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The Regulation of Female Identity in the Novels of Florence Marryat

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:

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Summary

This thesis evaluates the contribution to Victorian literary and cultural debate of Florence Marryat (1833-99) a prolific and varied writer yet to receive sustained critical attention. Specifically, I examine her many fictional representations of the legal, medical, and religious regulation of female identity in novels published between 1865 and 1899. I argue that Marryat goes further than other contemporary writers in subverting gender norms and theorising in fiction a transgressive female. By considering Marryat's output in relation to comparator authors, I demonstrate how her work represents a uniquely radical protest, anticipating and prefiguring the New Woman writing of the *fin de siècle*. I also show how Marryat appropriates different styles of rhetoric to expose and challenge various mid-Victorian notions of 'woman' constructed for the purposes of regulation.

By representing and then challenging the regulation of female identity, Marryat's novels provide an important insight into how Victorian gender roles were constructed. My research shows that her work constitutes an effective protest against this regulation, evidenced by the critical response which attempted to undermine her reputation and arguments. I examine these criticisms in detail, showing how Marryat's novels became a space in which she engaged with her critics, thereby pushing literary and gender boundaries. By bringing critical insight and contextual knowledge to close readings of Marryat's novels, I reveal the feminist meaning hitherto occluded by literary regulation and subsequent superficial interpretations. Through extensive archival research, I also explain how Marryat used her own experiences to educate her readers, often appearing as a character in the novels. I propose that this direct relationship with her audience, presenting feminist ideas in a quasi-polemical style, makes Marryat's oeuvre distinctive and worthy of further consideration. While Marryat is often considered a writer of ephemeral romances, I establish her as an early feminist who questioned and subverted nineteenth-century notions of femininity.

List of Figures

1. The Blessed Damozel by Dante Gabriel Rossetti 140

2. Daniel Dunglas Home 154

Contents

Introduction.....	3
The Spectacle of Femininity: Women Sensation Novelists	4
Florence Marryat: The Critical Story So Far.....	11
The Life and Career of Florence Marryat	13
A Victorian Feminist?.....	25
Regulating Female Identity: A Critical Approach.....	26
Chapter One: ‘Is a toad worth painting?’ – The Regulation of Marryat’s Writing.....	30
‘The Illiterate Censorship of a Librarian’: The Power of Mudie.....	32
‘A Pen Dipped in Vinegar and Gall’: The Publisher’s Reader.....	38
‘A Veil Between Book and Reader’: The Role of the Periodical Reviewer.....	44
The <i>Athenaeum</i> : A ‘Mirror of Victorian Culture’	48
‘Moral Earnestness’ and ‘Blameless Sobriety’ in the <i>Spectator</i>	51
Woman Against Woman in the <i>Saturday Review</i>	54
‘Intruding Her Own Personality’: Marryat’s Ongoing Relationship with Critics.....	56
Chapter Two: ‘The chains that gall them’ – The Legal Regulation of Marryat’s heroines	61
Who pays for the butter? Marryat and Marriage.....	63
‘Entirely Different Creations’: The Matrimonial Causes Act and the Sexual Double Standard ...	66
‘An Entire Subversion of Domestic Rule’: The Married Women’s Property Acts	74
‘Grounded on Force’: Marital Violence in Marryat’s Fiction.....	82
Chapter Three – ‘Are you going to cut me up?’ – The Regulation of Women’s Bodies	93
The Conflation of Medical and Patriarchal Authority	94
‘A bad imitation of a man’: Women Doctors.....	101
‘The torture of the damned’: Regulating the Vivisector	105
The Pathologisation of Female Sexuality	113

Chapter Four: ‘Undomesticated and remarkably mobile’ – Spiritual Rebellion in Marryat’s Fiction	125
Our Mother Who Art in Heaven - The Virgin Mary	129
The “Divine Mother” in <i>My Own Child</i>	131
“A Bitter Penance”: Neglected Spirituality in <i>The Dead Man’s Message</i>	138
Spectral Politics: Spiritualism and Power	143
“It isn’t all jam to have a medium in the house”: The female authoritative voice in <i>The Strange Transfiguration of Hannah Stubbs</i>	148
Vested Interests: Hyperfemininity and Homosexuality in <i>Open! Sesame!</i>	150
Conclusion	157

Introduction

My thesis evaluates the contribution to Victorian literary and cultural debate of Florence Marryat (1833-99), a prolific and varied writer yet to receive sustained critical attention. Specifically, I examine her many fictional representations of legal, medical, and religious regulation of female identity, arguing that Marryat goes further than other contemporary writers in subverting gender norms and theorising in fiction a transgressive female. By evaluating Marryat's output in relation to comparator authors, I demonstrate that her work forms a uniquely radical protest, anticipating and prefiguring New Woman writing of the *fin de siècle*. I also show how Marryat appropriates different styles of rhetoric to expose and challenge various mid-Victorian notions of 'woman' constructed for the purposes of regulation.

Marryat is also significant in her use of autobiographical fiction, often appearing as a character in her novels to share her experiences and opinions with readers. I propose that this direct relationship with her audience, presenting feminist ideas in a quasi-polemical style, makes her oeuvre distinctive and worthy of further consideration. Barbara Caine has argued that this willingness to create and articulate a shared female experience contributes to a "feminist consciousness,"¹ and I use this idea below to justify my anachronistic use of the term 'feminism' to describe Marryat's approach.

This project complements and develops recent scholarship on specific areas of Marryat's work, including her Spiritualism, plays, and journalism, which I survey in my primary literature review. While there have been several studies on Marryat's fiction, none has attempted to assess all of her novels. By considering the full range and focussing on the most significant, I establish Marryat as an early feminist who questioned and subverted nineteenth-century notions of femininity. Typically considered a romance writer, Marryat confronted a wide range of themes, including vivisection, marital violence, terrorism, transvestism, and homosexuality. Her heroines are often wives and mothers, but they are seldom confined to the domestic sphere.

Mary Poovey observes that "women were granted the authority to write and publish literature, but they were largely denied access to 'masculine' discourses like medicine, law, and theology".² By representing and then challenging the regulation that impeded women's participation in these discourses, Marryat's novels provide an important insight into how Victorian gender roles were constructed. My research shows that Marryat's work constitutes an effective protest against literary, legal, medical, and religious regulation, evidenced by the critical response which attempted to undermine both her reputation and her arguments. I examine this critical response in detail in

¹ Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.9.

² Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p.81.

Chapter One, showing how Marryat's novels became a space in which she engaged with her critics, thereby pushing both literary and gender boundaries. While Marryat's work has been described as tentative by some critics (as I discuss below), I address the compromises she was obliged to make in order to become a successful operator in the Victorian literary marketplace, this conformity allowing the political meaning of her writing to reach a wider audience. By bringing critical insight and contextual knowledge to close readings of Marryat's novels, I reveal the feminist agenda that has been occluded by literary regulation and superficial interpretations.

My thesis is located within the wider context of ongoing recovery and evaluation of non-canonical nineteenth-century women writers, and will enrich and expand the field, facilitating a greater understanding of another important neglected writer. I map this field in my secondary literature review below. This introduction sets out the scope of my work and the ways in which feminist methodology and theoretical developments inform my thesis. I include a biography of Marryat, correcting some of the errors in previous accounts and adding new material from my archival research. My literature review evaluates and contextualises recent criticism on Victorian women's writing, going on to assess previous studies on Marryat. Where appropriate, thematic literature reviews also appear in each of the chapters.

The Spectacle of Femininity: Women Sensation Novelists

Florence Marryat started her writing career in 1863 when the sensation novel was at its zenith, a genre that administered "continual shocks by violating decorum,"³ presenting "a turbulent universe far removed from mid-Victorian stodginess and respectability".⁴ There has been much debate surrounding the delimitations of this genre; for example, Patrick Brantlinger asserts that it was "a minor subgenre of British fiction that flourished in the 1860s only to die out a decade or two later".⁵ Contemporary critics, too, were apt to dismiss it as a fad, keen to limit its appeal and durability. In a lengthy, and now infamous, diatribe, critic and author Margaret Oliphant complained that "all our minor novelists, almost without exception, are of the school called sensational,"⁶ thereby quarantining these questionable novels from the work of canonical authors. Meanwhile, theologian Henry Mansel decreed "no more immortality is dreamed of for it than for the fashions of the current season,"⁷ and future Poet Laureate Alfred Austin concluded "the world may congratulate itself when the last sensational novel has been written and forgotten".⁸ Austin's

³ Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading 1835-1880* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), p.73.

⁴ Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.4.

⁵ Patrick Brantlinger, 'What Is "Sensational" about the "Sensational" Novel?', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 37 (1982), 24-38 (p.24).

⁶ Margaret Oliphant, 'Novels', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 102 (1867), 257-280 (p.258).

⁷ H L Mansel, 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review*, 113 (1863), 481-514 (p.483).

⁸ Alfred Austin, 'Our Novels', *Temple Bar*, 29 (1870), 410-424 (p.424).

tirade appeared alongside a serialised version of Marryat's *The Poison of Asps* (1870), a particularly gruesome novella in which a brutal husband disguises himself as an Indian to evade arrest for a crime, illustrating that sensation fiction was set to endure into the next decade.

Andrew Maunder has argued convincingly for sensation's genesis in the 1850s and its persistence into the 1890s.⁹ Given its longevity, I think it is more helpful to think of sensation fiction as representing a particular era, rather than as a genre. If it can be characterised as embodying lurid tropes such as bigamy, self-immolation, and train wrecks, then few nineteenth-century authors are immune from this designation. Oliphant liked to think that sensation was confined to the "lower strata of light literature,"¹⁰ but writers such as Charles Dickens and the Brontës hardly restricted themselves to safe domestic plots. Wilkie Collins's phenomenally successful *The Woman in White* (1860) is often credited as being the first sensation novel,¹¹ but *Hide and Seek* (1854) and *The Dead Secret* (1857) are no less sensational, and Collins's first contemporary novel *Basil* (1852) arguably contains some characteristics of the genre.

As I argue in this thesis, sensation novels, or novels with sensational themes, can be seen as a response to profound cultural change. More specifically, I contend that the dominance of this genre coincided with the transformation of the position of women, beginning in the 1840s with the Brontës and the first significant stirrings of the movement, and subsiding in the 1890s when women had won many key battles surrounding property, infant custody, and marriage. While writers such as Marryat were protesting, others, such as Eliza Lynn Linton, were expressing their fears of what might happen if those demands were met. Linton offers a useful counterpoint to Marryat: although she benefitted from women's gradual emancipation, separating from her husband and retaining her own earnings, she remained an ardent anti-feminist; whereas Marryat was evangelical about the opportunities available to women, Linton feared setting a dangerous precedent.

Maunder identifies Caroline Clive's *Paul Ferroll* (1855) as a possible contender for the first sensation novel.¹² While I disagree with its precedence,¹³ it is incontrovertibly a strong early example, given Ferroll murders his wife and gets away with it. Not only does his crime remain undetected, he is allowed to remarry. This extraordinary plot (which is far less equivocal than the bigamy novels that proved so controversial in the subsequent decade) could be interpreted as either

⁹ Andrew Maunder, ed., *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction, 1855-1890*, 6 vols. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2004), I, p.xii.

¹⁰ Oliphant, 'Novels', p.258.

¹¹ For example Rachel Ablow, 'Victorian Feelings', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.193-210 (p.204).

¹² Maunder, I, p.12.

¹³ I believe Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) is a stronger contender, addressing themes such as wife-beating, women's work, and marriage reform. I consider this novel briefly in Chapters One and Two.

a bleak comment on the essential fungibility of women, especially wives, or a critique of the marriage laws that permitted divorce only for the wealthy and in exceptional circumstances.

Contrary to popular contemporary belief, the Second Married Woman's Property Act (1882), an important milestone in the history of women's rights, did not cause the very fabric of society to disintegrate. Consequently, the fear provoked by the articulation of female wrongs subsided, to be replaced with anxieties surrounding masculinity, degeneration, homosexuality, sexual purity, and scientific materialism. Having won a key battle that impacted upon both their personal and professional lives, some women authors started turning their attention to other issues, such as sexual liberation and female suffrage. Although there was still vocal opposition, the New Woman of satire is usually a risible, rather than a threatening, figure. Throughout her career, I argue, Marryat remained a 'sensation' writer, continually using shocking ideas to expand nineteenth-century notions of femininity. Many of her later novels, engaging with controversial themes such as vivisection and clitoridectomies, were as provocative as her early fiction.

In a review of Marryat's second novel *Woman Against Woman* (1866), Geraldine Jewsbury observed:

it is curious that the most questionable novels of the day should be written by women. To judge from their books the ideas of women on points of morals and ethics seem in a state of transition, and consequently of confusion.¹⁴

This "state of transition" is clearly discernible in Marryat's fiction, and, while lamentable for Jewsbury, it sets the keynote for women's writing over the remainder of the century. In *Temple Bar*, the poet Robert Buchanan observed, equivocally, that:

The birth of the novel has given speech to many ladies who must otherwise have been silent. They have revealed to us hidden chords of the female heart, together with strange suggestions relative to woman's influence on modern society and manners; and they have given practical men some idea of the point of view from which women regard the ethics of the sterner sex.¹⁵

Buchanan suggests that these "strange ideas" are unwelcome, resenting the scrutiny to which men are subjected. Denied a public voice in politics and established religion, fiction provided a vital platform on which women could voice their opinions. Lyn Pykett explains that women's sensation fiction was characterised by "passionate, devious and not infrequently deranged heroines," presenting a "spectacle of femininity".¹⁶ Oliphant, herself a dabbler in sensation, thought this "spectacle" regrettable: "What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings, is a very fleshly and unlovely record."¹⁷ In *The Gay Science*, E

¹⁴ 'New Novels', *Athenaeum*, 17 February 1866, p.233.

¹⁵ Robert Buchanan, 'Society's Looking-Glass', *Temple Bar*, August 1862, 129–137 (pp.135–136).

¹⁶ Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.47, 138.

¹⁷ Oliphant, 'Novels', p.259.

S Dallas deplored that “one of the earliest results of an increased feminine influence in our literature [has been] a display of what in women is most unfeminine,” comparing their behaviour with the “masculine lust of power” evident in Eve’s original sin.¹⁸ Women’s sensation fiction, then, revealed an inconvenient truth about prevailing notions of female identity: the feminine soul, rather than being pure and unsullied, was shown to be passionate and unlovely. Literary critics were one of the groups who established themselves as authorities with the right to pronounce on appropriate femininity, a form of regulation I discuss in Chapter One.

In her article ‘Sentiment and Suffering’ (1977), Sally Mitchell offered tantalising glimpses of lesser-known women writers, some of whom have become the focus of more sustained critical attention. While suggesting new research possibilities, Mitchell dismisses women’s sensation novels as “light fiction,” containing “little satire or overt social comment”.¹⁹ This conclusion belies some of the difficult themes tackled during the 1860s, including abortion, prostitution, and incest. Mitchell does, however, concede that the limited appeal of this fiction, appealing “to readers of a specific class at a particular time ... indicate[s] the way women felt about the society in which they lived”.²⁰ Examining this “intimate relationship”²¹ between these novels and their cultural setting provides us with a valuable insight into a body of work that expressed women’s anxieties and facilitated their protest against perceived wrongs. Building on Mitchell’s argument by examining Marryat’s fiction in relation to contemporary discourses, I show that the ephemerality of her work makes it particularly worthy of consideration.

Elaine Showalter’s groundbreaking study *A Literature of Their Own* (1979) tentatively suggested that some sensationalists might have been making important arguments about the position of nineteenth-century women, albeit “thwarted in full exploration of their imaginative worlds by Victorian convention and stereotypes”.²² They are categorised as “feminine,” rather than “feminist,” writers, contributing to a “transitional literature that explored genuinely radical female protest against marriage and women’s economic oppression, although still in the framework of conventions that demanded the erring heroine’s destruction”.²³ This model is true, at least superficially, of Mrs Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) but overlooks the complexity and variety of this genre. Furthermore, no account is

¹⁸ E S Dallas, *The Gay Science*, 3 vols. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1866), II, pp.297, 298.

¹⁹ Sally Mitchell, ‘Sentiment and Suffering: Women’s Recreational Reading in the 1860s’, *Victorian Studies*, 21 (1977), 29–45 (pp.30, 31).

²⁰ Mitchell, ‘Sentiment and Suffering’, pp.30–31.

²¹ Mitchell, ‘Sentiment and Suffering’, p.30.

²² Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1982), p.162.

²³ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, pp.13, 28–29.

taken of the literary censorship to which novels were subjected during this period, an issue I address in Chapter One.

In *The Fallen Angel* (1981), Mitchell acknowledges that: “The subterfuges that novelists had to invent so heroines could have freedom of action and still be pure enough to marry the hero reveal the strain that social limitations imposed on the feminine role.”²⁴ Nevertheless, she ultimately concludes that the prevailing moral system “is never seriously denied” and “[n]ot until the nineties were books written in which women sought to realise their desires for affection and maternity without subjecting themselves to the legal and social restrictions of marriage”.²⁵ As I shall argue, Marryat’s fiction, even that from the 1860s, foregrounds the New Woman novel, allowing for truly radical readings, and offering far more than the “hints of desire”²⁶ that Mitchell ascribes to the women sensationalists.

Janice Radway’s important study *Reading the Romance* (1984) offers an explanation as to why these early studies of Victorian women’s writing are flawed:

Most critics assume initially that because these popular genres appear to be formulaic, all differences and variations exhibited by particular examples of them are insignificant. As a result, it becomes possible to analyse a few randomly selected texts because they can be taken as representative of the generic type.²⁷

Although Radway’s research was based on twentieth-century American readers, it clearly demonstrates how women’s writing is often interpreted as homogeneous and subsequently dismissed. In *The ‘Improper’ Feminine* (1992), Pykett criticises Showalter’s approach, making explicit links between sensation fiction and the New Woman novels of the 1890s, seeing a continuum, rather than two distinct genres. She demonstrates that they both “registered and reacted to the unfixing of gender categories,” forming “interventions in the changing debate on the Woman Question”.²⁸ While Pykett questions why Showalter places women sensation novelists in the ‘feminine’ rather than the ‘feminist’ phase, she nevertheless asserts that “[f]ew (if any) of the female sensationalists could be regarded as either feminist or progressive”.²⁹ Pykett’s study concentrates almost exclusively on Mrs Henry Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, taking them as representative of the genre – exactly the approach against which Radway cautions. This equivocation notwithstanding, Pykett’s observation that Showalter’s analysis “reveals the problems of

²⁴ Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, p.74.

²⁵ *The Fallen Angel*, p.175.

²⁶ *The Fallen Angel*, p.175.

²⁷ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp.5–6.

²⁸ Pykett, pp.10, 6.

²⁹ Pykett, pp.49, 5.

concentrating too much on endings at the expense of the more complex middles of novels,”³⁰ provides a useful starting point for further analysis. She goes on to call for research focused on individual writers, along with “informed historical analysis of the discursive contexts in which the sensation genre was produced”.³¹ This is the approach I adopt in this thesis.

Pamela Gilbert’s *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Novels* (1997) covers Braddon, but also includes analyses of novels by Ouida and Rhoda Broughton, then forgotten authors, arguing convincingly that their categorisation as sensation novelists has restricted our willingness to see them as transgressive writers. Gilbert proposes that these authors “offer a rich complexity and intelligent commentary on the culture they represent and create”.³² Andrew Maunder’s *Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction* represented a landmark in the recovery project initiated by Pykett and Gilbert. Comprising six critical editions of novels by lesser-known authors, this collection challenged the misconception that these writers were simply “unadventurous imitators of their better-known contemporaries”.³³ It includes Marryat’s first novel *Love’s Conflict* (1865), Mrs Henry Wood’s *St Martin’s Eve* (1866), Felicia Skene’s *Hidden Depths* (1866), Rhoda Broughton’s *Cometh up as a Flower* (1867), Mary Cecil Hay’s *Old Myddleton’s Money* (1874), and Dora Russell’s *Beneath the Wave* (1878). These novels are anything but homogenous, encompassing detection, social commentary, eroticism, and the gothic. As Maunder explains, “sensation fiction by women is a crucial part of the literary history of the nineteenth century,” and the increased availability of more obscure novels “enriches our understanding and interpretation of Victorian fiction generally”.³⁴

In 1996 Carol Poster warned that “prolonged theoretical debate” risked “permanent silencing of the majority of popular female novelists by permitting physical disintegration of their works”.³⁵ Arguing that such inertia serves to perpetuate and restrict the literary canon, Poster concludes that we risk losing “women novelists as authorising figures for many distinct Victorian fictional genres”.³⁶ Although Poster’s concerns regarding the physical disappearance of these novels are largely obviated, her call to action to recover these writers is still valid, as scholarship tends to coalesce around recently recovered authors, so the canon is augmented only very slowly. Mark

³⁰ Pykett, p.50.

³¹ Pykett, p.78.

³² Pamela K Gilbert, *Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.7.

³³ Maunder, I, p.x.

³⁴ Maunder, I, pp.xxvii, ix.

³⁵ Carol Poster, ‘Oxidization Is a Feminist Issue: Acidity, Canonicity, and Popular Victorian Female Authors’, *College English*, 58 (1996), 287–306 (p.289).

³⁶ Poster, p.293.

Knight claims that scholars are “unlikely to muster much enthusiasm”³⁷ for the recent proliferation of critical works on marriage and divorce in sensation fiction, but by considering the full range of women’s writing, rather than just a few high profile examples, we can refute Brantlinger’s claim that “rather than striking forthright blows in favour of divorce-law reform and greater sexual freedom, sensation novels usually merely exploit public interest in these issues”.³⁸

The remarkable growth of digital repositories such as Text Archive (archive.org) and Project Gutenberg offers us unprecedented access to thousands of forgotten novels, which we can now read at our leisure, rather than just within the confines of research libraries. Problems persist, such as the much publicised quality issues with Google Books – where key plot twists are obscured by missing pages or the appearance of disembodied thumbs – but we are still in a considerably happier position than twenty years ago when Poster issued her clarion call. Thanks to the increased availability of electronic texts, there are now critical editions of novels by Marryat, alongside those by Rhoda Broughton, Mary Cholmondeley, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Eliza Lynn Linton, and Sarah Grand. The recovery project is now firmly underway, with scholars championing unjustly neglected authors. The Victorian Popular Fiction Association, founded in 2009, also provides a space in which marginalised authors can be discussed, without fear of their literary merit being impugned.

The recently published *Companion to Sensation Fiction* (2011) offers a “provocative survey of the state of the field ... providing a springboard and inspiration for future work”.³⁹ The editor acknowledges that Braddon and Wilkie Collins are already settling into their “natural place in a wider pantheon of writers,”⁴⁰ so the focus should now be on recovering the next stratum of important authors. Marryat warrants her own chapter in this collection of essays, indicating her inexorable rise from footnote to significant author. Greta Depledge explores Kate Newey’s contention that Marryat’s work is “ideologically challenging,”⁴¹ providing insightful readings of several novels and identifying a number of transgressive heroines. However, while Depledge acknowledges that Marryat “prefigure[s] and vocalise[s] the protests seen in ... later feminist writers,” she agrees with Showalter that “Marryat clearly falls into the ‘feminine phase’ of women writers”.⁴² As Ross Forman proposes elsewhere in this volume, “[h]istoricising sensation fiction and thinking historically about the culture in which it emerged gives us tools to access the secrets

³⁷ Mark Knight, ‘Figuring Out the Fascination: Recent Trends in Criticism on Victorian Sensation and Crime Fiction’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 37 (2009) [n.p.].

³⁸ Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth Century British Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p.159.

³⁹ Pamela K Gilbert, ‘Introduction’, in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* (Chichester, West Sussex: Blackwell, 2011), pp.1–10 (p.2).

⁴⁰ Gilbert, ‘Introduction’, p.5.

⁴¹ Kate Newey, *Women’s Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p.181.

⁴² Greta Depledge, ‘Ideologically Challenging: Florence Marryat and Sensation Fiction’, in Gilbert *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, pp.306–318 (p.312).

and stratagems the Victorians used in representing sex and gender,”⁴³ an approach I shall be using in this thesis to demonstrate that Marryat’s work is far more ideologically challenging than previous critics have suggested.

Florence Marryat: The Critical Story So Far

Although it is only in the last decade that Marryat’s novels have featured regularly in surveys of nineteenth-century literature, there were three studies of her work in the last millennium. Catherine Nai-Jean Wang’s *Mrs Florence (Marryat) Church Lean, 1838-1899: A bio-bibliography* (1966) attempted to gather the known facts of Marryat’s life and also build a detailed primary bibliography. Unfortunately, the profusion of mistakes renders this an unhelpful and misleading source.

Jule Eisenbud’s ‘The Case of Florence Marryat,’ originally a 1975 journal article that was included in a later collection of essays, attempts a Freudian analysis of the eight novels he was able to access. Often insightful, the study suffers nevertheless from an implausible assertion that Marryat was suffering either penis envy, or at least what we would now understand as gender dysphoria. A photograph showing a supposedly “mannish hairdo,” and an unquestioning conflation of Marryat with one of her fictional characters are taken as evidence that she was a castrated female and a man-hater.⁴⁴ Eisenbud concludes that Marryat was “mired in mediocrity,” defeated by her inability to emulate her father’s success.⁴⁵ This reductive interpretation belies the multiple successes that comprised Marryat’s career, and, as I shall show in my biographical section, she was certainly not antipathetic to the opposite sex. I argue that, rather than indicating an unconscious desire to be a man, Marryat’s novels demonstrate a very deliberate attempt to challenge prevailing notions of female identity.

Jean Gano Neisius’s thesis *Acting the Role of Romance: Text and Subtext in the Work of Florence Marryat* (1992) remains to date the most detailed study of Marryat’s work, analysing forty of the novels and also contributing some new biographical details. While errors and omissions occur, primarily through the difficulty of accessing archival material, this research makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Marryat as a writer. Neisius places Marryat’s courtship novels within the context of twentieth-century writers such as Danielle Steel, tracing the development of the romance tradition, and successfully identifying tropes emerging from fairy tales and popular myths. There is no attempt to compare Marryat’s writing with that of her contemporaries, and the lack of historical context makes it difficult to gauge the significance of her work. Although Neisius admits that Marryat “subtly subverted the Victorian patriarchy,” she concludes that her novels “encourage recognition of male superiority,” entreating readers to “be content as the angels of their

⁴³ Ross G Forman, ‘Queer Sensation’, in Gilbert *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, pp.414–429 (p.416).

⁴⁴ Jule Eisenbud, ‘The Case of Florence Marryat’, in *Parapsychology and the Unconscious* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1983), pp.209–226 (pp.217, 219).

⁴⁵ Eisenbud, p.218.

own hearths”.⁴⁶ Throughout my thesis, I shall be refuting this claim, demonstrating how Marryat argued not only for sexual equality, but also female superiority. Many of her heroines are anything but content, continually testing the limits of female identity.

Newey’s essay ‘Women’s Playwriting and the Popular Theatre in the Late Victorian Era, 1870-1900’ (2001) recognises the importance of Marryat’s playwriting, particularly *Miss Chester* (1872), “a searing dramatisation of the pain of an older woman,” which “calls into question contemporary ideals of femininity, and significantly, does so from within those very conventions”.⁴⁷ Although Marryat’s plays are beyond the scope of this thesis, I argue in Chapter Two that by adapting her novels for the stage, she reached a much wider audience with her political message.

In his critical edition of Marryat’s *Love’s Conflict*, Maunder claims it as “an important cultural document, one shaped by the social structures and ideological sources of its time,” engaging with “ongoing discourses of degeneration and unlawful sexuality, together with the accompanying surveillance, policing and punishment deemed necessary to keep sexually deviant women in check”.⁴⁸ Throughout this thesis, I shall be identifying those themes elsewhere in Marryat’s fiction, establishing them as important tropes. Maunder’s introduction also resolved ongoing confusion surrounding some of Marryat’s biographical details, which I enlarge upon below.

Tatiana Kontou’s thesis and subsequent monograph examine the influence of Victorian Spiritualism on modern and contemporary authors, looking in detail at Marryat’s commentary on spirit materialisations in *There is No Death* (1892).⁴⁹ I shall be discussing Marryat’s spiritualist beliefs in Chapter Four, although focusing on their role in challenging established religion, and showing how it was used to question traditional gender roles. In their theses both Beth Palmer and Georgina O’Brien Hill consider Marryat’s role as editor of popular journal *London Society*. Looking specifically at the production rather than the consumption of sensation fiction, Palmer (2007) explains that the editorial roles of Marryat, Braddon, and Wood allowed them to assert their status in the literary marketplace.⁵⁰ In subsequent articles, Palmer examines the performative self-constructions Marryat

⁴⁶ Jean Gano Neisius, ‘Acting the Role of Romance: Text and Subtext in the Work of Florence Marryat’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1992), pp.55, 43.

⁴⁷ Kate Newey, ‘Women’s Playwriting and the Popular Theatre in the Late Victorian Era, 1870-1900’, in *Feminist Readings of Victorian Popular Texts* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2001), p.157.

⁴⁸ Andrew Maunder, ‘Introduction to *Love’s Conflict*’, in Maunder *Varieties of Women’s Sensation Fiction, 1855-1890*, II, pp.33, 29.

⁴⁹ Tatiana Kontou, ‘Ventriloquising the Dead: Representations of Victorian Spiritualism and Psychical Research in Selected Nineteenth and Late Twentieth Century Fiction’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2006); Tatiana Kontou, *Spiritualism and Women’s Writing: From the Fin de Siècle to the Neo-Victorian* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁵⁰ Beth Palmer, ‘Strategies of Sensation and the Transformation of the Press, 1860-1880: Mary Braddon, Florence Marryat and Ellen Wood, Female Author-Editors, and the Sensation Phenomenon in Mid-Victorian Magazine Publishing’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Oxford: Oxford University, 2007); Beth Palmer, *Women’s Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture: Sensational Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

adopted to negotiate a traditionally male role,⁵¹ also proposing that “Marryat’s sensation targets conventionally feminine roles by performing them in ways that exaggerate and expose their artificiality,” prompting readers to question their own concepts of identity.⁵² By reading all of Marryat’s novels and selecting the most significant, I develop and extend this idea, considering sexuality as well as gender. Comparing her with George Eliot and Charlotte M. Yonge, Hill (2009) illustrates how Marryat’s vision of women’s professionalism was reflected in her novels *Her World Against a Lie* (1878) and *My Sister the Actress* (1881).⁵³ As there is now a substantial body of research on Marryat’s editorial career, I shall allude to it only briefly in this thesis, although her commitment to a woman’s right to work is key to my argument.

Greta Depledge has edited scholarly editions of three Marryat novels: *The Dead Man’s Message* (1894), *Her Father’s Name* (1876), and *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897), which are consequently receiving more critical attention. The latter, with its vivid portrayal of anxieties aroused by the New Woman, is now a regular feature on both undergraduate and postgraduate reading lists, and is included in many thematic studies on the *fin de siècle*. I engage with these studies in my individual chapters, extending my arguments across the full range of Marryat’s novels and proposing a more radical interpretation than has hitherto been attempted.

The Life and Career of Florence Marryat

Florence Marryat left no diary, few personal letters, and deliberately obfuscated some aspects of her life. Much of what is known about her has been pieced together from fragmentary memoirs in her non-fiction works and accounts written by her contemporaries. Some gaps can be filled through official documents: marriage and death certificates, census returns, and court proceedings. There is also *The Nobler Sex* (1892), a novel which follows closely the documented events of Marryat’s life with only a few details, mainly names and locations, changed. Written retrospectively in the first person as Molly Malmaison, it fulfils George Landow’s criteria to be classed as autobiographical: “to qualify as autobiography a work must not only present a version, myth, or metaphor of the self, but it must also be retrospective and hence it must self-consciously contrast two selves, the writing “I” and the one located (or created) in the past”.⁵⁴ Every chapter heading starts with “I”, reinforcing that it is Marryat, rather than the heroine, who is addressing the reader. The narrative commences with the statement: “What I am about to write is the true history of my life,”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Beth Palmer, “Chieftaness,” “Great Duchess,” “Editress!” “Mysterious Being!”: Performing Editorial Identities in Florence Marryat’s London Society Magazine’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 42 (2009), 136–154.

⁵² Beth Palmer, ‘Florence Marryat, Theatricality and Performativity’, *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 2009.

⁵³ Georgina Ellen O’Brien Hill, ‘The Woman Author-Editor and the Negotiation of Professional Identity, 1850-1880’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Liverpool (University of Chester), 2009).

⁵⁴ George P Landow, *Approaches to Victorian Autobiography* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1979), p.xliii.

⁵⁵ Florence Marryat, *The Nobler Sex* (New York and London: Street & Smith, 1890), pp.5–6.

concluding: “I have told my story clumsily, perhaps, but I have told it truly.”⁵⁶ Although interpreting autobiographical fiction is notoriously problematic, the intersections between known facts and dramatic versionings can offer an insight into the emotional turmoil behind the official documents. For example, Eliza Lynn Linton’s *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland* is frequently accepted as an account of the author’s life,⁵⁷ even though the central character is a man, this subterfuge allowing Linton to describe her sexual relationships with women. Marryat uses self-representation throughout her writing, but *The Nobler Sex* is the only novel written in a clearly autobiographical style.

Florence Marryat was born on 9 July 1833,⁵⁸ the ninth child of Captain Frederick Marryat, distinguished mariner and popular novelist, and Catherine Shairp, daughter of the British Charge d’Affaires in St. Petersburg. Her parents legally separated in 1839, the young Florence dividing her time between their two homes: the Captain’s Norfolk estate and her mother’s small house at Southsea.⁵⁹ Although she held her father in high esteem throughout her life, Florence was clearly perturbed by the way in which the separation affected her parents disproportionately, this forming a recurring theme in her fiction. As a middle-class woman born at the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was no possibility of Catherine Marryat earning her own living, so she spent the remainder of her life dependent on her daughters. In 1893, *The Idler* asked popular novelists “Is childhood the happiest or the most miserable period of one’s existence?” Revealingly, Marryat responded: “If I am to choose one, or the other extreme, I should say decidedly the most miserable, and made so by the folly, ignorance, or neglect of parents. Not one hundredth part of the men and women who marry are fit to become fathers and mothers.”⁶⁰ This idea is perpetuated throughout her fiction, with heroines succeeding in spite of, rather than because of, their parentage.

Marryat’s biography of her father, *The Life and Letters of Captain Marryat* (1872), describes a benevolent and indulgent parent whose children received an erratic education. Florence and her sisters were taught by a succession of ineffectual governesses, their efforts complemented by the Captain’s language lessons.⁶¹ Given the sustained criticism of Marryat’s French and grammar

⁵⁶ Marryat, *The Nobler Sex*, pp.313–314.

⁵⁷ Nancy Fix Anderson, *Women Against Women in Victorian England: Life of Eliza Lynn Linton* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.x.

⁵⁸ There is some confusion over Marryat’s birthdate and it is normally given as 9 July 1837. This date appears in the latest printed edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* and has been consequently perpetuated through secondary materials. Marryat mischievously lied about her age in interviews and deducted six years on her second marriage certificate. Although no birth certificate exists (such records were not yet mandatory), her christening record, first marriage certificate, divorce records, and death certificate all cite her birthdate as 9 July 1833.

⁵⁹ ‘The Real Florence Marryat. By Her Daughter’, *St Paul’s: An Illustrated Journal of the Day*, 1899, 588–589 (p.588).

⁶⁰ ‘The Idlers Club’, *The Idler*, July 1893, 229–241 (p.234).

⁶¹ Florence Marryat, *Life and Letters of Captain Marryat* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1872), pp.239–40.

throughout her career, the Captain was an unsuccessful, if enthusiastic, pedagogue. Much of Marryat's later fiction calls for women to be formally educated, either so they can seek fulfilling employment or become better wives to intelligent husbands. Captain Marryat was remembered with pride and affection by Florence; Catherine Marryat, conversely, is largely absent from her memoirs and there is no mention of her at all in the biography beyond the elliptical "His widow also survives him."⁶² Recalling an encounter with the Marryats in Lausanne, Charles Dickens makes Catherine Marryat sound like one of his most ridiculous female characters:

Poor fellow! He seems to have had a hard time of it with his wife. She had no interest whatever in the children; and was such a fury, that, being dressed to go out to dinner, she would sometimes, on no other provocation than a pin out of place or some such thing, fall upon a little maid she had, beat her till she couldn't stand, then tumble into hysterics, and be carried to bed.⁶³

Florence was reticent about her relationship with her mother, but her various fictional portrayals of profoundly dysfunctional mother-daughter relationships indicate the sensitivity of the situation. Where mothers are present, they are at best ineffectual and at worst malevolent, conspiring to deny their daughters' right to self-determination. Most accounts of Catherine Marryat describe her as intensely pious, and the dedication in Florence Marryat's 1869 novel, *The Girls of Feversham*, indicates her mother's attitude towards her daughter's literary career: "My dearest mother, I dedicate to you this little story; the first perhaps, from my pen, in which not a line is to be found which can be called 'sensational,' and trust you will accept it with the love of your daughter."⁶⁴ The dedication is either disingenuous or mischievous: the plot involves traditional sensation themes of murder and elopement, and features two families functioning quite happily without a mother. Marryat makes a rare reference to her mother in *The Spirit World* (1894), twelve years after her death, recounting her horror when her young son on his death bed demanded beer instead of soothing descriptions of the afterlife. Mrs Marryat was terrified that God would punish him for his blasphemy.⁶⁵

Little is known of the courtship of Thomas Ross Church and Florence Marryat, beyond the fact that Church was a frequent visitor to Marryat's grandmother's house in Wimbledon.⁶⁶ After several years' engagement, she was sent out to be married on the island of Penang on 13th June 1854.⁶⁷ As part of the marriage settlement, Marryat signed over her one-fifth share of an investment worth £15,804, which later became the subject of two legal battles. Church was an Ensign in the 12th Madras Staff Corps, and Marryat embarked upon a life as an officer's wife in the Raj. Writing after her death, Marryat's daughter said of this marriage: "She was too young to realise the responsibility

⁶² Marryat, *Life and Letters*, p.322.

⁶³ John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Lippincott & Co, 1873), II, p.269.

⁶⁴ Florence Marryat, *The Girls of Feversham* (London: Richard Bentley, 1869).

⁶⁵ Florence Marryat, *The Spirit World* (New York: Charles B. Reed, 1894), p.28.

⁶⁶ "The Real Florence Marryat", p.588.

⁶⁷ Marriage certificate: Florence Marryat and Thomas Ross Church, Public Record Office.

of entering into a life-long engagement with a man who was more or less a stranger to her.”⁶⁸ Marryat returned home from India in December 1860, apparently suffering from exhaustion and the after-effects of an unspecified trauma. She was accompanied by three children and pregnant with a fourth. Church remained in India and they were effectively separated – his military records show that he progressed up the ranks and did not seek to join a regiment based in England.⁶⁹

A fortnight after her arrival in England, Marryat gave birth to her fourth child, also called Florence. She was born with serious facial deformities and had to be fed by artificial means during her ten-day existence. Marryat claims her condition was considered so unusual that it was reported in *The Lancet*, although under assumed names,⁷⁰ adding:

I was closely catechised as to whether I had suffered any physical or mental shock that could account for the injury to my child, and it was decided that the trouble I had experienced was sufficient to produce it.⁷¹

Marryat never elaborates on the nature of the “shock”, but offers clues throughout her fiction: in the short story ‘The Box with the Iron Clamps,’ published in *London Society* in 1868, Blanche Damer gives birth to a deformed baby after an extra-marital affair. She carries its tiny skeleton around in a sealed box as a symbol of her guilt. In *A Fatal Silence* (1891), Paula Bjørnson’s son is born with severe learning difficulties as a result of her husband kicking her in the stomach during pregnancy. In Marryat’s first novel, *Love’s Conflict* (1865), Elfrida Treherne’s sickly baby survives only a few hours. She blames herself for thinking of a man other than her husband and sees it as God’s punishment. Significantly, in a later novel, Elfrida blames the baby’s death on the stress of living with a violent husband. One possible interpretation is that Marryat became pregnant after an extra-marital affair, causing her husband to react violently.

Alone with three children to support, and receiving only limited financial assistance from Church, Marryat was encouraged to start writing by her childhood friend, Annie Thomas, herself a successful author. Marryat’s first novel, *Love’s Conflict*, was accepted by publisher Richard Bentley, although extensively revised by his reader, Geraldine Jewsbury (see Chapter One). This work earned Marryat a relatively modest fee of £100, but she quickly followed it up with two further novels in the same year, *Woman Against Woman* and *Too Good for Him*, in which Isobel Reverdon turns to novel-writing to support her baby after her husband absconds. Marryat’s novels of this decade, while not overtly radical, do portray strong women who offer a counterpoint to the often circumscribed heroines of authors such as Anthony Trollope.

⁶⁸ ‘The Real Florence Marryat’, p.588.

⁶⁹ Military Records, Madras Army. Filed at Public Record Office.

⁷⁰ Either Marryat was mistaken in her claim, or the details were so heavily disguised as to render the article’s retrieval impossible.

⁷¹ Florence Marryat, *There Is No Death* (New York: National Book Company, 1891), p.73.

There appears to have been an uneasy truce between Marryat and Church during the remainder of the decade. They corresponded regularly (the letters have been since destroyed) and he visited “3-4 times”⁷² (there were four more children, so four is the more likely figure, assuming he was the father). He is recorded as present in the family home at the 1871 census, but this coincides with their more formal separation, so he had probably returned temporarily to settle his affairs. In this year the first Married Women’s Property Act came into effect, allowing Marryat to control her own earnings and live more independently (see Chapter Two). Church’s brother, Edward, was a frequent visitor and seems to have helped Marryat through this difficult time.⁷³ She dedicated her 1866 novel *For Ever and Ever* to him. Significantly, it is the story of an adulterous army captain based in India who physically and mentally abuses his wife and child.

Matters had come to a head in 1870 when Marryat converted to Roman Catholicism. Church strongly disapproved, fearing his children would be brought up as papists. He threatened to divorce her unless she converted back to Anglicanism, and she dutifully obliged. This rapprochement swiftly gave way to an irrevocable breach, and the couple resolved to separate. In return for her partial freedom, Marryat agreed to largely support herself and the children, this point marking her transformation from wife to businesswoman. She became more aware of her earning capacity, demanding larger advances from her publishers and licensing her copyrights, rather than selling them outright. Marryat’s contracts in the Bentley Archives show that she stipulated better terms and was more commercially astute than some of her literary contemporaries.⁷⁴ Through his research in the Tillotson archives, Graham Law shows that Marryat could earn up to £360 for the serialisation of a novel.⁷⁵ Not afraid to capitalise on her famous name, Marryat used her father’s contacts, such as Charles Dickens, to publicise her work. Marryat’s attempts to raise her profile caused a rift with her unmarried younger sister Augusta, a children’s author, who felt she had a superior claim to the illustrious title of ‘Miss Marryat’. Augusta started accepting dinner invitations clearly meant for her sister and denounced her at every available opportunity, describing her novels as “ridiculous”.⁷⁶ Florence later avenged herself publicly with a vitriolic portrait of the other Miss Marryat in her novel *Fighting the Air* (1875).

In 1872 Marryat assumed the editorship of *London Society*, a monthly shilling magazine that regularly published her work. Through her regular unsigned opinion pieces she assumed a male identity and lent support to her favoured causes, such as the status of the theatrical profession and,

⁷² ‘A Military Divorce Case’, *Reynold’s Newspaper*, 10 November 1878, p.5.

⁷³ ‘A Military Divorce Case’, p.5.

⁷⁴ Troy J. Bassett, ‘Living on the Margin: George Bentley and the Economics of the Three-Volume Novel, 1865-70’, *Book History*, 13 (2010), 58–79 (pp.60–66).

⁷⁵ Graham Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p.68.

⁷⁶ ‘Miss Florence Marryatt [sic] and Her Sister’, *New York Times*, 4 January 1875, p.2.

later on, Spiritualism.⁷⁷ She was an imposing figure, both physically and professionally, and letters from her male contributors show deference and respect.⁷⁸ Edmund Downey, assistant to Marryat's publisher William Tinsley, was warned: "She is a tall, striking-looking woman, and she'll talk to you just like a man."⁷⁹ As an editor, Marryat inhabited the public sphere, but she became an even more prominent figure when her first play, *Miss Chester*, opened at the Holborn Theatre on 6th October 1872, described by Newey as "the searing dramatisation of the pain of an older woman".⁸⁰ Although she categorises the play as a "full-blooded domestic melodrama ... in the mould of *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret*," Newey also views it as "more subversive than the overt critiques by later Victorian feminists" in terms of challenging the relegation of emotion to the private, and therefore feminine, sphere.⁸¹ Although most reviews were unfavourable, all critics noted the force, passion and emotion of the title character. Marryat took a bow on the opening night, thereby publicly associating herself with the piece.⁸² The following year Marryat was encouraged by a fellow journalist to attend a séance at the home of Mrs Holmes, a celebrated American medium, beginning a life-long belief in Spiritualism. Marryat again converted to Roman Catholicism and managed to reconcile it with her spiritualistic beliefs, creating her own gynocentric faith, which I discuss at length in Chapter Four.

Marryat subsequently made a complete break with her previous life by undertaking a theatrical tour with the celebrated actor and satirist George Grossmith, after they were introduced by the impresario George Dolby.⁸³ The tour lasted much of 1876-77, taking them all over the United Kingdom and Ireland. The show was called *Entre Nous* and comprised piano sketches, recitations in historical costume, concluding with a short play entitled *Cups and Saucers*. Although the performance received mixed reviews, the attendant publicity raised their respective profiles, establishing them both as public performers.⁸⁴ It was while on tour that Marryat met Francis Lean, a retired colonel with eight children. He had already filed a petition for divorce from his wife, Lettice Anne Cumming, on grounds of her adultery with two men and her "habits of intemperance and drunkenness".⁸⁵ The illustrator Harry Furniss, who worked with Marryat on *London Society*, recalled in his memoirs:

⁷⁷ Palmer, 'Chieftaness', p.148.

⁷⁸ Palmer, 'Chieftaness', p.147.

⁷⁹ Edmund Downey, *Twenty Years Ago: A Book of Anecdotes Illustrating Literary Life in London* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1905), pp.38–39.

⁸⁰ Newey, 'Women's Playwriting', p.157.

⁸¹ Newey, 'Women's Playwriting', pp.157–158.

⁸² 'Holborn Theatre', *The Athenaeum*, 1872, p.72.

⁸³ Tony Joseph, *George Grossmith: Biography of a Savoyard* (Bristol: Tony Joseph, 1982), p.61.

⁸⁴ Joseph, p.62.

⁸⁵ Divorce Court Proceedings. 1877. Public Record Office J77/186/4810.

she sent all her friends and acquaintances, myself included, a statement in cold printer's ink, informing us that she was not divorced, but that in future she wished to be known as Mrs. Lean. This little piece of eccentricity fell into her husband's solicitor's hands and thus ended the Church business.⁸⁶

Thomas Ross Church sued for divorce, citing his wife's adultery with Lean. Both denied the charge, but a *decree nisi* was granted to Church, with costs. Counsel for the prosecution spoke of the difficulties caused by Marryat's religious conversion, resulting in "unpleasantness,"⁸⁷ apparently a euphemism for violence. A letter to her daughter Eva was read in which she described taking the seemingly foolhardy step of living with Lean owing to all the unhappiness she had endured during her married life.⁸⁸ Church, annoyed by Eva taking her mother's side, stipulated in his will that her issue should inherit none of his wealth.⁸⁹ After the decree absolute was issued, Church again (unsuccessfully) claimed Marryat's inheritance through a variation of settlement. Finding herself ostracised from polite society, Marryat felt solidarity with George Eliot, writing her a heartfelt letter of sympathy on the death of George Henry Lewes.⁹⁰

Marryat and Lean were married on 5th June 1879, a week after the final decree was granted. As I discuss in Chapter Two, this second marriage was no happier than the first. Curiously, Lean's journal makes no mention of his marriage to Marryat, whereas he includes full details of the guest list and gifts for his first wedding.⁹¹ Cumming was reluctant to relinquish her husband, exerting a malign influence over his second marriage. A medium told Marryat: "She would go any lengths to take that you value from you, even to compassing your death. She is madly in love with what is yours."⁹² In her penultimate novel, *A Rational Marriage* (1899), Marryat suggests the reason behind her incompatibility with both husbands:

A retired army man is the worst sort of man in the world to set up house with. He never knows what to do with himself. He seldom has any resource beyond his profession. He has been bred in indolence and accustomed to be directed in all things, so he has forgotten how to think for himself. You could hardly find a stupider companion than a retired officer. They only know how to read the newspaper and play billiards.⁹³

These lines are spoken by Joan Trevor, a young orphan who is unlikely to have encountered a retired army officer, so it is reasonable to assume these are the thoughts of the author herself.

⁸⁶ Harry Furniss, *Some Victorian Women, Good, Bad, and Indifferent* (London: John Lane, 1923), p.11.

⁸⁷ 'An Indian Colonel's Divorce', *The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 8 November 1878, p.2.

⁸⁸ 'A Military Divorce Case'.

⁸⁹ Last will and testament of Thomas Ross Church.

⁹⁰ Letter: Florence Marryat Lean to George Eliot, 8th February 1879, The George Eliot and George Henry Lewes Collection, 1834-1981, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

⁹¹ Donald F Bittner, 'Florence Marryat and Lieutenant Colonel Francis Lean, RMLI', 5 July 2013.

⁹² Marryat, *There Is No Death*, p.176.

⁹³ Florence Marryat, *A Rational Marriage* (New York: F M Buckles & Company, 1899), p.119.

After spending a week alone in Brighton in July 1880, Marryat resolved to separate from Lean, again taking to the stage. Shortly before her marriage to Lean, she had written to the actor-manager Henry Irving, informing him of her dramatic talent and requesting that he consider her for Shakespearean parts.⁹⁴ There is no record of his response or of Marryat having assumed the role she desired. In 1881 she took matters into her own hands by adapting her novel *Her World Against the Lie*, taking for herself the lead role of Hephzibah Horton, a crusading feminist who encourages a young friend to leave her violent husband. The novel discusses both the Matrimonial Causes and Married Women's Property Acts, a programme of legislation that gradually improved the legal position of women. (I discuss this in more detail in Chapter Two.) As with her earlier play *Miss Chester*, Marryat portrayed the wrongs of woman on the public stage. Having received excellent reviews, she was invited to join the D'Oyly Carte company, touring Britain and Ireland for twelve months. Although her performance schedule was tough, she nevertheless managed to write three novels during this period, all of them concerned with elevating the position of actresses, describing the stage as a respectable career for an independent woman. Marryat also wrote a pamphlet entitled 'The Majesty of Work,' in which she argued forcefully that women should be encouraged to train for gainful employment, as they would be then less likely to enter into unhappy marriages.

The 1880s also saw a number of unauthorised stage adaptations of Marryat's novels, the letters page of *The Era* bearing testimony to her annoyance with the worst offenders, Augustus Daly, C H Hazelwood and J S Blythe.⁹⁵ She felt particularly strongly about the versions of *Her World Against a Lie* which heightened the sensation and abandoned the political message regarding marital violence. It is ironic that a novel which espoused a woman's right to her own income should have been so ruthlessly exploited by men. As Kerry Powell writes, adaptations of women's novels by male playwrights "represent a massive assault against women writers that is both textual and sexual in nature".⁹⁶ Marryat was also obliged to defend her literary reputation five years later, when Charles Ogilvie published a serialised novella *The Lost Diamonds*, claiming that it had been co-authored by Marryat. In fact, she had contributed only one scene, which Ogilvie expanded into four chapters.⁹⁷

Marryat continued touring for the next few years, giving dramatic readings and also performing her one-woman show *Love Letters*. In 1884-5 she undertook a major tour of North America, chronicling her experiences in *Tom Tiddler's Ground* (1886). On her return Marryat established the School of Literary Art, instituted for the "instruction of both sexes desirous of entering the Literary Profession, in the Arts of Composing and writing Fiction, Journalism, and the construction of

⁹⁴ Florence Marryat, 'To Henry Irving', 16 March 1879, THM/37/7/30, Henry Irving Foundation Centenary Project <<http://www.henryirving.co.uk>> [accessed 12 April 2010].

⁹⁵ Florence Marryat, 'Our Daily Bread', *The Era*, 7 August 1886, p.11.

⁹⁶ Kerry Powell, *Women and the Victorian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.101.

⁹⁷ Florence Marryat, 'Collaboration', *The Morning Post*, 30 December 1891, p.3.

