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# "A Very Fleshly and Unlovely Record"

## NON-NORMATIVE FEMALE SEXUALITY IN VICTORIAN SENSATION NOVELS

### ANONYMA.

Under the above heading the following curious letter appears in the *Times* :-

"Early in the season of 1862 a young lady, whom I must call Anonyma, for I have never been able to learn her name, made her appearance in Hyde Park. She was a charming creature, beautifully dressed and she drove with ease and spirit two of the handsomest brown ponies eye ever beheld. Nobody in society had seen her before ; nobody in society knew her name, or to whom she belonged ; but there she was, prettier, better dressed, and sitting more gracefully in her carriage than any of the fine ladies who envied her her looks, her skill, or her equipage. A good many young gentlemen seemed to be acquainted with her; but their recognition was generally limited to a respectful bow as she passed by, or to a few friendly words slyly interchanged on the step of her pony carriage when she drew up in some remote corner of the park. Anonyma seemed at first to be rather a shy damsel. She is somewhat bolder now. Last year she avoided crowds, and affected unfrequented roads, where she could more freely exhibit her ponies' marvellous action, and talk to her male acquaintances with becoming privacy. When all the fashionable world were sauntering on foot, on horseback, and in carriages, along the Ladies' Mile, by the side of the Serpentine, Anonyma used to betake herself to the deserted thoroughfare leading from Apsley House to Kensington.



suicide of a man in a public house in Great Howard-street, Liverpool, on Thursday night. The deceased (who cut his throat with a razor) was named Edward Hughes, and belonged to Newmarket, where he worked at the trade some time ago. Having been thrown out of employment he went on 'tramp,' and among other places he visited Ince, near Wigan. While there he lodged with a man with whose wife, it is said, he contracted an improper intimacy, and the guilty pair eventually eloped together, the woman leaving several children behind. They visited several towns, and eventually came to Liverpool. The woman seems to have become repentant and was desirous to return to her husband. She intimated this to her paramour, and he endeavoured by every means to prevent her. But all his persuasion was of no avail: the female expressed her determination to go back to the home she had deserted. Hughes, finding that he could not prevail upon her to stay with him, called a policeman, and gave her in custody on a charge of threatening to commit suicide. Hughes and his companion were .

### NASTY NOVELS.

It would be a task beyond our powers to enter into all the varieties of immorality which the novelists of the day have ingeniously woven into their stories. In these matters the man who writes is at once more and less bold than the woman : he may venture on positive criminality to give piquancy to his details, but it is the female novelist who speaks most plainly, and whose best characters revel in a kind of innocent indecency, as does the heroine of 'Cometh up as a Flower.' Not that the indecency is always innocent ; but there are cases in which it would seem the mere utterance of a certain foolish daring-an ignorance which longs to look knowing-a kind of immodest and indelicate innocence which likes to play with impurity. This is the most dismal feature among all these disagreeable phenomena. Nasty thoughts, ugly suggestions, an imagination which prefers the unclear, is almost more appalling than the facts of actual depravity, because it has no excuse of sudden passion or temptation, and no visible boundary. It is a shame to women who write ; and it is a shame to the women who read and accept as a true representation of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshly inclinations herein attributed to them.

### CHEAP EDITION OF "AURORA FLOYD."

AYRORA FLOYD. By the Author of "Lady Audley's Secret." The Cheap Edition, uniform with "Lady Audley's Secret," is Now Ready, at all Booksellers' and Railway Stalls in the Kingdom. Tinsley Brothers, 18, Catherine-street, Strand.

### AURORA FLOYD

Transient as is the fame of even great literary successes in this day of teeming literary toil, it is almost unnecessary to revert to the reputation of this remarkable novel. Those who have read are still talking of it ; and those who have not are eager for its perusal. The prolific pen of the author has launched two competitors for fame simultaneously on the sea of public opinion since the completion of this tale, and, though they are sailing before a fair wind, their career is not more prosperous than was that of "Aurora Floyd." In this novel Miss Braddon displays the full height and depth of her genius, the rarest constructive power, and the masterly facility of a writer who thoroughly comprehends the spirit, the taste, and the demands of her time.

### THE ROAD MURDER.

The mysterious and most lamentable murder of Mr. Kent's child at Road still creates a degree of excitement in the public mind, particularly in the district where the crime was committed, very unfavourable to a sound and dispassionate judgment. Rumours and surmises have been hastily cast upon different individuals who could, by the utmost stretch of imagination have been supposed to be guilty of the crime ; and the victim's own nearest relatives are the least spared. The sorrow for their bereavement with which, if innocent-and there is no ground at this moment for believing them guilty-they must be overwhelmed, is aggravated a thousand-fold by the heavy load of obloquy under which they labour. It is well known that the most strict and searching investigation was instantly set on foot by our active and intelligent local force ; but not a single circumstance transpired which could lead to the smallest suspicion in their mind, nor in the minds of the magistrates, against any individual whatever. So matters remained : every effort was made that skill and ingenuity could suggest to penetrate the mystery, but every effort was baffled ; till at length a London Detective, employed in the business, laid an information before the Magistrates against Constance Kent, the murdered child's sister, on which a warrant was granted for her apprehension, and the unhappy girl was lodged in Deynise gaol, where she now lies.



### BIGAMY AT SUNDERLAND.

GEORGE GARDNER (29), pleaded guilty to committing bigamy, by marrying Mary Alice Gray at Bishopwearmouth on the 28th December, 1863, his lawful wife being then alive, and was sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment.

### SECOND EDITION OF "THE MOONSTONE."

NOTICE.-Now ready, at every Library, the Second Edition of THE MOONSTONE. By Wilkie Collins, Author of 'The Woman in White,' &c. 3 vols. Tinsley Brothers, 18, Catherine-street.

### ADULTERY, FLIGHT, AND SUICIDE.

The police have obtained a somewhat extraordinary explanation in reference to the shocking

# “A Very Fleshly and Unlovely Record”

## Non-Normative Female Sexuality in Victorian Sensation Novels

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June 10, 2015

## Masteropleiding Letterkunde

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Dr. Dennis Kersten

Titel van het document:

“A Very Fleshly and Unlovely Record”: Non-normative female sexuality in Victorian Sensation Novels

Datum van indiening: 10-06-2015

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### Abstract

De Victorianen hadden hun eigen ideeën over hoe mannen en vrouwen zich moesten gedragen. Zeker van vrouwen werd er verwacht dat ze zich streng aan deze ongeschreven regels zouden houden, ook als het aankwam op het uiten van hun seksualiteit. Dit gebeurde echter niet altijd en zeker in fictie komen veel vrouwen voor die de regels breken. In deze scriptie worden vier werken uit de periode 1860-1870, zogeheten *sensation novels*, onderzocht om te kijken hoe zij omgaan met de seksualiteit van hun vrouwelijke personages. Hoofdstuk een is een algemene inleiding op de ideeën over seksualiteit die de Victorianen erop nahielden. In hoofdstuk twee wordt gekeken naar het boek *Griffith Gaunt* (1866) van Charles Reade. In hoofdstuk drie wordt gekeken naar *Aurora Floyd* (1863) van Mary Elizabeth Braddon. In hoofdstuk vier wordt gekeken naar *The Moonstone* (1868) van Wilkie Collins. Tot slot wordt er in hoofdstuk vijf gekeken naar *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867) van Rhoda Broughton. Uiteindelijk wordt er geconcludeerd dat normatieve seksualiteit eigenlijk niet bestaat en dat de besproken *sensation novels* een positief beeld geven van niet-normatieve seksualiteit.

