the public dialogue surrounding mid-nineteenth-century prostitution, and is particularly concerned with how fallenness was classified, and how it was thought that it should be ameliorated. Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel *Ruth* (1853) engages with the myth of fallenness – how female sexuality was religiously and socially conceived – which contributed towards the dichotomy of two classes of women: the fallen and the virtuous. Gaskell, as a Unitarian, rejected Original Sin, believing that the human mind and soul were not innately sinful but had immense potential for growth. Consequently, Unitarians considered the environment as fundamentally responsible for shaping and determining an individual’s character and fate. This religious viewpoint permeates Gaskell’s response to the “problem” of the fallen woman, perceiving female sexuality not to be inherently corruptible or dangerous. She challenges the institutionalised, separatist response of penitentiary restoration by locating Ruth’s redemptive process within the family home of the Bensons. She offers female solidarity and the role of motherhood as the ideal ameliorative solutions and yet the novel ends with Ruth’s sacrificial death. The article takes this problematic conclusion and suggests that Gaskell, frustrated with the reality of the fallen woman’s fate, hands Ruth over to the Unitarian hope of redemption in death.

‘I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it’ is how Elizabeth Gaskell attempted to assess her character after the publication of her novel, *Ruth* (1853), which so shocked and offended certain readers that it led to the dramatic if confined action of copies being ‘burnt’.<sup>1</sup> Gaskell’s anxiety surrounding the formation and final production of *Ruth* can be observed in her correspondence, as she anticipates the ‘talk’ people will ‘make’ (p. 209) of choosing to depict a fallen woman as heroine, an ‘unfit subject for fiction’ (p. 220), especially for ‘family reading’ (p. 223). She acknowledges the necessity of courage and endurance against such criticism, by believing in her intentions as a writer to speak out a ‘very plain and earnest truth’ (p. 225). However, what troubles Gaskell’s resolve is the unforeseen experience of feeling ‘improper’ under the gaze of friends and worshippers, particularly of those attending the Unitarian Chapel, where her husband William was Minister. In a letter, addressed to her close correspondent Eliza Fox (Feb. 1853), Gaskell diagnoses herself as having a “‘Ruth’ fever”, in which she is physically indisposed from the ‘hard things’ (p. 222) that have been said about the novel, unsettling both her mind and dreams. In the novel, Ruth succumbs to fever several times, with the last bout

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Mandolin, 1997), p. 223. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

proving fatal. The first time she suffers is after being abandoned by her lover, Bellingham, when the full force of her public shame and inconsolable position is revealed. Gaskell's choice to align herself with Ruth's fever interestingly associates her experience as publishing novelist with the exposure and tainted character of the fallen woman. To 'shrink' (p. 220) and 'hide one's head like an ostrich' (p. 227) in the sand, because of shame, is to understand the fallen woman's condition, both as a genuine experience of fallenness and as a forced punishment dictated by public disapprobation. Gaskell reconciles her own misrepresentation with the conviction that *Ruth* has brought a 'subject which is so painful' (p. 227) out into the discussion of the public domain, and, by doing so, she secured her place in a growing dialogue surrounding mid-century prostitution.

During the 1840s and into the 1850s, prostitution began to attract the attention of social investigators, largely due to conflicting evidence that it was expanding at an exponential rate, with unsustainable estimates figuring one in six unmarried women or an equivalent of 83,000 were working as prostitutes.<sup>2</sup> It was labelled the Great Social Evil, not only as an affront to morality, but as recognition of the profession acting upon economic principles of supply and demand. The writings of prominent Congregational minister Ralph Wardlaw and moral reformer J.B. Talbot were characteristic of the 1840s approach to the 'intolerable evil', emphasising prostitution as a threat to the sanctity of family life and to the wider social order.<sup>3</sup> Wardlaw's *Lectures on Female Prostitution* (1843), first delivered to an exclusively male audience in Glasgow, looked to 'unite all truly patriotic and Christian men [...] to active and strenuous co-operation for the prevention and cure of the prevailing immorality'.<sup>4</sup> There was a significant branch of social science at this time, which Wardlaw, Talbot and William Bevon represented, whose practices were synonymous with 'applied Christianity': it was a desire to promote monogamy, self-discipline and cleanliness; three things that the prostitute's life seemed to refute.<sup>5</sup> Christian morality, in fact, informed the societal identification of prostitution as the illicit intercourse of the sexes, with the sin of fornication intensified by the act being 'committed for hire'.<sup>6</sup> Judith Walkowitz explains that these empirical surveys were intended as preliminaries to action, in which accumulated data could be used as

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<sup>2</sup> See E.M. Sigsworth and T.J. Wyke, 'A Study of Victorian Prostitution and Venereal Disease', in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. by Martha Vicinus (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), pp. 77-99 (p. 78).

<sup>3</sup> See Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 31-33.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Wardlaw, *Lectures on Female Prostitution: Its Nature, Extent, Effects, Guilt, Causes and Remedy* (Glasgow: Maclehose, 1843), p. vi.

<sup>5</sup> See Mary Poovey, 'Speaking of the Body: Mid-Victorian Constructions of Female Desire', in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, ed. by Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 29-46 (p. 31).

<sup>6</sup> Wardlaw, *Lectures*, pp. 10-17.

recommendations for ameliorative policies.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, in the 1850s, there was an attempt to review the accounts put forward in the previous decade, building upon the evidence collected by Wardlaw and Talbot, generating an ‘intellectual climate sympathetic to regulation’.<sup>8</sup> William R. Greg, leading essayist, reviewer and social commentator, published an article entitled ‘Prostitution’ (1850) in the *Westminster Review*, whilst William Acton, a practicing surgeon as well as a prolific writer of articles on a variety of medical problems, published *Prostitution: Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects* (1857).<sup>9</sup> Acton also published a second edition in 1869 which contained a useful Preface expanding upon his initial conclusions, demonstrating a far greater confidence in his assertions which were nevertheless born out of the 1850s climate. Acton and Greg were advocates of ‘recognition’ and ‘regulation’, terms which were defined in Acton’s introductory remarks:

I propose, in the following pages, to inquire whether, in the interest of society and civilization, on what are commonly called sanitary and social grounds, some compromise, which I should term ‘RECOGNITION’, may not be effected between sanction and pretended ignorance of vice, and whether some useful mean may not exist between unbridled licence and despotism, which for want of a better name might be called ‘REGULATION’.<sup>10</sup>

Acton believed that because of ‘men’s nervous reluctance to admit acquaintance with it [prostitution], only half-formed opinions prevail among the most enlightened official men, and extremely erroneous ones among the general public’.<sup>11</sup> It became the duty, therefore, of the essayist to dispel such ignorance, to promote prevention, amelioration and regulation as state responsibilities. They attempted to achieve sympathetic regulation by insisting that fallenness should ‘no longer be held to necessitate, depravity’, for the woman was the victim of male desire.<sup>12</sup>

Amanda Anderson argues that the depictions of prostitutes and fallen women in Victorian culture (both through medical and literary forms) dramatised the predicament of agency, with uncertainties raised concerning the nature of selfhood,

<sup>7</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> See Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> This article will quote substantially from the 1857 edition of William Acton’s *Prostitution Considered in Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and other Large Cities and Garrison Towns with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils* (London: John Churchill, 1857). I will also quote from the 1869 revised edition, where appropriate, because the revisions do provide a clarity of thinking and expression which offers an interesting insight into the work’s development.

<sup>10</sup> Acton, *Prostitution* (1857), pp. 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> Acton, *Prostitution* (1857), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> W.R. Greg, ‘Prostitution’, *Westminster Review*, 53 (July 1850), 448-506 (p. 503).

character and society.<sup>13</sup> There was an underlying fear that fallenness proved the unpredictability of identity, with women susceptible to an irrevocable loss of character. As Sally Mitchell explains, sexual desire was considered to be either weak or nonexistent in women and therefore to fall was a conscious, deliberate or forced choice.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence, a mythology of fallenness was conceived: a myth, according to Nina Auerbach, that enabled cultural fears of female sexuality to hide behind it. By creating an enigmatic icon, the fallen woman could embody, depending on the observer, either a monstrous, autonomous aggressor or a pitiful victim, and yet neither viewpoint sought to understand female sexuality.<sup>15</sup> This myth was also reaffirmed by domestic ideology in which the virtuous woman protected the morality of the home, and through the husband, influenced the nation too. Therefore, as Lynda Nead notes, the prostitute was a deviation from this respectable norm, and ‘threatened not only stable class relations but also national and imperial security’.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, such diverging representations of female sexuality helped to affirm the dichotomy of two classes of women, the fallen and the virtuous.<sup>17</sup> This article is interested in how Gaskell’s *Ruth* critiques, although hesitantly and with much concern, the myth of fallenness, as conceived primarily in the texts which sought to recognise and regulate prostitution. The literary form challenges the causes and effects of fallenness, complicating the assumptions of individual weakness and victimisation, and offering redemption other than through legislative solutions. The article will be structured into two parts: firstly looking at the causes of prostitution, drawing on the Unitarian disavowal of Original Sin; and secondly on the possible restoration of the fallen woman, based upon a unique combination of divine and self-redemption.

Individual weakness, with certain women susceptible to fall, fuelled the Victorian myth of two types of women, and this was often conceived in religious terms. It is this area of thought that is most interesting for the study of *Ruth*, because Original Sin was often blamed for the downfall of the unfortunate woman.<sup>18</sup> The concept of Original Sin, or as the Calvinist defined it, Total Depravity, was the linchpin in the Evangelical creed.<sup>19</sup> Man was under the curse of the ‘fall’, the

<sup>13</sup> Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women’s Reading 1835-1880* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1981), p. xi.

<sup>15</sup> Nina Auerbach, ‘The Rise of the Fallen Woman’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35 (June 1980), 29-52 (pp. 29-31).

<sup>16</sup> Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 91.

<sup>17</sup> See George Watt, *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> See Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 37.

<sup>19</sup> See Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-*



consequences of the first, unlawful disobedient act towards God by Adam and Eve, releasing evil into the world. The only solution to man's moral condition was through faith in the atoning death and resurrection of God's son Jesus.<sup>20</sup> This placed salvation securely in the hands of God, with man unable to redeem himself. Another dimension to redemption, affirmed by Calvinists, was predestination: the belief that only a select number of mankind, already known to God, will experience his salvation. What is of interest here is the 'flaw in Evangelical logic', the contradictory behaviour that resulted from those who subscribed to Original Sin.<sup>21</sup> Transgression had become a distinctly gendered experience, as Nina Auerbach argues, with the doom of Milton's Satan 'grafted' onto the character of Eve, a creature predisposed to fall.<sup>22</sup> Despite recognising that all men were weak and susceptible to sin, and in need of moral salvation, there was a tendency towards exclusiveness and separation. As Mark Knight and Emma Mason explain:

The individualistic tendency of Evangelicalism meant that total depravity was seen primarily in terms of personal human sinfulness, yet it extended to the belief that all society was fallen. As a result, many Evangelicals sought to separate themselves from the evil of their society and its corrupt 'worldly' influences.<sup>23</sup>

This helps to understand why the myth of the fallen and the virtuous existed, even though, according to orthodox Christianity, all were sinners. The prostitute had become Original Sin incarnate, the corruptible, dangerous figure, who, it can be assumed, was not predestined, and thus beyond societal and redemptive help.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, to prevent contamination, she must be isolated from her virtuous counterpart. This is the Calvinist position taken to its extreme, and not all social investigators held to this view, but it does highlight the root of such thinking.

Although Gaskell was no different to her contemporaries in designating prostitution as an illicit act, with women vulnerable to male desire, she refuses to view salvation as selective, insisting on a Unitarian dismissal of Original Sin. This stance challenged the Calvinistic, pre-determined nature of man's moral condition, allowing instead a moral "level playing field" in which individual choices and

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*Century Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 54.

<sup>20</sup> See Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> See Jay, *Religion of the Heart*, p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 155.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Knight, and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 128.

<sup>24</sup> See Patsy Stoneman, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 67.

environmental circumstances formed character.<sup>25</sup> Despite referring to herself as ‘Unitarianly’ unorthodox, Gaskell did follow the essential Unitarian doctrines, such as the belief in a benevolent God as judge, Jesus as *the* model but not divine human, universal salvation, a dismissal of both pre-destination and, as already noted, Original Sin.<sup>26</sup> The human mind and soul were not innately sinful, but instead were born with an immense potential for growth. Unitarians considered the environment as fundamentally responsible for shaping the individual, therefore, it is not surprising to find Gaskell interested in the role that environment plays in a fallen woman’s plight.

Gaskell commences *Ruth* with her familiar trope of describing the novel’s locality, drawing attention to people’s traditions and mode of work. Her justification for such an opening is to:

enable one to understand more clearly the circumstances which contributed to the formation of character. The daily life into which people are born, and into which they are absorbed before they are well aware, forms chains.<sup>27</sup>

Gaskell uses Ruth’s environment to suggest possible reasons for her susceptibility to seduction, whilst maintaining the innocence of Ruth’s character and behaviour. Ruth is described as a caged bird in Mrs Mason’s dress-making establishment after being ‘wrenched’ (p. 38) away from her past life of familial affection in the countryside. She is now orphaned and friendless in a ‘large populous desolate town’, and the narrator asks of the reader ‘what became of such as Ruth?’ (p. 34). Her life is confined to the ‘incessant labour of the work-days’ and the isolating, ‘monotonous idleness’ of Sundays (p. 35). Gaskell’s use of juxtaposition highlights Ruth’s problematic position, where, although she is surrounded by people and activity, she is removed from the protection of intimates and fruitful labour. The lack of parental supervision is regretted, particularly for the vulnerable situation it leaves Ruth in, as she is pursued by her potential lover, Bellingham, without any protector or advice respecting ‘*the* subject of a woman’s life’ (p. 44). Ruth is described as ‘innocent and snow-pure’, who had heard of falling in love but did not know the ‘signs and symptoms’ (p. 44). Yoko Hatano argues that Gaskell’s intention here is to represent Ruth as an example of seduced innocence, the type of fallen woman Evangelical penitentiaries preferred to rescue. Such a differentiation conforms to the belief that Evangelical, particularly Calvinistic, redemption was unheeded and consequently unavailable to the hardened and innately corrupted prostitute. This assessment by

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<sup>25</sup> See Anderson, *Tainted Souls*, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> See Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 10; R.K. Webb, ‘The Gaskells as Unitarians’, in *Dickens and Other Victorians: Essays in Honour of Philip Collins*, ed. by Joanne Shattock (Hampshire: The Macmillan Press, 1988), pp. 144-71 (p. 144).

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth*, ed. by Alan Shelston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 2. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Hatano, however, not only misunderstands Gaskell's Unitarian disavowal of Original Sin, which rejects such classification of a woman's moral condition, but it is also a misreading of Gaskell's intentions in highlighting Ruth's innocence.<sup>28</sup> Gaskell distances Ruth from an innately sinful character but also reveals the vulnerabilities of female ignorance, for at the crucial point of seduction the narrator appeals to the reader to 'remember how young, and innocent, and motherless she was!' (p. 56).

Evangelical, sociological writers of the 1840s rarely questioned the belief that a woman's sinful nature contributed to her fallen state. Although receptive to the vulnerability of the prostitute's position, the tone and rhetoric of lectures presented by Ralph Wardlaw insisted upon her guilt. Wardlaw sincerely felt his responsibility to verbally strip the prostitute of her 'allurements', revealing her 'true character of moral loathsomeness' with 'wretched and damning tendencies'.<sup>29</sup> He quotes extensively from Dr. William Tait's *Magdalenism: Inquiry into the Extent, Causes and Consequences of Prostitution in Edinburgh* (1842), in which Tait outlines natural and accidental causes of prostitution, with 'licentiousness of inclination' taking prominent place at the top of the list. Wardlaw also suggests that the ready compliance of the seduced (as an example of an accidental cause) almost deprives the term 'seduction' of its appropriateness.<sup>30</sup> Gaskell places the rhetoric, as voiced by Ralph Wardlaw, into the mouth of Esther, her first example of a fallen woman, in *Mary Barton* (1848), whose seduction and later abandonment by a soldier leads her into the life of a 'street-walker'.<sup>31</sup> She condemns her own position, describing herself as a 'wretched loathsome creature' (p. 145) with the 'black curse of Heaven' (p. 277) resting upon all her actions. She is haunted by 'some spiritual creature' (p. 192), which she equates with the condemning eyes of family and friends. John Barton's violent reaction, to fling her 'trembling, sinking, fainting' (p. 144) from himself is to reinforce Esther's guilt, that she is 'past hope' (p. 192). Despite the suggestiveness of Esther's untimely demise Gaskell consistently avoided the use of rhetoric which insisted a lapse into sin was inherent and not circumstantial. Esther goes out into the streets to feed her starving child and asks her listener Jem Wilson: "'Do you think God will punish me for that?'". The 'wild vehemence' (p. 189) of her tone, along with the directedness of her question, also seeks a response from the reader.

Jemima, daughter of Mr Bradshaw, in whose household Ruth finds employment as a governess, is a character consistently used by Gaskell to critique the association of the fallen with the sinful nature. She rebels against the 'hard doctrines' of her father, the perfect embodiment of Calvinistic values, in which he drew a 'clear

<sup>28</sup> Yoko Hatano, 'Evangelicalism in *Ruth*', *The Modern Language Review*, 95 (July 2000), 634-41 (p. 637).

<sup>29</sup> Wardlaw, *Lectures*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Wardlaw, *Lectures*, pp. 113-16.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, ed. by Edgar Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 6. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

line of partition' between two groups of mankind, the one to which he belonged, and the other, composed of individuals in need of 'lectures, admonitions and exhortations' (pp. 323-24). However, an acquaintance with Ruth's past life shows the extent to which Jemima's indoctrination from her father has, nonetheless, instilled itself within her; she recoils from the knowledge of Ruth's sin, this 'evil most repugnant to her womanly modesty' (p. 324). She compares this contact with 'open sin' to the diver's terrifying encounter with a 'strange, ghastly, lidless-eyed monster' (p. 323). Jemima's imagination has conjured up a frightening metaphor of fallenness, largely due to her inexperience and ill-preparation for facing what appears on first encounter a new 'terror' (p. 323); she has only pre-learned condemnation to guide her response. Gaskell is critical of the unreasonable classification of 'wantonness' (p. 337) as the one sin hated and loathed above all others, which fuels such judgment, and is perpetuated by writers such as Wardlaw.

The 1850s, however, did see some writers attempt to inculcate a more 'humane and reasonable response' to prostitution, by shifting responsibility onto the male and his unrestrained sexual desire.<sup>32</sup> Gaskell notes this shift by using Bellingham, Ruth's seducer, to characterise the male persona that Greg and Acton put forward as the main cause of prostitution; they transfer blame from a woman's inherent sinful nature to that of the man. Bellingham demonstrates an unbridled sexuality, which Jemima unconsciously alludes to when comparing him to a race horse:

She watched her father's visitor attentively, with something like the curious observation which a naturalist bestows on a new species of animal. [...]

'Brutes are sometimes very beautiful, mamma. I am sure I should think it a compliment to be likened to a race-horse, such as the one we saw. But the thing in which they are alike, is the sort of repressed eagerness in both [...]. Though he seems so gentle, I almost think he is very headstrong in following out his own will'. (pp. 263-64)

Jemima has never been acquainted with such a man before; hence her observation is likened to a 'naturalist' bestowing interest upon a 'new species of animal'. However, Jemima does not possess the vocabulary or knowledge to successfully identify 'repressed eagerness' as a coherent sexual desire; consequently, she finds some expression through using the metaphor of a racehorse. She is able to hint, although not fully, at his dangerous attractiveness, surmising that 'brutes' can also be 'beautiful'. Similarly, Old Thomas, previously a servant in Ruth's family home, tries to warn Ruth of the danger Bellingham presents through the scriptural reference of

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<sup>32</sup> See Anne Humphreys, 'Biographical Note' in Acton's *Prostitution Considered in Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects in London and other Large Cities and Garrison Towns with Proposals for the Control and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils* (London: Frank Class, 1972), p. vi.

the 'devil' prowling around as a 'roaring lion' (p. 51). She cannot translate this biblical warning into the appropriate social terms: the words fail to form a 'definite idea' in Ruth's mind as she is ignorant of male passion, especially desire disguised in the form of a 'handsome young man' (p. 51).<sup>33</sup> The narrator, however, makes it clear that Bellingham is motivated by the possession of Ruth's beauty, her only commodity he 'cared for, and it was supreme. It was all he recognized of her, and he was proud of it' (p. 74).

Both Greg and Acton refer to prostitution as a profession, insisting that it exists and flourishes because it relies on the economic principles of supply and demand, with male desire fuelling the need for prostitutes. Such a shift in responsibility could only be effected if woman's sexuality was denied altogether.<sup>34</sup> Greg trod on dangerous ground as he knew that if women were seen to have no sexual inclination, then those who did sell themselves must be perverse, beyond societal help, and open to the severest condemnation. Jill Matus makes the comment that the vision of a world in which sexually driven women exercised their urges was a hellish apocalypse to Greg.<sup>35</sup> Hence, Greg's priority had to be a dismissal of autonomous desire. He writes:

Women's desires scarcely ever lead to their fall, the desire scarcely exists in a definite and conscious form, till they have fallen [...] men's sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous.<sup>36</sup>

Acton also refutes the possibility of a woman's enjoyment motivating her fall by stressing 'uncontrollable sexual desires of her own play but a little part in inducing profligacy of the female'.<sup>37</sup> One physician, giving advice on the developments of puberty for adolescents, remarked that 'puberty, which gives man the knowledge of greater power, gives to woman the conviction of her dependence'.<sup>38</sup> Greg believed that a woman's sexuality only became active once sexual intercourse had taken place, hence she was dependent on the man's 'greater power', unable to control or assert her own sexuality. Consequently, maintaining a female unconsciousness of sexuality was a sure way of keeping women protected until marriage could provide a secure awakening. Prostitution only confirmed to the essayist the degradation, demonstrated in both the diseased body and mind, of the woman subjected to unsanctioned sexual

<sup>33</sup> See Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 158.

<sup>34</sup> Greg, 'Prostitution', p. 490.

<sup>35</sup> Jill L. Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 123.

<sup>36</sup> Greg, 'Prostitution', pp. 456-57.

<sup>37</sup> Acton, *Prostitution* (1857), p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> See Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 86.

relations. Ignorance construed as innocence was perpetuated and encouraged by advice pamphlets, stipulating that if any information of a sexual nature was to be imparted, it must come from the mother; for as historian Deborah Gorham quotes from advice literature, Lydia Child's *The Mother's Book* (1832), a girl 'who receives her first ideas from shameless stories [...] has in fact prostituted her mind by familiarity with vice'.<sup>39</sup>

Gaskell's characterisation of Ruth as ignorant and sexually unaware could be seen on face value as an affirmation of Greg's denial of female sexuality. The narrator acknowledges that Ruth never received her mother's advice respecting 'the subject of a woman's life' (p. 44), and it takes a child's rebuke, after living with Bellingham for several weeks, to spark a 'new idea' (p. 72) of her compromised position. Ruth cannot deny Bellingham's justification for committing herself to him when it is presented to her as 'natural', in the sense of throwing 'yourself upon the care of the one who loves you dearly' (p. 57). Greg confidently asserts that nine out of ten women fell from 'pure unknowingness [...] from motives or feelings in which sensuality and self have no share'.<sup>40</sup> As Ruth begins to realise the 'estimation in which she was henceforward to be held', she accepts 'I must not think of myself so much. If I can but make him happy, what need I care for chance speeches?' (p. 73). Ruth upholds what Greg terms as 'weak generosity'.<sup>41</sup> However, it is a more credible assessment, as suggested by Jill Matus, to view Ruth's 'unknowingness' as a topical representation of passionlessness, in which Gaskell critiques the dangers of sexual ignorance.<sup>42</sup> Bellingham primes Ruth for seduction by slowly extending their unchaperoned walks after the Sunday church service. Ruth at first refuses but then:

suddenly wondering and questioning herself why she refused a thing which was, as far as reason and knowledge (*her* knowledge) went, so innocent, and which was certainly so tempting and pleasant, she agreed to go the round [...] she forgot all doubt and awkwardness – nay, almost forgot the presence of Mr. Bellingham. (p. 40)

This quotation draws attention to the various dangers of feminine ignorance of sexual desire. Firstly, the parenthetical inclusion of '*her* knowledge' is deliberately used by the narrator to identify Ruth as ill-equipped to make an accurate assessment of the impropriety of Bellingham's suggestion; she does not possess the right knowledge to uncover Bellingham's subterfuge as seduction. Secondly, when she is caught up in the 'beauty of an early spring day' (p. 40), she forgets Bellingham's presence completely. Ruth is unable to perceive Bellingham as a sexual being; hence, she

<sup>39</sup> Gorham, *The Victorian Girl*, p. 92.

<sup>40</sup> Greg, 'Prostitution', pp. 459-60.

<sup>41</sup> Greg, 'Prostitution', p. 458, and see Poovey, 'Speaking of the Body', p. 33.

<sup>42</sup> Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, p. 126.

cannot comprehend herself being viewed in similar terms. This is also seen in her ability to disassociate physical beauty from herself. She acknowledges that ‘yes! I know I am pretty [...] I could not help knowing [...] for many people have told me so’ (p. 12), yet this speech is void of all conceit or any understanding that beauty can be exercised as a power.<sup>43</sup> Ruth’s forgetfulness of Bellingham’s presence indicates her naïve misunderstanding of the situation, and, consequently, leaves her vulnerable to his advances.

Greg believed that if women were placed in the right environment, protected from and ignorant of the knowledge of sexuality and associated vice, ‘from exciting causes’, then all would be pure and virtuous.<sup>44</sup> This appears to affirm a Unitarian dismissal of Original Sin, considering all women to be virtuous, and, with Greg’s wavering Christianity grounded in such Unitarianism, it is quite possible he is advocating innate goodness. However, Gaskell cannot perpetuate this myth of female sexuality, believing instead that it was an essential and not shameful part of a woman’s nature. Patsy Stoneman is right to identify the tension Gaskell faced of advocating ‘self regulating’ adult women, whilst retaining the desire to control and protect female purity, which was often only achieved through the denial of sexual knowledge.<sup>45</sup> There is evidence within *Ruth*, demonstrated through the characterisation of Jemima, of female passion, desire and yearning which contradicted both the dangers of sexuality and the consequent need to promote passionlessness in women.<sup>46</sup> Gaskell is able to explore sexual desire, without expressing it explicitly, by defining it as ‘impulse’. Jemima is aware of the growing attachment between herself and Mr Farquhar, the suitor chosen by her father because of the ‘fitness’ (p. 216) of the alliance to suit his purposes. However, the ‘silent rebellion’ (p. 215) existing in Jemima’s heart against the ‘manoeuvring’ of her future course like ‘pieces at chess’ (p. 240) causes her to withdraw and maintain a ‘sullen reserve’ (p. 224) in Farquhar’s presence. Farquhar recognises ‘impulse’ as the guiding force of Jemima’s behaviour, and is troubled by its existence in such a girl, being ‘taught to dread impulses as promptings of the devil’ (p. 215). Jemima disagrees with this alignment of impulse with evil, lamenting: ‘Poor impulse! how you do get abused’ (p. 217). She will not allow herself to ‘change her very nature’ to ‘gain the love of any human creature’ (p. 219), and although Jemima’s impulsive, ‘headstrong’ and ‘passionate’ (p. 365) nature causes her uneasiness, both physically and mentally, as she wrestles the ‘demon’ (p. 245) of jealousy when Farquhar’s affections are transferred to Ruth, it is important that Gaskell allows her to experience the full range

<sup>43</sup> See Hilary M. Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 61.

<sup>44</sup> Greg, ‘Prostitution’, p. 457, and see Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, p. 123.

<sup>45</sup> Patsy Stoneman, ‘Gaskell, Gender and the Family’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. by Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 131-47 (p. 140).

<sup>46</sup> See Matus, *Unstable Bodies*, p. 130.

of desire.