Drama”.⁹⁸ In his memoirs, Francis Gribble claims she addressed her first pupil, a shy and timorous youth, thus: “Are you in love? No? Have you ever been in love? No? Then go away and fall in love at once, and when you have done so, come back and tell me about it. No one can possibly write fiction until he has fallen in love.”⁹⁹ The youth was said to have run away from the school and never dared return. In *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, George Gissing’s protagonist recalls:

I heard not long ago, of an eminent lawyer, who had paid a couple of hundred per annum for his son’s instruction in the art of fiction—yea, the art of fiction—by a not very brilliant professor of that art.¹⁰⁰

These anecdotes aside, there is no evidence to indicate the success or otherwise of this venture.

In 1887 Marryat was devastated by the death of her beloved eldest daughter, Eva. Although the death certificate records the cause as “Premature Labour Septicaemia 8 days,”¹⁰¹ her great-granddaughter believes it was the result of a botched abortion, as no record exists of a baby having been born.¹⁰² Marryat supervised the posthumous publication of her only novel, *An Actress’s Love Story*, writing a moving preface in which she implored critics to treat this literary début gently, as the author had no opportunity to learn from her mistakes.¹⁰³

In 1891 Marryat embarked upon a UK lecture tour, *Women of the Future*, in which she expounded her forthright views on the position of her sex. In the previous decade, New York audiences had been unsure what to make of her lecture ‘What to Do with the Men?’, in which she predicted that by the year 1995 the need for men would have been obviated by technological developments.¹⁰⁴ Men would help out with childcare, but mostly live in trees, leaving women to manage the planet. The title perhaps pays homage to Frances Power Cobbe’s essay “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?”, itself a riposte to W R Greg’s essay “Why are Women Redundant?” in which he proposed shipping superfluous spinsters to the colonies.

Although her early novels challenged the sexual double standard and women’s economic dependency, Marryat’s writing through the 1880s became more explicitly feminist, with novels such as *How They Loved Him* (1882) and *The Heart of Jane Warner* (1884) championing elective single motherhood. *In the Name of Liberty* (1897) shows an abandoned wife who becomes a police detective

⁹⁸ Florence Marryat, ‘The School of Literary Art: Conducted by Florence Marryat’, 1885, MSS.C/194.a.117, British Library.

⁹⁹ Francis Gribble, *Seen in Passing: A Volume of Personal Reminiscences* (London: Ernest Benn, 1929), p.122.

¹⁰⁰ George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (London: Archibald Constable, 1904), p.211.

¹⁰¹ Death Certificate for Eva Florence Stevens, 20 July 1887, File no. 597549, General Register Office, Pancras. Certified copy in possession of author.

¹⁰² Simone Hull, ‘Florence Marryat’, 14 April 2010.

¹⁰³ Eva Ross Church, *An Actress’s Love Story* (London: F V White & Co., 1888).

¹⁰⁴ ‘What to Do with the Men: Miss Florence Marryat’s Glimpse Ahead to the Year 1995’, *New York Times*, 16 May 1885, p.4.

and averts a terrorist bomb plot orchestrated by her estranged husband. Along with New Woman writers such as Sarah Grand, Marryat made the link between vivisection and women's oppression, both seen as the result of an abuse of male power (see Chapter Three). Whereas Eliza Lynn Linton and Rhoda Broughton were highly scathing of women's clubs in *In Haste and at Leisure* (1895) and *Dear Faustina* (1897), Marryat presents a partially sympathetic portrait of the Pushahead Club in *At Heart a Rake* (1895). She is wary of the athletic types, but tolerant of the 'mannish' figures Broughton and Lynn Linton found so repellent. The sub-plot featuring a married woman black-balled by the Club for living with a man other than her husband recalls the experience of Dr Anna Kingsford, who was excluded from the Somerville Club on moral grounds. Marryat stresses that female solidarity is required in order to achieve women's emancipation.

Although her later novels display nascent misogamy, the 1891 census shows that Marryat had not eschewed men altogether. She was living with Herbert McPherson, an actor 33 years her junior, although she was claiming to be only 45 (she was actually 57). Born Herbert Pearson, he belonged to an acting family, and met Marryat sometime during 1885.¹⁰⁵ Two of her novels during this period show women in relationships with much younger men. In *Gentleman and Courtier* (1888), Elsa Carden breaks off her engagement to Jocelyn Yorke after friends presume he is her son. Reviewers were relieved by this narrative twist, believing the nine-year age gap to be insupportable. The fact that the teenaged Elsa's first suitor, the family doctor, was a quarter of a century her senior was not mentioned.¹⁰⁶ Marryat is more confident in her next depiction of a May-December relationship, *The Beautiful Soul* (1895), allowing her plain heroine, Felicia Hetherington, to marry handsome young journalist Archibald Nasmyth.

The Nobler Sex (1892) marks a watershed between her unhappy marriages and this new phase of her life. Closely modelled on Marryat's own experiences, heroine Mollie Malmaison endures two disastrous marriages, during which she supports her family through writing novels and appearing on the stage. Although the names and locations have been changed, many of the episodes are clearly based on fact. Most reviewers identified the novel as autobiographical and were united in their disapproval. The *Westminster Review* wondered "how far ... it may be a sort of romance of the author's own life," concluding that it was a "hateful book" in which Marryat "goes out of her way to fall foul of Mrs Lynn Linton."¹⁰⁷ As I demonstrate in Chapter One, falling foul of Mrs Lynn Linton was precisely Marryat's intention.

Marryat's 1892 interview with Helen C Black for the *Lady's Pictorial*, later published in *Notable Women Authors of the Day*, was carefully designed to resurrect her reputation. Emphasising her femininity, Black refers to Marryat's "graceful simplicity" and "exceeding softness," describing her

¹⁰⁵ Uncatalogued papers in Harry Ransom archive, University of Texas.

¹⁰⁶ 'New Novels', *The Academy*, 1888, p.269.

¹⁰⁷ 'Belles Lettres', *Westminster Review*, 1892, 687–92 (p.687).

literary career as having been motivated by a love of telling stories, rather than economic necessity.¹⁰⁸ Marryat showed her gratitude for this portrait by dedicating her 1896 novel *The Dream That Stayed* to Black. Conversely, an obituary of Marryat by her daughter portrays her as a weary (and unfeminine) workhorse, driven to her physical limits by the need to support her family.¹⁰⁹

Still producing novels at a prodigious rate, Marryat became more famous for her Spiritualism during the 1890s. *There is No Death* (1891), her account of her early experiences at séances, was a best-seller which was praised and castigated in equal measure. She received hundreds of letters of gratitude from bereaved parents around the world, but the press ridiculed her. Undaunted, in 1893 she helped celebrated medium Bessie Williams write her memoirs and also presented a more sustained and scholarly defence of her beliefs in *The Spirit World* (1894), in which she criticises the hegemony and dogmatism of established religions. Another tour brought her new admirers and she became better known for her unorthodox beliefs than her novels. One regional newspaper noted:

Florence Marryat is being drawn more and more into the realms of Spiritualism, and now devotes a great deal of her time to the study of that occult science. Miss Marryat is really Mrs Frances Lean, and is now a grandmother. Despite her years she is not yet grey, and retains much of that masculinity of manner which has always distinguished her.¹¹⁰

Appropriately entitled ‘Purely Personal’, in this piece the author attempts to domesticate Marryat, referring to her by her married name (even though she had been separated from Lean for over a decade) and drawing attention to her status as a grandmother (her first grandchild was born almost twenty years earlier). There is a suggestion here that, given her status, Marryat should have by now lost that “masculinity of manner” that characterised her professional persona.

Although her literary star seemed to be in the descendant (her later novels were barely noticed by the British press), Marryat’s final decade was partly devoted to the professionalisation of writing. Marryat became active in the Society of Authors, attending their annual dinner in 1895, along with Sarah Grand and Mathilde Blind.¹¹¹ Marryat also campaigned vigorously for the passing and subsequent extension of the International Copyright law. Despite being the self-styled most popular writer in the United States of America, her transatlantic earnings had been minimal, thanks to “pirates” such as the Seaside Library.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Helen C Black, *Notable Women Authors of the Day*, ed. by Catherine Pope and Troy Bassett (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2011), pp.96, 104.

¹⁰⁹ ‘The Real Florence Marryat’.

¹¹⁰ ‘Purely Personal’, *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* (Portsmouth, 3 March 1894), p.9.

¹¹¹ ‘The Society of Authors’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 25 May 1897, p.7.

¹¹² Florence Marryat, *Tom Tiddler’s Ground* (London: Sonnenschein & Co, 1886), pp.119, 121.

Marryat died on 27th October 1899, the cause of death cited as diabetes and pneumonia.¹¹³ The funeral, which took place at a small Catholic church in St. John's Wood, celebrated her life and varied career. The mourners spanned the worlds of literature and the stage, including George Grossmith, Arthur A'Beckett and Annie Thomas, who were accompanied by members of Marryat's family.¹¹⁴ She was buried at Kensal Green Cemetery, sharing a grave with her beloved daughter Eva. *The Era* praised Marryat's career, but most other obituaries commended her industry while condemning her output. *The Times* wrote that her novels were "certainly not all of equal merit; but their author had imagination and dramatic instinct, and many of them enjoyed a good deal of popularity".¹¹⁵

Marryat's estate at death was valued at £1479 16s 8d – surprisingly little given her long-standing success. In her interview with Black she refers to her fortune: "Others have spent it for me ... and I do not grudge it to them."¹¹⁶ Marryat left two houses to her son Frederick and a third to her daughter Ethel. She bequeathed her main home, 26 Abercorn Place in St John's Wood, to Herbert McPherson "in token of many year's [sic] unbroken affection,"¹¹⁷ with all other possessions and literary royalties divided between him and her son Francis. Thomas Ross Church, who had tried to claim a share of Marryat's literary earnings after their divorce, later left a considerably larger estate of £16,769 15s 9d.¹¹⁸

Marryat's sixty-eight novels¹¹⁹ were undeniably popular, their author a household name throughout the Anglophone world, but were largely forgotten after the so-called 'Great Divide' of 1914. However, she did enjoy an unexpected afterlife in Stella Gibbons' *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), where Marryat's *How She Loved Him* is included in Flora Poste's list of novels one can read while eating an apple.¹²⁰ Michael Sadleir later categorised Marryat, along with Annie Thomas, as a "purveyor of dangerously inflammatory fiction, unsuitable for reading by young ladies, but much to their taste".¹²¹ It is partly this reputation that has led to the dismissal of her work. Superficial and often inaccurate accounts of her life and career have also caused her to be overlooked in favour of some of the more famous authors she influenced. However, an evaluation of her prolific and varied

¹¹³ Death Certificate for Florence Lean, 28 October 1899, File no. 313938, General Register Office, Marylebone. Certified copy in possession of author.

¹¹⁴ 'The Late Miss Florence Marryat', *The Era*, 4 November 1899, p.13.

¹¹⁵ 'Obituary: Florence Marryat', *The Times*, 28 October 1899, p.8.

¹¹⁶ Black, p.99.

¹¹⁷ Last Will and Testament of Florence Marryat.

¹¹⁸ Last Will and Testament of Thomas Ross Church.

¹¹⁹ Accounts of Marryat's output vary: I have identified 68. Some novels were published under multiple titles, and some of her sisters' work was also mistakenly attributed to her.

¹²⁰ Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm* (London: Penguin, 1998), p.53.

¹²¹ Michael Sadleir, *XIX Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), I, p.229.

body of writing alongside an appreciation of her struggles as a woman reveals her as an important neglected nineteenth-century feminist.

A Victorian Feminist?

Applying the anachronistic label ‘feminist’ to a Victorian woman is, of course, problematic. As Karen Offen demonstrates, “[t]he term ‘feminism’ can be endlessly qualified,”¹²² and is often used to discuss the women’s rights movement before its invention in the 1890s and widespread use in the 1910s.¹²³ Surveying the use of ‘feminist’ to describe pre-twentieth-century campaigners, Offen identifies the shared characteristic as “the impetus to critique and improve the disadvantaged status of women relative to men within a particular cultural situation”.¹²⁴ While Offen concedes that this approach is too simplistic to be effective,¹²⁵ I nevertheless believe this provides a useful model for establishing Marryat, and other campaigners, as nineteenth-century feminists, supporting Barbara Caine’s conclusion that “[n]o other terms suggest adequately the extent or the intensity of their concern about the situation of women or their sense of need to remove the injustices, the obstacles, and the forms of oppression which women faced”.¹²⁶ As Caine points out, the terms ‘liberalism’ and ‘socialism’ are used retrospectively (and no less problematically) to describe nineteenth-century political movements.¹²⁷ Philippa Levine, too, insists that “women’s positive identification with one another in a context of political struggle suggests that the use of the term feminism is not anachronistic,”¹²⁸ and Denise Riley’s argument that “both a concentration on and a refusal of the identity of ‘women’ are essential to feminism”¹²⁹ proves the centrality of the idea to Marryat’s fiction.

Through both her novels and her non-fiction writing, Marryat campaigned on a wide range of women’s issues, including property rights, employment, birth control, wife-beating, medical abuse, divorce, and education. In later life, she even questioned the need for marriage, portraying elective single motherhood in her fiction and lecturing on ‘The Mistakes of Marriage’. In some cases Marryat actually argues for female supremacy, creating heroines who are physically stronger and more intelligent than their husbands.¹³⁰ There is no evidence that Marryat joined any political

¹²² Karen Offen, ‘Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach’, *Signs*, 14 (1988), 119–157 (p.134).

¹²³ Caine, p.4.

¹²⁴ Offen, p.132.

¹²⁵ Offen, p.134.

¹²⁶ Caine, p.6.

¹²⁷ Caine, p.6.

¹²⁸ Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism, 1850-1900* (London: Hutchinson Education, 1987), p.14.

¹²⁹ Denise Riley, *Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p.1.

¹³⁰ For example, Everil West-Norman in *Open! Sesame!* (1875) (see Chapter Four) and Joan Trevor in *A Rational Marriage* (1899) (see Chapter Two).

organisations, perhaps wanting to be seen primarily as a novelist rather than as a campaigner; however, I show in this thesis that she engaged with the writings of prominent activists such as Frances Power Cobbe, particularly on the issue of vivisection, which was closely linked with the women's movement. Like many outspoken nineteenth-century women, Marryat was not an ardent supporter of female suffrage. While in a few of the more polemical novels, such as *Her World Against a Lie*, heroines express their desire for the vote, Marryat makes no sustained argument in its favour. In *At Heart a Rake* (1895), a novel centred around a women's club, the issue is conspicuous by its absence. The reasons for Marryat's reticence are unclear, but might be explained by apathy towards the political system, or a belief that women could control their own lives without governmental intervention once basic rights had been achieved. In her personal life Marryat challenged convention through openly adulterous behaviour, co-habiting in favour of marriage, establishing a legal basis for her status as breadwinner, and retaining her maiden name. By also writing about these aspects of her life and adapting them for the stage, Marryat encouraged her readers to think about their own lives differently. If we see feminism as relative to its historical context, then Marryat's radicalism emphatically deserves that label.

Regulating Female Identity: A Critical Approach

While Alfred Austin complained that sensation novels "represent life neither as it is nor as it ought to be,"¹³¹ Trollope's Lily Dale in *The Small House at Allington* believed "a novel should tell you not what you are to get, but what you'd like to get".¹³² Although Oliphant held up Lily as a good example of what a literary heroine should be,¹³³ Margaret Marwick has argued more recently that Lily's peculiarly ascetic behaviour is motivated by a loss of virginity rather than by social propriety.¹³⁴ This is an effective example of how close readings can yield transgressive interpretations of supposedly conservative texts. "[T]he image of the heroine," concludes Rachel Brownstein "makes multiple contradictory suggestions about the illusion of an ideal feminine self,"¹³⁵ and I argue that by considering her political, as well as her literary, function we can understand more about the mid-Victorian deployment of gender ideology and the reality it sought to displace. Mary Poovey proposes that this deployment "allowed for the emergence in the 1850s of a genuinely – although incompletely articulated – oppositional voice,"¹³⁶ and with women's

¹³¹ Austin, p.424.

¹³² Anthony Trollope, *The Small House at Allington*, ed. by Julian Thompson (London: Penguin, 1991), p.462.

¹³³ Oliphant, 'Novels', p.277.

¹³⁴ Margaret Markwick, *Trollope and Women* (London and Rio Grande: Hambledon Press, 1997), p.85.

¹³⁵ Rachel M. Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine: Reading About Women in Novels* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.xx.

¹³⁶ Poovey, p.4.

voices silenced in legal, theological, and scientific discourses, fiction provided one of the few outlets that facilitated protest. Poovey deduces:

The epistemological term woman could guarantee men's identity only if difference were fixed – only if, that is, the binary opposition between the sexes was more important than any other kinds of difference that real women might experience. And this depended, among other things, on limiting women's right to define or describe themselves.¹³⁷

As I illustrate in Chapter One, by negotiating the regulated literary marketplace, Marryat was able to create heroines who both defined and described themselves. Riley identifies women as a “volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that apparent continuity of the subject of ‘women’ isn’t to be relied on,” concluding that “these instabilities of the category are the *sine qua non* of feminism”.¹³⁸ I establish Marryat's heroines as a “volatile collectivity,” with their instability indicative of the author's feminist agenda.

While I disagreed above with Mitchell regarding the political impact of mid-Victorian women's writing, she makes an important point that it is “improper (as well as fruitless) to deal in wholly intellectual terms with novels which were written for an emotional – rather than an intellectual – response”.¹³⁹ Most of Marryat's novels would collapse under the weight of serious critical interrogation, having been written hurriedly and for a largely indiscriminating audience. However, as Anne Cvetkovich concludes: “The sensation novel, and sensationalism more generally, makes events emotionally vivid by representing in tangible and specific terms social and historical structures that would otherwise remain abstract.”¹⁴⁰ My theoretical approach is, therefore, primarily socio-historical, examining Marryat's novels within the context of contemporary discourses and making extensive use of associated primary sources. Arguing that history and fiction are effectively indistinguishable, Beverley Southgate concludes:

novelists, unconstrained by any pressure to disciplinary consensus might be more free than historians to look at the past in fresh ways – and so, as individual observers, catch sight of alternative people and events from alternative perspectives. Such writers can also foreground topics that have otherwise been ignored or sidelined.¹⁴¹

It is these “alternative people” and “alternative perspectives” that Marryat presents in her novels, establishing what Rosemary Bodenheimer calls “fictional paths through highly charged ideological territories”.¹⁴² As many critics have observed, Foucault's work on regulation does not consider the

¹³⁷ Poovey, p.80.

¹³⁸ Riley, p.2.

¹³⁹ Mitchell, ‘Sentiment and Suffering’, p.31.

¹⁴⁰ Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p.23.

¹⁴¹ Beverley C. Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009), p.10.

¹⁴² Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p.3.

significance of gender,¹⁴³ and the female body is largely absent from his work. For these reasons his theories do not provide a useful model for my arguments.

In *Body-Politics*, Sally Shuttleworth asks: “Why, at this specific historical period, should women have been perceived as being in possession of a disruptive sexuality that needed to be disciplined and controlled?”¹⁴⁴ This is one of the key questions I address in this thesis. I show how a concept of female identity was constructed through literary, legal, medical, and religious discourses, which interrelated to both define and contain women. What emerges is a problematic female body that must be subjected to regulation to maintain social order, along with an inherent contradiction between the concept of femininity as innate and the need to reinforce it. I do not intend to show women as helpless victims of oppressive patriarchy, rather as cultural agents who resisted and redefined the identity imposed upon them during this crucial period of social change. In the following chapters, I discuss the types of regulation that were exercised, examining the ways in which both Marryat and her heroines defied them. Resistance and transgression are recurring themes in her fiction, converging to subvert prevailing images of ‘woman’.

In Chapter One I examine the regulation of Marryat’s writing, particularly with regard to her portrayal of female characters. I consider the various constraints that acted upon her work, focusing mainly on contemporary critical responses to Marryat’s first novel, *Love’s Conflict*, including a detailed analysis of Geraldine Jewsbury’s reader’s report. I argue that had Marryat not been subjected to this editorial control, she would have been credited with the radicalism later attributed to New Woman authors. I also discuss Marryat’s ongoing relationship with critics and how she constructed a dialogue with them, using her novels as a site of resistance through her use of the authorial voice and self-representation.

Marryat shows marriage as an area of increased regulation and a carceral condition from which her heroines must escape. In Chapter Two I demonstrate how Marryat appropriated legal discourses in her fiction, quoting legislation at length in order to make her largely female audience aware of their increasing rights. I focus on three key areas of the laws affecting married women’s rights: divorce, property, and wife-beating, all of which Marryat discusses at length in her work. My extensive contextual research into the nineteenth-century women’s rights movement demonstrates how Marryat engaged with important debates, bringing radical ideas to an audience they would not otherwise reach. Through my archival research, I explain how events in Marryat’s own life informed her writing, sharing her own experiences to educate readers.

The conflation of medical and patriarchal authority is a dominant theme in Marryat’s fiction, evidenced in her repeated use of plots involving women married to doctors who abuse their

¹⁴³ For example Carol Smart, *Regulating Womanhood: Historical Essays on Marriage, Motherhood and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.12.

¹⁴⁴ Evelyn Fox Keller, Mary Jacobus and Sally Shuttleworth, eds., *Body-Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.54.

position by seeking to exert excessive authority. In Chapter Three I analyse those novels, also examining how the diagnosis of hysteria was used to pathologise female sexuality and supposedly deviant behaviour, such as lesbianism and masturbation. My close reading of Marryat's fiction will show how she engaged with and supported Frances Power Cobbe's campaign to prevent misuse of medical authority, and also link her anti-vivisection arguments with the wider women's movement.

Marryat's religious doubts were prompted by her discomfort with the ways in which the established church sought to uphold the subordinate position of women. In Chapter Four I discuss her conversion to Roman Catholicism and espousal of Mariolatry, adapting established religion to suit her unconventional lifestyle. I also examine how and why Marryat came to embrace Spiritualism in her life and work, in her desire for a faith based on compassion rather than authority. Ultimately, I argue that Marryat depicts heroines who defined their own spiritual identity, rejecting the conservative ideology of the established Church which sought to contain and condemn them.

Chapter One: ‘Is a toad worth painting?’ – The Regulation of Marryat’s Writing

As I discussed in my introduction, Victorian women writers were often accused of timidity, but little work has been done on the constraints that acted upon them. In this chapter, I consider the regulation of women’s writing and, more specifically, that of the transgressive heroine who represented a threat to moral orthodoxy. Through my detailed research on Marryat, I present her as an important author who questioned dominant gender ideology, thus inviting considerable censure from morally conservative critics. Firstly, I briefly explore the figure of the woman reader, the primary consumer of popular fiction, who was thought to be susceptible to the supposedly harmful effects of sensation novels. I go on to investigate the dominance of the circulating libraries, whose exacting requirements had to be observed if an author wanted to guarantee a market for their work.

Secondly, and most significantly, I examine in detail the publisher’s report on Marryat’s first novel *Love’s Conflict*, which demanded substantial changes to the original manuscript. I also assess the role of the publisher’s reader, and how Geraldine Jewsbury in particular exerted a powerful influence over women writers of the period by censoring their work. I argue that had Marryat not been subjected to this editorial control, she would have been credited with the radicalism attributed to later authors such as Sarah Grand and Mona Caird. Thirdly, I evaluate reviews of Marryat’s novels in what were arguably the three most influential periodicals of the day: the *Athenaeum*, the *Spectator*, and the *Saturday Review*. I discuss the ideological agenda of the press, identifying the critical double standard that sought to undermine and constrain the work of women writers.

Lastly, I describe Marryat’s ongoing relationship with critics, demonstrating the dialogue she created with them, using her novels as a site of resistance by means of the authorial voice and self-representation. I argue that while other women writers were responsive to criticism, a defiant Marryat continued to confront controversial themes and ideas, proving herself a highly-skilled manipulator of the literary form.

As Kate Flint has argued, women’s reading can be seen as “a site on which one may see a variety of cultural and sexual anxieties displayed,”¹⁴⁵ an idea evidenced by some of the critical responses discussed below. The reason for this anxiety becomes clear through Janice Radway’s research, revealing that popular romance helps women “learn about the world around them,” offering a “beneficial form of escape” and permitting a “means of partial protest”.¹⁴⁶ Sally Mitchell, too,

¹⁴⁵ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.22.

¹⁴⁶ Radway, pp.14, 202.

perceives fiction as “a means of mediating reality,” providing “expression, release, or simply indulgence for emotions or needs which are otherwise not satisfied”.¹⁴⁷

It is unsurprising that Victorian journalist J Hain Friswell identified novel reading as “an educational agent of no mean power,” continuing:

It educates the heart, enlarges the view of character and society, and gives us other thoughts than those which pervade our narrow circle. And it must be confessed, and we wish our reader to look the matter boldly in the face, and to remember that the education of novel reading is the only kind of education that many even of the higher and middle classes can be said to have.¹⁴⁸

This was especially true of the woman reader, who was both chided for her ignorance and derided for favouring light fiction. In his famous lecture ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’ (1864), John Ruskin stressed the importance of regulating the educational role of literature for girls, warning, “the best romance becomes dangerous, if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting”. For Ruskin, literature should instead keep women in “a lofty and pure element of thought”.¹⁴⁹ He declines to single out any particular authors or novels, but cautions, “let us be sure that her books are not heaped up in her lap as they fall out of the package of the circulating library, wet with the last and lightest spray of the fountain of folly”.¹⁵⁰ The woman reader is infantilised, deemed incapable of choosing her own reading material.

In *Love’s Conflict*, published the following year, Marryat responds to Ruskin and those who echo his sentiments, insisting:

I like nothing better than a good novel. I do so despise the narrow-mindedness of those who condemn all works of fiction as ‘mental dram,’ because a few inferior ones present us pictures of insipid folly, without moral or meaning in them. I think a novel may be productive of as much good as many a more seriously written book.¹⁵¹

This is also a rejoinder to critics such as Henry Mansel, who likened novel reading to a morbid addiction to alcohol.¹⁵² Having attended a school where novels were banned, Marryat’s heroine has no idea what to expect when she emerges into the outside world, a sexually dangerous place for which fiction might have prepared her.

Ruskin was particularly concerned by the power of the circulating libraries, describing their patrons as “filthy and foolish” in their desire to consume the cheap fiction the libraries distributed

¹⁴⁷ Mitchell, ‘Sentiment and Suffering’, pp.32, 45.

¹⁴⁸ J. Hain Friswell, ‘Circulating Libraries’, *London Society*, December 1871, pp.515–524 (p.523).

¹⁴⁹ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies: Two Lectures Delivered at Manchester in 1864* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1865), p.163.

¹⁵⁰ Ruskin, p.162.

¹⁵¹ Florence Marryat, *Love’s Conflict*, 3 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1865), I, p.224.

¹⁵² Mansel, p.485.

throughout the country.¹⁵³ Although these institutions made popular novels far more accessible to a wider audience, especially women who were mainly confined within the home, they also played a significant role in determining what could be published.

‘The Illiterate Censorship of a Librarian’: The Power of Mudie

One of the major constraints acting upon Marryat’s work was the power of Mudie’s Select Library, the largest and most iconic of the circulating libraries, providing “one of the most effective means of regulating literature in middle-class Victorian society”.¹⁵⁴ At the time of Charles Mudie’s death in 1890, he had around 25,000 subscribers, with some estimates suggesting there had been as many as 50,000 during his zenith.¹⁵⁵ Mudie came to represent the three-volume system to which publishers were obliged to conform if they wanted to sell books. With the cost of a ‘three-decker’ set at 31s 6d, more than a week’s wages for the average working man,¹⁵⁶ the circulating libraries established an effective monopoly. Those with the necessary financial means could borrow three volumes at a time for an annual subscription of one guinea. As a contemporary commentator observed, some readers devoured works to the value of £200 to £500 every year, making Mudie a “power in the land”.¹⁵⁷ For publishers and authors it was not simply a matter of conforming to a certain physical format: the ‘Select’ in the name of Mudie’s Select Library was significant. Mudie himself explained this premise in a letter to the *Athenaeum*:

I have always reserved the right of selection. The title under which my library was established nearly twenty years ago implies this ... [the public] are evidently willing to have a barrier of some kind between themselves and the lower floods of literature.¹⁵⁸

As Lewis Roberts states, this “curatorial judgement” made it seem as though Mudie “had not so much bought the novels as granted them the privilege of belonging to the library”.¹⁵⁹ While for some authors, such as George Moore, this “barrier” proved insuperable, for Margaret Oliphant Mudie’s patronage was “a sort of recognition from heaven”¹⁶⁰ – a guaranteed audience, meaning an author who turned out a novel each year could earn a respectable income.

¹⁵³ Ruskin, p.77.

¹⁵⁴ Anthony Patterson, *Mrs Grundy’s Enemies: Censorship, Realist Fiction and the Politics of Sexual Representation* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), p.13.

¹⁵⁵ Guinevere L Griest, *Mudie’s Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971), p.79.

¹⁵⁶ Griest, p.79.

¹⁵⁷ ‘Mudie’s Library’, *The Leisure Hour*, March 1886, pp.187–189 (p.189).

¹⁵⁸ ‘Mr Mudie’s Library’, *Athenaeum*, 6 October 1860, p.451.

¹⁵⁹ Lewis Roberts, ‘Trafficking in Literary Authority: Mudie’s Select Library and the Commodification of the Victorian Novel’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34 (2006), 1–25 (p.8).

¹⁶⁰ Griest, p.25.

Moore complained that “English literature is sacrificed on the altar of Hymen” because the circulating libraries cater for the masses of “young unmarried women who are supposed to know but one side of life”.¹⁶¹ In a subsequent article, he thunders that the corollary of this situation is that fiction becomes a “pulseless, non-vertebrate, jelly-fish sort of thing ... scattered through the drawing-rooms of the United Kingdom”.¹⁶² However, as I show below, Moore thought this fiction was anything but “pulseless,” and instead attempted to set his own moral agenda.

Although Moore’s novel *A Modern Lover* (1883) was praised by both the *Spectator* and the *Athenaeum*, it was banned by Mudie following objections to a scene featuring nudity (one might suggest that in choosing a provocative title he made the novel more conspicuous). Two years later, Mudie blacklisted Moore’s *A Mummer’s Wife* for an episode involving implied (or, one could argue, *inferred*) extra-marital sex. Moore criticised Mudie in a spirited article for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, in which he refers to him by the ineffective pseudonym of ‘Mr X’: “[T]he literary battle of our time lies not between the romantic and realistic schools of fiction, but for freedom from the illiterate censorship of a librarian.”¹⁶³ This argument was entirely disingenuous, as Moore’s battle was as much with women writers of the romantic school as with Mudie himself. In his 1885 pamphlet ‘Literature at Nurse,’ Moore cites many examples of novels written by women authors that were accepted by Mudie, despite their featuring controversial themes similar to his own banned works. He is outraged that Ouida’s *Puck* is “the history of a courtesan [sic] through whose arms ... innumerable lovers pass,”¹⁶⁴ neglecting to mention the fact that the narrator is actually a dog, and might therefore be considered unreliable, or at least fanciful. He also condemns Marryat’s *Phyllida* (1882), in which he finds “a young lady proposing to a young parson to be his mistress,”¹⁶⁵ and also cites it as having had a deleterious effect on his heroine in *A Mummer’s Wife* (1885).¹⁶⁶ Kate Ede decides to leave her husband, an asthmatic draper, for a travelling actor after reading *Phyllida*, prompting her spiral into alcoholism. For Moore, Kate’s proper place was by the side of her asinine husband, suffering the endless taunts of her querulous mother-in-law, but women’s popular fiction introduces the possibility of escape, presenting a morally ambiguous universe in which heroines err and are rewarded with the realisation of their unwholesome desires. Moore claims to have opened Marryat’s book “at haphazard,”¹⁶⁷ but Adrian Frazier’s research shows that he actually made a very

¹⁶¹ George Moore, ‘Literature at Nurse; Or, Circulating Morals’, in *A Mummer’s Wife*, ed. by Anthony Patterson (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2011), pp.415–430 (p.429).

¹⁶² George Moore, ‘A New Censorship of Literature’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 December 1884, pp.1–2 (p.1).

¹⁶³ Moore, ‘A New Censorship of Literature’, p.2.

¹⁶⁴ Moore, ‘Literature at Nurse’, p.426.

¹⁶⁵ Moore, ‘Literature at Nurse’, p.426.

¹⁶⁶ George Moore, *A Mummer’s Wife*, ed. by Anthony Patterson (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2010), p.93.

¹⁶⁷ Moore, ‘Literature at Nurse’, p.426.

deliberate study of popular novels in the 1880s,¹⁶⁸ seeking “an exciting bit of bosom exhibited here and a naughty view of an ankle shown there”.¹⁶⁹

Moore makes a sustained and flawed argument for the existence of a critical double standard he believed permitted women authors more latitude than their male colleagues. However, the ‘immorality’ in Moore’s novels is far more conspicuous than in Marryat’s. The anti-heroine of *A Mummer’s Wife* is successively an adulterer, an alcoholic, and a prostitute, finally killing her own child through neglect – this ultimate act a taboo never broken by Marryat. In Marryat’s novels, portrayals of lesbianism are carefully nuanced, whereas Moore made little attempt to disguise the sexual desires of Cecilia Cullen for her friend in *A Drama in Muslin* (1886), which I discuss in Chapter Three. Marryat was more skilled than Moore in conforming to Mudie’s requirements, making oblique references to more controversial subjects and contriving seemingly conventional endings, thereby distracting the morally squeamish reader from more radical interpretations. This deftness meant that Marryat was never banned, unlike some of her female contemporaries: Mudie refused to stock Rhoda Broughton’s first two novels until a decade after they were published and, although he did buy copies of Ouida’s novels, he often refused to circulate them.

While Mudie made no secret of his moral agenda, he was also a businessman, seeking to please his subscribers’ seemingly insatiable appetite for fiction by women authors. Moore criticises the censorship exercised by Mudie, but he is really claiming for himself the right to define ‘literature’ and attempting to regulate women’s writing. In his preface to the English translation of Zola’s *Pot Bouille* (1886), Moore refers to Rhoda Broughton’s novels as “a wheezing, drivelling lot of bairns ... their pinafore pages ... sticky with childish sensualities,”¹⁷⁰ likening her to an irresponsible and sexually incontinent mother, and reinforcing Ruskin’s image of the infantilised woman reader. His opprobrium recalls ‘Literature at Nurse,’ where Moore refers to the novels stocked by Mudie as a “motley and monstrous progeny, a callow, a whining, a puking brood of bastard bantlings” running in and out of his “voluminous skirts”.¹⁷¹ This *ad feminam* attack on Broughton is likely to have been prompted by professional jealousy – Troy Bassett’s research on Bentley’s account books shows that she commanded significantly higher advances than male authors. Marryat, too, was consistently successful and therefore able to negotiate better deals.¹⁷² The mid-Victorian literary marketplace was remarkable for its dominance by women, giving them a powerful platform on which to express their views.

¹⁶⁸ Adrian Frazier, *George Moore, 1852-1933* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p.82.

¹⁶⁹ Moore, ‘Literature at Nurse’, p.416.

¹⁷⁰ George Moore, ‘Preface to Piping Hot!’, in *A Mummer’s Wife*, ed. by Anthony Patterson (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2011), pp.402–407 (p.405).

¹⁷¹ Moore, ‘Literature at Nurse’, p.427.

¹⁷² Bassett, ‘Living on the Margin’, pp.76, 74.

Mary Hammond notes a perception that the nation was weakened and emasculated by this feminisation of literature,¹⁷³ and this is evident in Moore's outpourings of disgust, resenting the "suffrage of young women"¹⁷⁴ that popular fiction encouraged. As Bassett notes, "the libraries did not by themselves impose a moral yardstick but instead complied with what many of their middle-class clients wanted"¹⁷⁵ – this relationship promoting the dominance of women writers for a largely female audience, who did not want what Moore was offering. While his novels were deemed more outrageous than Marryat's, their ultimate meaning is more conservative, with his transgressive heroines thoroughly punished for their crimes. Moore was ostensibly arguing against censorship, but also asserting that the reading habits of young women should be carefully regulated, reprising Ruskin's fears of the "fountain of folly" that sprang from the circulating libraries. The portrayal of rebellious women was acceptable only if the overall message was didactic and salutary; a story could be realistic, so long as it was also instructive – reinforcing prevailing notions of proper feminine behaviour, and pathologising anything that deviated from it. As Anthony Patterson concludes, Moore might have "provided the most strident assault in fiction on both the aesthetics of the middle-class novel and the broader restrictions sexual morality imposes on both men and women, but ... did little to disturb the hegemony of middle-class men".¹⁷⁶ It was Marryat's own assault on this hegemony that attracted Moore's ire.

Much of the correspondence following Moore's article and pamphlet encouraged authors to harness the power of the Society of Authors, formed in 1884, to effectively to unionise themselves and defy the might of the circulating libraries. Elaine Showalter criticises women authors for their failure to professionalise themselves: "[They] might have banded together and insisted on their vocation as something that made them superior to the ordinary woman ... instead they adopted defensive positions and committed themselves to conventional roles."¹⁷⁷ However, it was not possible for women authors to participate in the Society, and a formal resolution allowing them to join was not passed until 1896¹⁷⁸ – further evidence that they were not deemed professional. In the meantime, they were graciously invited to partake of tea on Wednesday afternoons.¹⁷⁹ In 1892, in response to this exclusion and patronising treatment, Frances Low found the Writers' Club for Women to provide a social and work space for authors.¹⁸⁰ The Club's archives, held at the

¹⁷³ Mary Hammond, "'The Great Fiction Bore': Free Libraries and the Construction of a Reading Public in England, 1880-1914", *Libraries & Culture*, 37 (2002), 83–108 (p.100).

¹⁷⁴ Moore, 'Literature at Nurse', p.427.

¹⁷⁵ Troy J. Bassett, 'Circulating Morals: Moore's Attack on Late-Victorian Literary Censorship', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 40 (2005), 73–89 (p.78).

¹⁷⁶ Patterson, p.95.

¹⁷⁷ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.86.

¹⁷⁸ Society of Authors archives, British Library Add. MSS 56868, 56869.

¹⁷⁹ 'Authors' Club', *The Author*, III (1893), 401.

¹⁸⁰ Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain and Ireland* (London: Routledge, 2006), p.129.

Women's Library, make no mention of Marryat being a member, but this might be because the facilities were notoriously shabby, and she already had a large house in London. An 1898 newspaper article detailing the Society of Authors' annual dinner includes Marryat among its 1,300 members,¹⁸¹ so she probably joined as soon as she was allowed. Until then, Marryat used her novels as a space in which she raised the profile of the woman writers, also pushing her themes as far as possible, while avoiding an outright ban by Mudie.

Aside from the risk of Mudie's disapproval, authors also faced the threat of legal sanction. Although the Obscene Publications Act did not explicitly seek to censor fiction, it was, as M J D Roberts observes, part of a wider attempt to "legislate morals".¹⁸² This legislation was passed in the same year as the Matrimonial Causes Act (see Chapter Two) and the year before the Medical Registration Act (see Chapter Three), together embodying the impulse towards state regulation of people's lives. During the parliamentary debates that preceded it, the railway bookseller W H Smith, less 'select' than Mudie, successfully objected to an attempt to ban Alexandre Dumas' *Lady of the Camelias*, thus setting the benchmark for what would be covered by the eventual Act.¹⁸³ Roberts describes the air of "self-congratulation" following Gustave Flaubert's prosecution for obscenity in *Madame Bovary* (1857), politicians assuming that English writers could be trusted to voluntarily accept the "moral responsibility" of authorship.¹⁸⁴ Although high profile prosecutions in the United Kingdom were limited mainly to translations of foreign fiction, Roberts argues that established authors such as Charles Dickens were "consciously concerned to distance themselves from writing, or approving anything which a critic might tag as 'Holywell Street Literature'," ¹⁸⁵ an allusion to the London street synonymous with the circulation of indecent material.

Dickens, a friend of Captain Marryat, makes his nervousness apparent in a letter to Florence Marryat, warning that he detected "a certain 'coarseness'" in her writing, suggesting that she was "unwise in touching on forbidden topics".¹⁸⁶ The "forbidden topics" to which he referred were allusions to extra-marital sex and prostitution in Marryat's novel *The Confessions of Gerald Estcourt* (1867). Dickens also refused to support his friend Charles Reade, whose bigamy novel *Griffith Gaunt* (1866) was accused of immorality after it was used as evidence for the prosecution in a US divorce trial.¹⁸⁷ When Marryat dedicated her own bigamy novel *Véronique* (1869) to Dickens, he responded with a rather uncomfortable letter of thanks, later equivocating over her request that he help

¹⁸¹ 'The Authors' Society', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 February 1898, p.13.

¹⁸² M J D Roberts, 'Morals, Art, and the Law: The Passing of the Obscene Publications Act, 1857', *Victorian Studies*, 28 (1985), 609–629 (p.611).

¹⁸³ M J D. Roberts, p.611.

¹⁸⁴ M J D Roberts, p.618.

¹⁸⁵ M J D. Roberts, p.628.

¹⁸⁶ Charles Dickens to Florence Marryat, 6 August 1867. Marryat Family Papers, MSS. 104 (GENM), Beinecke Library, Yale University.

¹⁸⁷ David Saunders, 'Copyright, Obscenity and Literary History', *ELH*, 57 (1990), 431–444 (p.439).

promote her work.¹⁸⁸ This lack of a united front among authors meant they could not even rely on the most powerful among their peers to support them; consequently, many erred on the side of caution, or employed oblique strategies to avoid censorship or prosecution. Marryat's first novel *Love's Conflict* (1865) was published, therefore, at a time of cultural anxiety, when artistic expression was constrained by a need to conform to an ideology imposed by both the government and self-appointed moral guardians such as Charles Mudie.

Love's Conflict is the story of ingénue Elfrida Treherne, who meets the love of her life, George Treherne, shortly after she is tricked into marrying his cruel cousin, William. After William places her in a compromising position, Elfrida has no choice but to accept his marriage proposal. Elfrida and George struggle to suppress their feelings for one another, but when her baby is born severely deformed, Elfrida believes it is God's punishment for adulterous thoughts. After the baby dies, George urges Elfrida to elope with him, but she reluctantly refuses, insisting that she must do her duty. In a fit of pique, George hastily marries his unrefined cousin Héléne, who has been recently restored to the family following the death from syphilis of her prostitute mother, who brought shame upon them by eloping with her music master. George eventually forgives Elfrida, accepting that she was right to refuse him, settling into a new life as a good husband. His peace is disrupted, however, when Héléne is brutally murdered by a jealous former lover; he escapes his troubles by joining efforts to suppress the Indian Mutiny and is decorated for his efforts. Meanwhile, William has guessed Elfrida's feelings for George and insists upon an immediate separation, obliging her to seek her father's protection. Elfrida considers her life to be effectively over until one day she receives word that William has suffered a terrible accident. Urged by her sister, she goes to look after him and there is an emotional reunion, with forgiveness on both sides. William is a reformed character; Elfrida, although denied the man she loves, derives contentment from having done her wifely duty.

Although the plot contains many sensational elements, the conclusion appears conventional, with the erring heroine contrite and tamed, thereby supporting Showalter's idea of Marryat's conformity to a "framework of feminine conventions".¹⁸⁹ However, this assumption overlooks the intervention of Geraldine Jewsbury, who substantially revised the text in her role as publisher's reader for Bentley & Son.

¹⁸⁸ Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens: 1868-1870*, ed. by Madeline House and Graham Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), XII, pp.406, 499. Of course, this resistance might have been due to failing health.

¹⁸⁹ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.29.

‘A Pen Dipped in Vinegar and Gall’: The Publisher’s Reader

Geraldine Jewsbury reviewed over 700 manuscripts for Bentley & Son between 1858-80,¹⁹⁰ seeing herself as a moral sentinel who protected the reading public’s delicate sensibilities. She was also a prolific reviewer for the *Athenaeum*, producing 2,300 reviews over a period of thirty years,¹⁹¹ giving her a powerful dual role in moderating literary tastes. Jewsbury had in mind the prestige of her employer – Bentley & Son was appointed “publisher in ordinary to her Majesty the Queen”¹⁹² – and also the requirements of the circulating libraries, who were the main purchasers of three-decker novels. Furthermore, Bentley was a shareholder of Mudie’s, receiving substantial dividends after 1864.¹⁹³ Bentley and Mudie, therefore, enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, dominating both the production and consumption of fiction. As Bentley was “primarily a specialist in fiction thought to be consumed by women,”¹⁹⁴ Jewsbury had to ensure the firm published nothing that would have a pernicious effect on the impressionable female mind, or at least nothing that would be declined by the all-powerful Mudie.

Jewsbury’s reader’s reports for Bentley range from brief letters simply condemning a manuscript as “dull” and unfit for publication, through to detailed summaries of the sections she thought needed rewriting. Royal Gettman explains that “[o]ne of the duties ... of the publisher’s reader was to revise manuscripts by authors who could not or would not meet the standards of the publisher or conform to his tastes”.¹⁹⁵ Sometimes this meant completely rewriting the novel, as was the case with Captain Smart’s *After Three Years*, which Jewsbury edited “line by line”;¹⁹⁶ a three-decker by Charles Beach ended up a single volume after Jewsbury had expunged all the content she thought “bosh”.¹⁹⁷ A random sample of the reports indicates that Jewsbury generally condemns male authors on grounds of quality and women authors on their morality.

These reports have received a certain amount of critical attention, but there has been little work on the novels themselves and how the authors’ subsequent writing was affected by Jewsbury’s intervention. Jeanne Fahnestock cautions against overestimating Jewsbury’s power, showing that nearly one-third of the manuscripts she rejected on behalf of Bentley were subsequently published

¹⁹⁰ Monica Correa Fryckstedt, *Geraldine Jewsbury’s Athenaeum Reviews: A Mirror of Mid-Victorian Attitudes to Fiction* (Uppsala: Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia, 1986), p.12.

¹⁹¹ Fryckstedt, *Geraldine Jewsbury’s Athenaeum Reviews*, p.13.

¹⁹² Griest, p.121.

¹⁹³ Griest, p.24.

¹⁹⁴ Gaye Tuchman and Nina E Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.68.

¹⁹⁵ Royal A Gettman, *A Victorian Publisher: A Study of the Bentley Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p.205.

¹⁹⁶ Gettman, p.203.

¹⁹⁷ Gettman, p.213.

by other firms.¹⁹⁸ However, this ultimate rejection often occurred after substantial revisions had already been made. Furthermore, I would argue that authors were nevertheless aware of Jewsbury's influence (especially given she also worked for other publishers) and wrote with it in mind. Authors like Marryat were keen to earn royalties from their work, and were often prepared to sacrifice artistic integrity in favour of financial expediency. Bentley turned down Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely, but Too Well* in 1866 on the advice of Jewsbury, who found it full of "unregulated sensual passion," and "not fit to be published".¹⁹⁹ Broughton initially agreed to "expunge all the coarseness and slanginess," but then tired of making endless revisions, instead approaching rival publisher Tinsley. Tamar Heller's important work on this novel has shown the extent of Jewsbury's intervention – many of the sensuous descriptions of heroine Kate Chester's extra-marital liaisons with Dare Stamer are rewritten, and the suggestion of an orgasm is removed completely.²⁰⁰ Most significantly, Broughton completely changed the conclusion. In the original version, serialised in the *Dublin University Magazine*, Stamer shoots Kate dead, and then turns the gun on himself; in the three-decker, Stamer is fatally injured in a carriage incident and Kate enters an Anglican convent. In the mistaken belief that Bentley had acted against her superior judgement and published the novel regardless, Jewsbury wrote to him: "[I]t is lucky for you that my eyes have kept me out of work or I would have reviewed it to some purpose."²⁰¹ In other words, she would have attempted to impede the novel's success with a damning review. This communication epitomises Jewsbury's desire to control the literary marketplace, and she was able to carry out her threat to damage a writer's reputation in the case of Marryat's third novel, *Woman Against Woman*, as I discuss below.

Marryat initially submitted her manuscript for *Love's Conflict* under the title 'The Struggle for Life' in November 1864. Although Jewsbury felt the novel contained "great cleverness is some portion," she recommended substantial revisions to correct "shocking violations of good taste," appending ten pages of detailed notes on the her proposed changes.²⁰² She asked that Bentley have her notes copied by another hand, as Marryat was familiar with her writing. This request confirms Horne's claim that the publisher's reader was the author's "unknown, unsuspected enemy, work[ing] to the sure discomfiture of all original ability,"²⁰³ enabling Jewsbury to adopt an ideological position at odds with her earlier career as a sensation novelist. Jewsbury's overall agenda can be deduced from her judgement on the novel's title: she thought 'The Struggle for Life'

¹⁹⁸ Jeanne Rosenmayer Fahnestock, 'Geraldine Jewsbury: The Power of the Publisher's Reader', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 28 (1973), 253–272 (p.254).

¹⁹⁹ Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley; 2 July 1866, Bentley Archives, Add. MSS 46,657.

²⁰⁰ First identified in Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel*, p.89.

²⁰¹ Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley; 10 November 1867, Bentley Archives, Add. MSS 46,658 (all underlining in subsequent quotes is Jewsbury's own).

²⁰² Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley; 10 November 1864. Bentley Archives Add. MSS 46,657.

²⁰³ Richard Henry Horne, *Exposition of the False Medium and Barriers Excluding Men of Genius from the Public* (London: Effingham Watson, 1833), p.135.

unsuitable, with its suggestion that doing the “right thing” was difficult. She favoured ‘Enduring to the end’ as representative of Elfrida’s need to repress her emotions, perform her wifely duty, and subjugate her own needs to those of others:

Elfrida is offered to the reader as a woman struggling with an illicit affection – the mere fact of refusing to run away with a man is not enough to comprise a woman’s virtue – her expressions of endearment are not pleasant to read ... the author must show her sympathy with what it right in the treatment of the wife’s conduct ... & her determination to hold on to the obligations she unwillingly took on herself.²⁰⁴

As Andrew Maunder observes, Marryat’s original title of ‘The Struggle for Life’ is Darwinian, whereas ‘Enduring to the End’ is more evangelical.²⁰⁵ Jewsbury is concerned that Marryat should depict what is morally right, rather than attempting a realistic representation of the dilemma faced by her heroine, also insisting that her message is fully compatible with prevailing gender ideologies:

There is an unrestraint & a want of reticence on the lady’s part wh is quite incompatible with any pretence of wifely duty or womanly self respect – it has the effect of shocking the reader.²⁰⁶

Jewsbury emphasises Elfrida’s “wifely duty” to “bear to the end” and “repress her emotion,” the thickness of the underlining in her letter indicating her strength of feeling.²⁰⁷ The selflessness demanded of Elfrida by Jewsbury is reminiscent of Sarah Stickney Ellis’ *The Women of England* (1843), in which she urges the wife to “spend of mental and moral capabilities in devising means for promoting the happiness of others, while her own derives a remote and secondary existence from theirs”.²⁰⁸ Jewsbury was most emphatic that the conclusion should be moral: “Let the stern moral of the story remain – that the consequences of our actions remain and must be endured to the end.”²⁰⁹ Marryat, clearly eager to be published, included Jewsbury’s “stern moral” almost verbatim in her concluding chapter: “the consequences of our evil actions remain with us, and must be endured to the end”.²¹⁰ She did, however, agree only to change the title to another of her own choosing: ‘Love’s Conflict’. There is evidence throughout the novel that Marryat either agreed with Jewsbury’s proposed changes, or, I would argue, thought it expedient to accede to her requests. She was, after all, writing to support her family, and a lengthy skirmish with a formidable opponent would have been an expensive luxury.

The concluding chapter of volume two, ‘The Life Struggle,’ shows Elfrida telling her lover that William has hit her. Initially throwing herself on George’s protection, insisting that he take her away

²⁰⁴ Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley; 10 November 1864.

²⁰⁵ Maunder, II, p.xxi.

²⁰⁶ Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley; 10 November 1864.

²⁰⁷ Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley; 10 November 1864.

²⁰⁸ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Wives of England: Their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1843), p.31.

²⁰⁹ Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley; 10 November 1864.

²¹⁰ Florence Marryat, *Love’s Conflict*, 3 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1865), III, p.319.

with him, there is a sudden change of tone at the end, when she suddenly stresses her wifely duty and refuses to leave her husband. It is as though Jewsbury is standing behind her, telling her what to say:

George, I am very foolish and very wicked; and I have little to make me happy in this world; but I have one thing left, and I am neither so foolish nor so wicked as to part with that – my virtue! (II:310)

In contrast with the emotional fluency elsewhere in the novel, here Elfrida is mechanical, making appropriately pious statements, instead of indulging in what Jewsbury called “romantic nonsense”. Although referred to elsewhere in the novel as irreligious, Elfrida suddenly appeals to God for strength, invoking the power of prayer, and declaring: “Don’t touch me. Don’t speak to me, for the love of heaven!” (II:313) Elfrida is stern, resolute, and moralistic, which is incongruous with the meek ingénue of earlier chapters.