Key words: seksualiteit, Victoriaans, sensation novels, Charles Reade, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Wilkie Collins, Rhoda Broughton, Griffith Gaunt, Aurora Floyd, The Moonstone, Cometh Up as a Flower, queer theory

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## Introduction

“Here was a fictional form written for a largely female audience by a largely female group of authors that appeared to turn the idealized Victorian notion of gender on its head. What was not to admire? Not all proponents of sensation’s resurgence, most of them feminist literary critics, considered the novel to be the locus for a truly radical gender politics, but everyone could agree that the novels provided a fascinating ground for the discussion of Victorian gender norms and their bending.” – Emily Allen in *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* p.402

Sensation fiction as a genre first emerged in the 1860s and was, as Emily Allen suggests, a genre written mostly by women, for a female audience, and mainly featuring female protagonists. Lyn Pykett points out that during the nineteenth century it became a common notion that mass culture was the domain of women while high culture remained the exclusive domain of men (31). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that sensation fiction was generally seen as an inferior, although popular, genre of fiction. Moreover, the genre was condemned as utterly immoral by critics such as Margaret Oliphant and Geraldine Jewsbury. Much of this criticism focuses on the perceived immoral behaviour of women in the sensation novels. In her much quoted review of sensation novels in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* Margaret Oliphant laments that English novels used to be kept free from “noxious topics” by general agreement, in order to protect women and the young from immoral subjects (257). According to Oliphant, this was no longer the case in the mid-nineteenth century. While French novels were more shocking in their subjects, they were kept out of reach of young women. English novels, on the other hand, could be easily acquired by respectable ladies and were sometimes even written by them (258). It is true that some of the favourite subjects of sensation novels were bigamy, adultery, seduction, and murder. While this may seem quite scandalous and appears to turn all notions of decorum upside down, it is not quite as bad as Margaret Oliphant makes it seem. Christine Sutphin points out that while sensation novels frequently featured “fallen women” – seduced away from their husband, often under mitigating circumstances – they rarely go so far as to feature actual prostitutes (512).

What was it about sensation novels that made critics condemn them as immoral, even though many of them would seem quite tame to twenty-first century readers? This has much to do with the moral climate of the mid-Victorian period. While the Victorians were not as prudish as modern stereotypes seem to suggest, Eric Trudgill points out that a stricter moral code was slowly being implemented even before Victoria took the throne. This new code mostly seems stricter in comparison with the much more lax Georgian period that preceded it and it was especially harsher on women (176). This stricter code and anxiety about it not

being enforced throughout society meant that Victoria's reign was marked by pervasive discussion on immorality. So much so that by the end of the 1850s

[i]mmorality was recognized as a pervasive social fact: the detailed modes in which prostitution was conducted, the varying grades of brothels and harlots, their relative costs, pleasures and disadvantages, the detailed modes in which marital intrigues might be conducted, the tactics and subterfuges shown in the diaries and letters of adulterers and adulteresses, these were becoming an open feature of social life.

(Trudgill 179)

It is then not surprising that writers took these social facts as subjects for their novels, and, given the emphasis on female immorality under the new moral code, it is also not surprising that many of these novels focused on the perceived immorality of women. This makes sensation fiction a suitable starting point for discussions on mid-Victorian female sexuality.

Despite this suitability, sensation fiction has only begun to draw the attention of scholars in the last two decades. It has perhaps not received any attention for so long because it has always been considered popular fiction rather than literature. Yet the fact that so many sensation novels were written by women and read by women makes them interesting objects of study for gender studies. Since the rise of queer studies and feminist theory researchers have begun to acknowledge this, which has led to a renewed interest in the representation of gender and sexuality in sensation novels. However, most studies are focused on just a handful of the most famous novels, while a great many sensation novelists have been all but ignored by scholars. This thesis will examine how non-normative female sexuality is represented in four sensation novels: *The Moonstone* (1868), *Aurora Floyd* (1863), *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867), and *Griffith Gaunt* (1866). I have chosen these novels because all of them were popular in their own time. In the interest of equal representation I have selected two books written by men and two written by women. Furthermore, each gendered pair consists of one author who is fairly well remembered in contemporary culture, or at least by scholars, and one who has been mostly forgotten.

*The Moonstone* is one of the earliest sensation novels, written by Wilkie Collins in 1859 and first published serially in Charles Dickens' magazine *All the Year Round*. It tells the story of the Moonstone, a diamond taken from India, and the havoc it wreaks on an upper-class English family after it is stolen at a birthday party. Wilkie Collins is one of the most famous sensation novelists and his works have been the subject of a relatively great number of scholarly works. However, research on gender and sexuality representation in his works

focuses almost exclusively on his earlier novel *The Woman in White* (1859) or on representations of masculinity. Arguably because of its relation to India, most studies of *The Moonstone* have focused on themes of imperialism.

*Aurora Floyd*, one of the most popular sensation novels of its time, was written by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. It was first published serially in *Temple Bar Magazine* starting from 1862 and published as a complete novel in 1863. It tells the story of the rebellious heroine Aurora Floyd, the daughter of a rich banker. When she was younger she eloped with her groom and, believing him dead, had later married again. She kept her first marriage a secret from everyone but her father. Her secret eventually leads to her being accused of murder. Mary Elizabeth Braddon enjoyed huge popularity during her life and she is still arguably the most famous female sensation novelist. Her work has also received a relatively large amount of scholarly attention which focuses on gender and representation of sexuality. However, most of the scholarly attention has focused on her most famous and more overtly non-normative novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862).

*Cometh Up as a Flower* was written by Rhoda Broughton in 1867 and was first published serially in the *Dublin University Magazine*. It tells the story of Nell Lestrangle, daughter of an impoverished country gentleman. She falls in love with a soldier, but after machinations by her scheming and mercenary sister, and in order to please her father, she marries a rich gentleman who is much older than her. Trapped in a loveless marriage, and with her lover and beloved father dead, she herself dies of consumption. Broughton has been all but forgotten by scholars, even though *Cometh Up as a Flower* was massively popular when it was first published. Interest in her work has only picked up very recently, with Pamela Gilbert publishing an edition of *Cometh Up as a Flower* in 2010. Very recent scholarly articles have examined themes of gender and sexuality in her work, but this research is almost exclusively centred on her first novel *Not Wisely but Too Well* (1866).