Jemima's understanding of her own sexuality and desires is greatly increased when she is made fully acquainted with Ruth's past. Her first encounter with 'open sin', as already noted, was a tumultuous experience, precisely because the 'family and religious circumstances' had tried to 'hedge' and 'guard' (p. 323) her from ever encountering vice. Yet knowledge of sexuality enables Jemima, for the first time, to fully understand her own desires for Farquhar, as well as to recognise the unjust jealousy she has been harbouring against Ruth. It is a 'sudden impulse' which makes her aware of the offence she has given to Farquhar, and causes her to ask "'I have not vexed you, have I, Walter?'" (p. 374). The use of his first name settles the doubt of whether mutual affection exists between them, and they are finally identified as lovers. During Bradshaw's angry and violent admonition of Ruth's past sin, Jemima confidently and for the first time openly rebels against her father's wishes, bearing 'witness' to the goodness of Ruth's behaviour. There is a display of female solidarity as Jemima stands 'side by side' with Ruth, taking her 'cold, dead hand' in her 'warm convulsive grasp' (p. 338). Jemima's passionate nature, demonstrated through her association with impulse and manifested in bodily action, is only strengthened and confirmed in the revelation of possessing such a sexual nature.

Jemima's confession that "'I might just have been like Ruth'" (p. 365), susceptible to temptation, but for the difference in family circumstances, draws Ruth's history closer to the bourgeois social sphere, refusing to affirm the myth of two types of women, who should never interact.<sup>47</sup> It also engages head on with the social investigator's contradictory viewpoint of what has happened to the fallen woman's character during the period of her prostitution. Despite Acton's insistence in the 1857 edition of *Prostitution* that 'it must not be imagined that, though disordered and for a time lost to our sight, the other strata of the woman's nature have ceased to exist' he wrote in the revised 1869 edition that a woman's progression into fallenness, starting with a single act of unchastity, is a losing of her better self.<sup>48</sup> He explains that:

By unchastity a woman becomes liable to lose character [...] reduced to prostitution for support. She is a woman with half the woman gone, and that half containing all that elevates her nature, leaving her a mere instrument of impurity.<sup>49</sup>

Acton's reading of a woman's fallenness suggests that her character becomes defective, with a significant breach taking place between her once virtuous state and her current position. Although Acton and Greg promoted rescue, believing that the

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<sup>47</sup> See Bodenheimer, *Politics of Story*, p. 163.

<sup>48</sup> Acton, *Prostitution* (1857), p. 53.

<sup>49</sup> Acton, *Prostitution* (1972), p. 166.



‘first false step [...] should no longer be considered irretrievable’, they did present the fallen condition as unstable and changeable.<sup>50</sup> It is this categorisation which Gaskell challenges, unconvinced that a transgression into sin changes the essential nature of a woman’s character.

This belief of Gaskell’s is reflected in her approach to amelioration, wanting to reintegrate women back into a ‘conventional and recognisable’ bourgeois society.<sup>51</sup> She was sceptical that ‘deception’ (giving a woman a new identity), as carried out by penitentiaries and institutes of reclamation, was the correct solution for dealing with fallenness. Charles Dickens helped to set up Urania Cottage, a ‘Home for Homeless Women’, whose activities were described in detail in his weekly *Household Words*. After an average term of probation, usually lasting one year, a ‘refining and humanising alteration’ was ‘wrought in the expression of the [woman’s] features [...] which scarcely can be imagined’.<sup>52</sup> With irreproachable character matching their transformed appearance, such women were ready to emigrate to Australia, to take up their new positions as domestic servants, governesses and eventually wives. Such schemes implied that reintegration could only occur in an environment where past lives were unknowable. The uncomfortable knowledge of a woman’s sexuality had to be erased in a scheme of forgetfulness. Gaskell objected to this type of ‘humanising alteration’ in her fictional portrayal, by stripping Ruth of her widowed disguise and allowing her sexual past to be known in the heart of domesticity, in the Bensons’s home.

Once Gaskell has placed Ruth into a domestic environment, she is able to dramatise the functional benefits domesticity has in restoring a fallen woman’s social reputation. Ruth is given six years peace in the Bensons’s home and the narrator interestingly describes the external change that this had given to her, whilst subtly playing down any internal change:

But, perhaps, in Ruth herself there was the greatest external change; for of the change which had gone on in her heart, and mind, and soul, or *if there had been any*, neither she nor anyone around her was conscious; but sometimes Miss Benson did say to Sally, ‘How very handsome Ruth is grown!’ (p. 208, emphasis mine)

The emphasis upon her external features, in the above quotation, indicates that it is the physical effects of Ruth’s ordeal that have been soothed by domesticity. The strong bond between mother and son is also presented as evidence that the domestic space can restore, with Ruth’s ‘whole heart’ given over to this ‘boy’ (p. 209). Gaskell

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<sup>50</sup> Greg, ‘Prostitution’, p. 503.

<sup>51</sup> See Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, p. 33

<sup>52</sup> Charles Dickens, ‘Home for Homeless Women’, *Household Words*, 7 (April 1853), 161-175 (p. 173).

is concerned with the proper sphere and object of love, concluding that Ruth's motherly and fierce regard for her son should supersede her childish love, naively conceived, for Bellingham.<sup>53</sup> This practice of selfless love, which is distinguished from 'weak generosity', therefore, has implications for Ruth's redemption. Thurstan Benson, when he first hears that Ruth is pregnant, dismisses Faith's concern that this will be Ruth's 'badge' of 'shame' but instead rejoices, believing that reverence for her child will 'shut out sin, – will be purification' (p. 119). Contradictorily, this physical reminder, the product, of Ruth's fall will not debase her but instead be revered as the means of blotting out the past wrong, and will initiate her spiritual renewal. Ruth, at first, fears that she 'loved him too much – more than God himself – yet she could not bear to pray to have her love for her child lessened', and, in consequence of this honest dialogue with God, the narrator comments that 'her love for her child led her up to love to God' (p. 209). Ruth and her son, Leonard, 'grew and strengthened into the riper beauty of their respective ages', with 'no touch of decay' (p. 214) transferred to their respective household members. This bond, nurtured in the domestic home, not only leads to Ruth's spiritual awakening, but protects her from the worst excesses of outside disapprobation.

Despite Gaskell's support of the fallen woman's character, her Unitarian belief could not throw aside the problem that a sexual sin had been committed. And so consequently, Ruth is led through an extended period of suffering, culminating in her untimely death. This is often the most troubling part for the modern reader to accept. The narrator explicitly identifies suffering as having a spiritual benefit, with Gaskell enforcing it upon Ruth not to satisfy social expectations of punishment, but of God's law; 'His law once broken, His justice and the very nature of those laws bring the immutable retribution' (p. 286). The critic R.K. Webb explains that, within a Necessarian scheme, which Gaskell subscribes to, the inescapable effect of wrong formation of character or a deliberate or careless choice would result in suffering.<sup>54</sup> Through such an experience, the person would learn the dictates of duty and to put others before themselves.<sup>55</sup> William Gaskell's sermon reveals a positive and embracing attitude towards suffering, stating that 'he who has never suffered, has not attained to anything like true moral elevation and maturity of character. We must be purified in the fires of affliction'.<sup>56</sup> Ruth, after the trial of turning down Bellingham's proposal, suffers an acute sense of doubt and mental uncertainty, but, within the turmoil, 'suddenly a fresh thought came, and she prayed that, through whatever

<sup>53</sup> See Schor, *Scheherezade in the Marketplace*, p. 66.

<sup>54</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the Necessarian scheme as a 'believer in necessity; a person who holds that human conduct is dictated by force of circumstance (as opposed to free will)', <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 23.01.13].

<sup>55</sup> Webb, 'The Gaskells as Unitarians', pp. 164-66.

<sup>56</sup> William Gaskell, *Christian Views of Life and Death: A Sermon Preached in Cross-Street Chapel, Manchester, September 25th, 1859, On the Occasion of the Death of John Ashton Nicholls, Esq., F. R. A. S., with a Sketch of his Life* (London: E.T. Whitfield, 1859), p. 12.

suffering, she might be purified [...], God might see fit to chastise her' (p. 285). Ruth correctly responds to her situation by relying on her 'tears' to wash away the 'errors' (p. 301) of her youth, which is juxtaposed against Bellingham's complete lack of guilt or awareness of his waywardness. His actions have 'left no sense of sin' or shame upon his 'conscience' (p. 303) and he lives out his life dismissive of eternal consequences. Gaskell uses Ruth's acceptance of her suffering as a positive indicator of her path towards self-redemption and salvation.

The transitory nature of suffering is an important consideration explored by Gaskell in this novel, to insist on its reformatory purpose and to not allow it to be judged as punishment.<sup>57</sup> A Unitarian Minister, Lant Carpenter, believed that retributive punishment could have no place in God's intentions but that when 'suffering has done its work, and the deep stains of guilt have been removed as by fire, suffering will be no longer continued'.<sup>58</sup> There is an uneasy tension between Gaskell's insistence on Ruth's innocent nature and her need for spiritual reform, but through a controlled suffering process, Gaskell finds an opportunity to address humanity's spiritual condition which will eventually culminate in universal salvation. Ruth takes spiritual strength from a carved gargoyle her eyes rest upon whilst in church. The narrator describes in detail the unknown carver's ability to capture an 'intense expression of suffering' (p. 282) without retracting from its beautiful features. Ruth views the carving as a memoriam to an 'imager, carver, sufferer' (p. 283) who has long passed away but left evidence of a hope that, in time, all human suffering would be at an end. This identification with another human sufferer directly engages with the Unitarian understanding of Christ's role in the world. He is the perfect embodiment of humanity and leaves an exemplified life of self-redemption for all men to follow. As James Drummond preached at the sermon of Gaskell's own death, 'we must suffer with him, if we would be also glorified together [...] sorrow belongs to us as immortal beings'.<sup>59</sup> Ruth's suffering, therefore, satisfies a social fall but more significantly attempts to represent Gaskell's Unitarian understanding of universal spiritual failings that are inevitable in a Necessarian worldview. At Ruth's funeral, Thurstan reads out chapter seven from *Revelation*, a reference to a time after death when those who have come out of a 'great tribulation' are now cleansed and are before the 'throne of God' (p. 457). This is a pointed dismissal of predestination and Calvinistic assumptions that not all will be saved.

Gaskell's conclusion has continued to receive various degrees of criticism

<sup>57</sup> See Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies Concerning Eternal Punishment and the Future Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 43.

<sup>58</sup> *An Examination of the Charges Made against Unitarians and Unitarianism by the Rt. Rev. Dr. Magee, Bishop of Raphae* (Bristol, 1820), quoted in Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, p. 43.

<sup>59</sup> James Drummond, *The Holiness of Sorrow: A Sermon, Preached in Cross Street Chapel, Manchester, on Sunday, Nov. 19th, 1865: On Occasion of the Sudden Death of Mrs Gaskell* (Manchester: Guardian Steam Printing Offices, 1865), pp. 15-16.

towards the validity of killing her heroine, beginning with Charlotte Brontë's objections: 'Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping?'<sup>60</sup> Gaskell had bravely set out to challenge the Victorian myth of fallenness, choosing to depict a heroine free of Original Sin, restoring her into the domestic setting where female friendships were prioritised and sexuality was affirmed. And yet there is a sense that Gaskell continued to be frustrated with the limitations of Victorian culture, as witnessed in her unease of how *Ruth* would be received. Unable to comprehend the full restoration of a fallen woman in her own reality, in a fit of disappointment, she handed Ruth over to the Unitarian security of redemption in death.

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<sup>60</sup> *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*, ed. by T.J. Wise and J.A. Symington, 4 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1932), III, p. 332.

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## **‘SO PURE AND RATIONAL AN ATTACHMENT’: ISABELLA GLYN’S PERFORMANCE OF SOCIAL AND SEXUAL RISK AT SADLER’S WELLS**

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### *Abstract*

This paper examines Isabella Glyn’s performance as the Duchess of Malfi at Sadler’s Wells during the 1850 season, investigating the way in which she was seen as performing social and sexual risk whilst presenting a model of respectable female behaviour. John Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*, adapted by R.H. Horne for a Victorian audience, was presented as part of Samuel Phelps’s project to improve the morals and conduct of the Sadler’s Wells audience via legitimate drama, and the Duchess’s second (potentially compromising) marriage provided a focus for anxieties around female sexual agency and the display of desire.

The stage upon which Glyn performed was widely discussed as having been reclaimed from coarse and prurient melodramas to be used as a tool to reform the pleasures of the working class, and contemporary commentary shows particular concern with the presence of ‘bold women’ in the theatre. Horne himself had collaborated with Dickens on a piece for *Household Words* which stressed these women as the aspect of theatre most in need of reform. Thus the production would have been inevitably haunted by the theatrical ghosts of the “fallen” women who had appeared in the despised melodramas which *The Duchess of Malfi* was intended to supplant, and who had formed part of the public to whom the theatre had played.

Glyn’s performance took place at the intersection of competing discourses around female sexual propriety, social respectability and the effects of legitimate drama, a fact which was recognised by contemporary reviewers. The terms of their commentary frame the production as Glyn performing the Duchess’s appropriate performance of her own feelings in a compromising situation. The praise awarded to her, which seems to locate her artistry in her ability to perform the potentially problematic material in a haunted setting, demonstrates the way in which her labour as an artistic professional became visible in her negotiation of these discourses.

Tracy C. Davis’s landmark study *Actresses as Working Women* (1991) focussed attention on the socially marginal position of female performers in the Victorian theatre industry. As she points out

No matter, how consummate the artist, pre-eminent the favourite, and modest the woman, the actress could not supersede the fact that she lived a public life and consented to be ‘hired’ for amusement by all who could command the price.<sup>1</sup>

Davis demonstrates how the social and cultural spaces which actresses had to negotiate in order to work made them vulnerable to being framed as generally

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<sup>1</sup> Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses As Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 69. Further references are given after quotations in the text.



“fallen”, or more specifically as sex workers. Paradoxically, ‘to counter-act negative judgements about their public existence, they endeavoured to make the propriety of their private lives visible’, which itself ‘defile[d] the bourgeois separation of public and private spheres’ (p. 69). The potent social and sexual discourses which Davis identifies are well worth tracing in the case of Isabella Glyn’s performance as the Duchess of Malfi at Sadler’s Wells in 1850.

I read this performance as an unusual case which took place at the intersection of discourses around sexual propriety, social respectability and female professionalism. These discourses all played out in public, and all impinged on perceptions of private life. The play, which was itself in the process of being critically rehabilitated, was produced as part of a widely recognised project of “improvement” at the theatre, intended to raise the social and moral tone of the audience. Glyn’s performance is worth investigating because it appears to have established her credentials through its potentially problematic nature, by demonstrating the risks involved when playing a Duchess who married her steward in a potentially coarse old play on the stage of Sadler’s Wells. On one hand her portrayal of the Duchess highlighted the discourses of “proper” female behaviour which could potentially condemn the actress herself. As Mary Jean Corbett has pointed out, female performers in the Victorian theatre were still vulnerable to being identified with the perceived moral failings of the characters they portrayed:

The actress’ performances on either side of the curtain may [...] be understood as mutually determining: if being ‘well-bred’ impedes the representation of passionate abandon, then representing passionate abandon may also imperil one’s reputation for (and experience of oneself as) being ‘well-bred’.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, the performance was intended to help reclaim an audience which included sex workers by the beneficial effects of high culture. Her labour and agency only became visible as the audience (and commentators) recognised her performance of sexual and social risk and the way she managed to avoid transgressing the accepted limits whilst modelling a certain set of behaviours for the audience. Glyn appeared as a “working woman” in this performance in several modes. She was a theatrical professional, pursuing her paid employment and later arguing in public about the terms of her contract. She was a woman in the public sphere of the entertainment industry whose presence was available for hire, portraying another woman (the Duchess of Malfi) who is forced to balance the public and private aspects of her life. She was also part of an artistic project to reform the audience of a particular theatre, performing cultural work on the people who paid to see her. These

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Jean Corbett, ‘Performing Identities: Actresses and Autobiography’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 109-28 (p. 113).

competing, and sometimes clashing, kinds of work mean that this production provides us with an unusually rich and nuanced vision of a mid-Victorian actress negotiating the paradoxes of her profession.

Born in 1823, Glyn studied acting in Paris and was adopted as a *protégée* by Charles Kemble, first appearing in Manchester. She also performed in York and at the Olympic Theatre in London, before arriving at Sadler's Wells to take lead roles opposite Samuel Phelps in the 1848 season. By the time she created the role of Marina, the Duchess, Glyn was an established part of the Sadler's Wells company, though it was still early in her career and she had not been a leading lady at any other theatre in London. Kathleen McLuskie and Jenny Uglow describe her as 'an actress of great physical presence' and 'a skilful comedienne [...] able to bring variety into the standard tragic roles', though they cite some contemporary opinion which found her performances stylised, mannered and even affected.<sup>3</sup> This notion of stylisation seems to reflect a general perception that Glyn's acting style was old-fashioned and "picturesque" rather than belonging to the "intuitive" school represented by Kean. Her performance as Queen Katherine in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* was called 'the most finished and finest piece of classic elocution on the stage'.<sup>4</sup>

The 'Memoir of Miss Glyn' which was attached to the 1851 printing of *The Duchess of Malfi* stresses her connection to the Kembles, an association echoed in a review from the same year, which describes her as 'trained in what may be called the ideal school of acting' and 'the sole representative of that style which is generally associated with the Kemble family'.<sup>5</sup> The references continue later into the decade, as an advert for the production of *The Duchess of Malfi* at the Great National Standard announces 'Miss Glyn, the acknowledged Siddons of the day' and a reviewer for the *Glasgow Herald* advises readers that '[t]he style of Miss Glyn has been moulded in the Kemble school'.<sup>6</sup> These sources seem to be corroborated by the actor George Coleman, who disliked Glyn and found her difficult to work with: 'Accurately parroted in the archaistic method of Mrs. Siddons, many of Isabella's performances were intelligent, picturesque and striking [...] a thrilling piece of Siddonian "business"'.<sup>7</sup> Thus commentators who both approved and disapproved of Glyn place her within a Kemble tradition, giving us solid grounds for adopting this as a frame for understanding her as a performer. It can give us a sense of how her acting might have appeared, and the cultural freight which it would have carried for many spectators.

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<sup>3</sup> Kathleen McLuskie and Jenny Uglow, *The Duchess of Malfi (Plays in Performance)* (Bristol: The Bristol Press, 1989), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> *Era* (24 Oct. 1852), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Northern Star and National Trades Journal* (15 March 1851), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> *Era* (20 April 1856), p. 1; *Glasgow Herald* (9 Oct. 1860), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> George Coleman, *Fifty Years of an Actor's Life*, 2 vols. (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1904), II, pp. 570, 573.

Jim Davis gives a sense of what the performances of this Kemble school might have looked like, and how they would have been read by audiences when he describes Sarah Siddons as the last of the practitioners of ‘a long era of neoclassical acting, a carry-over from the previous century’ which emphasised clarity, the recognisable expression of an established set of emotions and well-known ‘passages of high emotion’ within plays.<sup>8</sup> The audience would recognise the minor ways in which a performer indulged in a ‘careful departure from the practice of previous interpreters’ (p. 230). Davis contrasts this with the arrival of Edmund Kean, whom Michael Booth has described as ‘an actor for romantic poets, romantic critics and a romantic age’, with his ‘physical intensity, his abrupt transitions of mood’ and his ‘violent (though carefully controlled) expressions of emotion’.<sup>9</sup> Both reviewers and advertisers clearly saw Glyn as part of an older tradition, a neoclassical school of idealistic (as opposed to romantic) acting.

Siddons was also a very powerful cultural figure more generally. Russ McDonald has described her as ‘arguably the first female English theatrical superstar’, the only female performer at the time to have achieved a place in the heroic tradition of English acting which ran from Burbage, through Betterton and Garrick.<sup>10</sup> Whilst discussing William Hazlitt’s writing about Siddons, McDonald suggests that the ‘cast of the prose conveys distinctly the force of Siddons’s effect on her audiences, and by implication the culture at large’ (p. 114). The links made with Siddons in the press coverage connect her with a figure who had significance far beyond the specific acting style she represented. Establishing a lineage from Siddons to Glyn sited the latter both within theatrical history and the cultural iconography of the period as the inheritor of a heavyweight tragic mantle. This association gave gravitas to Glyn, who was still in the relatively early years of her career in 1851, and it is likely to have shaped the understanding of this performance of *The Duchess of Malfi*, too. Her apparently statuesque style, relying on presence and measured elocution, associated her with Sarah Siddons and her neo-Classical brand of tragedy. This dovetailed well with the legitimising and improving model of theatre which Sadler’s Wells offered during the mid-century.

However, *The Duchess of Malfi* was not the most obvious play to find favour with a Victorian audience, at least not on the commercial stage. Written in Webster’s typically dense and allusive verse, the plot centres on the consequences of the young

<sup>8</sup> Jim Davis, ‘Presence, Personality, Physicality: Actors and their Repertoires 1776-1895’, in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre 1660-1895*, Vol. 2., ed. by Joseph Donohue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 229-72 (pp. 229-30). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 303.

<sup>10</sup> Russ McDonald, ‘Sarah Siddons’, in *Garrick, Kemble, Siddons, Kean: Great Shakespeareans* Vol. 2., ed. by Peter Holland (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 105-37 (p. 111). Further references are given after quotations in the text.



The passion of the Duchess for Antonio, a subject most difficult to treat, is managed with intimate delicacy; and, in a situation of great peril for the author, she condescends without being degraded, and declares the affection with which her dependant had inspired her without losing anything of dignity and respect.<sup>14</sup>

His praise for Webster's care and 'delicacy' blurs from verbal skill into moral propriety as he describes the relationship in terms which sound more like a defence of a friend's *mésalliance* than the plot of a revenge tragedy:

Her attachment is justified by the excellence of its object; and she seems only to exercise the privilege of exalted rank in raising merit from obscurity. We sympathise from the first moment in the loves of the Duchess and Antonio, as we would in a long standing domestic affection, and we mourn the more over the misery that attends them because we feel that happiness was the natural and legitimate fruit of so pure and rational an attachment. It is the wedded friendship of middle life transplanted to cheer the cold and glittering solitude of a court. (p. x)

The pressing into service of the rhetoric of companionate marriage, with its stress upon 'rational [...] attachment' and 'wedded friendship' displays Dyce's concern to justify what might easily appear to be an unsuitable second marriage between social unequals, embarked upon for her own gratification by Ferdinand's 'lusty widow'. Those concerns are further illuminated when we reflect that the Duchess's wedding ceremony is held in secret, and attended by a waiting-woman rather than a clergyman, appealing to common law rather than the church and state authorities. Sos Eltis underlines the fact that to be regarded as a fallen woman in Victorian drama, a character only had to 'indulg[e] in sex outside the legal and moral bounds of marriage', a category which included the 'seduced virgin, adulterous wife or professional prostitute'.<sup>15</sup> When presented on the Victorian stage, the Duchess's marriage would not simply reflect on her wisdom or judgement, but could cast her into a dramatic category which potentially also contained the sex workers on the streets of London (and in the audience of Sadler's Wells).

This intersects with Tracy Davis's evidence that '[f]or the middle classes, an acting career was a version of The Fall from virtue' (p. 72). The character of the

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<sup>14</sup> John Webster, *Works of John Webster, Now First Collected With Some Account of the Author and Notes*, ed. by Rev. Alexander Dyce (London: William Pickering, 1830), pp. ix-x. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>15</sup> Sos Eltis, 'The Fallen Woman on Stage: Maidens, Magdalens and the Emancipated Female', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Kerry Powell, pp. 222-36 (p. 223).

Duchess was dangerously close to the kind of socially and sexually compromised figure which Victorian commentators so often associated with the actress. I read the eighteenth-century instantiations of *The Duchess of Malfi* via Jean Marsden's insights, elaborated in her study *Fatal Desire* (2006), into the ways she-tragedy betrayed its heroines into more and more inadvertent and blameless transgressions of expected sexual conduct. As the second generation of she-tragedy developed, and the Society of Reformation of Manners made itself felt during Anne's reign, she notes that the 'manner in which heroines step over this line becomes increasingly vexed in the eighteenth century' and the works exhibit a concern with sexual agency and how far each heroine is culpable for perceived stains on her honour.<sup>16</sup> This involvement of tragic plotting with shifting gender ideology contributed to the 1708 printing and the 1730 adaptation I mentioned above, and is worth bearing in mind when we consider how R.H. Horne's adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi* provided a vehicle for Glyn to engage with the boundaries of female sexual agency and propriety.

The literary critics I have cited from the early nineteenth century provide useful evidence for us as to what aspects of the play merited most attention (whether they were deploring or defending it), but they also provided a frame through which contemporaries read the play when it made its way back onto the stage. Lines from Hazlitt and Lamb turn up in reviews, sometimes specifically credited and sometimes as part of the common currency of theatre discussions. Before discussing Glyn's performance, *Lloyd's London Newspaper* quoted more than a hundred and fifty words of Hazlitt's *Lectures* and noted that the adaptor, Horne, 'has given every consideration to the foregoing just remarks', declaring that 'he has stripped the play of much of its horror, purged it of its grossness'.<sup>17</sup>

Horne's writing at this time can be read as part of the broad concern with reform which criss-crossed cultural and political institutions of the mid-century. The year after his adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi* reached the stage of Sadler's Wells he published a novel entitled *The Dreamer and the Worker: A Story of the Present Time*, which had been serialized through 1847 in *Jerrold's Shilling Magazine*. The preface to this work placed it alongside Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), as well as works by Henry Mayhew and Lamartine as concerned with 'the same tendency – the bodily and mental condition, the social and political position and progress of the working classes'.<sup>18</sup> Revealingly, however, he also distinguishes it from these other works by his particular ideology:

<sup>16</sup> Jean I. Marsden, *Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality and the English Stage, 1660-1720* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 134.

<sup>17</sup> *Lloyd's London Newspaper* (24 Nov. 1850), p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Richard (Henry) Hengist Horne, Preface to *The Dreamer and the Worker: A Story of the Present Time* (London: Henry Colborn, 1851), pp. iii-viii (p. iii). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

But there is one important feature in which *The Dreamer and the Worker* differs from the rest of its family. It never fails, on all fair opportunities, to claim for the literary man, and public teacher, a due recognition of his order. The working classes are not everything; the thinker must precede the doer – or the latter may waste his strength, and do mischief besides. The working man must be educated; a limited number may educate themselves, but the great mass need every help that the best, *i.e.* the most sympathizing and highly-informed instructors can give them. (p. iv)

Whilst hurrying to “warn off” all mere novel readers’, Horne also tries to discourage anyone from misinterpreting his title as setting up an opposition between the two terms.

Let no-one [...] expect [...] any setting up of our practical friends, the energetic and industrious artizans [*sic*], by knocking down all abstract thinkers; any repetition of the vulgar-minded crusade against the poet or the speculative thinker. (p. v.)

He declares that the distinction in the title could equally well have been made by using ‘the Idealist and the Realist, the Poet and the Mechanic, Theory and Practice, Thought and Action &c.’ (p. v.). His belief that these sets of pairs are equivalent to each other (and that thought is necessarily prior to action) demonstrates Horne’s concern that the working classes should not be the objects, but the subjects, of their own improvement. For Horne, the creative and beneficial potential was not located within disadvantaged groups in Victorian society, but in the culture and ideals to which they could be exposed by their social superiors.

Horne’s involvement draws attention to a larger cultural project which framed the performance: the improving possibilities of legitimate drama in a working class area such as that which surrounded Sadler’s Wells. Legitimate and illegitimate drama had been abolished as legal categories by the Theatres Regulation Act of 1843, and the minor theatres no longer had to smuggle their productions of Shakespeare in under a thin veneer of musical accompaniment to avoid offending against a law which made respectable comedy and tragedy the preserve of a few favoured houses. Nonetheless, the terms retained their force as markers of cultural value, as Jane Moody has explained, with the term legitimate chiming with broader Victorian notions of a national cultural inheritance. Moody describes ‘illegitimate culture’ as ‘an unstable category which crosses the boundaries between institutions and indeed between genres’, covering ‘the controversial production of melodrama and spectacle at the Theatres Royal’ as well as plays at the minor houses, and ‘crucially implicit in [...] polemical descriptions of theatrical culture’.<sup>19</sup> Samuel Phelps had taken over

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<sup>19</sup> Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London 1770-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Sadler's Wells in 1844, the year after the Theatres Regulation Act which permitted the production of the legitimate drama, including Shakespeare, by non-patent theatres. Between 1844 and 1862, when he left the theatre Phelps produced 'almost the entire Shakespeare canon, revivals of Jacobean and eighteenth-century plays, and acknowledged literary successes by contemporary nineteenth-century authors'.<sup>20</sup>

Contemporary commentators frequently praised Phelps for establishing a stronghold of the legitimate drama in such a supposedly unpromising location as Islington, contrasting it with their assumptions that working-class audiences were naturally barbaric, stupid and faintly criminal. Theodor Fontane enthused in the late 1850s that Sadler's Wells was 'the true Shakespearean stage – the place where we find him at his most authentic', despite the theatre being 'at best second rate'. He explained that the 'questionable company' of the 'by no means elegant public of Islington' did not discourage more fashionable patrons.<sup>21</sup> Michael Williams's *Some London Theatres Past and Present* (1883) includes a 1879 piece which gives another contemporary's opinion of the cultural work effected at Sadler's Wells, in a movement from 'melodrama of the coarsest type' being offered to 'utterly vicious' audiences to 'the Drama' being performed to the adulation of 'the most intellectual pit of any theatre in London', including figures from the fashionable and literary worlds.<sup>22</sup> This note is also struck by the actors Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, who record the theatre's previous reputation (before the Phelps management) 'for having the roughest audiences in London and for being the home of the lower forms of dramatic entertainment'.<sup>23</sup>

This narrative of legitimisation and reformation, though broadly supported by Shirley Allen in 1971 and Michael Booth in 1991, has come under increasing criticism by more recent scholarly work.<sup>24</sup> Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow have critiqued the 'mythopoeia' of 'miraculous transformation' in work which sits comfortably alongside Jacky Bratton's broader unravelling of the myth of the mid-century doldrums of Victorian theatre in *New Readings in Theatre History* (2003).<sup>25</sup> I

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Press, 2000), p. 78.