The other substantially revised chapter, ‘Past and Gone,’ includes a moving description of Elfrida’s deformed baby, possibly based on Marryat’s own experience (see Introduction). When asked by the doctor whether Elfrida has suffered any trauma, her husband responds with a “decided ‘No!’,” although he knows the blow she received from him might have been the cause. (III:5) Instead, there are outpourings of contrition from Elfrida, who blames herself: “my child was killed by my own wicked indulgence of feelings I ought never to have had”. (III:20) Here Marryat is forced to suggest that adulterous thoughts, rather than marital violence, could cause deformity in a baby, and that a wife must bear the consequences of her husband’s actions in addition to her own – an example of female self-sacrifice that becomes almost parodic. Throughout the novel, Elfrida’s saintly sister Grace urges her to subordinate her own needs to those of her husband, in accordance with Christian teachings. In the first volume, we learn that Grace has not been allowed to read novels, so she has no advice for Elfrida, other than what she has absorbed from the Bible. (I:223)

Most significantly, Marryat conceded that the morally questionable Hélène Treherne should be murdered, rather than her husband. Although George had visited prostitutes and coveted another man’s wife, Jewsbury thought he should be given the opportunity to redeem himself through hard work. He experiences an unconvincing Damascene conversion in his armchair, resolving henceforth to behave decently:

One morning, as he sat smoking in his armchair, a great change came over his spirit, a noble resolution took possession of his heart, and thenceforth he arose determined to do his duty, and bear his share of this life’s troubles, as a man should bear it. (III:106)

The awkward phrasing of this episode suggests that Marryat wanted to draw attention to the revision, or at least was not concerned to disguise it – in the space of a few paragraphs, George is transformed from a man who is revolted by his wife to a model husband. Later, he actually speaks the words Jewsbury provides for him, as though in an act of ventriloquism:

What do I want to do? anything to be useful; head an exploring party for Government, or go and look after Sir John Franklin: it little matters to me: my head and hands are at the world's service, but I must have *work*. (III:203)

Jewsbury in her report had written:

Let him go away & do something good & useful – head a government exploring party. Any how let him begin a next life with some principle of hard work in it. ²¹¹

George's redemption can be achieved by winning a Victoria Cross in India; his wife, meanwhile, is fatally punished for having had sex outside marriage. For the transgressive female there is no option but to become a (literally) fallen woman: Héléne appears in her final scene stretched out on the grass with her face blown off by a shotgun. Jewsbury comments sadistically that Héléne should be made to feel frightened before she is killed, and this usually aggressive character becomes placatory in the moments before her gruesome death. The revisions to this episode emphasise that women should be punished disproportionately for what Jewsbury calls "unlawful love," and Héléne's story is made salutary. Jewsbury also insisted that Marryat should not reunite her lovers in the final chapter, believing that Elfrida should devote herself to her lawful husband and not be distracted. She decreed: "They may meet, the reader will hope, but not in the book."²¹² This proved prophetic, as I discuss below.

After making these changes, Marryat resubmitted her manuscript. The publisher's reader was still not happy. Although Jewsbury conceded that the "authoress has certainly improved the plot of the story," she was, nevertheless, "much disappointed," commenting that it was "weak where it ought to be strong". Jewsbury was particularly offended by the childbirth scene:

I detest absolutely the indelicate prominence given the heroine's confinement of her first & only Baby – no author, unless a medical man writing for *The Lancet*, ought to enter into so much detail as the lady does; & and the account of the new born baby is very disagreeable & painful.

This wd be sufficient for you to decline the story. Added to this, there is something disagreeable in the fact brought prominently forwards of the heroine hearing ardent declarations of love from one man, when she is just going to become the mother of her husband's child.²¹³

Jewsbury concludes unequivocally by telling Mr Bentley: "you must refuse this absolutely". The publisher chose to ignore his reader's further comments – perhaps a novel from the daughter of the celebrated Captain Marryat was too great to resist, or maybe he simply decided that sufficient concessions to propriety had been made. The novel appeared as *Love's Conflict* in January 1865 and earned both author and publisher a modest profit.²¹⁴ Jewsbury's concerns regarding the supposedly graphic nature of the childbirth scene were seemingly noted, however; Isobel Reverdon, heroine of

²¹¹ Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley; 10 November 1864.

²¹² Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley; 10 November 1864.

²¹³ Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley; 2 December 1864. Bentley Archives, Add. MSS 46657.

²¹⁴ Bassett, 'Living on the Margin', p.72.

Marryat's next novel *Too Good for Him* (1865) is astonished to find a baby in her arms after suffering a slight headache.

Bentley published Marryat's next four novels without consulting Jewsbury, and she exacted her revenge through a scathing review of *Woman Against Woman* in the *Athenaeum*, which I discuss below. Jewsbury repeatedly implored Bentley not to publish Marryat's 1868 novel *Nelly Brooke*, appalled that the eponymous heroine was as "merry as a cricket" after her abusive husband suffers a fatal bite from a rabid dog.²¹⁵ Although Jewsbury made the sensational novel sound as unappealing as possible by including a dreary three-page plot synopsis, Bentley published it without revision. Jewsbury also condemned Marryat's biography of her father, *The Life and Letters of Captain Marryat*. She described it as "poor," deploring the "cursory" manner in which the author treats her parents' marriage. The absence of Florence Marryat herself in the pages is deemed suspicious, Jewsbury concluding: "The impression made upon me by the biography is unpleasant."²¹⁶ The charge of unpleasantness is bewildering, as the biography's main faults are lack of incident and its hagiographic style, as identified in Virginia Woolf's essay 'The Captain's Death Bed'.²¹⁷ Jewsbury is trying to give an impression of immorality where none exists: Florence is actually attempting to recreate the Captain as an unblemished national hero, ignoring aspects of what was an undeniably colourful life. Again, Bentley ignored his reader's comments and published the *Life* unchanged, although not until six years later. Jewsbury's final attempt to impose her will with regard to Marryat's writing came in 1870, when she wrote to Bentley asking him to cancel his serialisation of the novella *The Poison of Asps* in *Temple Bar*, claiming she had heard "great complaints" of it.²¹⁸ Her request was firmly declined.

Jewsbury was eventually side-lined into reviewing children's fiction and travel literature. She was an anachronism and her grip on literary tastes was relaxed; Jewsbury had become more conservative, whereas the reading public's attitudes were more permissive. By the 1870s Bentley was employing five other women novelists as readers, so he was obviously reluctant to rely so heavily on the opinions of just one critic, and a critic who had lost him the likes of Rhoda Broughton, Ouida, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon – three Queens of the Circulating Library, who regularly produced best-sellers. As Bassett proves, "Bentley's most important and best-paid authors were women,"²¹⁹ so he could not afford to keep losing them. By 1874 Marryat had moved to rival publisher Tinsley, who was famously motivated more by profits than by morals. The competitive literary marketplace defeated the control Jewsbury had exerted for more than a decade. Fahnestock concludes that she "had in general a conservative's resistance to the changes that were taking place

²¹⁵ Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley; 29 February 1868. Bentley Archives Add. MSS 46658.

²¹⁶ Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley; 18 February 1866. Bentley Archives Add. MSS 46657.

²¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950).

²¹⁸ Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley; 12 September 1870. Bentley Archives Add. MSS 46659.

²¹⁹ Bassett, 'Living on the Margin', p.74.

in fiction,”²²⁰ and also, it could be argued, to the changes that were taking place in society. Readers clearly craved more realistic, or perhaps aspirational, representations of women, and it was in the publishers’ financial interests to satisfy them.

Although Jewsbury’s power waned after the 1860s, her reputation as a literary Mrs Grundy endured and her interference was resented by women writers. Rhoda Broughton parodied Jewsbury as the uncompromising Miss Grimston in her novel *A Beginner* (1893), and braced herself for “old Jewsbury’s pen dipped in vinegar and gall” after the publication of her phenomenally successful novel *Red as a Rose is She* (1870).²²¹ Marryat herself included an unflattering caricature in *Fighting the Air* (1875). The editorial control Jewsbury initially exerted in her role as publisher’s reader is often overlooked, but remains an important explanation for the moral conservatism with which women authors of the mid-Victorian period are charged. As I demonstrate below, Marryat regretted her concessions to Jewsbury’s demands, reworking those revisions in later writing, and adopting a far more combative approach in resisting the regulation subsequent critics attempted to impose upon her.

‘A Veil Between Book and Reader’: The Role of the Periodical Reviewer

Whereas the publisher’s reader could control, to an extent, what was published, the periodical reviewer could influence what was read, or at least *how* it was read. The literary review has been referred to by several critics as a mediator between literature and the reading public.²²² As I shall show below, the reviewer often attempted to regulate the reader’s response, interpreting the novel through the journal’s moral framework. Mrs Humphry Ward’s comments on her experience of reading *Wuthering Heights* are indicative of this practice: “If we read it at all, we read in haste, and with a prior sense of revulsion, which dropped a veil between book and reader”.²²³ The “veil” to which she refers had been dropped by critics who created a reputation for novels, ensuring the reader could not view them objectively. They achieved this aim either through a detailed consideration of the novel’s faults, or often by dismissing it as belonging to the ‘sensation school’. Monica Correa Fryckstedt argues that readers did not necessarily distinguish between high and low fiction, so the periodicals assumed a powerful role in attempting to do so on their behalf by reviewing a wide range of literature and establishing a hierarchy.²²⁴ Although, as I demonstrate, the periodicals varied in their attitudes towards novelists, one can discern a literary spectrum with

²²⁰ Fahnestock, p.254.

²²¹ Fryckstedt, *Geraldine Jewsbury’s Athenaeum Reviews*, p.85.

²²² For example, Fryckstedt, *Geraldine Jewsbury’s Athenaeum Reviews*, p.24; Nicola Diane Thompson, *Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p.3.

²²³ Quoted in Peter Collister, ‘After “Half a Century”’: Mrs Humphry Ward on Charlotte and Emily Brontë’, *English Studies*, 66 (1985), 410.

²²⁴ Monica Correa Fryckstedt, *On the Brink: English Novels of 1866* (Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 1989), p.39.

French novels and one end and the triumvirate of Thackeray, Dickens, and George Eliot at the other.

The *Athenaeum*, the *Saturday Review*, and the *Spectator* have been identified by a number of critics as the most popular of the mid-Victorian period and therefore representative of middle-class tastes.²²⁵ In 1866, the *Athenaeum* had 15,000 subscribers, the *Spectator* 2,000, and the *Saturday Review* 18,000.²²⁶ As Mudie's Circulating Library also carried twenty-three of the most popular periodical titles,²²⁷ their reach was even wider than the circulation figures might suggest. Each title took its own position: the *Athenaeum* was concerned mainly with literature, science, and art, whereas the *Spectator* and the *Saturday Review* combined political commentary with their literature. All three periodicals favoured anonymous reviews of fiction, partly to maintain a unified stance that was representative of their philosophy, but also to ensure that critics could be candid without fear of retribution. As J D Jump writes, the reviewer was "required to subordinate his own likes and dislikes in the interests of providing a 'voice' for the journal".²²⁸ Nicola Thompson goes further, claiming that they were "anonymous, oracular voices which seemed to speak with the authority of Culture behind them,"²²⁹ and John Woolford proposes that the reviewer's "virulence of language stems from the enormous and overbearing authority he derives from this centrality".²³⁰ As I discuss below, the combination of this anonymity and sense of cultural authority empowered critics to attempt to regulate the work of women writers and the heroines they created.

This elevated self-image is epitomised by the *Spectator* review of Marryat's *For Ever and Ever* (1868), with the reviewer devoting half of the 1,970 words to discussing canon formation, pronouncing: "there are conventional rules in literature, as in society, which are not to be broken without grave reason, on pain of offending that consensus of cultivated opinion".²³¹ He or she²³² claims that this "consensus" comprises entirely objective reviewers who concur broadly on what constitutes "good art". As Thompson concludes, there was an "unconscious assumption that the Victorian views of gender, class, and morality were not ideological, but natural, not relative to

²²⁵ J D Jump, 'Weekly Reviewing in the Eighteen-Sixties', *The Review of English Studies*, 3 (1952), 244–262; Ellen Miller Casey, 'Weekly Reviews of Fiction: The "Athenaeum" vs. the "Spectator" and the "Saturday Review"', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 23 (1990), 8–12.

²²⁶ Monica Correa Fryckstedt, 'Through the Looking-Glass of Periodicals: A Fresh Perspective on Victorian Fiction', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 25 (1992), 22–29 (p.23).

²²⁷ Nicola Diane Thompson, p.8.

²²⁸ Jump, p.245.

²²⁹ Nicola Diane Thompson, p.4.

²³⁰ John Woolford, 'Periodicals and the Practice of Literary Criticism, 1855–64', in *The Victorian Periodical Press: Samplings and Soundings*, ed. by J Shattock and M Wolff (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982), pp.109–44 (p.115).

²³¹ 'For Ever and Ever', *The Spectator*, 20 October 1866, pp.1171–72 (p.1171).

²³² Unfortunately, the current editor has sheepishly admitted that the file containing the identities of reviewers was lost: Judith Flanders, 'Identities of Book Reviewers', 7 January 2010.

nineteenth-century England, but trans-historical”.²³³ This attempted empiricisation of cultural taste was, I argue, part of a wider moral agenda to define the role of women both in life and in literature.

As Showalter explains, “[t]o their contemporaries, nineteenth-century women writers were women first, artists second,”²³⁴ and Thompson argues that for periodical reviewers, “[g]ender was not only an analytical category used ... to conceptualise, interpret, and evaluate novels, but in some cases the primary category”.²³⁵ The *Saturday Review* initially heaped praise on George Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*, believing them to be the work of a male author. Realising their mistake when faced with *The Mill on the Floss*, they admitted that her first novel was “thought too good for a woman’s story”.²³⁶ Keen to uphold the validity of their gendered approach, and backtracking furiously, they added: “Now that we are wise after the event, we can detect many subtle signs of female authorship.”²³⁷ Still hiding behind the pseudonym of Acton Bell, Anne Brontë asked that her second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), be judged on its merits, rather than the sex of its author, writing in the preface: “I am satisfied that if the book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be.”²³⁸ Charles Kingsley was not convinced by Brontë’s assertion, adding a strongly worded footnote to his review:

We have spoken of the author in the feminine gender, because, of whatever sex the name ‘Acton Bell’ may be, a woman’s pen seems to us indisputably discernible in every page. The very coarseness and vulgarity is just such as a woman trying to write like a man, would invent[.]²³⁹

Nearly twenty years later, the situation had not improved; John Doran, reviewing Marryat’s *For Ever and Ever* for the *Athenaeum*, admitted: “[w]ere this book from a man’s pen, we might give it more qualified praise than we feel justified in now doing”.²⁴⁰

Male writers also sought to avoid certain gender-based assumptions. Trollope’s *Nina Balatka* (1867) and *Linda Tressel* (1868) were published anonymously, and his portrayals of young women in love were thought to have come from the pen of an authoress, with the *Athenaeum* referring to the author as “she”.²⁴¹ Conversely, Broughton’s *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867) was thought to have been written by a man. The reviewer, identified as Geraldine Jewsbury, writes: “That the author is not a young woman, but a man, who ... shows himself destitute of refinement of thought or feeling, and

²³³ Nicola Diane Thompson, p.4.

²³⁴ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p.73.

²³⁵ Nicola Diane Thompson, p.2.

²³⁶ ‘The Mill on the Floss’, *Saturday Review*, 14 April 1860, pp.470–471 (p.470).

²³⁷ ‘The Mill on the Floss’, p.470.

²³⁸ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. by Geoffrey Duncan Hargreaves (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.31.

²³⁹ Charles Kingsley, ‘The Tenant of Wildfell Hall’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, April 1849, section Recent Novels, pp.417–432 (p.426).

²⁴⁰ ‘New Novels’, *Athenaeum*, 6 October 1866, pp.427–28 (p.427).

²⁴¹ ‘New Novels’, *Athenaeum*, 23 May 1868, pp.724–725 (p.724).

ignorant of all that women either are or ought to be, is evident on every page.”²⁴² Broughton and Trollope’s failure to conform to a gendered style of writing clearly destabilised the *Athenaeum*’s critical apparatus, exposing its flaws. The confusion caused by this situation was articulated in the *Reader*. In their review of Marryat’s *Woman Against Woman*, they commented:

It is impossible to take up some of the novels of the day without feeling something like a necessity for a third sex among novels. There is the feminine novel and the masculine novel ... but of late years another class has sprung into being, the writers of which may fairly lay claim for them to some generic distinction, the style of which is often in the same work both effeminate and coarse, yet wanting the refinement of the feminine school of novelists and the wit of the masculine.²⁴³

As my examination of the reviews of Marryat’s novels shows, most critics tried to place her among this “third sex,” classing her as unwomanly, but not crediting her with the enviably masculine mind of George Eliot. The *Saturday Review*, in one of its regular tirades against women novelists, was more succinct, declaring: “The wisest thing for a woman is to abstain from pen and ink, unless her vocation is indisputable.”²⁴⁴ Many of their reviews embody highly personal attacks on women authors, portraying them as infamous and unsuitable for respectable readers – a provocative agenda designed to contain them within their supposedly appropriate sphere, or to exclude them from literature altogether. The suggestion is that women are incapable of creating proper heroines – and by ‘proper,’ the critics meant ‘morally acceptable’ – and this important responsibility should be left to male authors. As Charlotte Brontë observes in *Shirley* (1849):

If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed; but the cleverest, the acutest men are often under an illusion about women: they do not read them in a true light: they misapprehend them, both for good and evil; their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend. Then to hear them fall into ecstasies with each other’s creations, worshipping the heroine of such a poem – novel – drama, thinking it fine – divine! Fine and divine it may be, but often quite artificial ... if I gave my real opinion of some first-rate female characters in first-rate works, where should I be? Dead under a cairn of avenging stones in half an hour.²⁴⁵

Judith and Andrew Hook note that *Shirley* was written partly as a riposte to the *Quarterly Review*’s denunciation of *Jane Eyre* as unchristian and immoral. Brontë had wanted to include a preface responding to these criticisms directly, but her publisher refused.²⁴⁶ Nevertheless, her fury is evident throughout the narrative and it is arguably her most feminist, although possibly least read, novel. As I shall show, Marryat’s approach to critics was similarly pugnacious, and my analysis of reviews of *Love’s Conflict* alongside some of her later fiction reveals how these self-appointed cultural authorities conspired to regulate women’s writing.

²⁴² ‘New Novels’, *Athenaeum*, 20 April 1867, p.514.

²⁴³ ‘Woman Against Woman’, *The Reader*, 20 January 1866, p.63.

²⁴⁴ ‘Authoresses’, *Saturday Review*, 11 November 1865, pp.601–603 (p.603).

²⁴⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, ed. by Andrew Hook and Judith Hook (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p.343.

²⁴⁶ ‘Introduction’, in Charlotte Brontë *Shirley*, p.18.

The *Athenaeum*: A ‘Mirror of Victorian Culture’

Leslie Marchand writes that the *Athenaeum* was the “most generally respected of the purely critical journals in England” and “an organ of literary criticism with unequalled influence in the Victorian era”.²⁴⁷ It considered itself a “mirror of Victorian culture” and has been identified by both Casey and Fahnestock as the most thorough and comprehensive periodical in terms of its fiction coverage.²⁴⁸ The *Athenaeum* exceeded its rivals in the number of books reviewed, average length of the review, and timeliness, with the earliest review of a book appearing there 79% of the time.²⁴⁹ Although the *Saturday Review* rapidly eclipsed the *Athenaeum* in terms of circulation figures, Casey concludes that “[f]or the reader interested in the latest book, clearly the *Athenaeum* was the review of choice”.²⁵⁰

The *Athenaeum* was the first periodical to review *Love’s Conflict* and also the briefest of the three under consideration. It is, on the whole, a positive review from William Lush, commencing with a backhanded compliment: “Without the aid of any very ingenious plot, Miss Marryat has succeeded in producing an exceedingly good novel.”²⁵¹ Lush praises Marryat’s realistic approach in presenting everyday problems and showing how her characters deal with them. Unlike Jewsbury in her reader’s report, he appreciates the “delineation of men and women who really are men and women, and do not pretend to be angels or devils,”²⁵² rather than believing it the author’s duty to portray women as they *should* be. This realistic approach, he suggests, allows the reader to engage more readily and therefore derive moral instruction (a ‘moral instruction’ inserted, of course, by Jewsbury). Although Marryat presents a “melancholy reality,” she shows young people struggling with and successfully overcoming temptation, Lush concluding, with satisfaction: “Such novels as this are just the class which we desire to see multiplied.”²⁵³

The first half of the review assesses the novel very much on its own merits, but the second half is more characteristic of the criticism generally meted out to those referred to pejoratively as ‘lady novelists’ or ‘authoresses’. Lush warns that she has gone “a step or two too far in her manifest anti-prudish tendencies,” adding that “[a] good novel ... should contain nothing to make it in the least degree awkward for a gentleman to read before the ladies”.²⁵⁴ He refers to “blemishes” and

²⁴⁷ Leslie A Marchand, *The Athenaeum: A Mirror of Victorian Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), pp.89, 94.

²⁴⁸ Casey; Jeanne Fahnestock, ‘Authors of Book Reviews in the “Athenaeum”, 1830-1900: A Preview and Sample’, *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter*, 1972, 47–52.

²⁴⁹ Casey, p.9.

²⁵⁰ Casey, p.11.

²⁵¹ ‘New Novels’, *Athenaeum*, 11 February 1865, p.196.

²⁵² ‘New Novels’, 11 February 1865.

²⁵³ ‘New Novels’, 11 February 1865.

²⁵⁴ ‘New Novels’, 11 February 1865.

“errors” that must be corrected in future novels, feeling confident that “a hint like this will suffice,”²⁵⁵ emphasising the idea of the reviewer as cultural authority. In fact, his hint did not suffice, as Lush found Marryat’s next novel, *Too Good for Him*, “unnatural and artificial” and full of yet more “blemishes”.²⁵⁶ This gendered approach is also evident in his criticism of a legal error in the plot, where he declares as “impossible” a “lady’s endeavour to write a novel and not make some mistake on a point of law”.²⁵⁷ In later novels, such as *The Heart of Jane Warner*, Marryat included footnotes to cite her legal sources, in a blatant riposte to this criticism. Lush is also condemnatory of Marryat’s use of English, French, and grammar, as though this were an assessed piece of writing, rather than a published novel. As Lewis C Roberts observes:

Reviewers often judged the professionalism of women writers by pointing out their inability to write other than domestic or sentimental narratives, or condescendingly correcting the mechanics of their writing without attending to its content.²⁵⁸

The brevity of the review and the concluding line that it is a novel “we can yet recommend to our reader” urges them to judge for themselves, and, unlike the other review I go on to discuss, seems less inclined to formulate the readers’ response on their behalf. The *Athenaeum*, then, extended a cautious welcome to Marryat, but was emphatic that improvements needed to be made if their relationship were to remain cordial.

Marryat’s third novel, *Woman Against Woman* published later that year,²⁵⁹ had the misfortune to be sent to Geraldine Jewsbury for review. Unable to prevent publication of *Love’s Conflict*, she seized the opportunity to condemn Marryat, claiming that “all principle of duty and perception of the difference between right and wrong is wanting throughout the book,” castigating its “morbid” and “unhealthy” tone, and concluding “we cannot call it harmless”.²⁶⁰ These criticisms heralded a broader attack in which Jewsbury proclaimed that “the ideas of women on point of morals and ethics seem in a state of transition, and consequently of confusion”.²⁶¹ The tone of the review is entirely condemnatory, warning the reader of the novel’s contagion, and there is no doubt that Jewsbury wished to utterly destroy Marryat’s professional reputation, going as far as she could without risking a libel suit. In contrast, reviewing Trollope’s *Can You Forgive Her?* a few months earlier, Jewsbury judged that “[t]he moral of the tale is sound; people reap the things they sow”.²⁶²

²⁵⁵ ‘New Novels’, 11 February 1865.

²⁵⁶ ‘New Novels’, *Athenaeum*, 24 June 1865, p.841.

²⁵⁷ ‘New Novels’, 24 June 1865.

²⁵⁸ Lewis C. Roberts, “‘The Production of a Female Hand’: Professional Writing and the Career of Geraldine Jewsbury”, *Women’s Writing*, 12 (2005), 399–418 (p.408).

²⁵⁹ Remarkably, Marryat published three novels during 1865.

²⁶⁰ ‘New Novels’, 17 February 1866.

²⁶¹ ‘New Novels’, 17 February 1866.

²⁶² ‘New Novels’, *Athenaeum*, 2 September 1865, p.305.

Like *Love's Conflict*, it features an abortive elopement, but Lady Glencora's behaviour is deemed more appropriate: having rejected Burgo Fitzgerald, she is shown happily married to Plantagenet Palliser, a man she initially found repellent. Jewsbury comments admiringly that "[n]othing can be more delicate than Mr Trollope's handling".²⁶³ His melodramatic division of characters into good and bad also made the moral abundantly clear; Marryat, conversely, portrayed essentially good women who had immoral thoughts, thereby introducing moral complexity where Jewsbury thought there should be unambiguous didacticism. Jewsbury further feared a realistic portrayal of marriage might convince young women that it was not necessarily their desideratum, favouring Trollope's approach of showing wives deriving fulfilment from the most unprepossessing husbands.

Athenaeum reviewers often praise the readability of Marryat's plots, but become increasingly critical of transgressive heroines. Although her use of literary realism is occasionally commended, there are repeated attempts to constrain her more radical creations. *How They Loved Him* (1882) is accused of being a more outrageous version of Ouida's novels, creating a "strong effect of disgust".²⁶⁴ The plot is partly a reworking of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), but Marryat's heroine embraces single motherhood, refusing to marry the father of her child and going on to enjoy a successful singing career (see Chapter Two). The *Athenaeum* also found Rachel Saltoun in *How Like a Woman!* (1892) unacceptable, identifying her faults as "chiefly those of early independence, wealth, and want of discipline".²⁶⁵ Having inherited a large and lucrative estate, Rachel is able to defy her family's wishes by choosing a husband from the lower ranks; a likeable character and a responsible employer, her "fault" is to challenge a prescriptive model of femininity.

The *Athenaeum* was particularly horrified by Marryat's realistic depiction of marital violence, believing she was using the technique to portray an unrealistic situation. In *The Root of All Evil* (1879), the reviewer claimed that "her illustrations of [society] are too unnatural to provide an effective moral".²⁶⁶ Marryat's "illustration" involves a working-class woman who is beaten senseless by her husband and subsequently dies – a definite moral, although one designed to regulate male, rather than female, behaviour. As Maeve Doggett's analysis of contemporary newspapers shows, this incident was all too realistic and, indeed, prevalent.²⁶⁷ The review of *Her World Against a Lie* (1878) is much stronger, professing "[t]here are some human affections so sacred that the attempt to make capital out of them in order to obtain a sensational chapter for an ephemeral novel strikes us as being most repulsive".²⁶⁸ As I discuss in the next chapter, these representations of marital

²⁶³ Jewsbury, 'Can You Forgive Her?'.

²⁶⁴ 'Novels of the Week', *Athenaeum*, 29 July 1882, p.141.

²⁶⁵ 'Novels of the Week', *Athenaeum*, 12 November 1892, p.660.

²⁶⁶ 'Novels of the Week', *Athenaeum*, 6 December 1879, p.725.

²⁶⁷ Maeve E Doggett, *Marriage, Wife-Beating and the Law in Victorian England* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1992), p.111.

²⁶⁸ 'Novels of the Week', *Athenaeum*, 7 December 1878, pp.722–23 (p.723).

violence are partly autobiographical, and Marryat is using her own experiences to engage with political debates at a time when the Second Matrimonial Causes Act (1878) had just begun to offer wives limited protection against violent husbands. By showing men as destroyers rather than protectors of women, Marryat was contesting the dominant gender ideology, thus provoking an irritable response from those who sought to preserve it.

Marryat's failure to heed the *Athenaeum's* advice led to increasingly dismissive and cursory reviews. *An Angel of Pity* (1898), a powerful anti-vivisection polemic, was condemned in a couple of lines as "flap-doodle".²⁶⁹ After the briefest of synopses, their review of *The Dream That Stayed* (1896) concludes: "there is no need to analyse any further a book which no person of refinement or taste will read beyond the first chapter".²⁷⁰ The story is effectively a reworking of the main plot of *East Lynne*, with the adulterous heroine forgiven by her husband after she elopes with another man. The reviewer lamented: "It is a pity that Miss Florence Marryat will not take advice ... her faults seem to be inveterate."²⁷¹ As her writing career had lasted thirty years, it seems unlikely that she would start taking advice at this point.

Having initially recognised and applauded Marryat's talent as an original writer, successive reviewers become frustrated at her unwillingness to submit to their regulation, and her questionable morality came to overshadow her flair for realism. Literary realism was applauded by the *Athenaeum*, so long as an effective moral could be derived from it, but denounced if it subverted the established gender binary.

'Moral Earnestness' and 'Blameless Sobriety' in the *Spectator*

According to Casey, the *Spectator* "stressed morality, good taste, and wholesomeness" and was known for its "moral earnestness" and "blameless sobriety". The first editor, Robert Rintoul, affirmed that it contained "no indecency" and its strong editorial line was characterised by a resistance to literary innovation.²⁷² However, William Beach Thomas, the *Spectator's* archivist contends that it was "often particularly ready to praise ... work that ran counter to what might seem its literary and philosophic canons".²⁷³ Although the *Spectator's* policy was not to summarise a book, their review of *Love's Conflict* includes a précis of the labyrinthine plot and a lengthy extract to substantiate their charge that the work embodies a "hard, almost coarse, realism".²⁷⁴ While the *Athenaeum* and the *Saturday Review* both praised *Love's Conflict* for its realism, for the *Spectator* this was the novel's terrible weakness. The reviewer refers twice to the "coarse realism," adding, in an echo

²⁶⁹ 'New Novels', *Athenaeum*, 18 June 1898, p.786.

²⁷⁰ 'New Novels', *Athenaeum*, 28 November 1896, p.752.

²⁷¹ 'New Novels', 28 November 1896.

²⁷² Casey, p.10.

²⁷³ William Beach Thomas, *The Story of the Spectator, 1828-1928* (London: Methuen, 1928), p.204.

²⁷⁴ 'Love's Conflict', *The Spectator*, 25 February 1865, pp.215-16 (p.215).

of Jewsbury's reader's report, that it is "not a pleasant story," and shrinking from the scenes "described with sickening force and truth".²⁷⁵ Unlike Jewsbury, the *Spectator* stops short of condemning it as immoral: "there is nothing to induce us to class it among French sensation novels, nothing evil in moral, or incident or description, and yet there is a tone over the whole, a scent as of compost, a flavour as of garlic".²⁷⁶ This insinuation reminds the reader of the 1857 obscenity trial of *Madame Bovary*, thereby aligning Marryat's novel with one of the most controversial novels of the period.

Again, the reviewer specifically objects to the depiction of marital violence, arguing that such incidents are best confined to the legal reports of the Divorce Court and are not a fit subject for fiction. Like Jewsbury, they thought Elfrida should endure until the end, rather than contemplate an escape from the bonds of matrimony. Unlike the *Athenaeum*, they acknowledge it is "truthful," with the "realism of Balzac," but refer to Marryat's "dreadful inability to skin over sores, or paint out cicatrices, or conceal aught whether or no it ought to be concealed".²⁷⁷ Again, the allusion to French literature is an oblique attempt to suggest the novel's impropriety, stressing that the author has a duty to present moral paragons, rather than real people. As Flint explains, the French novel was used as a cultural leitmotif to denote immorality, and in Augustus Egg's triptych *Past and Present*, a yellow-backed Balzac novel was interpreted by contemporary critics as "a Hogarthian indication of [the] mother's perversion".²⁷⁸ When Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* insists on the right to choose her own husband, her guardian responds: "Your mind is poisoned with French novels. You have imbibed French principles," predicting that she will end in "infamy".²⁷⁹ Overall, the *Spectator* complains of a "certain brutality alike of subject and treatment which offends, and we believe ought to offend, cultivated taste".²⁸⁰ Here the reviewer is trying to formulate the reader's response and establish the boundaries of good taste: Marryat's stylistic approach in *Love's Conflict* attracts an uncultivated readership that prefers realism to 'high art,' and the *Spectator* is showing both Marryat and her readers which is preferable.

The *Spectator* reviews of Marryat's first three novels are very long and detailed, all of them nearly 2,000 words in length. In subsequent reviews, the novel is often summarily dismissed in no more than a paragraph, the reviewer's brevity signalling their frustration with Marryat's recalcitrance. *Nelly Brooke* (1868) is described as "ugly," "repulsive," and "revolting"²⁸¹ – adjectives that recur throughout all the reviews. Marryat is compared unfavourably with Wilkie Collins, who the

²⁷⁵ 'Love's Conflict'.

²⁷⁶ 'Love's Conflict'.

²⁷⁷ 'Love's Conflict'.

²⁷⁸ Flint, p.138.

²⁷⁹ Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, p.513.

²⁸⁰ 'Love's Conflict'.

²⁸¹ 'Nelly Brooke', *The Spectator*, 21 November 1868, pp.1378–79 (p.1378).

reviewer believes is far better qualified to handle the sensation format, condemning the “revolting nature of the secret mechanism” that reveals the heroine’s illegitimacy.²⁸² Although they would normally refrain from discussing such matters, the review describes the plot twist in detail so as to avoid “sending curious readers to the book”.²⁸³ A modicum of praise is reserved for the “most perfect” heroine, Nelly herself: “The redeeming point in the novel is the character of Nelly Brooke on which [the author] has bestowed great pain, and with which she has been eminently successful.”²⁸⁴ Nelly is entirely subservient to her sadistic husband, displaying the classic signs of clinical depression. Through this character, Marryat is parodying the selflessness expected of literary heroines, and the *Spectator*’s praise exposes their unrealistic expectations.

The *Spectator*’s review of *For Ever and Ever* consigns the novel to the “debatable land” where canons do not operate. Marryat is charged with ‘vulgarity’, but permitted some modest praise for creating characters who “really move and live,” although the reviewer asks, “[i]s a toad worth painting?”²⁸⁵ An unfavourable comparison with George Eliot leads to the conclusion that women simply cannot handle literary realism competently, probably a criticism of her popularity as much as of her gender. Throughout the review, Marryat’s name appears in inverted commas, as though a pseudonym, and elsewhere they insist on referring to her by her married name, emphasising her role of wife over that of professional writer. The reviewer reserves some censure for the novel’s conclusion: “[S]he will never have the position which will induce Mudie’s subscribers, or any decently cheerful human beings, to tolerate a wilfully and whimsically bad ending.”²⁸⁶ For “bad” we should read “unhappy”; in what might be viewed by the modern reader as a welcome subversion of the traditional marriage plot, the hero of the story dies before he can be reunited with his lover. The *Spectator*’s comment demonstrates the degree to which writers were expected to conform to a particular formula, both in tone and structure. In an earlier review, the *Spectator* criticises Marryat for employing in her writing “all the machinery with which subscribers to circulating libraries are becoming so wearisomely familiar,”²⁸⁷ but then criticises her for trying to abandon that “machinery”.

The strongest condemnation of one of Marryat’s heroines appears in the *Spectator*’s review of *The Fair-Haired Alda* (1880). The eponymous Alda is described as “distinctly of the order of evil-doers who ought not to escape a whipping” and “one of a long series of young women who ought to be, and no doubt would be, carefully avoided by respectable, God-fearing people”.²⁸⁸ The ferocity of

²⁸² ‘Nelly Brooke’.

²⁸³ ‘Nelly Brooke’.

²⁸⁴ ‘Nelly Brooke’.

²⁸⁵ ‘Nelly Brooke’.

²⁸⁶ ‘Nelly Brooke’.

²⁸⁷ ‘Love’s Conflict’.

²⁸⁸ ‘The Fair-Haired Alda’, *The Spectator*, 1880, p.1044.

this review is perplexing; Alda's transgression is to elope with a husband of her choice, rather than marry the dissipated valetudinarian favoured by her parents. She remains loyal to her husband through the most trying of circumstances, and it is her family who behave badly in trying to force her into a bigamous marriage. When this plot fails, her father stabs her husband to death in a frenzied attack. For the reviewer, Alda's failure to observe the fifth commandment remains the cardinal sin. While Alda is prepared to break the rules in the interests of autonomy, she is no Lady Audley, but is held up as an irredeemable villainess. Like Rachel Saltoun, discussed above, her display of female agency is sufficient for her to be denounced as wicked.

The reviews discussed above certainly demonstrate the *Spectator's* emphasis on morality, good taste, and wholesomeness. They also partly support Thomas's contention that the journal at the same time championed literary innovation and realism. However, the novels praised for these qualities were all written by men. George Moore, for example, was commended for his portrayal of an adulterous, alcoholic, and violent woman in *A Mummer's Wife*, but Marryat's feisty heroines were repeatedly condemned, and often in the strongest of terms. Whereas Moore's Kate Ede was ultimately disgrace and destroyed, Marryat's protagonists were often rewarded for their audacity, or at least vindicated. It was Marryat's refusal to conform to the traditional trajectory of the fallen woman that excited the opprobrium of the press.

Woman Against Woman in the *Saturday Review*

The *Saturday Review* was something of an upstart in the field of periodical publishing. It has been described as a "dangerous rival" to the *Spectator*, notable for its "gay cynicism" and belief that "nothing is new, nothing is true, and nothing of any importance".²⁸⁹ Within two years of its birth, the *Saturday's* circulation had surpassed that of the *Spectator*, and by the mid-1860s it had also overtaken the *Athenaeum*.²⁹⁰ Casey writes: "The *Saturday* was the most eager to strike a balance, whether between character and plot, realism and idealism, or power and respectability. *Saturday* critics valued strength, originality, cleverness, and power."²⁹¹ However, Merle Bevington argues that the *Saturday* "assumed as a fact that women were inferior to men," describing their reviews as "ungenerous and exaggerated".²⁹² My analysis of their reviews of Marryat's novels certainly supports Bevington's argument.

The *Saturday* had a deliberate policy of what it called "setting woman against woman" to create controversy, with prominent female authors employed to review the work of their rivals, and encouraged to be vituperative. Clement Scott recalled in his memoirs:

²⁸⁹ Thomas, p.57.

²⁹⁰ Fryckstedt, 'Through the Looking-Glass of Periodicals', p.22.

²⁹¹ Casey, p.10.

²⁹² Merle Mowbray Bevington, *The Saturday Review, 1855-1868* (New York: AMS Press, 1966), pp.116, 202.

Thus if Annie Thomas or Florence Marryat brought out a novel, they would send on the volume to Mrs. Lynn Linton, or another, to praise or to scarify. And vice versa. The result was admirable. The paper became brilliant ... the Douglas Cook policy was to set woman against woman, and to see who would make the best fight of it.²⁹³

Although the identity of the reviewer of *Love's Conflict* is unknown, it is possibly Linton herself, who began writing for the *Saturday* around this time, later becoming infamous for her 'The Girl of the Period' essays, in which she "argued that a civilisation's strength was in inverse proportion to the social freedoms of women".²⁹⁴ As Hilary Fraser proposes, Linton's career "crystallises the convoluted and contradictory sexual politics of a binaried gender model that continually and demonstrably deconstructs itself".²⁹⁵ Almost two-thirds of the review is concerned with Marryat's portrayal of fate, of which the *Saturday* does not approve, fearing the potentially harmful effects on her female readers:

The moral effect of that view on the female mind, if it were generally entertained, would be deplorable. It would lead to a dangerous state of indolence and suppressed activity.²⁹⁶

Their fear was that young women might wait around for their future husband to materialise, rather than "exerting [themselves] in season and out of season to please and fascinate".²⁹⁷ The duty of the novelist, they imply, is to instruct the female reader, and there is no place for supernatural romanticism. Marryat is criticised for showing "the dark side of the fatalist theory of marriage,"²⁹⁸ thereby encouraging women to remain spinsters. The *Saturday* believes it would be better for a woman to marry a brute like William Treherne than to remain single. The preponderance of the word 'marriage' in the review indicates the importance of this event to the *Saturday*, and how they perceive the author's duty in presenting it. The reviewer is particularly damning of Marryat's authorial voice (which I examine below), the "tedious reflections with which every chapter is studded;" this device is, in their view, "an absurd egotism" and a "gross sin against the rules of art".²⁹⁹ The author, they suggest, must simply tell a (moral) story, rather than try to guide the reader's response to it, which is, of course, exactly what the review tries to do.

Like the *Athenaeum*, the *Saturday* reserves much of its criticism for Marryat's heroines. In *For Ever and Ever*, they object to the woman taking the lead in a passionate kiss, deploring the "gorgeous throbbing style," adding that such scenes are reminiscent of cheap literature: "This is just the thing

²⁹³ Clement Scott, *The Drama of Yesterday & Today*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan & Co, 1899), I, pp.421–422.

²⁹⁴ Nancy Fix Anderson, 'The Rebel of the Family: The Life of Eliza Lynn Linton', in *The Rebel of the Family*, ed. by Deborah T Meem (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), pp.428–440 (p.437).

²⁹⁵ Hilary Fraser, and others, *Gender and the Victorian Periodical* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.9.

²⁹⁶ 'Love's Conflict', *Saturday Review*, 11 February 1865, p.549.

²⁹⁷ 'Love's Conflict'.

²⁹⁸ 'Love's Conflict'.

²⁹⁹ 'Love's Conflict'.

to titillate the soul of John Thomas and Mary Ann, when they indulge in their weekly pennyworth of fiction.”³⁰⁰ There is a refusal to acknowledge that the middle-class reader might enjoy titillation, or at least a suggestion that they ought not to. The reviewer is also incredulous that Marryat depicts a vicar showing compassion for a fallen woman, inviting her and the child to live in his home, in defiance of popular opinion. While she is criticised here for her lack of realism, Marryat is instead demonstrating how clergymen *should* behave, pleading for tolerance, rather than censure. In their review of *Véronique* (1869), the *Saturday* complains that Marryat kills off the legitimately-married couple, rather than the “time-hardened flirt”.³⁰¹ Like Jewsbury in her report on *Love’s Conflict*, the reviewer wants the transgressive heroine to be punished, preferably violently.

The *Saturday*’s frequent editorials on the faults of ‘authoresses’ illustrate their desire to control women’s writing, with Marryat a frequent target. In their review of *The Confessions of Gerald Estcourt*, they repeatedly compare Marryat with Annie Thomas, praising the latter for having “learnt the lesson” from critics.³⁰² Rhoda Broughton, despite her formidable reputation, was sensitive to the relentless nature of the *Saturday*’s campaign, writing to George Bentley in 1892:

I positively dread the Saturday. I cannot get used to the coarse and discriminate abuse with which I am belaboured. To my dying day it will make me wince. It is so bitter not to be able to answer: to sit under their gross unfairness – their flagrant misrepresentation.³⁰³

Marryat, however, appears to have been impervious to their “coarse and indiscriminate abuse,” continuing to shock until the very end, and retaliating and resisting them through her fiction. Whereas other women authors, like Broughton, responded to criticism by becoming less radical or sensational, Marryat retained her power to cause outrage, even against the backdrop of controversy over novels such as *Griffith Gaunt* and *Madame Bovary*. As I shall argue below, her novels became a site of resistance against the control the critics were attempting to exert.

‘Intruding Her Own Personality’: Marryat’s Ongoing Relationship with Critics

Marryat’s most significant retaliation against Jewsbury’s regulation is the resurrection of *Love’s Conflict*’s Elfrida Treherne in *A Harvest of Wild Oats* (1878). Far from endorsing her earlier conformity, Elfrida is shown in a blissfully happy marriage with her lover George. The reader is told that William, her first husband, died not long after their reunion, having reverted to his old ways: Marryat effectively punishes him when Jewsbury’s back is turned. Elfrida defends her earlier adulterous behaviour, stressing William’s violence, and explaining that her baby died as a result of

³⁰⁰ ‘For Ever and Ever’, *Saturday Review*, 6 October 1866, pp.432–33 (p.432).

³⁰¹ ‘Véronique’, *Saturday Review*, 9 October 1869, pp.490–91 (p.491).

³⁰² ‘Two Novels by Two Ladies’, *Saturday Review*, 31 August 1867, pp.291–92 (p.291).

³⁰³ Quoted in Michael Sadleir, *Things Past* (London: Constable & Company, 1944), p.104.

the stress he caused. Clearly, Marryat wanted to imply that the baby's deformity was the somatic corollary of emotional trauma, rather than the moral judgement demanded by Jewsbury. Elfrida comes to the assistance of Clare Iredell, a young wife who has left her husband after suspecting him of infidelity, helping her accept that it is simply a misunderstanding. Marryat's use of Elfrida mirrors her own relationship with the reader: she presents them with a realistic scenario so they might experience the moral dilemma vicariously, thus deriving instruction for their own lives.

Marryat evidently resented the earlier concessions she made to Jewsbury, giving her heroine another opportunity to speak and to be happy. The plot of *Love's Conflict* was again reworked in Marryat's 1898 play *The Gamekeeper*, on which she collaborated with her lover, Herbert McPherson. Although Marryat avoids a neat marital conclusion, it is implied that Elfrida will marry her soulmate George (Ralph in the play), rather than the sociopathic William (Martin). Harriet Treherne, a prostitute who dies quietly of syphilis in the novel, is brought centre stage in the adaptation and allowed both to defend her behaviour and to die very publicly. Marryat also makes the coded references to extra-marital sex in the novel much more explicit in the play, and the murder of Hélène is portrayed as the action of a madman, rather than as the sadistic punishment demanded by Jewsbury. A comparison of these two texts shows that Marryat was being morally oblique in *Love's Conflict* to ensure its publication, and *The Gamekeeper* gives us an idea of her original, much more radical, intentions.

Elfrida is the only example of Marryat reintroducing a character, and her appearance in *A Harvest of Wild Oats* was not noted by the periodical press. What they could not fail to notice, however, was Marryat's authorial voice, with which she addressed the critics as much as she did her readers. The *Saturday* complained: "Worse than any fault of construction is the habit which Miss Marryat has acquired ... of intruding her own personality on the reader at every juncture of the story."³⁰⁴ Marryat often prefixed dramatic scenes with an address to critics in which she carefully established the episode's basis in fact, obviating any claims of sensationalism. She adopted an even more direct approach in *Véronique*, adding a preface "To the novel-reading public". Although ostensibly addressed to her readers, it is intended primarily for the critics. Marryat defends her use of realism, the style for which she was so often criticised, declaring that she would "prefer that my effort should fall stillborn from the press, rather than to flourish by pandering to a false taste for a falser art".³⁰⁵ Quoting her nemesis the *Saturday Review*, she adds: "Let a man once have absolute confidence in his line, whether of thought or action, and he smiles at attack."³⁰⁶ Marryat concludes

³⁰⁴ 'Love's Conflict'.

³⁰⁵ Florence Marryat, *Véronique*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1869), I.

³⁰⁶ Marryat, *Véronique*, I.

by referring to her readers as the “true critics”.³⁰⁷ As a single mother with seven children to support, she was interested in commercial success, rather than critical acclaim.

The *Athenaeum* rose to the bait in their review, responding that Marryat “has a bone to pick with that reckless class of men which has been styled a chorus of indolent reviewers”. The reviewer goes on to criticise Marryat’s writing, claiming that she “with a curious mixture of pride and simplicity, aspires openly to the honours of a ‘sensation’ novelist, without possessing the qualifications by which the perishable laurels of sensation novelists are earned”.³⁰⁸ Although the *Athenaeum* frequently dismissed Marryat as a mere sensation novelist, the reviewer is displeased when she appropriates the term for herself, quickly mobilising to rank her even lower in the literary hierarchy.

Marryat also introduced literary critics into her novels as characters, using them as Aunt Sallys, and often contrasting them with a representation of herself as a successful writer. *Fighting the Air* (1875) features Miss Poppingham, a very thinly-veiled caricature of Eliza Lynn Linton:

She is a strong-minded woman of the very first water; wears cropped hair, writes for the *Reviler*, and gives out publicly that she doesn’t believe in anything.³⁰⁹

The less distinctive character Miss Stringer is possibly based on Geraldine Jewsbury, by now less of a threat than Linton. Mrs Littleton, a popular novelist much derided by the press, describes the pair thus:

Two of the most bitter detractors of their own sex in London ... Both disappointed in their own attempts at literature, and ready to fall upon and grind to a powder any woman that succeeds.³¹⁰

Unsurprisingly, this vilification did not go unheeded by the *Athenaeum* reviewer (alas neither Jewsbury nor Linton on this occasion), who responded:

[Marryat] is, perhaps unnaturally, a little bitter against the ‘critics’; nor will we, for ourselves, grumble at a few hard words, when we see her following at length our often-bestowed advice.³¹¹

Again, Marryat is admonished for her failure to heed to advice of critics who have established themselves as moral and cultural arbiters.

Although Marryat’s attitude towards the critics could be described as robust, she nevertheless felt their jibes. When faced with the emotional task of writing a preface to a novel her eldest daughter Eva wrote shortly before her death, she entreats reviewers to “deal as gently as possible

³⁰⁷ Marryat, *Véronique*, I.

³⁰⁸ ‘New Novels’, *Athenaeum*, 18 September 1869, pp.367–8 (p.368).

³⁰⁹ Florence Marryat, *Fighting the Air*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1875), I, p.38. [*The Reviler* was a nickname for the *Saturday Review*.]

³¹⁰ Marryat, *Fighting the Air*, I, p.38.

³¹¹ ‘Novels of the Week’, *Athenaeum*, 18 September 1875, p.368.

with the faults of her maiden effort”.³¹² Marryat believed strongly that the reputation of a woman unable to defend herself should not be destroyed. The *Athenaeum* heeded her *cri de coeur* with an uncharacteristically delicate appraisal of the novel, admitting that the “pathetic preface ... disarms the critical reader”.³¹³

In addition to the authorial voice and parody, Marryat used self-representation to confront critics, and the difficulties faced by the woman writer are a recurring theme throughout her fiction. In *Too Good for Him* (1865), Isobel Reverdon makes it clear to her publisher that she is not embarking on a writing career to express herself artistically, rather because it is the only viable option for a middle-class woman who needs to support a young family. This portrayal symbolises Marryat’s resistance to being judged in terms of high art, and is perhaps based upon her own initial approach to Bentley. In *Mad Dumaresq* (1873), Bell Dumaresq is a highly sympathetic portrait of a sensation novelist who works diligently to support her aged parent. Her cousin, Adrian “Mad” Dumaresq, meanwhile, takes on work as a publisher’s reader, often condemning novels without actually reading them. The *Athenaeum* found much fault with Bell, ridiculing her professional status in what is essentially an attack on Marryat herself through her literary avatar.³¹⁴ Marryat’s growing confidence can be discerned in Elsa Carden, heroine of *Gentleman and Courtier* (1888). Elsa is a mistreated wife and mother who finds great success, both critical and popular, as a novelist. Her literary reputation attracts the admiration of a younger man, with whom she forms a relationship – a reflection of events in Marryat’s own life. This repeated self-representation can be seen both as a desire to raise the professional status of women writers and a way in which to confront her detractors. These distinctive characters counter the critics’ attempts to define the woman author as ill-educated, unprofessional, and inartistic.

By portraying aspects of her professional self in her novels and attacking critics through parody and the authorial voice, Marryat was able to defy the control they attempted to exert upon her and her heroines. Despite receiving very little critical acclaim during her lifetime, Marryat remained a popular and financially successful author. In the face of accusations of immorality in *Love’s Conflict*, she went much further in *For Ever and Ever* and *The Confessions of Gerald Estcourt*, while managing to avoid an outright ban by the circulating libraries or an obscenity trial. Jennifer Carnell, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s biographer, believes Marryat “probably went further than any other novelist, male or female, of the period,”³¹⁵ while Fryckstedt distinguishes Henrietta Stuart, heroine of *For*

³¹² Ross Church, p.2.

³¹³ ‘Novels of the Week’, *Athenaeum*, 4 February 1888, p.142.

³¹⁴ ‘Novels of the Week’, *Athenaeum*, 6 December 1873, p.729.

³¹⁵ Jennifer Carnell, *The Literary Lives of M E Braddon* (Hastings: The Sensation Press, 2000), p.170.