*Griffith Gaunt* was written by Charles Reade in 1866. It was first published serially in *The Argosy*. Though the novel is named for the character Griffith Gaunt, the heroine of the story is Catherine Gaunt, his wife. After she falls in love with a catholic priest, her husband deserts her and commits bigamy. The underlying theme of the novel is the effects of unfounded jealousy on a family. Charles Reade is not always classified as a sensation novelist by Victorian critics, but his works do include the same subject matters and treatment of said subject matters as other sensation novels. His reputation as a more serious writer is the reason that he has received some scholarly attention, but mainly in the first half of the



twentieth century. Contemporary scholars have mostly ignored his writing, focusing instead on the importance of his legal work and his friendship with both Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens.

Each of these novels will be examined in turn in the light of queer theory. Kathy Rudy, in her 2000 article “Queer Theory and Feminism,” specifies four general main points of queer theory:

1. Queer theory is not necessarily the study of homosexuality, but rather the study of anything that is perceived as not normal. (197)
2. Queer theory assumes that sexual identities are social constructions. (198)
3. Queer theory assumes that gender is a social constructions (200).
4. Queer theory challenges the idea of the gender binary and also “disputes the idea that sexuality has any ‘normal’ parameters at all” (205).

How we construct sexual identity and gender changes from one time period to the next. Therefore, in order to make sense of what is considered “feminine” or “masculine” it is necessary to understand the cultural context within which those binary categories are constructed (Rudy 197). The same thing goes for sexual identities. Rudy points out that what we commonly refer to as homosexuality in Ancient Greece “looks very little like what we know as homosexuality today” (198). It is, for example, wrong to assume that someone is either male or female based on their genitalia (200). Not only does this ignore intersex individuals, but it also ignores the reality of transgender individuals, who are male or female despite being born with what are normally considered female or male genitalia respectively. Neither can it be assumed that to be male or female leads to certain physical characteristics or behaviour. Behavioural patterns often have no biological basis in one gender or the other and it is society that dictates how men and women should behave and dress. This is why fashion and behaviour that would be considered masculine in one time period can be considered feminine two centuries later. Both gender and sexuality are then social constructs that depend almost entirely on the society in which someone is brought up.

Kathy Rudy’s assumptions will inform the close reading of the four novels specified. Especially the first three points are useful to keep in mind when researching the construction of Victorian female sexuality. Several other theoretical frameworks will also be used, but they will be discussed at the start of the relevant chapters. Chapter one will provide a reconstruction of the dominant views of normative female sexuality that these sensation novels are rebelling against.

I will be conducting this research because I feel that sensation novels, especially different sensation novels than those that scholars have focused on, are deserving of more research. There are many novels, like *The Moonstone* and *Aurora Floyd*, which are subject to scholarly research but on subjects other than gender or sexuality. Then there are authors such as Broughton and Reade who were massively popular in their own time and, through a variety of factors, have been all but forgotten by posterity. Both Broughton and Reade show marked concern for issues of gender and sexuality in their novels, but they have largely been ignored by contemporary scholars. They deserve to be re-examined because of the interest in gender and sexuality they demonstrate in their texts as well as because of their massive popularity in their own time.

## Chapter One: Lie Back and Think of England - Dominant Victorian Views on Female Sexuality

This chapter will provide a reconstruction of the dominant views that were held on female sexuality in the mid-nineteenth century. It is necessary to understand these dominant views in order to understand why many sensation novels were considered subversive in terms of their description of female sexuality. This chapter focuses as specifically as possible on views that were prevalent during the mid-nineteenth century, because most sensation novels were written and published during that time. In the late nineteenth century many of these views and assumptions changed, partially because of the emergence of the New Women who became the first feminists, which means that late nineteenth-century views are irrelevant to representation in novels published during the 1860s.

The contemporary stereotype of the Victorians holds that they were sexually repressed, prudish, and overly moralistic. This attitude spilled over into fiction and nineteenth-century critics loved to point out what they perceived to be the immoral character of some novels. This was never more true than in the 1860s, the decade of the sensation novel and the ‘fast women,’ women who went against social conventions. As pointed out before, immorality was recognized as a pervasive social fact by the 1860s (Trudgill 179) and this most likely caused both the immense interest in sensation novels and the immense amount of criticism these novels received. While there were critics who praised the novels for their lifelike portrayal of characters and situations, others condemned them for exaggerating the amount of crime and secrets that was to be found in the average home of a respectable English family (“Sensation Novels” 565). One writer for *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* was of the latter persuasion, but she did not put the blame entirely on an author’s depraved mind:

The violent stimulant of serial publication – of *weekly* publication, with its necessity for frequent and rapid recurrence of piquant situation and startling incident – is the thing of all others most likely to develop the germ, and bring it to fuller and darker bearing. (“Sensation Novels” 568)

Writing in 1862, this writer was convinced that serial publication was to blame for the immorality of popular fiction at the time. This seems unlikely, given that serial publication had been gaining in popularity ever since the 1840s and yet this literature was not considered as shocking.

However, due to the - real or imagined - pervasiveness of immorality in the 1860s, part of the population was experiencing something of a moral panic. This was mostly due to

the popularity of both the ‘fast women’ and sensation novels. Laurie Garrison explains that sensation novels were considered to inflict bodily, rather than intellectual responses upon the reader (1). These bodily reactions, which were always caused by “unwholesome” pleasures found within the sensation novels, were thought to be unfit for young women. They would become so enthralled by these pleasures that they would become unfit for their proper feminine duties (Garrison xi). A letter supposedly written by ‘Seven Belgravian Mothers’ appeared in *The Times* in June 1861, in which they complained that they were unable to find good husbands for their daughters, because men found the ‘fast women’ more attractive (Trudgill181). Lyn Pykkt explains this popularity of women who were generally considered unsuitable wives, by saying that “[t]he women of the demi-monde were seen not only as being more sexually attractive than their respectable counterparts, but also as more lively and interesting, and hence more suitable companions for educated middle-class men” (64). Indicators of a fast lifestyle were, amongst others, smoking, addressing members of the opposite sex by their Christian name, uninhibited talking of sexual matters, and being daringly intimate with men that you hardly knew (Mason 120). Michael Mason also states that the percentage of people getting married had started to decline by the 1860s (120). It is then not difficult to see that part of the panic surrounding the fast lifestyle was the fact that it was thought to be the cause of both men and women putting off marriage or declining it altogether. However, the existence and popularity of the fast lifestyle seems to indicate that perhaps our stereotypical Victorian view on sexuality, and specifically female sexuality, is in need of some updating.