<sup>20</sup> Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow, *Reflecting the Audience: London Theatregoing 1840-1880* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001), p. 108.

<sup>21</sup> Theodor Fontane, *Shakespeare in the London Theatre 1855-58*, trans. by Russell Jackson (London: Society for Theatre Research, 1999), p. 59.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Williams, *Some London Theatres Past and Present* (London: Gilbery & Rivington, 1883), p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, *The Theatres of London* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961), p. 247.

<sup>24</sup> See Shirley Allen, *Samuel Phelps and Sadler's Wells Theatre* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1971) and Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> See Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).



am not arguing that the myth of transformation is either accurate or a useful scholarly approach, but it was a powerful context for contemporary reception, and lets us draw connections between the discourses audiences brought to bear on Glyn's performance.

Glyn's appearance as the Duchess took place in 1850, about a third of the way through Phelps's management of Sadler's Wells. Dickens's weekly *Household Words* ran a series of articles on popular entertainment in its first issues during the same year, arguing that it should be elevated rather than abolished, but working from the assumption that working-class audiences needed to be controlled and improved. The description of the Victoria Theatre (which was similar to the pre-Phelps Wells) in *Household Words* was generally indulgent and sympathetic, making its attitude to the behaviour and character of the young women present even more striking:

The place was crammed to excess, in all parts. Among the audience were a large number of boys and youths, and a great many young girls grown into bold women before they had well ceased to be children. These last were the worst features of the whole crowd, and were more prominent there than in any other sort of public assembly that we know of, except at a public execution.<sup>26</sup>

A few months before Phelps staged *The Duchess of Malfi*, Horne himself collaborated on an article with Dickens in the same journal, declaring that they 'wish[ed] to show what an intelligent and resolute man may do, to establish a good Theatre in most unpromising soil, and to reclaim one of the lowest of all possible audiences'.<sup>27</sup> Once again interest in the improving benefits of art blended with a concern for behaviour and (implicitly) sexual morality, as they decried the 'foul language, oaths, catcalls, shrieks, yells, blasphemy, obscenity' (p. 25) which used to be heard within the theatre. Their most stringent condemnation was reserved for this obscene language, and the article calls it 'the most intolerable defilement of the place' which had to be stopped before 'any effectual purification of the audience and establishment of decency' could take place (p. 26). The charged language of 'defilement', 'purification' and 'decency' suggests the undercurrent of anxiety in this piece – an anxiety which lead Dickens elsewhere to label the 'bold women' of the Victoria as 'the worst features of the whole crowd'. A journalistic sketch of 'The Story of Old Sadler's Wells', written in 1879 and included in Williams's *Some London Theatres Past and Present*, similarly associates the pre-Phelps theatre with concern over women in public:

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<sup>26</sup> [Charles Dickens], 'The Amusements of the People', *Household Words* (13 April 1850), pp. 57-60 (p. 57).

<sup>27</sup> [Charles Dickens and Richard H. Horne], 'Shakespeare and Newgate', *Household Words* (4 Oct. 1851), pp. 25-27 (p. 25). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Their task was, at first, no easy one. Melodrama of the coarsest type had long been the fare offered to a class of frequenters, in themselves so utterly vicious, that no respectable tradesman would dream of taking his wife or daughters to the place. The lessees had not only to purify the nature of the performances, they had also to *unmake*, as well as to create, their audience.<sup>28</sup>

The qualification of ‘respectable’ in the last quotation presumably implies that there were indeed women and girls present at Sadler’s Wells before Phelps, but that they were potentially ‘bold’ (in Dickens’s term), or at least not effectively performing a ‘respectable’ social role. Thus Glyn’s performance as the Duchess took place as part of a rehabilitating process both for the play and the theatre, in which both were seen as at risk of enabling or containing sexual impropriety. The cultural work carried out by the production was intended to disrupt the sex work which Dickens and Horne believed was taking place in the theatre. The cultural gravitas of Glyn’s association with Siddons was being leveraged to present this production as legitimate and capable of bringing the high culture tradition to bear upon the supposedly degenerate surroundings of the theatre. Horne’s hand in the *Household Words* article positions him in the project of moral and theatrical regeneration as both reformer and reporter. He appears presenting a certain form of entertainment to the audience and then policing their reaction to it in print, just as he attempted to determine and control the reader’s engagement with *The Dreamer and the Worker*.

Having set the production in these contexts, it is striking (if not surprising) how much energy newspaper reviews of Glyn’s performance expend on the love scenes at the beginning of the play, whether using them to commend or criticise it. The *Birmingham Daily Post* had this to say:

Miss Glyn was more thoroughly at home in the earlier sunny phases of the history than from her tragic acquirements and aspirations might have been expected; and in the wooing scene with *Antonio*, in the first act, where womanly diffidence and womanly impulses contend respecting those advances which the superiority of her station impose upon her, she was especially happy. The passages of affection with her husband lover, *Antonio* (Mr McLein), were delightful pieces of dramatic sketching, and the girlish expression of joy which escapes her at the assumed leniency of her stern brother *Ferdinand*, in regard to the current scandals concerning her, was a master-stroke in its way, striking a chord that vibrated in every bosom.<sup>29</sup>

The *Examiner* was less keen on Glyn’s performance, but nonetheless picked the same aspects of the show upon which to base its judgment:

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<sup>28</sup> Williams, *Some London Theatres Past and Present*, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post* (26 Dec. 1850), p. 3.

The performance of Miss Glyn also has fine points, though a little too gay and conscious in the early scenes, and somewhat failing of the intensity of spirit with which one fancies she should repel the taunts of her murderers – ‘I am Duchess of Malfi still’.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the difference in opinion, this review clearly regards the performance of appropriate female behaviour in a potentially compromising situation as a crux for deciding whether or not the production has been a success. The stress is laid not only on accuracy or affecting display of emotion, but the suitable *performance* of those emotions in public within acceptable bounds. The elision (or lack of distinction) between who precisely is too ‘conscious’ when displaying her feelings, Glyn or the Duchess, highlights the double performance that is being assessed here. The audience is understood to be watching Glyn’s performance of the Duchess’s appropriate performance of her feelings. *Lloyd’s Weekly* described her as exhibiting ‘a genius equalled by few and surpassed by none’ and assured its readers that she communicated ‘a feeling through-out no less feminine in its traits than vivid in its dramatic force’.<sup>31</sup> Her suitably womanly demeanour is offered here as a necessary accompaniment to the force of the performance, even a counterbalance to it, to assure us that her demonstration had not carried her beyond necessary limits.

When she played the role later in her career, reviewers tended to address the same aspects of the play, such as the *Glasgow Herald*’s description of being ‘pleasingly beguiled by the matchless touches which Miss Glyn threw into the part’, of the character ‘who first married for reasons of State, and latterly chose one of her Ministers for reasons of her own – the warm heart prompting the willing hand in the last instance’.<sup>32</sup> This extraordinary summary of the character, which begins several years before the play’s action and ends with the first act, gives a sense of how much Glyn’s version of the role (the first for over a century) had become interpreted through the delicacy of her second marriage. It would have been even more strongly involved in questions of female conduct and display when first performed at Sadler’s Wells during Phelps’s reformation of the theatre when he was attempting to “purify” the place and establish decency. The *Herald* reviewer’s extraordinary reframing of the narrative also draws attention to the tendency of reviewers to avoid mentioning a scene which might be expected to draw their attention and emotional response: the Duchess’s death. Despite the appreciation of her ‘spirit’ and ‘force’, though some reviewers mention the fact of her death, it is not made a key aspect of her character in the same way the marriage is. Perhaps this can be attributed to the almost inevitable tendency, which Eltis describes, of fallen women to die as a result of their

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<sup>30</sup> *Examiner* (7 Dec. 1850), p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Lloyd’s Weekly London Newspaper* (24 Nov. 1850), p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> *Glasgow Herald* (9 Oct. 1860), p. 2.

transgression (pp. 225-26). Making the Duchess's death too central to their reading of the character, even if it would garner pity, might push her back into the company of the compromised and doomed women who appeared upon the Victorian stage and, according to Dickens and Horne, in the audiences of unreformed theatres.

I think it would be wrong to read these reviews as rebuking Glyn's performance for straying so close to risky territory that it required justification. On the contrary, the respect for her artistry and restraint seems to locate her skill in the ability to act out potentially problematic material, which is recognised as such, whilst not transgressing. The work her acting carried out was visible because it was working against elements which could compromise the performance by association with the kind of sensational, violent and prurient melodrama which had been so strongly linked to Sadler's Wells. This is made explicit in two comments: when noting that she used the character for a benefit performance, the *Northern Star and National Trades Journal* said rather back-handedly that the choice was made 'with reason, for it is by her judicious handling that John Webster's sanguinary old play is rendered tolerable'.<sup>33</sup> At the other end of the decade, the *Glasgow Herald* decided of a later performance that '[w]e may say of Miss Glyn in this character, *opus superabat materiam*. We would have wished to have seen her dramatic power transfused into a more genial channel'.<sup>34</sup> It was '*opus*' or work which this review identified as significant in her performance, the visible agency and professionalism of a "working woman" in the theatre.

In fact, Glyn's performance seems to have been more significant for her development as an individual professional than for the Sadler's Wells project of reforming their local audience. Given that her engagement at the theatre was Glyn's first serious public success, her performance as the Duchess garnered an unusual level of public attention. When Horne's adaptation of the play was published the following year, it did not employ him as an authorising figure, but included her picture and the aforementioned 'Memoir of Miss Glyn' in the front matter. The advertising material on the back of the book praised the 'terrible energy' and 'profoundness [...] of pathos' of the play, but also dwelt on the 'tragic power' and 'well-earned fame' of Glyn herself.<sup>35</sup> Inside the cover, the reader is presented (after some advertising) with a portrait of Glyn, in the position where one might expect to find the face of the dramatist, presenting her as an authorising figure for this printing. When she quarrelled with the management of Sadler's Wells and departed, she took the part with her in the sense that the Surrey theatre staged *The Duchess of Malfi* with her in the lead, whilst Sadler's Wells did not produce it again for years (despite Phelps having played the male lead.)

Most significantly for our examination of how this performance situated Glyn

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<sup>33</sup> *Northern Star and National Trades Journal* (15 March 1851), p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Glasgow Herald* (9 Oct. 1860), p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. by R.H. Horne (London: John Tallis, 1851), p. 66.

as a professional who had to negotiate perceptions of her public and private *personae*, this disagreement took place in public. In fact, Glyn made sure it became public because she wrote a letter to the editor of the *Daily News*, asking:

SIR – As the press is the great court of appeal, sitting constantly for the public in all matters of wrong, may I claim the privilege of your columns to lay before your readers an account of the circumstances under which I quit the boards of Sadler’s Wells Theatre?<sup>36</sup>

She went on to complain of the ‘meanness’ and ‘petty jealousies’ at the theatre, and the management’s reneging on what she regarded as an unwritten agreement in her contract. They had engaged her, she claimed ‘to perform all parts and give all such assistance as may be required in all such pieces as may be selected for performances by the aforesaid managers’, but that ‘it is always perfectly understood that such agreements are interpreted with reference to the quality and the station of the actor being engaged’ (she particularly objected to being called on to perform the Queen in *Hamlet*). Glyn then complains of more unfair dealing in relation to parts:

Having secured my signature to the agreement alluded to, Messrs. Greenwood and Phelps henceforth engage Mrs. Warner, underhand, to open the season in July and thus anticipate my principal parts, exhausting their interest with the audience before I could appear, refusing at the same time to pay my salary for the two weeks, during which that lady was ‘starring’, though I was quite ready to fulfil my engagement, and was entitled to the privilege of opening the season myself.

Given Glyn’s use of *The Duchess of Malfi* for her benefit, it is extremely likely that the ‘principal parts’ which she worried Warner would exhaust included that of the Duchess. The suggestion becomes even more probable when she continues:

In conclusion, I cannot help mentioning that, while Mr. Phelps was, contrary to all rule, engaging Mrs. Warner over my head, and subsequently requiring me to support him in *Hamlet*, he had been careful to avoid reciprocating the service by withdrawing himself from the part of Ferdinand, in ‘*The Duchess of Malfi*’, in which I was expected that I should re-appear, without his usual assistance.

This letter positions Glyn as the consummate professional, appealing to her public to appreciate the position which the management have put her in. Her argument is also carried out not via reference to outraged feelings or the abstract wickedness, but by the terms of her contract, the accepted conditions of employment and the

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<sup>36</sup> *Daily News* (23 Aug. 1851), p. 3. All quotations are from this page.

technicalities of parts being 'exhausted'. She draws upon her successful negotiation of the public space of the theatre (and the goodwill she believes this has garnered her) in order to stage her dispute with the theatre management. Whilst exposing herself to one form of social risk by conducting her business in public, Glyn manages to recast her role as a professional woman away from the image of a female performer available for hire by anyone with the price of a ticket. She does this by stressing the traditions and conventions of theatrical employment, directing attention away from the immediate financial transaction.

Thus her performance at Sadler's Wells, taking place at the intersection of discourses around social and sexual respectability, the improving possibilities of legitimate culture and the unmaking of supposedly depraved audiences, emphasised Glyn's agency within the theatrical system. The modelling of propriety, which required a performance of a social and sexual risk, drew attention to the cultural work which her performance was carrying out, and positioned Glyn as a professional woman who authorised subsequent productions of the play in print and on stage. This case offers an intriguing vision of the cross-currents of female agency and professionalism, intersecting with discourses of sexual propriety and social control.

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## **MADNESS IN MARRIAGE: EROTOMANIA AND MARITAL RAPE IN *HE KNEW HE WAS RIGHT* AND *THE FORSYTE SAGA***

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### *Abstract*

This article challenges the view that the Victorian novel is based on an essentially female courtship plot leading to marriage by reassessing the assumption that it presents marriage as a healthy physical and psychological fulfilment of masculine desire. Drawing attention to the failed and masculine marriage plot, I argue that Anthony Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right* (1869) and John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* (1906-21) illustrate dangers of masculine desire and the pathologisation of jealousy. Both writers position themselves within hotly debated areas of nineteenth-century marital law, viewing their male protagonists through the eyes of a judge and jury. The use of psychological language to describe jealous monomania illustrates the influence of new forms of psychiatry upon fiction, and there is evidence of reciprocal contributions to that new discipline. Combining the analysis of Victorian marriage law reforms, treatises on insanity, and studies of marital violence, this article considers Trollope and Galsworthy's novels in a new light. Trollope's writing can be seen as a foundation for Galsworthy's more overt critique of Victorian marriage laws, such as the legality of marital rape, while masculine desperation for absolute control, increased rather than reduced by marriage, is presented as a cause of psychological disorders such as erotic monomania or erotomania.

### **The Failed Marriage Plot**

Despite the proliferation of research on women in Victorian culture in recent years, an extensive re-evaluation of texts which subvert the traditional marriage plot has not yet taken place. Victorian studies has scarcely moved beyond Ian Watt's assertion in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) that 'the great majority of novels written since *Pamela* have continued its basic pattern, and concentrated their main interest upon a courtship leading to marriage'.<sup>1</sup> A wedding in the closing pages of a novel closes off narrative possibilities as well as marking the successful result of courtship. D.A. Miller has argued that novels ending in happy marriages, like Jane Austen's, 'inhibit narrative productivity'. Emma and Mr Knightley's marriage, for instance, '*must* end the novel [...] otherwise, it would not be a "perfect" union'.<sup>2</sup> This article builds on Kelly Hager's research on divorce, and argues that a trend towards the imperfect marriage and the failed-marriage plot gained force from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, three decades earlier than has previously been suggested.<sup>3</sup> It also identifies fiction

<sup>1</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> D.A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> See Kelly Hager, *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce: The Failed-Marriage Plot and the Novel Tradition* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

which framed this primarily as a male rather than female plot, and argues that writers of these novels drew attention to difficulties surrounding male agency in the context of psychology and a crisis of masculinity within Victorian culture.

Depictions of men's borderline or absolutely monomaniacal desire to control the female body became increasingly explicit in literature towards the end of the nineteenth century. This desire culminates, in extremis, in the act of rape. Once depicted in Samuel Richardson in *Pamela* (1740), the possibility of rape festered just beneath the surface of early- and mid-nineteenth-century fiction, before emerging in more explicit narratives with characters such as Alec D'Urberville in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and Soames Forsyte in the first novel of John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga, The Man of Property* (1906).

In *The Woman in White* (1860) Wilkie Collins described the secret administration of Count Fosco's violence thus:

His management of the Countess (in public) is a sight to see. He bows to her, he habitually addresses her as 'my angel,' he carries her canaries to pay her little visits on his fingers [...] he kisses her hand [...] he presents her with sugar-plums [...] which he puts into her mouth playfully [...]. The rod of iron with which he rules her never appears in company – it is a private rod, and is always kept upstairs.<sup>4</sup>

This 'private rod' is concealed not only from women's acquaintance, but also largely from the readers of early- to mid-Victorian fiction. However, the increasing public emergence of this rod in literature towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century can be identified.

It is often argued that marital unhappiness and failure became a new theme for the novel at the dawn of modernism, with seminal texts such as *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Emily Blair, for instance, argues for a different area of continuity from Victorian novelists to Woolf, and writes that '[i]n her modernist masterpieces Woolf's depiction of femininity resonates with the depictions of Gaskell and Oliphant as she simultaneously reinvents the novel and revises the marriage plot'.<sup>5</sup> Mary Poovey places this narrative shift at the end of the preceding century, with the emergence of the novel that 'would take as its subject marital unhappiness as well as bliss' in Thomas Hardy's writing in the 1890s.<sup>6</sup> This article, however, will argue that this shift may be observed still earlier, in fiction from the 1860s.

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<sup>4</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1993), p. 174.

<sup>5</sup> Emily Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (Albany, NY: State of New York Press, 1997), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Poovey, 'Recovering Ellen Pickering', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13 (2000), 437-52 (p. 448).

In *The Forsyte Saga* Galsworthy's shockingly frank contribution to covert debates about women's rights within marriage confronts the issue of marital rape. This contribution is a particularly complex and interesting one. As well as laying bare the brutalities of a marriage based on servitude and mastery, Galsworthy also exposes the tragedy of male madness driven by sexual desire: a consideration generally overshadowed by disgust. He writes in his novel *In Chancery* (the second novel in the trilogy, published in 1920): 'Was there anything, indeed, more tragic in the world than a man enslaved by his own possessive instinct, who couldn't see the sky for it, or even enter fully into what another person felt!'<sup>7</sup> Here Galsworthy echoes Anthony Trollope's description of Louis Trevelyan, who had 'made himself wretched in every affair of life' by his own obstinacy.<sup>8</sup> Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, Galsworthy was able to write about an act of marital rape that takes place in the 1880s (the decade in which the novel is set): an act which, I argue, underlies concerns about marriage and a wife's independence in earlier fiction.<sup>9</sup>

Despite its early date, Trollope's novel also goes against the grain of Victorian fiction on the subject of marriage, making a thorough examination of the state of 'monomania'. The marriage in *He Knew He Was Right* (1868-69) marks the beginning of Louis' jealous mania, rather than the end of it. Elsewhere, the depiction of monomaniacal sexual desire in mid-Victorian literature tends to end when a marriage takes place, in keeping with the broadly idealistic formulation of the marital state within the courtship plot. The marriage service defines that the institution is ordained firstly for the procreation of children, and secondly, 'for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled'.<sup>10</sup> In keeping with this message, Charles Dickens presents marriage as a cure for jealous monomania in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65). This article explores novels which run counter to this ideal. I argue that novels like *He Knew He Was Right* may be read as pioneering texts on the subject of marital disharmony, madness and male desire, laying the foundations for later writers such as Galsworthy to write more explicitly about the pathologisation of sexual desire, and its violent potential consequences, such as rape.

Following the feminist tradition, many critics read the failed-marriage plot as a woman's plot: 'a plot that concerns itself primarily with the matter of female agency:

<sup>7</sup> John Galsworthy, *The Forsyte Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 514. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Trollope, *He Knew He Was Right* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 325. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Just fifteen years before the publication of this section of the saga, Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* scandalised readers with its portrayal of the raped woman as a morally pure victim. Galsworthy's Irene is similarly innocent of all blame for the violence she experiences.

<sup>10</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (London: Rivington, 1850), p. 399.

it tends to revolve around a wife leaving her husband, an act that was both illegal and unacceptable'.<sup>11</sup> However, I argue that novels such as *He Knew He Was Right* frame the failed-marriage plot primarily as a man's plot. The consideration of the failed-marriage plot as a woman's plot is predicated on the assumption that female agency is the only form to be restricted and problematised by nineteenth-century marriage. The valuable feminist project of the exposure of the difficulties surrounding female agency have overshadowed the exposure of the masculine. James Eli Adams has explained the critical shying away from masculinity studies, suggesting that '[e]xplicit and sustained articulation of this emphasis within literary and cultural studies [...] has been resisted by those concerned that dwelling on the complexities and burdens of masculine identity would serve to obscure, and thereby to reinforce, the brute realities of male domination against which feminist analyses were and are in the first place directed'.<sup>12</sup> By examining aspects of the failed-marriage in terms of pathologised male desire, which inherently increases female repression, this article begins to address the gender imbalance in studies of Victorian psychology. In doing so it aims to illuminate rather than obscure additional instances of male domination, while resisting the assumption that women were the only "victims" in socio-psychological terms.

### Marital Rape, Domestic Violence and the Law

Lawrence Stone has identified a late eighteenth-century revival of Puritan religion in England, bringing with it a resurgence of an old ideal of marital relationships: one based on 'the enforcement of patriarchy and obedience and the idealisation of female submission'.<sup>13</sup> However, this puritanical model of marriage underwent a thorough interrogation and revision during the course of the nineteenth century in the press, fiction and even Parliament. Current historical debates are reassessing the popularity and practicalities of the 'companionate marriage', suggesting that such relationships were both less normative and less homogenous in nature than has previously been thought.<sup>14</sup> James Hammerton has observed that companionate marriage frequently led husbands to be more aggressively assertive, rather than less, as its name might

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<sup>11</sup> Hager, *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce*, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1972), p. 667.

<sup>14</sup> 'Companionate marriages', most often to a friend or cousin, were based on friendship and mutual understanding rather than passionate love, and were often childless. Having been popularised in the seventeenth century, the practice continued, albeit less widely, into the nineteenth century. Marianne Dashwood and Colonel Brandon's marriage in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) is one particularly well-known example. Also see Wendy Jones, *Consensual Fictions: Women, Liberalism, and the English Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

imply.<sup>15</sup> John Tosh argues that nonetheless, ‘companionate marriage stood at the heart of the Victorian ideal of domesticity’ and that such marriage ‘was assumed to be voluntary, not arranged or imposed, and to be for love, whatever secondary motives might be involved’.<sup>16</sup> I suggest that an additional assumption is implied: that voluntary agency continues after the marriage takes place. The texts examined in this article dispute such continuity. Trollope’s and Galsworthy’s novels interrogate the assumption that happy, companionate marriage is the principal relationship in Victorian culture, instead drawing portraits of failed marriages, in which marital discord leads to violence and madness.

Marital rape was perceived as a technically impossible concept during the nineteenth century. A husband’s enforcement of his conjugal rights was entirely legal, and as such could not constitute the illegal act of rape. A wife’s consent was not required in the Victorian period, based on eighteenth-century law.<sup>17</sup> John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor denounced marital rape as the epitome of the sexual double standard and a key aspect of women’s legal subordination in *The Subjection of Women* (1869).<sup>18</sup> In 1888 the case of *R v. Clarence* contested the husband’s exemption from rape laws as an extension of coverture, although no agreement was reached by the nine judges.<sup>19</sup>

Denial persisted deep into the Victorian period that domestic violence could possibly be commonplace in the middle and upper classes. While such abuse in the Victorian period was expected to be meted out by stereotypical, brutish, working-class men, codes of *gentlemanliness* as opposed to generic manliness, could not possibly entertain such an idea. During the second reading of the Aggravated Assaults Act Amendment Bill in 1860, John Walter, MP for Berkshire, insisted in the House of Commons that if people ‘looked to the revelations in the Divorce Court they might well fear that if the secrets of all households were known, these brutal

<sup>15</sup> James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Married Life* (London: Routledge, 2001), chapters 3-4.

<sup>16</sup> John Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> Sir Matthew Hale’s legal treatise of 1736 states that ‘the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract’. Matthew Hale, *History of the Pleas to the Crown*, 2 vols. (London: E. Rider, 1800), I, p. 628. The London barrister John Archbold also asserted that ‘a husband also cannot be guilty of a rape upon his wife’. See John Archbold, *Archbold’s Summary of the Law Relating to Pleading and Evidence in Criminal Case* (New York: Banks, Gould & Co., 1846), p. 571.

<sup>18</sup> See Marina Morales, ‘Rational Freedom in John Stuart Mill’s Feminism’, in *J. S. Mill’s Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment*, ed. by Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 43-65 (p. 55).

<sup>19</sup> Marital rape was eventually outlawed in England and Wales when the case of *R v. R* reached the House of Lords on appeal in 1991.

assaults upon women were by no means confined to the lower classes'.<sup>20</sup> At this stage the divorce courts had been open for just over two years. The enormous increase in the number of divorces following their creation put much information about failing domestic relations, and the violence that was often attached, in the public domain for the first time, through press reports and other media. The high number of instances of such abuse was being revealed across all classes, making the idea of an inherent distinction between the working-class brutishness and middle- and upper-class gentlemanliness increasingly difficult to uphold.

A woman's existence as part of her husband's legal entity, rather than her own, sustained her legal vulnerability to domestic violence in two vital ways. Firstly, men were legally responsible for their wives' behaviour to a large extent, and so their right to "correct" transgressive behaviour with violence seemed logical.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, by the same logic, marital violence perpetrated against women did not legally constitute an assault since women were not classified as separate from their husbands. Thus a husband's battery of his wife could be framed as a form of self-harm, free from legal redress.<sup>22</sup> Despite the successful passage of the Divorce Bill in 1857, the first law against matrimonial cruelty was not passed until two decades later.<sup>23</sup> An amendment to the Matrimonial Causes Act in 1878 made provision for women to divorce their husbands on the grounds of cruelty and to claim custody of their children. Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right* entered the thick of a complex network of debates about Victorian marriage and child custody, which interrogated the assumptions on which cultural and legal gendered distinctions were based.

Trollope's dissection of the intricacies of jealousy and subsequent monomania in marriage subverts normative representations of the institution in Victorian fiction, and constitutes a challenging contribution to contemporary debates. *He Knew He Was Right* opens with the Trevelyans embarking on a perfect ideal of companionate

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<sup>20</sup> *Hansard* (House of Commons), vol. 158, 2 May 1860.

<sup>21</sup> Roderick Phillips has pointed out the ways in which the right to physically chastise wives was integral to the legal marital relationship: 'In part this right was justified in terms of the legal obligations borne by the husband to answer for his wife's actions; because he was thus personally responsible for her misdeeds, it was considered reasonable that he should have the right to control her behaviour and to repress her when necessary'. Roderick Phillips, *Putting Asunder: A History of Divorce in Western Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 324-25.

<sup>22</sup> Caroline Norton, a major figure in nineteenth-century marital and child custody reform, made a plea to the Queen: to address the root cause of women's entrapment in abusive marriages without legal redress was a crucial one. Without existing separately from their husbands in legal terms, attempts to limit this key ground for women seeking legal separation could only be extremely limited.