Ever and Ever, as the most sexually proactive heroine of the period and a “subversive element in the fiction intended for a middle-class audience and a challenge to its code of morality”.³¹⁶

Radway acknowledges that the “ideological power of contemporary cultural forms is enormous, indeed sometimes even frightening,” but also observes that it is not “all pervasive, totally vigilant, or complete,” with interstitial resistance forming a “legitimate form of protest”.³¹⁷ This resistance, I argue, can be discerned in Marryat’s fiction, as she defies critics who attempt to empiricise cultural taste, denying female readers and writers their subjectivity. Pykett describes sensation fiction as “a site in which the contradiction, anxieties, and opposing ideologies of Victorian culture converge,”³¹⁸ but the literary heroine, too, is a contested site. Critics such as Jewsbury, Linton and Moore were all vying to set the moral agenda, projecting their anxieties on female protagonists, insisting that a failure to respect the bounds of acceptable femininity should be demonstrably catastrophic. This agenda was seriously undermined by Marryat’s competing narratives of transgressive heroines who defined their own identity and got away with it.

Modern critics of sensation fiction, especially of that written by women, often ignore the constraints under which authors were writing and, in Marryat’s case, overlook the subtle ways in which she challenged and overcame the various modes of editorial control. Through close readings of her novels, analysis of reviews, and archival research, I have demonstrated Marryat’s significance as an author who challenged the regulatory atmosphere in which she was working. During the 1860s, Marryat addressed many themes associated with later New Woman fiction, and she did so in a milieu far more conservative than that enjoyed by her literary successors. As I show in my next chapter, some of her novels made important and subversive arguments against the legal discourses that sought to regulate women’s behaviour. Working within the considerable restrictions placed upon her, Marryat contested literary and gender boundaries, thereby redefining mid-Victorian women’s writing.

³¹⁶ Fryckstedt, *On the Brink: English Novels of 1866*, p.110.

³¹⁷ Radway, p.222.

³¹⁸ Pykett, p.50.

Chapter Two: ‘The chains that gall them’ – The Legal Regulation of Marryat’s heroines

As I demonstrated in Chapter One, it was Marryat’s eagerness to confront controversial issues in her fiction that provoked censure from critics. With a life neatly spanning the Victorian period, Marryat was well placed both to witness and to benefit from the momentous social changes that took place, particularly those affecting the position of women. As I show in this chapter, through her fiction Marryat also participated in this process, contributing to debates that triggered a programme of transformative legislation, using her novels as a platform from which to articulate the wrongs of woman, and depicting through her heroines the possibilities that emancipation might bring. By evaluating Marryat’s polemical novels within the context of contemporary legal discourses, I argue that her writing constitutes a significant radical protest, challenging the prescriptive nineteenth-century legal identity of ‘woman,’ constructed for the purposes of regulation. I propose that Marryat’s confrontation of these important debates brought feminist ideas to an audience they would not otherwise have reached. Through archival research, I also explain how Marryat’s own experiences informed her writing, sharing her marital difficulties to educate readers.

Firstly, I consider the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, ostensibly designed to make divorce more accessible, but in reality legislation that enshrined the sexual double standard in law. Through my analysis of Marryat’s fiction, I show how she portrayed marriage as a carceral institution for many women, campaigning instead for a more equal union. Challenging the image of the submissive and forgiving wife that emerged from Parliamentary debates, Marryat presented heroines who successfully insisted on a single sexual standard. In the second section I explore Marryat’s engagement with the Married Women’s Property Acts, significant legal landmarks that allowed wives to control their own earnings and also to enjoy an identity separate from that of their husband. By comparing Marryat’s novels with those of more conservative authors, such as Anthony Trollope, I demonstrate how she made potent arguments that undermined dominant ideology. Finally, I examine Marryat’s portrayal of marital violence, a widespread problem that was popularly believed to be confined to the working classes. Through shocking scenes condemned by critics, Marryat insisted this was both a threat and a reality experienced by women of all classes, and the result of the notion of ‘woman’ as a subordinate being.

In the mid-nineteenth century, matrimonial practices were seen as an indicator of civilisation with “civilised monogamy” believed to make Britain superior to those countries that either allowed easy

access to divorce or practised polygamy.³¹⁹ The significance of marriage brought it under increased regulation, although with very different implications for men and women. The concept of coverture, originally described in Blackstone's *Legal Commentaries* (1756) and based on common law, decreed that the very being or legal existence of the wife was suspended during marriage. A single woman was known as a *feme sole* and a married women as a *feme covert*, signifying that her identity was subsumed into that of her husband.³²⁰

Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, in their influential examination of gender differences during this period, propose that "marriage became both institution and symbol of women's containment," seeing the middle classes as divided into separate public and private spheres delineating the appropriate realms of masculine and feminine activity.³²¹ However, the diversity of the lives they describe belies their argument, and subsequent critics have shown that these spheres represented a retrospectively-applied conservative ideology, rather than the fundamental organising characteristic they propose. Amanda Vickery, for example, perceives the separate spheres ideology as a "defensive and impotent reaction to public freedoms already won,"³²² arguing that the perpetuation of the model ignores the "unpredictable variety of private experience".³²³ Linda Colley concludes that women largely accepted their role in the domestic sphere, but saw this arrangement as "profoundly contractual,"³²⁴ assuming this subordinate position in return for (often non-existent) financial support and protection. The notion of separate spheres was, therefore, subject to challenge and negotiation from within the institution that was its embodiment: marriage.

Furthermore, the findings of the 1851 Census disputed the existence of the domestic ideal of middle-class marriage, instead identifying what Lynda Nead terms a "clear hierarchy of sexual behaviour,"³²⁵ with married couples at the top and unmarried mothers languishing at the bottom. As Karen Chase and Michael Levenson explain, the need for this classification "exploded the myth of neat family units".³²⁶ Although marriage was supposed to be central to a woman's life, the Census showed that there were nearly two million unmarried women – single, divorced, or

³¹⁹ Joanne Gill, 'The Imperial Anxieties of a Nineteenth-Century Bigamy', *History Workshop Journal*, 57 (2004), 58–78 (p.66).

³²⁰ Susie Steinbach, *Women in England 1760-1914* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), p.250.

³²¹ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2002), p.451.

³²² Amanda Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *The Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), 383–414 (p.414).

³²³ Vickery, p.390.

³²⁴ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Vintage, 1996), p.277.

³²⁵ Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p.35.

³²⁶ Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.3.

widowed – who had collected into a “disruptive vortex”.³²⁷ This epiphany placed gender at the centre of Parliamentary debates and subsequent legislation can be seen as a series of attempts to regulate this area of such vital national importance.

In his 1901 lecture on women’s rights during the nineteenth century, eminent lawyer Montague Lush referred to the previous thirty years as a “revolution in the law”.³²⁸ Concluding that the married state for the mid-Victorian woman was one of “almost absolute subjection,” Lush expresses surprise that one finds “no trace in the ordinary literature of the time of their occupying any such subordinate position, or of marriage making the woman the mere nonentity in point of law which she actually became”.³²⁹ It is certainly true that few authors made overt challenges to the status quo, mainly, as I discussed in chapter one, for reasons of literary censorship. However, many sensation novelists, most notably Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins, did examine, and sometimes protest against, the inequitable position of wives, although they often stopped short of making radical arguments, frequently opting for conventional conclusions where outspoken heroines are ostracised, tamed, or otherwise silenced. As Ian Ward observes, the common choice for the literary heroine was to “put up with it, or run away”.³³⁰ As I shall argue, by subverting the traditional courtship plot, Marryat instead challenged the institution of marriage, theorising a radically different role for women, and disputing its centrality to their lives.

Who pays for the butter? Marryat and Marriage

Marryat was exposed to the inequities of marriage at a formative age when in 1839 her parents decided upon an irrevocable separation. Captain Marryat granted Catherine an annual allowance of £500, a small sum for maintaining their seven surviving children in the comfort befitting their upper-middle-class status, and also miserly given he had inherited a large share of his father’s £250,000 fortune.³³¹ As their separation occurred before the 1878 Matrimonial Causes Act, Marryat had no obligation to support his family and could have withdrawn payments at any time. Fortunately for Florence, legal changes and a successful literary career meant that she fared better than her mother when her own marriages broke down.

On her marriage in 1854 to Thomas Ross Church, Marryat was obliged to sign over her one-fifth share of an investment worth £15,804,³³² which later became the subject of two legal battles.

³²⁷ Chase and Levenson, p.183.

³²⁸ Montague Lush, ‘Changes in the Law Affecting the Rights, Status, and Liabilities of Married Women’, in *Twelve Lectures on the Changes in the Law of England During the Nineteenth Century* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1901), p.342.

³²⁹ Montague Lush, p.349.

³³⁰ Ian Ward, ‘The Case of Helen Huntingdon’, *Criticism*, 49 (2007), 151–182 (p.151).

³³¹ Tom Pocock, *Captain Marryat: Seaman, Writer and Adventurer* (London: Chatham, 2000), p.162.

³³² Marriage Certificate: Florence Marryat and Thomas Ross Church, PRO.

The couple were estranged soon after the birth of their eighth and final child, and the record of Church's presence in the family home during the 1871 census suggests he had returned from India to settle his affairs. This date is significant, as it is the year in which the first Married Women's Property Act came into effect, allowing Marryat to control her own earnings and to live a more autonomous existence. Although Church appears to have been both violent and domineering, in the absence of proven adultery, Marryat lacked the grounds for divorce. The most she could hope for was a judicial separation, a compromise she dismisses in her semi-autobiographical novel *The Nobler Sex* (1892):

Let them attempt to rend the chains that gall them, and they will find how little justice there is in England for the woman, however innocent, who is separated from her husband. It is divorce without freedom – loss without hope of gain – the pulling down of a domestic hearth, without any chance of building it again.³³³

An uneasy truce persisted until 1875, when Church tried to enforce the marriage settlement and claim Marryat's share. A Bill of Complaint³³⁴ filed against him shows that the investment should have been passed down to their children, and, in any case, only after the death of Marryat's mother, Catherine. Church had already tried to declare his (still living) mother-in-law dead in order to access the funds through probate. As coverture still operated and husband and wife were indivisible in law, Marryat was cited as a defendant, along with Church, and their infant children were the plaintiffs. The legal files show that Marryat's earnings were covering two-thirds of the household expenditure, and her statement that she had "largely provided towards the support of herself and her children for several years" weakened Church's position. The court decided that the money should be retained for the children and that they were sufficiently well cared for by their mother. Marryat's public protest belied the idea of the husband as breadwinner. As she later wrote, "it would not need much perspicuity ... to guess from whom the butter that spread the bread came".³³⁵ Marryat recalled this episode through her heroine Mollie in *The Nobler Sex*:

It was to the Court of Chancery, therefore, that, by my solicitor's advice, I presently appealed, to afford me some redress against the man who had benefited by the use of my earnings for so long, and then actually robbed me of the possessions I had acquired with them. The [Second] Married Woman's Property Act had not then passed, but had it done so, my marriage had taken place too soon for me to take advantage of it, so that an appeal to the Lord Chancellor for protection was the only remedy open to me. (133)

The marriage officially ended in 1878 when Church sued for divorce, citing her adultery with Francis Lean.³³⁶ Both denied the charge, but a *decree nisi* was granted to the plaintiff, with costs. In her defence, Marryat claimed to be seeking protection from the unhappiness (possibly a euphemism

³³³ Marryat, *The Nobler Sex*, p.141.

³³⁴ Bill of Complaint. Filed 10th June 1875. C16/997 Public Record Office.

³³⁵ Marryat, *The Spirit World*, p.95.

³³⁶ Divorce Court Proceedings. 1877. Public Record Office J77/186/4810.

for violence) of her marriage.³³⁷ Following the *decree absolute*, Church again claimed his ex-wife's inheritance through a variation of settlement. Marryat responded: "I further say in answer to the said Petition that the Petitioner has sufficient means of his own for his own maintenance and that he has no occasion to resort to my property for the purpose of obtaining a settlement out of the same for his own benefit but that I am willing upon my death that my 1/5 share of the said sum be divided amongst my children."³³⁸ The truth of Marryat's words were confirmed when Church bequeathed assets amounting to nearly £1,000,000 in his will.³³⁹

In a triumph of hope over experience, Marryat married for a second time in 1879, the bride admitting to only 39 of her 45 years.³⁴⁰ Based on an autobiographical reading of *The Nobler Sex*, this second marriage was no happier than the first, and was characterised by violence and humiliation. Her relationship with Lean also forms the basis for her 1886 novel *Spiders of Society; With Cupid's Eyes*, written in 1880, is a bitter tale of a talented and hard-working artist whose dissipated husband fritters away all her earnings. This time, however, the law was on Marryat's side and she was able to extricate herself from Lean without sacrificing her wealth or future earnings. The 1882 Married Women's Property Act ensured that both her earnings and her home belonged to her, rather than to him. Marryat celebrated her liberty with a theatrical tour of the USA, recounting her experiences in a memoir, *Tom Tiddler's Ground* (1886), including an investigation of the American divorce laws:

A judge in New York sent me the Code of Divorce, and I was astonished to see the penalties attached to any breach of the marriage contract. A man cannot strike his wife, nor call her a bad name, nor use any violence towards her, without running the risk of being had up in court for the offence. In the State of New York, divorce is obtainable only on the grounds of adultery. No cruelty is needed to be proved against the man in addition to the first offence, for it is a thing almost unknown that a man should treat his wife as men do in England.³⁴¹

This anecdote suggests that Marryat was considering divorcing Lean, but she opted instead for a legal separation. Her reasons are unclear, but if she had no intention of remarrying, then there was no compelling reason to suffer the expense and humiliation of a second court case. As Marryat wrote when still married to her first husband: "No single life, however lonely and unblest, can be so cursed, as that of a woman unhappily married."³⁴² Thanks to the Married Women's Property Acts, Marryat regained her financial independence and the terms of the 1878 Matrimonial Causes Act protected her from the man who had abused her.

³³⁷ 'A Military Divorce Case'.

³³⁸ Divorce Court Proceedings.

³³⁹ Last Will and Testament of Thomas Ross Church.

³⁴⁰ Francis Lean and Florence Church, Certified Copy of an Entry of Marriage, General Register Office, Hampstead, 1227061-1.

³⁴¹ Marryat, *Tom Tiddler's Ground*, p.199.

³⁴² Florence Marryat, *Woman Against Woman*, 3 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1865), III, p.257.

‘Entirely Different Creations’: The Matrimonial Causes Act and the Sexual Double Standard

The 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, popularly known as the Divorce Act, was part of a wider programme of reform initiated by Lord Brougham, with the intention of gradually removing legal authority from the Church and placing it in the hands of the state. This move gave Parliament greater latitude, enabling them to privilege national interest above Christian doctrine. Under the terms of the Act, men could divorce their wives on grounds of adultery alone, whereas a wronged wife had to prove that her husband’s adultery had been ‘aggravated’ by bigamy, incest, sodomy, or cruelty.³⁴³ The Act, therefore, established the sexual double standard: female infidelity was a more serious crime and should be more easily punishable. During the debate, Lord Cranworth declared that it would be harsh to punish a husband for being “a little profligate”.³⁴⁴ Although at variance with the seventh commandment, which states that adultery is equally sinful for both parties, Cranworth’s view was shared by many. Women were believed to be innately chaste, whereas men struggled to contain their animal instincts. The consequences of a wife’s adultery were also perceived as more serious, with her potentially “palming spurious offspring upon the husband”;³⁴⁵ the core of this Act was, therefore, as much to do with the control of property as with allowing spouses to extricate themselves from unhappy marriages.

The Act established a London-based Divorce Court, presided over by the “incarnate omnipotence” of the splendidly-named Sir Cresswell Cresswell.³⁴⁶ In theory, this made divorce more readily obtainable through a judicial process, as hitherto a final and irrevocable separation could be achieved only by means of a lengthy and expensive Parliamentary Bill. Although *The Times* described the reform as “one of the greatest social revolutions of our time,”³⁴⁷ there was only a small increase in the subsequent divorce rate in the following decade, and this remained fairly constant as a proportion of the population until the late-1870s.³⁴⁸ *The Times* felt duty-bound to report divorce cases in full, subscribing to the Benthamite view that “publicity is the very soul of justice,”³⁴⁹ and the repeal of the stamp duty on printed material in 1855 meant there was a proliferation of weekly newspapers preying on the more sensational cases. Consequently, rather than serving to release the unhappily married, the Divorce Court simply made marital problems

³⁴³ Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.42.

³⁴⁴ 3 Hansard 134 (13 June 1854), 7.

³⁴⁵ Hansard.

³⁴⁶ Barbara Leckie, *Culture and Adultery: The Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law, 1857-1914* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p.77.

³⁴⁷ ‘The Suitors in Our Courts of Law and the Public’, *The Times*, 28 May 1867, p.11.

³⁴⁸ Alan Horstman, *Victorian Divorce* (London: Palgrave, 1985), p.85.

³⁴⁹ Anne Humpherys, ‘Breaking Apart: The Early Victorian Divorce Novel’, in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. by Nicola Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.227.

more visible by holding them up to public scrutiny. As F M L Thompson concludes, “[t]he immediate effect of forensic divorce was to expose the sanctity of the middle-class hearth to the public gaze”.³⁵⁰ Desperate to avoid such exposure, the middle classes faced a domestic crisis as the institution of marriage itself was effectively placed on trial. Mary Poovey identifies the Act as “the first major piece of British legislation to focus attention on the anomalous position of married women under the law”.³⁵¹ They emerged from debates as subordinate creatures, whose identities were bound up in those of their husbands.

Jane Jordan observes: “Given Parliament's failure to provide greater protection to wronged wives, it is unsurprising that the literature of the period took up the question, or that a new genre of sensation literature emerged.”³⁵² Indeed, novelists seized upon this rich new source of information, and marital conflict became a popular theme in the sensation novels of the 1860s. While marriage had formed the basis of many a novel, “divorce erupted into imaginative life without any coherent metaphors”.³⁵³ The fictional response, however, was not an outpouring of divorce plots, rather a flurry of bigamy novels. Literature was articulating the confusion of a population coming to terms with the fact that marriage was no longer indissoluble. Furthermore, bigamy was more palatable than divorce, with Margaret Oliphant acknowledging that it did at least show a “certain deference to the British relish for law and order”.³⁵⁴ Novelists also became preoccupied with the ‘irregular’ marriage, an informal ceremony often taking place in Scotland or Ireland, where the lack of proof could mean either spouse getting away with bigamy. The most famous example was the 1861 Yelverton Case, in which Theresa Longworth undertook a lengthy legal battle to prove that her husband Major Charles Yelverton had married her bigamously. This exposure of a problematic area of the law was explored most notably by Wilkie Collins in *Man and Wife* (1870).

One of the few novels to deal directly with divorce during the 1860s was Mrs Henry Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861). After the conniving Afy Hallijohn convinces Lady Isobel Carlyle of her husband Archibald’s infidelity, she elopes to the continent with the rakish Captain Levison, only to find herself swiftly abandoned and subsequently divorced. Whereas Archibald Carlyle is free to marry the importunate Barbara Hare, his ex-wife becomes a shadow of her former self, forced to endure demotion to the rank of governess, and to watch impotently as her young son dies. In *East Lynne*, divorce means liberation for the husband but humiliation for the wife. Rather than lamenting the double standard, Wood issues a warning to her women readers, and the message is salutary rather

³⁵⁰ F M L Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain 1830-1900* (London: Fontana, 1988), p.445.

³⁵¹ Poovey, p.51.

³⁵² Jane Jordan, ‘The Law and Sensation’, in Gilbert *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, pp.507–515 (p.509).

³⁵³ Chase and Levenson, p.187.

³⁵⁴ Margaret Oliphant, ‘Novels’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 94 (1863), 168–83 (p.169).

than subversive. The conservative tone of Wood's novel is confirmed by Geraldine Jewsbury's approving reader's report, contrasting starkly with her views on Marryat's *Love's Conflict*.³⁵⁵

The anonymously published novel *My Lady* (1858) is a more sympathetic portrayal of the wronged woman. When Lady Umphraville's husband, Sir Philip, elopes with another man's wife, she suffers the ignominy of the case being discussed at length in the press. After the failure of his affair, Sir Philip returns to the family home, resuming his position at its head. When Lady Umphraville refuses to countenance this final insult, Sir Philip invokes the custody laws to deny her access to their children, subsequently obtaining a court order to sue her for restitution of conjugal rights. Lady Umphraville has no case for divorce, as her husband's adultery has not been compounded by another 'aggravating' factor, and her only release is through the expedient of an untimely death. This novel shows that the Matrimonial Causes Act had done little to protect wives, showcasing the implications of the sexual double standard.

Ouida's *Moths* (1880) showed a divorced woman happy and enjoying a new life, an outcome never before attempted in fiction. Earlier writers, like Wood, had bowed to convention, ensuring that divorcées were both repentant and ruined. Although nominally radical, *Moths*, with its sparkling narrative sweep across the glamorous capitals of Europe to the snowy outposts of the Russian empire, has a fairy-tale quality, removing the action from the reality of readers' lives. Jordan argues that "in dealing with the heroine's ... legal incapacity to extricate herself from marriage, it engages very seriously with contemporary debates concerning anomalies in legislation relating to marital separation and divorce".³⁵⁶ This is true to an extent, but, by setting the action overseas and making her heroine Vere subject to Russian laws, Ouida ensures that she is rendered passive in the divorce (only husbands can issue proceedings) even though in England she would have substantial grounds for divorcing him, on account of his serial adultery and cruelty. Vere is liberated only when Prince Zouroff tires of her, and she is denied the agency necessary to release herself. Indeed, Vere believes that "The woman who can wish for a divorce and drag her wrongs into public—such wrongs!—is already wanton herself ... A woman who divorces her husband is a prostitute legalised by a form, that is all."³⁵⁷ Ouida does allow her heroine a second, more fulfilling marriage, but she remains "forever defiled,"³⁵⁸ her happiness tempered by shame.

Wilkie Collins's *The Evil Genius* (1886) was, in many ways, ahead of its time, featuring a partly sympathetic portrayal of a mistress, and also of Catherine Linley, a woman who refuses to forgive her husband's adultery. Collins's initially radical treatment of the marriage question suddenly recoils, however, as though terrified of its own subversion. By the end of the novel, the sexual double

³⁵⁵ Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley, 19 June 1861, Add MS 46656, Bentley Archives.

³⁵⁶ Jane Jordan, 'Ouida', in *A Return to the Common Reader: Print Culture and the Novel, 1850-1900*, ed. by Beth Palmer and Adelene Buckland (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate), p.49.

³⁵⁷ Ouida, *Moths*, ed. by Natalie Schroeder (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2005), pp.422–23.

³⁵⁸ Ouida, p.541.

standard is firmly upheld, with Catherine denied a divorce. To strengthen his morally conservative message, Collins devotes a paragraph to the authorial voice in which he declares that a husband's "sexual frailty" should not be deemed sufficient grounds for divorce.³⁵⁹ Although divorce is shown to be Catherine's only means of recourse, Collins advises that she should have exercised forgiveness, allowing her daughter to live with her estranged husband and his mistress. Perversely, Catherine's initial forbearance is criticised by the divorce court judge, who accuses her of being "impulsively ready to forgive,"³⁶⁰ and ultimately she is held to be equally responsible for the marital breakdown. This imbrication of patriarchy and the law places Catherine in a double bind, thereby epitomising the powerlessness of women. What begins as a tentatively disruptive text resolves itself into a morally conservative conclusion. Collins argues that male sexual urges render monogamy impossible and that a husband's adultery should be accommodated within marriage. While tacitly acknowledging that this situation is unfair to wives, he finds himself unable to suggest a viable alternative.

Unlike many of her sensational peers, Marryat uses bigamy as a narrative device in only a handful of novels, preferring instead to challenge the institution of marriage from within, or to present alternatives for women. Divorce is seldom invoked directly, Marryat aware from her own experience that life as a divorcée or separated woman was a difficult one. The eponymous young hero of *The Confessions of Gerald Estcourt* (1867) is, like the six-year-old Marryat, caught up in his parents' divorce, receiving an early education in the disparity of the sexes:

I lay awake pondering on the account which I had heard of my parents' separation, and the reason of the great inequality in their establishments. The question puzzled me; it was my first insight to the law of England as exhibited in favour of men versus women.³⁶¹

Estcourt's father is a successful novelist who is able to retain his fortune and make his estranged wife live on a pittance. The 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act made no provision for alimony, this situation remaining unaddressed until the 1878 Act. The young Estcourts enjoy a much better life with their father, resenting the periods they have to spend in Croydon with their bitter and impecunious mother – a situation likely to have been based on Marryat's own peripatetic childhood. Gerald is confused by the inequitable dissolution of his parents' marriage, asking: "When people marry, don't they promise to share everything together; why should there be a difference between them?" His sister Emmeline responds: "Oh! don't ask such things, Gerald; it's the law of the land, dear; beyond your understanding or mine." (I:65)

As an adult, Gerald enjoys his masculine privilege, forgetting his earlier introduction to sexual inequality. As eldest son he has inherited a fortune and is able to move freely between his London *pied à terre* and the family estate. Believing his status places him beyond reproach, he moves a young

³⁵⁹ Wilkie Collins, *The Evil Genius*, ed. by Graham Law (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1994), p.347.

³⁶⁰ *The Evil Genius*, p.214.

³⁶¹ Florence Marryat, *The Confessions of Gerald Estcourt*, 3 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1867), I, p.67.

woman into his house, even though they are unconnected. His actions are challenged only when he attempts to woo Ada Rivers, a “thinking woman”. (206) Imagining her preoccupations to be as frivolous as his own, he is astonished to discover that she is pondering the “vast difference with which the same actions are judged in men and women,” continuing: “We are made by the same Hand; endowed with the same feelings, impulses, and affections: and yet the world judges us as if we were entirely different creations.” Gerald replies that it is the laws of society that are responsible, to which she retorts: “The laws of society – yes! but who made those laws? Were they not laid down by men for their own advantage and against ours? And yet they call use the weaker vessels, and profess to cherish and protect us!” (I:204) Ada draws the reader’s attention to the fact that women’s subordination is literally man-made, rather than the result of biological determinism. Already disarmed by Ada’s outburst, Gerald’s enthusiasm is further dampened by the discovery that she has a child by a deceased husband. His pride struggles with living proof of Ada’s sexual experience and he wishes the baby dead. The novel ends not with Gerald taming this independent-minded woman, but with her delivering an ultimatum that he must prove himself worthy of her love by renouncing his earlier chauvinism. Their marriage is by no means inevitable, and is subject to negotiation before Ada will consent.

In *The Prey of the Gods* (1871) Marryat depicts a woman deploying similar tactics. Trapped in a loveless marriage with the sepulchral Sir Lyster Gwynne, Lady Gwendoline falls for the dubious charms of Auberon Slade, a notorious poet, based on Algernon Swinburne. Their plans to elope are abandoned when Lady Gwendoline’s daughter Daisy sustains a serious injury and she resolves to perform her maternal duty by remaining in the marital home to care for her. Disgusted by his lover’s decision to put the needs of her child before him, Slade quickly agrees to a hasty and improvident marriage to a dull young woman. He soon comes to regret his haste when Sir Lyster dies of apoplexy on Slade’s wedding day. Although Marryat releases Lady Gwendoline from her marriage through the expedient of her husband’s death, rather than through divorce, she does not simply use it as a device to unite her star-crossed lovers. Instead, Marryat makes Slade suffer as a single father who comes to realise the responsibility of parenthood. A decade passes before Lady Gwendoline decides he has achieved a greater understanding of women, and only then does she agree to marry him. By this stage, they are both past their prime and their union will be based on a true meeting of minds, rather than on sexual excitement. Like Gerald Estcourt, Slade must prove himself worthy of a woman’s love, rather than unashamedly expecting her devotion as his right. Having already experienced the carceral state of marriage, Lady Gwendoline is keen to stipulate her terms.

In this novel, Marryat subverts the traditional plot trajectory – the wicked (or morally questionable) prosper, whereas the virtuous (but dull) meet with an untimely end. Lady Gwendoline is presented sympathetically and is by far the most appealing character in the novel. Furthermore, as the story is told in the present tense, the reader is invited into her consciousness, thereby creating a

sense of vicarious participation in her actions. Her ten years of living independently is also presented positively: she is financially secure and has no need of a husband, unless she decides to marry for love. She rejects a marriage proposal from a retired army major, privileging her autonomy over security and convention. Lady Gwendoline is also shown to be a very good mother – Daisy flourishes under her care and does not miss the dead father who neglected her.

Marryat's portrayal of this heroine is in many respects a riposte to the downfall of Mrs Henry Wood's Lady Isobel Carlyle. Rather than punishing her for her adultery, Marryat rewards Lady Gwendoline with the death of her rebarbative husband and by a fulfilling relationship with her daughter. She is even reunited with her lover once he has undergone a teleological experience that divests him of his arrogance. The characters of Sir Lyster and Lady Gwendoline are also evocative of Sir Lester and Lady Dedlock in Dickens' *Bleak House*, with Marryat creating a similar sense of ennui and marital dissatisfaction. Rather than prostrate herself with impotent longing for her lost lover, however, Lady Gwynne embraces independence. Although Marryat avoids portraying her heroine as a divorcée, she is radical in portraying elective single motherhood and suggesting that a child could be happier without a father. In this novel, Marryat manages to be radical, but is also careful to avoid criticism that proponents of women's rights shunned the responsibilities of motherhood, showing that what is right for the mother also benefits the child. Unsurprisingly, the *Saturday Review* was appalled by *The Prey of the Gods*, describing Sir Lyster as "the whipping-boy whereon Mrs Church exercises her lash against husbands in general".³⁶² The fact that Marryat provoked such a strong reaction shows that her writing was challenging deep-held beliefs and the prevailing domestic ideology. Marriage is shown as requiring compromise on both sides, rather than as an institution that succeeds by subjugating women.

Marryat also addresses and promotes the idea of elective single motherhood in her 1882 novel *How They Loved Him* (1882). This time she reworks elements of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853) and Ouida's *Moths* to realise one of her most radical messages, questioning both marriage and heteronormativity. Fenella Barrington spends her adolescence in a Belgian convent, abandoned by a mother more interested in securing a rich husband than in caring for her daughter. Fenella emerges aged sixteen "a white innocent lily,"³⁶³ with little knowledge of the outside world. When informed that she must leave and find a husband, Fenella professes that she loves her friend Honorée St. Just and would like to marry her instead, imagining them living a happy life together. (I:30) The setting of the scene in a homosocial environment carries more than a suggestion of lesbianism. This same-sex desire is mirrored by Mrs Barrington's lady's maid, Eliza Bennet, who finds herself "magnetised" by her mistress' presence and "thrills" at her touch; (I:104) in her presence her face "glowed with ardour". (II:92) Fenella is advised that female marriage is both impossible and

³⁶² 'The Prey of the Gods', *Saturday Review*, 23 September 1871, p.410.

³⁶³ Florence Marryat, *How They Loved Him*, 3 vols. (London: F V White & Co, 1882), I, p.17.

undesirable, and she is banished to Eliza's brother's farm in a remote area of Wales (a clear parallel with Gaskell's *Ruth*). Upon arrival, Eliza promptly breaks her leg, leaving Fenella to move around unchaperoned, "a child in experience, and a woman in feeling". (II:5) She is easy prey for the handsome and urbane Geoffrey Doyne, who persuades her to enjoy a series of secret trysts with him. The nature of these meetings is suggested by the name of the local man who enjoys watching them: Mr Tugwell. When his family force him to marry a woman he does not love, Doyne abandons Fenella, after she tells him blushing, "you have made me a woman". (II:18)

Fenella is obliged to return to London and live with her mother. When Mrs Barrington discovers that her daughter is pregnant, she strikes her hard across the face, the first of many blows she administers. They move to Belgium to avoid scandal, where the local community comments on the screams emanating daily from the Barringtons's cottage. Mrs Barrington is determined to induce a miscarriage through regular beatings and kickings, and after one particularly brutal episode Fenella throws herself half-naked into an icy stream. Her baby is born soon afterwards, mute and without the use of her legs. She is placed immediately with foster parents and Mrs Barrington and Eliza collude to convince Fenella that she died. Determined to recover the family reputation, Mrs Barrington forces Fenella into a loveless marriage with the respectable Sir Gilbert Conroy. Although himself a Lothario, he is appalled to discover that the new Lady Conroy has a 'past,' and one evidenced by her newly-discovered daughter, Valeria. Exercising the full gamut of masculine privilege, he declares himself free of the marriage, while dictating that Fenella must remain in the marital home and subject to his financial and moral control. Instead, Fenella instigates a legal separation, insisting on maintaining herself and Valeria. Reverting to her maiden name, she cultivates her singing voice and pursues a career on the stage, ignoring the gossip that inevitably follows her.

When Doyne's wife dies, leaving him with four young sons, he seeks out Fenella, asking her to marry him so he can become her "protector and guardian". (III:267) Fenella accuses him of hypocrisy, having maintained a façade of respectability for so long when she was obliged to deal alone with the consequences of their affair. When he explains the importance of having a man in her life, she retorts "I have had enough of that sort of thing to last me a lifetime," also impugning his masculinity. (III:291) Marriage for Fenella is irrelevant; Doyne failed to provide either emotional or financial support, forcing her to become both mother and father to Valeria, and she has no need of a protector or guardian. Marryat illustrates that the notion of separate spheres that limits women is entirely specious if men fail to fulfil their self-appointed role as provider and protector.

Moths and *Ruth* both attracted opprobrium, but Marryat artfully pushed those themes even further than either Gaskell or Ouida had done. Whereas Ruth must do penance and eventually die for her 'sin,' Fenella embraces the opportunity to live beyond the realms of respectable society. Marryat makes clear "this is not the history of a saint," (II:290) establishing her heroine as a real woman, rather than a virtuous cipher. The critical response was one of outrage. *The Spectator*

referred to *How They Loved Him* as a “powerful and unpleasant novel” and an “utter mistake”.³⁶⁴ The *Westminster Review*, meanwhile, thought it an “unsavoury book” with “no redeeming quality,” their exasperated critic imploring Marryat to cease writing altogether.³⁶⁵ The vehemence of these reviews demonstrates the subversive nature of Marryat’s work. The 1851 Census had placed single mothers firmly at the bottom of the pile, but Marryat elevates them, making them aspirational rather than shameful figures, and showing marriage to be an unattractive prospect for some women.

In *The Dream that Stayed* (1896), Marryat returns to the plot of *East Lynne*, having condemned its timidity and unoriginality and criticised Wood’s decision to have Lady Isobel elope with an unworthy man. Marryat argues that authors like Wood are “so terribly afraid of outraging the sensibility of their readers, that they try to make an improper thing as proper as possible, and render it (to my mind) far worse than it would otherwise have been”.³⁶⁶ In *The Dream that Stayed*, Mrs Raynham abandons her husband and daughter for an old lover with whom she goes on to have another child. When her lover dies, Mrs Raynham returns to her husband, who is prepared to put the affair behind them. Still in love with his wife, he withstands the taunts of the local community. Here Marryat transposes traditional gender roles, with the wife succumbing to carnal desires and the husband exercising compassion and forgiveness. Marryat argues that an adulterous woman should not be condemned and ruined for a mistake as Lady Isobel was in *East Lynne*. The reference to Mrs Henry Wood’s novel is made mischievously clear when one of the children refers to Mrs Raynham as “muvver,” recalling the famous line from the stage adaptation. Again, the critics were incredulous, the *Academy* decreeing: “If a woman plays battledore and shuttlecock with the seventh commandment in the irresponsible, motiveless way that she does, she ought to take the consequences.”³⁶⁷ Marryat’s attempt to establish in fiction a single standard for sexual behaviour was roundly condemned.

Rather than simply grant her heroines second, happier marriages through bigamy or the death of an inconvenient spouse, Marryat directly challenged the institution of marriage itself, questioning its centrality to a woman’s life. Lady Gwendoline and Ada Rivers negotiate the contract of the separate spheres before they will agree to its terms; Fenella Barrington rejects it completely; and Mrs Raynham manages to find within the institution the latitude usually enjoyed only by men. Whereas her contemporaries were subtly reworking the marriage plot, Marryat was redefining it by imagining new possibilities for her heroines, both within and outside marriage.

³⁶⁴ ‘How They Loved Him’, *The Spectator*, 23 September 1882, p.1234.

³⁶⁵ ‘Belles Lettres’, *Westminster Review*, October 1882, pp.574–589 (pp.580–581).

³⁶⁶ *The Nobler Sex*, p.187.

³⁶⁷ ‘The Dream That Stayed’, *The Academy*, 12 December 1896, p.528.

‘An Entire Subversion of Domestic Rule’: The Married Women’s Property Acts

When the Married Women’s Property Bill was debated in Parliament in 1870, the MP George Shaw-Lefevre quipped that the marriage service ought to be changed: the husband said that he endowed his wife with all his earthly goods, but in reality it was the other way around.³⁶⁸ Upon marriage, a wife effectively ceded all control of her financial assets to her husband. Except for her clothing and personal ornaments, known as ‘paraphernalia,’ a husband could dispose of his wife’s wealth as he saw fit and without her permission. Even gifts from husband to wife remained the former’s property and could be revoked (a situation examined at length in Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds*). Even if a husband deserted his wife, he was still entitled to control her earnings and property, even to support another household and common-law family. When her husband did exactly that, the novelist Mrs Alexander Fraser was on two occasions denied a judicial separation, thereby obliging her to subsidise his adultery.³⁶⁹ Although women were supposedly supported financially by male relatives, the 1851 Census showed that a quarter of married women were employed outside the home.³⁷⁰ As with marriage itself, it became clear that reality was rapidly diverging from ideology.

The 1850s saw the beginning of the campaign to reform the property laws with a petition presented to Parliament on 14th March 1856. Among the signatories were Elizabeth Gaskell, Geraldine Jewsbury, Jane Welsh Carlyle, Marian Evans and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. None of these women was an outspoken advocate of women’s rights (quite the reverse in the case of Jewsbury and Gaskell), yet they recognised the importance of retaining their own earnings. Marryat would have been in India at the time and possibly unaware of events back home. However, the progress of this long-fought campaign was to have a profound effect on her life. Although a resolution was subsequently moved and seconded to reform the law, traditionalists on all sides succeeded in replacing the Bill with the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, legislation that, as I showed earlier, enshrined the sexual double standard in law and did little to protect wives. Following a sustained campaign by the Married Women’s Property Committee, fourteen years later the Bill passed through the Commons intact, only to be eviscerated by the Lords, who thought its further passage would herald “an entire subversion of domestic rule”.³⁷¹ Its chief enemy was Lord Penzance, who later presided over Marryat’s divorce proceedings.

³⁶⁸ Quoted in Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women’s Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1983), p.154.

³⁶⁹ Black, p.344.

³⁷⁰ Holcombe, p.8.

³⁷¹ Holcombe, p.174.

The Married Women's Property Act of 1870 satisfied few of its supporters' demands, but did at least recognise that in some circumstances married women should control their own earnings and inherit property. Montague Lush described it, with the benefit of hindsight, as a "curiously tentative and partial measure";³⁷² one MP at the time thought it "a feeble compromise".³⁷³ Significantly for Marryat and the literary signatories of the original petition, a married woman who wrote a book after 1st January 1871 would herself hold the copyright, rather than it belonging automatically to her husband. For example, Millicent Garrett Fawcett's husband Henry had to bequeath to her in his will the copyright of one of her early books,³⁷⁴ and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna changed her name so that her estranged husband could not claim her literary earnings.³⁷⁵ Having come so close to victory, campaigners redoubled their efforts, finally achieving their demands in the Act of 1882, described by Mary Lyndon Shanley as "arguably the single most important change in the legal status of women in the nineteenth century".³⁷⁶ Married women were at last granted the same rights over property as unmarried women and were treated as a separate legal entity. They were now *femes soles* rather than *femes couverts* – husbands and wives were no longer one person under law. Women would never again find themselves in the anomalous position of taking legal action against their husband, but finding themselves a defendant, as Marryat did in 1875.

Opponents damned the Act as a "social revolution"³⁷⁷ as its effect was to "sweep away for all practical purposes the old common law disabilities of a married woman".³⁷⁸ Conservatives feared that this power shift would turn the wife into a "domestic tyrant," the final debates punctuated with cries of "No, no!"³⁷⁹ As John Tosh observes, "To be head of a household, and to be visibly head of it, was essential to masculine status,"³⁸⁰ and this Act suggested the possibility of two heads, with equal authority. Throughout her fiction, Marryat showed that women were men's equals, and sometimes their superiors.

Given the involvement of women writers in the nascent campaign, the issues it raised are remarkably absent from fiction of the mid-Victorian period. For example, in addition to signing the original petition, Elizabeth Gaskell in her letters made two references to the fact that her husband

³⁷² Montague Lush, p.353.

³⁷³ Holcombe, p.179.

³⁷⁴ David Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women: The Life of Millicent Garrett Fawcett* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), p.53.

³⁷⁵ Linda K Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p.44.

³⁷⁶ Shanley, p.103.

³⁷⁷ Holcombe, p.201.

³⁷⁸ Montague Lush, p.354.

³⁷⁹ Holcombe, p.201.

³⁸⁰ John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp.60–61.

pocketed her earnings,³⁸¹ yet there is no consideration of this law in her fiction. Two full-length studies have examined representations of women's property in Victorian fiction. Deborah Wynne's *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Period* (2011) focuses on "things," rather than what might be referred to as real estate. Wynne usefully relates her study to Hegel's theory of property ownership as an act of will and thus essential to personhood, arguing that a wife's ability to transact in her own right validates her as an individual.³⁸² Wynne sees women's assertion of individuality as a crucial step in the path to suffrage and, although real estate is not covered by her study, there is an inherent link, given householders were the only citizens qualified to vote.³⁸³ As I shall show, Marryat makes frequent use of female householders to challenge the idea of women's innate dependency, proving their fitness to be considered citizens in their own right.

In *Mistress of the House* (1997), Tim Dolin considers how Victorian ideas of property were represented in novels between 1854 and 1882. He argues that coverture was felt "as a powerful institutional undercurrent" and that women's opposition to it broke out as "textual disruption and resistance".³⁸⁴ Although he introduces some interesting ideas, Dolin quickly abandons the framework of the Married Women's Property Acts in favour of theoretical ideas of landscape and, with his focus on canonical texts, he misses the opportunity to engage with some lesser-known voices. Furthermore, his desire to give equal weight to male and female authors provides a composite view of attitudes to property, but fails to fully realise the idea of textual disruption and resistance that he introduces.

One of the novels that dealt most explicitly with the theme of married women's property was Dinah Mulock Craik's *A Brave Lady* (1870). Serialised between May 1869 and April 1870, the story unfolded as the Bill was debated in Parliament. In her polemical novel, Craik invokes powerful maternal imagery to argue that wives' financial assets should be protected for the sake of their children. Josephine Scanlan, a mother of six children, leaves her spendthrift husband Edward after he repeatedly privileges his whims over the needs of his family. Learning she has no right to retain her own earnings, Josephine returns to Edward, only to watch her children die, one by one. The overwrought emotion of the narrative serves to illustrate the devastating consequences of mothers' lack of financial autonomy, but the relentless misery heaped on her heroine distracts the reader from Craik's political message. Josephine is presented as a victim of male solipsism, rather than as a strong woman capable of managing her own financial affairs.

Charlotte Riddell's *Weird Stories* was published in 1882, just as the Second Married Women's Property Act was debated in Parliament. In contrast to both Marryat and Craik, Riddell's stories

³⁸¹ J A V Chapple and Arthur Pollard, eds., *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), pp.70, 89.

³⁸² Deborah Wynne, *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2011), p.23.

³⁸³ Wynne, p.17.

³⁸⁴ Tim Dolin, *Mistress of the House: Women of Property in the Victorian Novel* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), p.2.

depict the unfortunate consequences of women gaining financial independence. In ‘The Old House on Vauxhall Walk’, the ghost of Miss Tynan, a woman who refused to share her fortune during life, is condemned to eternal Scrooge-like lamentation over her miserliness. She finds peace only on relinquishing her wealth to a male heir. The living ‘ghost’ in ‘The Open Door’ is a malevolent woman seeking a lost will, who is prepared to poison and shoot anyone who attempts to thwart her search. As Vanessa Dickerson observes, “the desire for money has transformed the demure angel into a fury the male can barely control”.³⁸⁵ The uncontrollable fury is Riddell’s prophecy of what havoc legislative change might wreak. Miss Gostock in ‘Nut Bush Farm’ represents an even less subtle warning. Although an astute businesswoman, she wears men’s clothes and keeps her hair short; her house does “not contain a single feminine belonging—not even a thimble,”³⁸⁶ and she unashamedly favours brandy over domesticity. Miss Gostock is described in summary as “some monstrous figure in a story of giants and hobgoblins,”³⁸⁷ a nightmare vision of the emancipated woman. Riddell proposes this character as the corollary of women controlling their own wealth, without the guiding influence of men. The independent woman is at best a man, at worst a freak.

The issues surrounding women’s property pervade Anthony Trollope’s novels, but he ultimately presents the subordinate position of women as desirable, given the unconscionable consequences of the alternative. While mindful of the inequitable position of wives, his sympathy is confined exclusively to the working classes, who he thought alone needed protection. As Shanley observes, foregrounding the problems of the poor allowed people to express liberal sentiments without engaging with feminist principles.³⁸⁸ In *The Struggles of Brown, Jones and Robinson* (1870), published in the year of the first Married Women’s Property Act, Trollope exposes the problem in the opening chapter:

The widow McCockerell, in bestowing her person upon Mr. Brown, had not intended to endow him also with entire dominion over her shop and chattels. She loved to be supreme over her butter tubs, and she loved also to be supreme over her till.³⁸⁹

Her husband’s views, however, “were more in accordance with the law of the land as laid down in the statutes”.³⁹⁰ The ailing Mrs Brown discovers to her horror that she is unable to bequeath even a small portion of her estate to her daughters from her first marriage. On her death, Mr Brown sells the business to start another, denying his step-daughters any form of inheritance. The authorial

³⁸⁵ Vanessa Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), p.139.

³⁸⁶ Charlotte Riddell, ‘Nut Bush Farm’, in *Weird Stories*, ed. by Emma Liggins (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2010), p.67.

³⁸⁷ Riddell, p.68.

³⁸⁸ Shanley, p.15.

³⁸⁹ Anthony Trollope, *The Struggles of Brown, Jones and Robinson* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1870), p.12.

³⁹⁰ *The Struggles of Brown, Jones and Robinson*, p.12.

voice, usually prominent in Trollope's fiction, remains silent – the problem is presented sympathetically, but without solution.

In *An Old Man's Love* (1884), housekeeper Mrs Baggett is pestered by her disreputable husband, who regularly importunes for money. Although they have been estranged for some time, he urges her to perform her wifely duty by providing him with gin and shelter. The politically aware reader might assume that Mrs Baggett is able to invoke the recently-passed 1882 Married Women's Property Act, but she repeatedly submits to her fate in melodramatic fashion, insisting on doing her "dooty". Trollope suggests that even the law cannot deny a woman's responsibility to her husband.

When portraying middle-class wives, Trollope takes almost sadistic delight in their legal impotence. In *The Prime Minister* (1871) the wealthy and powerful widow Madam Max becomes the demure Mrs Phinn, meekly asking her penniless husband's permission before spending her own money. Phinn is at least benevolent and likely to grant her requests; Emily Wharton is less fortunate in marrying the adventurer Ferdinand Lopez. When he fritters away her dowry on guano speculation, the authorial voice lays the blame squarely on Emily: it is her fault for making a poor choice of husband. Suffering clinical depression following the death of both her husband and her baby, Emily is coerced into a hasty second marriage; there is no option for her to be independent. Even Martha Dunstable, a lively and intelligent heiress, is married off to Dr Thorne in *Framley Parsonage* (1861), with a sense he is performing a civic duty in rescuing an old maid from the shelf.

Trollope's middle-class heroines, then, become little more than financial assets without agency and must circulate in the marriage market to find an owner. For Trollope, a wealthy single woman is an anomaly that must be resolved through subordination in marriage, and he parodies the elective spinster in *Can You Forgive Her?*, *Miss Mackenzie*, and *Is He Popenjoy?* As G W Pigman observes, Trollope is "vulnerable to John Stuart Mill's criticism of 'those who find it easier to draw a ludicrous picture of what they do not like, than to answer the arguments for it'".³⁹¹ Victoria Glendinning concludes that he thought marriage good for women, and good for the world. His association with prominent feminists such as Kate Field and Emily Faithfull opened his mind, but "this horror of women abandoning the domesticity which sustained men overruled his intelligent sympathy".³⁹²

Rather than presenting these laws as an opportunity for women to abandon domesticity, Marryat demonstrated in her fiction how they could be employed to negotiate an identity as equal marriage partner. *Her World Against a Lie* (1878) was published between the Married Women's Property Acts, praising and explaining the progress already made, but also demanding more. The

³⁹¹ Anthony Trollope, *Kept in the Dark*, ed. by G. W. Pigman (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.2221.

³⁹² Victoria Glendinning, *Trollope* (London: Pimlico, 1993), p.328.

heroine, Hephzibah Horton is described as “the spirit of a man cased in a woman’s body”³⁹³ and someone who reads the papers and keeps abreast of current affairs:

“A fine speech!” she thinks as she finishes a long discourse on the injustice of taxing landowners who are ineligible for representation in Parliament. “I wonder what the Ministry will say to it! Ah! if the time had only come for them to give us a voice in such matters, I would move heaven and earth until I had seen some of these radical wrongs set right. But what’s the use of talking when the greatest wrong of which they are guilty—the position of our unfortunate sex—is right under their noses, and they will not even notice it. For eighteen centuries they have cramped our minds as the Chinese have cramped their women’s feet, and for the same reason—the fear that we should prove as strong a body as themselves—and it will be a hard fight to get the swathing-bands off now. But I see it coming in the distance—the hour when we shall assert our right to stand side by side with the other half of creation, and be heard in our own cause. Heaven grant I may live to see it come!” (I:2)

Hephzibah uses her knowledge of the law to help Delia Moray, a young woman married to a violent alcoholic. Before the main action has even begun, Marryat makes an impassioned political speech through her avatar, supporting the idea of female suffrage. Sensing that another leap forward is required before equality is achieved, Marryat explains this will be facilitated only when women have a direct political voice:

...if women had but ventilated their wrongs from the commencement, instead of hiding them in their own breasts, they would have been emancipated before now! ... We have suffered in silence too long not to be afraid of our own voices. (I:30)

There is acknowledgement that the first Act made a difference to the legal position of wives, and Hephzibah praises it to Delia, effectively assuming the position of the author addressing the reader:

Not that I’m an advocate for marriage, as you well know; though, since that blessed Property Act has passed, it’s not half the slavery it used to be ... We haven’t been standing still for the last fourteen years. If I warned you not to place your foot upon the rotten plank, because it would give way and precipitate you into the stream, that’s proper caution. But when this same rotten plank has been propped up by a stout support from beneath, I should say you might cross with safety. (II:35)

Hephzibah goes on to explain the Act’s provisions, ostensibly to Delia, but actually to the reader:

[T]he ‘Married Woman’s Property Act’ is more comprehensive than any bill that has been passed for the protection of women before. It embraces a wide area of possibilities, and it provides that the earnings of any married woman, however obtained, and all investments of such earning, shall be held as her separate property, and settled to her separate use ... No more use for drunken or dissolute husbands, whose wives can earn a little money, to try and make their homes miserable as yours was made. The women can spend their earnings as they will, and snap their fingers in the men’s faces. (II:41-42)

Hephzibah herself eventually marries, retaining her own name and choosing for her husband a tiny man she can patronise without fear of him asserting his superior strength. Marriage provides Hephzibah with a room of her own and leisure to write what she pleases, while her attentive husband assumes the household cares. For Marryat this was probably wish-fulfilment realised in fiction. Marryat’s polemic is woven into a sensational, compelling and labyrinthine plot, mitigating

³⁹³ Florence Marryat, *Her World Against a Lie*, 3 vols. (London: Samuel Tinsley & Co., 1879), I, p.4.

the didacticism suggested by the above quotes. However, repeated references to women's property legislation, along with many examples to illustrate their application, show that Marryat's aim was to inform as well as to entertain. The figure of Hephzibah shows a strong woman who is not subjugated by marriage, offering a role model to her readers.