## Two Schools of Thought

First, there is an important difference between the way modern scholars look at issues of gender and sexuality and the way the Victorians looked at these same issues. While many modern day scholars agree that both gender identity and sexual identity are social constructs, the Victorians saw these identities as expressions of biological truths (Allen 403). A woman’s sexuality was an expression of her biological nature, therefore making it easier to argue that all women experienced sexuality in roughly the same way. After all, if the biology that their sexual identities are based on is the same, then their sexual identities should also be similar. It also meant that any woman who digressed from the sexual norm was not only going against the perceived moral code, but against nature itself. Ideally, this focus on biology meant that women and men, different in biology, also occupied different spheres of existence and

exhibited different virtues in a neat division between the sexes (403). However, in reality this did not always hold true. Moreover, there does not seem to have been a real consensus on what, exactly, a woman's biological nature should or should not induce her to feel.

One popular school of thought was that of the "angel of the house." A woman should embody the virtues of morality, chastity, piety, sympathy, nurturance, sexual passivity, innocence, sexual ignorance, humility, and dependence (Allen 403; Pykett 16; Beller 116). All in all, a woman should be pure and dependent on the men in her life for guidance in all things non-domestic. This emphasis on pureness and essentially child-like qualities led to the fetishization of child-like women and sexual purity, according to Beller (116-119). Essentially, a woman was thought most pure if she never grew up mentally and remained as pure and innocent as a child. This line of thinking led to the belief that women were inherently sexless beings. The most famous proponent of this theory was William Acton who in 1857 wrote that "[t]he majority of women (happily for society) are not very much troubled by sexual feelings of any kind" (Acton, qtd. in Pykett 15). It was quite common for this school of thought to represent women as essentially asexual. Furthermore, female sexual desire was often framed as not being a real bodily desire, but a subconscious desire for motherhood (Curtis 79). In many cases, it was even thought that women only exhibited sexual desire when confronted with the more aggressive sexual desire of men (Weeks 42). A woman's inherent nature was passive and eager to please. She would only experience, or maybe even feign, sexual desire when confronted with the sexual desire of her husband in order to please him. There were even some people who believed that a woman's sexual desire would not be awakened until she had intercourse (with a man) for the first time, and then only if she was actively trying to enjoy herself (Mason 225).

All this does seem to tie in with our idea of repressed women in the Victorian period, however, as Allen points out, women themselves also perpetuated these stereotypes: "[w]omen, for example, find themselves rewarded under patriarchy for the adoption of stereotypically feminine behavior, and they may serve to perpetuate a system that nonetheless disadvantages them" (402). Disadvantage them it did. In order for 'respectable' women to remain sexually pure before marriage, it was acceptable for men to have sexual intercourse with prostitutes instead (Crozier 384). After all, it was thought that, in opposition to a woman's passive sexuality, men were aggressively and actively sexual and needed to have sex in order to stay in good health. This meant that many poor or abandoned women turned to prostitution to maintain a livelihood. These same women would then be condemned for being

prostitutes and not living up to the moral standards of the period. Prostitution as such was not illegal during the Victorian period (Walkowitz 14), which meant prostitutes were often arrested on different charges, such as “disturbing the peace.” Even though prostitution was technically not illegal, the social ramifications could be enormous, because prostitutes were seen as the exact opposite of respectable femininity, as they were not asexual or married mothers (Pykett 63).

Even though many argued that women were essentially asexual, this was by no means a majority view. Another school of thought held that women were inherently sexual creatures. A woman was thought to be ruled by her reproductive system (Mason 198; Pykett 14; Weeks 43). Since a woman’s reproductive system is larger than that of men, it was thought that her sexuality is dispersed even more broadly in her physical being. According to the uterine theory the existence and condition of the womb and ovaries have an influence on a woman’s whole physical and psychological being far greater than that on men by the testes. (Mason 199)

Women were thus thought to be inherently *more* sexual than men. It was even a common belief among medical professionals at the time, even those who doubted the existence of a woman’s inherent sexuality, that a woman must achieve orgasm in order to conceive (199). This put an emphasis, if not on a woman’s inherent eroticism, then at least on her capability to feel pleasure. Since this capability was widely acknowledged and respected, it puts a dent in the twentieth-century stereotype of the sexually frustrated Victorian housewife. There were both medical men and lay men who felt that a healthy sex life was of vast importance to a woman’s health, even more so than to that of a man (217). Since even these professionals held that a woman would first have to experience sexual intercourse in order to start having sexual urges, it would not be unhealthy for a woman to remain celibate for life. However, once these sexual urges had been awakened, sexual abstinence could, owing to the larger dispersion of her reproductive system, cause more major disorders in women than it could in men (217). This line of thinking gave birth to the idea that women should not remain chaste through sexual ignorance, but through conscious choice (Pykett 17). It is not hard to see why. If a woman’s nature is inherently sexual, ignorance of any and all sexual issues will lead to women being unable to distinguish right from wrong. This will make it easier for them to be seduced into a life of sexual immorality. Only through knowledge of her own nature could a woman maintain her chastity.

Even so, respectable moral sought to contain female sexuality within marriage and keep it outside of polite discussions (Suthpin 512). Lyn Pykett argues that there was a real fear that female sexuality, if left unchecked, would turn women into wild beasts who would undermine society. Therefore, female sexuality had to be contained within marriage and checked by the husband (56; Curtis 79). Even though most considered sexual intercourse between husband and wife a conjugal duty (Weeks 22), sexual excess, even within marriage, was widely considered unhealthy and sinful (Mason 184; Hall 436). Perhaps out of this fear came the social construct of marriage being the only state, other than celibacy, of respectable femininity. This idealized representation of marriage “strove to overcome nature: a woman was to serve as the civilizing force in a household and lift her family from baser instincts” (Craton 130). Only containment within the patriarchal unit of a family headed by a man could govern a woman’s baser instincts. Gordon and Nair even argue that marriage was considered the natural state of respectable womanhood. Unmarried women were generally regarded with pity and as social anomalies: “At worst, they could be seen as presenting a sexual threat to the married; at best, they were viewed as “incomplete” and probably embittered, if they were unable to fulfill their biological destiny as wives and mothers” (126).

Margaret Oliphant agrees that marriage is the natural state of being for men and women, but laments that

[w]e have grown accustomed to the reproduction, not only of wails over female loneliness and the impossibility of finding anybody to marry, but to the narrative of many thrills of feeling much more practical and conclusive. 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 (259).

The sensation novelists that she is deriding depicted the inner lives – and sexual feelings – of the women who were their main characters, often in detail. It is not only that Oliphant disbelieves that women had such feelings altogether, although her reference to “a very fleshly and unlovely record” seems to indicate that this is exactly how she felt, but also that “up to the present generation most young women had been brought up in the belief that their own feelings on this subject should be religiously kept to themselves” (259). She acknowledges that women, although perhaps only women who were not entirely respectable, might have such feelings, but if they did it was certainly not something they would ever dream of sharing with anyone else, let alone write fiction about. Female sexuality was something to be repressed, even if one did feel it. What made sensation fiction even worse was the fact that it

was written by women, women who were breaking the taboo placed on female sexuality by the society they lived in. “[W]ere the sketch made from the man’s point of view, its openness would at least be less repulsive” (259). It is then specifically female sexuality that is being policed, the same subjects written about by men or described from a male character’s point of view, while not entirely decorous, do not carry the same amount of social stigma. Sensation fiction was condemned because it gave a voice to female sexuality.