<sup>23</sup> Although the Act for the Better Prevention and Punishment of Aggravated Assaults upon Women and Children (1853) imposed limits on the level of force which could legally be used by husbands on their wives (beyond which a prison sentence up to six months could be given), domestic violence remained lawful, and was actively encouraged by some judges as a correction to a wife's unruly or disobedient behaviour.

marriage, but goes on to chart its complete destruction. Trollope highlights the contrast between a companionate marriage entered into entirely voluntarily, and the subsequent restraints placed on both female and male agency: the former destroyed by the attempt to preserve the latter, which is itself shattered by repression and psychiatric illness.

## Monomania and Erotomania

Trollope's writing is deeply rooted in psychological theory from the nineteenth century, and influenced by various seminal works. In particular he appears to have been familiar with Jean-Étienne Esquirol's ideas, and specifically his coining of the term 'monomania', a newly-identified form of insanity.<sup>24</sup> Monomania was classified in the Victorian period as a form of insanity which only showed itself when the patient thought or spoke about one particular subject.<sup>25</sup> The patient typically began to show obsessive thought patterns and behaviour on this subject, developing an *idée fixe* until it overtook his or her mind entirely, allowing little room to think of anything else. In J.C. Prichard's influential study, *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (1837), he defined monomania as a form of insanity 'in which the understanding is partially disordered or under the influence of some particular illusion, referring to one subject, and involving one train of ideas, while the intellectual powers appear, when exercised on other subjects, to be in a great measure unimpaired'.<sup>26</sup> Although divorce could be granted on the grounds of insanity, including monomania, the courts and the public struggled to find satisfactory ways of determining the severity of such mental conditions. Given that doctors' views and motives varied so considerably, there was widespread concern at the amount of power they wielded in the courtroom, making the final judgment about the extent of insanity in each case.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jean-Étienne Esquirol, *Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845).

<sup>25</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that by 1897 the term 'monomania' had become outdated as a medical term.

<sup>26</sup> James Cowles Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (New York: Arno Press, 1973), p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> An anonymous journalist in 1885 reasoned, 'Now inasmuch as it is the function of a mad doctor to detect insanity, and as a mad doctor, like other people, aims at professional distinction, mad doctors who are able, and therefore ambitious, will always be anxious to discover insanity where no insanity was discovered before; and, whatever provisions are made for the protection of the insane and those connected with them, we shall have to be on our guard against the professional pride of mad doctors. But perhaps it will be time enough to consider these questions when the subject of lunacy generally has been placed on a moderately safe and reasonable footing', *The Star* (14 March 1885), p. 4. The most famous Victorian use of the insanity defence was in the case of Daniel



Whereas moral insanity was understood to transform behaviour in most aspects of the patient's life, impairing their natural temperament and feelings on numerous subjects, the term 'monomania' was applied to a single obsession which impaired the rational faculties. Furthermore, whereas the morally insane tended to retain their intellectual faculties, despite the alteration of their temperament, monomaniacs tended to lose all reason on the subject of their obsession. Such an illness was inevitably a concern to the periodical- and fiction-reading public who, entangled as they were in a prescriptive set of normative social behaviours, were apt to consider any unusual preoccupation a symptom of monomania. These kinds of lunatics could, therefore, remain in the community, undetected until a particular subject was broached. Literary scholarship on the subject of monomania includes Sally Shuttleworth's *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (1996), which reads monomania alongside moral insanity as 'invisible insanity', tracing Esquirol's influence through the English phrenologist Andrew Combe, before examining monomania in *Villette*.<sup>28</sup> Shuttleworth's more recent study, *The Mind of the Child* (2010), includes a thought-provoking section exploring sexuality in the context of childhood experience and psychology.

The primary conceptualisation of erotic monomania or erotomania in the Victorian period also comes from Esquirol's *Mental Maladies, a Treatise on Insanity* (1845), in which his careful disambiguation clarifies the definition. Most crucially, erotomania does not describe the same state as nymphomania: 'In the latter, the evil originates in the organs of reproduction, whose irritation reacts upon the brain. In erotomania, the sentiment which characterises it, is in the head. The nymphomaniac, as well as the victim to satyriasis, is the subject of a physical disorder. Erotomania is to nymphomania and satyriasis, what the ardent affections of the heart, when chaste and honourable are, in comparison with frightful libertinism'.<sup>29</sup> These 'ardent affections', becoming too extreme, constitute a pathology, with the patient exhibiting monomaniacal symptoms on the subject of the object of his or her love. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, new definitions of erotomania described the more active, potentially violent, symptoms we see in Galsworthy's account. John Quackenbos, for instance, writing during the year following *A Man of Property*'s publication, writes that 'erotomania', literally 'raving love', may remain in the imagination, but may be 'grossly sensual', perverted and quite repulsive.<sup>30</sup>

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McNaughton (1843), who was acquitted of the murder of Edward Drummond whom he had shot, mistaking him for Robert Peel (then Prime Minister). For a discussion of the insanity defence in Trollope see David. D. Oberhelman, 'Trollope's Insanity Defense: Narrative Alienation in *He Knew He Was Right*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 35 (1995), 789-806.

<sup>28</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 51-52.

<sup>29</sup> Esquirol, *Mental Maladies*, p. 335.

<sup>30</sup> John Quackenbos, *Hypnotic Therapeutics in Theory and Practice* (London: Harper and Brothers, 1908), p. 201.

## Louis Trevelyan: The Deterioration of a Companionate Marriage and Melancholic Erotomania

Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right* is perhaps the most extended and detailed portrait of male monomania in the Victorian canon. The novelist uses the term 'monomaniacal' to describe his protagonist (p. 796). Suspecting (incorrectly) that his wife is conducting an affair with Colonel Osborne (her aging godfather, an MP), Louis Trevelyan gradually becomes mad with jealousy. Trollope periodically makes connections between Trevelyan's mental health and his masculinity. The two are closely intertwined from the outset of the narration, and deteriorate simultaneously. In highlighting these connections, Trollope becomes part of the discourse within Victorian culture which associates manliness with good health, both physically and mentally, and which perceives weakness in the mind (as madness was understood) as weakness in masculinity.

Ian Watt's claim that 'the great majority of novels written since *Pamela* have continued its basic pattern, and concentrated their main interest upon a courtship leading to marriage' is challenged by this novel.<sup>31</sup> Here Trollope goes against this trend, describing the courtship of the central couple in the first two pages, swiftly skipping to events two years after their marriage. The subject of jealousy as a forerunner of male madness had been explored previously in novels such as Charles Reade's *Griffith Gaunt* (1866). Ellen (Mrs Henry) Wood's sensation novel *St. Martin's Eve* (1866) also discussed the theme, although here the symptoms occurred in a female character. In an article entitled 'Madness in Novels', the *Spectator* reviewed Wood's novel, complaining that the seriousness of mental illness was belittled by its use as a dramatic plot device. The anonymous reviewer expressed his hope that a realist novelist would take up the subject to produce a more considered psychological study. Wood, meanwhile, merely 'wants to paint jealousy in its extreme forms, and she has not of course the power to create Othello, or the art to paint, as Thackeray or Trollope might have done, the morbid passion in its naturalistic nineteenth-century dress'.<sup>32</sup>

P.D. Edwards has suggested that this review, together with Eliza Lynn Linton's *Sowing the Wind* from 1867, may have been Trollope's inspiration for writing *He Knew He Was Right*.<sup>33</sup> He, however, would produce a more realistic study of jealousy in marriage, portraying mental disintegration by drawing extensively on contemporary medical writings. Linton's novel reveals her ideological struggle as she became a radical antifeminist, expressing disgust at the 'deficient attitudes which

<sup>31</sup> Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, p. 154.

<sup>32</sup> *The Spectator* (3 Feb. 1866), p. 135.

<sup>33</sup> P.D. Edwards, *Anthony Trollope: His Art and Scope* (Hassock: Harvester Press, 1966), p. 115.

women have lately assumed, and their indifference to the wishes and remonstrances of men'.<sup>34</sup>

Various more recent critics have blamed societal pressures for the Trevelyan's tragedy, such as R.C. Terry, who drew attention to 'the destructive powers of society' in the novel, such as 'gossip, spying, and false council'.<sup>35</sup> Certainly these destructive powers have a strong effect in exacerbating Trevelyan's jealousy and his sense of embarrassment. At her dinner party Lady Milborough's observation of Louis's 'black' face and mood, deteriorating as she speaks, does not stop her observing that Colonel Osborne is 'a snake in the grass', liking to go 'about and making mischief between men and their wives' (p. 31). Trollope notes that 'to be cautioned about his wife's conduct cannot be pleasant to any man'. His natural reaction of being 'intolerably bitter' (p. 31) becomes less ordinary, however, as Trollope continues the process of pathologising Trevelyan's anxiety. Like Othello's, Trevelyan's feelings of jealousy seem to make a mockery of his masculinity and status in society; his emotion is 'the green-eyed monster which doth mock/ The meat it feeds on'.<sup>36</sup> In common with Soames Forsyte, who I suggest may be read as his literary successor, Louis is unable to bear the idea that his marriage is the subject of drawing-room gossip. Towards the end of the novel Trollope goes to some length to clarify that he places the blame squarely on Trevelyan's shoulders. In the context of nineteenth-century ideals of marriage and theories of monomania, the novel focuses on the psychological degeneration caused by erotomania and its consequences in marriage. In this case it takes a melancholic, chaste form, as described by Esquirol, while later fiction such as *The Forsyte Saga* depicts it in more highly sexualised, violent terms.

By demonstrating the transition from sanity to insanity by means of familiar emotions, such as jealousy, Trollope increases a sense of familiarity with mental disintegration, as well as the vulnerability of the human mind, which is never safe from the threat of insanity, whether manifested as absolute mania or brief moments of madness. As Mary Elizabeth Braddon's narrator in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-62) enquires: 'Who has not been, or is not to be, mad in some lonely hour of life? Who is quite safe from the trembling of the balance?' The balance is a highly precise one: 'There is nothing so delicate, so fragile, as that invisible balance upon which the mind is always trembling'.<sup>37</sup> Trevelyan's state of mind is at the centre of the novel,

<sup>34</sup> Eliza Lynn Linton, *Modern Women and What is Said of Them* (New York: Redfield, 1868), pp. 91-92. Some contemporary reviewers of *He Knew He Was Right*, sharing Linton's sentiments, placed the blame entirely on Louis Trevelyan's wife, Emily. An anonymous reviewer in the *Spectator*, thought to be R.H. Hutton, blames Emily entirely, condemning Trevelyan's sympathy for her towards the novel's close. *Spectator* (12 June 1869), pp. 706-8.

<sup>35</sup> R.C. Terry, *Anthony Trollope: The Artist in Hiding* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman, 1977), p. 138.

<sup>36</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by Michael Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), III. 3. 166-67.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (London: Wordsworth, 1997), p. 321.

which, running to more than eight hundred pages, gives Trollope ample opportunity to make a thorough dissection. Trevelyan experiences mental deterioration, dating from the point at which he achieves a culturally idealised position: marriage to the woman he loves, complete with beauty, obedience, a respectable family and suitable connections in society. We are told that ‘when Louis Trevelyan was twenty-four years old, he had all the world before him where to choose’ (p. 41).<sup>38</sup> Like Emma Woodhouse, ‘handsome, clever, and rich’, Louis Trevelyan makes his first impression on the reader in the novel’s first sentence as an extremely fortunate young person, and ‘a very pearl among men’ (p. 9).<sup>39</sup> He bears no resemblance to the withered hermit, hiding from his wife at Casalunga, outside Siena, whom we pity a few months later, despite achieving what appears to Society to be a highly successful match.

In seclusion in Italy, and later on his death bed in Twickenham, Trevelyan shows symptoms of erotomania, as outlined by Esquirol. He bears out the French psychologist’s observation that sufferers ‘neglect, abandon and fly both their relatives and friends’, as well as that in the absence of the object of their love, ‘the look of this class of patients is dejected; their



‘Louis Trevelyan at Casalunga’, illustration by Marcus Stone for chapter 84 of Anthony Trollope’s *He Knew He Was Right*

<sup>38</sup> Trollope quotes from *Paradise Lost*.

<sup>39</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 5.

complexion becomes pale; their features change; sleep and appetite are lost. They are thoughtful, greatly depressed in mind, agitate, irritable'.<sup>40</sup>

Louis Trevelyan remains rational throughout the novel, except on the subject of his wife's alleged infidelity. After Colonel Osborne's first few visits, uncharacteristically, he experiences great difficulty in deciding whether to complain or apologise to his wife: 'Though he believed himself to be a man very firm of purpose, his mind had oscillated backwards and forwards [...] affected by some feeling which pervaded him in reference to this man, that all his energy was destroyed, and his powers of mind and body were paralysed. He could not, and would not, stand it' (p. 23). Even at this very early stage in the novel, Trevelyan struggles to attain the balanced, rational mode of thought that he knows he ought to have on the subject, and we see symptoms of pathological jealousy begin to emerge.

There is no doubt about the diagnosis of madness made in the novel: 'Now Trevelyan was, in truth, mad on the subject of his wife's alleged infidelity. He had abandoned everything that he valued in the world, and had made himself wretched in every affair of life, because he could not submit to acknowledge to himself the possibility of error on his own part. For that, in truth, was the condition of his mind' (p. 325). The doctor at Trevelyan's death bed observes that 'his patient's thoughts had been forced to dwell on one subject till they had become distorted, untrue, jaundiced, and perhaps mono-maniacal' (p. 796). Finally, Trollope announces, 'At last the maniac was dead, and in his last moments he had made such reparation as was in his power for the evil that he had done' (p. 820). From the opening of the novel we have been told that Trevelyan 'was wise in many things', but not all, and that 'as Lady Rowley was the first to find out, he liked to have his own way'. Problematically, 'Emily likes her way too' (p. 11), and so we are not surprised that although legally obliged to obey Louis's direct commands, she may not do so willingly.<sup>41</sup> In the course of the marriage, however, Trevelyan struggles to keep his instincts for mastery in check in favour of a companionate marriage, but is unable to achieve an agreeable balance.

Christopher Herbert has argued against the existence of 'a monolithic system of "male superiority and command"', suggesting instead that Victorian marriage 'amalgamates two distinct principles almost impossible fully to reconcile in practice, if not perhaps in theory: on the one hand, the principle of male supremacy so deeply rooted in custom and law and, on the other, the great cult of Home'.<sup>42</sup> Trevelyan's

<sup>40</sup> Esquirol, *Mental Maladies*, p. 336.

<sup>41</sup> Her father, Sir Marmaduke, supports the traditional ideal of feminine obedience, deciding that "[a]t any rate, if there were anything amiss with Emily's temper, it would be well that she should find her master in such a man as Louis Trevelyan" (pp. 10-11).

<sup>42</sup> The home was idealised by Ruskin and defined by Stone as the foundation for a companionate marriage. See Christopher Herbert, 'He Knew He Was Right, Mrs. Lynn Linton, and the Duplicities of Victorian Marriage', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 25 (1983), 448-69 (p. 451).

mastery becomes monomaniacal and despotic as his desperation to assert his rights as a husband increases. His actions quickly come to embody male command in tyranny, while his rhetoric, repeating that Emily has free will, and need only admit to flirtation and wrongdoing in order to live at her marital home, indicates his anxiety to return to a peaceful, companionate mode.

Trollope's letters reveal that during the writing of *He Knew He Was Right* he was in communication with a number of psychologists, collecting material for his fictional case study. Crucially though, there is evidence that this channel of influence was reciprocal in nature, with not only the public, but also doctors reading the novel as pseudo-authentic history of monomania. Thus, in turn, the novel influenced scientific writings. Trollope wrote to one physician, 'I am gratified by the attention which your scientific analysis shews that you have given to the character of the unfortunate man which I attempted to draw in my novel'.<sup>43</sup> This traffic of ideas in both directions between literary and scientific disciplines is particularly interesting since it demonstrates that novels were being read as realities in themselves, rather than a mere reflection of them. Elizabeth Langland has argued that novelists and novels 'do not simply reflect the contemporary ideology. Rather, by depicting a material reality filled with and interpreted through ideology, they also expose ideology'.<sup>44</sup> I suggest that Langland's argument about ideology may be applied to psychology, as part of a wider argument about Victorian pre-disciplinarity. Trollope's combination of the psychological and the literary makes the interdisciplinary study of *He Knew He Was Right* the most appropriate method for today's scholars.

Trollope's clear knowledge of contemporary psychological theory enabled him to detail a realistic scientific case study in his fiction. Trevelyan bears out the theory that monomania stemmed primarily from personal matters rather than heredity, expounded by doctors such as Forbes Winslow and J.G. Davey. Trevelyan is entirely consumed by an unhealthy desire to be vindicated, even by proving that his wife has been unfaithful. He continues down this self-destructive path until 'his happiness had been shipwrecked' (p. 326). We are told that he hopes 'with the hope of the insane man, who loves to feed his grievance, even though the grief should be his death' (p. 327). The heightened suspicion we see so clearly in Trevelyan was central to the new mid-Victorian conception of monomania as revealed by Davey.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Letters of Anthony Trollope*, ed. by N. John Hall, 2 vols. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), II, p. 1011.

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Langland, 'Nobody's Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Novel', *PMLA*, 107 (1992), 290-304 (p. 291).

<sup>45</sup> Trollope's detailed description of Trevelyan's physical decline also correlates closely with contemporary medical observations. Davey observed in 1855 that 'the vacillating countenance indicates the condition of the dismal mind; the eyes sunk in their hollow sockets, the muscles of the face sharp and rigid in their outlines, and the looks restless and vacant, proclaim the convulsive throes of the sufferer'. J.G. Davey, 'Lectures on Insanity, Delivered at the Bristol Medical School

## Soames Forsyte: The Rights of Property and Violent Erotomania

The first novel of *The Forsyte Saga*, *The Man of Property*, set from 1886-87, centres on Soames Forsyte, the wealthy solicitor referred to in the title, and his marriage to the beautiful Irene Heron. I suggest that Soames may be read as a successor to Louis Trevelyan, exhibiting yet more overt symptoms of erotomania. The term remained in use in the intervening years before Galsworthy's writing, perhaps most notably in Oscar Wilde's letters during the 1890s. It also made regular appearances in newspapers during the 1920s. Galsworthy's preface to the 1922 edition of the complete saga cites 'possessive instincts', 'the tribal instinct' and 'sense of home and property' as his primary concerns. Soames is a collector of paintings; the possession of beauty pleases him, as does its value in monetary terms. With the addition of Irene to his collection, she becomes his most prized possession. To emphasise her identity as property, she is never present in Galsworthy's narrative except through the perception of other characters. Irene's enigmatic appeal as a 'passive goddess' (p. 21) inspires Soames's desire to possess her. Alongside her lack of fortune, this makes her prey to his predatory advances. Unlike Louis Trevelyan's, Soames Forsyte's suspicions about his wife's infidelity are correct. Irene begins an affair with her husband's cousin June's fiancé (also the architect her husband has commissioned to build their new home).<sup>46</sup> Following Irene's disclosure to her lover, Philip Bosinney, that Soames had raped her the previous night, he sets off in a rage. Apparently planning to seriously injure or even kill Soames, he is run over by a carriage in the fog on the way.

To the outside world, Soames appears to be an excellent husband. His maintenance of an exterior of perfect gentlemanliness is, as for Collins's Count Fosco and others, essential.<sup>47</sup> He attempts to sustain sexual repression in the long-term context of his cooling marital relations. He finally cracks, becoming violent, and eventually raping Irene in an attempt to assert his ownership of his wife's body. Having been written in the first few years of the twentieth century, *A Man of Property* follows key writings on repression by Richard von Krafft-Ebing (*Psychopathia Sexualis*, 1886) and Sigmund Freud (*The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 1901).<sup>48</sup> In an introduction to the former, Terence Sellers writes that

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During the Summer Session of 1855: Lecture II', *The British Medical Journal* (20 July 1855), pp. 668-75 (p. 674).

<sup>46</sup> Notably, Soames will not permit her a separation, despite his pre-nuptial promise that Irene would be free to leave were the marriage to be unhappy.

<sup>47</sup> For example, Irene's father-in-law tells her, "I can't think what you're about. He's a very good husband!" Irene's answer, 'almost inaudible among the sounds of traffic', is simply, 'You are not married to him!'" (pp. 214-15).

<sup>48</sup> John Kucich's *Repression in Victorian Literature: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987) is the principal work on this subject, exploring the emotional values of repression, stressing the psychological potential of self-

‘[t]he sexual tragedies foisted upon a generation of women by urging these “therapeutically repressed cases” to marry can only be imagined’.<sup>49</sup> Galsworthy’s novel is one such imagining.

Personal violation by violence and rape had been veiled increasingly thinly in the fiction of preceding decades. The possibility of a violent sexual attack haunts the narrative of sensation fiction from the early 1860s. D.A. Miller has argued persuasively that rape can be figured as what Roland Barthes would call the ‘symbolic mode’ of *The Woman in White*. The vague fear of such an act is present during Anne and Walter’s first encounter at the beginning of the novel, and later ‘what Fosco finally accomplishes when he reads Marian’s *journal intime* – is virtual rape’.<sup>50</sup> Marian is

firmly abandoned by Walter’s erotic interest and forcibly seduced by Fosco’s [...] perhaps the most important fantasy feature of rape is the reaffirmation of the rapist’s unimpaired capacity to withdraw, the integrity of his body (if not his victim’s) recovered intact. (Fosco, we recall, returns to Marian the journal he has indelibly signed, and she, eventually, is stuck with it).<sup>51</sup>

Galsworthy’s later date enabled him to lay bare what had been implied in earlier fiction. Although Irene’s rape takes place outside the narrative, we cannot doubt what the ‘incident of the night before’ entailed (p. 253). The sight and sounds of Irene during the rape haunt Soames afterwards, with a searing clarity that was unthinkable for Victorian writers.

Once he suspects his wife’s infidelity, Soames’s anger bubbles beneath the surface of his composed exterior, barely contained, until finally it bursts out in attempts to break down a door, or the crushing of a teacup in his hand. The narrative makes repeated references to Soames’s hot blood, which rises with the heat of summer. Even in October, he sits at home, with ‘the weather kept as gloriously fine that year as though it were still high August. It was not pleasant to be disturbed; he

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contradictions.

<sup>49</sup> Terence Sellers, Introduction to Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: The Case Histories* (London: Velvet, 1997), pp. 5-15 (p. 11).

<sup>50</sup> D.A. Miller, ‘*Cage aux folles*: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*’, in *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 107-36 (p. 116).

<sup>51</sup> D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p. 181. The indelible imprint on the raped woman is described later by Hardy, who questions why Tess Durbeyfield should have been so doomed: ‘Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissues, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive’. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 74.



desired too passionately to set his foot on Bosinney's neck' (p. 225). It is only once he has fully exercised his rights by raping his wife that the weather finally cools, with 'the fog of late November wrapping the town as in some monstrous blanket till the trees of the Square were barely visible from the dining-room window', mirroring the enshrouding of his marital relations, once the stuff of family gossip, in a thicker layer of secrecy (pp. 249-50).

Soames attempts, and for long periods succeeds, in keeping his violent sexual jealousy, and his consequent mania, repressed, and thus, private. The pressure of this heats the blood in his veins, as outwardly he maintains his characteristic 'lack of sentiment peculiarly Forsytean' (p. 77). Habitual reserve, avoiding displays of emotion became an increasingly entrenched aspect of codes of middle- and upper-class masculinity during the second half of the nineteenth century. Richard Sennett has termed this the 'discipline of silence'.<sup>52</sup> By observing that such a central tenet of contemporary masculinity could conceal a violent mania, Galsworthy increases readers' sense of proximity to madness. Trollope, too, uses his representation of marital disharmony to increase our familiarity with the causes of monomania, but Galsworthy's more violent reformulation of this method is yet more disturbing. Even with his 'supercilious calm unbroken', those who know Soames well, such as his father, can see that he is 'violently angry' on hearing about his architect's over-expenditure. Bosinney exceeds his £12,000 limit on building expenses by £400, increasing Soames's desperation to control what he physically can: Irene.

All the rancour and hidden jealousy that had been burning against [Bosinney] for so long was now focussed in rage at this crowning piece of extravagance. The attitude of the confident and friendly husband was gone. To preserve property – his wife – he had assumed it, to preserve property of another kind he lost it now. (pp. 216-17)

Despite his own efforts to maintain a cool exterior, both in his business disagreement and his sexual rivalry with Bosinney, Soames repeatedly accuses his wife of coldness. His own blood boils until he can hide it no longer. One evening, 'unconsciously taking a china cup from the mantelpiece', he asks, "'Are you carrying on a flirtation with Bosinney?'" and she replies in the negative. Irene's serene appearance and ability to hide her passions from him increase Soames's infuriation at being unable to read her mind, and consequently his desperation to control her by forcing her body into submission rises: 'he never had known, never would know,

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<sup>52</sup> Sennett suggests that this discipline was enforced by mid-century urban decorum in England and France. Silence became a norm in response to the 'profound self-doubt' generated by the assumption that one's public presence could involuntarily disclose one's private character. See Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1977). See also Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*, pp. 183-228.

what she was thinking. The sight of her inscrutable face [...] soft and passive, but so unreadable, unknown, enraged him beyond measure’.

‘I believe you are made of stone’, he said, clenching his fingers so hard that he broke the fragile cup. The pieces fell into the grate. And Irene smiled.

‘You seem to forget’, she said, ‘that cup is not!’

Soames gripped her arm. ‘A good beating’, he said, ‘is the only thing that would bring you to your senses’, but turning on his heel, he left the room. (p. 218)

His wife’s lover seems to haunt Soames; ‘he was never free from the sense of his presence [...] Bosinney haunted the house. And every man’s shape that he saw in the dark evenings walking past, seemed that of him’ (p. 225). In the midst of this personal crisis, Soames’s proprietorial instincts do not desert him but rather intensify. More than ever, he sees his wife as an item of property, and himself as sole owner. Thus, in drawing Irene’s attention, Bosinney is a thief, and that information must remain under cover, ‘subterranean’, in fact (p. 225).

That night Soames finally decides to assert his marital rights by rape, representing, I suggest, the ultimate assertion of his property ownership. The act may be seen as a climax of what Krafft-Ebing refers to as ‘Hyperaesthesia’, a psychological condition which appears to fit Soames’s symptoms.<sup>53</sup> Thereafter he is wracked with guilt, further distorting the order of his mind in an uncontrollable madness. In the chapter entitled ‘Voyage into the Inferno’ Galsworthy opens with a striking and ironic statement: ‘The morning after a certain night on which Soames at last asserted his rights and acted like a man, he breakfasted alone’ (p. 249). This sudden aloneness continues through the narrative, having committed a legally permissible yet socially unspeakable act. Although at first this secrecy is reassuring (‘One thought comforted him: No one would know – it was not the sort of thing that she would speak about’, p. 250), his isolation with his own doubting and increasingly

<sup>53</sup> Krafft-Ebing gives the following definition: ‘Hyperaesthesia (increased desire, satyriasis). In this state there is an abnormally increased impressionability of the sexual impulse to organic, psychic and sensory stimuli (abnormally intense libido, lustfulness, lasciviousness). The stimulus may be central (nymphomania, satyriasis) or peripheral, functional or organic’. This condition is closely connected to Krafft-Ebing’s conception of sadism, which he describes thus: ‘It consists in this that the association of lust and cruelty, which is indicated in the physiological consciousness, becomes strongly marked on a psychically degenerated basis, and that this lustful impulse coupled with presentations of cruelty rises to the height of powerful affects [...]. The quality of sadistic acts is defined by the relative potency of the tainted individual. If potent, the impulse of the sadist is directed to coitus, coupled with preparatory, concomitant or consecutive maltreatment, even murder, of the consort “Lustmurder”, the latter occurring chiefly because sensual lust has not been satisfied with the consummated coitus’. Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: The Case Histories* (London: Velvet, 1997), p. 20.

insane thoughts gradually becomes intolerable. Having been certain of the rightness of his actions throughout his life, he is now plagued by doubt.