When Marryat adapted the novel for the stage in 1880, she took for herself the role of Hephzibah, thereby reinforcing her link with the character and her opinions, and also reaching a wider audience. Unfortunately, most of the script has been lost,³⁹⁴ so it is very difficult to know the extent to which the radical elements of the novel were recreated on stage. However, a detailed review of the London première suggests that the plot was left untouched, with Hephzibah retaining her stridency: "Miss Florence Marryat made a hit as Mrs Horton. The strong-minded asserter of woman's rights was hit off to the life."³⁹⁵

In *A Harvest of Wild Oats* (1878), Marryat shows that women would not have to accept the sexual double standard if they were allowed to manage their own wealth, as financial dependency forces wives to tolerate husbands' unreasonable behaviour. When her husband Frank starts making nocturnal visits to an old flame, Clare Iredell resolves to separate from him. As an independently wealthy woman with a fortune held in trust, she is able to act with more autonomy than most unhappy wives. The worldly but serpentine Addy Seymour advises: "a married woman cannot be too independent. The fact serves to keep her husband in order,"³⁹⁶ also providing Clare with anecdotes of other women disposing of mendicant husbands. When Frank demands that Clare move with him to an unattractive garrison town, she responds: "Well, it seems very hard that with twelve thousand a year of one's own, one should not be allowed to choose one's residence." (335) Frank is "thunderstruck" and "her words go through him like a sudden stab". (335) He realises that a wife who controls the purse strings is no mere chattel to be moved around at his whim. When the couple finally resolve their differences, they embark upon a marriage of two equals. Addy Seymour's advice was not altruistic – she hoped to divide the couple, believing that no man would want an independent wife. Marryat is keen to prove that strength is both attractive and necessary in a woman. Clare's femininity is stressed throughout the narrative, and she is a loving, forgiving and emancipated wife.

Elsa Carden in *Gentleman and Courtier* (1888) suddenly finds herself the owner of the imposing Newton Hall in Yorkshire, along with an income, like Clare Iredell's, of £12,000 per year. She soon attracts the attention of a much younger man, Jocelyn Yorke, who is drawn more to her wisdom and maturity than he is to her fortune. In a reversal of the traditional May-December courtship plot, Yorke begs Elsa to advise and guide him, impressed by her financial acumen. In this novel

³⁹⁴ The MS included in the Lord Chamberlain's Plays collection at the British Library comprises only a few soot-blackened pages.

³⁹⁵ 'The London Theatres', *The Era*, 19 February 1881, p.6.

³⁹⁶ Florence Marryat, *A Harvest of Wild Oats* (London: The Standard Library Company, nd), p.222.

Marryat again shows that a financially independent woman does not equal disaster, instead such women can make excellent wives. Similarly, in *How Like a Woman* (1892), Rachel Saltoun is sufficiently wealthy to become a patron of the arts and to choose a lover outside of her immediate circle. Both women are shown to be responsible and pleasant, in contrast with the grotesque monsters created by Riddell and the demure creatures imagined by Trollope. For Marryat's heroines, their money permits them the freedom to live like gentlemen, controlling their own space without the obligation to fulfil a feminine ideal. They assume a self-created identity, rather than the 'feminine' one imposed upon them by patriarchal discourses.

In her semi-autobiographical novel *The Nobler Sex* (1892), Marryat is able to provide a retrospective view of the legal advances she witnessed and from which she benefited:

The Acts which have been lately passed for the protection of married women and their earnings are the greatest blessings ever bestowed upon the daughters of England, although one half of the sex does not yet know the privileges it has gained. Had these Acts been passed twenty years sooner my life would have altered from beginning to end, and the greatest sins I have committed been avoided.³⁹⁷

Here Marryat acknowledges that, like her heroines, she was forced to be transgressive to avoid legal regulation. The Married Women's Property Acts were the fulcrum on which the women's rights movement turned. The fact that no fewer than twenty related Bills were presented to Parliament during the nineteenth century demonstrates their importance and pervasiveness during this period.³⁹⁸ This prominence is also reflected in contemporary fiction, with women's property a recurring theme in Trollope's novels and the subject of a preface in Wilkie Collins' *Man and Wife* (1870). In this emotive novel, Collins charts working-class Hester Dethridge's realisation that "[t]he law doesn't allow a married woman to call any thing her own,"³⁹⁹ as her husband reduces her to penury by appropriating all her property. Although both are critical of the law, they are ultimately conservative in their overall position on female emancipation, fearing the social consequences for men of their class.

As shown above, most women writers were reticent on the issue of property, or vehemently opposed to increasing the rights of wives. Other than Marryat, only Dinah Craik used her platform to argue for change, albeit in an overwhelmingly sentimental fashion that privileged motherhood over womanhood. Marryat alone made a heartfelt and unqualified plea for wives to be given the right to be treated as individuals, and not as the slave of their husband.

³⁹⁷ *The Nobler Sex*, p.97.

³⁹⁸ Holcombe, p.208.

³⁹⁹ Wilkie Collins, *Man and Wife*, 3 vols. (London: F S Ellis, 1870), III, p.249.

‘Grounded on Force’: Marital Violence in Marryat’s Fiction

In *On the Subjection of Women* J S Mill wrote that relations between the sexes were “grounded on force,”⁴⁰⁰ women’s supposedly submissive nature a result of physical, rather than intellectual, inferiority. A legal system that upheld a wife’s subordinate status suggested that she might require chastisement to ensure she did not assert herself. As Elizabeth Foyster notes, “violence in marriage was not always seen as a deviant behaviour, and could be viewed instead as a feature of a ‘normal’, functioning relationship.”⁴⁰¹ The nature of permissible chastisement was an area of contention, however, and this lack of clarity delayed attempts to address the situation. Blackstone’s influential *Commentaries* stated:

The husband also, by the old law, might give his wife moderate correction. For, as he is to answer for her misbehaviour, the law thought it reasonable to intrust him with this power of restraining her, by domestic chastisement, in the same moderation that a man is allowed to correct his apprentices or children. ... The civil law gave the husband the same, or a larger, authority over his wife: allowing him for some misdemeanours, flagellis et fustibus acriter verberare uxorem[.] [to beat his wife severely with scourges and sticks]⁴⁰²

The oft-quoted idea of the Rule of Thumb, whereby a husband might beat his wife with a stick no thicker than his thumb, has been rebutted comprehensively by Maeve Doggett.⁴⁰³ However, she notes that the idea remained influential, notwithstanding its apocryphal nature. Jack Straton has argued persuasively that the Rule of Thumb has served as an unhelpful distraction from more productive debates over women’s rights, with some conservatives proclaiming that the mythical status of the term proves the violence it suggests is equally imaginary.⁴⁰⁴

Sarah Stickney Ellis, the arbiter of wifely conduct, was revealingly reticent in addressing the problem in her popular conduct manuals: “What then, if by perpetual provocation, [the wife] should awaken the tempest of his wrath? We will not contemplate that thought.”⁴⁰⁵ Her assumption is that a husband’s violence manifests only in response to his wife’s shrewish behaviour, and the consequences remain unspeakable. This conspiracy of silence persists throughout most literature, revealing marital violence to be an unwritable, as well as an unspeakable, act.

In fact, from the 1840s onwards, there was a greater awareness of wife-beating, and 1853 saw the successful passage of the Aggravated Assaults on Women and Children Act, infringements

⁴⁰⁰ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and The Subjection of Women*, ed. by Alan Ryan (London and New York: Penguin, 2006), p.139.

⁴⁰¹ Elizabeth Foyster, *Marital Violence: An English Family History, 1660-1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.4.

⁴⁰² Sir William Blackstone and William Draper Lewis, *Commentaries on the Laws of England: In Four Books*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: George T. Bisel, 1922), II, p.417.

⁴⁰³ Doggett, p.7.

⁴⁰⁴ Jack C Straton, ‘Rule of Thumb Versus Rule of Law’, *Men and Masculinities*, 5 (2002), 103–109 (p.104).

⁴⁰⁵ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Mothers of England: Their Influence and Responsibility* (London: Fisher, Son & Co, 1843), p.27.

punished by a £20 fine or a six-month prison sentence. As cases came before magistrates, a “moral panic” ensued, prompting demands for a Bill to introduce flogging for violent husbands.⁴⁰⁶ When in 1856 yet another flogging Bill was defeated, *Punch* insinuated that “the real causes of the rejection of [the Bill] was the fact that wife-beating is not confined to the slums; and that if all offenders in that particular had their deserts [sic], some highly respectable gentlemen would not escape whipping”.⁴⁰⁷ One of the most prominent voices to acknowledge the extent of wife-beating was the historian John William Kaye, who decried the treatment of wives in England. Although his argument was powerful in calling for greater equality to make wives less dependent on violent husbands, Kaye stated unequivocally that “Men of education and refinement do not strike women.”⁴⁰⁸ He allows that such men might inflict psychological damage (as Trollope was to show in *He Knew He Was Right* (1869)), but remains confident that the savage beatings he describes are confined to the working classes. In Parliament, Gladstone echoed Kaye’s sentiments, but did at least allow a modicum of doubt: “adultery with cruelty [is] at present a thing *almost* unknown in the higher classes of society”.⁴⁰⁹ Even Frances Power Cobbe, whose campaigning journalism was instrumental in changing the law, was unwilling to acknowledge the extent of the problem:

Wife-beating exists in the upper and middle classes rather more, I fear, than is generally recognised, but it *rarely* extends to anything beyond an occasional blow or two of a not dangerous kind. The dangerous wife-beater belongs *almost* exclusively to the artisan and labouring classes.⁴¹⁰

As I shall show, Marryat’s novel *Her World Against a Lie*, published in the same year as Cobbe’s article, was a riposte to this selective blindness, and in subsequent novels she depicts marital violence across all classes.

As I discussed earlier, the newly-established Divorce Court exposed middle- and upper-class marriage to unprecedented scrutiny, and the results were revelatory. As A James Hammerton’s survey shows, “48% of petitioners citing cruelty were middle and upper classes,”⁴¹¹ and, contrary to popular belief:

among those appearing in the court, upper-class men were as likely as those lower in the social scale to strike their wives with pokers and similar weapons, throw them downstairs, beat them during

⁴⁰⁶ Ben Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women’s Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.70.

⁴⁰⁷ *Punch*, 17 May 1856, p.193.

⁴⁰⁸ John William Kaye, ‘Outrages on Women’, *North British Review*, 25 (1856), 233–256 (p.235).

⁴⁰⁹ 3 Hansard 147 (13 August 1857), 1538 [emphasis added].

⁴¹⁰ Frances Power Cobbe, ‘Wife-Torture in England’, *The Contemporary Review*, 32 (1878), 55–87 (p.58) [emphasis added].

⁴¹¹ A James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Married Life* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.105.

pregnancy, enforce sexual intercourse after childbirth, and indulge in marital rape or enforced sodomy.⁴¹²

Although newspapers delighted in this seemingly endless source of prurient detail, many novelists were too squeamish to make use of it in their fiction. As Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky write, “domestic violence with an origin *inside* the bourgeois home verges on the edge of the non-narratable, and is thus replete with manifest evasions, silences, and distortions in its representations of both the woman’s body and the domestic sphere it inhabits”.⁴¹³

A number of recent studies have attempted to establish a genre of domestic violence literature. Lawson and Shakinovsky’s *The Marked Body* is a psychoanalytical examination of the violated bodies of middle-class women in mid-nineteenth-century fiction and poetry. Although a useful study, their central argument that marital violence is invisible in nineteenth-century literature is countered by my own research. Marlene Tromp’s study *The Private Rod* (2000) examines the role of sensation fiction in exposing and challenging marital violence. Although partly persuasive, Tromp’s claim that the law was a “coherent, seamless text”⁴¹⁴ undermines her argument. As outlined above, attitudes to wife-beating were based on a combination of statute, common law, and popular myth and, as such, had to be tackled from a number of standpoints. Tromp’s argument that sensation fiction was successful in defeating a unified opponent, therefore, is unconvincing. Furthermore, her narrow focus on largely canonical texts excludes marginal voices, such as Marryat’s, and means that some of her conclusions are easily disputed. Similarly, Lisa Surridge’s otherwise excellent *Bleak Houses* limits its scope to well-known texts.

Two of the earliest nineteenth-century works by women authors depicting marital violence are George Eliot’s ‘Janet’s Repentance’ in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857-8) and Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). Eliot’s story depicts a wife beaten by a middle-class husband, which Lawson and Shakinovsky describe as a “realist depiction of bourgeois domestic violence”.⁴¹⁵ Eliot, however, is careful to explain that Janet is of a lower class than her lawyer husband, with visits to her mother’s humble dwelling reinforcing the idea. Moreover, Janet is presented as an alcoholic, thereby complicating the message and potentially inviting censure, rather than sympathy from the reader, who might view her husband’s chastisement as necessary.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall was criticised for scenes of “the most disgusting and revolting species,”⁴¹⁶ and is arguably “a classic of mid-Victorian feminist protest”.⁴¹⁷ Most controversial was

⁴¹² A James Hammerton, ‘Victorian Marriage and the Law of Matrimonial Cruelty’, *Victorian Studies*, 33 (1990), 269–292 (p.276).

⁴¹³ Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky, *The Marked Body: Domestic Violence in Mid-Nineteenth Century Literature* (State University of New York Press, 2002), p.6.

⁴¹⁴ Marlene Tromp, *The Private Rod: Marital Violence, Sensation and the Law in Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p.72.

⁴¹⁵ Lawson and Shakinovsky, p.61.

⁴¹⁶ Lisa Surridge, *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), p.75.

Helen Graham's denial of her husband's conjugal rights, as she slammed the bedroom door in his face, rather than his unreasonable behaviour towards her. Although violence against Helen is implied, rather than described, a subplot shows Arthur's friend Ralph Hattersley abusing his wife until she cries. The adverse reaction to this powerful novel possibly explains literary reticence on the issue of marital violence over the next two decades.

Trollope also addresses the issue of domestic violence in *The Way We Live Now* (1875). Monika Rydygier Smith argues that the "Now" of the title "implicitly equat[es] it with real conditions outside of the discursive world of the novel, violence against women is recorded as a facet of the contemporary world".⁴¹⁸ However, the only example of English non-working-class violence (that perpetrated against Lady Carbury) happens in the past, and to a figure who Trollope makes appear ridiculous (as he does with Madeline Neroni in *Barbaster Towers*). The other victim of such abuse, again told retrospectively, is Winifred Hurtle, a gun-toting American who operates entirely beyond the sensibilities of polite society. The violence committed during the immediate narrative is inflicted on by Melmotte his daughter Marie. Although Mrs Melmotte is certainly a timorous, downtrodden wife, at no point does Trollope suggest that she suffers physical abuse. Furthermore, the much-discussed dubious provenance of both father and daughter enables the reader to distance themselves from these characters, who, like Winifred Hurtle, are far beyond the English domestic norm. While Smith argues that this novel addresses the "invisibility" of domestic violence,⁴¹⁹ Trollope actually occludes it by suggesting that it is relegated to the past, or is the exclusive preserve of foreigners. As with Dickens's *Dombey and Son*, the physical manifestation of the husband's brutality is played out on the daughter (although, unlike Florence Dombey, Marie Melmotte is permitted the self-respect not to forgive her father). Although "violence against women is recorded as a facet of the contemporary world," Trollope balks at the idea of impugning the sanctity of the middle-class marriage.

As with his stance on married women's property, Trollope identifies the problem, but does not offer any solution. His ultimately 'good' women are married off at the novel's conclusion, while Mrs Hurtle, the only woman prepared to resist male violence, remains unhappy and alone. Although she appears the most genuine character in the narrative (and arguably the only likable one), men shrink from her, yet gravitate towards a bullying man. She cannot be both feminine and emancipated. After much vacillation, Paul Montague rejects Winifred's charm and urbanity for the insipid purity of Hetta Carbury. Trollope implies that the situation is regrettable, but that is how it must be.

⁴¹⁷ Ward, p.151.

⁴¹⁸ Monika Rydygier Smith, 'Trollope's Dark Vision: Domestic Violence in the Way We Live Now', *Victorian Review*, 22 (1996), 13–31 (p.13).

⁴¹⁹ Smith, p.14.

As discussed in Chapter One, Marryat intended a shocking depiction of marital violence in her first novel, *Love's Conflict* (1865), with William's "hard rule"⁴²⁰ resulting in the deformity of the heroine's baby. Extensive revision by the publisher's reader, Geraldine Jewsbury, ensured that the birth defects were instead caused by Elfrida's adulterous thoughts. By resurrecting Elfrida in her later novel *A Harvest of Wild Oats*, Marryat was able to link retrospectively the baby's death with its father's violence. Marryat revisits this theme more strongly in *A Fatal Silence* (1891), the passage of a quarter of a century (and the demise of Jewsbury) allowing for a more overt treatment. The heroine, Paula, is described as "the mother of Carl Bjørnsen's idiot child – the child whose brain and body he had blighted by his brutal violence to herself".⁴²¹ Due to the repeated blows sustained by Paula during pregnancy, their son Paulie is weak, undersized and incapable of speech. His permanently open, yet soundless mouth marks him as a silent victim of his father's abuse. After Paula flees the marital home and establishes herself as a teacher in a far-off village, Bjørnsen is able to resume his tyranny by kidnapping Paulie and exhorting money from his estranged wife. The physical abuse is compounded by financial exploitation from a man who still believes he can treat his wife and son as he pleases.

While *Her World Against a Lie* is mainly a vehicle for Marryat's views on married women's property, some of the most shocking and graphic scenes concern the physical abuse that Delia suffers at the hands of her alcoholic middle-class husband:

"... to-day, he has beaten my poor child till he is black and blue, and pushed me from the top of the stairs to the bottom. Look at my arm!" she exclaims suddenly, as she pushes up the sleeve of her thin alpaca dress, and shows the angry red and blue mark of a fresh bruise. (I:16)

Not content with abusing his wife directly, Moray causes her further torment by tying her to a chair, locking her in the room and then beating their ill son. The incarcerated Delia is forced to listen to the screams of Willie, who suffers from respiratory difficulties, as he is beaten black and blue by an "inhuman monster". (I:96) Delia is completely ignorant of the limited protection offered to her under the law and her guardian angel, Hephzibah, explains: "Have you never heard of such a thing as a protection order?" She continues:

Really, the ignorance of our sex upon matters of general information is astounding! I should have thought it was the interest of every married woman in Christendom to make herself acquainted with the relief the law contains for her. It's little enough, my dear, I can tell you, and would burden on one's brains to get by heart. A protection order, obtained from a magistrate, would render you safe from the assaults of that man to-morrow, and enable you to live in peace, and support yourself and your child. (II:24)

Hephzibah goes on to enumerate the benefits of protection orders, also explaining how they operate. This lengthy exposition is clearly designed to enlighten the female reader as much as Delia, Marryat using her literary platform as a means of educating women as to their rights (and advising

⁴²⁰ Florence Marryat, *Love's Conflict*, 3 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1865), II, p.308.

⁴²¹ Florence Marryat, *A Fatal Silence* (New York: Hovendon Company, 1891), p.84.

men of their limitations). To emphasise the message, Hephzibah later cites an example of a woman who takes out a protection order against her violent husband and then travels to the United States, where a divorce can be obtained on grounds of cruelty alone. *Her World Against a Lie* is part novel, part instruction manual, offering women the means of both metaphorical and literal escape.

When Hephzibah consults a lawyer on Delia's behalf, he replies that "there is a difficulty in drawing the line between necessary chastisement and ill-treatment," (I:117) explaining that the law shows an unwillingness to place any constraints on husbands, preferring to believe them capable of self-regulation. The widespread refusal to believe that marital violence exists in the middle classes is represented by Delia's brother-in-law, William Moray, who banishes her from his suburban villa. When she complains to him of his brother's violence, he responds:

"Really, my dear lady, these little domestic differences can have no interest for a third party. They are so much better kept to one's self."

"Little domestic differences!" she echoes scornfully. "Would your wife call it a 'little domestic difference' if her arm was bruised as mine is?" (II:242)

Here Marryat draws the reader's attention from the general to the particular, inviting them to imagine their own arm in place of Delia's, this shock of proximity a traditional sensation device. After her rapid education in the rights of woman from Hephzibah, Delia is finally able to stand up to her husband, asserting "I don't consider it my duty to submit to be treated like a dog rather than a woman." (II:221) Marryat hopes that her women readers will also feel more able to stand up to tyranny, now they have been acquainted with their rights.

Marryat's next novel, *Written in Fire* (1878) also showed marital violence in the middle-class home. Emily Hayes, an educated woman, dies of consumption, her demise hastened by her husband's abuse. Her firstborn child is also "killed by a passionate blow" from his hand.⁴²² The authorial voice pronounces it "despicable when humility is permitted to merge into humiliation". (79) Here Marryat is arguing that the submissiveness demanded of women is the cause of the violence they suffer: by becoming meek and docile, they render themselves worthless. Ominously, their son is described as having inherited his father's viciousness, using "his little sister and his animals to practice upon". (79) As I discuss in the next chapter, many feminists perceived clear links between the abuse of women and that of animals, who were both at the mercy of their owner.

In *The Root of All Evil* (1879), Marryat was also preoccupied with marital violence. Bonnie Bell, a greengrocer's assistant, is coerced into marriage with costermonger Kit Masters. Before he has even proposed, Kit forces himself upon her, his ardour undampened by her shrieks and frantic struggling.⁴²³ The authorial voice comments "[c]ommon-sense might teach them that the girl who shrinks intuitively from their embrace is hardly likely to prove a passionate and devoted wife," (138)

⁴²² Florence Marryat, *Written in Fire*, 3 vols. (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1878), I, p.78.

⁴²³ Florence Marryat, *The Root of All Evil* (London: Richard Edward King, 1879), p.14.

and their marriage is predictably unhappy, with Kit soon administering “a violent blow upon the side of the head”. (145) When Bonnie seeks her grandmother’s sympathy, she is told: “I suppose you druv ’im beside hisself and ’e just let out at you. You musn’t think of sich trifles. ... You mustn’t never go against a man. Allays let ’im ’ave ’is own way, and ’e’ll jog on quiet enough.” (185) Having also witnessed the shoemaker’s wife “with her cheek laid open from a blow with a cobbler’s awl,” Bonnie realises that marriage means servitude and subordination: “To be a wife, she found, was to be a sort of servant—at the beck and call of one person only—who must do, not what she liked, but what she was told, or she would be punished for her disobedience.” (186)

The frequency of Kit’s violence has an impact on Bonnie’s mental capacity, rendering her “stupid and dull,” prompting him to “jog her memory with a stick”. (186) Her expressions of grief at her grandmother’s death provoke a “quieting dose” from Kit so severe that his mother fears he will end up in jail, like one of their neighbours who “finished his wife by mistake”. (191) Driven to despair, Bonnie runs away, seeking sanctuary in Putney workhouse, but is soon tracked down by her husband. Although a shadow of her former self, he recognises her by the “scream of terror,” with which she greets him, her frightened face haunting the matron after he drags her away. (192) Back home, Kit is told by a neighbour that Bonnie is pregnant, and she warns him that he will be lynched if he lays a hand on her. This panoptical surveillance keeps him in check, at least temporarily, but Kit gets his own back by selling the baby boy to a rich family for £100. Although Bonnie finally tracks him down, he dies soon afterwards, his constitution weakened by his father’s mistreatment.

The plight of Bonnie Masters recalls the case of Susannah Palmer, also a costermonger’s wife, whose harrowing story dominated the press in December 1868. While her husband had escaped prison after blacking her eyes and punching out five of her teeth, Susannah was sent to Newgate for inflicting a slight cut to his hand in self-defence.⁴²⁴ When Frances Power Cobbe attempted to secure her release, Susannah “expressed perfect contentment because her husband could not get at her,”⁴²⁵ mirroring Bonnie Masters’s relief at having found sanctuary in the workhouse. For some women, prison and the workhouse were preferable to the institution of marriage.

This working-class marriage is juxtaposed with that of Lord and Lady Chasemore, who are no happier than Kit and Bonnie. Like Kit, Lord Chasemore believes he can do as he pleases with his wife, informing her that she must submit to his control, else he will be obliged to use “brute force” (172-173). Grasping her arm roughly, he snarls “it is time you learned who is your master!” (172) With the benefit of vast wealth, the Chasemores are able to live apart, but the wife remains under her husband’s control, albeit at a distance. Lord Chasemore’s threats and rough treatment of his wife show the prevailing idea that women’s behaviour must be regulated by superior strength and

⁴²⁴ Cobbe, ‘Wife-Torture in England’, p.69.

⁴²⁵ Doggett, p.112.

coercion. The novel's title of *The Root of All Evil* reflects a plot concerned with society's inexorable descent into materialism, but also implies that male brutality is just as damaging, estranging families and dividing communities.

Some of the violent scenes depicted in these novels reappear in Marryat's semi-autobiographical novel *The Nobler Sex* (1892), suggesting they were based on her own experience. William Stopford (modelled on Thomas Ross Church) is repeatedly violent towards his wife Mollie (Marryat) and his child Nita. In one of the early scenes, William pushes Mollie violently against a table for refusing the sexual advances of his boss, thereby ruining his employment prospects. Like James Moray, he also torments his child in order to persecute his wife, his misogyny compounded by this attack on the maternal bond. William strikes baby Nita's legs with a riding whip, slashing her legs until they were "covered with weals". (62) Mollie explains how she tried to wrest the whip from him, but:

wrenching his arm away he threw me violently across the threshold which divided the two apartments, where I fell against the bed he had just quitted. I was considerably shaken and my spine was bruised and hurt. (62)

When Mollie manages to escape with Nita, William follows them to England, expecting her to support him. Mollie seeks refuge with her family, who offer no sympathy, instead urging her to return to her violent husband and resume her wifely duties. After arguments about money:

[H]e gave me a blow that sent me reeling down the flight of stairs. I caught at the banisters to try and save myself in falling, and broke off two of them in my hand, and I landed on the mat in the hall with no limbs broken, fortunately, but cut, bruised and bleeding. Although William had often shoved and pushed me about before, and had tied my hands behind my back, and subjected me to various other indignities, this was the first time he had actually assaulted me. (99-100)

The "various other indignities" implies marital rape, a concept that did not exist in law until 1991, and also recalls Hester Detheridge in Wilkie Collins's *Man and Wife*, who refers obliquely to suffering "the last and worst of many indignities".⁴²⁶ Mollie seeks protection from the seemingly sympathetic David Annesley (based on Francis Lean), who later becomes her second husband. Unfortunately, he is no better than his predecessor, and threatens her variously with a chair leg, a truncheon, and a carving knife. During one altercation, he tries to strangle her and is prevented only the intercession of the servants. When Annesley next shows signs of violence, incorrectly accusing Mollie of adultery, she locks herself in the bedroom, only for him to break down the door:

Without a warning of his intention, Annesley marched straight to the bedside, and, seizing me by the collar of my night-dress, dragged me out upon the floor, and kicked me before him into the next room, where he flung me upon the bed. I rose to leave him, or call for assistance, but he placed himself before the door. "If you cry out," he exclaimed, "or make a scene about this, I'll kick you all the way downstairs, and out on the pavement just as you are." And then followed the usual execrations and abuse[.] (300)

The location of the violence – Mollie's bed – again implies marital rape, and Mollie subsequently

⁴²⁶ Collins, *Man and Wife*, III, p.270.

refers to the incident as “the last indignity that I would suffer at the hands of this man”. (301) When challenged by Mollie, both Stopford and Annesley respond with the most devastating act of violation: rape. Towards the conclusion of the novel, Mollie considers the protection offered to wives by the legislative change that has occurred during her lifetime:

England has never borne a darker blot than the freedom formerly allowed to husbands to torture the unhappy creature they had sworn to cherish. It is sufficient for a quick-witted woman to have noted the ill-concealed chagrin exhibited by the stronger sex, at the passing of the merciful Act of Parliament that in some measure freed their wives from injustice and tyranny, to see how much such a protection was needed. (256)

The cumulative effects of the 1878 Matrimonial Causes Act and the 1882 Married Women’s Property Act free both Mollie and Marryat herself. Critics were united in their condemnation of *The Nobler Sex*. Sensing the autobiographical nature of the novel, they criticised the author’s desire to make public her sufferings, describing her as “entirely wanting in womanly reserve and reticence”.⁴²⁷ A woman must suffer in silence, rather than challenge ideology designed to uphold the ancillary position of her sex.

As violence alone was insufficient grounds for divorce, the stories of many abused women went unheard. As I have shown, this led to many commentators, even feminists such as Frances Power Cobbe, to conclude that wife-beating did not exist outside of the working classes. By boldly articulating her own experiences, Marryat showed quite clearly that it did, challenging a highly influential misconception. Through her repeated portrayals of middle-class marital violence, rendered more forcefully than any other author, Marryat helped define its existence. Radway proposes that such manifestations of “[r]omantic violence” are the product of an “ability to imagine any situation in which a woman might acquire and use resources that would enable her to withstand male oppression and coercion”.⁴²⁸ Through narrating the non-narratable, Marryat was using her fiction to empower women and to demonstrate how they could resist the desire of some men to contain them.

Having catalogued the problems with husbands, in her penultimate novel *A Rational Marriage* (1899), Marryat effectively sets out her manifesto for a successful marriage. Joan Trevor, a secretary and aspiring novelist, agrees to marry Larry O’Donnell only on the understanding that she retains her independence:

If people want to be married, to have a license for being the closest of friends, well, let them—but why in the name of goodness should they alter all their lives on that account—give up their ambitions,

⁴²⁷ ‘Belles Lettres’, *Westminster Review*, July 1892, 687–92 (p.688).

⁴²⁸ Radway, p.72.

their fancies, their friends, and settle down in the same house to bore each other from morning till night!⁴²⁹

Larry, who thinks his wife “must be all his own; as much his property as his hair-brush or his razor,” (28) but desperately in love with Joan, finally agrees to her terms, which stipulate that they must have separate finances and apartments, and also keep their marriage secret. Furthermore, there is an spoken agreement that she keeps her own name and does not wear a wedding ring. By the novel’s conclusion, Joan has relented on the written agreement, but there is no sign of concessions on the other points.

Joan’s cousin is shocked by her modern approach, citing examples of happy marriages in literature, where initial difficulties are overcome by a “lovely wedding”. Joan responds:

Yes, that’s the mistake of novel ... the lovely wedding comes at the end, just where the misery begins. The surgeon stops dead there—smiling at you with the knife concealed in his hand—he won’t let you see any further, for fear you should shrink from the operation. (122-123)

Marryat’s sinister image recalls Zola’s preface to *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), in which he claims “I simply carried out on two living bodies the same analytical examination that surgeons perform on corpses.”⁴³⁰ Throughout her literary career, Marryat performed a similar “analytical examination” on marriage, demonstrating that the legal regulation of wives that sanctioned husbands’ unreasonable behaviour was the cause of much unhappiness. As Hammerton notes, the idea of female subordination “was premised on assumptions about male perfection which were bound to strain credibility,”⁴³¹ and Marryat exposed it as a myth.

The need to regulate the supposedly separate immutable spheres through legislation demonstrated that they did not reflect biological determinism, a concept I discuss in my next chapter. Their tacitly contractual foundation was shown to be unworkable, requiring state intervention. This regulation in turn prompted a discourse concerning gender roles, with the novel providing a space in which concerns and experiences could be articulated. The gender binary that emerged from the dominant ideology relied on imposing on women an acceptably feminine identity that Marryat rejected. Instead she asserted a feminine subjectivity through her portrayal of strong heroines who were prepared to transcend their designated role. Poovey has argued that such narratives transformed women “from silent sufferer of private wrongs into an articulate spokesperson in the public sphere,”⁴³² and by also taking to the stage, Marryat widened this sphere considerably.

⁴²⁹ Marryat, *A Rational Marriage*, p.23.

⁴³⁰ Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, trans. by Andrew Rothwell (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.2.

⁴³¹ Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship*, p.75.

⁴³² Poovey, p.64.

Marryat was not arguing for an end to marriage or for freely-available divorce, rather she wanted equal marriage, based on a companionate rather than a patriarchal model. In order for such reform to take place, the gender ideology of the period needed to be destabilised, a process towards which, I argue, Marryat's work contributed. Although the reforms passed during Marryat's lifetime did not present a substantial threat to patriarchy, they did at least give women the protection implied by the idea of separate spheres, protection that had been hitherto theoretical. Some of Marryat's more ambitious heroines would have to wait for the advances of the following century, when equal divorce was finally possible and personal fulfilment in marriage a reasonable expectation. The law was unable to impose its ideology on women's lives and eventually it had to realise that they were resisting their containment. *The Times* saw the Divorce Court as "holding up a mirror to the age,"⁴³³ but in her fiction Marryat was refracting that image, interpreting and redefining its meaning.

⁴³³ 'Editorial', *The Times*, 12 December 1859, p.8.

Chapter Three – ‘Are you going to cut me up?’ – The Regulation of Women’s Bodies

As I argued in the previous chapter, the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act represented a legal landmark, bringing both marriage and wifely behaviour under unprecedented scrutiny. The following year the Medical Registration Act was passed, professionalising the role of doctor and creating the General Medical Council to regulate standards.⁴³⁴ Many feminist historians have noted how, from the early 1700s onwards, medical men gradually displaced women who had traditionally assumed responsibility for midwifery and healing in their communities.⁴³⁵ Consequently, the domestic sphere – the only place where female authority was tolerated – became the domain of male physicians, who enjoyed privileged access and significant power over their patients.

Sheryl Burt Ruzek argues, “Historically, physicians have served the interests of those in power, not only offering technical medical skills but also serving as arbiters of morality and agents of social control,” seeing their role in a patriarchal society as “managing female sexuality”.⁴³⁶ Doctors thus exerted a regulatory effect upon women, who were perceived as a medical problem in need of solution. By consolidating their power through legislation and the creation of professional bodies, doctors increased their influence and established a scientific foundation for their authority. As Jane Ussher proposes, “Nineteenth-century discourse placed women firmly on the side of nature, infirmity and superstition, and men on the side of learning, direction, management and science.”⁴³⁷ Thus the rational man sought to regulate the irrational woman.

In this chapter I examine three aspects of how medical authority was used to regulate women, considering the ways in which Marryat represented and opposed this regulation in her fiction. Firstly I assess the role of the doctor, often presented by Marryat as a malevolent figure more concerned with the exercise of power than with patient care. By focussing on those novels where the doctor marries the heroine, I identify the conflation of medical and patriarchal authority, regarded by Marryat as highly dangerous. I also assess the medical profession’s determination to exclude women from its ranks, inhibiting a feminine influence deemed essential by Marryat. Secondly, I explore links between the feminism and anti-vivisection movements, examining their

⁴³⁴ Noel Parry and José Parry, *The Rise of the Medical Profession: A Study of Collective Social Mobility* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), p.130.

⁴³⁵ Ornella Moscucci, *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Sheryl Burt Ruzek, *The Women’s Health Movement: Feminist Alternatives to Medical Control* (New York: Praeger, 1978); Nead; Ann Dally, *Women Under the Knife: A History of Surgery* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1991).

⁴³⁶ Ruzek, p.17.

⁴³⁷ Jane M. Ussher, *Women’s Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p.69.

shared objections to medical dominance over women and animals. By evaluating Marryat's fiction within the context of contemporary debates and the work of comparator authors, I demonstrate her argument that male, rather than female, behaviour should be regulated. Lastly, I discuss hysteria and the ways in which this deliberately ambiguous diagnosis was used to pathologise female sexuality, marking as deviant any behaviour deemed 'unfeminine'. I argue that through coded representations of lesbianism often dismissed or ignored by critics, Marryat challenged the reductive notion of 'woman' as a weak creature, entirely at the mercy of her reproductive system. Rather than showing women fit only for marriage, Marryat presents complex, sexually liberated heroines who resist the limitations placed upon them.

The Conflation of Medical and Patriarchal Authority

Noel and José Parry see the 1858 Medical Registration Act as "a major landmark in the rise of the apothecary and of the surgeon from their lowly status of tradesmen and craftsmen and their assimilation into a unified medical profession with the higher status physicians".⁴³⁸ By the time the next Medical Act was passed in 1886, this higher status was being questioned. In this year Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* appeared, a disturbing novella that disputed the apparent respectability of the medical profession. Stevenson wrote it while living next door to Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard (discussed below), whose research into the spinal cord caused controversy. This year also saw the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, legislation that had permitted doctors to forcibly examine women suspected of being prostitutes. In less than thirty years, then, the fictional doctor had gone from being an undisputed authority to a figure viewed with suspicion and even contempt.

This transformation can be charted in the fiction of the period: the doctor of mid-Victorian fiction is often an affable character, such as the hero of Trollope's *Doctor Thorne* (1858), a pillar of the community whose treatment relies more on sage advice than on medical intervention; and in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1870), Tertius Lydgate is an idealistic young physician who wants to "resist the irrational severance between medical and surgical knowledge in the interest of his own scientific pursuits".⁴³⁹ In Marryat's *Love's Conflict* (1865), Dr Salisbury is a gentle man who is prepared to take counsel from others. Here, however, the reader can also detect the displacement of feminine influence. When Elfrida Treherne asks for her sister during a difficult labour, her husband insists that no women should be in the room with her, allowing only a male doctor to accompany him. By the end of the nineteenth century, the doctor has become a monstrous figure, such as Dr Raymond in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894), and H G Wells's vivisector in *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), whose aim is to harm rather than to heal. Marryat's fiction marks this

⁴³⁸ Parry and Parry, p.131.

⁴³⁹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1874), p.105.

change, too. The affable family physician of the earlier novels is replaced by the phlegmatic man of science who views his position as unimpeachable. While many of these malevolent doctors are hidden from view, Marryat “brings the threat to women out of the doctor’s surgery and into the marital bed”.⁴⁴⁰ As I argue, by illustrating the conflation of medical and patriarchal authority, Marryat showed the consequences of unfettered masculine power, also alerting her readers to the ways in which it was exercised.

Marryat’s first novel to feature a doctor as protagonist is *Nelly Brooke* (1868), a dark story in which a young woman agrees to marry an unpleasant man who promises to provide medical care for her twin brother, Bertie. Bertie suffers from an unspecified spinal weakness which confines him to the couch for much of the time, a fate usually reserved for Victorian heroines. This is a reversal of the traditional roles, with Nelly undertaking the physical labour and Bertie circumscribed by his physical limitations. He is a demanding and irascible patient, whose emotional blackmail makes a domestic slave of the robust Nelly. When Dr Monkton appears on the scene proposing a cure, Bertie insists that Nelly must marry him, even though she finds him utterly repellent. Monkton’s intentions are no more honourable than Bertie’s, as he seeks only a domestic servant who is strong in body and not subject to womanly emotions.

Monkton is described as “cold-blooded” (II, 2) with a passion that only extends as far as his temper; the narrator’s implication is that he is asexual and unlikely to satisfy a healthy woman like Nelly. His marriage proposal is characteristically unromantic, revealing the complicity between would-be husband and brother:

Robert and I have been discussing this subject far more in detail than I have done with yourself ... you should become my wife, and make your brother’s interests mine. (I, 313)

Patriarchal and medical authority unite here to deny female subjectivity and to regulate Nelly’s behaviour and her own wishes are immaterial. Nelly rejects his offer, overwhelmed by an instinct that causes her to recoil, subsequently mirrored by a physical flinch when he tries to touch her. (I, 345) Bertie later rebukes her for having privileged her own happiness over his, and the local vicar warns that her failure to marry the doctor might result in her brother’s untimely death.

Worn down by this patriarchal conspiracy, Nelly relents and agrees to marry Monkton. Approaching her marital home for the first time, Nelly thinks it “looked like a prison, and that it must be difficult to breathe there”. (II, 26) It is on a “well-guarded” (III, 183) street, adding to the sense that Nelly’s behaviour is regulated. This is compounded by the continual attendance of her new sister-in-law, Mrs Prowse, who, like Nelly is expected to act like a wife to her brother. Inevitably, Monkton’s interest in Bertie vanishes once he has attained his goal, and he is keen to establish his supremacy. When Bertie acts the martinet, Monkton informs him: “You talk very

⁴⁴⁰ Greta Depledge, ‘Experimental Medicine, Marital Harmony and Florence Marryat’s *An Angel of Pity*’, *Women’s Writing*, 20 (2013), 219–234 (p.220).

glibly, young man, of what you will allow 'your sister' to do, but you seem to forget that your sister is my wife." (II, 209)

Monkton later informs Nelly that "[Bertie] has already monopolised the best part of your life, the rest belongs to me." (II, 235) She exists purely to serve men and is to have no life of her own. Realising the failure of his plan, Bertie admits to his sister: "I have sold you for very little, indeed. I made a bad bargain of you, Nell". (II, 190) Sensing his own imminent death, he ponders:

I wish we were both *dead* ... I often think what a good thing it would be if I just took one of my grandfather's old pistols, or the carving knife, and put a bullet through your head, Nell, or cut your dear little throat, and made away with myself directly afterwards. (171)

Bertie can conceive of no separate existence for Nelly, and her own identity has been completely effaced. At the beginning of the novel, "[Bertie] was his sister struck down and withered by sickness: [Nelly] was her brother, glowing with health and strength," (I, 26) by the end they are equal: Nelly's cheeks have fallen in and her eyes are lifeless. Monkton has reduced the once blooming Nelly to a husk, and she now resembles her brother, rather than being his antithesis. Denied the medical care he was promised, Bertie soon dies, causing Nelly further upset.

Monkton's response is to medicate her, which serves only to weaken her further. Her lack of energy and interest suggest clinical depression, and her doctor husband treats it with sedatives, ensuring that she does not become emotional. The medication prevents her from reproaching Monkton for Bertie's death and guarantees appropriately feminine docility. Even Nelly's dog Thug is forbidden to protest. When he barks at his hated master, Monkton orders that he be muzzled and then thrashes him, a punishment metaphorically similar to his drugging of Nelly. The usually lamb-like dog later retaliates by sinking his teeth into the doctor's throat, an attack that turns out to be fatal, as Thug is rabid. It was believed at the time that hydrophobia was caused by cruelty,⁴⁴¹ so this is a fitting fate for a doctor who abuses his power. In fiction of the period, mistreatment of animals is often a signifier that the perpetrator also abuses women, a trope I discuss in the next section. Although the widowed Nelly remarries, this time to a man of her own choosing, "subdued melancholy seemed to pervade every feeling and tone down every pleasure," and she claims there is "no such thing as happiness". (II, 334-335) She is ostensibly content in her new life, but the scars persist from the old one. The novel's ironic subtitle, *A Homely Story*, conveys the idea that the domestic space is not safe, especially when it is inhabited by a doctor who is also a husband.

In *Petronel* (1870), Dr Ulick Ford seems a less sinister character than Monkton, but nevertheless he commits a significant abuse of his power. Learning that his quondam lover is on her death bed, he rushes to see her and agrees to adopt her thirteen-year-old daughter, Petronel. Although his actions are portrayed as largely altruistic, he is motivated partly by the girl's extraordinary

⁴⁴¹ J. Turner, *Reckoning with the Beast: Animals, Pain, and Humanity in the Victorian Mind* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p.135.

resemblance to her mother. Even though her behaviour is portrayed as juvenile, even immature, Ford projects sexual maturity upon her, seeing her as:

A tall girl ... who carried her thirteen summers bravely, standing upright as a young poplar, and who, although younger by three years than her mother had been when first he saw her, looked almost as old as she had done.⁴⁴²

This is echoed by one of Petronel's middle-aged cousins, who demands a kiss and a lock of her hair in return for some pocket money, remarking that she is "Doosdily handsome". (I, 227) This apparent competition inspires jealousy in Ford and he allows himself to entertain thoughts of marrying Petronel, despite the twenty-two-year age gap. Even *The Spectator* thought this May-December plot "almost revolting".⁴⁴³ When his motives are questioned, he replies:

Medical men are not in the habit of falling in love with their patients, Bertram: in the first place it is not considered *du r  gle*, and in the second, they know a little too much about them. (30)

In fact, he uses this knowledge to his advantage, and the propriety of his courting his young ward is never seriously questioned by the other characters.

Dr Ford exerts considerable influence over his female patients, some of whom refuse to eat until he visits them again, also becoming tearful in his presence. Eventually, he has the same effect on Petronel and she succumbs to his power, finding herself "weak and languid, and lying on the sofa". (II, 251) The only cure is for her to marry Ford. Ford's methods are hinted at darkly. His consulting room is described as "Bluebeard's Chamber" and when Petronel tries to explore it she is sternly admonished: "This is not the place for little girls." (I, 196) When caught in the act, she has been examining some of Ford's instruments:

I had never met with such a collection before. There were long thin scissors, which looked as though they had been nearly starved to death, and short fat scissors, that seemed as though they had been cut in two, and scissors that shrugged their shoulders; and others again, all curly-wurly, which reminded me of nothing but a corkscrew. (I, 190)

Given the emergence of gynaecology and the controversy it caused, this description is unsettling. Ford is concerned not with hygiene or safety, rather that his methods should not be uncovered. His older sister, who acts as his housekeeper, is also barred from entering his professional space. The novel appeared after the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, so to the enlightened reader Ford's instruments would have had a political connotation, as well as suggesting his use of the speculum. As Louise Foxcroft notes, the abuse of the speculum was widely discussed in the medical press during the 1850s and 60s, with men such as William Acton concerned that it

⁴⁴² Florence Marryat, *Petronel*, 3 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1870), I, p.111.

⁴⁴³ 'Petronel', *The Spectator*, 5 November 1870, p.1328.

was being used in cases where patients were not suffering from a gynaecological complaint.⁴⁴⁴ In 1853 the physician, Robert Brudenell Carter, wrote:

I have, more than once, seen young unmarried women, of the middle-classes of society, reduced, by constant use of the speculum to the mental and moral condition of prostitutes; seeking to give themselves the same indulgence by the practice of solitary vice; and asking every medical practitioner, under whose care they fell, to institute an examination of the sexual organs.⁴⁴⁵

This offers an explanation as to why Dr Ford's patients become so dependent on him. The father of one patient tells him:

She seemed so well when you were her last ... but since then she has had fits of hysterics every day, generally an hour or two after the time that your visits are usually paid; and neither yesterday nor to-day have we been able to induce her to touch any solid food; and she has scarcely done anything but weep. (I, 48)

At the novel's conclusion, Petronel is the mother of six children (her fecundity is noted with distaste by one reviewer),⁴⁴⁶ thereby suggesting that her excessive sexual appetite has been channelled into normative, reproductive sex. Although she is apparently happy, the implication is that Ford has used his medical knowledge to achieve his aims, and Petronel has been at the mercy of her own sexuality. Whereas the man of science is generally presented as cold and even repugnant, Ulick Ford is a popular and personable character, which is exactly why he has so much trust conferred upon him. Nobody questions his right to enter the homes of vulnerable young women, and thus he represents a more dangerous figure.

While Dr Ford gently insinuates himself into his patients' lives, in *Dr Phillips: A Maida Vale Idyll* (1887) Frank Danby (the pseudonym of Julia Frankau) presents a gross caricature of the apparently omnipotent doctor. Unfortunately, Danby's agenda is anti-semitic as well as iconoclastic, with many faults ascribed to the eponymous doctor's race, making the novel an uncomfortable read (even by nineteenth-century standards). Like Ulick Ford, Dr Phillips exerts great influence over women:

the magnetic touch of his smooth palmed hands had a remarkable power of nerve soothing; he had the faculty of at once exciting and gratifying the imagination. He was conscious of this gift, and fond of exercising it; to it he owed his successes among women.⁴⁴⁷

The narrator implies that his profession allows him to legitimately spend intimate time with women which would otherwise be unacceptable for a married man, and there are hints that he also visits prostitutes. Resolving to marry his mistress, Phillips deliberately administers a fatal dose of chloroform to his wife during surgery. Although his lover forsakes him, realising the danger of a husband with such power, he is never found out. Phillips instead simply initiates a sexual

⁴⁴⁴ Louise Foxcroft, *Hot Flushes, Cold Science: The History of the Modern Menopause* (London: Granta, 2009), p.150.

⁴⁴⁵ Robert Brudenell Carter, *On the Pathology and Treatment of Hysteria* (London: John Churchill, 1853), p.69.

⁴⁴⁶ 'Petronel'.

⁴⁴⁷ Frank Danby, *Dr Phillips: A Maida Vale Idyll* (London: Vizetelly & Co, 1887), p.46.

relationship with his housekeeper and carries on as before. The narrator admonishes him for his “moral recklessness” and desire to “unsex women,” (341) but he is completely unstoppable, with his behaviour condoned and occluded by the medical fraternity. Danby’s novel is in many ways more powerful than Marryat’s, with its damning indictment of masculine privilege. However, Marryat’s subtle portrait of Dr Ford, although ambiguous, does offer a more alarming vision: that those who abuse their power are not always as conspicuous as Dr Phillips.

One of the aims of the Medical Registration Act was to drive out practices such as mesmerism and hypnotism, which the profession rejected as ‘quackery’. They persisted, nevertheless, as “there was widespread feeling that many doctors were not necessarily more successful than those they branded ‘quacks’.”⁴⁴⁸ Harriet Martineau was a high-profile adherent of mesmerism, which she believed cured her uterine cancer.⁴⁴⁹ Her letters to the *Athenaeum* on the subject provoked a furious response from the President of the Royal College of Surgeons, who made a public diagnosis of hysteria to discredit her opinion.⁴⁵⁰ In this case, alternative medicine actually empowered a woman, enabling her to resist experimental surgical intervention; more popular, however, were stories of how such powers were abused. Elizabeth Gaskell, for example, was interested in mesmerism, but feared the possibility of sexual dominance that it implied.⁴⁵¹ As Alison Winter explains:

The physical positions of mesmerist and patient ... had to be judged carefully. For example, when a man mesmerised another man, they often sat with their knees touching, hands interlaced ... But when a man mesmerised a woman, he stood over her, either as she sat in a chair or, if she were too ill, lay on a bed. This arrangement satisfied the demands of sexual propriety, and expressed the power relations that justified the trajectory of influence between the male mesmerist and the female patient.⁴⁵²

Marryat explored the abuse of such power relations in *Blindfold* (1890) through the practice of mesmerism, a term she uses interchangeably with hypnotism. This indicates that Marryat saw little difference between mesmerism, a practice that had been discredited, and hypnosis, one that enjoyed a surge in popularity during the preceding decade, largely due to the work of French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot. Mesmerist Paul Adrastikoff boasts that he has “acquired complete control”⁴⁵³ over his sister, Olga:

[She] was entirely subservient to him. He had magnetised her so often that in his presence she had no will of her own, although her nature often uprose against the bondage, and made her pant to burst the

⁴⁴⁸ Alison Winter, ‘Harriet Martineau and the Reform of the Invalid in Victorian England’, *The Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), 597–616 (p.598).

⁴⁴⁹ Winter, ‘Harriet Martineau’, p.598.

⁴⁵⁰ Winter, ‘Harriet Martineau’, p.610.

⁴⁵¹ Robin Waterfield, *Hidden Depths: The Story of Hypnosis* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), p.165.

⁴⁵² Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.140.

⁴⁵³ Florence Marryat, *Blindfold*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1890), I, p.278.

chains that bound her to him against her better judgement. He could sway her actions when in a normal condition by his unspoken wishes, and even when miles of distance stretched between them he could make her do just as he chose. This awful and mysterious power ... is perhaps the most fatal influence which one human creature can exercise over another[.] (280-281)

During a stay in the Swiss Alps, Paul forces Olga to participate in a stage act where he mesmerises her and invites audience members to perform degrading acts on her while she is in a trance. In one performance, Paul lies on her chest and then invites two men to take their turn in doing the same, prompting one audience member to exclaim: “Fancy that brute inviting two great hulking men to sit on that tender creature’s body.” (I, 274) This extraordinary spectacle is reminiscent of Charcot’s hypnotic demonstrations, where he was “ruthlessly insensitive to the pain and anguish of his patients,” who were brought on stage “to be examined, poked and prodded, hypnotised, all-but-anatomised”.⁴⁵⁴

Paul’s behaviour gives the impression of sexual assault and there are hints that he can make Olga have sex while in a trance. He effectively uses mesmerism to control his sister in the way that pimps might administer drugs to manage prostitutes. He pockets all the money from ticket sales and sees Olga’s role as earning his living, expressing a desire for her to marry a rich man, preferring “to live upon another person than to make money for himself”. (I, 279-280) Displeased with Olga’s choice of future husband, he hypnotises her and renders her complicit in his murder. He then blackmails her into marrying his friend Jack Dorrian so that they might live in a *menage à trois*. Paul essentially courts Jack on Olga’s behalf, controlling her every movement through mesmerism, and she has no will of her own. Near the novel’s conclusion it is revealed that Paul is no relation to Olga: sensing she was susceptible to his power, he hypnotised her into believing they were siblings. Marryat shows how controversial medical practices could be used to reinforce patriarchal authority, or indeed to establish it where none existed.