### **Dangerous Sexuality**

Whether someone subscribed to the idea of women being inherently asexual or women being inherently hyper-sexual, there were expressions of female sexuality that were condemned throughout all of society. Female sexuality, even if it was acknowledged as being an inherent part of a woman’s nature, had to conform to a specific set of social parameters for it to be acceptable. Sensation heroines were decidedly nonconformist. Not only were sensation novels sensational because they caused a physical reaction in its readers, or because they portrayed women as being inherently sexual, they were even more scandalous because of the “very fleshly and unlovely record” (Oliphant 259) that Oliphant was so upset about. Lyn Pykett points out that women were not only described as being sexual, but that the narrative frequently dwelt on the physical responses that these sexual feelings could cause in its heroines (34). Sensation novels placed the emphasis on a woman’s body. Even if there were people who privately admitted to themselves that women could experience a purely physical form of sexual excitement and that they could be enticed by good-looking men without any need for feelings of love, it was simply not something that was written about and certainly not written about in novels. Margaret Oliphant complained that the sensation heroine “waits now for flesh and muscles, for strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her through, and a host of other physical attractions, which she indicates to the world with a charming frankness” (259). Not only does the sensation heroine look for physical attractions rather than emotional ones, she openly talks about this, albeit in a book.

Especially the last point, that of women openly talking about physical attractions and their own desires, was shocking. This was aggressive and manly behaviour, not passive and feminine behaviour. Margaret Oliphant remarked that the sensation novel has “moulded its women on the model of men, just as the former school moulded its women on the model of women” (265). Sensation heroines were manly women and decidedly non-feminine. Natalie Schroeder lists masochism, self-love, aggression, and cruelty as non-feminine characteristics



(90). Sensation heroines generally exhibited at least three of these characteristics. Female aggression is represented not just by talking openly about sexual issues, but also through the common sensational plot elements of murder and deceit. These non-sexual forms of female aggression, while scandalous in their own right, also represent the underlying and even more scandalous sexual aggression of the women in these novels. One could even argue that in a great many sensation novels the heroine's sexual aggression is the cause of all other calamities that happen during the course of the plot.

Using non-sexual markers to refer to suspect sexual behaviours is not limited to outpourings of aggression. Horse riding had become a popular pastime among women during the 1860s and as such many sensation heroines became what has been referred to as 'horsey heroines.' Horse riding was considered an acceptable pastime for a woman because it provided her with exercise and because, in this time before cars, being able to ride made you a more desirable bride. Interestingly enough, women who were looking to marry were sometimes referred to as taking part in the "steeplechase after husbands" (Mason 121). That phrase instantly hints at some of the social stigmas associated with horse riding. The image that the phrase 'steeplechase after husbands' conjures up is one of aggression and pursuit. Add to this the fact that horse riding was popular among 'fast' women and immediately the woman who is too much interested in horse riding becomes suspect. Gina Dorré argues that it was indeed the case that women who were too interested in or too good at horse riding "were in danger of being perceived as too assertive – by mastering the horse, women were seemingly rejecting their feminine roles of passivity, submissiveness, and non-physicality" (78). Training a horse is a physical activity and one that requires aggression and assertiveness in order to do it well. In mastering a horse, a woman is in essence exhibiting the same kind of behaviour as a man. The woman is behaving towards the horse as a man would towards a woman, inverting the social construct of femininity. So while horse riding was socially acceptable, it remained suspect.

It seems that unfeminine women were mostly chastised for exhibiting male behaviour. In the Victorian ideology of characteristics ruled by biology, men and women were supposed to exhibit completely different virtues. A woman who behaved like a man was going against nature. This argument was strengthened by the growing popularity of Darwinism in the early 1860s, according to Laurie Garrison. The discourse of evolution provided new arguments associating characteristics with nature. Women who behaved like men could be constructed in Darwinian discourse as primitive. They belonged to a race that was less developed, such as

the lower classes, or downright unnatural, such as the Amazons (38). Both non-sexual aggression and sexual aggression, as well as self-assertion, thus became proof of women's underdeveloped state in comparison to men. It provided proof that women really were the weaker sex and that it was justified for women to be subordinate to men.

What was more, women who resisted the dominant ideology of what a woman should be like and who exhibited masculine behaviour were thought to be unwomanly in the worst way possible. They were not women, but simply exhibiting masculine behaviour did not make them men either. They were thought of as unsexed, or as something which Lyn Pykett describes as an intermediate sex (14). Disabled women were also generally thought of as belonging to this intermediate sex. Martha Stoddard Holmes claims that disabled women were usually thought of as something less than womanly, as diseased. They are not able to become mothers and wives, removing them from the normal "sexual economy" and refusing them access to respectable femininity, but they are not viewed as sexual beings or sexually attractive, meaning they are never considered 'fallen' women either (61). They, too, belong to the category of the intermediate sex, what Holmes calls "the odd women" (86). These women chafe against the construct of the binary, since they are neither good nor bad, neither women nor men. They are considered a threat to society because they challenge everything that is seen as normal and natural, not only conventional gender roles, but the gender binary itself and thus the neatly ordered world of the Victorians.

There was another reason that these sexually nonconforming women were considered a threat to society in a way that sexually nonconforming men were not. Jeffrey Weeks explains that women carried the children and that out of a fear for illegitimate children a woman's adultery was feared (30). It is not difficult to see why. A man might have many mistresses, but if he conceives a child with one of them this child will not be a legitimate heir to his estate. However, if a woman commits adultery and falls pregnant by her lover – without the husband finding out – there is a real possibility that a child that is not biologically his will inherit a man's entire estate. Weeks further argues that sons born to a couple might later in life become business partners to their father and daughters might be valuable in forming alliances through marriage (30). It is therefore crucial that these children are legitimately the offspring of the man who they consider their father, lest a scandalous revelation later in life disrupts both financial and familial agreements. Men cannot commit the social crime of placing a fraudulent heir to the estate in the family home, but a woman can. It was for this reason that women, especially middle-class women, were held to a much stricter code of

chastity than their husbands. It was also for this reason that women who deviated from this strict moral code were viewed with fear and distrust.