He ate steadily, but at times a sensation as though he could not swallow attacked him. Had he been right to yield to his overmastering hunger of the night before, and break down the resistance which he had suffered now too long from this woman who was his lawful and solemnly constituted helpmate? He was strangely haunted by the recollection of her face, from before which, to soothe her, he had tried to pull her hands – of her terrible smothered sobbing, the like of which he had never heard, and still seemed to hear; and he was still haunted by the odd, intolerable feeling of remorse and shame he had felt, as he stood looking at her by the flame of the single candle, before silently slinking away. (p. 250)

In the course of his commute to work, however, Soames's habitual Forsytean stubbornness briefly protects himself from the extremities of guilt:

The incident was not really of great moment; women made a fuss about it in books; but in the cool judgment of right-thinking men, of men of the world, or such as he recollected often received praised in the Divorce Court, he had but done his best to sustain the sanctity of marriage, to prevent her from abandoning her duty [...]. No, he did not regret it. (p. 251)

Once secure in his first-class compartment on the Underground from Sloane Square to the City, however, 'the smothered sobbing still haunted him'. He opens *The Times* to distract himself and becomes 'barricaded behind it', but is confronted by news of violent acts: 'three murders, five manslaughters, seven arsons, and as many as eleven – a surprisingly high number – rapes, in addition to many less conspicuous crimes' so that 'inseparable from his reading' rises up 'the memory of Irene's tear-stained face, and the sounds from her broken heart' (p. 251). The assertion of his marital rights is reconfigured by Soames's guilt-wracked mind as a violent crime, utterly incompatible with his perception of, and presentation of, himself as a man of property and, crucially, a gentleman.

Upon discovering that Irene has left him altogether, Soames's mind struggles to interpret the information. Bilson tells him "that Mrs Forsyte had left the house about noon, taking with her a trunk and bag", and leaving no message (p. 270). Standing in his hallway, suddenly cut off from his ordinary life, Soames wonders, 'Who the devil were all these people? He seemed to have forgotten all familiar things. The words "no message – a trunk, and a bag," played hide-and-seek in his brain' (p. 271). Although highly skilled in burying his emotions, Soames's body gives way to a startling reflex: he weeps, feeling his 'brain going round' while tears

‘forced themselves into his eyes’. Detecting the faint scent of Irene’s hair lotion, ‘the burning sickness of his jealousy seized him again. Struggling into his fur, he ran downstairs and out into the street [...]. His power of decision again failed’ (p. 271). Galsworthy deconstructs idealised male rational decisiveness and twists it with irony. Soames’s most decisive act was that in which he ‘asserted his rights and acted like a man’: an act of rape absolutely antithetical to ideals of both happy companionate marriage and gentlemanliness. It is also, of course, the act most destructive of his chances of bringing about what, above his desperate desire to possess the female body at any cost, is his openly displayed wish: a marriage in which Irene willingly and gladly submits to him, both in public and private.

## Conclusion

Charles Kingsley describes the role of masculine bravery in *Westward Ho!* (1855) thus: ‘To be bold against the enemy is common to the brutes; but the prerogative of a man is to be bold against himself’.<sup>54</sup> This article has made an examination of what happens when the Victorian man is unable to sustain the level of repression required in order to be bold against himself both in terms of staving off his desires and postponing mental breakdown. The brute is internalised by monomaniacal jealousy and the gentleman breaks down, both as a cultural concept, and at the level of individual psychology. Jealousy takes over the male mind so that male desire is pathologised, and the threat of violent attack comes from within rather than beyond the domestic space. This deterioration of the gentlemanly into the monstrous within the most sacred of Victorian social institutions, marriage, was to have an enormous social effect. It was a key factor in prompting a radical re-evaluation of masculine identity towards the fin de siècle.

By identifying the failed marriage plot’s emergence in the 1860s, several decades earlier than previous studies have done, and by shifting from a female to a male perspective so that the plot’s focus on the man’s perspective is revealed, this article has exposed some of the difficulties of male agency, and their implications for normative masculinities. Most crucially, although law allowed husbands to force their wives into domestic and sexual submission, codes of middle- and upper-class gentlemanliness did not. How, then, could a husband prevail upon his independently-minded wife to willingly obey, without making matters unpleasant at home or in public? Trevelyan and Forsyte fail catastrophically in this task, becoming maniacal in the process. Within the context of sexual desire, fuelled by a pathologised jealousy, male agency asserts itself in Trollope and Galsworthy’s protagonists to represent a crisis of class and gender identities. Thus the two novels prompt a reconsideration of

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Kingsley, *Westward Ho!* (London: Macmillan, 1855), p. 27.

the conventional model of Victorian gentlemen. The novels also demonstrate the effect of psychology both at the level of individual psychological crises and of a broader cultural crisis at the heart of Victorian society. Representations of marital breakdown, erotomania, domestic violence and marital rape are crucial aspects of the failure of idealised domesticity, and illustrate the more extensive heterogeneity of Victorian marriages. Such depictions mark a deep chasm in ideologies of domestic perfection, and present a strong opposition to the traditional perception of the Victorian novel's companionate marriage plot.

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## VICTORIAN COUGAR: H. RIDER HAGGARD'S *SHE*, AGEING AND SEXUAL SELECTION IN MARRIAGE

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### *Abstract*

H. Rider Haggard's late nineteenth-century novel *She* (1887) details the adventures of two British explorers who venture deep into the heart of Africa, where they encounter an ageless, white African queen. The novel has fascinated Victorian scholars with its depictions of race, gender and power, but I argue that what distinguishes this novel is the way that Darwinian arguments infuse the narrative with male anxieties about older women and female choice in marriage.

The ageless, white queen Ayesha promotes a narrative that is ripe for exploration about the nexus of age and power. While my book *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth Century British Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan 2009) argues that age is an aspect of gender by focusing on the figure of the ageing male husband in nineteenth-century literature, I turn here to the less common figure of the older wife. Ayesha, also called 'she who must be obeyed', challenges typical readings of Victorian power distribution in marriage. Using Darwin's theories of mate selection, Haggard engages this female character to pique Victorian anxieties about female choice in marriage. What is revealed is not a renewed sense of "natural" male selection, but overlapping anxieties about women's power, the ageing female body and degeneration.

The influence of Charles Darwin's work on H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) is hard to miss and corresponds with Haggard's querulous exploration of gendered relationships. Four paragraphs into the novel, Ludwig Horace Holly, a man characterised by his long arms, thick body hair, protruding forehead and barrel chest, remarks, 'Women hated the sight of me. Only a week before I had heard one call me a "monster" when she thought I was out of hearing, and say that I had converted her to Darwin's theory'.<sup>1</sup> There is little critical debate regarding Haggard's investment in evolution, and numerous scholars have theorised about what *She* says about late-Victorian imperial anxieties about civilisation, God, and race via evolution. Alan Sandison writes that 'Haggard has a very real affinity for the basic characteristics of Darwin's concept of evolution is thus beyond question'.<sup>2</sup> Lisa Hopkins concurs that '[i]nterest in evolution is everywhere in Haggard', adding, 'Haggard's most successful foray into Africa was with *She*, a novel on which the hand of Darwin lies heavy'.<sup>3</sup> Sandra Gilbert, Anne McClintock and Patricia Murphy have also offered

<sup>1</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *She* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), p. 41. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Sandison, *The Wheel of Empire: A Study of the Imperial Idea in Some Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Fiction* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1967), p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa Hopkins, *Giants of the Past: Popular Fictions and the Idea of Evolution* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004), pp. 71-72. In 'A Triptych: Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Rider Haggard's *She*, and Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*', *Comparative Studies in Society and*

pointed feminist readings of this boys' fiction that enjoys the narrative of the exploration, penetration and rejection of a feminised Africa.<sup>4</sup> What has not been fully vetted regarding the novel is how Darwinian ideas inform the novel's late-Victorian delivery of the sentimental marriage plot. Holly's understanding that he is unattractive, that women 'hated the sight of' him, emphasises both the Darwinian importance of female choice in the mating process and the reciprocal misogyny that such power elicits in response. Ultimately, the novel reveals deep anxieties about female choice in marriage: anxieties that coincide with changes in marriage law that benefitted women, with fears that ageing altered gender roles, and with worries that widespread biological degeneration could return Victorian society to a primitive, matriarchal system.

Haggard's positions on these issues at times appear painfully, even embarrassingly, obvious. Describing the climactic scene in which the beautiful, ageless and powerful queen who is known alternately as 'She', 'Ayesha' and '*She-who-must-be-obeyed*' is destroyed by a pillar of fire, Gilbert concludes: 'Finally, therefore, naked and ecstatic, in all the pride of her femaleness, She must be fucked to death by the "unalterable law" of the Father'.<sup>5</sup> Murphy agrees, arguing that the novel 'ultimately strives to contain the New Woman threat by annihilating the unruly She at closure'.<sup>6</sup> These readings of the novel as semiconscious, immature backlash against women's power make sense: the novel champions the all-male society of Cambridge, the one woman Holly had previously loved only 'pretended' to return his affections, and she unkindly terminated their relationship by taking him to a mirror and reasoning: 'Now, if I am Beauty, who are you?' (p. 41). But this recoil from women oversimplifies the novel's dynamics. I agree that the novel chronicles the confused actions of confused men. As Holly explains after meeting She, 'for [...] I, a fellow of my college, noted for what my friends are pleased to call my misogyny, and a respectable man now well on in middle life, had fallen absolutely and hopelessly in love with this white sorceress' (p. 157). If Holly is drawn to the power of women against his will, Haggard is no more in control than Holly, and the novel's vacillations reveal much about late Victorian attempts to reconcile a gendered society

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*History*, 35 (1993), 726-45. Bruce Mazlish also points out the connection between Darwin and Haggard. See Bruce Mazlish, 'A Triptych: Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Rider Haggard's *She*, and Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 35 (1993), 726-45 (pp. 735-36).

<sup>4</sup> The dedication to Haggard's earlier *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) reads: 'This faithful but unpretending record of a remarkable adventure is hereby respectfully dedicated by the narrator, Allan Quatermain, to all the big and little boys who read it', see H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Sandra Gilbert, 'Rider Haggard's Heart of Darkness', in *Coordinates: Placing Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. by George E. Slusser, Eric S. Rabkin and Robert Scholes (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), pp. 124-38 (p. 131).

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Murphy, 'The Gendering of History in *She*', *SEL*, 4 (1999), pp. 747-72 (p. 748).

with science and a gendered science with society. Questions about marriage, its obligations and its power structures punctuate the novel's attempts to square evolutionary principles with contemporary gender relations. Ultimately, these anxieties about evolution and gender converge in the figure of the sensual older woman, the Victorian "cougar", Ayesha, who, in both choosing her mate and seducing him with her aged, indeed 'ancient' body, hastens the process of societal devolution.

The novel's plot runs thus: on the eve of his death, Holly's friend places his only son and a mysterious quest in Holly's hands. The quest is to be undertaken when the child, Leo Vincey, turns twenty-five. Holly raises Leo as if he were his son, and when Leo is of age, both learn the unfulfilled quest has been passed down in Leo's family for two thousand years. 'Vincey', they deduce, derives from Vindex: the avenger. Leo and Holly pick up the challenge and travel to Africa with their servant Job, where they travel up river in search of the ageless white queen Ayesha. Along the way, they run into cannibals, and Leo is chosen by the beautiful native Ustane to be her husband before they are brought by Ayesha's people to her underground caves. Everyone fears Ayesha – she is so powerful that her subjects literally crawl on their bellies to address her at her throne. Ayesha cures Leo from a serious illness, discovers he is the reincarnation of her beloved Kallikrates, whom she killed two millennia ago out of jealousy and has been awaiting ever since, and eliminates her modern rival Ustane by killing her. Ayesha is so beautiful that she makes both Holly and Leo fall in love with her despite her awful power and unfeminine ways. Ayesha explains that her secret to eternal youth comes from stepping into a hidden pillar of fire, and she pledges to share its secret. Testing it out for them, however, she finds that the flames have a reverse effect on her already ageless body, and she instantly withers into a mummy. Horrified, Leo and Holly nevertheless pledge their faithful love, and the novel concludes with their awaiting Ayesha's return.<sup>7</sup>

Women's decisions drive the plot, and the novel contends that women's choice in sexual selection limits men's participation in, and control of, the evolutionary process, though this conclusion is not one that Darwin advanced himself. Darwin conceded that among 'the lower orders' sexual selection rested with the females of the species. But Cynthia Eagle Russett and Rosemary Jann have explained how Darwin manipulated his theories to correspond with Victorian gender roles: how Darwin sidesteps the human implications of female choice in sexual selection among birds by arguing that, in humans, evolutionary skills like warfare and creating tools increased male intelligence and eventually led to a system of *male* choice in mating.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Ayesha*, Haggard's 1905 sequel to *She*, reunites the main characters in Tibet, though gender roles are more traditional in this incarnation.

<sup>8</sup> See Rosemary Jann, 'Darwin and the Anthropologists: Sexual Selection and its Discontents', in *Sexualities in Victorian Britain*, ed. by Andrew H. Miller and James Eli Adams (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 287-306.

However, Darwin's efforts to cover up women's role in sexual selection fail to remove the implications of his findings for Haggard, who constructs *She* to allow the human mating processes to develop in animalistic fashion. In Africa, Leo is known as 'the Lion', and Holly, 'the Baboon', and Haggard suggests, much like Joseph Conrad ten years later in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), that Europeans may feel compelled to "go native" when in Africa. Casting the African Amahaggar as primitive humans, Haggard also hints that they hark back to an evolutionary past that still permits women the ultimate power in mating. This exposure to women's controlling role in evolution is titillating in itself, but Haggard does not relegate it to the past or to Africa. Devolution and the threat of women's choice already threaten late-Victorian England.

The effects of female choice are most readily apparent through the experiences of the novel's hero, Holly. Despite Holly's intelligence, sensibility and physical strength, his unattractive appearance marks him as unmarriedable and effectively removes him from the fight for survival of the fittest. Before the quest, Holly ensconces himself within the masculine bastion of Cambridge, and his College offers an all male sanctuary, tinged with homoeroticism and misogyny, in which Holly can raise Leo. The servant Job performs traditional feminine tasks for them, 'clucking' motherly and buttering Leo's toast, and a neighbouring crusty 'old resident Fellow' plies Leo with 'unlimited quantities of brandy-balls [...] making him promise to say nothing about it' (p. 51). Within the College, Holly can comfortably ignore the power that women wield in evolution, but the role of sexual selection within natural selection becomes so prominent that women are acknowledged as a threat to men's survival. The editor of Holly's manuscript recounts witnessing Holly and Leo meet an attractive young woman on the street: giving Leo a 'reproachful look', Holly abruptly flees. The editor clarifies, 'I heard afterwards that he was popularly supposed to be as much afraid of a woman as most people are of a mad dog, which accounted for his precipitate retreat' (p. 36). Holly's fear is best read as more than the fear of rejection: in fact, it is also the fear of selection. The quest bequeathed to Holly and Leo is itself a matter of female choice, originating in the selection of Kalikrates by Amenartas, whose shard records that she 'caus[ed] him through love to break the vows that he had vowed' and that her selection results in generations and generations of men being drafted into a dangerous and fruitless quest. In this scenario, selection by women is both desired and feared.

Unlike Holly, Leo is attractive as a Greek god, fond of women and an eager participant in the evolutionary process (p. 52). The editor deems Leo 'altogether too good-looking' and observes that he cannot claim that 'young Vincey showed much aversion to feminine society' (p. 36). The editor goes as far as to warn his brother with a laugh that Leo 'was not the sort of man whom one would care to introduce to the lady one was going to marry, since it is exceedingly probable that the acquaintance would end in a transfer of her affections' (p. 36), and his comment

further emphasises the importance of women's choice in courtship. Women flock to the unwitting Leo throughout the novel, first Ustane and then Ayesha, and his success in "mating" coincides with Darwin's theories about male beauty and female choice. Darwin writes in *The Descent of Man* (1871):

it appears that female birds in a state of nature, have by a long selection of the more attractive males, added to their beauty or other attractive qualities. No doubt this implies powers of discrimination and taste on the part of the female which will at first appear extremely improbable; but by the facts to be adduced hereafter, I hope to be able to shew that the females actually have these powers.<sup>9</sup>

Ustane's seduction of Leo challenges readers by exhibiting a classic case of sexual selection as Darwin observed it amongst birds. Ustane is the 'handsomest of the young [Amahaggar] women' but, like Darwin's birds, is 'less modified' than the male she chooses (p. 93). Like many female birds, Ustane is brown, with hair 'of a shade between brown and chestnut', whereas Leo is decidedly flashy. As Darwin concludes, 'many cock birds do not so much pursue the hen, as display their plumage, perform strange antics' (p. 256), and therefore Leo 'excite[s]' the Amahaggar women's attention by presenting his 'tall, athletic form and clear-cut Grecian face' (p. 93). Haggard explains that when Leo 'politely lifted his hat to them, and showed his curling yellow hair, there was a slight murmur of admiration' (p. 93). Leo's mating ritual is a success: Ustane 'deliberately advanced to him, and in a way that would have been winning had it not been so determined, quietly put her arm round his neck, bent forward, and kissed him on the lips' (p. 93). Witnessing female choice being performed, Holly gasps, and Job cries: 'The Hussy – well, I never!' Meanwhile, the other Amahaggar women merely show 'traces of vexation' that they had missed their chance (p. 93). Leo, however, 'return[s] the embrace' (p. 93), fulfilling Darwin's account that '[t]hus the more vigorous females, which are the first to breed, will have the choice of many males; and though they may not always select the strongest or best armed, they will select those which are vigorous and well armed, and in other respects the most attractive' (p. 249).

The reactions of Job and Holly reflect the Victorian hope that humans had evolved out of this system of female dominance in sexual selection, and Leo's participation in this "primitive" mating ritual reeks of degeneration. Ustane's power cannot be 'winning' to a Victorian gentleman, especially one like Holly who fails to profit from a structure that objectifies the male body and evaluates its worth. Ustane's power of choice proves unsettling because it has direct ties to specific social and legal bonds. When Holly discovers that Ustane's actions were not exceptional, in fact, that

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<sup>9</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 246. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

among the Amahaggar, ‘when a woman took a fancy to a man she signified her preference by advancing and kissing him publicly [...]. If he kissed her back, it was a token that he accepted her, and the arrangement continued till one of them wearied of it’ (p. 94), the implications of Darwinian sexual selection become clearer: female choice does not support a patriarchal society. Holly explains that he has learned that

women among the Amahaggar are not only upon terms of perfect equality with the men, but are not held to them by any binding ties. Descent is traced only through the line of the mother, and while individuals are as proud of a long and superior female ancestry as we are of our families in Europe, they never pay attention to, or even acknowledge, any man as their father, even when their male parentage is perfectly well known. (p. 94)

This threat of female choice to patriarchal rule makes Holly uncomfortable, and he is quick to note pettishly that because of his unattractive appearance, ‘none of the young ladies offered to pet me in this fashion’ (p. 94). This is a lose-lose situation for Holly: he neither maintains masculine privilege nor secures a mate. Yet his allegiance to Leo, as man and surrogate father, demands that he find some justification for Leo’s willingness to compromise his gender superiority for immediate sexual gratification. Attempting to ameliorate the effects of Leo’s devolutionary behaviour, Holly argues cultural relativity: ‘the customs of mankind on this matter vary in different countries, making what is right and proper in one place wrong and improper in another’ (p. 94). Holly reasons, when in Africa, do as the Africans, but don’t think of advocating female choice in Britain. However, in attempting to resolve Leo’s willing participation in matriarchal customs and openly promiscuous sex acts, Holly inadvertently complicates his case by conceding the ritual as the equivalent of marriage. Since ‘ceremony is the touchstone of morality’, Holly excuses his ward by deeming that there was ‘nothing immoral about this custom’, and he concludes the chapter by declaring ‘the interchange of the embrace answers to our ceremony of marriage, which, as we know, justifies all things’ (p. 94). Despite Holly’s claims that the marriage ‘justifies all things’ – that is, Leo and Ustane’s sexual relations – and that they are only subject to Africa’s laws while in Africa, his slippery logic leads to troublesome realities. In fact, as I have explained, the novel has already recognised that Africa’s laws of sexual selection were already active in England. Wittingly or unwittingly, Haggard also raises other troublesome questions about marriage. Is marriage a force of stability or instability for masculinity? Are men, like Leo, who wed women overseas immune to the implications of their vows when they return home?

The attention to sexual selection in Africa functions as a narrative distraction, meant to avert readers’ attention from women’s power in sexual selection back home, where numerous changes to Victorian laws regarding marriage and concerns about



degeneration heighten the significance of Haggard's foray into the sentimental marriage plot. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 extended the availability of divorce to the middle and working classes. Although the Act did not ensure equality – women still had to prove aggravated adultery to sue for divorce – it improved women's ability to determine her own destiny in marriage. Divorce, however, was viewed by many as regression. If human evolution followed the narrative of female choice giving way to male choice in sexual selection, any relapse suggested the potential for devolution. Just as the Amahaggar and Holly's baboon-like body serve as reminders of earlier evolutionary states, female choice in marriage and reciprocal legal reforms suggest backwards momentum. Divorce undermined the possibility that a wife was the property of her husband. Divorce also threatened the sanctity of marriage, suggesting that a breakdown in marriage law would lead to serial monogamy or, worse, outright promiscuity. Parliament considered this risk most serious among the lower classes, already believed to be less evolved, and hence only one divorce court was established in London, effectively denying the working poor from the country and surrounding industrial cities access because they usually could not afford travel expenses.<sup>10</sup>

William Gladstone, who opposed the Divorce Act, warned of the dangers if British working-class men's "natural" instincts were to go unchecked without the confines of marriage: 'Take care, then how you damage the character of your country men. You know how apt the English nature is to escape from restraint and control; you know what passion dwells in the Englishman' (p. 41). Other Members of Parliament identified women's unfettered sexuality as the source of real anxiety: for them, divorce raised issues of paternity, since women's adultery threatened the legitimacy of a husband's heirs, and hence the marriage itself. Other legislation that pushed women's rights chipped away at gender inequities regarding marriage. The *Women's Suffrage Journal* deemed the 1882 Married Women's Property Act the "Magna Carta" of women's liberties' as it gave wives control of property they brought to their marriage (p. 124). Meanwhile, issues regarding marriage, including a mother's custodial rights to her children and a wife's right to sue for marital rape, dominated public attention in the press and in the courts. Haggard's attention to the relative equality of Amahaggar women, who 'are not held to [their husbands] by any binding ties' emphasises their choice in entering and exiting marriage; men could only accept their fates 'when their wives deserted them in favour of a rival, accept [...] the whole thing much as we accept the income-tax or our marriage laws, as something not to be disputed' (p. 94). The fact that tax and marriage laws were in dispute for much of the century belies Haggard's seeming acceptance of Amahaggar custom; he never intends for his readers to be at ease with a female dominated

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 41-42. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

process of sexual selection. Moreover, the implications of female choice in marriage were thus not mere paranoia to men like Haggard; women's role in sexual selection raised immediate concerns in England. By the late nineteenth century, many Victorians could conceive of female choice in marriage as socially beneficial.<sup>11</sup> Feminist supporters of eugenics like Sarah Grand argued that women could detach themselves from purely physical motivations for marriage to make matches that held the fitness (both physical and moral) of the marriage's offspring foremost – in some ways, the Victorian version of a “designer baby”. Ayesha, also known as ‘She’, thus represents not just a character but empowered Western women *en masse* through the universality of her name, demanding of respect as characterised through the capitalisation of the personal pronoun.

Having proven how ‘among the Amahaggar the weaker sex ha[d] established its rights’, Haggard crafts the second marriage plot between Leo and the ageing Ayesha as further evidence of women's power in an earlier stage of evolution. If life among primitive nineteenth-century Amahaggar linked humanity to a past of ‘perfect equality’, Ayesha's magical two-thousand-year-old existence initiates a leap further into an evolutionary history of awesome female power, and Ayesha's age is a critical aspect of this process. Kay Heath explains that her character ‘registers apprehension about mature female power, the *femme fatale* whose experience gives her incredible dominion over men’ and that ‘she contravenes not only expectations of old maids but also the paradigm of sexless service expected of all postmenopausal women’.<sup>12</sup> Ayesha is not content with equality, nor does She fade into familiar gendered roles. Ayesha delights in her undisputed power over men, as when She brings Holly, who initially refused to bow to her, to his knees. Ayesha reverses the age dynamic of many Victorian marriages, in which older men selected and married women half their age. The ageing woman thus exaggerates the implications of female power and female choice in sexual selection, and, in doing so, provides characters with a representative figure who can be disciplined and punished for the advances suggested by Ustane and the other women in the text.

If a man's being selected by a same-aged woman pointed to devolution, then being selected by an ageing woman escalated the message of degeneration, as ageing was itself considered further slippage backwards on the evolutionary path. Even the modern use of the word “cougar” to describe an older woman who is romantically involved with a younger man exploits these animalistic associations. Male sexual attraction to the ageing female body overtly suggests sexual deviancy – it is not “natural” and seemingly does not promote reproduction, yet overtly hints at secret longings for a distant evolutionary past. In the 1880s, such abnormal, anti-progressive

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<sup>11</sup> See Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 33-57.

<sup>12</sup> Kay Heath, *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian England* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), p. 105. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

desires were subject to public scrutiny, and signs of premature ageing, likely the result of poor environmental and nutritional practices in urban centres, incited worries of widespread regression. By the end of the century, a story about 11,000 Manchester men applying for military duty and 8,000 of them being turned away because of physical problems fuelled fears that society was rapidly degenerating. Reports deemed men ‘tadpoles’ because of their large heads and underdeveloped bodies.<sup>13</sup> Ageing was one sign of physical regression. Heath theorises:

During the last two decades of the century, an unprecedented advertising boom and mounting anxiety about degeneration combined to offer manufacturers increased impetus to exploit decline apprehensions for commercial profit [...]. Many of their campaigns focused on youthfulness as an imperative midlife concern, capitalizing on the degeneration fears of a mass audience. (p. 173)

Victorians struggled to hide ageing and any potential devolution from others. Like the readers of Haggard’s novel, Ayesha strives to look younger than her years. Having discovered a pillar of fire that gives eternal life, Ayesha’s beauty secret is more effective than that of most Victorians, who only enjoyed Pears’ Soap and various tonics. Ayesha is thus old and not old. She is repulsive yet desirable. Even Holly, who had fought so hard to remove himself from women’s influence, finds himself succumbing to her beauty against his better judgment: ‘the very *diablerie* of the woman, whilst it horrified and repelled, attracted even in a greater degree’ (p. 157). Part of the appeal is in fact Ayesha’s age; Holly reasons that a ‘person with the experience of two thousand years at her back’ is superior to regular women and ‘certainly worth falling in love with, if ever woman was’ (p. 157). Ayesha’s age is inseparable from her power to ‘slay’ men both literally and figuratively. With only partial regret, Holly muses, ‘to fall victim to a modern Circe! But then she was not modern [...]. She was almost as ancient as the original Circe’ (p. 157).

When She selects Leo, again because of his appearance as he looks just like her former lover Kallikrates, She fulfills Darwin’s theories of sexual and natural selection, since She must also destroy her rival Ustane.<sup>14</sup> In language strongly suggestive of late-Victorian theories of Social Darwinism, She justifies killing Ustane: ‘day by day we destroy that we may live, since in this world none, save the strongest, can endure. Those who are weak must perish; the earth is to the strong, and the fruits thereof’ (p. 192). Despite Ustane’s repeated claims that Leo is her rightful

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<sup>13</sup> See Vanessa Heggie, ‘Lies, Damn Lies, and Manchester’s Recruiting Statistics: Degeneration as an “Urban Legend” in Victorian and Edwardian Britain’, *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 64 (2008), 178-216.

<sup>14</sup> As Mazlish points out, Haggard draws much of this plot from Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (1871) in which an all powerful female leader Zee rules a world where women also control the selection of mates. See Mazlish, ‘A Triptych’, pp. 738-39.

husband and Leo's confirmation that Ustane and he are 'married according to the custom of this awful place' (p. 209), Ayesha kills Ustane and 'with a sweet, mocking laugh' predicts that Leo will 'within a very little space [...] creep to my knee, and swear that thou dost love me' even though he calls her a 'murderess' and declares 'I hate thee' (p. 211). Ayesha is right. Within moments, Leo uses the body of Ustane as an altar and 'plight[s] his troth to [the] red-handed murderess – plight[s] it for ever and a day' (p. 213). He cannot do otherwise, as he has very little power in this ancient, female-controlled sexual selection. Indeed, the devolution is clear to him: 'Leo groaned in shame and misery; for though he was overcome and stricken down, he was not so lost as to be unaware of the depth of the degradation to which he had sunk' (p. 213). She had chosen him, and there was literally nothing he could do about it.