Iza Duffus Hardy addresses this theme in *A New Othello* (1890), although through different relationships. Dr Gervas Fitzallan is a creepy and sadistic doctor who repeatedly taunts his wife with accusations of frigidity and threatens to strangle her with her own hair. Fortunately for her, he soon turns his attentions to Eileen Dundas, an impressionable young woman on whom he practices mesmerism. When a man from his past identifies Fitzallan as an escaped murderer with no medical qualifications, he ‘programmes’ her to poison him. Fitzallan has assumed the identity of a doctor in order to practice mesmerism, this illusion of medical authority allowing him to act with impunity. His real name turns out to be George Charcott, an unflattering reference to Jean-Martin Charcot.

Both Marryat and Hardy’s novels, published in the same year, express the anxieties surrounding mesmerism and hypnotism. Indeed, the following year the British Medical Association appointed a commission to investigate hypnotism, concluding that “under no circumstances should female

⁴⁵⁴ Andrew T Scull, *Hysteria: The Biography* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.114.

patients be hypnotised, except in the presence of a relative or a person of their own sex”.⁴⁵⁵ Attempts to professionalise medicine, then, had done nothing to stop unscrupulous men from exploiting the power it gave them over women. Having established the doctor as the powerful being and the patient as the helpless woman, abuses were predictable – unless, of course, the doctor was a woman.

‘A bad imitation of a man’: Women Doctors

Although the 1858 Medical Registration Act did not specifically exclude women doctors, this was purely an oversight. As women were not permitted to study for medical degrees in the United Kingdom it was not deemed necessary to formally debar them. However, nobody had given any thought to those who had qualified overseas, and Elizabeth Blackwell was able to register and practice in England. Nothing could be done to stop her, but an amendment was swiftly passed to exclude foreign degree holders. While this event passed almost unnoticed, the arrival in London of US Civil War veteran Dr Mary Walker attracted attention. Having served on the frontline with the Federal army medical service, Walker commanded a certain amount of respect when she visited Middlesex Hospital, and nobody dared to question her professional credentials. It was her rational dress that excited comment and opprobrium. The *Lancet* was deferential, but questioned “the advisability of this lady's example being very generally followed by her sex”.⁴⁵⁶

In her novel *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland*, Eliza Lynn Linton devotes several pages to the evils of women doctors, referring to them as “flirting, touzled, pretty young creatures,”⁴⁵⁷ unsuited to the dissecting room. Walker is singled out as doing “much to retard the woman question all round” with her “Bloomer costume”. (259) She cautions that the corollary of equal rights will be “men’s virile force toned down to harmony with the woman’s feminine weakness; the abolition of all moral and social distinctions between the sexes”. (258-259) Although Marryat was seldom in agreement with Linton, her response in 1866 to Walker’s appearance was similar:

There is no reason because women work that they should unsex themselves. We might as well assume men’s clothing and say we have a right to it, as try to wrest their proper occupations from them ... in all such cases ... women silently acknowledge they are overstepping the limits to which they should go, by adopting some part or other of masculine costume. Could anything be more absurd than the appearance of Dr Mary Walker, for instance, unless, indeed, it is herself? Such a hybrid only inspires me with the supremest disgust.⁴⁵⁸

As I shall explain, while Marryat remained sensitive to the supposed ‘hybridity’ of the female doctor, she later argued that medicine needed a feminising influence. The controversy really started

⁴⁵⁵ Waterfield, p.210.

⁴⁵⁶ ‘Medical Annotation’, *The Lancet*, 88 (1866), 498–502 (p.502).

⁴⁵⁷ Eliza Lynn Linton, *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland*, ed. by Deborah T Meem and Kate Holterhoff (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2011), p.121.

⁴⁵⁸ Florence Marryat, *The Girls of Feversham* (Boston: Loring, n.d.), p.127.

in 1869 when Sophia Jex-Blake and four other women enrolled as medical students at the University of Edinburgh – the only institution prepared to accept them. The following year the women were harassed by an angry mob who tried to prevent them from attending an anatomy lecture. They were pelted with mud and rubbish, and even the college's pet sheep was encouraged to attack them.⁴⁵⁹ Undaunted, they graduated, setting a precedent for those who sought to follow their example. The *Saturday Review* thundered: "it is monstrous to allow so small a minority, moved in great measure by the strange teaching of Mr. Stuart Mill, to disturb the whole relations of social life,"⁴⁶⁰ a conservative position reiterated by some novelists.

In Wilkie Collins's novel *The Legacy of Cain* (1889) Helena confides to her diary: "A female doctor is, under any circumstances, a creature whom I detest. She is, at her very best, a bad imitation of a man."⁴⁶¹ As Kristine Swenson explains, sceptics were grappling with "the radical implications of a woman with the medical knowledge and professional legitimacy to control human bodies".⁴⁶² Critics also feared that women doctors would acquire sexual knowledge, rendering them unfit to become wives. In his short story 'Fie! Fie! Or the Fair Physician' Collins portrays Sophia Pillico, an attractive young doctor who apparently finds a seventy-four-year-old patient with angina sexually irresistible. While it was acceptable for men to treat women, reflecting supposedly innate power relations, the reverse was a dangerous aberration that could cause chaos. It was better for woman to remain ignorant, as medical knowledge would "'unsex' her, make her a 'neuter,' biologically incapable of the conventional womanly duties of marriage and motherhood".⁴⁶³

It was this 'unsexing' that preoccupied some authors, including Charles Reade. His novel *The Woman-Hater* (1877) is ostensibly an argument in favour of women doctors, but this is significantly compromised by its sensationalism (and also by a regressive main plot involving two women fighting over a useless man). The protagonist, Rhoda Gale (a composite of Elizabeth Blackwell and Sophia Jex-Blake), is presented as a man-hating lesbian, albeit one who is far gentler than her rhetoric suggests. Ultimately, she is a good character who successfully campaigns for medical and sanitary reform, but she is also a sexless hybrid. As Patricia Murphy concludes, the novel "undermines its feminist pretensions and reifies unsettling perceptions of femininity".⁴⁶⁴ Rather than endorsing the role of women doctors, Reade instead consigns them to a third, indeterminate sex.

⁴⁵⁹ Margaret Todd, *The Life of Sophia Jex-Blake* (London: Macmillan, 1918), pp.291–292.

⁴⁶⁰ 'Women and University Degrees', *Saturday Review*, 18 July 1874, pp.77–78 (p.77).

⁴⁶¹ Wilkie Collins, *The Legacy of Cain*, 3 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1889), III, p.105.

⁴⁶² Kristine Swenson, *Medical Women and Victorian Fiction* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), p.3.

⁴⁶³ Swenson, p.7.

⁴⁶⁴ Patricia Murphy, *In Science's Shadow: Literary Constructions of Late Victorian Women* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), p.214.

Arabella Kenealy adopts a similar approach in *Dr Janet of Harley Street* (1893), labelling her heroine's masculinity throughout: "The forehead was large and massive, the chin broad and resolute. He would be a bold man who opposed the firm and fiery will of this big woman."⁴⁶⁵ Even her womanly tears fall on "large hands" and she prides herself on being a "neuter,"⁴⁶⁶ conforming to neither male nor female stereotypes. While this gives her great latitude, it also means she must remain single. Her young protégé, Phyllis Eve, renounces her medical career upon marriage, realising that the two are incompatible; unwilling to become a neuter, she must instead embrace her biological destiny.

Annie Swan also portrayed the woman doctor in *Elizabeth Glen MB*, the conclusion of which might be guessed from the title of its sequel: *Mrs Keith Hamilton MB*. The narrator is at pains to emphasise Glen's femininity throughout, almost apologising for her choice of career, and stressing that her domestic skills have been of most benefit to her patients. Glen eventually sacrifices a successful medical career to marry a partially repentant sexist, finding far more fulfilment as Mrs Keith Hamilton than she did as Dr Elizabeth Glen. In the sequel, she acknowledges that "his career is more interesting to me than any case I ever had," a statement accompanied by a "lovely blush".⁴⁶⁷ Although Swan is offering a partial defence of women doctors, showing what their feminine touch can do for patients, her relief is palpable when her heroine is returned to normative womanhood through marriage. Like Phyllis Eve, Elizabeth Glen cannot be both wife *and* doctor. Tabitha Sparks writes of the woman doctor: "When she chooses to marry, she ends her career, and when she chooses her career, she renounces marriage."⁴⁶⁸ Although this is broadly true of Victorian fiction, there are exceptions.

Mona Maclean, Medical Student (1893) was written by Margaret Todd (under the pseudonym of Graham Travers), herself a doctor, and also the life partner of Sophia Jex-Blake. Mona is a clever creation who manages to be intelligent, feminine and nonthreatening. Although she encounters hostility during her studies, she is able to win over her enemies with a combination of charm and self-deprecation. She graduates after several attempts and marries a fellow doctor with whom she sets up a practice. This apparently utopian conclusion offers a counterpoint to Reade and Kenealy's novels, showing that women doctors are not necessarily freaks. However, their adjoining consulting rooms represent an important division: Mona treats only the female patients, an arrangement that goes unquestioned by the narrator. As Swenson argues, "The novel's message about medical women, then, is that they should be afforded an equal though distinct place within the profession."⁴⁶⁹ The seemingly radical narrative also conceals a conservative undercurrent.

⁴⁶⁵ Arabella Kenealy, *Dr Janet of Harley Street* (London: Digby, Long & Co., 1893), p.87.

⁴⁶⁶ Kenealy, p.340.

⁴⁶⁷ Annie S Swan, *Mrs Keith Hamilton, MB* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1897), p.8.

⁴⁶⁸ Tabitha Sparks, *The Doctor in the Victorian Novel: Family Practices* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), p.152.

⁴⁶⁹ Swenson, p.144.

Complicating Swenson's contention that the female doctor was "*the* exemplar of the New Woman," Mona is pro-vivisection and a sceptic of women's suffrage, a position that would have placed her outside mainstream feminist thinking.

In making her argument for the radicalism of women doctors, Swenson asserts that "The nurse was merely an independent rather than a 'New' woman," because she endorsed traditional sex, gender and class distinctions, thereby rendering her no threat to society.⁴⁷⁰ Indeed, many fictional nurses are idealised and saintly creatures, such as Gaskell's Ruth, or fantasy figures, such as the sexually rapacious Edith Archbold in Reade's *Hard Cash* (1863). They invariably conform to the Madonna/Magdalen dichotomy, allowing little room for complexity or individual expression. The title of Marryat's novel *An Angel of Pity* (1898) gives the impression that heroine Rose Gordon will conform to the Madonna model. However, she has taken up nursing after passing a medical degree with high honours at Edinburgh University. She also holds a BA from Girton, boosting her New Woman credentials and establishing her as someone who is not completely in the thrall of science. Her decision to nurse rather than practice as a doctor implies a desire to conform to notions of femininity, but, as her colleagues discover, Rose does not consider the role of nurse to be subordinate. One of her colleagues warns her: "We nurses cannot afford to fight the medical men. They have it all their own way. Their word is law, and we can do nothing but obey it."⁴⁷¹

Undaunted, Rose immediately starts challenging Dr Lesquard, a pompous misogynist who disregards the opinions of others. During a ward round he deliberately induces a fit in a female patient for the benefit of his audience, smiling at the result. When Rose complains about the indignity he has inflicted she is cautioned by the matron: "the doctors know best. ... If they say she is in no pain, she isn't." (14) Thus, the female patient is denied both her dignity and her subjectivity. This scene is perhaps inspired by Frances Power Cobbe's scathing essay on the abuse of medical power, in which she comments: "No doctor can be dull enough to ignore the fact that the feeling of a woman with a crowd of curious young students round her bed of agony must be almost worse than death."⁴⁷²

When Lesquard realises his behaviour is being questioned, he pronounces:

Women have no business in the profession at all! As nurses, they are useful enough – but for nurses we don't require these very highly-educated young ladies. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing ... I cannot say I relish having to excuse or explain my conduct to a woman, who, had she remained in her proper position, would have been satisfied that a man of my experience could do no wrong. (20)

Medical men like Lesquard want nurses whose work is merely an extension of their feminine duty to nurture, rather than knowledgeable professionals capable of making decisions. Rose

⁴⁷⁰ Swenson, p.90.

⁴⁷¹ Florence Marryat, *An Angel of Pity* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1898), p.49.

⁴⁷² Frances Power Cobbe, 'The Medical Profession and Its Morality', *Modern Review*, II (1881), 296–328 (p.311).

repeatedly undermines Lesquard, defying his orders and exposing him as a prolific vivisector. Eventually they marry, each believing they can change the other. While Rose makes no attempt to conceal her agenda, Lesquard pretends to be supportive of her medical career, quietly resolving that she will resign her position. Ultimately, Rose's determination and medical knowledge allow her to triumph over Lesquard. At the novel's conclusion the couple are running a private clinic, with the clear understanding that Rose enjoys equal authority with him. In this respect it mirrors the final scene of *Mona Maclean*, but there is no implication that Rose treats only female patients. Depledge argues that Marryat introduces resolution and compromise to achieve a traditional 'happy' ending,⁴⁷³ but the explanation lies earlier in the novel, when Rose confesses:

I have no money, and no influence. The doctors do not want to let women advance in the profession—they would turn them out altogether if they could—and I am likely, at this rate, to remain a hospital nurse all my life. As Mr Lesquard's wife, I shall at once possess all that I need to help me on, and if the many advantages are clogged by the chain of matrimony, I must try to bear it. (147)

For Rose, marriage to Lesquard is purely expedient, allowing her to circumvent the problems faced by many other women in the medical profession. By making her medical heroine a nurse, Marryat neatly avoids the hostility that a woman doctor might have provoked. Rose is plainly shown to possess as much knowledge as the male doctors, but there is no suggestion that she is taking their jobs from them. Furthermore, the nurse's uniform renders her appropriately feminine with no hint that she has adopted a masculine or neuter role. Marryat is not explicit as to whether Rose becomes a doctor in the clinic, but by doing so she is able to portray a medically competent woman while escaping the criticisms levelled at both real and fictional women doctors. Marryat's solution to the controversy is to empower a traditionally female role, rather than making her heroine masculine, as Reade and Kenealy felt it necessary to do. For them, while a woman could become an effective doctor, she could not do so without also renouncing her femininity. Unlike Elizabeth Glen, Rose is also allowed to combine her career with marriage, and her feminine influence constrains the male abuse of medical power that seeks to regulate women. For Rose, marriage presents an opportunity to further her scientific interests, rather an institution that ensures her conformity to a feminine ideal.

'The torture of the damned': Regulating the Vivisector

The rapid rate of medical progress during the mid-nineteenth century made animal experimentation increasingly conspicuous, with opposition mounted by religious, feminist, and moral campaigners. The prominence of the issue is demonstrated by the fact that from 1876-1884 a bill calling for the abolition of vivisection was introduced every year, and subsequently defeated.⁴⁷⁴ Although the 1876

⁴⁷³ Depledge, 'Experimental Medicine', p.230.

⁴⁷⁴ Richard D. French, *Antivivisection and Medical Science in Victorian Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p.164.

Cruelty to Animals Act regulated vivisection, requiring practitioners to obtain a license for some experiments, many scientists flouted the rules with impunity. Such arrogance was as provocative as the practice itself, prompting widespread fury. As I have discussed above, there was already considerable concern regarding the burgeoning power of the doctor, whose newly professionalised status conferred upon him an aura of infallibility. For some women's rights campaigners, there were clear parallels between the female body and the vivisected animal: the equipment used by gynaecologists for invasive and often painful examinations was not unlike the paraphernalia used in the laboratory, placing the subject in a similar state of helplessness and discomfort.

James Turner argues that this solidarity with quadrupeds was prompted by the assimilation of Darwinism into more general discourses, and also by sensitivity to the sufferings of slaves.⁴⁷⁵ While this might be true in some cases, it seems more likely that the increasing number of surgical interventions (thanks in part to the advent of chloroform) and the well-publicised horrors of the lock hospitals were more prominent in women's minds. Meanwhile, Carol Lansbury identifies an unequivocal link between vivisection and pornography involving sexual violence.⁴⁷⁶ The graphic examples she cites are mostly convincing, but they ignore the diversity of the anti-vivisection movement. Although it was heavily imbricated with women's rights campaigns, not all feminists were opposed to animal experimentation, or indeed to the Contagious Diseases Acts. For example, Millicent Garrett Fawcett was in favour of vivisection, while her sister Dr Elizabeth Garrett Anderson thought compulsory examination of prostitutes an acceptable practice. Richard French sees the movement as one opposed to scientific progress, portraying campaigners as hysterical people (mostly women) with too much time on their hands who manipulated material meant for experts and used it to excite amateurs. While these three studies provide invaluable perspectives, a composite view of the movement is required. Like many other political movements of the nineteenth century, the anti-vivisectionists were far from united in their cause, although it is broadly true that there was an overlap between concern for the rights of women and those of animals.

Such concerns were reflected in the composition of the anti-vivisection movement, with women comprising 40-60% of its membership and, even more unusually, occupying posts on executive committees.⁴⁷⁷ As was later the case with the Women's Political and Social Union, many campaigners were keen that female involvement should be carefully maintained within the bounds of propriety, thus avoiding censure. *The Home Chronicle*, an anti-vivisection magazine with a high female readership, came under considerable pressure to omit graphic images of animal

⁴⁷⁵ Turner, p.6.

⁴⁷⁶ Carol Lansbury, *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers, and Vivisection in Edwardian England* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

⁴⁷⁷ French, pp.239, 240.

experimentation from its pages to avoid upsetting the “delicately minded”.⁴⁷⁸ This journal also featured a column variously titled ‘Woman’s Work’ or ‘Work for Women’. As Susan Hamilton argues, “The column carefully confines the public, feminine antivivisection voice to actions which in no way contest the middle-class construction of femininity, but rather suggest that women’s political strength lay within the codification of femininity.”⁴⁷⁹ Appropriate activities included signing petitions and discreet recruitment of new members, rather than active campaigning.

Ultimately, a woman’s most important role was to ostracise the vivisector from polite society. As Hamilton explains, “Over and over again, women are exhorted not to consort with the vivisector, specifically not to marry with them.”⁴⁸⁰ Among the majority of the anti-vivisection fiction of the period, this is the overarching message, with the phlegmatic man of science offered up as a bogeyman to terrorise mothers hoping to marry off their daughters. The model for this stock character was the physiologist Emmanuel Klein, who in 1875 impassively explained to the Royal Commission on Vivisection that he had “no regard at all” for the suffering of the animals on whom he experimented, and therefore did not use anaesthesia.⁴⁸¹ He came to epitomise the sadistic detachment of the vivisector who recognised no greater authority than himself. Klein became both an embarrassment to the scientific community and an obvious target for the campaigners. As I show below, the figure of Klein is repurposed by many authors, including Marryat, in their fictional responses to the vivisection debate. Rob Boddice concludes, “At the centre of the vivisection debates, ultimately was *man*”⁴⁸² – although the controversy is generally viewed as a heated debate between opposing forces, the pro-vivisection argument often focused on an individual’s right to pursue his interests, and it is this solipsism that proved most interesting to many novelists.

An almost universal trope in anti-vivisection fiction is the young ingénue, manoeuvred into an expedient marriage with a respectable scientist who turns out to be a cold-blooded sadist. As Lansbury observes, “the man who could vivisect a dog would unquestionably find his next victim in his wife or sweetheart”.⁴⁸³ This plot forms the basis for Sarah Grand’s, *The Beth Book* (1897), in which Beth McClure makes the horrifying discovery that not only is her husband Dan the superintendent of a notorious lock hospital, but he also performs experiments on live animals at their home. The *mise en scène* of Beth’s discovery of the flayed dog in Dan’s study marks her transformation from ingénue to chatelaine, also shocking the reader into the realisation that a

⁴⁷⁸ Susan Hamilton, “‘Still Lives’: Gender and the Literature of the Victorian Vivisection Controversy”, *Victorian Review*, 17 (1991), 21–34 (p.28).

⁴⁷⁹ Hamilton, p.30.

⁴⁸⁰ Hamilton, p.31.

⁴⁸¹ *The Royal Commission on Vivisection: Selections from the Admissions, Assertions and Evasions of the Witnesses* (London: The Society for Protection of Animals from Vivisection, n.d.).

⁴⁸² Rob Boddice, ‘Vivisecting Major: A Victorian Gentleman Scientist Defends Animal Experimentation, 1876–1885’, *Isis*, 102 (2011), 215–237 (p.219).

⁴⁸³ Lansbury, p.132.

handsome and respectable doctor can also be an unrepentant sadist. Beth relishes the prospect of a day when the vivisector will be “driven out of all decent society, to consort with the hangman – if even he will associate with you”.⁴⁸⁴

One of the lesser-known novels on the theme of vivisection is *The Professor's Wife* (1881) by Leonard Graham, a shocking and grotesque portrayal of the man of science. Beatrice Egerton is a young orphan who falls for the specious charms of Sir Eric Grant, a prominent scientist and atheist. Unbeknown to her, he is also an “arch-vivisector,”⁴⁸⁵ an activity he works hard to conceal. When Beatrice finally discovers her husband bending over the vivisecting table, she falls at his feet in convulsions and has to retire to a darkened room. Succumbing to brain fever, she quickly descends into madness and is sent away to Switzerland under the care of a sinister German physiologist. There he keeps her drugged and hypnotised so that he might carry out experiments on her twitching body until her eventual death. Although Grant is upset by his loss, he consoles himself with the fact that his friend has been able to further his studies, and he continues with his own experiments.

Dr Benjulia in Wilkie Collins's *Heart and Science* (1883) is arguably Victorian literature's most famous vivisector, and is thought to be based on David Ferrier, a Professor who was publicly charged and acquitted under the Vivisection Act.⁴⁸⁶ While he shows brief glimpses of humanity, Benjulia is prepared to do almost anything in the name of science. His actions are mimicked, rather than challenged, by Maria Galilee, a woman who neglects her duties as wife and mother in order to pursue her love of science. Her “hardened nature” (190) appears more dangerous than Benjulia's sociopathy, as it undermines the family unit and subverts ideas of acceptable femininity. As Patricia Murphy argues, “a woman is intended to be a passive object of science, not an active agent”.⁴⁸⁷ While the threat of the Doctor is removed at the novel's conclusion by his self-immolation, Mrs Galilee is shown blithely continuing with her work. Collins's novel offers no solutions or redemption, rather an unsettling exposé of the vivisector's psyche as one insusceptible to morality: he is to be vanquished, rather than tamed. Collins is also more interested in a psychological portrait of his villain, rather than exposing the practice of vivisection. In a letter to Frances Power Cobbe he explained that he did not intend the novel to be “terrifying and revolting [to] the ordinary reader,”⁴⁸⁸ elaborating in the preface:

⁴⁸⁴ Sarah Grand, *The Beth Book*, ed. by Jenny Bourne Taylor (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2013), p.457.

⁴⁸⁵ Leonard Graham, *The Professor's Wife: A Story* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881), p.95.

⁴⁸⁶ Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.399.

⁴⁸⁷ Murphy, p.9.

⁴⁸⁸ Quoted in Wilkie Collins, *Heart and Science: A Story of the Present Time*, ed. by Steve Farmer (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1997), p.370.

From first to last, [readers] are purposely left in ignorance of the hideous secrets of Vivisection. The outside of the laboratory is a necessary object in my landscape—but I never once open the door and invite [them] in. (38)

Marryat shows no such reticence in *An Angel of Pity* (1898). It is in many ways highly derivative of the anti-vivisection novels that preceded it, but her central argument differs significantly and constitutes, I contend, a far more radical text than *Heart and Science*. Rose marries Dr Quinton Lesquard without realising he is “the greatest and the most enthusiastic vivisector in England”. (284) His name and French background are perhaps intended to suggest a link with controversial neurologist Brown-Séquard. Her suspicions initially aroused by his mistreatment of patients, Rose discovers that Dr Lesquard owns a large collection of books on vivisection, including *The Handbook of the Physiological Laboratory*, identified by Nicolaas Rupke as an influential textbook held responsible for the increase in experiments on animals during the 1870s.⁴⁸⁹ When she hears cries of pain from an outhouse, Rose investigates, only to discover an appalling scene:

[S]he stood in a vivisecting laboratory ... the first thing that attracted her attention was a heap, literally a heap, of dead and dying animals, from which the moans, which had had indistinctly heard, proceeded. They were lying in a corner, just as they had been thrown aside when released from the tortures to which they had been subjected. Milk-white rabbits, with their innocent, harmless mouths fixed wide open in their dying struggles, their glazed eyes immovable, though some rats in their last agonies were trying to tear their lips and eyes with impotent revenge. Dogs opened from head to foot, still quivering with life, cats which had been burned in an oven, panting with scorched flesh and starting eyeballs, dead frogs, dead doves, dead mice, heaped up with expiring animals of larger growth, who could not get rid of the torment of living so easily. (294)

With the benefit of a medical degree, Rose quickly recognises both the purpose of the experiments and also their futility. In the subsequent confrontation, Lesquard struggles with the intellect of an educated woman, a breed with which he is unfamiliar. Unable to triumph intellectually, Lesquard resorts to physical power, forcing himself into Rose’s bedroom, claiming, “You and the laboratory are both my property, and I shall dispose of you as I see fit.” (304) Later, he insists that Rose come to bed, warning “if you persist in refusing I will force you to do so”. (307) The narrator explains:

Lesquard was now in a fury, all the more since he knew that if this determined creature persisted in her resolve he had no real power over her. A man can hardly force his wife to receive his caresses and blandishments, nor are such things very acceptable to him, when extracted, as it were, at the point of the sword. (308)

Either unaware of or unwilling to accept the terms of the Jackson vs Jackson ruling of 1891, which established that a husband had no right to detain his wife against her will, Lesquard has to be informed that masculine privilege is constrained. Emasculated by legal changes, Lesquard wreaks his revenge by vivisecting Rose’s beloved dog, Bran, these contiguous scenes emphasising the perceived links between marital violence and mistreatment of animals (and recalling the thrashing of Nelly Brooke’s dog). On the vivisecting trough Rose discovers:

⁴⁸⁹ Nicolaas P Rupke, ed., *Vivisection in Historical Perspective* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), p.6.

The poor animal was lying on his back with an iron gag in his mouth. His carcase was laid open from the throat to the lower extremities. At his throat the flesh had been carefully picked away by means of fine instruments, till they had left long nerves like bits of white thread extending across the gaping wound. As though this were not sufficient agony, the kidneys had been lifted out of the body, leaving them attached so that they continued to act; and a piece of the skull had been sawn out leaving the brain exposed, and in a condition which was designated by one of these inhuman operators as "a lately hoed potato field." (317-318)

Prevented by the law from perpetrating violence on Rose, he hurts her vicariously through Bran. With great presence of mind, and utilising her medical knowledge, Rose quickly plunges a scalpel through Bran's heart so that he dies instantly. This act of mercy is witnessed by an incensed Lesquard, who accuses her of meddling with his specimens. Rose retorts: "You have transgressed the law in destroying what was *my* property before marriage, and legally mine to keep, and I am perfectly justified in killing it, if I choose." (319) The seemingly omnipotent man of science realises that some legal boundaries are insuperable, cursing, "The damned injustice of women being allowed to keep their money to themselves." (341) When Lesquard demands that Rose return the scalpel to him, she throws it with great force and the contaminated blade lodges in his hand. The wound soon turns septic and Lesquard suffers the pain and discomfort of erysipales. This experience opens his eyes to the nature of suffering, especially that which is caused by one who is supposed to nurture:

Since I have been lying here ... ill and in pain for the first time in my life, I have thought what a terrible punishment pain is and how little those who have experienced it should wish to inflict it on others. (362-363)

Moved by his contrition, Rose resolves to remain with her husband, on the proviso that they establish a clinic dedicated to the ethical treatment of its patients, with the couple enjoying equal authority. Rose's seemingly inexplicable decision not to divorce Lesquard (and her ability to survive marriage to a vivisector) subverts the traditional plot of this genre. Marryat argues that such men should be re-educated and redeemed through the influence of strong women, rather than simply driven further into homosocial environments where such practices are acceptable. Lesquard himself admits: "it is altogether wrong that men should live without women about them to prevent their degenerating into utter savages". (60) Rather than collapsing in nervous prostration like Beatrice Egerton, Rose engages directly with the vivisector, defeating him with reasoned argument. The passive and indulgent Angel suggested by the novel's title instead turns out to be an avenging force and a powerful agent of change.

To prove that her novel is a polemic, as well as a melodramatic, text, Marryat includes sources in an afterword to substantiate her claims. Accustomed to charges of sensationalism by critics, she is careful to establish a clear grounding in fact:

Author's Note: If any of my readers should imagine that I have not chapter and verse for the facts related in this story, or that such things cannot possibly be, I beg them not to accept my testimony, but to send to the office of the Society for the Protection of Animals from Vivisection, 1 Victoria Street, S.W., for the following pamphlets: -- "The Royal Commission in Vivisection", "The Nine

Circles,” and “Light in Dark Places.” The three will only cost them ninepence. I would also refer them to a little book published by Swan Sonnenschein, Lowry & Co, entitled, “Dying Scientifically,” for my authority on the hospital cases. (367)

Dying Scientifically was a companion volume to *St. Bernard's: The Romance of a Medical Student* (1887), providing explanations for the novel's most controversial scenes that had upset the medical profession. Frances Power Cobbe's *Light in Dark Places* (1885) is an uncompromising and graphic attack on the abuse of animals. Comprising mainly detailed images, there is no attempt to indulge potentially delicate sensibilities, and Marryat borrows liberally from this pamphlet, and also its companion piece *The Nine Circles*. Whereas Grand writes that the vivisectioning room presents “a sight too sickening for description,”⁴⁹⁰ and Collins leaves the “detestable cruelties of the laboratory to be merely inferred,”⁴⁹¹ Marryat provides several pages of graphic detail, leaving the reader with no illusions as to the reality of vivisection. The *Athenaeum*, adopting its wonted opposition to anything from the pen of Marryat, commented:

From an ‘author’s note’ at the end we gather that the book is chiefly intended as a protest against vivisection. If so, it seems a pity to have swamped it with so much of what the author's distinguished father would have called “flap-doodle”.⁴⁹²

Even when quoting her sources, Marryat's attempt at a rational argument is dismissed as “flap-doodle”.

While Lesquard is given a chance to redeem himself before it is too late, in Marryat's supernatural novella *The Dead Man's Message* (1894), the anti-hero is instead held to spiritual account in the afterlife. Waking from what he believes to be a nap, Professor Aldwyn discovers that he has died and that a spirit guide, Peter Forest, has arrived to convey him to the Other Side. Forest was himself a scientist during life and explains to an astonished Aldwyn that, like him, he must atone for his misdeeds and accept the consequences of his actions. First, however, the guide shows him how happy his family are without him, rejoicing at their liberation from his dogmatism and brutality. On reaching their destination, Aldwyn is delighted to see his first wife, Susan, who he imagines will want to look after him. Instead she treats him with disdain, explaining that she has made a much happier spiritual marriage and has not missed him at all. The idea of innate masculine authority is exposed as a specious social construct.

Aldwyn also finds himself persecuted by the “dumb brutes” he “tortured in the name of science”.⁴⁹³ (94-95) Formerly at his mercy, he is now their victim. When Aldwyn suggests that science is more important than mongrels and cats, the spirit guide explains:

⁴⁹⁰ Sarah Grand, *The Beth Book*, ed. by Jenny Bourne Taylor (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2013), p.453.

⁴⁹¹ Collins, *Heart and Science*, p.370.

⁴⁹² ‘An Angel of Pity’.

⁴⁹³ Florence Marryat, *The Dead Man's Message* (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2009), pp.94–95.

All the long, weary hours of acute pain under which you kept these helpless creatures of God, in order that you might watch their hearts beating, or the various parts of their organism working, have been reckoned up against you, and the animals themselves are ordained to accompany you throughout the hell you have created for yourself, till your own tortures will have so accumulated that you would be thankful to exchange them for those you made them suffer—aye, even to have your head and body laid out and secured on the vivisection table, as theirs were, whilst all your nerves and most of the delicate portions of your system are mutilated by the dissecting knife. (94-95)

Aldwyn's mistreatment of both women and animals went unpunished on the temporal plane, but could mean endless torment in the hereafter unless he truly repents. Unlike in many other anti-vivisection novels, Aldwyn's wives enjoy a happy ending: the first in the spirit world, the second in a joyous second earth marriage. Meanwhile, Aldwyn's future is uncertain and frightening, "the torture of the damned" (356) feared by the repentant Dr Lesquard.

Lesquard's belief that without women, men would degenerate into "utter savages" is realised in Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897). The eponymous vampire is Harriet Brandt, daughter of a scientist and a mixed-raced voodoo priestess who run a Jamaican slave plantation. Henry Brandt is a notorious vivisectionist and has been expelled from numerous medical institutions for experimenting on his patients. He has exiled himself to the West Indies, where his laboratory work can remain undetected – reminding the reader of H G Wells's Dr Moreau, who conducts depraved reproductive experiments on his remote Pacific island. An ex-colleague comments, "I would not shock your ears by detailing one hundredth part of the atrocities that were said to take place under his supervision".⁴⁹⁴ Brandt experiments on his slaves after luring them into his "Pandemonium" (68) (the equivalent of Moreau's House of Pain) and they are never heard of again. The "negroes" eventually revolt, murdering him and his common-law wife with "appropriate atrocity" (68) and setting fire to the estate.

The law is impotent in the face of men like Brandt, who simply remove themselves to places where it does not apply. As his ex-colleague remarks, "Henry Brandt was not the man to regard the laws, either of God or man." (68) Consequently, his daughter turns out "cruel, dastardly, godless," (69) leaving a trail of destruction wherever she goes. When the hapless Ralph Pullen is foolish enough to vex her, "she would have given [him over] to the vivisection laboratory if she could". (111) As a *Spectator* reviewer commented, "The illegitimate daughter of a barbarous, vivisectioning man of science and of a voluptuous Creole slave, she is scarcely likely to attain any high degree of moral perfection."⁴⁹⁵ Marryat shows that by allowing the vivisectionist to continue unchallenged by feminine influence, the repercussions will endure for successive generations.

Laura Otis observes, "these literary trials challenge the values of science in ways that no actual trial ever could," never emerging beyond "a desire to prove a point".⁴⁹⁶ These novelists made no

⁴⁹⁴ Florence Marryat, *The Blood of the Vampire* (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2010), pp.67–68.

⁴⁹⁵ 'The Blood of the Vampire', *The Spectator*, 1 October 1898, p.447.

⁴⁹⁶ Laura Otis, 'Howled out of the Country: Wilkie Collins and H G Wells Retry David Ferrier', in *Neurology and Literature, 1860-1920*, ed. by Anne Stiles, pp.28, 46.

acknowledgement of the value of Ferrier's work to practising physicians who lacked detailed knowledge of the brain,⁴⁹⁷ or of the fact that some vivisectors also actually experimented on themselves, rather than simply exploiting others: Brown-Séquard, for example, developed an 'incompetent sphincter' after performing exhaustive tests on his own digestive system.⁴⁹⁸ While the novels discussed above are highly propagandist, refusing to countenance oppositional voices, they do, nevertheless, offer an important insight into the popular perception of the medical profession. Throughout these novels Marryat argues for an end to the dichotomy of the rational male/irrational female, demonstrating that women's intellect equalled that of their male counterparts, also providing a useful brake on the excesses of scientific discovery. Rather than presenting heroines who either adopt a traditional role in the campaign against vivisection or become its unwitting victims, Marryat makes a forceful argument for the regulation of masculinity.

The Pathologisation of Female Sexuality

Reviewers of both *Dr Janet of Harley Street* and *Mona Maclean, Medical Student* accused their respective authors of infecting the texts with hysteria.⁴⁹⁹ For centuries, the diagnosis of 'hysteria' was conveniently applied to any woman who displayed transgressive behaviour, whether it be through sexual promiscuity or simply by expressing strong opinions. Little progress had been made from Hippocratic medicine, which believed the womb wandered about in search of moisture, thereby causing its owner to behave erratically.⁵⁰⁰ For a growing nineteenth-century medical profession keen to assert its authority, hysteria – a disease with no distinguishing symptoms – became a useful diagnosis both to limit women and to pathologise their sexuality. Edward Tilt claimed that gynaecology was the "accurate study of diseases of women"⁵⁰¹ but some of its practitioners were propelled by an imperfect understanding of women's bodies that was based more on ideology than on scientific progress. The protean nature of hysteria meant it "could be modified in order to diagnose all the behaviours which did not fit the prescribed model of Victorian womanhood,"⁵⁰² that is, behaviours that acted against the perceived interests of the family institution. Foxcroft notes that, "There was no parallel scientific study of masculinity or andrology, an omission that reflected the ancient belief of an ideal male body and an imperfect, problematic female one."⁵⁰³ The

⁴⁹⁷ Otis, p.30.

⁴⁹⁸ Joseph C. Watson and Stephen V. Ho, 'Charles Edouard Brown-Séquard's Departure from the Medical College of Virginia: Incompatible Science or Incompatible Social Views in pre-Civil War Southern United States', *World Neurosurgery*, 75 (2011), 750–753 (p.752).

⁴⁹⁹ Swenson, p.124.

⁵⁰⁰ Scull, p.13.

⁵⁰¹ Edward John Tilt, *The Change of Life in Health and Disease: A Practical Treatise on the Nervous and Other Affections Incidental to Women at the Decline of Life* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1882), p.vii.

⁵⁰² Jane Wood, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.12.

⁵⁰³ Foxcroft, pp.134–135.

reductive view that woman was dominated by her sexual functions is epitomised by the eminent pathologist Rudolph Virchow, who wrote that “Woman is a pair of ovaries with a human being attached; whereas man is a human being furnished with a pair of testes.”⁵⁰⁴

The prescribed model of Victorian womanhood was one who “did not initiate but reacted”.⁵⁰⁵ The diagnosis of hysteria became particularly powerful in establishing deviant sexual behaviour, that which defied ideas of feminine propriety. While William Acton’s belief that “women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling” is much quoted, Lucy Bland usefully explains that there were an equal number of doctors who viewed women as naturally sexual beings.⁵⁰⁶ Indeed, there were many who warned of the dangers of women being able to express their sexuality and the implications this might have for future generations, for example widespread sterility and homosexuality. Acton did himself admit that “there are some few women who have sexual desires so strong that they surpass those of men and shock public feeling by their exhibition”.⁵⁰⁷ Manifestations of an unhealthily strong sex drive included masturbation, which became a cultural anxiety, with many fearing the consequences of women indulging in an expression of sexuality that was autonomous and divorced from reproduction. Masturbation was thought to impair a woman’s ability to bear children, potentially leading to a loss of desire for “normal” sexual intercourse.⁵⁰⁸ Acton warned of the dangers in *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Orders* and Nicholas Cooke devoted a chapter of *Satan in Society* to female masturbation, which begins, “ALAS, that such a term is possible! O, that it were as infrequent as it is monstrous.” He continues, “Beyond all dispute the crime exists, and incontestably the female boarding-school is the arena where it is most widely acquired and practised.”⁵⁰⁹

In *The Blood of the Vampire*, Harriet Brandt describes her time at boarding school:

It’s the very last place where they will let you make a friend – they’re afraid lest you should tell each other too much! [...] us girls, we were never left alone for a single minute! There was always a sister with us, even at night, walking up and down between the row of beds. (16)

This passage clearly evokes masturbatory fears, and is also indicative of how girls’ behaviour was regulated. Furthermore, the teenage boy who is infatuated with Harriet is described as “an anaemic young fellow and very delicate, being never without a husky cough” (83) – classic signs of onanism,

⁵⁰⁴ Quoted in Dally, p.84.

⁵⁰⁵ Wood, p.45.

⁵⁰⁶ Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast* (New York: Tauris Parke, 2002), p.56.

⁵⁰⁷ William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life Considered in Their Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations* (London: John Churchill, 1862), p.101.

⁵⁰⁸ Diane Elizabeth Mason, *The Secret Vice: Masturbation in Victorian Fiction and Medical Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), pp.32, 34.

⁵⁰⁹ Nicholas Francis Cooke, *Satan in Society* (Chicago: C. F. Vent, 1890), pp.100, 106.

according to Cooke.⁵¹⁰ In case the reference is insufficiently obvious, Marryat calls him Master Bates.

The boarding school scene also suggests lesbianism, a theme that persists throughout the novel. Masturbation certainly has not lessened Harriet's desire for 'normal' sexual intercourse, rather she has become sexually omnivorous, exerting a powerful influence over nearly everyone she meets, with both men and women feeling a strange and inexplicable attraction to her. Margaret Pullen describes herself as "scooped hollow" after spending time in Harriet's company:

[She], glancing up once, was struck by the look with which Harriet Brandt was regarding her — it was so full of yearning affection — almost of longing to approach her nearer, to hear her speak, to touch her hand! It amused her to observe it! She had heard of cases in which young unsophisticated girls had taken unaccountable affections for members of their own sex and trusted she was not going to form the subject for one such experience on Miss Brandt's part. (23)

Although aware of what is happening, Margaret finds herself helpless:

She had become fainter and fainter as the girl leaned against her with her hand upon her breast. Some sensation which she could not define, nor account for — some feeling which she had never experienced before — had come over her and made her head reel. She felt as if something or someone were drawing all her life away. She tried to disengage herself from the girl's clasp but Harriet Brandt seemed to come after her, like a coiling snake, till she could stand it no longer[.] (18)

Harriet's "hungry, yearning look was more accentuated than before — it seemed as though she was on the alert, watching for something, like a panther awaiting the advent of its prey," (37) and she is reminiscent of the hideous panther-like figure in Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau*, that symbol of dangerous female sexuality.

Aware of the power she exerts, Dr Phillips warns: "she is a woman whom you must never introduce to your wife, and that it is your bounden duty to separate her, as soon as possible, from your fiancée and your sister-in-law". (77) Harriet is a vector of lesbian contagion. When Harriet consults Dr Phillips as a patient, he urges her not to breed. Astonished, she asks: "And that is the truth, medically and scientifically — that I must not marry?" He explains:

You will always exert a weakening and debilitating effect upon them so that after a while, having sapped their brains and lowered the tone of their bodies, you will find their affection, or friendship for you visibly decrease. You will have, in fact, sucked them dry. (162)

Susan Zieger makes the important point that "although this novel is about vampirism, it is not a supernatural novel: Harriet's 'proclivity' is rigorously elucidated in medical science".⁵¹¹ Aberrant female sexuality is viewed as sick and, in the interests of society, must be quarantined. Richard von Krafft-Ebing claimed that the behaviour of both the sexual invert and the masturbator was contagious — they were capable of seducing and corrupting "normal," sexually healthy

⁵¹⁰ Cooke, p.93.

⁵¹¹ Susan Marjorie Zieger, *Inventing the Addict: Drugs, Race, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), p.266.

individuals.⁵¹² Octavia Davis writes that Harriet's behaviour "illustrates what contemporary science termed 'primitive bisexuality,'" ⁵¹³ with Darwinian theory used to argue that certain racial types were regressing to their origins. While this is a convincing reading of Harriet, I would argue that Marryat is looking forward as well as back: Harriet represents the modern and sexually liberated woman. She is one of the novel's few likable characters and is compared favourably with the Englishwomen, who are described as passionless and frigid. Ralph Pullen, who is obsessed with Harriet, describes his fiancée as "prim and old-maidish" (61) and "enough to freeze the sun himself". (130) The sexuality that Harriet represents may be dangerous, but it is also very appealing when contrasted with the sexual reticence expected of women. She represents the unregulated woman: unstable, but inherently attractive.

In this novel Marryat explicitly links hysteria with lesbianism, an idea developed more fully in some of her other novels. As Ross Forman observes, the doctor's description of Harriet's 'condition' uses "very much the terms of late nineteenth-century medical discourse about homosexuality".⁵¹⁴ Bland notes that, "[l]esbianism was rarely mentioned by nineteenth-century doctors ... until the rise of sexology as the end of the century".⁵¹⁵ The fact that it was not openly discussed has led some to conclude that it did not exist, what Terry Castle calls the "no-lesbians-before-1900' myth".⁵¹⁶ As Sharon Marcus has shown, lesbian desire was expressed in a multitude of ways:

our contemporary opposition between hetero- and homosexuality did not exist for Victorians, and that Victorians were thus able to see relationships between women as central to lives also organised around men.⁵¹⁷

However, few writers were prepared to openly portray lesbian characters in their fiction, and certainly not positively. An early exception is Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, who calls herself Captain Keeldar and pursues emotional intimacy with Caroline Helstone. Through her research on Anne Lister, Anne Longmuir makes a convincing argument for a "more explicitly sexual interpretation of female relationships" in this novel.⁵¹⁸ In her short story 'Angelina; or, L'Amie Inconnue' (1801),

⁵¹² Kelly Hurley, 'Hereditary Taint and Cultural Contagion: The Social Etiology of *Fin-de-Siècle* Degeneration Theory', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 14 (1990), 193–214 (p.200).

⁵¹³ Octavia Davis, 'Morbidity Mothers: Gothic Heredity in Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire*', in *Horri-fying Sex: Essays on Sexual Difference in Gothic Literature*, ed. by Ruth Binstock Anolik (Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company), p.45.

⁵¹⁴ Forman, p.426.

⁵¹⁵ Bland, p.54.

⁵¹⁶ Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p.30.

⁵¹⁷ Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p.19.

⁵¹⁸ Anne Longmuir, 'Anne Lister and Lesbian Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*', *Brontë Studies*, 31 (2006), 145–155 (p.153).

Maria Edgeworth tells of sixteen-year-old Anne Warwick, who elopes from her guardian's home to live in the Welsh cottage of Araminta Hodges, an author with whom she has conducted a passionate epistolary romance. When they finally meet, Anne discovers that the woman of her dreams is a masculine creature who reeks of brandy, reminiscent of Charlotte Riddell's Miss Grostock (see Chapter Two). The disillusioned ingénue returns home, presumably to normative behaviour. Matilda Betham-Edwards's *The White House by the Sea* (1857) and Mrs. Alexander's *Which Shall it Be?* (1866) both show female marriages, but only as a part of a transition towards a heterosexual union. Interestingly, both occur at the mid-point of the narrative, thereby offering tantalisingly alternative conclusions. Towards the end of the century, when the lesbian was a more visible figure, such characters become less subtle. Eliza Lynn Linton's Bell Blount in *The Rebel of the Family* (1880) and Rhoda Broughton's Faustina Bateson in *Dear Faustina* (1897) are both mannish, almost monstrous creatures who lead young women astray. George Moore's *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) features a hunchbacked lesbian who hates men and behaves like a stalker towards the woman she loves. Sally Ledger concludes that "Moore transposed female friendship into lesbian malady," offering "a clear instance of Sheila Jeffrey's claim that the 'accusation' of lesbianism has all too often been used to subvert women's attempts to emancipate themselves from male authority".⁵¹⁹

These unsympathetic portrayals of lesbians serve to dissuade the female reader from identifying with them, instead reinforcing ideas of normative sexuality. Conversely, Marryat discusses lesbianism sympathetically in several of her novels. While the lesbian theme is necessarily coded, Marryat nevertheless presents models that challenge the idea of what Judith Butler calls the "heterosexualising imperative".⁵²⁰ As discussed in Chapter Two, Fenella Barrington in *How They Loved Him* wants to marry a woman and eventually elects to be a single mother. In *The Beautiful Soul* (1894), the intense relationship between childhood friends Fanny Cuthbert and Felicia Hetherington, who refer to each other as Frank and Felix, is interrupted when Fanny is obliged to return to Wales and care for her sick mother. When Felicia decides to marry a feminine-looking man (who has been further emasculated by the amputation of a leg), Fanny exclaims: "He will find I am as jealous of my Felix as if I were her husband myself!"⁵²¹ Neisius writes that this novel "suggests lesbianism," a notion that "probably would have horrified the Victorian Florence Marryat".⁵²² As I demonstrate through my readings of Marryat's fiction, these are subtle, but entirely intentional, representations, designed to introduce an extra layer of meaning, and also to challenge the heteronormative ideal that limited women's behaviour.

⁵¹⁹ Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp.140, 142.

⁵²⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.23.

⁵²¹ Florence Marryat, *The Beautiful Soul* (New York: The Cassell Publishing Co, 1894), p.104.

⁵²² Neisius, p.169.

One of Marryat's earliest novels, *The Girls of Feversham* (1869) includes a coded lesbian subplot. When Mary "Polly" Pelham returns to her childhood home and announces her engagement, everyone is delighted apart from close friend Ursula Ripley, who enquires tentatively: "I suppose – I suppose – you're awfully fond of him, Polly?"⁵²³ When answered in the affirmative, Ursula goes into a decline: "her eyes had dark rings about them, and her face and figure had lost much of their plumpness," (38) symptoms suggestive of both the hysteric and the masturbator. Polly's brother Edward proposes to Ursula, but she tells him that she never wants to marry anyone. Meanwhile, Polly's initial excitement wears off and she realises that marriage could compromise her intimacy with Ursula. Making enquiries, she discovers that "Marriage is usually the signal for the rupture of all such 'young-lady' friendships," (49-50) suggesting that they are merely part of the transition towards a heterosexual relationship. Worn down by her illness, Ursula finally agrees to marry Edward, perhaps mindful that this is the only way she can remain close to Polly. Marryat leaves the novel's conclusion unresolved, the narrator merely speculating as to whether they do actually marry. This is a device she frequently employs – reaching a morally acceptable resolution, but leaving an air of ambiguity – suggestive of alternative endings.

Her Father's Name (1876) is one of Marryat's most radical and intriguing novels, featuring a cross-dressing heroine with whom other women fall in love, and a character who is a textbook hysteric. As I argue, the plot distinctly shows how hysteria was linked with sexual deviance. In the opening scene of the novel, Leona Lacoste appears as Joan of Arc, immediately identifying her with one of history's most famous cross-dressers. (It also identifies her with Marryat, who appeared dressed as Joan of Arc on her *carte de visite*.)⁵²⁴ Shortly afterwards Leona is shown to carry a loaded pistol and a long knife, nonchalantly rolling and lighting a cigarette, and indicating the presence of her weapons to a man who makes unwelcome sexual advances. The reader is immediately alerted to the fact that this is not a woman who conforms to accepted notions of femininity. When she discovers that her recently deceased father's name has been wrongly linked to a murder, Leona dresses as a man so she can embark upon an international quest to exonerate him. During a sea voyage she is challenged to a duel and accepts, seriously wounding her opponent by shooting him straight in the chest. When he collapses, however, "All the woman had come back to her in the idea that she might have killed her antagonist,"⁵²⁵ and she nurses him back to health. Through Leona, Marryat is keen to show a character who embodies the best of both masculine and feminine characteristics, rather than simply a woman who seeks to behave like a man.

On reaching London, Leona, disguised as a merchant by the name of Don Valera, enters the house of her uncle. There she meets Lucilla Evans, a woman of twenty-five who has been ill since

⁵²³ Marryat, *The Girls of Feversham*, p.16.

⁵²⁴ Uncat MSS 104, Marryat Family Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscripts Library, Yale University.

⁵²⁵ Florence Marryat, *Her Father's Name*, ed. by Greta Depledge (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2009), p.59.

the age of fifteen, so probably from the onset of puberty. Her ailment is non-specific: “She had no organic disease, but she had suffered from a weak spine for many years past, and it prevented her taking any active part in life. And the restraint made her fractious.” (131) Isaac Baker Brown’s work suggests that Lucilla displays classic signs of hysteria and masturbation: “The patient becomes restless and excited, or melancholy and retiring, listless, and indifferent to the social influences of domestic life.”⁵²⁶ He believed that “peripheral excitement of the branches of the pudic nerve” caused a disease with eight stages, progressing from hysteria, through to mania, and ultimately death, explaining Lucilla’s subsequent erratic behaviour.⁵²⁷

Lucilla is under the care of Dr Hastings, a “bluff, manly fellow” who endears himself to her parents with his promises of a cure. His attendance on the patient is unwelcome, however:

It was strange ... that Lucilla Evans should have taken a distaste (it was scarcely to be called a dislike) to the man who had really benefited her health, and was so constantly attentive to her—strange, that is to say, to anyone who did not know the secret of her heart and his. For the cause lay in the fact that Dr. Hastings was too attentive, and that his attentions bore a deeper meaning than mere interest in her as a patient. He was fond of Lucilla Evans, and she felt the influence without acknowledging it; and not being prepared to return his affection, it worried instead of pleasing her. (137-138)

Her parents encourage this incipient relationship, declaring “He is thoroughly fond of the girl, and understands the management of her health, so he is by far the best husband she could have.” (322) Lucilla, meanwhile, “could not bear to see that Dr. Hastings’ eyes rested on her longer than was necessary, or that he lowered his voice when he addressed her”. (138) As discussed in the previous section, such conflation of patriarchal and medical authority could be particularly powerful in dealing with troublesome women. The narrator explains that Lucilla’s aversion is not specific to Dr Hastings: “she would be as happy in the future with [him] as she would have been with anybody else.” (323) The reason for her antipathy is explained when the disguised Leona makes her entrance: “Lucilla Evans raised her eyes to the stranger’s countenance and withdrew them instantly, blushing deeply. There was something in the face of the newcomer that attracted her at once.” (142)

And it is not just Lucilla who is aroused. Lizzie Vereker, “a fine handsome girl of two or three and twenty, a perfect specimen of the fast young lady of the nineteenth century” (131) is instantly drawn to Leona and flirts outrageously with her. When they find themselves acting together in amateur theatricals, the attraction becomes palpable:

[Lizzie] lifted up a very bright face so close to Leona’s that it only seemed natural to my heroine to kiss it. The minute she had done it though, she saw by the blush that dyed her companion’s cheek, how imprudent she had been, but it was impossible to explain the action away again. She must let Miss Vereker [and the reader] think what she chose. (172)

⁵²⁶ Isaac Baker Brown, *On the Curability of Certain Forms of Insanity, Epilepsy, Catalepsy and Hysteria in Females* (London: Robert Hardwicke, 1866), p.14.