It might have also been for this reason that women were encouraged to direct their erotic feelings elsewhere. Shanon Marcus argues that women were encouraged to view each other as sexually attractive through fashion magazines. Especially the fashion plates printed in these magazines, which were mostly drawn by women from a female point of view, depict women as “sexually attractive figures designed to be looked at” (119). These fashion magazines put women and their bodies on display in an effort to sell them items that would enhance their femininity. They provided women with drawings that glorified the ultimate conforming view of femininity and in doing so made women attractive, even to their own sex. They did not encourage women to feel an overtly sexual attraction to each other, but there is a sort of erotic feeling to the way they are encouraged to fall in love with feminine beauty. In 1874, Mary Collier, a married twenty-five year old woman, wrote the following entry in her diary:

I went with Emily to the skating on asphalt at Princes in Hans place. I never saw a prettier sight – some 200 young women all in more or less graceful motion and dressed in all manner of print dresses with most astonishing and picturesque hats. The beauty of the girls was something to make one scream with delight. The older I grow the more slave I am to beauty. (qtd. in Marcus 111)

There is a definite undercurrent of homoerotic feeling in this passage, although most of it seems to be directed at the outward displays of femininity. Marcus claims that “Victorian society accepted female homoeroticism as a component of respectable womanhood and encouraged women and girls to desire, scrutinize, and handle simulacra of alluring femininity” (111). In light of the fear of unchecked female sexuality, this encouragement might have been given to turn women’s erotic attention away from men and provide it with a safer outlet.

### **Theory and Practice**

Despite this ideology of female sexuality as something that could be dangerous and needed to be kept under control, there seem to have been many discrepancies between theory and practice. Michael Mason develops something which he refers to as “the courtship theory”. By comparing the numbers of pre-marital pregnancies and the number of illegitimate births, defined as a birth where the parents are not married, he comes to the conclusion that for many

people of all social classes sex was an integral part of courtship. Most women who conceived before marriage later married, or had the intention to marry the father of their child (70). This alone would suggest, as Mason does, that there is a discrepancy between the prevailing moral code and actual behaviour (41). Furthermore, Mason suggests that there was a discrepancy between the moral code of the city and that of the country, so that what was considered acceptable in the more modern climate of the city was still very much frowned upon in the countryside (114). This makes it difficult to claim that the whole of society agreed on one specific moral code.

The 1860s were a special period in the light of sexual morality, with the emergence and immense popularity of both the 'fast' women and the sensation novels. Mason suggests one other area in which the 1860s stood out from the rest of the century. Through the analysis of birth records, the number of births, the number of marriages, and the relative age of people marrying for the first time, Mason concludes that during the 1860s British people first started using birth control more extensively than they ever had before (45). Moreover, there was a definite link between class (defined by occupation rather than income) and the reliance on birth control, with upper classes starting the trend of reliance on birth control and family planning (53). This means that for upper and upper middle class women, the 1860s were the decade in which they were first given a choice about when and how often they became pregnant. The topic was not often discussed in literature until a few decades later, but if Mason's analysis is correct it would be strange to think that birth control was so widely accepted. After all, if a woman had the choice of when to become pregnant it might give her license to indulge in her sexual urges without any dire consequences. Moreover, if it was generally accepted that all women wanted to become mothers and were ruled by their reproductive system it would seem strange that a system which limits their fertility would find much acceptance. The fact that this acceptance is what happened, at least among the higher classes, seems to be an argument in favour of the fact that there was indeed a difference between theory and practice in the moral code of the mid-Victorians. Mason himself supports this view and suggests that some Victorians themselves also thought of the notorious English prudery as being entirely superficial (132; 145).

## Conclusion

In reference to female sexuality, the situation is probably a mix of superficiality and actual adhering to the strict moral code. Whether one subscribed to the view of the 'angel of the

house' which held that women were inherently asexual, or to the view that women were inherently more sexual than men, female sexuality was something that needed to be controlled and suppressed. Even those who thought that women were inherently sexual sought to contain this sexuality within marriage. Marriage, and marriage alone, was the state in which a woman could give limited expression to her sexuality. That this was not altogether what happened in practice did not seem to matter. Even if pre-marital sex was practiced, it was not talked about. The same is true for virtually every other aspect of a woman's sexuality. Women's sexual feelings were thought to come from the heart, from a place of emotions and love, not from physical desire. Describing or talking about physical female desire was simply not done. Female sexuality was supposed to be passive. A woman might enjoy sex, but she must never seek it out. Aggression, especially in sexual matters, was masculine behaviour and not becoming of a lady. Talking openly about sexual matters was also considered a sign of aggression. All in all, it seems to have been generally acknowledged that female sexuality and sexual desire existed, albeit in a more passive form than the aggressive male sexuality, but it was not to be talked about. This seems to be suggested by Margaret Oliphant's words that "their own feelings on this subject should be religiously kept to themselves" (259). Even if the 'angel of the house' ideology was wrong in thinking that women were inherently asexual, outwardly a woman must appear to be embodying the virtues of morality, chastity, piety, sympathy, nurturance, sexual passivity, innocence, sexual ignorance, humility, and dependence. Even if they did not conform to this ideal in private, which was expected but not always achieved in practice, to the world a woman must keep up appearances. Samuel Carter Hall reflected on the early Victorian period in his 1883 memoirs by saying that:

[i]t is not enough for a woman to *be* pure; she must *seem* pure to be so; her conscience may be as white as snow, but if she give scope to slander and weight to calumny her offense is great. (qtd. in Trudgill 177)

In general, then, it seems to have been acknowledged that women could be sexual and could experience both physical attraction and sexual pleasure. However, they were not to behave in a masculine and aggressive way and show or talk about their sexual desires. So while the stereotype of the sexually innocent Victorian housewife is probably not true, outwardly they were expected to behave like one.

## Chapter Two: Griffith Gaunt

This chapter will examine Charles Reade's *Griffith Gaunt* in the light of female sexuality. The focus of the chapter will be on two female characters: Kate Gaunt and Mercy Vint. There is one other subversive female character, that of Kate's lady's maid Caroline Ryder. While she is represented as an explicitly subversive character, she is only subversive because she adheres to the stereotype of the sexually permissive woman as evil. She is in fact so evil that she almost becomes a caricature. She will therefore mainly be disregarded. Kate and Mercy, while also subversive, provide a more nuanced view of female sexuality. Specifically, it will be argued that they perform their sexuality in a way that makes it appear more normative than it actually is.

### Charles Reade and *Griffith Gaunt*

Charles Reade was born in Oxfordshire on 8 June 1814 as the youngest of eleven children to John Reade and Anna Maria Reade. He studied at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he graduated in 1838. He was made Dean of Arts at Magdalen in 1845 and in 1847 graduated from the same college with a degree in civil law (Kent 354-355). Throughout his literary career he produced fourteen novels, twenty-six plays, and over twenty-four short stories. Reade was an incredibly popular writer throughout his life time, although some critics also condemned his work for exceeding "the bounds of decency and decorum" (Fantina, *Daring Works* 1). Despite the fact that his work seemed to occasionally go beyond the bounds of common decency and the fact that he was in favour of equal rights for women, he was a conservative and enthusiastically in favour of traditional marriage (*Daring Works* 82). In one of the most extensive works of research published about Reade in the last decade, Richard Fantina points out that Reade was preoccupied by issues of gender construction, sexuality, and institutions of control (*Daring Works* 6). Nineteenth-century critics also picked up on Reade's preoccupation with strong female characters. A reviewer for *Blackwood's Magazine* points out that while all of Reade's female characters appear to be virtually the same character, they are all splendid: "Mr. Reade has made this woman; he has clothed her, not in weakness, as has been the wont of the romanticists, but in beautiful power and strength, the fulness of health and vigour, bodily and mental" ("Charles Reade's Novels" 490). This emphasis on power and especially physical strength seems to be in direct contrast to the dominant view of what a woman should be like as outlined in the previous chapter. According to the reviewer, most of the women in Reade's works of fiction conform to this pattern.