Men's subordinate position in this process is clear. In agony, Leo curses himself for what had happened to himself and to Ustane. He does not curse Ayesha. And his lamentations reveal his utter subjection: 'not that I could help,' 'I cannot resist', 'I know I shall do it again', 'I know that I am in her power', 'I must follow her as a needle follows a magnet', 'I would not go away now if I could', and 'my legs would not carry me' (p. 220). Also in love with Ayesha, Holly is likewise impotent, unable to escape. He describes, '[w]e could no more have left her than a moth can leave the light that destroys it' (p. 221). Ayesha is likened to opium, a devastating addiction, and she is deemed 'wicked' and, blurring genders in her power, even 'the old gentleman', the devil himself (pp. 221, 223). The men are horrified by their lack of control, their lack of choice, and the novel ratchets up the dynamics of the plot when Ayesha announces her plans to return with Leo to England. Leo and Holly react with 'exclamation[s] of horror' to the idea of Ayesha's power contaminating England's patriarchal system. Holly and Leo ultimately come to terms with their powerlessness by acknowledging that this system of female choice in sexual selection and female power in marriage is already at work in England. With misogynist humour, Holly reasons: 'True, in [Leo's] uniting himself to this dread woman, [Leo] would place his life in the hand of a mysterious creature of evil tendencies, but then that would be likely enough to happen in any ordinary marriage' (pp. 221-22). Holly's hatred of women stems from feelings of powerless that originate in England, and again, the men's efforts to confine women's power to a distant and exotic Africa fail. Thus, while Holly attempts to ameliorate the effects of his realisations, these notions of universal female control and devolution are vexing rather than comforting. Haggard suggests that England's system of male dominance is an elaborate ruse hiding the truth of female control just as a myth of evolutionary progress hides an alternative reality of evolutionary decline.

Though the text makes clear that Leo will never be Ayesha's equal, She demands that he undergo the life-extending properties of the pillar of fire as soon as they wed. She explains that without reconciling their 'difference', they could not

marry or ‘mate’, nor could he even look at her at length without endangering himself (p. 227). Leo’s alteration would be to make him worthy of She; he really has no choice in the matter. Likewise, Ayesha does not ask for Leo’s hand in marriage. She demands: ‘we [shall] stand in the place of Life, and thou shalt bathe in the fire, and come forth glorified, as no man ever was before thee, and then, Kallikrates, shalt thou call me wife, and I will call thee husband’ (p. 228). Leo is not even Leo. She renames him, recreates him, as his ancestor from thousands of years ago. Like Ustane, Ayesha needs no outside entity to sanctify her marriage; She performs her own marriage ceremony: ‘Here, too, are we wed, my husband – wed till the end of all things; here do we write our marriage vows upon the rushing winds which shall bear them up to heaven’ (pp. 254-55). Ayesha’s plan to return to the pillar of fire leads to her undoing, what Gilbert reads as her being ‘fucked to death’, controlled and punished. And, indeed, the pillar changes her, taking her rapidly through ageing and into death. However, instead of offering a comforting resolution to the problem of female control in sexual selection, the hidden reality of Ayesha’s age proves even more threatening to male privilege.

When the pillar of fire removes Ayesha’s superficial appearance of youth, she appears both old and devolved, and the extent of the men’s complex fear of and longing for devolution becomes apparent. Without a mirror, Ayesha is the last one to perceive her physical decline. No longer empowered, she asks with confusion, ‘[w]hy, what is it – what is it?’ when she notices the changes through reading the faces of the men who view her. Suddenly, there is ‘no spring in her step,’ her arm is ‘thin and angular’ instead of plump and round, and her beautiful face ‘*was growing old before [their] eyes!*’ (p. 261, emphasis in original). Her voice alters from ‘deep and thrilling notes’ to one ‘high and cracked’ (p. 261). In witnessing the ‘horror of horrors’ of the ageing female body, Leo recoils, backing away from Ayesha. The process continues; Ayesha’s hair falls out, leaving her ‘utterly bald’, her skin browns and wrinkles, resembling ‘an old piece of withered parchment’ (p. 261). Nestled in ‘the masses of her own dark hair’ and rolling upon the floor, She is ‘no larger than a big monkey, and hideous’ (p. 263). Characteristics of ageing and degeneration fuse throughout Haggard’s description of her destruction; ‘turning into a monkey’, Ayesha ‘pucker[s] into a million wrinkles’ and ‘shrivel[s] up’ until She is ‘no larger than a she baboon’ (p. 261). The effects of the transformation are too much for Holly, who reflects ‘nobody ever saw anything like the frightful age that was graven on that fearful countenance’, remembering the image of a degenerated She ‘swaying her head slowly from side to side as a tortoise does’ (p. 263). When Ayesha dies, Holly quickly covers her withered remains with her shroud; he had ‘no wish to look upon that terrible sight again’ (p. 266).

Ayesha’s aged body is terrible because it suggests a complete lack of male choice in sexual selection to readers. They are still bound to She, regardless of their disgust. After recovering from fainting at the sight of Ayesha’s ageing and eventual

destruction, Leo promptly renews his marital commitment, promising to remember her, to never 'have anything to say to another living woman', and to 'wait for her as faithfully as she waited for me' (p. 267). Holly reflects to himself that he hopes that Ayesha will return 'as beautiful as we knew her' instead of as he last saw her, but, the text makes clear that, either way, Holly and Leo are committed to her. Holly explains, '[w]e both loved her now and for always, she was stamped and carven on our hearts, and no other woman could ever raze that splendid die' (p. 267). Despite his physical revulsion from her aged body, Holly attributes incredible power to her years; he even excuses many of her atrocities as both the result of the bitterness that comes with age as well as wisdom. In a lengthy footnote to the main narrative, Holly concedes that Ayesha behaves as any man with enormous power would, and he further reasons: 'Now the oldest man upon the earth was but a babe compared to Ayesha, and the wisest man upon the earth was not one-third as wise. And the fruit of her wisdom was this, that there was but one thing worth living for, and that was Love in its highest sense' (p. 221). Although the novel attempts to control female choice in marriage, first by characterising it as exotic and alien to England, then by destroying its supreme embodiment, the novel ultimately concedes its power. Ayesha's selection of Leo determines his past, present and 'the dim and distant future' (p. 280). Leo and Holly return to the protection of his male-only college, but even there they are not free from women's selection. They have already been chosen, and all the men can do is to wait for her return.

Perhaps the convergence of female choice in marriage and ageing women's power had special significance for a Victorian audience in 1887, the year of Victoria's Golden Jubilee, when the details of the ageing queen's reign were celebrated. Queen Victoria's much romanticised marriage to Prince Albert was evidence of women's role in sexual selection: like Darwin's birds, many males competed for the hand of young Victoria, and, like Leo, Albert distinguished himself by his physical attractiveness. Victoria describes her early impressions in her journal: 'It was with some emotion that I beheld Albert – who is beautiful'.<sup>15</sup> Monica Charlott explains in her biography of the young queen, 'Lord Melbourne praised Albert's looks and advised her to "take another week" [to consider him as a husband]. Victoria confessed to him that she had not to admit the power of beauty' (p. 165). Darwinian sexual selection plays out in textbook fashion, Victoria decides that Albert is the mate for her, and, contrary to etiquette, she proposes. Victoria's journal reveals: 'Then I asked [Lord Melbourne] if I hadn't better tell Albert of my decision soon, in which Lord Melbourne agreed. How? I asked, for that in general such things were done the other way – which made Lord Melbourne laugh' (p. 165). Even decades after Albert's death, the royal couple taunted Victorians who idolised the couple while questioning their gender reversals. Combined with the growing sensationalised coverage of

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Monica Charlott, *Victoria: The Young Queen* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 164. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Divorce Court proceedings and the movement for women's rights in the daily papers, women's potential, even "natural", role in marriage was unsettling to the point that men like Haggard and Holly were tempted to consign it to distant lands and then attempt to destroy it. However, ultimately, the novel suggests a much more nuanced relationship with Darwin's theories. Haggard concedes, perhaps with bitterness, certain knowledge that women did wield power in sexual selection and that humans had not evolved into male control of the mating process. Moreover, this idea of female choice was attractive even while it frightened: it tantalised even while it repulsed.

Rather than functioning as a stabilising, conservative plot device, the sentimental marriage plot undermines conventional power structures in emphasising gender reversals through Darwinian sexual selection. Marriage in *She* is neither conservative nor strictly heterosexual as it toys with fundamental issues of gender and power. Even taking into consideration the undeniable backlash against the powerful women in *She*, Ustane's murder and Ayesha's destruction by the pillar of fire, Haggard's novel speaks to a marked, Victorian ambivalence toward female choice, deeming marriage a unique venue for gendered power to play out.

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## PEDERASTY AND SEXUAL ACTIVITY IN OSCAR WILDE'S *THE HAPPY PRINCE AND OTHER TALES*

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### *Abstract*

This article argues that pederastic sexual activity is evident in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), and it suggests that sex was a significant element in Wilde's pederastic imagination. I contend that sexual activity is a pressing topic in Wilde studies due to the prevalence of the queer theory framework in the field. The historical exactitude of queer theory has produced an overdue analysis of Wilde's eros in relation to 'pederasty' as opposed to 'homosexuality', but its profound anti-foundationality has led to a refusal to calcify the moments in Wilde's fiction when sexual activity between males may be in the figurative mix, and this repeats the de-realising representational strategies that once consigned male-male sex to a shadowlike existence. I contest the etherealising bent of queer theory *vis-à-vis* Wilde on theoretical, textual and historical grounds, and I then unearth a hitherto unidentified interaction between the pederastic and sexual elements in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. I show that the issue of mutuality in pederastic relations is a significant concern for Wilde, and I argue that he remains pessimistic about the place of sex in pederastic relationships because it subsumes, distorts, or eradicates what he saw as pederasty's invigorative properties.

The denaturalising, decentring and defamiliarising properties of queer theory have had a significant impact on Wilde studies over the last twenty years.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I focus on the relationship between two of these effects: (1.) the need to consider the 'pederastic' nature of Wilde's eros as opposed to the 'homosexual' one, and (2.) the fact that sexual activity has been sidelined in most discussions of Wilde's literary works. In the first section, I conduct a general discussion of the relationship between sex, pederasty and Wilde, and I outline the need for more analytical follow through on the moments in Wilde's *oeuvre* when sexual activity seems to be implied. In the second section, I consider three intergenerational and inter-dimensional relationships between male characters in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888).<sup>2</sup> This collection is an apt place to engage the link between pederasty and sexual activity: it has been one of the main focal points in current discussions of Wilde's pederastic identity, and John-Charles Duffy has recently bucked the critical trend by identifying

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful discussion of these effects, see Richard A. Kaye, 'Gay Studies / Queer Theory and Oscar Wilde', in *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies*, ed. by Frederick S. Roden (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 189-223 (pp. 191-219).

<sup>2</sup> The stories from *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* are included in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1966). Subsequent references to all of Wilde's works in the article are to this edition, and they appear parenthetically in the text, preceded, when necessary, by the title of the work.

its representations of sex scenes.<sup>3</sup> However, Wood does not locate sexual activity in the collection as she advances her argument that Wilde ‘proffers an artificial, idealistic sensuality’, and sexual activity in Duffy’s essay is just one of the many ‘gay’ ‘themes’ that he discusses.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I demarcate two hitherto unidentified examples of sex scenes in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, and I examine how the pederastic frame of the relationships in the collection enables Wilde to consider the dynamics of pederastic bonds, especially the place of sex in them. An important element of my argument is that the prevalent queer theory framework in Wilde studies is not the most effective way of handling the presence and significance of the pederastic sexual undercurrents in Wilde’s *oeuvre*.

## I.

Queer Theory promotes attentiveness to historical particularities, and its refusal to presuppose the existence of homo/hetero forms of selfhood in periods preceding the twentieth century has yielded a culturally unfamiliar version of Wilde. Wilde has (re)emerged as ‘the most famous pederast in the world’s history’, but the dissolution of his status as the ‘ultimate icon of the modern homosexual’ has coincided with the etherealisation of sexual activity in his *oeuvre*.<sup>5</sup> This movement into indistinctness is epistemo-logically troubling, and it is also difficult to uphold in view of Wilde’s literature and his life experiences. In this section, I explore why pederastic sex scenes in Wilde’s *oeuvre* have remained untapped, and I demonstrate the connection between pederasty, sex and Wilde that sets up my consideration of this subject in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*.

In the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Wilde’s own eros was most closely tuned to the note of [...] pederastic love’, and ‘his desires seem to have been structured intensely by the crossing of definitional lines – of age, milieu, initiatedness, and physique, most notably – sufficiently marked to make him an embattled subject for the “homosexual” homo-genization’.<sup>6</sup> As Sedgwick notes, the

<sup>3</sup> The fact that pederasty is at stake in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* has been convincingly established in the last decade, mainly by Naomi Wood’s ‘Creating the Sensual Child: Paterian Aesthetics, Pederasty, and Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales’, *Marvels & Tales*, 16 (2002), 156-70, and, perhaps to a lesser extent by John-Charles Duffy’s ‘Gay-Related Themes in the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29 (2001), 327-50.

<sup>4</sup> Wood, ‘Creating the Sensual Child’, p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> For the two comments, see, respectively, Rupert Croft-Cooke, *Feasting with Panthers: A New Consideration of Some Late Victorian Writers* (London: W.H. Allen, 1967), p. 176; and Joseph Bristow, “‘A Complex Multiform Creature’: Wilde’s Sexual Identities”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 195-218 (p. 199).

<sup>6</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 57-58.

‘new homo/hetero terms’ had a ‘fix[ing]’ quality because they hinged on notions like ‘sameness’, ‘diagnos[is]’, ‘congruence’, and ‘stabil[ity]’, and they thereby ‘streamlined’ people and desires.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, pederasty is a more unruly framework. Its links to the hereditariness of the ‘homo/hetero’ model are weak, as pederasty is based on ‘acts’ and ‘relations’ as opposed to ‘types’.<sup>8</sup> The resultant idea of mutability is also evident in the fact that pederasty was designed to enable the growth, the socialisation, and, thus, the alteration of male youths through relations with adult males.<sup>9</sup>

The framework for analysing Wilde’s texts is now invariably a ‘queer’ one.<sup>10</sup> The ‘queer’ framework eschews and denaturalises the stabilising interpretive apparatus that produced our ‘modern sexual identities’, and it can thereby attend to the ‘slippage’, ‘blurr[ing]’, ‘confus[ion]’, and ‘indeterminacies’ that characterise sexuality in the minds of queer thinkers.<sup>11</sup> Alan Sinfield’s work on *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) aptly demonstrates the removal of the ‘homo’/‘same’ equation from discussions of Wilde’s texts. Christopher Craft has argued that the ‘discourse’ of ‘homosexuality’ is invoked in the play by the titular pun of Earnest/Urning, but Craft notes that the character Ernest does not correlate with the ‘essentialist notions of being’ that the word ‘Urning’ evoked: Ernest’s origin was in a terminus, and he was replaced by a work of fiction.<sup>12</sup> After his ‘origin has been terminated in this [farcical] way’, ‘no “serious” appeal can be made to natural reference or natural ground’, and ‘the very possibility of a “true inversion” grounded not in trope but in nature is [...] punningly dismissed by [the] play’.<sup>13</sup> Sinfield disputes Wilde’s ability to ‘broadcast homosexual critique into the gay interspace of a pun’.<sup>14</sup> He rejects the locus of such readings by arguing that sexual readings of ‘Ernest’ are invalid because the two Ernests are pursuing females, and he disputes attempts to read effeminate dandies as ‘Urnings’ because the ‘aristocrat was expected to be effeminate, so same-sex passion was not foregrounded by his manner’.<sup>15</sup> In this

<sup>7</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, pp. 57, 58, 59, 60.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York; London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 18-21.

<sup>9</sup> See William Armstrong Percy, *Pederasty and Pedagogy in Archaic Greece* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996), pp. 87-96.

<sup>10</sup> Kaye, ‘Queer Theory and Oscar Wilde’, p. 194.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Mills, ‘Male-Male Love and Sex in the Middle Ages, 1000-1500’, in *A Gay History of Britain: Love and Sex between Men Since the Middle Ages*, ed. by Matt Cook, with Robert Mills, Randolph Trumbach and H.G. Cocks (Oxford: Greenwood World Publishing, 2007), pp. 1-44 (pp. 43, 11, 5, 29, 18).

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Craft, ‘Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*’, *Representations*, 31 (1990), 19-46 (pp. 22, 46, 38-39).

<sup>13</sup> Craft, ‘Alias Bunbury’, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Craft, ‘Alias Bunbury’, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Sinfield, “‘Effeminacy’ and ‘Femininity’: Sexual Politics in Wilde’s Comedies”, *Modern Drama*, 37 (1994), 34-52 (pp. 34-35, 35, 39).

reading, Craft's delineation of the play's 'homosexual' content is a product of our expectation of the 'disclos[ure]' of a sexual 'truth', and this expectation distorts a text that was written by a man whose perception was not informed by our framework.<sup>16</sup> In the reading of *Sinfield*, as in Joseph Bristow's interpretation, the 'homo' in 'homosexual' disappears, and its attendant notions of sameness, 'truth', and singularity also vanish.<sup>17</sup> As a result, queer theory's cherished idea of 'openness' prevails.<sup>18</sup>

As the 'homo' disappears, though, so does the assuredness that produces 'fully developed homosexual undercurrent[s]' by 'reduc[ing] each and every moment of suggestive obliquity in Wilde's writings to an undeniable instance of homophile intensity', and, crucially, the envelopment of Wilde's *oeuvre* by 'queer' haziness either obfuscates or erases possible instances of sexual activity.<sup>19</sup> For example, Bristow leaves Ernest's 'sins' unspecified, and he always refuses to follow through on suggestions that such secrets may be homosexual: he refuses any definiteness by simply conceding that they may, 'at some undisclosed level, point to [...] disruptive fields of meaning'.<sup>20</sup> *Sinfield* goes further than Bristow: he empties the seemingly suggestive notion of 'Bunburying' of its sexual import by noting that there is no evidence that 'bun' denoted 'bum' in the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the 'oral, genital, and anal' resonances of the act that Craft identifies presumably dissolve.<sup>22</sup>

One problem with the pluralisation or dissolution of such suggestive sexual moments is that it replicates the 'derealiz[ing]' representational strategies that have been used by opponents of sex between people of the same gender.<sup>23</sup> Terry Castle offers a valuable comment on this issue when she attempts 'to bring the lesbian back into focus' by showing that she has 'always' 'existed'.<sup>24</sup> Her book is a response to the 'nonseeing', 'forgetting', and 'disembody[ing]' strategies which previous generations have used to represent 'homosexuality', and which are being perversely replicated by the current generation of academic 'deconstructors'.<sup>25</sup> She even posits a reason why these recent 'deconstructors' are so determined to dismantle the sexual categories that she seeks to uphold:

<sup>16</sup> See Bristow, 'Wilde's Sexual Identities', pp. 211, 197-99.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Bristow, 'Wilde's Sexual Identities', pp. 197-98, 208, 210.

<sup>18</sup> The description of queer theory as an 'open' methodology is widespread (see, for example, Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, pp. 8-9).

<sup>19</sup> Bristow, 'Wilde's Sexual Identities', pp. 197, 196.

<sup>20</sup> Bristow, 'Wilde's Sexual Identities', pp. 197, 210.

<sup>21</sup> *Sinfield*, "'Effeminacy'", pp. 34-35.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Craft, 'Alias Bunbury', pp. 29, 28.

<sup>23</sup> Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, pp. 1-20.

<sup>25</sup> Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, p. 12.

One of the reasons that historians of sexuality have been so eager to treat lesbianism as a recently ‘invented’ (and therefore limited) phenomenon, it seems to me, is because it is so difficult – still – for many people to acknowledge that women can and do have sexual relations with one another.<sup>26</sup>

These ‘morbid refusals to visualize’ are labelled ‘imaginative “blockages”’, and they allegedly ‘afflict the more sophisticated’ as well as the bigots, the conformists, and so forth.<sup>27</sup>

Are these ‘blockages’ manifest in the works of Bristow and Sinfield, and why might they be operative? For example, can the obfuscation or contestation of the sexual meaning of ‘Bunbury’ really be upheld? Bunbury is a ‘permanent invalid’, and to be familiar with him is to dwell by a ‘bed of pain’.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, it is noted that ‘know[ing] Bunbury’ (p. 327) may produce ‘pain’ and ‘pleasures’ (p. 348), and to go Bunburying involves indulging scandalous, unspeakable ‘pleasures’.<sup>29</sup> Neither Bristow nor Sinfield interrogate these specific moments, and the sexual acts that seem to be striving to appear are thereby left ‘undisclosed’.<sup>30</sup> Admittedly, they are left as Wilde packaged them, but they are left that way in a society that no longer has the legal restraints which once proscribed ‘Bunburying’ from being packaged directly. Importantly, though, the same cannot be said for the intergenerational sexual elements in Wilde’s texts. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example, a Canon is described as a ‘Paedobaptist’ who ‘[s]prinkl[es]’ on young ‘infant[s]’, and his plan to perform this act at one of the ‘outlying cottages’ (pp. 346, 347, 346, 347) calls to mind the idea of sexual solicitation between males known as ‘cottaging’. Sexual relationships with minors are illegal and loaded with opprobrium in our own century, of course, and so perhaps it is understandable why there may be ‘imaginative “blockages”’ regarding such sexual relations in Wilde’s texts, as they may reflect negatively on the man who has come to ‘serve’ as ‘the ultimate icon of the modern homosexual’, and, thus, on ‘homosexuality’ itself.<sup>31</sup>

In this sense, the question of whether it is sufficient to leave the sexual meanings in Wilde’s literature to operate on ‘some undisclosed level’ is a particularly freighted one, but sexual activity simply cannot be avoided in relation to Wilde.<sup>32</sup> Wilde knew that pederastic ‘affection’ was predicated on transitivity and difference, and he therefore does answer uneasily to the ‘homo’ type of readings that expect a

<sup>26</sup> Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>27</sup> Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1966), pp. 321-84 (pp. 326, 348).

<sup>29</sup> Craft, ‘Alias Bunbury’, p. 40.

<sup>30</sup> Bristow, ‘Wilde’s Sexual Identities’, p. 197.

<sup>31</sup> See Bristow, ‘Wilde’s Sexual Identities’, p. 199.

<sup>32</sup> See Bristow, ‘Wilde’s Sexual Identities’, p. 197.

‘fully developed’ ‘sexual truth’.<sup>33</sup> However, sexual activity *was* always somewhere in his pederastic mix. In his famous speech from the dock during the second of his three trials in 1895, he said:

‘The love that dares not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. [...] It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an older and a younger man, when the older man has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before him.<sup>34</sup>

In Wilde’s model, the elder man and younger man have very *different* qualities, and this is what generates the bond between them. The absence of the ‘homo’ is further pronounced by the deficiency of other features that cluster around *sameness*. Reciprocity and congruence do not exist in the ‘great affection’ as it is one-way: the elder man has feelings for the younger man, but Wilde never actually suggests that these feelings are reciprocated. Wilde’s view of the relationship is also unavoidably ephemeral because its younger side will eventually grow into the ‘life [that is] before him’. Nonetheless, Wilde’s protestation of the ‘pur[ity]’ of this type of ‘affection’ was simply not true: he may not have agreed with the legal framing of pederastic relations as ‘gross indecency’, and his denials of its sexual element may have been prudent given the punishment for the charges that he faced, but he had engaged in sex with boys. Sex was buried underneath the surface of Wilde’s speech, and it ultimately came out in the courtroom. Sex was no longer undisclosed.

The disclosure of pederastic sex scenes in Wilde’s works is a worthwhile endeavour, then, and it has both a contradictory relationship to queer theory and an important relation to Wilde studies. On the one hand, identifying the pederastic nature of such scenes is a product of queer theory’s attentiveness to the existence of unfamiliar eros, but, on the other hand, it is a contestation of the etherealising bent of a methodology that is liable to consign sexual activity to the hazy realm of indeterminacy. Queer theory has become the ‘received wisdom of humanistic scholarship’ over the last twenty years, and its disorderly precepts have proved valuable to critics who have analysed the ostensibly de-anchoring elements of Wilde’s aesthetic.<sup>35</sup> However, queer theory has also come under fire from some scholars due to its ‘reductive tendencies’, its ‘fundamentalism’, its ‘de-gaying’/self-

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Castle, *Apparitional Lesbian*, pp. 197, 211.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: Century, 2003), p. 391.

<sup>35</sup> See Kaye, ‘Queer Theory and Oscar Wilde’, p. 194.

erasing effects, and the shortcomings of its thesis of historical discontinuities.<sup>36</sup> The thread that unites these various critiques is the idea of loss: the decentring strategies of queer theory remove the possibility of historical anchorage and stable identities, and they ultimately weaken both the validity of notions like ‘homosexuality’ and the enabling properties of such notions.<sup>37</sup> Bristow inadvertently captures this sense of loss when he concludes his essay on Wilde’s ‘sexual identities’ in a valedictory tone when discussing *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

Such is the fate of the Bunburyist whose unnamed pleasures are terminated once the Army Lists are pulled off the shelves. But that is not to claim that he was ever at any point the ‘homosexual’ that Wilde, in our confused modern age, was for decades thought to embody.<sup>38</sup>

Bristow fittingly stresses absence as opposed to presence, and he places the onus firmly on mystery as opposed to definiteness. He denies the possibility of embodiment, identity, nomenclature and ‘the “homosexual”’ in relation to Wilde and his literary works, and he deploys negative lexemes like ‘not’ and ‘[n]ever’ to conduct this disavowal.

The disclosure of pederastic sex in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* is one way of contesting the indeterminacy and absence that now seems to preponderate in Wilde studies, especially regarding the pederastic nature of sexual relationships. The demarcation of these scenes can potentially open up a new critical avenue in the field of Wilde studies, which hinges on the idea that queer theory is not always the most appropriate way of handling Wilde’s engagement with sexual issues.

## II.

The relationship between sex and pederasty is aptly shown by the critical discussion of pederastic relationships in Wilde’s lifetime, and by Wilde’s relationship to this discourse. John-Charles Duffy has argued that Wilde would have perceived two different forms of the ‘great affection’: there was the model of desexualised ‘devoted friendship[s]’ that Wilde’s contemporaries like Benjamin Jowett and John Addington

<sup>36</sup> See, respectively, Sebastian Matzner, ‘From Uranians to Homosexuals: Philhellenism, Greek Homoeroticism and Gay Emancipation in Germany 1835-1915’, *Classical Receptions Journal*, 2 (2010), 60-91 (p. 77); Joseph Pequigney, review of David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 35 (1998), 95-105 (p. 101); Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 69, 4; and James Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love: A Radical Reappraisal of Homosexuality in Ancient Greece* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), passim.

<sup>37</sup> See Bersani, *Homos*, pp. 69, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Bristow, ‘Wilde’s Sexual Identities’, p. 215.



Symonds eulogised, and there was the notion of *paiderastia* that invariably denoted some type of sexual contact.<sup>39</sup> Wilde himself was more than willing to *articulate* the desexualised ‘strain in Victorian discourse *pro* male love’, but he was also more than willing to *live* the sexual ‘strain’.<sup>40</sup> Dowling offers a nuanced reading of Wilde’s relation to the two discourses by eschewing the obvious verdict of hypocrisy: instead, she argues that Wilde did believe in the ‘pure’ form, but he still indulged the purportedly ‘[im]pure’ one.<sup>41</sup> He thereby occupied a more complex position on the subject of ‘pederasty’ than either the ‘devoted friendship’ or the ‘*paiderastia*’ models allow, and this tension between sexualised and desexualised pederasty is an apt context in which to discuss *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. The collection contains five stories, and I discuss the three in which the tension is most pronounced: ‘The Happy Prince’, ‘The Nightingale and the Rose’ and ‘The Devoted Friend’. In each case, I discuss the purpose of pederastic relationships, their dynamics, and the place of sex in them, and I intend to gain a further sense of the workings of Wilde’s pederastic imagination.<sup>42</sup>

‘The Happy Prince’ is the first tale in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and it chronicles the growing friendship of a Prince and a Swallow. The little Swallow is diverted from travelling to Egypt by an enormous statue of a prince who tells the Swallow of the suffering in the city that he overlooks. The Swallow is subsequently encouraged to alleviate this distress by transporting various parts of his new friend’s jewelled body to the afflicted city dwellers. He stays in the city over winter to keep his dilapidated friend company after the latter gives his eyes away to his people and the Swallow eventually dies. As a consequence, the Prince’s heart breaks and his decaying body is dismantled and melted down. The obvious discrepancy in size and age between the two friends, the depth of the “love” that they have for one another (p. 290), and the tender “kiss” “on the lips” (p. 290) that they ultimately share all point to the fact that this is an unusually intense inter-generational and inter-dimensional bond between two males. Indeed, Naomi Wood has noted that the ‘tale of the love relationship between the happy prince and the male swallow who serves and learns from him clearly dr[a]w[s] upon and analyse[s] the transcendent effects of the pederastic relationship’.<sup>43</sup>

However, Wilde inverts the intergenerational relationship in the story, and this enables him to conflate the two constituents of this bond and their seemingly separate

<sup>39</sup> Duffy, ‘Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde’, pp. 329-30.