⁵²⁷ Brown, p.vi.

The narrator continues, “But what was this Leona was bringing on herself? She feared she would have to snub Lizzie Vereker for the future.” (173) The implication is that Leona is frightened of her own awakening sexuality, fearing the consequences:

Leona had no idea she intended going so far as she did that night. Even for two women personating lovers, the action was very strong, but under the supposed circumstances of sex, it almost passed the limits of decorum. (182)

When one of the men subsequently questions Lizzie’s behaviour she responds: “Oh! not half what I did when we were alone. You should have seen us together in the close carriage[.]” (280)

Lucilla, who is in the audience, is overcome by jealousy and has to be carried shrieking to her bed, her behaviour indicative of the fits Baker Brown associated with the masturbating hysteric. The disruption caused by the disguised Leona has not gone unnoticed by Dr Hastings, who makes frequent and disparaging comments about ‘his’ appearance: “He looks more like a woman stuck into boy’s clothes to me. I should like to try my biceps against his, though I believe he’s taller than I am, and broader into the bargain.” (145) Hastings is apparently threatened by this person who exerts such a powerful influence over women, and particularly over the woman he wishes to be his wife. His repeated references to Leona’s womanly shape reveal that he sees through her disguise, and the other men agree with him. Realising what is happening, he admonishes his patient:

“Now, Lucilla,” he said, sternly, “I cannot have any more of this nonsense, or I shall speak to your father about it ... I know far more than you have any idea of. But I have been watching you closely for some time past, and the absurd fancies you have got into your head are no secret to me.” (183-184)

Here the man of science establishes himself as moral arbiter, regulating gender and exposing artifice. His recognition of Leona’s sex reminds the reader of her subversion and reinforces it. If she had passed as a man without comment, her behaviour would have been less subversive.

Accepting the futility of his pleas, and afraid of Leona, Hastings instead asks Lucilla’s father to send her to the country, beyond harm’s reach. Lucilla refuses to go and her father recognises that only Leona/Don Valera is able to make her happy. Consequently, he encourages them to spend more time together, even telling Leona that a marriage proposal would be welcome, as:

[She], who in her weakness and timidity shrunk from the generality of the sterner sex, as something too rough and loud-spoken to give her any pleasure, considered Leona Lacoste, in her male attire, to be the very perfection of all she had ever dreamed of as amiable, and gentle, and winning in a man[.] (189)

When Lucilla tells a servant about Leona’s “pretty little hands and feet,” she responds: “Dear me, miss! that seems more like the description of a young lady than a gentleman to me.” (269) Furthermore, when another servant is admonished for “smirking at the men,” (157) i.e. Leona, she retorts that there are no men to smirk at, suggesting that she can see through the subterfuge. It is apparent that Lucilla, at least unconsciously, perceives that Leona is really a woman, and her

classically hysterical behaviour is explicitly linked with lesbian desire. The implication is that Leona makes an unconvincing, if extremely attractive, man. All the young women who encounter the disguised Leona are attracted to her and vie for her attention. Her power is similar to that of Harriet Brandt, but not as destructive, although both are feared by doctors as vectors of lesbian contagion.

Conscious of the influence she holds over Lucilla, Leona encourages her to respond to Dr Hastings's advances, believing their marriage to be the safest outcome. Lucilla acquiesces, desperate to agree to whatever Leona suggests. Leona is initially satisfied with the arrangement, believing it was for the best, but she has second thoughts: "Only as she passed the drawing-room door on her way downstairs the smile faded from her features, and gave place to a wild look of longing that was much more like pain." (285) This solitary and easily overlooked sentence is the only hint of Leona's true feelings. Any opportunity for second thoughts is neatly avoided by a plot twist in which Lucilla is revealed to be Leona's half-sister. As Leona divests herself of the male disguise, Lucilla realises that Don Valera was a chimera, and accepts her fate as the doctor's wife.

Leona, too, acknowledges marriage as her destiny, accepting a proposal from a childhood friend, Christobal, who has repeatedly asked for her hand. When he complains, "But you do not love me in the way I want you to love me, m'amie," (277) she responds: "Then you must learn to be satisfied with *my* way, Tobal." (277) The narrator reveals that her acceptance is not motivated by desire, rather "her heart prompted her to reward him at last for all his patient, faithful love to her". (321) Although the novel's conclusion is conventional, their marriage will be anything but conventional, and there is no suggestion that her behaviour will be rendered more feminine. Indeed, she resolves to return to the stage in New York, playing male roles.

Depledge refers to Leona's disguised interactions with women as featuring "lesbian undertones," providing homoerotic readings "not envisaged by Marryat".⁵²⁸ Although the lesbianism is not overt, I argue that the subtext would have been clear to an enlightened reader, while remaining suitably opaque to those ignorant of its existence. As Emma Donoghue writes: "anyone wanting to know how to interpret passion between women could have had access to stories about it, even if many other readers averted their gaze".⁵²⁹ In her study of *Her Father's Name*, Lillian Craton proposes that: "Leona's cross-dressing shows masculinity to be malleable, which is a provocative implication."⁵³⁰ In fact, Marryat goes further, showing *gender*, rather than just masculinity, to be malleable. Craton's essay, while compelling in its arguments on cross-dressing, does not examine the sexual implications of Leona's behaviour – Marryat's novel is more

⁵²⁸ 'Introduction', in *Her Father's Name*, ed. by Greta Depledge (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2009), p.xviii.

⁵²⁹ Emma Donoghue, *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture, 1668-1801* (London: Scarlet Press, 1993), pp.15–16.

⁵³⁰ Lillian Craton, *The Victorian Freak Show: The Significance of Disability and Physical Differences in 19th-Century Fiction* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2009), p.158.

provocative that Craton's analysis allows. While it would be perverse to suggest that Leona Lacoste is suffering from gender dysphoria, I would argue that her cross-dressing goes beyond simple expedience, allowing her to experiment with sexuality as well as gender. Leona's protean nature allows Marryat to explore these radical ideas in what is, on the surface, a pantomimic text, but one that yields deeply subversive readings, presenting a heroine who comprehensively challenges prevailing notions of femininity.

While the solution to Lucilla's hysteria was to marry her off to the doctor, surgical intervention was another favoured method. Clitorises were routinely removed to treat hysteria and masturbation, as well as epilepsy and insanity. In the 1860s Isaac Baker Brown set up The London Surgical Home in which he performed clitoridectomies on women and girls as young as ten, later publishing accounts of the operations. Although Baker Brown was eventually expelled from the Obstetrical Society, this was for the method he used (scissors), rather than for the procedure itself,⁵³¹ which was seen by some as a lamentable necessity. Interestingly, Baker Brown acted with the approval of Brown-Séquard,⁵³² the notorious vivisectionist discussed above, reinforcing the links between gynaecology and vivisection. The procedure was deemed successful, as patients usually (and unsurprisingly) became docile afterwards, and were still capable of fulfilling their reproductive duties with no troublesome expectations of sexual pleasure.

Although some historians, such as Dally and Wood, have cautioned against ascribing sinister and misogynistic motives to surgeons, there are no recorded instances of surgical interventions to cure men of sexual misbehaviour, and Baker Brown's claim that "Clitoridectomy is nothing more or less than circumcision"⁵³³ is demonstrative of the lack of medical knowledge behind the procedure. Furthermore, there is evidence that glossodectomies (removal of part of the tongue), were carried out on women who were considered too talkative,⁵³⁴ and Baker Brown also cut the tendons in the hands of female kleptomaniacs, and the buttock muscles of women who showed an inappropriate fondness for dancing.⁵³⁵ Ovariectomy was also a popular procedure, and it is estimated that between 1870 and 1900 around 150,000 women had their ovaries removed.⁵³⁶ So, surgical intervention was the regulatory solution to a variety of undesirable behaviours, and exclusively for women. Despite

⁵³¹ Brian Easlea, *Science and Sexual Oppression: Patriarchy's Confrontation with Woman and Nature* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1981), p.134.

⁵³² Patricia Jalland and John Hooper, *Women from Birth to Death: The Female Life Cycle in Britain 1830-1914* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), p.253.

⁵³³ Quoted in Jalland and Hooper, p.263.

⁵³⁴ Dally, p.157.

⁵³⁵ Dally, p.159.

⁵³⁶ Easlea, p.135.

the opposition of such authorities as *The Lancet*, who denounced ovariectomy as “spaying”⁵³⁷ and were also unconvinced of the merits of clitoridectomy, these practices persisted. Indeed, clitoridectomy was recommended as a cure for masturbation as late as 1890,⁵³⁸ and the last recorded case of it being used to correct an emotional disorder was on a five-year-old girl in the 1940s.⁵³⁹

In *The Strange Transfiguration of Hannah Stubbs* (1896), Marryat makes oblique references to such surgical interventions. Hannah Stubbs is a young servant who has been disowned by her family, as her mediumistic powers are disrupting the household by causing furniture to jump around. Her employer, Mrs Battleby, is also displeased by these events, repeatedly threatening to dismiss Hannah. The strange goings-on attract the attention of lodger Professor Ricardo and his friend, Dr Steinberg. While Ricardo is interested in Hannah’s mediumistic powers, hoping that she can contact his dead wife, Steinberg seems more concerned with her potential for experimentation. He is the archetypal callous scientist, who acknowledges: “As a rule, I have not cared for women. I look upon the sex as a necessary evil – something without which population cannot go on.”⁵⁴⁰ Their furtive behaviour does not go unnoticed by the landlady, whose friend muses: “Suppose he should be Jack the Ripper, and congeals the corpses in your third room.” (7) The behaviour of these men is thus explicitly linked with the perpetrator of the Whitechapel murders, whose mutilation of his victims led some to believe he was a gynaecologist.⁵⁴¹

Hannah becomes alarmed when her powers cause the table to leap across the kitchen, and Ricardo reassures her: “trust yourself to the Doctor and me and we’ll cure you of this nonsense”. (47) He tells the landlady: “she is a victim to what we call hysteria – and that if she will allow me to treat her for the complaint, I will undertake to cure her”. (49) He goes on to explain that it “will be more convenient for me to operate on her here, than at the hospital,” (53) and he requires a separate private room for the purpose. As with the vivisectors discussed above, he wants to practice beyond the gaze of society. The suspicious landlady asks: “O! Lor, Sir, you’re never a’ going to cut up the pore gal, surely!” (53) To which he responds, “No! no! Indeed! ... I intend to treat her by an entirely new process which, if I am not mistaken, will have an almost immediate effect in preventing those nervous tremors which seem to assail her,” (53) adding sinisterly, “she must be a little worse before she’s better”. (53-54)

When Ricardo and Steinberg take Hannah to their room, she reacts badly:

⁵³⁷ Bland, p.66.

⁵³⁸ Jalland and Hooper, p.243.

⁵³⁹ Elizabeth Sheehan, ‘Victorian Clitoridectomy: Isaac Baker Brown and His Harmless Operative Procedure’, *Medical Anthropology Newsletter*, 12 (1981), 9–15 (p.15).

⁵⁴⁰ Florence Marryat, *The Strange Transfiguration of Hannah Stubbs* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1896), p.12.

⁵⁴¹ Moscucci, p.159.

“In there?” she screamed, “but what for? I’ve never been in such a dark ’ole in all my life! And what do you want to do with me there? Are you going to cut me up?” (55-56)

They reassure her, then administer a sedative drug. When she comes round, Hannah complains “but I do feel so queer-like, as if my legs were all bruised”. (61) The doctor later explains that the drugs ensure the patient is unable to recall what has passed. Meanwhile, Mrs Battleby and her friend are speculating as to what might be happening behind the locked door: “Keep a gal in the dark, indeed, and give ’er summat to make ’er go to sleep – I’ve ’eard summat like that afore, Mrs. Blarney, and no good came of it.” (89) Mrs. Blarney suggest: “Why! ’oo knows? that Doctor might be Jack the Ripper – which many said ’e was a doctor – and going to cut Hannah into bits.” (88) When Mrs Battleby complains about the “diabolical practices” (100) going on under her roof, Ricardo and Steinberg decide to take a cottage in Hampstead where they can live together with Hannah. This curious ménage à trois becomes even curiousest when Hannah marries the two men in turn, and also reveals later on that she had sex with Steinberg while married to Ricardo. (273)

Although Marryat is understandably not explicitly describing genital mutilation, to the educated reader, these scenes are suggestive of such practices, Hannah’s fear indicating that they were well known. What *The Academy* referred to as a “bewildering narrative”⁵⁴² was actually Marryat’s way of obfuscating a dark and menacing subplot. Hannah’s mediumistic powers that disrupt her environment are used as a metaphor for unacceptable female behaviour, an idea I explore in the next chapter. As a woman, and especially as one from the lower classes, she should be quiet and demure. The ominous ‘cures’ proposed by Ricardo and Steinberg suggest the severity of the punishment meted out to women who refuse to submit to more subtle forms of regulation.

Elaine Showalter concludes that the “mutilation, sedation, and psychological intimidation” of women was “an efficient, if brutal, form of reprogramming”.⁵⁴³ As I have shown above, Marryat exposed these practices, depicting the various ways in which the medical profession attempted to regulate women’s identity and sexuality by defining and punishing their behaviour. I argue that Marryat went further than her peers in uncovering and opposing medical misconduct. Her willingness to engage with key scientific debates confirms that her work went beyond mere sensationalism, instead embodying a serious attempt to question the limits of masculine power.

Through Rose Gordon, Marryat transforms women from patients requiring special treatment to medical professionals who further their scientific understanding without exploiting the vulnerable. In Harriet Brandt and Leona Lacoste, Marryat allows women a greater range of sexual expression, presenting lesbianism as an alternative to marriage, rather than as an ugly subversion of the feminine ideal, and resisting the idea that a woman’s role was only reproductive. For Marryat, liberated women are the solution, rather than the problem.

⁵⁴² ‘New Novels’, *The Academy*, 9 May 1896, pp.382–383 (p.383).

⁵⁴³ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), p.66.

Chapter Four: ‘Undomesticated and remarkably mobile’ – Spiritual Rebellion in Marryat’s Fiction

As discussed in the previous chapter, the late nineteenth century saw an attempt to establish a scientific basis for women’s supposed mental and physical inferiority. By claiming that women’s biological difference rendered them hopelessly weak and emotional creatures, men could contain them within the limited domestic sphere. This impetus was prompted in part by shifting attitudes towards organised religion; with the Bible’s authority under attack, the scriptural foundation for women’s subordinate position was also called into question. Ben Griffin argues convincingly that “without these new religious ideas, a popular women’s movement could not have developed to challenge successfully the nostrums of Victorian domestic ideology”.⁵⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Ann Braude sees the growth of Spiritualism as part of the “rebellion against authority,”⁵⁴⁵ associating its adherents with some of the most radical reform movements.⁵⁴⁶

In this chapter I demonstrate how this “rebellion” and “challenge” is evident in Marryat’s fiction, arguing that her radical interpretation of Roman Catholicism and discovery of Spiritualism allowed her to explore important ideas surrounding women’s identity, spirituality, and sexuality. Firstly, I offer an account of Marryat’s evolving faith, setting it within the context of Victorian religious upheavals. Secondly, I consider the Virgin Mary, a contentious figure who came to symbolise both womanly perfection and spiritual authority. Through close readings of *My Own Child* and *The Dead Man’s Message*, I show how Marryat epitomised the “paradigm of sacred maternity”⁵⁴⁷ that Alex Owen proposes as central to late nineteenth-century feminist thought. Lastly, I investigate Marryat’s own experiences in the séance room and how she used this space to explore ideas of power, gender, and sexuality. Moving on to her spiritualist novels, I argue that in her fiction Marryat overcame the limitations of established religion to create a uniquely liberating and utopian vision of a gynocentric spirit world, where women are freed from the constraints of their earthly existence and men are forced to accept the limits of their rationality.

⁵⁴⁴ Griffin, p.112.

⁵⁴⁵ Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p.2.

⁵⁴⁶ Braude, p.3.

⁵⁴⁷ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.34.

The types of regulation I considered in the previous two chapters – legal and medical – were both man-made, and Spiritualism, a belief system that accords women a higher status, can be seen as countering many of the other ways in which their lives were regulated. While male authority was restricted to the temporal plane, women’s power was transcendent. As I argue, Marryat’s Spiritualism was a creed created by women to circumvent regulation of women’s identity and behaviour, supporting Owen’s view that it “validate[d] the female authoritative voice and permitted women an active and spiritual role largely denied them elsewhere”.⁵⁴⁸

The Bible is liberally scattered with references to male authority. In Genesis, wives are told “thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee”;⁵⁴⁹ the Epistle to the Ephesians explains “the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church”.⁵⁵⁰ The Church of England, as the established church, sought to use this doctrine to regulate women’s behaviour. However, this became increasingly difficult in the early nineteenth century, as the population started moving away from Anglicanism. Already in competition with the Roman Catholic and Presbyterian Churches, “the most serious threat came from the splintering of religious views within the Church of England”.⁵⁵¹ The three main factions that emerged during the 1840s – the Evangelicals, or Low Church; the Tractarians, or High Church (later the Anglo-Catholics); and the Broad Church⁵⁵² – had to negotiate difficult territory, demarcating their many differences without compromising the Church’s overall authority. This process of redefinition, while presenting challenges, also allowed sects to evolve that could accommodate a social diversity that Anglicanism refused to acknowledge. For example, as Kathryn Gleadle has shown, in the 1830s radical Unitarians had already attempted to promote marriage as a “triumph of dual responsibility and commitment, rather than the domination of one sex over the other,”⁵⁵³ with the wife maintaining a direct relationship with God, rather than one mediated through either her husband or male clergy. Other dissenting sects, such as the Methodists, also permitted women a more active involvement in the church, as George Eliot showed with her preacher Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* (1859). However, as Julie Melnyk points out, the novel is deliberately set in 1799 as women preachers were suppressed after 1804, their appointment to positions of spiritual authority becoming “rare and marginal”⁵⁵⁴ in most denominations. Logie Barrow’s important research shows that dissenting

⁵⁴⁸ Owen, p.6.

⁵⁴⁹ Genesis 3:16 [original emphasis].

⁵⁵⁰ Ephesians 5:23.

⁵⁵¹ Julie Melnyk, *Victorian Religion: Faith and Life in Britain* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2008), p.19.

⁵⁵² Melnyk, *Victorian Religion*, p.19.

⁵⁵³ Kathryn Gleadle, *The Early Feminists* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1995), p.113.

⁵⁵⁴ Melnyk, *Victorian Religion*, p.128.

religion was a clear antecedent for Spiritualism,⁵⁵⁵ a movement “capable of containing the full spectrum of beliefs,”⁵⁵⁶ absorbing even secularists and free-thinkers. As I discuss below, this plasticity allowed women to develop a faith that could be reconciled with feminist beliefs, granting them latitude beyond that offered by the established Church.

While the activities of the non-conformists had little impact on wider society, it was the historicist approach to biblical criticism during mid-century that seriously undermined Anglicanism. Already weakened by developments in geological and evolutionary science, the exposure of textual errors showed the Bible to be disappointingly fallible.⁵⁵⁷ Furthermore, by studying the Bible in its historical context, its more controversial tenets could be dismissed as anachronisms, rather than accepted as timeless decrees.⁵⁵⁸ In *The Spirit World* (1894), Marryat questions the sacredness of the Bible, referring to it as:

a very jumbled history of the times, written long after the events spoken of took place, and in the fantastical and allegorical language of the East, so that is difficult to know what the writers of it did, or did not, mean. The interpretation of it has been made ... by men, who felt compelled to explain it in some way or other, and so made it fit in, with their own doctrines.⁵⁵⁹

St Paul’s writings in particular had been hugely influential on domestic ideology, and women’s ability to withstand their subjection was equated with Christ-like suffering. As Melnyk argues, “the model of the suffering Saviour was an effective tool for controlling women and encouraging their self-sacrifice in the service of patriarchy”.⁵⁶⁰ Barbara Taylor adds that an “ideal of femininity which combined holy love with social subordination served to suppress women in an elision of spiritual power with social impotence”.⁵⁶¹ Conversely, Spiritualism permitted women a direct relationship with a spiritual authority and to determine their own ‘truth,’ while at the same time allowing them to remain within the appropriately feminine domestic sphere.

The potent image of the Virgin Mary was one of the reasons for ongoing tensions between the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches, which were greatly exacerbated during the nineteenth century. As I shall show, the appropriation of the Virgin Mary as a feminist icon also provided women with an inspirational role model, offering an image of the mother as independent and powerful, rather than a submissive creature limited by her biological function. The 1828 Catholic

⁵⁵⁵ Logie Barrow, *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians, 1850-1910* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

⁵⁵⁶ Owen, p.22.

⁵⁵⁷ Griffin, pp.114, 115.

⁵⁵⁸ Griffin, p.115.

⁵⁵⁹ Marryat, *The Spirit World*, pp.54–55.

⁵⁶⁰ Julie Melnyk, “‘Mighty Victims’: Women Writers and the Feminization of Christ”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31 (2003), 131–157 (pp.131–132).

⁵⁶¹ Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Virago Press, 1983), p.127.

Emancipation Act had finally given Roman Catholics the right to hold government offices, but, as Melnyk observes, this apparent progress was tempered by a number of caveats. For example, religious orders were forbidden to admit new members, and Catholics elected to Parliament were required to deny the Pope's authority.⁵⁶² Tensions persisted, and Roman Catholicism remained a deviation from the norm.

The Pope's appointment of Nicholas Wiseman as Archbishop of Westminster in 1850 was perceived as an act of papal aggression, intended to return England to its position before the Henrician schism. The Pope was effectively placing himself above the state,⁵⁶³ a provocative move, prompting an outpouring of anti-Catholic rhetoric and rioting, accompanied by the popular cry of "no Popery!"⁵⁶⁴ After decades of tension, in 1874 Parliament passed the Public Worship Regulation Act, legislation drafted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who sought to limit the rise of Anglo-Catholicism, or Ritualism, as it was then known.⁵⁶⁵ This controversial Act established a court with powers to prosecute those who indulged in Ritualist practices, leading to many high profile trials and convictions.⁵⁶⁶ Nigel Yates argues that the Act was prompted by panic, and resulted in more panic when people realised that their private worship could be subject to state intervention.⁵⁶⁷ The ruling judge was Lord Penzance, who had previously reigned over the Divorce Court,⁵⁶⁸ thus giving him the authority to regulate many areas of people's lives.

This desire to defeat the "hybrid" of Ritualism can be seen as a move designed to establish Roman Catholicism as a distinct "other". As Maureen Moran argues, "it serves as a 'heretical' foil against which orthodox middle-class beliefs and structures can be reaffirmed".⁵⁶⁹ For this model to succeed, the two faiths must remain polarised. It was during this foment that Marryat converted to Roman Catholicism, a profoundly rebellious act in which she adopted a faith that was deemed "sexually perverse and theologically alien".⁵⁷⁰ It was this religious conversion in 1870 that caused the irretrievable breakdown of Marryat's marriage to Thomas Ross Church. While she initially heeded her husband's demand that she return to Anglicanism, a subsequent relapse landed her in the Court of Chancery, where Church sought custody of their children so he could protect them

⁵⁶² Melnyk, *Victorian Religion*, p.45.

⁵⁶³ D. G. Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p.3.

⁵⁶⁴ Paz, p.10.

⁵⁶⁵ Nigel Yates, *Anglican Ritualism in Victorian Britain, 1830-1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.333.

⁵⁶⁶ Yates, p.245.

⁵⁶⁷ Yates, p.276.

⁵⁶⁸ Lord Penzance ruled on Marryat's own divorce in 1878.

⁵⁶⁹ Maureen Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p.4.

⁵⁷⁰ Patrick R. O'Malley, *Catholicism, Sexual Deviation and Victorian Gothic Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.24.

from their mother's Papist tendencies.⁵⁷¹ Marryat remained a Roman Catholic after winning her case, but her faith had a protean quality, continually adapting to accommodate the vicissitudes of her unconventional life.

Marryat's novel *The Hampstead Mystery* (1894) set in 1875, at the time of her conversion, is partly a vehicle for her criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church. Despite having "no religion at all"⁵⁷² the hero Frederick Walcheren becomes a priest, mainly to prevent himself from getting into any more disastrous relationships with women. A widower since his wife was murdered by a jealous admirer, Walcheren also has a love child with a woman he seduced (and there are rumours of others). Partly, too, this self-imposed reclusion allows Walcheren to contemplate the spirit of his dead wife, who becomes an object of worship and a symbol of goodness: "she was an angel in heaven, and he might dream of her just as soon as of the Virgin Mary, or any other saint". (III:99) Although he considers himself an independent thinker, Walcheren declines to heed the warnings of a clairvoyant, who prophesies that entering the priesthood would be a grave mistake. Choosing instead to take counsel from his devout cousin, Walcheren is subsequently forced to listen impotently to the confession of his wife's murderer. By submitting himself to the rules of the Church, he must respect confidentiality and allow a killer to go unpunished. Had Walcheren instead yielded to the feminine influence of the clairvoyant, he would have been spared considerable emotional turmoil. This novel embraces many of the themes explored in greater detail in Marryat's other fiction – the challenge to biblical authority, the supremacy of women's spirituality, and the limitations of established religion – all of which I discuss below.

Our Mother Who Art in Heaven - The Virgin Mary

One of the Archbishop of Canterbury's particular objections to Anglo-Catholicism was that its followers worshipped the Virgin Mary,⁵⁷³ thereby making a woman equal with God, and ignoring the taint of original sin. At the first Lambeth Conference in 1867, bishops specifically denounced the exaltation of the Virgin,⁵⁷⁴ indicating how much of a threat they perceived her to be. The gentle and merciful image of the Catholic Virgin Mary was more appealing to some than the vengeful Jehovah who emanated from the Protestant pulpit. This idea that religion should provide spiritual comfort and redemption, rather than dispense judgement and punishment, is a key theme in Marryat's fiction. Throughout the Victorian period, the Virgin Mary remained a pervasive, yet controversial figure. For Catholics she was the embodiment of womanly perfection, while for some

⁵⁷¹ Bill of Complaint filed 10th June 1875. C16/997 Public Record Office.

⁵⁷² Florence Marryat, *The Hampstead Mystery*, 3 vols. (London: F V White & Co., 1894), I, p.71.

⁵⁷³ Carol Engelhardt Herringer, *Victorians and the Virgin Mary: Religion and Gender in England, 1830-1885* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p.32.

⁵⁷⁴ Kimberly Van Esveld Adams, *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism: The Madonna in the Work of Anna Jameson, Margaret Fuller, and George Eliot* (Ohio University Press, 2001), pp.15–16.

Protestants she symbolised the worst excesses of Roman idolatry. An almost fantastical figure, people could project upon her their own image of woman. Even Protestants, particularly women, appropriated her as their spiritual figurehead, a “feminised version of Christ”.⁵⁷⁵ Kimberly Van Esveld Adams’s study on the work of Anna Jameson, Margaret Fuller and George Eliot shows how these Protestant women used images of the Virgin Mary to empower women, who became “their Lady of Victorian Feminism”.⁵⁷⁶ Christina Rossetti (an Anglican), too, found Mary a more appropriate model for her life, rejecting the idea of marriage, in which her spiritual growth would be mediated through her husband.⁵⁷⁷ As Melnyk observes, “Christianity in nineteenth-century England offered women no forceful female religious symbols, no images of women’s spiritual power.”⁵⁷⁸ As I shall argue, by conflating Spiritualism with Marian imagery, Marryat was able to create such an symbol.

Following Pope Pius’ 1854 proclamation of the Immaculate Conception, Mary became the only human being to be spared the taint of original sin, with his subsequent declaration of Papal Infallibility in 1870 establishing his authority for this apotheosis. While the Protestant Mary was a flawed woman with little power, the Catholic Mary was a “sinless virgin mother” with “extraordinary influence”.⁵⁷⁹ Thus the image of the Virgin Mary became a contested space, with Protestants outraged by her redefinition without scriptural authority, and the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception suggesting that a woman could be morally superior.⁵⁸⁰ Carol Engelhardt Herringer argues that these religious anxieties and arguments were partly attempts to define the role and nature of women, observing that “The Marian controversies became most heated during the decades in which the feminine ideal was dominant.”⁵⁸¹ Marina Warner concludes that the Virgin Mary was an “instrument of ascetism and female subjection,”⁵⁸² a man-made image that was accepted unquestioningly by women. However, as Sue Morgan and Jacqueline de Vries note, “Religious discourses were never passively received within religious institutions or in the wider culture; instead, they were constantly reinterpreted by women and invested with new meanings.”⁵⁸³ As I show, these “new meanings” are evident in Marryat’s fiction.

⁵⁷⁵ Melnyk, ‘Mighty Victims’, p.135.

⁵⁷⁶ Adams, p.226.

⁵⁷⁷ Sally Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol* (London: Random House, 1996), p.257.

⁵⁷⁸ Melnyk, ‘Mighty Victims’, p.134.

⁵⁷⁹ Herringer, p.21.

⁵⁸⁰ Herringer, p.25.

⁵⁸¹ Herringer, p.25.

⁵⁸² Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.50.

⁵⁸³ Sue Morgan and Jacqueline de Vries, eds., *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p.3.

The “Divine Mother” in *My Own Child*

The novel that best exemplifies Marryat’s appropriation of Mariolatry is *My Own Child* (1878), although the often mawkish plot belies a complex exploration of Marryat’s faith and her vision for a new form of gynocentric religion. Here she explores the intersection between Roman Catholicism and Spiritualism, with many of the ideas informing her non-fiction writing. Here I argue that Marryat uses the Virgin Mary as a symbol of feminine power to express radical ideas about marriage, reproduction, and gender roles.

Anxious to escape her disciplinarian aunt, fifteen-year-old Katherine Arundel elopes with handsome neighbour Hugh Power. During their honeymoon in Paris, Hugh falls ill with cholera, dying intestate after only four weeks of marriage. The distraught Katherine is obliged to return to her hated childhood home, reverting to the status of an unwanted ward. Discovering, to her joy, that she is pregnant, Katherine visits Ireland shortly after the birth to meet her parents-in-law, a powerful and aloof Catholic family. Objecting to Katherine’s Protestantism (she is actually agnostic), the Powers are keen to gain custody of their grandchild and to choose her name. Defiantly, Katherine has her daughter covertly baptised with the unusual name of Hugh Mary (shortened to May), in honour of her father and “the Divine Mother”.⁵⁸⁴

Although she now finds prayer a comfort, Katherine is uncomfortable with the Powers’s insistence on ritual, and her unconsciously deliberate breaking of a holy water stoup symbolises her rejection of such practices. (116-117) When she is told that May was to be anointed with holy water every morning and evening, Katherine retorts: “I’m very glad the stupid thing is broken. I never heard such rubbish in my life.” (117) Continually excluded by the family, Katherine tries to convert to Roman Catholicism so that their religious differences might be overcome. The priest refuses to admit her into the church unless she agrees that Jesus is more important than her daughter. (124) Unwilling to do so, it is only some years later, when they are living on the Continent, that Katherine’s conversion is complete. Now sharing the faith of her late husband and her daughter, she professes herself much happier than before, (138) drawing strength from her faith and the women around her in the homosocial environment of a convent. This exemplifies Susan Mumm’s arguments that “sisterhoods embody a powerful example of feminist practice,”⁵⁸⁵ offering an alternative to marriage. Marryat herself spent a year in a Belgian convent with her daughter Ethel, to whom the novel is dedicated.

⁵⁸⁴ Florence Marryat, *My Own Child* (London: Richard Edward King, 1876), p.75.

⁵⁸⁵ Susan Mumm, *Stolen Daughters, Virgin Mothers: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1999), p.210.

When Katherine receives a marriage proposal from her husband's schoolfriend Eustace Annerley, she travels to Paris and stays in the hotel room where she spent her honeymoon. Hugh appears to her as a powerful vision, convincing her to stay true to his memory. Annerley is outraged, wreaking his revenge by tricking May into a loveless marriage. He flaunts his adulterous liaisons and is physically violent towards her. Desperate to escape, a half-dressed May runs away on a cold, wet night, collapsing and dying in her mother's arms. Although bereaved once more, Katherine is relieved that May is safely with her father, and, most importantly, beyond the reach of her husband. The dramatic final scene resembles a *pietà*, with Katherine as the Virgin Mary and May a Christ-like figure in her arms. This idea is prefigured earlier in the novel when Katherine is told she is pregnant with May. Such is her ignorance of sexual matters, the idea had never occurred to her, and the doctor's portentous words and her disbelief recall the Annunciation. The doctor describes himself as "a messenger to assure you of God's care for and interest in you". (66) Even at her most sensational, Marryat would not allow for actual parthenogenesis.

Ruth Vanita contends that the literary model of the Marian ideal "eroticises the mother-daughter relationship and gives rise to triangles in which the primary energy is between two women".⁵⁸⁶ This idea is particularly apposite in the case of *My Own Child*, with the intense bond between Katherine and May, and the sublimation of Hugh, the father. Carol Dever concludes that, "To write a life, in the Victorian period, is to write the story of the loss of the mother,"⁵⁸⁷ but this novel subverts the usual trope in Victorian fiction where the mother dies, often in childbirth, becoming an idealised figure who can do no harm. Dever observes, "Mothers were often a source of transgression rather than a passive ideal"; in their absence, however, they can be "constructed retrospectively as virtuous".⁵⁸⁸ Here, this is exactly what happens to the father. Marryat's radical implication is that the family is better off once Hugh is in Heaven. He is freed from concupiscence and any sins he might have committed cannot be visited upon his wife and daughter. When he appears to Katherine, Hugh reveals: "Had I been left longer in this world, I should have ruined not only my own life, but yours. It was necessary for the salvation of both of us that I should be removed." (194) He has been "purged of the grossness of [his] mortal nature". (194) An absent father becomes the ideal – he has performed his biological duty, and now his work is done. Instead Marryat presents a divine motherhood, an all-powerful love that transcends everything else: Katherine's love for May is such that she needs no father, beyond a disembodied and distant figure. Marryat actually goes beyond contemporary Marian worship, relegating the figure of God the Father to a subordinate role.

⁵⁸⁶ Ruth Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p.2.

⁵⁸⁷ Carolyn Dever, *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.1.

⁵⁸⁸ Dever, p.130.

Hugh has assumed a saint-like status, protecting them from above and interceding with God on their behalf. When he appears to Katherine in the hotel room, he has “waving hair and beard” and his eyes “beamed like fire,” his countenance so dazzling that she is almost unable to look at him. (194) He inspires awe in Katherine, revealing that he is always with her, like a guardian angel. As Nina Auerbach observes, angels had been traditionally androgynous, but the Victorians saw them as female.⁵⁸⁹ Here Marryat returns them to the Miltonian or Blakean model, embodying strength and complexity. Whereas angels are often “soggy dilutions of human complexity,”⁵⁹⁰ Hugh embodies wisdom, compassion, gentleness and strength – a perfect blend of male and female characteristics. Marryat recreates the angel in the house as an idealised man in Heaven.

In a scene strongly suggestive of masturbation, Hugh appears before Katherine as she lies restless in bed, and the ecstasy he provokes is both religious and sexual: “‘Kiss me—kiss me!’ I urged, passionately, in my unchastened, earthly desire.” (194) It is after this vision that Katherine rejects Eustace Annerley and, indeed, the idea of a relationship with any other man. A superficial reading might suggest an appropriately wifely desire to remain true to her husband’s memory, but I propose a more radical interpretation: this spiritual marriage fulfils her, at the same time releasing her from the cycle of womanhood. As Vanita argues:

An immaculately conceived Virgin Mary suggests that women want autonomous creativity, power and gentleness, women’s community, sympathetic friendship with men, the joy and pain of love, and, most important, no father and no tying-in of childbirth with heterosexual marriage.⁵⁹¹

Aged only twenty-eight, a second marriage would likely mean more children for Katherine. By rejecting a marriage proposal from an eligible man, she is denying the teachings of St Paul, who decreed: “Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man.” She must instead “marry, bear children, guide the house, [and] give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully”.⁵⁹² As she did elsewhere in her fiction, (see Chapter Two) Marryat is championing elective single motherhood, elevating the status of women who reject the idea of a husband, and establishing a matrilineal heritage. By styling herself in the image of the Virgin Mary, Katherine invokes a figure who is “undomesticated and remarkably mobile,”⁵⁹³ the antithesis of the womanly ideal who is confined within the home. Katherine instead appoints May as her own personal saviour and worships her accordingly. By naming her ‘Hugh Mary’ she summons the masculine strength of her late husband and the feminine spirit of the Virgin Mary, creating an androgynous ideal, but one that is manifestly ‘woman’. As I outlined in the

⁵⁸⁹ Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.64.

⁵⁹⁰ Auerbach, p.64.

⁵⁹¹ Vanita, p.7.

⁵⁹² 1 Timothy, 5:9-14.

⁵⁹³ Adams, p.30.

introduction, the growth in nineteenth-century feminism was stimulated by such questioning of the Bible's wisdom and authority; here Katherine rejects the orthodox faith of parents-in-law, instead establishing a heterodox faith that permits her the freedom she craves.

Katherine is anxious that May should remain a virgin, actively discouraging her from marriage. The marital violence she subsequently endures vindicates Katherine's anxieties. Marryat's choice of 'Katherine' as her heroine's name is significant, as St Katherine was the patron saint of virginity. As Herringer contends:

As an eternal virgin, Mary repudiated Victorian family values. [...] She also threatened the model of patriarchal control in the family, for although she had married and borne a child, her child had no human father.⁵⁹⁴

By rejecting remarriage, Katherine also rejects the need for a human father for her child, and the masturbation scene expresses the ultimate in sexual self-sufficiency. As I showed in the previous chapter, there was a cultural anxiety surrounding an expression of sexuality that was autonomous and divorced from reproduction, and masturbation was also thought to impair a woman's ability to bear children.⁵⁹⁵ Katherine's name also perhaps acknowledges St Catherine of Alexandria and St Catherine of Siena, both of whom were reputed to have contracted a mystic marriage with Christ. The former also appeared to Joan of Arc, a feminist icon Marryat invoked in *Her Father's Name* and on her *carte de visite* (see Chapter Three). Early in the novel, Katherine's attitude to marriage is equivocal, and she admits that sometimes she would "rather go round the world and seek adventures". (10) Her acceptance of Hugh's proposal is largely an expedient that allows her to leave her unhappy home. She seems most smitten by the idea of the name she will assume when Hugh's father dies – Lady Power – a hint of the personal faith she later develops. She repeats the name to herself (14, 17), as if summoning a vision of her future self and invoking the "Divine Mother". This novel prefigures some of the arguments that Marryat later made in her lecture, 'The Mistakes of Marriage' (1898), where she urged alternatives to matrimony and also advocated contraception to limit the number of pregnancies women would have to endure.⁵⁹⁶

Even after the loss of her husband and daughter, Katherine lives a long and fulfilled life. Although she draws strength from her spiritual family, she is not defined by them. She evokes Anna Jameson's insistence that the Virgin Mary should be shown as "a majestic woman of mature age,"⁵⁹⁷ rather than as an impossibly youthful feminine ideal. An ingénue at the beginning of the novel with "no religion in [her] heart" (122), by its conclusion she has effectively constructed her

⁵⁹⁴ Carol Marie Engelhardt, 'The Virgin Mary and Victorian Anglicans', in *Women of Faith in Victorian Culture*, ed. by Anne Hogan and Andrew Bradstock (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p.162. [This author publishes as 'Carol Marie Engelhardt' and 'Carol Engelhardt Herringer'.]

⁵⁹⁵ Mason, p.32.

⁵⁹⁶ 'Mistakes of Marriage', *The Manchester Guardian*, 24 February 1898, p.7; 'Mistakes of Marriage', *Daily Mail*, 26 January 1898, p.3.

⁵⁹⁷ Quoted in Adams, p.67.

own religion, appropriating and modifying elements of Roman Catholicism. Katherine draws strength from the Roman Catholic Virgin Mary, but rejects those elements she deems patriarchal. For Katherine, the confession gives power to a man, investing him with the power to judge her, and providing him with a “long list of frailties” (51). She fears having to “render up an account of every idle word I said”. (51) As Susan David Bernstein argues, “confession is largely a site of coercion,”⁵⁹⁸ a dyadic structure “between the confessing subject compelled to narrate a story of transgression and the authorised audience of this tale who determines its meaning and the speaker’s absolution, treatment or punishment”.⁵⁹⁹ In Marryat’s *The Hampstead Mystery*, newly-qualified priest Frederick Walcheren, although a “man of the world” (III:100) is shocked by the questions he is required to ask young girls. He feels as though he will be “blushing all over, just as if he were in a drawing-room instead of a confessional”. (III:100) Rather than submit to this regulation and penetrative questioning, Katherine simply defines her own codes of behaviour.

This complex novel goes some way to explaining Marryat’s own faith, the disparate blend of Roman Catholicism and Spiritualism that she practised. Like Margaret Fuller, Anna Jameson and George Eliot, Marryat found Catholicism “a useful corrective to the exclusions of Protestantism,”⁶⁰⁰ and the protean nature of the Virgin Mary allowed her to redefine the popular image of womanhood. As Adams argues, the Virgin Mary “acts as a model and justification for unconventional behaviour by both women and men, [and] provides a convention for alternative ways of life”.⁶⁰¹ Through the character of Katherine Power, Marryat rejects both the ideal of Victorian womanhood and the patriarchal image of the Virgin Mary as a passive and impotent figure.

Engelhardt writes that “The Protestant Mary was isolated and uncertain, unlike the joyful Catholic Mary.”⁶⁰² This dichotomy can be seen by comparing Katherine’s strength and agency with the passive heroine of Margaret Oliphant’s novel *Madonna Mary* (1866). The goodness suggested by the eponymous heroine’s nickname is called into question when it is discovered that she is not actually married to the father of her children. Although it is her ‘husband’s’ fault that their marriage service was ‘irregular’ and unverifiable, she is described as a fallen woman, and becomes the subject of gossip – her legendary piety revealed as entirely specious. Her life as a single mother following her husband’s death is further marred by reproach from her sons for the invidious position in which they have been placed. For Mary, maternity becomes a shameful condition, rather than the

⁵⁹⁸ Susan David Bernstein, *Confessional Subjects: Revelations of Gender and Power in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p.1.

⁵⁹⁹ Bernstein, p.3.

⁶⁰⁰ Adams, p.226.

⁶⁰¹ Adams, p.26.

⁶⁰² Carol Marie Engelhardt, ‘Mother Mary and the Victorian Protestants’, in *The Church and Mary*, ed. by R. N. Swanson (Rochester, NY: Ecclesiastical History Society/Boydell Press, 2004), p.301.

expression of strength it represents in Katherine Power. Lacking any agency, her life is nearly ruined by her husband's action, and is made unpleasant because she has no authority over her sons. She conforms to St Paul's teaching that widowed women over thirty are "Widows Indeed,"⁶⁰³ whose lives should be dedicated to caring for others. As Herringer concludes, "Far from incorporating a strong and admirable Madonna figure into English discourse, this novel dismissed the viability of the Virgin Mary as a role model for women."⁶⁰⁴

While *Madonna Mary* merely exemplifies the Victorian woman's passivity and impotence, other novelists ridiculed the idea that women might define and control their own sexuality and faith. It was the very notion of female empowerment that agitated Charles Kingsley, the man who came to symbolise 'muscular Christianity,' described by Donald E Hall as "an association between physical strength, religious certainty and the ability to shape the world around oneself".⁶⁰⁵ Kingsley's image of 'masculinity' relied on an oppositional 'femininity': the woman was weak and receptive where the man was strong and authoritative. As Andrew Bradstock argues, Kingsley's particular issue was with elective virginity, and the suggestion that the female body should be used for anything other than reproduction. For him it went against his belief that "virility was proof of masculinity,"⁶⁰⁶ which could be expressed only through sexual conquest and procreation. In his memoirs he expresses his horror at overhearing a woman advised to "Go to the Blessed Virgin. ... She, you know, is a woman, and can understand all a woman's feelings."⁶⁰⁷ As far as Kingsley was concerned, a woman should go to her husband. Above all, women's spirituality needed to be "channelled and disciplined" through heteronormative marriage.⁶⁰⁸

In his novel *Yeast: A Problem* (1851), Kingsley argues that real Englishmen are both Protestant and manly, contrasting them with Luke, an effeminate and droopy Tractarian priest. His lack of interest in the opposite sex is mirrored by Argemone Lavington, who is "trying in vain to fill her heart with the friendship of her own sex," choosing Sappho as her heroine.⁶⁰⁹ Her lamentable lesbianism is overcome when she encounters a muscular Christian man whose virility defeats her:

She was matched, for the first time, with a man who was her own equal in intellect and knowledge; and she felt how real was that sexual difference which she had been accustomed to consider as an insolent calumny against woman. Proudly and indignantly she struggled against the conviction, but in vain. Again and again she argued with him, and was vanquished[.] (167)

⁶⁰³ 1 Timothy, 5:3.

⁶⁰⁴ Herringer, pp.96–97.

⁶⁰⁵ Quoted in Amanda Paxton, 'Charles Kingsley's Saintly Trials and Husbandly Duties', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 18 (2013), 213–229 (p.215).

⁶⁰⁶ Andrew Bradstock and others, eds., *Masculinity and Spirituality in Victorian Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p.48.

⁶⁰⁷ Charles Kingsley, *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of His Life*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1894), p.211.

⁶⁰⁸ Paxton, p.214.

⁶⁰⁹ Charles Kingsley, *Yeast* (London: John W Parker, 1851), p.31.

Argemone experiences a “new sensation” of normative sexuality, realising “the delight of dependence — the holy charm of weakness”. (126) Her self-defined version of femininity is powerless: “What was her womanhood, that it could stand against the energy of his manly will? The almost coarse simplicity of his words silenced her with a delicious violence.” (193) Argemone’s intellect cannot defy the essentialism that defines her position purely in relation to man, the “delicious violence” of his words conveying his physical superiority and her inexorable weakness. As Kingsley decrees in his memoirs, a woman should go “not to the indulgent virgin, but to the strong *man*”.⁶¹⁰ Unlike Katherine Power, she must submit to the traditional Protestant idea of feminine weakness, and, in the absence of a strong image of womanhood, Argemone can be defined only by her difference from a man.

Eliza Lynn Linton’s *Under Which Lord?* (1879), published shortly after *My Own Child*, offers an interesting counterpoint to Marryat’s family triangle: here the removal of the father causes its collapse. Hermione Fullerton, a wealthy heiress, has ceded all her money to her husband, Richard:

She was a woman without much reasoning faculty and with no sense of property; but with an overwhelming power of obedience and self-abnegation which made her the docile creature of the man whom she loved. And this sacrifice of her fortune, this transfer of her rights to the husband from whom they had been so jealously guarded, pleased her more than power would have done.⁶¹¹

This sacrifice ensures a loving husband and, in a particularly emetic passage, the narrator explains with satisfaction that her life is now “like one long poem”. (I:8) However, the marriage is threatened by the arrival of Launcelot Lascelles, an Anglo-Catholic priest who is seeking funding for a new church. Richard, a rational man of science and an atheist, refuses to donate any money to what he views as “superstition”. (14) Lascelles instead preys on the innate suggestibility of Hermione, perverting her with ideas that the money belongs to her.⁶¹² Under his influence, Hermione becomes a Ritualist, and her daughter Virginia converts to Roman Catholicism, swayed by evil nun Sister Agnes, who refers to herself as her “spiritual mother”. (I:97) The ease with which Hermione’s position is usurped suggests the essential fungibility of the mother figure, whereas the marginalisation of Richard is portrayed as disastrous.

The homosocial environment of the convent indoctrinates Virginia against her biological destiny and she resists the robust wooings of a hero with the unlikely name of Ringrove Hardisty. The symbol of male normativity, Hardisty is described as “The Samson of Erastianism” (III:251), conveying his strength and the message that his faith is cultural, rather than spiritual. He valiantly attempts to rescue Virginia from her “lost life” (III:3), declaring “A woman can do better for herself and the world than by incarcerating herself and renouncing all practical usefulness. A

⁶¹⁰ Charles Kingsley: *His Letters and Memories of His Life*, p.211.

⁶¹¹ Eliza Lynn Linton, *Under Which Lord?*, 3 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1879), I, p.7.

⁶¹² Technically, it does, as her father placed her inheritance in trust, thus circumventing the limited married women’s property laws at the time.

mother is of more value than a nun.” (III:19) For Marryat, celibacy represents the ultimate in female liberation, but for Linton it is self-indulgence that should be challenged. Like Argemone in *Yeast*, Virginia is denied the right to self-determination; her destiny is a matter of public interest and too important to be left in her own hands. The family ultimately disintegrates, the novel concluding with Hermione alone and lamenting the untimely death of her husband. Whereas in Marryat’s *My Own Child* the removal of the father strengthens the family, Linton implies that the strong spiritual bond between mother and daughter is damaging, and that the husband’s authority (and rationality) is necessary to their survival. The malignity of the mother’s influence is compounded by that of the nun and the effete priest who espouse feminist principles. The narrator asks, breathlessly:

And now the final struggle had come. Love or religion – her husband’s control or her Director’s authority – the obligations of marriage or the ordinances of the Church – which would win? Under which Lord would she finally elect to serve? (III:139)

Throughout the narrative, Hermione vacillates endlessly between the two. There is never a suggestion of ‘Under Neither Lord’ – for the wife it is a simple choice between two male authority figures, the husband and the priest, and the implication is that masculinity trumps spirituality. Even the *Saturday Review*, the former vehicle of Linton’s famously reactionary Girl of the Period articles, thought the novel a product of a “diseased imagination”.⁶¹³ The tone and rhetoric look back to *Yeast*, written almost thirty years earlier; it is a retrogressive tale that seeks to deny the reality of women’s changing lives and faith. Meanwhile, in *My Own Child*, Marryat anticipates the New Woman novel by portraying an autonomous heroine who controls her own spiritual growth, challenging the Church’s desire to enforce normative behaviour.

“A Bitter Penance”: Neglected Spirituality in *The Dead Man’s Message*

Marryat also explores the idea of heavenly parenting in *The Dead Man’s Message* (1894). This novella is more closely related to her Spiritualist beliefs, but is still expressed within the ideological framework of Roman Catholicism. Although this time the mother is absent, she enjoys considerable spiritual agency, rather than being simply a salutary presence to those left behind. Again a guardian angel acts as a link between the spiritual and the temporal. When Professor Aldwyn dies, he finds a “majestic figure” by his side, who, while in “the prime of manhood” has a “mild, calm” expression.⁶¹⁴ Like the apparition of Hugh Power in *My Own Child*, this figure combines masculine strength with feminine qualities, such as compassion and solicitousness. He tells Aldwyn “[t]he spirituality in you has been neglected,” (38) as he has been obsessed with rationalism and the supremacy of the masculine. The authorial voice explains “if he had yielded to the gentle counsel and entreaties of a woman who loved him, he might have turned out a very different man”. (45) Instead, his reductive view of a wife is that she could be nothing beyond a

⁶¹³ ‘Under Which Lord?’, *Saturday Review*, 29 November 1879, p.668.