However, this chapter concerns itself only with his novel *Griffith Gaunt*, which began publication in *The Argosy* in December 1865.

*Griffith Gaunt, or Jealousy* focuses, as the full title suggests, on the theme of jealousy. It tells the story of Griffith Gaunt, a young squire who is set to inherit a large estate from his aunt's husband after the man takes a liking to him. He has also been courting his benefactor's niece, Kate Peyton, for three years. However, George Neville, a rich heir, has started courting Kate as well. Right after Kate dismisses both Griffith and Neville, they learn that Kate's uncle has passed away. With a renewed sense of hope, both men begin courting Kate again. After some perceived slander of George against Kate, Griffith challenges him to a duel on the morning of the funeral. When Kate learns of this she rushes to intervene, saving both men. At the reading of the will it is found that Kate's uncle has left the estate to her and not to Griffith, under the assumption that Kate and Griffith would soon marry. Kate's father and her priest want her to marry Neville and join the estates together. However, Kate feels sorry for having taken his inheritance away from him and marries Griffith instead. For many years they are happily married and they have two children, of whom only a daughter survives past infancy. Trouble starts again when father Francis, Kate's confessor, leaves for a new parish and a new Italian priest, father Leonard, takes his place. Kate is enraptured with his orations and soon lets him dictate her every move, even her domestic arrangements. When father Leonard advises her to dismiss the servants in her house who are protestants, like Griffith and unlike Kate, Griffith becomes angry and violently jealous of Leonard. Kate becomes overtly pious and joyless, all her thoughts taken over by spiritual matters. Eventually, Griffith catches Kate and Leonard outside together and he sees Kate hand Leonard a bag of money. Convinced that his wife is unfaithful to him, he beats up father Leonard and nearly kills his wife before driving off in a fury. He ends up at an inn called the Packhorse. He falls ill and nearly dies, but Mercy Vint, the daughter of the innkeeper, nurses him back to health. Still convinced that Kate was unfaithful to him and jealous of Mercy's other suitor, he marries her and so commits bigamy. Eventually he travels back home in order to get money for Mercy's family, where he learns through father Francis that Kate was never unfaithful to him. Kate and Griffith make up, but he is now unsure of what to do about Mercy. Mercy is heavily pregnant at this time and Kate becomes pregnant during their reconciliation. Eventually Kate finds out that he has been unfaithful to her and threatens to kill him. When a body is found in the pond the next day that is believed to be Griffith's, Kate is charged with his murder and must defend herself in court. Mercy, who by now has learned that Griffith has committed bigamy and has turned

him away, travels to Kate's trial with her new-born baby in tow in order to testify that she has seen Griffith alive after he was supposed to have been dead. Her testimony acquits Kate and the two women become friends. Griffith later comes back home and reconciles with Kate after giving her his blood when she nearly dies during labour. Mercy marries George Neville and the two families remain friends for their entire lives.

### **Horsewomen**

While this story seems to be sensational mostly because of the bigamy and supposed adultery, there is more going on beneath the surface. Kate, her lady's maid Caroline, and to an extent Mercy Vint are all in the business of subverting gender stereotyping despite the novel's conventional ending in two happy marriages. First of all, in the very first chapter it is established that Kate is an accomplished horsewoman. As pointed out in the first chapter of this thesis, horsewomen were always viewed with suspicion because they "connoted sexual threat and ambiguous femininity" (David 180). In order to master the horse they must act in an aggressive fashion, rather than the passivity that was expected of women during the nineteenth century (Dorré 78). Laurie Garrison points out that women who were considered masculine in their behaviour or women who experienced and expressed great sexual desire were often equated with Amazonian battle strategists (38). Other than their hate for men and their great prowess in battle, the Amazons were also known to be excellent horsewomen. In equating masculine or sexually expressive women to Amazons the link between dubious femininity and the suspicion with which horsewomen were viewed becomes clear. Kate herself is described as an Amazon when she gallops in between the duelling Griffith Gaunt and George Neville: "There was a great rushing, and a pounding of the hard ground, and a scarlet Amazon galloped in, and drew up in the middle, right between the levelled pistols" (Reade 37). Not only does she rush in on her horse to stop the duelling, she actually places herself between the two duellists and runs the risk of being shot. This is not the passivity that women were supposed to possess, but rather an example of masculine aggression. The text makes this abundantly clear when a short while later Kate faints from the excitement and worry she had been feeling:

O, lame and impotent conclusion of a vigorous exploit! Masculine up to the crowning point, and then to go and spoil all with "woman's weakness"! "N.B. This is rote sarcasticul," as Artemus the Delicious says. Woman's weakness! If Solomon had



planned and Samson executed, they could not have served her turn better than this most seasonable swooning did. (Reade 37)

The text first expresses that swooning is a weakness found in women and equates Kate's fainting to impotent masculinity, not quite female but not quite male either. However, this is immediately followed up with a line that says the comment on women's weakness was sarcastic. Though society may view fainting as a sign of weakness, the novel considers it an effective strategy in a woman's arsenal to be used to get what she wants. By fainting, the duellists become so alarmed that they immediately abandon their pistols. Furthermore, by constructing Kate's fainting as something "planned and executed," it is turned into a battle strategy, further solidifying the view of Kate as an Amazon: a fantastic horsewoman and a battle strategist. This Amazonian conduct is constructed as a positive thing, however, and not something to be feared in women. Through her conduct Kate saves the lives of two good men.

Far from fearing the sexuality of the horsewomen, Reade seems to embrace it. Fantina suggests that Reade was "especially interested in women's physical strength" (*Daring Works* 118) and the idea of the powerful horsewoman fits in with this ideal. The opening passages of the book describe a hunt in which Kate is taking part. Fantina suggests that this part of the text reflects "Reade's admiration for athletic women, as well as his sexualized objectification of their bodies" (*Daring Works* 137). It is certainly true that the image given of Kate on her horse is painted using sexualized language:

Erect, but lithe and vigorous, and one with her great white gelding, she came flying behind the foremost riders, and took leap for leap with them. One glossy, golden curl streamed back in the rushing air; her grey eyes glowed with earthly fire; and two red spots on the upper part of her cheeks showed she was much excited, without a grain of fear. (Reade 2)

Kate is described as erect and one with her horse, signalling sexual coupling. Hair had important symbolic meaning to the Victorians. Galia Ofek states that loose hair was a symbol of sex and wantonness. A woman's hair was usually tied up, covered, or otherwise restrained. It was only allowed to flow free in the comfort of the bedroom (74). The fact that one curl has come undone and flows free signals sexual excitement. The "earthly fire" that glows in Kate's eyes also signal sexual excitement. It is specifically mentioned as being earthly, rather than for example something spiritual. This ties it to bodily excitement, rather than mental excitement. Together with the fact that Kate is blushing, which was another sign of sexual excitement to the Victorians (Heller, "Ambivalence about the Body" 97), this earthly fire can

only mean bodily sexual arousal. This whole scene represents an eroticised view of Kate the horsewoman and strongly signals physical excitement and sexual arousal. Interestingly enough it is a woman who is described as erect and vigorous, which are terms that suggest masculine sexuality. Coupled with the fact that Kate as a whole is represented as vigorously sexual in this scene, it would seem that Kate is being described as masculine and aggressive in terms of sexuality.