<sup>40</sup> See Duffy, ‘Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde’, pp. 329-30.

<sup>41</sup> See Duffy, ‘Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde’, pp. 329-30.

<sup>42</sup> I should note that opening up sexual moments in Wilde’s texts requires the ‘monothematic’ interpretation that has been used to unearth their other pederastic undertones. For a defence of this ‘monothematic’ approach, see Michael Matthew Kaylor, *Secreted Desires: The Major Uranians: Hopkins, Pater and Wilde* (Brno, Czech Republic: Masaryk University, 2006), p. v <[http://www.mmkaylor.com/Secreted\\_Webpage\\_page\\_2.html](http://www.mmkaylor.com/Secreted_Webpage_page_2.html)> [accessed 04 May, 2011].

<sup>43</sup> Wood, ‘Creating the Sensual Child’, p. 161.

functions. In terms of experience, the Prince is clearly a youth, since his only memories involve ‘play[ing] with [his] companions in the garden’ (p. 286), whereas the Swallow is clearly the adult, since he has travelled widely. In terms of size, though, the Prince is a colossal figure who towers ‘[h]igh above the city’ (p. 285), and the Swallow is a tiny bird who is always referred to as “‘little’” (p. 290).

Even the pedagogical function of intergenerational relations is inverted and then reversed back in ‘The Happy Prince’. Pederastic pedagogy was theorised by the early Greek tribes, and it involved the *erastes* teaching his *eromenos* ‘courage’ and ‘loyalty’, preparing his mind and body for war, and stimulating and developing his intellect, thereby making him a useful, integrated member of the community.<sup>44</sup> This ‘educational authority’ of pedagogical pederasty reached its ‘culmination in Plato’s *Symposium*’.<sup>45</sup> In ‘The Happy Prince’, though, the child is the one who teaches the adult about social responsibility. The Prince repeatedly illuminates ‘all the ugliness and all the misery of [his] city’ to the Swallow (p. 286), and after continually soliciting the Swallow to ‘stay with me one night longer’ in order to aid the unfortunates in his realm (p. 288), the Swallow eventually proves to be a committed student by continuing to perform this task without even being asked. Indeed, the Swallow is the one who changes as a result of the relationship: he transforms from a cynical and self-absorbed individual into a romantic and altruistic one. Wilde manages to present this situation congruously because the child is big and the adult is small. One evening, the roles reverse back to their original form as the Swallow takes the adult role by educating the Prince about the world: he illuminates the ‘marvellous things’ (p. 290) that can be viewed in the world by telling the Prince ‘stories of what he had seen in strange lands’ (p. 289), and, at the Prince’s request, he relays the dolorous plight of the poor in the city that the Prince overlooks. The result of such inversions is something approaching harmony and equality: the seemingly patent distinctness is jumbled and reduced as both characters perform the anticipated functions of the other, and possess the expected attributes of the other.

This harmony is actually out of tune with Wilde’s pederastic imagination, since pederastic affection for him was usually one-way, and it was also reliant on exchange and extraction. In his speech in the courtroom, the elder man feels the ‘affection’, not the younger one. Indeed, the capacity for devotion that the elder man possesses is rarely properly reciprocated in Wilde’s works: Shakespeare and Erskine from *The Portrait of Mr W.H.* (1889) are besotted by younger men, and the latter run amok and behave heartlessly as the elder men helplessly observe this uncaring, reckless and wilful behaviour. Similarly, Dorian Gray goes on a series of variegated and wild adventures as his two obsessed elder companions fall away to the story’s sidelines, and even *De Profundis* (1897) can be read as Wilde’s lamentation of his devotion to a younger man who had been inattentive to the elder one’s wishes, needs and counsel.

<sup>44</sup> See Percy, *Pederasty and Pedagogy*, pp. 87-89, 96.

<sup>45</sup> Percy, *Pederasty and Pedagogy*, p. 89.

Indeed, pederastic affection was premised on inequality, whether of size, age, experience, beauty or fondness, and it was also reliant on the idea of exchange. As Wilde's speech in the courtroom suggested, the older man desires attributes that he does not possess anymore, and the younger man will receive benefits by allowing the elder one to absorb his vivacity.

The fact that Wilde inverts and conflates the constituents and the function of the intergenerational relationship in 'The Happy Prince' enables him to address his concerns about the one-way nature of pederasty, and its foundation on exchange and extraction. The bond in the story enables the development of the adult, but the adult could easily be the child given his size and his status as the student for most of the relationship. Likewise, the child enables the adult to grow, but his lack of growth, his enormous size, and his status as a teacher could easily make him the adult. In other words, a pederastic bond like this one can be mutually invigorating: it can foster the development of the adult as well as the child, and the idea of status and discrepancy thereby becomes inconsequential. Fittingly, then, the older/smaller and younger/bigger partners in 'The Happy Prince' each express 'love' for the other, and, despite the tale's deaths and disfigurements, there is thus still a sense in which its pederastic relationship is romanticised. This may convey Wilde's hope (or his wishful dream) that mutuality and depth of affection could exist in pederastic bonds.

Wood has drawn attention to the idealisation of pederasty in 'The Happy Prince', especially given the absence of sexual suggestiveness in the story, and whilst this idealisation can be acknowledged in two senses, it can also be questioned in another.<sup>46</sup> Pederasty is connected to altruism in the story, insofar as the relationship between the Prince and the Swallow is able to develop because the Prince needs the Swallow to aid his plan to redistribute his gold and jewels. By doing so, though, the Prince and the Swallow are effectively living for others, and this mode of life is one that Wilde would strongly condemn less than a year later in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1890). Perhaps this is why the story sandwiches the altruistic actions of the two characters between the behaviour of the city's negligent and misinformed rulers: it shows that they may have temporarily alleviated the conditions of the poor, but they have done nothing to change the state of affairs that generated such conditions in the first place. Indeed, the idealism and naivety of the Prince's policy for alleviation may spring from its germination in the mind of a child, and it impacts on both members of the relationship: the Swallow suffers through the winter and dies of cold, and the Prince is blinded, disfigured and eventually heartbroken by the death of his friend. Admittedly, such occurrences could point to the physical transience of the pederastic bond that the pederastic poets from Wilde's period were so prone to lament: children, after all, grow out of the plasticity, spotlessness, beauty and vigour that make them objects of affection to pederasts.<sup>47</sup> However, the adverse influence

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Wood, 'Creating the Sensual Child', p. 161.

<sup>47</sup> See Timothy d'Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English*

that the younger man has over the older one may also point to the dangers of a youth possessing sway over the actions and decisions of an adult.

The vision of pederasty in 'The Happy Prince' may not be as idealised as some critics have suggested, but it is certainly romanticised, and it markedly contrasts with the figuration of pederastic relationships in the collection's second tale. Duffy's shrewd essay, 'Gay-Related Themes in the Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde', usefully delineates the sexual nature of 'The Nightingale and the Rose'. The story chronicles a little bird being penetrated by the thorn of a giant tree so that it can produce a red rose for a desolate young student, who needs to supply his female lover with a red rose in order for her to dance with him at a forthcoming ball. Duffy reads the scene of penetration and the Tree's constant encouragement to allow the penetration to go deeper as an 'act of sexualized, but non-reproductive, penetration [that] figures as the supreme gesture of self-sacrificing love'.<sup>48</sup> Given the anal undertones of the act and the awkward fact that the tree is never assigned a gender, Duffy reads the tale as a glorification of 'non-reproductive sex'.<sup>49</sup>

However, Duffy never includes the young Student in the scene, and he never frames the text in relation to male-male sexual activity, let alone the inter-generational variety. The former reading is understandable in view of the Student's departure from the scene before the penetration takes place, and the latter one is understandable considering the Tree's 'gender[less]' position and the Nightingale's status as a female.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, in *Teleny, or The Reverse of the Medal* (1893), which is an underground erotica that Wilde may have had a role in writing and/or editing and which is certainly a good source of the period's sexual codewords and metaphors, the word 'nightingale' is used to refer to a phallus.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, the act of giving someone a '*feuille de rose*' denotes anal rimming: 'I greatly wondered what she meant, and I asked myself where she could find a rose-leaf', admits the callow narrator, but 'I was not left to wonder long, for [...] two other whores came and knelt down before the backsides that were thus held open for them, put their tongues in the little black holes of the anuses, and began to lick them'.<sup>52</sup> These codewords enable a pederastic subtext in 'The Nightingale and the Rose'. Firstly, it becomes possible to include the young Student in the story's sexual action because he desires and eventually receives a rose. Secondly, the Nightingale might actually connote something that is distinctly masculine, and the upright Tree's action of sinking its own thorn into a little creature can potentially add to the effect that this scene

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'*Uranian*' Poets from 1889 to 1930 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), passim.

<sup>48</sup> Duffy, 'Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde', p. 334.

<sup>49</sup> Duffy, 'Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde', p. 334.

<sup>50</sup> Duffy, 'Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde', p. 334.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Anon. [attributed to Oscar Wilde et al.], *Teleny, or The Reverse of the Medal* (1893; New York: Mondial, 2006), p. 131.

<sup>52</sup> Anon. [attributed to Oscar Wilde et al.], *Teleny*, pp. 131, 30.

involves males.

The sex act in 'The Nightingale and the Rose' can be presented bluntly, baldly and with the degree of licence that the text seems to invite by including two codewords in its very title. The giant member of the ménage penetrates the tiny member, thereby drawing the 'blood' that is always evident in the scenes of anal penetration from eroticas like *Teleny* and *Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881). The latter is replete with 'crimson engorged member[s]' and 'tortured arseholes' as an alleged male prostitute charts his lifetime of sexual escapades.<sup>53</sup> The former presents 'ruby beads of blood trick[ling] from all around [a] splitting orifice'.<sup>54</sup> In turn, the Nightingale's willingness to be penetrated and become 'crimson as a ruby' (p. 295) enables it to give the younger Student a red rose straight after receiving its bloody impact. This particular subtext can enable us to understand Wilde's conception of sex acts between three differently sized and differently aged males, especially the effects of such acts, and it thereby offers a version of pederastic bonds that differs in content from the one available in the collection's previous tale.

In some senses, though, the second story invites comparison with the first, and this process draws attention to the impact that sex can have on pederastic relationships once it comes into the mix. The Tree is obviously older and bigger than the tiny Nightingale, but the Student is much bigger than the bird, and yet he is also younger and childlike in his naivety, selfishness and petulance. In other words, a similar inversion exists in the relationship between the Student and the Nightingale as the one between the Prince and the Swallow. Indeed, the smaller but older member is once again wholeheartedly dedicated to the younger and larger one: like the Swallow, the Nightingale mutilates itself and finally perishes in order to fulfil the wishes of the bigger man. However, the key difference between these two relationships is the absence of mutuality in the one between the Nightingale and the Student: the Student's only mode of interaction with his little companion involves carelessly and obliviously receiving the red rose.

The reason why inequality and subservience are so pronounced in 'The Nightingale and the Rose' is because of the sexual impulse. The story's opening excessively repeats the desperate need of the Nightingale and the Student to have a red rose. "[I]n all my garden there is no red rose", laments the student, "[n]o red rose", and "for want of a red rose my life is made wretched" (p. 292). Similarly, the Nightingale 'crie[s]' three times, "Give me a red rose", and it avidly reaffirms that "[o]ne red rose is all I want [...] only one red rose!" (p. 293). The story subsequently becomes based on this one notion: "If you want a red rose," said the Tree, "you must build it [...] and stain it with your own heart's-blood" (p. 293), and this route

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Jack Saul, *Sins of the Cities of the Plain* (1881; [London]: Olympia Press, 2006), pp. 40, 64, 71, 101, 107.

<sup>54</sup> Anon. [attributed to Oscar Wilde et al.], *Teleny*, p. 82. For another scene of bloody anal sex in the novel, see p. 98.

involves enduring the penetration of a large thorn. In other words, sexual experiences like giving and receiving a red rose must be earned, and the story's frantic, consuming urge to give and receive such 'pleasures' is placed within a self-interested economy of labour and exchange, which clearly cannot accommodate the nonsexual aspects of pederasty that were evident in 'The Happy Prince'.

This urge-driven longing is thereby responsible for the affliction and the lack of mutuality in the story, and it is also responsible for the absence of the pedagogical function of pederasty and its capacity to invigorate its members. Indeed, Wilde notes that the Student cannot understand the words or feelings of the Nightingale amidst his obsession about the red rose, and this obsession with the physical element of existence is captured when his fixation on the Nightingale's "'form'" obscures its other qualities (p. 294). Just as importantly, the Nightingale's mania about receiving and giving a red rose cannot lodge pedagogical considerations: "'Give me a red rose'" is literally its one and only refrain. The fact that the Nightingale is prepared to die in order to get hold of a red rose gives full voice to an apprehension that runs throughout the story about the capacity of sex to vaporise the enlivening and instructional elements of pederastic relations. The death of the Nightingale immediately after it receives and gives a red rose implies that pederastic relations will not unfold through both stages of what Dowling calls 'the Platonic ideal, according to which "intercourse" between adult males and young men should pass 'from pandemic physical delight to Uranian intellectual friendship'.<sup>55</sup>

These two possibilities comprise the juxtaposition that Wilde sets up between idealised and sexualised pederasty in 'The Happy Prince' and 'The Nightingale and the Rose', and Wilde's concern about sex proving inimical to the 'noble[r]' facets of pederasty is best viewed in 'The Devoted Friend'.<sup>56</sup> The story contains the sexualised and pedagogical elements of pederasty, but given the fact that nobody has unearthed the sexual elements in the story, its consideration of the relationship between the two elements has never been examined.

'The Devoted Friend' chronicles a "'friendship'" between 'little Hans' and 'big Hugh the Miller' (p. 302). Big Hugh teaches little Hans about various aspects of life: 'nothing gave [little Hans] greater pleasure than to listen to all the wonderful things [big Hugh] used to say' (p. 302), for 'he was a very great scholar' (p. 307). Little Hans is clearly in need of some tutoring since he is 'an honest', unworldly 'little fellow' (p. 301), and the mature, assertive and well-established big Hugh consequently acknowledges his responsibility as the young man's "'best friend'" to "'watch over him'" (p. 303). He also offers to give him a wheelbarrow. As in Ancient

<sup>55</sup> See Duffy, 'Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde', p. 338.

<sup>56</sup> Each of the five tales in the collection contains pederastic elements. 'The Remarkable Rocket' is about a phallic firework rocket that can only 'get very stiff and straight' and "'explode'" before 'little boys' (pp. 318, 316), and 'The Selfish Giant' is about a Giant who learns to 'love' and 'play' with 'children', especially a 'little boy' (p. 299).

Greece, then, the older male takes the younger one under his wing, monitors him, supplies him with gifts and stimulates and develops his intellect.<sup>57</sup>

The consistent implication in the story is that this ‘friendship’ has a corporal dimension that recalls the one in ‘The Nightingale and the Rose’: big Hugh always expects a ‘return’ for his services, and after supplying little Hans with his wisdom and the promise of gifts, he takes many ‘flowers’ from the ‘garden’ of little Hans despite the latter’s unwillingness to part with them, as he had planned to sell them at market (p. 305). In other words, little Hans gives away his flower to an older male, despite the discomfort it will later bring him. This pattern continues throughout the tale: little Hans submits to big Hugh’s taxing and harmful demands, and this invariably brings him pain because he can never tend to his garden and make money from its contents, as he is always completing various ‘long errands’ (p. 307) for big Hugh that leave him ‘tired’ (p. 36) and ‘very much distressed’ (p. 307). This is actually consistent with big Hugh’s ‘theory’ of ‘friendship’: he notes that “‘a true friend [...] does not mind giving pain. Indeed [...] he prefers it, for he knows that then he is doing good’” (p. 306). So after receiving wisdom and being promised presents from the senior, the junior must submit to a form of punishment that he is told he should enjoy. This may anticipate the idea that ‘know[ing] Bunbury’ will produce pain and pleasure. Indeed, big Hugh’s demands for painful pleasure tire little Hans, and they keep him away from his flowers.

The sexual content of ‘The Devoted Friend’ is reinforced by the story’s employment of specific words like ‘basket’, ‘friend’, ‘cottage’, and ‘flower’. Paul Baker has collected the words and phrases that have been used amongst homosexual people over the past few centuries, and amongst some users, at least, these ‘slang’ words even came to ‘resemble’ a type of gay ‘language’.<sup>58</sup> Some of these words are familiar today. ‘Cottaging’ had its root in the resemblance between Victorian public toilets and cottages, and these ‘cottages’ were locations where men solicited sex with men.<sup>59</sup> This is why Craft is able to sexualise the scene in *The Importance of Being Earnest* when a ‘Paedobaptist’ basically follows big Hugh’s lead by ‘go[ing] down’ to the ‘outlying cottages’ to ‘sprinkl[e]’ on youths. Less familiarly, ‘basket’ could denote a phallus, as it referred to the bulge of a male’s genitals through his trousers, or, more simply, to his crotch.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, ‘friend’ could mean either side of a pederastic bond in Wilde’s lifetime.<sup>61</sup> The word ‘flower’, meanwhile, could obviously signify

<sup>57</sup> See Percy, *Pederasty and Pedagogy*, pp. 87-89, 96.

<sup>58</sup> Paul Baker, *Fantabulosa: A Dictionary of Polari and Gay Slang* (London; New York: Continuum, 2002), p. vii.

<sup>59</sup> Baker, *Fantabulosa*, p. 22.

<sup>60</sup> Baker, *Fantabulosa*, p. 77.

<sup>61</sup> Timothy d’Arch Smith notes the use of this word by late-nineteenth century pederastic poets in the abovementioned context (d’Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest*, p. 53), and it is also used in *Teleny* after the two central male characters have slept together – they describe each other as ‘my friend’, and ‘my friend–my lover’, see Anon. [attributed to Oscar Wilde et al.], pp. 126, 128, 129, 132, 136,

virginity. Each of these words combines in 'The Devoted Friend'. Big Hugh's relationship with little Hans is initially played out at the latter's 'cottage', and big Hugh goes down to this cottage with his 'basket in his hand' in order to take little Hans's 'flowers'. Indeed, big Hugh knows that little Hans "'will be able to give me a large basket of primroses, and that will make him so happy'" (p. 302).

These code words are yoked halfway through the story in order to suggest an anal encounter, and the nature of this encounter is supported by G.P. Jacomb Hood's illustration to the story that adorned the early editions of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*.<sup>62</sup> Wilde writes:

'And now [said big Hugh], as I have given you my wheelbarrow, I am sure you would like to give me some flowers in return. Here is the basket, and mind you fill it quite full.'

'Quite full?' said little Hans, rather sorrowfully, for it was really a very big basket, and he knew that if he filled it he would have no flowers left.

'Well, really,' answered the Miller, 'as I have given you my wheelbarrow, I don't think that it is much to ask you for a few flowers. I may be wrong, but I should have thought that friendship, true friendship, was quite free from selfishness of any kind.'

'My dear friend, my best friend,' cried little Hans, 'you are welcome to all the flowers in my garden. [...] [A]nd he ran and plucked all his pretty primroses, and filled the Miller's basket.' (pp. 304-5)

The original illustration for 'The Devoted Friend' gestures towards this reading. It shows little Hans bent over in his garden whilst being approached from behind by big Hugh, and the look of shock and anxiety on little Hans's face is justified, since

123).

<sup>62</sup> The question raised here is whether Jacomb-Hood gleaned the pederastic subtext, or whether Wilde informed him of it. Indeed, it should be noted that the idea of a coterie readership for the collection is given renewed force by my interpretation. Michael Matthew Kaylor has suggested that the 'paederastic elements often hidden beneath the complex surfaces' of Wilde's texts were 'intended primarily for a select group of readers', and, according to Naomi Wood, this 'Hellenic coterie led by Wilde emphasized the physical senses'. See Kaylor, *Secreted Desires*, p. v; Wood, 'Creating the Sensual Child', p. 159. Kaylor suggests that 'Wilde's coterie' embraced the physical aspect of pederasty, and it would be feasible that this is reflected in his texts (pp. 295, 344, 342, 371, 295). By 1888, this coterie included Robert Ross, Harry Marillier, W. Graham Robertson, Richard Le Gallienne, Harry Melvill and Arthur Clifton, and a recent biographer has noted that it would be 'easy to imagine [Wilde] giving copies' of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* 'to members of his rapidly growing gay circle'. See Gary Schmidgall, *The Stranger Wilde: Interpreting Oscar* (London: Abacus, 1994), pp. 153-54. Indeed, Wilde did distribute the collection to men who may have been receptive to its pederastic subtexts, such as Walter Pater, Clyde Fitch and Harry Marillier, and his friendships with the latter two males may have had a sexual dimension. See McKenna, *The Secret Life*, pp. 71-77, 95, 115; Schmidgall, *The Stranger Wilde*, p. 156.



although big Hugh is barricaded from little Hans's garden, he is about to force an entry from the rear of his little 'friend'.<sup>63</sup> There is also no suggestion in the picture that big Hugh is interested in the nonsexual aspects of 'friendship' that he so energetically theorises, since the picture only shows him in the process of attaining access to his little friend's private area.

Indeed, 'The Devoted Friend' demonstrates the ability of the sexual urge to distort and subsume the 'noble[r]' elements of pederasty. Big Hugh's promise of gifts is null because the wheelbarrow that he offers little Hans is worthless and never materialises, and it is thus a particularly cynical gesture when he mobilises his promise in order to gain little Hans's 'flowers'. Likewise, the 'theor[ies]' about 'friendship' and tutorship (p. 306) that big Hugh supplies are sullied by the fact that they are marshalled to justify the punishing favours that he desires, and to gain unrestricted access to little Hans's property: 'the wonderful things' he 'say[s]' to little Hans 'about the unselfishness of friendship' enable him to 'never go by his garden without leaning over the wall and plucking' its contents (p. 302). Indeed, 'The Devoted Friend' is devoid of idealistic inversions of age and dimension, and it seems that the hope for mutuality that was evident in 'The Happy Prince' cannot be posited in view of the sexual relationship between little Hans and big Hugh.

This is a pessimistic view of pederastic relations that equals the one in 'The Nightingale and the Rose', and the fact that sex is the culprit relates to the broader themes of the collection. Two points of critical focus in Wilde's fairy tales have been the disharmony evident in them, and their presentations of contrasts between ideas of responsibility and egotism, spirituality and physicality, and so on. Philip K. Cohen has noted that '[r]ather than the humanized, unified world common to fairy tales, Wilde almost always presents a setting marked by division, fragmentation, and irreconcilable strife'.<sup>64</sup> This strife is principally evident in the disconnection between the characters: for example, the Student never hears the Nightingale or sees its sacrifice. Norbert Kohl has also noted that 'tensions arise' in each of Wilde's tales 'between selfishness and thought for others', and that the 'development of the action' in the stories 'depends on whether the initial moral defect' of selfishness is 'overcome'.<sup>65</sup> In Kohl's argument, the stories contain one of 'two types of dénouement': the spiritual 'transformation' that ensues if the characters reject their 'self-deception and egotism', or the 'unreconciled fade-out' that results if they remain egocentric and deceptive.<sup>66</sup> It is a sense of loss and disappointment that prevails in

<sup>63</sup> See Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, ill. by Walter Crane and Jacomb Hood [1888] (London: David Nutt, 1910), p. 59.

<sup>64</sup> Philip K. Cohen, *The Moral Vision of Oscar Wilde* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1978), p. 80.

<sup>65</sup> Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde: The Works of a Conformist Rebel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 52, 53.

<sup>66</sup> Kohl, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 53.

the collection, as shown by the deaths in every story, and as epitomised by the anticlimactic conclusion of the collection's final tale, 'The Remarkable Rocket', which ends with its eponymous protagonist fading away without the fanfare that he has always craved: 'And he went out', as Wilde fittingly concludes (p. 318). It is worth noting that the triumph of the defiling, distorting sexual drive in the collection is one source of its defeatist, fatalistic atmosphere, and it is thus an important facet of the contrasts that the collection draws between reality and romance, physicality and spirituality, and egotism and selflessness.

## Conclusion

*The Happy Prince and Other Tales* contains Wilde's engagement with the question of mutuality in pederastic relationships, and the deleterious impact that sex can wreak on the nonsexual elements of pederastic bonds. The almost rhapsodic version of pederasty in 'The Happy Prince' is despoiled in 'The Devoted Friend' because its pedagogical properties are used by the older man to take advantage of the younger one, and this marks a return to the type of relationship that was evident in 'The Nightingale and the Rose'. In other words, when the two types of pederasty are asked to cohabit, the vitalising facets are sullied by the sexual ones.

It is the willingness to follow through on the moments when sexual activity is in the figurative mix that enables the emergence of Wilde's struggle to find a place for sexual activity in pederastic relationships, and the demarcation of these moments enables us to grasp an important feature of Wilde's eros. My reading of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* thereby profits from interpreting Wilde's fiction in a manner that the etherealising hermeneutic of queer theory has refused to countenance, and this shows that queer theory is not always the most effective tool for grasping the dynamics of sexual issues in Wilde's fiction, or, indeed, the very presence of such issues.

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## VALENCES OF DESIRE: THE SUSPENDED EROTICISM OF *MIDDLEMARCH*

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### *Abstract*

This paper seeks to unpack moments of implicit sexual desire in George Eliot's realist novel, *Middlemarch* (1872), and focuses particularly on the sexually charged scene between Dorothea and Ladislaw in the library at Lowick. While previous readings of this moment have focused on economy or knowledge and their problematised relationships with desire, I argue that a truer understanding of how desire works here emerges from viewing these scenes in the light of Georg W.F. Hegel and Georges Bataille. Hegel, whose work Eliot would have known, lets us see the emergence of a recognised self-consciousness propelled by desire; but Eliot's novel also looks forward to Bataille's understanding of desire, particularly in his theorisations of general and restricted economies. If we are to grasp the realism of Eliot's text, we must come to terms with how desire structures this reality; if we are to grasp how the novel deals with the economies of its historical moment, we would profit from seeing it in the terms of Bataille's general and restricted economies. The dynamic nature of desire in Eliot's text requires this multivalent philosophical lens: one which historically influences her work and one which she greatly anticipates.

While he was speaking there came a vivid flash of lightning which lit each of them up for the other – and the light seemed to be the terror of a hopeless love. Dorothea darted instantaneously from the window; Will followed her, seizing her hand with a *spasmodic* movement; and so they stood, with their hands clasped, *like two children* looking out on the storm, while the thunder gave a tremendous crack and roll above them, and the rain began to pour down. Then they turned their faces towards each other, with the memory of his last words in them, and they did not loose each other's hands.<sup>1</sup>

Bodily desire in nineteenth-century literature is largely implied rather than explicitly enunciated. In her novel *Middlemarch* (1871-72), however, George Eliot appears to be working through a theorisation of desire that separates bodily desire from its expected scandal-marked plot lines. Rather, she showcases its social value and personal importance. This is not the bodily desire in Eliot's early work that leads to Hetty Sorrel's illegitimate pregnancy in *Adam Bede* (1859), nor is it the hinted-at desire that the rehabilitated Janet harbours for the Reverend Mr Tryan in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857). To illustrate her literary experiment, this paper is a case study of

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<sup>1</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. by Bert G. Hornback (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 498 (emphasis mine). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Eliot's grappling with the expression of bodily desire in this late-career novel. I focus particularly on the interaction between Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw in the library at Lowick, a scene that best lends itself to a dynamic representative reading of desire's function in Eliot's work. I will be drawing on the philosophies of desire in the work of Georges Bataille and Georg W.F. Hegel. Even though these philosophies converge within this text, each serves a different function for an understanding of character motive throughout the novel. Eliot, along with her lover and intellectual partner George Henry Lewes, shared an ardent interest in German philosophy and literature, and the couple travelled extensively throughout Germany. Much of Lewes's own philosophical writing speaks to the work of German and French philosophers such as Hegel, Comte, Herder, Schelling and others. Eliot's own writing career began with translating German texts into English, her first project being a translation of David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1846). She also actively read and commented on the work of Ludwig Feuerbach and Auguste Comte.