⁶¹⁴ Marryat, *The Dead Man’s Message*, p.38.

housekeeper and mother. Upon arrival in the Spiritual World, Aldwyn is taken to the 'Sphere of Meeting,'⁶¹⁵ one of the lowest spheres where the recently deceased are greeted by those who knew them during life. (45) He is initially excited, believing his first wife, Susan, will be there to welcome him:

He had always expected, in a vague way, that, when he met his first wife again, all the differences of their married life would be dissolved, in some miraculous manner, and they would be lovers again for eternity. (52)

Although he remarried after Susan's premature death, Aldwyn expects her to have remained true to him. She soon appears, but it is not the emotional reunion for which he had hoped. Instead she chides him for having neglected her during life and predicts a "bitter penance" for him. (51) She has made a much happier spiritual marriage and has been reunited with her two stillborn children. When Aldwyn claims his paternal rights to the children, Susan impugns his parental abilities, declaring "happily for them, [they] never lived to know you," (52) expressing her reluctance for their purity to be defiled by his grossness. (53) As in *My Own Child*, Marryat marginalises the father figure, instead making a bold statement of the supremacy and divinity of both motherhood and femininity. Although she never becomes angry, Susan is far from meek and mild, refusing to forgive Aldwyn's sins against her. The onus is on him to repent, rather than on her to provide absolution. She reiterates that he is solely responsible for his own actions and the concomitant repercussions:

"This is hell, indeed."

"It is," replied Susan, gently; "the hell you have made for yourself. There is no heaven and no hell in reality, Henry—not such as we are wrongly taught from infancy to believe in. We make our heaven, or we make our hell. What greater hell could there be than for a man to find ... that no one wants him here, and no one wants him there?" (54)

When the Guide takes Aldwyn back to earth, he is surprised to see Susan once more. Questioning her presence, he is told:

She has never ceased to visit her children, since she was called away from them. But what eyes had you to see her? What ears to hear her gentle counsels? Every good influence which has been brought to bear upon you—every whisper from your better self—every doubt whether, after all, you were quite just and right—has been prompted by the invisible presence of Susan. She has watched like a sister over your second wife; without her aid and solace, Ethel would hardly have been able to bear the trials you put upon her. (67)

Here Marryat firmly establishes Susan as a Marian figure, a powerful maternal divinity, watching over her child and exerting a benign influence on them. Crucially, she is also acting as a brake on Aldwyn's patriarchal authority by supporting his long-suffering second wife in a spiritual sorority that he finds disturbing. Susan is a kindly friend to the weak and powerless, but a stern critic of

⁶¹⁵ Predominant views of the spirit world involved a series of concentric spheres, arranged hierarchically, through which the soul would progress.

those who abuse them. The description of Susan recalls a Leonardo Virgin Mary, and is also reminiscent of Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel*, (1878) a sumptuously dressed spirit who leans over the bar of Heaven:

Her fair hair hung down her neck in waving ringlets; her large blue eyes were soft and ambient; her graceful figure was draped with consummate taste, and her head and waist were wreathed with flowers. (50)



Figure 1: *The Blessed Damozel* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Many of the Spiritualist tracts popular at this time portray dead mothers as benevolent maternal spirits, continuing to care for their families from the other side of the veil:

My dear mother was surrounded by little children and young people, who looked to her for knowledge and instruction, and hung on to her words and treasured them up in their minds as jewels of priceless value. I thought her beautiful upon earth, but here she is exquisitely lovely, youthful, and graceful; her long golden hair floats around her, forming clouds of loveliness and glory, her robes are of spotless white, and all around seems pure and spotless, and unsullied by evil.⁶¹⁶

⁶¹⁶ A. H. M. W., *Glimpses of a Brighter Land* (London: Balliere, Tindall, and Cox, 1871), p.43.

Marryat's "dear mother" is similarly graceful and irreproachable, but she is also a model of female agency, not merely a heavenly vision. When their daughter Maddy has a photograph taken in a studio, she is mystified by the appearance in the negative of a "tall, slight women, with long, loose-flowing hair".⁽⁷²⁾ She eventually realises it is her mother, and visits a medium to discover the reason for her manifestation. Susan speaks to her, explaining that she has been looking after her from the "other world" and warning that the man she wants to marry will be unkind to her. (90-91) She chose the photograph because "I knew the sight of my features would make you pause and think." (92) This image is like a Marian apparition, imbuing its witness with a sense of the feminine divine.

Disconcerted by Susan's omnipresence, Aldwyn is told by the Guide that Susan has been commissioned to remain by his side, supervising his spiritual growth: "you will see her and feel her presence wherever you go – her influence will lead you aright". (128) Whereas the popular perception is that the naïve wife must be educated by a superior husband, here the roles are transposed. Without this feminine guidance, Aldwyn can never achieve salvation. At the novella's conclusion, he is described as a "repentant child," (122) relegated to the lowest position in the family unit, far from his self-image of unassailable patriarch. Christine Ferguson argues that Susan "is delivered to him in terms that might please even the staunchest defender of traditional gender role with marriage: silent, dutiful and capable of exerting power only through gentle moral influence,"⁶¹⁷ adding that Marryat's afterlife is "deeply patriarchal ... restoring rather than transforming earthly conjugal bonds".⁶¹⁸ This analysis overlooks the fact that this arrangement is only temporary, designed to last only until Aldwyn progresses to the next sphere. Also, Ferguson does not allow Susan to derive any satisfaction from her position of spiritual superiority, perceiving her only as "dutiful" and "gentle". In fact, Susan is given the opportunity to perform a protracted emasculation of her bullying ex-husband in the afterlife, with the power to decide whether he has atoned for his sins or should endure further "bitter penance". There is no suggestion of spiritual bigamy, rather the exaction of an exquisite revenge. While the "earthly conjugal bonds" are in evidence, the dynamics have changed completely. As Marlene Tromp concludes:

[Aldwyn's] wives, who it seems must be bound by cultural standards to accept his cruelties and criticisms, are liberated by Spiritualism (one in life, and the other in death) to pursue the things that will make them happy.⁶¹⁹

Just as God's authority and omnipotence were being questioned, so was the position of the father in the microcosm of the family. As Janet Oppenheim writes, "the angry God was another

⁶¹⁷ Christine Ferguson, *Determined Spirits: Heredity and Racial Regeneration in Anglo-American Spiritualist Writing, 1848-1930* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p.110.

⁶¹⁸ Ferguson, p.110.

⁶¹⁹ Marlene Tromp, *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), p.61.

remnant of ancient paganism, to be swept aside by the truly modern religion of progressive spiritualism”.⁶²⁰ *The Dead Man's Message* represents a challenge to both the omniscient (and male) transcendental deity and his temporal representative in the home. At the same time, Marryat denies the conception of women as weak and passive. Rather than an omnipotent patriarch, many Victorians were craving “humility, tolerance, love, care, and forgiveness – all the virtues which the age prescribed to the feminine sphere, the realm of the mother”.⁶²¹ Susan Aldwyn represents a divine mother who is strong and compassionate, also embodying Adams’s idea of the Virgin Mary as “undomesticated and remarkably mobile”.⁶²² She is not confined to the heavenly sphere, and can both intervene and intercede where she sees fit. This is not the feminine ideal – the portrait of male fantasy suggested by Warner – rather a radical re-envisioning of Victorian woman that builds on the character of Katherine Power from *My Own Child*. Tromp argues that novels like *The Dead Man's Message* “participated in the evolution of the narrative face of marriage and became a voice in the shifting cultural and material face of marriage as well”.⁶²³ I would go further and suggest that Marryat is not only redefining women’s place within marriage, but also allowing them to define their own sexuality and identity.

For Marryat, the afterlife was not a choice between heaven and hell, rather a holding to account of one’s life and an opportunity for redemption. In *The Dead Man's Message*, death becomes a celestial courtroom where men are on trial for crimes of masculinity. A later edition of the novel was entitled *A Soul on Fire*, conveying a sense of the post-mortem journey and linking the ideas more explicitly with traditional Roman Catholicism ideology. Although her vision is one of universal salvation, Marryat depicts an extremely uncomfortable teleological experience for those who neglected their spirituality and the feminine divine. As Marryat later wrote:

The more spirituality we acquire below, the better fitted shall we be to enjoy a spiritual life above. [...] and I have been taught that every man remains as he passes away until he aspires to become better. But that may incur a bitter penance first.⁶²⁴

Geoffrey Rowell writes that this “indeterminate state ... fitted better with a dynamic, evolutionary picture of the universe, than the conception of fixed an unalterable state into which men entered at death.”⁶²⁵ By exploring the idea of *alterable* states, Marryat was helping to reshape this dominant ideology and imagining a new vital role for women’s spirituality.

⁶²⁰ Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.95.

⁶²¹ Jenny Uglow, ‘Introduction’, in *Victorian Ghost Stories by Eminent Women Writers*, ed. by Richard Dalby (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1989), p.xvii.

⁶²² Adams, p.30.

⁶²³ Tromp, *Altered States*, p.60.

⁶²⁴ Marryat, *The Spirit World*, p.15.

⁶²⁵ 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.216.

Spectral Politics: Spiritualism and Power

In 1873 Marryat was encouraged by a fellow journalist to attend a séance at the home of Mrs Holmes, a celebrated American medium. She was accompanied by the novelist Annie Thomas, who claimed to have seen the spirit of her dead mother. The spirit of an unknown girl also appeared, and it was only afterwards that Marryat came to believe that she was her daughter, Florence, who had died just ten days old. The child manifested once more, this time during a séance at the home of novelist and mystic Mabel Collins. Baby Florence had continued to develop in the spirit world and Marryat was able to speak to her, their emotional reunion confirming her belief in Spiritualism and providing, for her, incontrovertible evidence of its truth.⁶²⁶ Although convinced that her hosts knew nothing of Baby Florence's history, Collins's biographer suggests they had previously obtained details of the child's distinctive deformities through mutual friends in order to make the medium's performance more plausible.⁶²⁷ They were keen to recruit a high-profile supporter to their cause, and their efforts were entirely successful. Marryat became evangelical, and through her popular novels and non-fiction she convinced many others, alongside her participation on the council of the newly-formed British National Association of Spiritualists, which held séances and gave public lectures.⁶²⁸ In *Notable Women Authors of the Day*, Helen C. Black comments: "Florence Marryat numbers her converts by the hundred and they are all gathered from educated people; men of letters and of science have written to her from every part of the world and many clergymen have succumbed to her courageous assertions."⁶²⁹ Although this is difficult to verify, *There is No Death*, in which Marryat recounts her early experiences, has remained in print since its first publication in 1891.

Marryat had as many detractors as she did fans and was widely ridiculed in her lifetime, and is regularly held up by more recent commentators as a risible example of late-Victorian credulousness.⁶³⁰ Owen describes Marryat as "an ardent and susceptible believer,"⁶³¹ her selection of sensational séance scenes leading an excited tabloid reviewer to label her "a slightly histrionic contemporary novelist".⁶³² Trevor Hall, in his thorough debunking of the famous mediums, wrote that Marryat "could be relied upon to write columns of eulogistic and inaccurate rubbish about

⁶²⁶ Marryat, *There Is No Death*, pp.17–22.

⁶²⁷ Kim Farnell, *Mystical Vampire: The Life and Works of Mabel Collins* (Oxford: Mandrake, 2005), p.43.

⁶²⁸ Oppenheim, p.54.

⁶²⁹ Black, pp.100–101.

⁶³⁰ Oppenheim, p.39; Trevor Hall, *The Spiritualists: The Story of Florence Cook and William Crookes* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co, 1962); Owen, p.227.

⁶³¹ Owen, p.227.

⁶³² Val Hennessey, 'The Darkened Room', *Daily Mail*, 18 May 1989, p.31.

spiritualism”.⁶³³ In *The Diary of a Nobody*, Marryat’s quondam professional partner George Grossmith parodied both her and her beliefs, depicting Mrs Pooter reading *There is no Birth* by Florence Singleyet.⁶³⁴ When his wife holds a séance in their parlour, Mr Pooter mischievously taps on the ceiling with a hammer from above.⁶³⁵ This was Grossmith’s revenge, after Marryat became furious with him for his lack of respect during a table-rapping session.⁶³⁶ The *Athenaeum*, meanwhile, cheekily included *There is No Death* among its ‘Novels of the Week’.⁶³⁷ It is easy to become distracted by the question of scientific basis for Marryat’s claims, and some academics are inclined to place any Spiritualist claims in quotes. I do not see any reason to make retrospective judgements, nor to deny Marryat her subjectivity. Furthermore, Marryat was not trying to challenge the laws of physics, rather to reshape a prevailing ideology that had no more basis in fact than did Spiritualism. For Marryat, I argue, the appeal of the séance was twofold: firstly, this contact with the dead provided comfort lacking in established religion, allowing the bereaved to commune with departed souls. The dead were behind a thin veil, rather than separated by a final curtain. Secondly, through Spiritualism the influence of the feminine sphere could be extended in an age where many religious denominations still denied women a voice. I argue that Marryat’s enthusiasm for Spiritualism was more about pursuing a feminist agenda and pushing the boundaries of established religion.

Marryat did not embrace Spiritualism unquestioningly, even though she found séances a great comfort. As Georgina O’Brien Hill detects, Marryat’s editorials in *London Society* chart a transition from dismissal, to open-mindedness, then finally credence.⁶³⁸ While the Church denounced Spiritualism from the pulpit, Marryat received special dispensation from Father Dalgairn of the Brompton Oratory, who allowed her to pursue this “research”.⁶³⁹ Marryat was able, therefore, to reconcile her Roman Catholic faith with her Spiritualist beliefs (not to mention her divorce), an often untenable position she was frequently obliged to defend. In *The Spirit World*, described as her “spiritualistic manifesto,”⁶⁴⁰ Marryat enumerates the failures of established religion and ridicules aspects of Catholic doctrine. She also rejects the authority of the Church to which she belongs, declaring “if to be a Catholic is to be blind, deaf and dumb, I give up all claim to that title”.⁶⁴¹ Her

⁶³³ Hall, p.60.

⁶³⁴ George Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.123.

⁶³⁵ *The Diary of a Nobody*, p.124.

⁶³⁶ George Grossmith, *A Society Clown: Reminiscences by George Grossmith* (Bristol: J W Arrowsmith, 1888), pp.85–86.

⁶³⁷ ‘Novels of the Week’, *Athenaeum*, 12 September 1891, p.349.

⁶³⁸ Georgina O’Brien Hill, “‘Above the Breath of Suspicion’: Florence Marryat and the Shadow of the Fraudulent Trance Medium”, *Women’s Writing*, 15 (2008), 333–347 (p.333).

⁶³⁹ Marryat, *There Is No Death*, p.20.

⁶⁴⁰ Dickerson, p.145.

⁶⁴¹ Marryat, *The Spirit World*, p.12.

iconoclastic attitude is also exemplified in some of her more sensational plotlines. In *Phyllida* (1882), a Roman Catholic priest marries an apparently alcoholic divorcée, following an adulterous affair, and in *Parson Jones* (1893), a vicar struggles to resist the temptation of an extra-marital liaison with a young parishioner.

During the early days of Spiritualism in the 1850s, it was easily dismissed as table-rapping and disembodied voices. When two trance mediums, Florence Cook and Mary Rosina Showers, claimed to have achieved full-form spirit materialisations, many people, including Marryat herself, were prepared to give the idea more credence. It was the spectacle of materialisation that convinced her. Her sympathy, open-mindedness and influential position meant that Marryat was regularly invited to enter the private space of the medium's cabinet, a privileged position affording her rare access to some of the most astonishing scenes in 1870s domestic life. Not everyone shared Marryat's willingness to believe, and the Society for Psychical Research,⁶⁴² founded in 1882, sought to expose what it saw as fraudulent practice. Showers and Cook were crowned the "two princesses of the spiritualist world"⁶⁴³ and many, such as the SPR's William Crookes, were keen to dethrone them. The faith of believers like Marryat was an important bulwark against the constant interrogation and threat of exposure to which trance mediums were subjected.

Marryat was first convinced of Cook's power when she materialised the spirit of her dead daughter, Florence. To establish her authenticity, Cook would be secured in a cabinet while the spirit wandered freely, interacting with the sitters. The focus of Crookes's investigations was proving that the medium and the spirit were one and the same person. So a binary emerged of the rational male and the hysterical female (as discussed in Chapter Three), with the former determined to assert his mental and physical superiority. As I shall argue below, Marryat's passionate defence of Spiritualism was motivated by a desire to protect this female space, as much as by her faith. Marryat wanted to believe in the integrity of Cook, as she derived great comfort from contact with her dead daughter, but she was also claiming a feminine realm, free from the penetrative gaze of the male. As Owen notes, the séance was a "celebration and exercise of female spiritual authority"⁶⁴⁴ – while men were allowed to participate, it was on the understanding that they respected the woman's spiritual superiority and untouchability.

While the male investigators craved the opportunity to verify their suspicions, it was Marryat who was granted intimate access when "Katie King" [Cook] was "good enough" to give her "still more infallible proof".⁶⁴⁵ When sceptic Serjeant Edward Cox wrote to *The Spiritualist* claiming there

⁶⁴² There is no record of Marryat's involvement in the SPR.

⁶⁴³ Owen, p.51.

⁶⁴⁴ Owen, p.iv.

⁶⁴⁵ 'The Farewell Séance of Katie King, The Spirit', *The Spiritualist*, 29 May 1874, pp.258–259 (p.259).

was no proof that the body in cabinet was that of Cook, Marryat responded with a letter detailing her own version of events. The homoeroticism of the scene is striking:

When she summoned me ... I again saw and touched the warm breathing body of Florence Cook lying on the floor, and then stood upright by the side of Katie, who desired me to place my hands inside the loose single garment which she wore, and feel her *nude* body. I did so *thoroughly*.⁶⁴⁶

This account is toned down very slightly when it is reused in *There is no Death*, but remains surprising:

... she called me after her into the back room, and, dropping her white garment, stood perfectly naked before me. "Now," she said "you can see that I am a woman." Which indeed she was, and a most beautifully-made woman too; and I examined her well, whilst Miss Cook lay beside us on the floor. She then knelt down and kissed me, and I saw she was still naked.⁶⁴⁷

William Crookes, another attendee at the séance, also contradicted Marryat's account, and Trevor Hall dismisses it as a "careless and imaginative narrative".⁶⁴⁸ Careless or not, it is very illuminating. These conspicuously sensual scenes recall the homoeroticism of *Her Father's Name*, discussed in the previous chapter, which was written just after the séance took place. Marryat describes her heroine's form in the same admiring tones that she uses to confirm the spirit's womanliness. This feminine realm becomes a safe space in which women can explore their own non-reproductive sexuality, free from patriarchal constructions of their identity and the imperative to fulfil their biological duty.

When Cook retired as a medium, she left a note for Marryat, written as Katie King, saying:

From Annie Owen de Morgan (alias 'Katie') to her
friend Florence Marryat Ross-Church. With love. Pensez
à moi. May 21st, 1874.⁶⁴⁹

The style is reminiscent of a plaintive love letter. The safe space of the séance room enabled these two women to behave outside of societal norms. By adopting the position of the 'rational male,' Marryat was able to engage in a sensual and intimate experience under the guise of empiricism. In *The Blood of the Vampire*, the homosocial environment of the boarding school allows Harriet Brandt to explore her own sexuality, and in *Her Father's Name*, Leona Lacoste's androgynous disguise affords her far more latitude. Marryat's real world experiences, therefore, inform her fiction, where she continues to explore ideas of gender and sexuality.

⁶⁴⁶ 'The Farewell Séance of Katie King', p.259. [emphasis added]

⁶⁴⁷ *There Is No Death*, p.142.

⁶⁴⁸ Hall, p.66.

⁶⁴⁹ *There Is No Death*, p.144.

Sarah A. Willburn argues, “the context of the séance provides a dynamic space for role-playing and social interaction,”⁶⁵⁰ where the medium is “observed and touched in a scene of active frottage”.⁶⁵¹ As I argued in my previous chapter, male doctors sought to establish themselves as the experts and controllers of the female body, but in the séance room women are the arbiters of their own and each other’s bodies, this space offering “hands-on opportunities for radically reimagined social interaction”.⁶⁵² There is almost a sense that the mediums are seducing Marryat, aware that her physical attraction to them will ensure her loyalty. Marryat’s relationship with Rosina Showers was even more intimate, extending beyond the séance room. In *There is no Death* she describes them sharing a bed. Showers summons a spirit, Peter, who lies between them on top of the sheet. When she feels him touching her, Marryat ties Showers’s hands together to be sure she is not responsible. Still, the materialised hand touches her face and hair.⁶⁵³ In the séance room, Showers asks Marryat “to put [her] hands up her skirts”, to check that she had half-dematerialised.⁶⁵⁴

Tromp proposes that “The darkened parlour of the séance invited and embodied the disruption of the ordinary,” where the sitters “violated customary barriers of age and gender”.⁶⁵⁵ Disappointingly, she goes on to discuss only heterosexual relationships, which although illicit, are not quite as disruptive as the preamble promises. Notwithstanding this limitation, Tromp poses an interesting question:

Which experiences are those of the flesh and which are those of the spirit? In which body does the medium’s identity lie? Who is responsible for the reaching arms the shared kiss, the embrace? The boundary between the spiritual and the flesh of the medium became indistinct, and, by virtue of this slippage, one could not demarcate the medium’s identity, locate her accountability or intention, or distinguish the Victorian woman from the unfettered spirit.⁶⁵⁶

For Marryat, this lack of accountability and corporeality allows her more liberty than she could expect in the temporal world. That the séance room was an area for experimentation is also demonstrated in an episode from *There is no Death*, in which the spirit of Baby Florence (grown to a toddler in the spirit world) gleefully reorganises the accessories of the sitters, so that the women are wearing ties and the men are adorned with earrings.⁶⁵⁷ This fluidity is indicative of the liberation that Spiritualism affords. Tromp argues that full-form materialisation mediumship participated in “a shift of codes that made increased sexual freedom less a subject of spectacle and more a part of the

⁶⁵⁰ Sarah A Willburn, *Possessed Victorians: Extra Spheres in Nineteenth-Century Mystical Writings* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p.85.

⁶⁵¹ Willburn, p.86.

⁶⁵² Willburn, p.87.

⁶⁵³ *There Is No Death*, pp.68–69.

⁶⁵⁴ *There Is No Death*, p.11.

⁶⁵⁵ Marlene Tromp, ‘Spirited Sexuality: Sex, Marriage, and Victorian Spiritualism’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31 (2003), 67–81 (p.67).

⁶⁵⁶ Tromp, ‘Spirited Sexuality’, p.67.

⁶⁵⁷ *There Is No Death*, pp.81–82.

norm”;⁶⁵⁸ here “norm” is very much the operative word, as Tromp’s analysis allows only for heteronormative transgression, whereas the accounts of Cook, Showers and Marryat suggest a far more radical upheaval in gender roles. While it is important not to read too much into Victorian same-sex friendships, the bed scene in particular suggests an unusual level of intimacy.

In maintaining a sustained and passionate defence of Spiritualism, I argue, Marryat was, in fact, protecting a space which allowed freedom of self-expression, where women could reject traditional feminine ideals with impunity. Marryat’s remarkable experiences endorse Owen’s contention that the séance “effected a truly radical challenge to cultural orthodoxy and the stunning subversion of the nineteenth-century feminine ideal”.⁶⁵⁹ Often frustrated by the limitations placed on women in daily life, Marryat imagines a world in which women reign supreme and where their innate rationality prevents men from colonising. In the séance room the masculine imperial imperative is checked.

Marryat’s recollections have been thoroughly debunked by fellow Spiritualists, sceptics, and even her own family. In her memoirs, Marryat’s niece Viva King described her as “rather dotty on the subject of spiritualism but [...] quite terrified when her time came to meet those spirits with whom she had claimed so much familiarity in life”.⁶⁶⁰ This recollection suggests that Marryat was not as ardent as many people thought, indicating that her adoption of Spiritualism was motivated by something more than a desire for eternal life. As she shows in *The Strange Transfiguration of Hannah Stubbs* (1896), it was also about female power.

“It isn’t all jam to have a medium in the house”: The female authoritative voice in *The Strange Transfiguration of Hannah Stubbs*

Oppenheim notes, “striking is the number of middle-class housewives who discovered powers of trance communication, clairvoyance, and furniture re-location during the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s,”⁶⁶¹ which she sees as assuaging boredom and frustration. But the possibilities went beyond mere entertainment and diversion, affording women a status above that which their class and gender might dictate. In Marryat’s novel, protagonist Hannah has been ejected from the family home because her mediumistic powers are proving disruptive to domestic life. As I discussed in the previous chapter, these powers make her the victim of medical experiments by Professor Ricardo and Dr Steinberg. Hannah’s unusual powers have made her a far more valuable commodity, and, as the narrative progresses, she develops a sense of her own worth. By marrying her, Ricardo believes her powers will be entirely at his disposal, but it has to be pointed out to him: “performing the

⁶⁵⁸ Tromp, ‘Spirited Sexuality’, p.78.

⁶⁵⁹ Owen, p.212.

⁶⁶⁰ Viva King, *The Weeping and the Laughter* (London: Macdonald and Jane’s, 1976), p.4.

⁶⁶¹ Oppenheim, p.9.

office of a medium does not come within the legalities of Marriage, and if she will not do it of her own free will you have no means by which you can compel her!" (126) Hannah's gift, therefore, allows her to act more independently than the traditional wife. Ultimately, the roles are reversed and Hannah has the upper hand in the relationship: "The woman had magnetised his every sense, and he was a tool in her hands." (223) The newly-empowered Hannah tells him, "It isn't all jam to have a medium in the house, Professor!" (202)

It transpires partway through the novel that Hannah's burgeoning confidence is due partly to her body having been possessed by the spirit of Ricardo's first wife, the Marchesa, whom he murdered in a fit of sexual jealousy. Identifying Hannah as a weak and vulnerable host, the Marchesa controls her speech and actions to make Ricardo's life a misery. Through Hannah, Marryat shows that exploited women are responsive to stronger members of their own sex, and also that revenge is no longer confined to the temporal sphere – a concept she had also explored in *The Dead Man's Message*. The spirit of the Marchesa urges Hannah to murder her husband and marry someone richer and more powerful. Her only motivation is money, mimicking the idea that in marriage women should privilege financial security over emotional fulfilment.

Vanessa Dickerson argues that novels such as *Hannah Stubbs* show that "the angel in the house has become a demon hell-bent on getting money".⁶⁶² While it could be argued that Hannah's transfiguration is a grotesque image of women's desire for freedom and money, it is also a morality tale, showing that abused women might become resurgent in unexpected ways. As I showed in the previous chapter, Hannah had been sexually exploited by Professor Ricardo and Dr Steinberg, so her transformation into a depraved nymphomaniac is condign punishment for their actions. Their attempt to reconstruct her identity to suit their needs yields surprising results, with the usually passive Hannah harnessing the strength of a formidable woman. She becomes the embodiment of what the two men want: Ricardo craves money to restore his social status, while Steinberg wants a highly sexualised woman. Hannah is as much a projection of male fantasy as of woman's desire for agency, and Marryat is showing the dangers of men getting what they want. Ricardo and Steinberg are punished for using Hannah's powers for their own ends, instead of allowing her to provide spiritual comfort to others. Dickerson claims that Hannah's powers are purely "for the benefit of the male,"⁶⁶³ but she does also use them at séances, bringing together the bereaved and their loved-ones. She is not a complete "demon," but much of her agenda is dictated by a vengeful revenant. Hannah combines her talent with a sense of her own worth. Although Hannah dies at the end, her transfiguration has given her a sense of fulfilment she would not otherwise have enjoyed. Her death is joyful:

⁶⁶² Dickerson, p.143.

⁶⁶³ Dickerson, p.145.

The plain face glowed with delighted anticipation — the swollen hands were stretched out with rapture — the eyes, lovely to the last, beamed upon the apparition that stood before her, and the spirit of Hannah Stubbs, with the most gratifying result of all her mediumship, flew into the arms of her waiting mother, whilst her body fell back lifeless on the pillows. (287)

Through Spiritualism, this “plain and uninteresting” girl has become “beautified and refined and enlightened”. (288)

Diana Basham writes “Where the stereo-typical image of the male mesmerist and his passive female somnambule re-informed the gendered power structures encoded in English law, Spiritualism reversed them, offering to the female medium ... the active role of penetrating the minds of her audience.”⁶⁶⁴ This transformation can be traced in Marryat’s fiction, from the supine and assailable form of Olga Adrastikoff in *Blindfold* (discussed in Chapter Three), and Hannah Stubbs, initially a vulnerable victim of human vivisection, subsequently becomes a feted member of fashionable society and the nemesis of two dishonourable husbands.

Vested Interests: Hyperfemininity and Homosexuality in *Open! Sesame!*

Hannah Stubbs exemplifies Owen’s argument that “medicine linked spiritualism with hysteria ... alerting the profession to the prospect of femininity gone awry,” and in *Open! Sesame!* (1874-5), Marryat retaliates by pathologising the behaviour of the male protagonist. Written during the period when she was forming her own opinions on Spiritualism, Marryat uses this narrative space to explore her nascent ideas and also to establish the spiritual sphere as feminine. The novel is also a coded representation of homosexuality, a theme Marryat uses to expose the fragility of masculinity and to argue the ascendancy of the feminine, topics that were to dominate the debates of the *fin de siècle*.

Everil West-Norman, a robust and horsey young heiress, is appalled to discover that her father’s will stipulates she must marry her cousin, Bernard Valence, if she is to inherit the family wealth. She dismisses him as an “invalid – a bookworm – a lunatic!”⁶⁶⁵ Bernard is bookish and effeminate, eschewing outdoor pursuits in favour of the Stygian gloom of his castle in Ireland. Whereas Everil is “tall” with “more energy than softness in her expression,” (10) Bernard is “about the middle height, extremely fair and delicate in appearance” and his mouth is “too finely cut to betoken energy or much endurance”. (29) Bernard immediately declares that he is willing to “fulfil [his] part of the business” even though the “idea of marriage is distasteful to [him]”. (32) This resignation is motivated by a persistent belief that he is doomed to an early death. Everil, meanwhile, frantically

⁶⁶⁴ Diana Basham, *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p.127.

⁶⁶⁵ Florence Marryat, *Open! Sesame!* (London: R E King & Co, n.d.), p.25.

resists the idea, hoping for a turn of events that will render their union unnecessary, as he's "not *my* idea of a husband". (18)

Bernard's indifference to women is openly discussed by his family, and his widowed sister-in-law Agatha tells Everil: "I don't suppose dear Valence ever paid attention to a woman in his life," (25), also apprising her of his preference for homosocial environments. Everil remarks, "I hate a man who isn't a man." [73] Bernard discusses his likely fate with his best friend Bulwer, explaining that he and Everil would be able to lead separate lives and still fulfil the terms of the will. An incredulous Bulwer asks, "but *your wife* will surely have your company, Valence?" To which he responds, "No! Bulwer, no! or at best, very little of it... It is the one thing my cousin must not ask of me. She may have everything I possess, except—" (43) The ellipsis and concluding dash denote the unspeakableness of Bernard's homosexuality; he is prepared to countenance marriage purely as a financial transaction, but the idea of a sexual relationship with a woman is repugnant.

Realising that an unfulfilling marriage is preferable to destitution, Everil agrees to marry Bernard, adding "I should marry you, under the circumstances, if you were a chimpanzee." (164) Indeed, Everil shows herself no more suited to marriage than her cousin. During an awkward dinner party, Everil asks why women should not enjoy the same freedoms as men. Bernard in a "nervous, half-diffident manner" enquires whether men would then be free from responsibility for women. Sensing his fear and discomfort, Everil gleefully responds: "Leave you free! Why, what should we want with you then? *By Jove!* ... it would be the best day's work we had ever done!" A "dark flush rises to the very roots of Lord Valence's hair" and the other men start examining the pattern on their dinner plates. (98)

When Everil discovers that Bernard spends hours alone in a darkened room, pursuing his spiritualist studies, she responds "I have the greatest contempt for anything like belief in the supernatural." (205) Bernard's beliefs become an area of conflict within their marriage, as Everil attempts to make him more rational and, indeed, masculine. His housekeeper is quietly optimistic that Everil will be successful:

He's very bad in his head, poor gentleman, and has been all along, as every one about him can say; and the dreadful things as go on in this house, sir, words, couldn't tell you of them; and it's a wonder anyone can bear to stay here - and not more they wouldn't if they hadn't loved him, boy and man, as their own ... it's only the Lord above as knows all. And if I thought the lady as is coming could win him from such dark deeds, why, I'd bless her on my bended knees, that I would. (171)

The "dreadful things" and "dark deeds" are an explicit metaphor for homosexuality, which can be cured only by the presence of a woman. His physician, Dr Newall tells him, "Shake off this slough of superstition and blind bigotry which has *unsexed* you." (280, emphasis added) Bernard's study represents the dark side of his character, and it becomes both a literally and metaphorically contested space, as he endeavours to retain his "harbour of refuge". (166) Bernard reveals to Everil that he spends long nights practising his dark arts and regularly conjures up a spirit control called

Isola, who has told him he will die on the stroke of noon on 3rd February. Obsessed with the idea of his own mortality, he waits patiently for her to appear with her “diaphanous drapery – and a veil of flowing golden hair”. (252)

Isola is all softness and femininity compared with the tomboyish Everil, her blonde hair and elaborate clothing representing the hyperfemininity of the mid-Victorian womanly ideal. It also suggests the exaggerated appearance of the drag artist. *Open! Sesame!* was written only a couple of years after the infamous 1871 trial of Boulton and Park, also known as Fanny and Stella, two young men who were charged with conspiring to incite others to commit unnatural offences⁶⁶⁶ – namely, wearing women’s clothing and having sex with other men. To be decadent in an age of utility was unforgivable, and they were ridiculed as the “He-She Ladies”.⁶⁶⁷ Until they were subjected to the glare of publicity, however, many men were duped by Stella’s flaxen curls and elaborate dress – the very epitome of feminine attire. The case was mentioned in *London Society* under Marryat’s editorship, so she was certainly aware of it. The details of this sensational story would have been in her readers’ minds, too, and the coded references to Bernard’s homosexuality and his fascination with an almost grotesque form of ‘femininity’ were intended to evoke this collective cultural memory. Through this character, Marryat anticipates the homosexual panic and crisis of masculinity of the *fin de siècle*.

When Everil conceals herself in Bernard’s study one night, she too sees Isola and becomes jealous, this apparent competition prompting her to desire a more conventional marriage with her husband. The next morning, Everil comes bouncing down the stairs, looking radiantly happy, and then devours an enormous breakfast (256) – a clear signal to the reader that the marriage has been finally consummated. As his taste for normative sexuality grows, Valence starts noticing other women and comparing them unfavourably with his own wife, praising her “fire and energy and action” and musing “I can’t understand any man falling in love with any woman whilst Everil is within the range of sight.” (282) The feminine strength that initially repelled him has now become overwhelmingly attractive.

Notwithstanding his heterosexual epiphany, Bernard remains firmly convinced of his own imminent demise, and Everil is unable to convince him otherwise. Increasingly agitated, she consults Dr Newall, who advises that she must provoke jealous rage in her husband to rouse his manly instincts. Everil reluctantly feigns disinterest in Bernard and instead starts responding to the flatteries of old flame, Maurice Staunton. A distraught and dejected Bernard starts regressing to his former weakly self, seeking consolation in the company of Isola, who reiterates his appointment with death, thereby reassuring him that his agony will soon be over. In the face of Bernard’s visible decline, Everil organises a grand ball to take place at the castle, an elaborate subterfuge to facilitate

⁶⁶⁶ Neil McKenna, *Fanny and Stella: The Young Men Who Shocked Victorian England* (London: Faber, 2013), p.36.

⁶⁶⁷ McKenna, p.1.

a feigned elopement with the asinine Staunton, who believes himself irresistible. They slip away under cover of darkness, leaving a note for the devastated Bernard. Urged by Bulwer to pursue the 'lovers' and reclaim his wife, Bernard races to the hotel for an angry confrontation. As the doctor predicted, his manly instincts are roused: "His eyes are flaming fury, his hand grasps a pistol. His adversary feels that ... he is not a man to be trifled with." (371) Bernard's transformation into a red-blooded heterosexual is complete. When Staunton claims that Everil loves *him*, Bernard retorts: "Don't presume to mention her name with your dastardly lips, or I will cram this pistol down your throat." (371) He then strikes Staunton across the mouth and throws him into the passage. Bernard has gone from penetrating Everil to penetrating everything. Marking this transition from deviance to normalcy, Bulwer comments: "You have awakened, Valence, thank God, from the saddest dream your life has ever known." (374)

Bulwer also reveals that Isola is, in fact, Valence's sister-in-law Agatha, who donned a wig and robes in a ploy to frighten him into an early grave. Eager that her own son should inherit the family fortune, Agatha has a vested interest in convincing Bernard that he is deviant, sterile and doomed. When her "veil of flowing hair" is shown to be a wig, her hyperfemininity is exposed to be as inauthentic as that of Boulton and Park. In this overwrought denouement, Marryat deploys the *East Lynne* plot, but, unlike Lady Isobel, Everil remains firmly in control throughout. Combining strength and intelligence, she is superior to both the men vying for her attention. At the novel's conclusion, Bernard resolves to retain his spirituality while renouncing his former credulousness. Everil's vigour and rationality have proven a positive influence on him, in a transposition of the traditional gender roles. Such was the fragility of Bernard's masculinity, it could be stabilised only by feminine strength. Everil's pre-nuptial speech that so horrified her husband-to-be anticipates Marryat's 1885 lecture 'What to Do with the Men?' in which she took the audience forward to 1995, when men would be living in trees, leaving women to run the country. Exploiting *fin-de-siècle* anxieties of degeneration, Marryat suggests that men are either regressing or becoming terminally weak, while women evolve into the superior sex. Agatha represents an atavistic threat to the female sex, an asexual woman who is interested solely in money – her tenacity is employed only in securing an inheritance for her son. Marryat proposes that humankind's only hope of salvation is through allowing women sexual liberation, rather than expecting them to conform to realistic ideas of chastity and financial dependence. Here it is the husband, not the wife, who is forced to adapt, and Everil's strong-mindedness is displayed as an asset, rather than as something that should be tamed: *she* is the standard to which *he* should aspire. Whereas women were supposed to be sexually reactive, Everil here is the instigator. Like the New Woman who she anticipates, she craves financial independence *and* sexual fulfilment.

While Marryat is making a bold claim for women's equality (and, arguably, superiority), she is also establishing their preeminence in spiritual matters. Bernard's deviance and narrowly averted downfall was precipitated by dabbling in what Marryat sees as the feminine domain: Spiritualism.

As Basham observes, trance mediumship was “widely regarded as providing access to the ‘female’ side of the human psyche,”⁶⁶⁸ and Owen explains that it was thought to undermine “the strength of mind (will-power) which differentiated the masculine from the feminine psychological profile”.⁶⁶⁹ By pursuing his interests despite the opposition of those around him, Bernard unwittingly becomes effeminate and feminised. There are overt similarities between Bernard and the celebrity Spiritualist Daniel Dunglas Home, who divided opinion with his flamboyant performances.

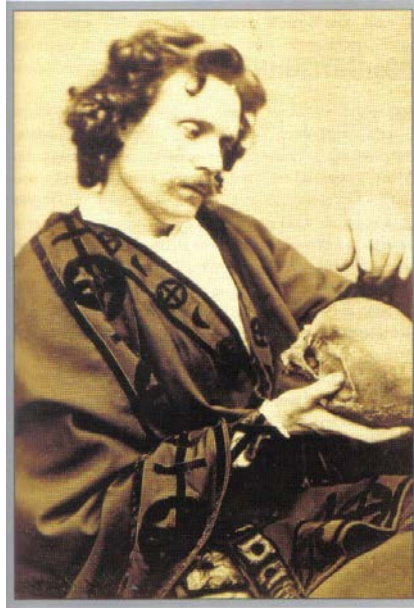


Figure 2: Daniel Dunglas Home

Robert Browning thought Home “weak and effeminate,” accusing him of “unmanliness” and resenting his wife’s endorsement of his mediumistic powers.⁶⁷⁰ Home was widely rumoured to have been imprisoned in Paris for “an unnatural offence”⁶⁷¹ and in 1869 Lord Adare disclosed that he had shared a bed with Home, ostensibly to create greater intimacy with the spirits.⁶⁷² Home was obliged to retire following this scandal, but Marryat’s novel would probably have refreshed the memories of those familiar with his disgrace. As the portrait above shows, there is a marked resemblance between Home and the physical description of Bernard Valence. Owen writes that Home’s “long hair, sensitive hands, and personal vanity” would have been enough to prompt “persistent rumours,”⁶⁷³ and Marryat aims to elicit a similar response from her reader. Furthermore,

⁶⁶⁸ Basham, p.vii.

⁶⁶⁹ Owen, p.10.

⁶⁷⁰ Peter Lamont, *The First Psychic: The Peculiar Mystery of a Notorious Victorian Wizard* (London: Abacus, 2006), p.50.

⁶⁷¹ Lamont, p.96.

⁶⁷² Lamont, p.97.

⁶⁷³ Owen, p.10.

Home was debilitated by chronic illness and suffered an early death – the fate Bernard avoids by renouncing Spiritualism and becoming more masculine. Marryat exposes the destruction that can ensue when men encroach upon Spiritualism and compromise the sanctity of the divine feminine. Bernard redeems himself by admitting the limits of masculine knowledge, concluding:

we can never ‘have done’ with spiritual companionship. It is beneath us, over us, and round about us; appointed by the wisdom of the Almighty to be our protection and our guide ... for the future you and I will be content to feel and know this care without striving to *penetrate* the mysteries that He has hidden from us. (374, emphasis added)

Bernard continues to derive comfort from an awareness of the spiritual, but he has renounced the need to *penetrate* or master this realm, instead focusing those energies on a healthy sexual relationship.

In writing a novel in which the medium turns out to be fraudulent, Marryat is demonstrating her willingness to approach Spiritualism objectively, employing ‘male’ rationality, rather than succumbing to ‘female’ credulousness. As Hill explains, Marryat had an “acute awareness that unquestioning belief *and* uninformed scepticism could both do damage to the ‘cause of spiritualism’”.⁶⁷⁴ Marryat was as quick to denounce a fraud (or ineffectual medium) as to embrace one she considered gifted, so long as they were female. Men could be supporters of Spiritualism, but not practitioners; for Marryat, the spiritual realm was one regulated by women.

Although *The Spirit World* is credited as Marryat’s “spiritualistic manifesto,”⁶⁷⁵ as I have shown above, she made equally powerful arguments through her fiction, much of which would have reached a wider and more diverse audience. In the novels discussed above, Marryat’s transgressive heroines are able to appropriate power through mediumship and by developing their own icons of the feminine divine. The séance room enlarged the influence of the domestic sphere, while a reimagining of the Virgin Mary offered alternatives to marriage and reproduction. These women define their own spiritual identity, rejecting the conservative and man-made ideology of the established Church, which sought to contain and condemn them. By taking control of her own spiritual identity, Marryat was able to reconcile her faith with her feminism; as a divorcée, adulteress, and a purveyor of risqué novels, she still had an opportunity for redemption. Griffin argues that the “religious justification for the subjection of women was arguably the single most important component of nineteenth-century ‘anti-feminist’ thinking,”⁶⁷⁶ and by unweaving this “complex web

⁶⁷⁴ O’Brien Hill, p.334.

⁶⁷⁵ Dickerson, p.145.

⁶⁷⁶ Griffin, p.52.

of male beliefs,”⁶⁷⁷ writers like Marryat were able to articulate radical ideas that imagined a different spiritual life for women.

While Owen discerns that “women’s involvement with spiritualism was at one level all about gender expectations, sexual politics, and the subversion of existing power relations between men and women,”⁶⁷⁸ she is quick to dismiss Marryat as “an ardent and susceptible believer”.⁶⁷⁹ An analysis of Marryat’s life and work, however, show that Spiritualism was much more than a faith to her, allowing her to imagine possibilities denied her by conventional religion. Oppenheim complains that “the vivid detail that enlivens her séance accounts owes something to a novelist’s imagination,”⁶⁸⁰ but it was precisely this imagination that allowed Marryat to reinvent women’s spiritual identity. As Tatiana Kontou observes, her “spiritualist experiences are hybrids between life and death, memory and fantasy, performance and reality,”⁶⁸¹ exemplifying Marryat’s contention that “religion does require a lot of what children call ‘making believe’ to render it satisfactory”.⁶⁸² By establishing the idea of female spiritual authority, Marryat disrupted the basis of religiously mandated gender binaries.

⁶⁷⁷ Griffin, p.6.

⁶⁷⁸ Owen, p.i.

⁶⁷⁹ Owen, p.229.

⁶⁸⁰ Oppenheim, p.39.

⁶⁸¹ Tatiana Kontou, ‘The Case of Florence Marryat’, in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, ed. by Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp.221–229 (p.226).

⁶⁸² Florence Marryat, *Parson Jones* (London: Griffith and Farran, 1893), p.30.

Conclusion

In this thesis I explored Marryat's many fictional representations of the regulation of female identity, arguing that through her transgressive heroines she mounted a significant challenge to mid-Victorian notions of femininity. Often dismissed as an ultimately conservative and an ephemeral writer, I claimed Marryat as an important social commentator who redefines our understanding of nineteenth-century women's writing. Through close readings, archival research, and engagement with extensive contextual material, I uncovered the feminist meaning in Marryat's novels that has been occluded by superficial and selective readings in which critics have not considered the numerous constraints that acted upon her work. I also retrieved Marryat from Showalter's 'feminine' phase, placing her unequivocally among the 'feminist' writers whose work she prefigures and anticipates. Having written about elective single motherhood, lesbianism, and birth control in the 1860s and 70s, Marryat deserves to be credited with the radicalism later attributed to New Woman writers who were operating in a more permissive literary marketplace, and who had also benefitted from the legislative change she demanded.

For Marryat, the idea of femininity was open to negotiation, rather than one half of an immutable gender dichotomy, and she exposes the inherent contradiction between the concept of femininity as innate and the need to reinforce it. Her fiction is replete with transgressive heroines who seek to define their own roles as wives and mothers, and even by rejecting matrimony and motherhood altogether. By identifying the different types of regulation – literary, legal, medical, and religious – that operated on Victorian women, I demonstrated how in Marryat's fiction resistance and transgression converged to subvert the dominant image of 'femininity' and to expose how these gender roles were constructed. Her heroines emerge as a "collective volatility," a concept described by Riley as the "*sine qua non* of feminism,"⁶⁸³ constantly pushing the parameters of the roles imposed upon them by dominant discourses. These issues, normally confined to the work of journalists such as Frances Power Cobbe, reached a far wider audience through Marryat's popular novels.

By considering the regulatory atmosphere of the literary marketplace, I explained the constraints that operated on Marryat's writing. In particular, my close analysis of Geraldine Jewsbury's reader's report on *Love's Conflict* uncovered the extensive revisions to Marryat's original manuscript, which she rescinded by resurrecting her heroine in subsequent work. Through analysing her ongoing relationship with the press, I identified the critical double standard that sought to regulate Marryat's work, showing the many ways in which she defied reviewers, continuing to confront controversial themes throughout her career. Examining Marryat's novels in the context of legal discourses on the position of wives, I argued that her work constitutes a significant radical protest, disputing the

⁶⁸³ Riley, p.2.

dominant idea of women's subordination and demanding a single sexual standard. I showed how Marryat exposes traditional marriage as a carceral condition for women, suggesting alternatives such as single motherhood, and also demanding substantial reform to make the institution more equal. My archival research on Marryat's personal legal battles and the tensions in her own life accounts for the basis for some of her plots, proving that she was willing to share her own experiences to educate readers of their burgeoning legal rights.

Examining the conflation of medical and patriarchal authority, I explained how female behaviour was subject to regulation by the newly powerful doctor, part of a profession that constructed 'woman' as a problem requiring treatment. In her fiction, Marryat questioned the medical profession's desire to pathologise female sexuality as 'deviant', and through close readings of several novels, I revealed important lesbian subplots, overlooked or dismissed by previous critics. I argued that by destabilising the prevailing gender ideology, Marryat envisaged radically different roles for women, freeing them from their biological destiny as mothers and allowing them to express the full range of their sexuality. For Marryat, this celebration of womanhood was ultimately realised in the creation of her own gynocentric faith, combining elements of Mariolatry with the subversive opportunities provided by the growth of Spiritualism. Through establishing women's spiritual authority, Marryat challenged the scriptural basis for their subordinate position and disrupted the basis of the religiously mandated gender binary. As my consideration of Marryat's experiences in the séance room shows, this realm provided a space in which she could explore her own sexuality and develop progressive ideas about gender that were reflected in her fiction.

The accretion of feminist meaning across these different types of regulation confirms my view of Marryat as a polemical writer, her radicalism surpassing that which I had expected at the beginning of my research. Inevitably, it has not been possible to discuss in detail all of Marryat's novels, and consideration of her short stories would further illuminate the importance of her writing. Furthermore, family structures, and in particular mother-daughter relationships, remains an important unexplored theme in her novels, although it has been extensively covered in relation to other writers. More research is also needed on Marryat's non-fiction, particularly her journalism and lectures, which constitute a notable body of work by a nineteenth-century feminist. Although a prolific political writer, these writings have not as yet been consolidated or explored in any detail.

However, this thesis offers a starting point both for further research on Marryat and for applying a similar approach to other neglected Victorian women writers. By evaluating the vast literary output of these largely forgotten authors, we can greatly expand our perception of women's sensation fiction, building on the work already done by Lyn Pykett, Pamela Gilbert, Elaine Showalter, and Andrew Maunder. Historicising sensation fiction in this way helps us to understand what was important to its practitioners, creating what Southgate calls "a history that incorporates

some aspects of experience that have hitherto been relegated to the domain of fiction”.⁶⁸⁴ More specifically, sustained critical attention to marginalised ‘sub-literary’ fiction offers us an account of the individual struggles that together formed the women’s rights movement of the nineteenth century, whose persistent campaigning transformed wives from chattels to individuals in their own right. As Radway concludes, “Interstices ... exist within the social fabric where opposition is carried on by people who are not satisfied by their place within it,” adding that we should “not overlook this minimal but nonetheless legitimate form of protest”.⁶⁸⁵

I have interrogated existing studies of Marryat’s work, identifying the problems associated with readings that have not taken account of either censorship or coded feminist meaning. In her thesis on Marryat, Jean Gano Neisius concludes:

By accepting positions as submissive, obedient wives who find satisfaction in their homes and marriages, Marryat heroines appear to give up any hope of independence. They do not rebel unless they are mistreated, and if they do fight against their lot, they eventually submit to societal expectations.⁶⁸⁶

This reading, I argue, epitomises Pykett’s caution against “concentrating too much on endings at the expense of the more complex middles of novels”.⁶⁸⁷ In this thesis, I have focussed on these “complex middles,” also offering an account for the inclusion of conventional endings by exploring the constraints that acted upon Marryat’s work. Rather than interpreting Marryat as a writer who sought to challenge mid-Victorian notions of ‘woman’, Eisenbud concludes that “the unconscious standard against which she was always inwardly compelled to measure herself was the unrealistically unachievable one of being a man”.⁶⁸⁸ This approach ignores what Marryat was trying to do in both her life and her work, which was to imagine radically different possibilities for women. Her controversial lifestyle and writing were motivated not by gender dysphoria, rather by frustration with the circumscribed role of the mid-Victorian woman. As Marryat’s daughter wrote in her obituary, “femininity was too narrow a platform for her,”⁶⁸⁹ so she sought a much broader idea of female identity, both for herself and her heroines.

Instead of responding to criticism by becoming more conservative, Marryat remained a provocative writer, her sensational themes persisting into the 1890s and creating what Bodenheimer calls “fictional paths through highly charged ideological territories”.⁶⁹⁰ With women largely denied an official voice in legal, medical, and theological discourses, Marryat used the only means available

⁶⁸⁴ Southgate, p.200.

⁶⁸⁵ Radway, p.222.

⁶⁸⁶ Neisius, p.80.

⁶⁸⁷ Pykett, p.50.

⁶⁸⁸ Eisenbud, p.218.

⁶⁸⁹ ‘The Real Florence Marryat’, p.591.

⁶⁹⁰ Bodenheimer, p.3.

to her to make herself heard, creating a 'spectacle of femininity' and showcasing the ways in which reality deviated from the ideal. It must be acknowledged that many of Marryat's novels are no longer relevant to the modern non-academic reader, but this ephemerality is actually one of her strengths, many of the issues she highlights having been resolved thanks to oppositional voices such as her own. By placing her firmly within her historical context, Marryat emerges as a woman who dared to be different both in fact and fiction. I celebrate the richness and diversity of Marryat's fiction, elucidating her importance as a feminist writer who made a crucial contribution to Victorian literary and cultural debate.

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