Even though this is an exploratory argument that privileges Hegel for historical reasons, Bataille necessarily complicates the way I see Hegel working in Eliot's narrative. The intellectual alliance that I am establishing between Bataille and Eliot shows crucial elements of desire that unfold throughout the text that a Hegelian reading alone cannot wholly account for. The desire is there, and Bataille and Hegel generate a dynamic understanding of its function within Eliot's text. This study of *Middlemarch* is not a mere exercise in theoretical application. This text specifically and deliberately matters. Eliot's exposure and subsequent influence from Hegel makes sense; however, I argue that her own critical thought and philosophy extends well beyond Hegel. Eliot discovered another facet of desire worthy of exploration in its Victorian context, and this facet is a constitutive one for the entire literary fabric and narrative momentum of *Middlemarch*. Her discovery, I assert, is articulated theoretically in Bataille's work, in which he both directly and indirectly responds to Hegel's theories on Absolute Knowledge and desire.<sup>2</sup> Anticipating Bataille's work, Eliot herself complicates the philosophical Hegelian foundation on which perceived human desire rests as she creates a literary space that offers alternative ways of conceiving bodily desire in nineteenth-century England.

## First Looks Into the Library

Before fully offering my reading of the lightning bolt scene in Lowick, I want to show how desire within this library has previously been interpreted. Though these other readings provide insight only into a portion of what I deem to be Eliot's deeply social and psychological text, they do function as a means to further complicate the

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<sup>2</sup> See Georges Bataille, 'Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice', in *The Bataille Reader*, ed. by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 279-95.

stakes of the relationship between Dorothea and Ladislaw. In 'An Erotics of Detachment: *Middlemarch* and Novel-Reading as Critical Practice' David Kurnick places Dorothea in the role of the restless and perpetually desirous novel-reader. Kurnick argues that *Middlemarch*, as a novel about English society, shows how Dorothea as the heroine is also trying to become the reader of the novel itself. Kurnick labels 'the fraught relationship between novelistic eroticism and social understanding' as promoting 'incompatibility between knowledge and desire'.<sup>3</sup> He reads the library scene for Dorothea as her struggle to understand and make sense of her own desire. The bolt of lightning is her reminder of what has passed in Rome on her honeymoon, the memory of which haunts her because of her 'unappeasable desire'.<sup>4</sup> By equating Dorothea with the hungry reader of novels, Kurnick sets up a frame for a desire for knowledge, but this needs to be pushed further still. Where Kurnick suggests a gap between desire and knowledge, I want to show how Dorothea fuses her desire with knowledge. This does not, of course, always work in her favour, evidenced in her first failed marriage to Casaubon and his damning *Key to All Mythologies*. Dorothea must play around, trial-and-error style, to discover the ideal fusion between the two. Eliot shows how in the climactic scene of desire, Dorothea sees the face of Ladislaw, and their dialogue becomes a discussion of the whys and why-nots regarding the possibility of a marriage between them. Despite their shared desire for one another, they can and do engage in a conversation that is not wholly blind to the true knowledge and reality of their unusual situation; shared desire dovetails with shared knowledge.

In an economic approach to the text, Anna Kornbluh's 'The Economic Problem of Sympathy: Parabasis, Interest, and Realist Form in *Middlemarch*' posits a different type of opposition. Similar to Kurnick's desire/knowledge binary, Kornbluh's split between personal passion and social good overlooks Eliot's move to erase the issue behind Dorothea's choice to be with Ladislaw. Kornbluh considers Dorothea's ardent nature regarding reform and philanthropy as inconsistent with her more private passion for Ladislaw. Kornbluh argues that 'choosing Will means withdrawing from philanthropy'.<sup>5</sup> She reads the clasping of hands between Dorothea and Ladislaw as a 'spasmodic, radiating, political economy-sanctioned merger' that 'hushes her [Dorothea's] economic critiques and stoppers her philanthropic restitution'.<sup>6</sup> The lightning bolt is not something to be carnally understood in Kornbluh's argument; rather it is an aesthetic manifestation of personal fulfillment, rather than of any social good. However, I argue that Eliot is instead carefully setting up Dorothea to occupy a

<sup>3</sup> David Kurnick, 'An Erotics of Detachment: *Middlemarch* and Novel-Reading as Critical Practice', *ELH*, 74 (2007), 583-608 (pp. 584-85).

<sup>4</sup> Kurnick, 'An Erotics of Detachment', p. 598.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Kornbluh, 'The Economic Problem of Sympathy: Parabasis, Interest, and Realist Form in *Middlemarch*', *ELH*, 77 (2010), pp. 941-67 (pp. 961-62).

<sup>6</sup> Kornbluh, 'The Economic Problem of Sympathy', p. 962.



position that will allow her to satisfy both a personal and social good. Her desire to be philanthropic realises itself in a more personalised desire (for Ladislav). Kornbluh's reading preserves the gap between the personal and the social, which I argue Eliot is consciously trying to bridge through the relationship between Dorothea and Ladislav. Granted, Eliot's resolution comes as a delayed gratification. Ladislav does not become a Member of Parliament until the novel's finale. This occupational change facilitates Dorothea's philanthropic efforts; as his wife, she is presented with the opportunity to promote social good. By insisting on bodily desire and mutuality, Dorothea seeks a relationship that departs from the Victorian stereotype of the domestic wife.

If Kornbluh neglects the body in favour of a political-economic allegory, Gillian Alban does account for the physicality of desire, but not fully. Alban focuses on the rush of blood flooding the face as a result of a recognised gaze, locating the libido within the blush and describing it as a 'metonymously displaced orgasm'.<sup>7</sup> Significantly, Alban's account shows that reciprocal blushes happen between Dorothea and Ladislav, while the blushes that Casaubon evokes in Dorothea are one-sided. Alban does not, however, spend much time reading the scene in the Lowick library; she glosses over this bolt of lightning and the opportunity to realise the more intensely physical response is missed in favour of the more chaste dialectic of blushes. Alban's signaling towards the idea of 'displaced orgasms' in Eliot's work at large buttresses the more specific reading of the implied orgasm that I am uncovering in the culmination of desire in Lowick.

These alternative readings of the library scene all appear to be skirting around a similar gap: one that seeks to read Eliot's heroine as a desiring character perpetually in flux between, broadly construed, the private and the public. In providing my own corrective to these readings, I draw on Hegel and Bataille, the former insofar as he informs Eliot's developing philosophical thinking, and the latter as a means to show how Eliot actively began to see beyond her philosophical foundations. Both are necessary for understanding what Eliot is doing through Dorothea, particularly how each theorises the notion of Absolute. Where Hegel establishes that there is an Absolute to be ardently sought after, Bataille dismisses this goal as a wholly futile endeavour. It is this philosophical divergence over Absolutes that forms the basis for my own reading of the scene at Lowick.

### **The Men Themselves: Hegel and Bataille**

Hegelian desire is intimately linked with the development of self-consciousness, which in turn is a constitutive element of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807),

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<sup>7</sup> Gillian Alban, 'From the Erotic Blush to the Petrifying Medusa Gaze in George Eliot's Novels', *Victorian Newsletter*, 118 (2010), 67-86 (p. 67).

the articulated journey towards Absolute Knowledge. While I realise Hegel does not explicitly name or label desire until the section on Self-Consciousness in the *PhG*, I want to show how he implicitly postulates desire's role earlier than the transition point of becoming a recognised self-consciousness.<sup>8</sup> This early evidence of desire in the *PhG* occurs as Hegel considers general negation:

The Now that is Night is *preserved*, i.e. it is treated as what it professes to be, as something that *is*; but it proves itself to be, on the contrary, something that is *not*. The Now does indeed preserve itself, but as something that is *not* Night; equally, it preserves itself in face of the Day that it now is, as something that also is not Day, in other words, as a *negative* in general. This self-preserving Now is, therefore, not immediate but mediated; for it is determined as a permanent and self-preserving Now *through* the fact that something else, viz. Day and Night, is *not*.<sup>9</sup>

The mediated existence of the self-preserving Now has a dependence on an other (not-Now). Preservation happens in negation. I want to suggest that this Now/not-Now dynamic gestures towards the 'struggle' later seen as desire fully manifests itself as self-consciousness. I do not want to suggest that the dialectical movement toward self-consciousness is also a dialectical movement towards desire. The groundwork for a functioning desire is already a part of the phenomenological argument, implicitly, before the transition. However, desire emerges explicitly as essential in order for consciousness to move to self-consciousness.

Desire is a necessity because Hegel shows it to be such. Hegel illustrates how self-consciousness can only be understood insofar as it is desire for recognition from another, working its way from abstraction as a self-consciousness existing merely for itself. The inherently reproducible nature of desire and the negative relationship to an other is the only way self-consciousness may eventually begin to desire recognition in an other that shows itself to be its equal. The self-awareness of self-consciousness occurs through a negative relationship with the object. Hegel's emphasis on the importance of experience for the awareness of self-consciousness relies first on there being a desire that propels the abstract self-consciousness out into the world to seek an other. 'Self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well'.<sup>10</sup> At first, this other will itself be an object, not another self-consciousness. However, as Hegel stresses, the eventual turn of desire for recognition of another self-consciousness rather than just a general violent cycle of consumption

<sup>8</sup> For the remainder of my paper, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* will be referred to as *PhG*.

<sup>9</sup> Georg W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Arnold V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), p. 96.

<sup>10</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 175.

of an object validates desire's position within the *PhG*.

It seems that only the principal moment itself has been lost, viz. the *simple self-subsistent existence* for consciousness. But in point of fact self-consciousness is the reflection out of the being of the world of sense and perception, and is essentially the return from *otherness*. As self-consciousness, it is movement; but since what it distinguishes from itself is *only itself as itself*, the difference, as an otherness, is *immediately superseded* for it; the difference *is not*, and *it* [self-consciousness] is only the motionless tautology of: 'I am I'; but since for it the difference does not have the form of *being*, it is not self-consciousness. Hence otherness is for it in the form of a *being*, or as a *distinct moment*; but there is also for consciousness the unity of itself with this difference as a *second distinct moment*.<sup>11</sup>

Hegel notes that 'with that first moment, self-consciousness is in the form of *consciousness*'.<sup>12</sup> However, the first moment needs to be considered along with the second moment in order for 'the whole expanse of the sensuous world [to be] preserved for it', since the second moment entails 'the unity of self-consciousness with itself'.<sup>13</sup> The aforementioned sensuous world is only an appearance and self-consciousness becomes fueled by desire to demolish and consume it in the effort to truly feel the unity with the pre-self-conscious consciousness.

This rhetoric of demolition and consumption for the sake of self-consciousness is ultimately what makes a privileging of the Hegelian dialectic in *Middlemarch* necessary. The dialectic resolves itself with the happy formation of two self-consciousnesses that retain the knowledge of the pre-self-consciousnesses that were allegedly demolished for their purposes. Death by consumption becomes a realisation of Life and it is through the support and development of desire that this is made possible.

Providing the necessary groundwork for establishing the preoccupation with self-consciousness that pervades Eliot's work, Hegel brings us to the point where we must further inquire about what else matters in this process of self-consciousness formation *vis-à-vis* an other outside of itself. To take this next step, Bataille, utilising desire's relationship with consumption offers the crucial link between self-consciousness and his theoretical notion of economies of the self. A restricted economy is Bataille's idea of a system of production and exchange with utilitarian ends. Any and all actions and resources are used efficiently in order to meet a particular, necessary goal (usually one related to an appropriate maintenance of life's basic sustenance). A general economy, on the other hand, is unproductive and relies

<sup>11</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 167.

<sup>12</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 167.

<sup>13</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 167.

on needless expenditure and waste. The most basic underpinning of Bataille's general economy is the fact that 'neither growth nor reproduction would be possible if plants and animals did not normally dispose of excess'.<sup>14</sup> Excess is necessary for growth, but a society running solely on excess would be ruinous. How desire is handled becomes a determining factor in which of the two economies is produced. The Bataillean conception of desire resonates deeply with the Hegelian conception of self-consciousness:

The desire of the senses is the desire, if not to destroy oneself, at least to be consumed and to lose oneself without reservation. Now, the object of my desire does not truly respond to it except on one condition: that I awaken in it a desire equal to mine. Love in its essence is so clearly the coincidence of two desires that there is nothing more meaningful in love, even in the purest love. But the other's desire is desirable insofar as it is not known as a profane object is, from the outside.<sup>15</sup>

The way I read Eliot's text hinges on this co-existence of desires. What Hegel calls mutual recognition and the formation of two equal self-consciousnesses, Bataille calls Love. Even so, there is the shared idea that the sides must be equal in order for the process involving desire to be complete. I want to stress Bataille's comment that this dovetailing of desires happens 'without reservation'; this is not something highly restricted or regulated; this lack of reservation is needed and it becomes a stipulation in and of itself. Bataille's insistence that a general economy is necessary for the existence of life and society implicitly raises the question of the significance of death.<sup>16</sup> Death is certainly a version of expenditure, and the Bataillean idea of sacrifice shows how death lends itself to consumption (sacrifice seen as a gift for the taking, rather than an act of sheer waste). This sort of rhetoric plays an important role in the key transition point for self-consciousness in Hegel's *PhG*. The way desire works in the development of Bataille's two economies also serves, significantly, as an illustration of the way Hegel and Bataille diverge on the point of Absolute Knowledge. Bataille maintains that 'to speak about the absolute: an ignoble phrase, an inhuman term! Something you would imagine ghosts longing for.'<sup>17</sup> Seeking absolutes should not be what drives the desiring questioner (and seeking the absolute,

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<sup>14</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, ed. by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 188.

<sup>15</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 265.

<sup>16</sup> See Jacques Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious', in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), pp. 671-702. In his seminar, Lacan articulates the 'being of non-being' whereby the subject 'I' is constituted as existing because of death – 'death sustains existence'. We know we exist because we can (and will) die.

<sup>17</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 96.

in the form of the *Key to All Mythologies*, is what eventually kills Casaubon). It is on this point of absolutes that Bataille lingers over the language of violence and implicitly harnesses Hegel's assertion that desire is inherently reproducible. Bataille believes that 'the questioning of all things resulted from the exasperation of a desire' and thus, 'questioning without desire' (seeking knowledge without the drive of desire) is a questioning that has no value, no importance.<sup>18</sup> This 'exasperation of desire' implies an intensified condition, marked even with a (violent) passion.<sup>19</sup> This intensification is a form of excess, a feature of the general economy. Bataille's vehement response against the absolute suggests that the process of questioning, a process backed and driven by a reproducible desire, is more valuable than the arrival at a definitive, intended answer. Under these terms, then, I argue that Eliot accounts for both treatments of the Absolute, coming out in favour of the Bataillean one, where Dorothea is quite far from being a ghost; she is a physical body with burning questions (results from her exasperated desire), seeking human interaction in order to even begin the process of answering them.

### Self-Consciousness and Missed Climax in the Hegelian Paradigm

Ladislaw's figurative penetration of Dorothea in her late husband's library at Lowick during a storm is the ultimate giving way of reason to passion, a true indulgence in the needless expenditure that a natural phenomenon makes possible. This resonates with Bataille's idea of Inner Experience, which he describes as a moment of 'non-knowledge'; the moment of reaching the outermost boundary or limit of what is possible to have familiarity with in one's consciousness.<sup>20</sup> It is a point beyond ecstasy that is nearly painful because of its unknowable exteriority to the self. Keeping this in mind along with the development/creation of a rupture, this moment when the flash of lightning coincides with the physical clasping of hands is the ideal instant or moment. Theorising about laughter, Bataille states:

The main thing is the moment of violent contact, when life slips from one person to another in a feeling of magical subversion. You encounter this same feeling in tears. On another level, to look at each other and laugh can be a type of erotic relation (in this case, rupture has been produced by the development of intimacy in lovemaking). In a general way, what comes into play in physical or psychological eroticism is the same feeling of 'magical subversion'

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<sup>18</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 112.

<sup>19</sup> See the *Oxford English Dictionary*: exasperation (1) increase of violence or malignity; (2) intense provocation; (3) exasperated feeling, violent passion or anger, <<http://www.oed.com/>> [accessed 20.02.13].

<sup>20</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 84.

associated with one person slipping into another.<sup>21</sup>

In the lightning bolt scene, it is significant that the handclasp is akin to that of two children, as if the ruptive laugh could be possible. At the same time, the looming prospect of the 'terror of hopeless love' suggests what Bataille says of inner experience and its encounter with anguish: the instant, ideal moment's direct relationship with trauma. However, to strip this scene of its multivalent suggestions and read it strictly as a Bataillean embrace would be to severely disregard the subtleties of Eliot's prose. The flash causes Dorothea to move instinctively away from the window, as if she must protect herself from the penetrative bolt. In his pursuit of her, Ladislav's seizure of her hand happens in an erratic 'spasmodic' fashion. Their bodies move separately at first, before this handclasp, but the movements occur as if without conscious and deliberate thought from either party. The potentiality of the shared orgasm presents itself before they turn to face one another and engage in that activity of recognition. What Bataille calls the magical subversion of one subject slipping into the other, I call the Hegelian self-consciousness recognising itself in another self-consciousness.

Hegel states in the *PhG* that 'self-consciousness is Desire in general'.<sup>22</sup> Hegel tells us: 'But *for us*, or *in itself*, the object which for self-consciousness is the negative element has, on its side, returned into itself, just as on the other side consciousness has done. Through this reflection into itself the object has become Life'.<sup>23</sup> Returning to the idea that self-consciousness *is* desire, then, I want to consider the subject's relationship to the object as consciousness. Both the subject and the object are striving for equally independent (through one another) attainment of unity. However, self-consciousness is still mired in the stage of development where it considers itself to be completely *for itself*. Eventually, self-consciousness becomes divided where one self-consciousness recognises itself by way of another self-consciousness. Dorothea and Ladislav stop existing for themselves in isolation in this moment: barriers break down in the flash, permitting Hegelian recognition.

Similar to what I read as the implicit existence of desire throughout the *PhG* before the moment of self-conscious recognition, this lightning bolt of electricity is foreshadowed in the novel. In the first book of *Middlemarch*, when we are just meeting Dorothea, her uncle brings her religious pamphlets while she is in her own home library at Tipton Grange:

It seemed as if an *electric stream* went through Dorothea, thrilling her from despair into expectation [...] when he [Dorothea's uncle] re-entered the library, he found Dorothea seated and already deep in one of the pamphlets which had

<sup>21</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 167.

<sup>23</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 168.

some marginal manuscript of Mr Casaubon's, taking it in as eagerly as she might have taken in the scent of a fresh bouquet after a dry, hot, dreary walk. (p. 25, emphasis mine)

The difference between this early occurrence and the one in the library at Lowick where passion comes to near climax lies in the projection of desire. In the Lowick scene, the desire is shuttled back and forth between Dorothea and Ladislav, mutual recognition. In Tipton Grange, Dorothea's excited desire seems on the surface to be related to Casaubon. These are, after all, the pamphlets from *his* library and bear the markings of *his* pen. However, there is a disjunction here since Dorothea and Casaubon cannot and will not engage in a moment of recognition. Rather, Dorothea's building libidinous feelings are projected onto the pamphlets themselves and what they do for her.

At this point in the novel, she is in the early stages of the Hegelian dialectic where she is a self-consciousness existing for herself, but she is under the self-created illusion that she is relying on Casaubon for this happiness ignited within her. The 'dry, hot, dreary' rhetoric is suggestive of the aftermath of a sexual encounter, though it sounds more like a post-coital scenario that has not been the result of a truly pleasurable experience. It sounds, more particularly, like an experience that has been unproductively laborious (the 'dreary walk'), and lacking in sensual gratification (the body is left 'dry, hot' as opposed to calm and moist from a build-up of shared perspiration). The satisfaction Dorothea derives for herself comes from her solo-interaction with the pamphlets, rather than a human-to-human interaction with Casaubon. But what sort of sexual encounter happens when one is alone with literature that solicits excitement? Dorothea's moment of autoerotic reading must happen in the library, serving as the foreshadowing of the next sexual encounter in a library that will not be performed single-handedly. That this future encounter will happen with Ladislav and not Casaubon is further hinted at in the museum in Rome. Dorothea is highly susceptible to the alien aesthetic that she witnesses in Rome: 'Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present [...] all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual [...] at first jarred her as with an electric shock' (p. 124). Ladislav is the only other character described as experiencing this electric shock, which occurs in the library at Tipton Grange during a meeting with Dorothea's uncle: 'When Mrs Casaubon was announced he started up as from an electric shock, and felt a tingling at his finger-ends [...] Dorothea's entrance was the freshness of morning' (pp. 241-42). There is a noticeable change in his complexion in light of this freshness, similar to the change in Dorothea in her metaphorical imbibing of the aforementioned 'scent of a fresh bouquet' made manifest in the religious pamphlets.

Further evidence that Casaubon cannot be the self-consciousness through which Dorothea recognises herself is seen through his inability to pull himself out of

the intellectually constraining mire that is his *Key to All Mythologies*. He is closed off from the moment of genuine self-consciousness through another self-consciousness. His isolation is not broken because of a desire rooted in physical and psychological passion, but rather, he operates through drive, a drive that is ‘formal, immaterial’, in order to preserve his intellectual labour.<sup>24</sup>

She [Dorothea] could understand well enough now why her husband had come to cling to her, as possibly the only hope left that his labours would ever take a shape in which they could be given to the world. At first it had seemed that he wished to keep even her aloof from any close knowledge of what he was doing; but gradually the *terrible stringency of human need* – (p. 297, emphasis mine)

This is a call for necessity and not a genuine display of desire. The acquisition and application of knowledge is Dorothea’s true desire; however, it is initially sought in a restricted marriage. Dorothea’s first spouse is chosen because of a desire that is actually incompatible with the marriage itself.

Despite the prevailing power of the Hegelian dialectic in *Middlemarch*, Bataille provides the language with which to analyse the reworked and reframed pathology of desire that Eliot stages. His very definition of desire relies on an act of consumption, if not one of destruction, by another active desire. Thus, Eliot’s text raises provocative questions about who is having sex in *Middlemarch*, or, in Bataille’s parlance, who is sensuously desiring one another in the text. These questions carry a heavier weight under the reconsideration of the link between death and sex. In the lightning bolt scene, Dorothea and Ladislav do not have intercourse, but the suspended moment of autoerotic orgasm is tantamount to a promise of their eventual union where intercourse will take place. However, what happens to Dorothea once she is in a palpable sexual union with Ladislav? She is forced to answer her sister Celia’s plea: ‘And then there are all your plans! You never can have thought of that [...] you might have gone on all your life doing what you liked’ (p. 505). Is sex, then, the death of Dorothea the English provincial reformer? This question forces my hand to signal caution. Broader schools of criticism would have it that this is an instance of a classic moment of the public/private space divide that preoccupied Victorian society. I argue, however, that this is Dorothea’s second marriage of her own choosing; she does not allow herself to become the unrecognised self-consciousness that she was before. Rather, she reformulates her plans in light of this new union and still manages to make herself useful. ‘Doing what [she] liked’ would come at the sacrifice of recognition, and thus, voiding desire in general.

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<sup>24</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*; p. 112. Bataille uses the language ‘formal, immaterial’ to describe what it means to seek knowledge without a backing desire. This is the type of failed questioning that Casaubon executes in his work.



Dorothea's continual leanings towards the pursuit of the general economy are reconstituted in a happy life within the chaste, appropriate restricted economy in the English provincial landscape.

## A Conclusion with a Foil

Though Dorothea ultimately puts herself into the social role that keeps faith with the tenets of a restricted economy, she has desire-based aberrations that indicate an inclination towards a general economy. Where do these aberrations occur in the text and why do they matter? In the introductory pages of *Middlemarch*, Eliot gestures towards Dorothea's inclination towards a general economy through an examination of her marital views: 'Dorothea, with all her eagerness to know the truths of life, retained very *childlike* ideas about marriage' (p. 7, emphasis mine). This is not the only time something Dorothea does or believes is described as 'childlike', that fateful clasp of hands with Ladislaw in Lowick is also described as such. Eliot appears to use 'childlike' as a means for indirectly defining what English provincial society in the nineteenth century sees as an appropriate approach to marriage. Desiring fulfillment through knowledge that extends beyond Miss Lemon's school, where a young woman can even learn how to properly get in and out of a carriage, is deemed an infantile outlook on reality. Eliot-the-Realist of course does not believe this, but to portray society otherwise would be to misrepresent the norms of provincial Victorian England. I argue, however, that her use of 'childlike' carries more significant meaning. Children begin to learn about society through physical contact and basic trial-and-error, rather than through verbal abstractions. The physical, then, is the medium through which children may first gain knowledge of the world. Eliot's heroine's identification with the childlike knowledge of a marital relationship implies an important level of physicality; Dorothea seeks a more concrete, empirical way of understanding. In this way, she fulfills what Bataille conceives as the child's responsibility to be childish.<sup>25</sup> Childishness, he argues, is not merely a passing whimsical stage on the way to adulthood, but rather, a true necessity; a necessity because, in order to be a child, 'one must know that the serious exists'. Childishness is what allows for man's growing awareness that life must have space for both pleasure and pain.<sup>26</sup>

Dorothea's foil, Rosamond Vincy, appears at the outset to be the more physically desiring character in the novel, embracing the general economy in all its expansive glory. However, her desire is problematic as she continually operates under the mentality of a single self-consciousness. Eliot as omniscient narrator prematurely laments what she knows will be the failed union between Rosamond and Lydgate:

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<sup>25</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 72.

<sup>26</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 75.

‘Poor Lydgate! or shall I say, Poor Rosamond! Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing’ (p. 106). There is no space available for one self-consciousness to recognise another self-consciousness: this is a marriage predisposed to failure. Rosamond’s stagnancy within the Hegelian dialectic bars her from ever obtaining recognition:

For Rosamond, though she would never do anything that was disagreeable to *her*, was industrious; and now more than ever she was active in sketching *her* landscapes and market-carts and portraits of friends, in practising *her* music, and in being from morning till night *her* own standard of a perfect lady, having always an audience in her own consciousness, with sometimes the not unwelcome addition of a more variable external audience in the numerous visitors of the house. (p. 107, emphasis mine)

This one-sided way of living resonates with Bataille’s asserted belief that ‘there is no meaning for a lone individual [...] if I wish my life to have meaning for me, it is necessary that it have meaning for others; no one would dare give to life a meaning which he alone would perceive’.<sup>27</sup> This is exactly what Rosamond is inherently pushing against in her conception of her own life. Rosamond cannot be read as truly ‘a lone individual’, however, because she does wield an ample amount of influence and she depends on the audience for the perfection of her own consciousness, even if she does not reciprocate this recognition satisfactorily.

Rosamond does not exist within a vacuum: men suffer under her succubus-like power. Lydgate’s desire would be realised in Dorothea, but he submits to the general economy insofar as it exists in the sexualised Rosamond. Their marriage, however, still falls in line with that of a restricted economy as it is a union that subscribes to the ebb-and-flow of Middlemarch society. I asked the question before ‘who is having sex in *Middlemarch*?’ and therefore who dies because of it? Lydgate is left for dead: ‘He once called her [Rosamond] his basil plant; and when she asked for an explanation, said that basil was a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man’s brains’ (p. 513).<sup>28</sup> If *Middlemarch* is to be read as a novel that ends with marriages within the restricted economy, it is important to recognise that this theorisation of desire I have just unpacked shows that marriages participating in a restricted economy are not of the same cloth. Eliot’s developing theorisations of desire that

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<sup>27</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 73.

<sup>28</sup> See John Keats’s ‘Isabella; or The Pot of Basil’ (1820), Keats’ narrative poem based on Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. Lorenzo is in love with Isabella, but her brothers do not approve of the match and murder him. Inspired by a spirit to find Lorenzo’s forest burial place, Isabella retrieves his head and places it in a garden-pot, covering it with basil, which she waters with her tears. Her brothers steal the plant and she dies from pining away for her basil-pot, which held her soul’s sustenance.

anticipate Bataille's highlight the overlapping features of the marriages and relationships in Middlemarch society. Eliot's ending that subscribes to the wished-for Victorian novel ending does not fully discount the import of bodily desire that takes place throughout the text. That moment of physicality at Lowick is necessary for the Hegelian dialectic to resolve itself in its particular way, providing the means for understanding how desire and sex within the restricted economy can be ideally reconciled with the existence of two lives in mutual recognition of each other without the fear of death.

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