As mentioned earlier, horsewomen were also viewed with suspicion because of the fact that in mastering the horse they display aggressive and therefore masculine tendencies. If a woman can dominate a horse than she can dominate a husband. Again, the text makes it abundantly clear through the use of horses that Kate is in fact dominant. When she is preparing to mount her horse to ride to the duel, the horse refuses to be mounted. What Kate does instead is:

She walked him back to the stable and gave him a sieveful of oats, and sat it down by the cornbin for him, and took an opportunity to mount the bin softly. He ate the oats, but with retroverted eye watched her. She kept quiet and affected *nonchalance* till he became less cautious – then suddenly sprang on him, and taught him to set his wit against a woman's. (Reade 31)

Kate masters the horse. She does this not through violence – in a masculine way – but by using her ‘woman’s wit’ to trick him. She uses her femininity to gain control, rather than reverting to masculine behaviour. As with the fainting, she uses her femininity as a weapon. She is not wholly masculine of character, but she uses the feminine aspects of her character in a masculine way in order to dominate.

Another way in which Kate’s aggressive sexuality is made explicit through the use of horses is by linking it to her horsewhip. Whipping is linked to aggressive sexuality and sexual dominance because it is a self-assertive behaviour, which is thought of as masculine (Gravatt 115). When George Neville likens Kate to a coquette, she is furious:

Miss Peyton rose from her seat with eyes that literally flashed fire; and – the horrible truth must be told – her first wild impulse was to reply to all this Molière with one cut of her little riding-whip. (Reade 14)

Kate wants to literally whip George Neville into submission. The novel refers to it as “the horrible truth” because it is unladylike behaviour. Kate realizes this too, but is stopped from actually acting on her desire because she fears Neville will not do her the favour she wants from him if she whips him, rather than because it is unladylike. Instead, she sinks down onto

her knees and starts crying. Kate wants to dominate the situation and knows that the masculine behaviour she longs to exhibit will get her nowhere. Instead, she once again weaponizes her femininity in order to get what she wants. She is aggressive and dominant at heart, but knows that this behaviour is considered unfeminine and she knows when to check her own inclinations and when it is safe to let them run free, as during a hunt.

### **Woman's domestic role**

A Victorian woman's highest aspiration was supposed to be marriage and motherhood. Middle and upper class women were trained for this goal from a young age. They were being brought up to believe that marriage was the best thing that could possibly happen to them (Pykett 57). A woman's place was the domestic sphere. Kate, however, is a catholic and she does not want to marry. She wants to join a convent instead. Tamar Heller points out that "by entering convents women escaped immersion in domesticity" ("Ambivalence About the Body" 98). She claims that Victorians saw joining a convent as transgressive behaviour, because by escaping domesticity they reject marriage and consequently motherhood, the one thing that every woman ought to naturally aspire to ("Ambivalence About the Body" 98). It seems that Reade, who was staunchly in favour of traditional marriage, did indeed consider a woman joining a convent instead of marrying too transgressive even for his strong female characters. When Kate relays her intention of joining a convent to her confessor, Father Francis, and stating that she has very little interest in marriage, Father Francis tells her that she should not go into a convent but rather marry in order to help the Catholic faith:

'Oh no, Father! But how can I serve the Church better than by renouncing the world?'

'Perhaps by remaining in the world as she herself does, - and by making converts to the faith. You could hardly serve her worse than by going into a convent: for our convents are poor, and you have no means; you would be a charge. No, daughter, we want no poor nuns; we have enough of them. If you are, as I think, a true and zealous daughter of the Church, you must marry, and instil the true faith, with all a mother's art, a mother's tenderness, into you children. Then the heir to your husband's estate will be a Catholic, and so the true faith get rooted in the soil.' (Reade 44)

Kate is poor and would be a burden to a convent. However, because she is a woman she can use marriage and motherhood to benefit the Catholic faith. Even for this strong minded and dominant woman, marriage is the highest thing she can aspire too. Even after she inherits her uncle's estate and is therefore no longer poor she is still not allowed to enter a convent:

‘What, I may go into a convent *now* that I can bribe the door open?’

The scratch was feline, feminine, sudden, and sharp. But, alas! Father Francis only smiled at it. Though not what we call spiritually minded, he was a man of Christian temper. ‘Not with my good-will, my daughter,’ said he; ‘I am of the same mind still, and more than ever. You must marry forthwith, and rear children in the true faith.’

(Reade 63)

Ostensibly, Kate must marry because by coming between the duellists society thinks that she has a preference for one of the gentlemen and she must marry to avoid a scandal. However, the implication is still that a woman’s highest duty is to marry and raise children. This is the only way a woman could have an impact on society. Kate is not best pleased about this, but she submits to Father Francis’ will eventually and marries Griffith Gaunt.

By giving in and marrying Griffith, Kate seemingly becomes everything that a woman should be: a wife and a mother. However, even her marriage to Griffith is not quite as respectable as it seems. Father Francis had wanted her to marry George Neville after she inherited her uncle’s estate so that her estate and that of the Neville family could be joined together. However, because Kate inherits her uncle’s estate Griffith is left with nothing. She marries him instead of Neville because she pities Griffith and feels bad about having taken away his prospects. Lynn Pykett argues that Victorian women had only duties, not rights, within the patriarchal family structure (56). Everything they had owned before marrying belonged to their husbands after marriage. As pointed out in the previous chapter, in order for a woman to be truly respectable, she had to live in “a state of social and economic dependence on men” (Gordon and Nairr 126). Kate, however, is not dependent on Griffith for anything. Before they marry her father has contracts drawn up stating that her inheritance remains entirely her own, even after marrying. The estate that the Gaunts live on is Kate’s, not Griffith’s. She is not even entirely socially dependent on him because he is a Protestant while she is a Catholic and they go to church separately, which Griffith does not mind at all. However, Kate knows that it is not proper for a woman to be independent of her husband. Aside from the domestic arrangements and the servants she lets Griffith run the estate, because she feels it is his right as her husband. Since they are married her property is his property and her place is within the house. However, she never quite forgets that she is actually the one to whom the entire estate belongs, something which she uses against her husband during a fight:

‘Then I say that priest shall never darken my doors again.’

‘Then I say they are my doors, not yours; and that holy man shall brighten them whenever he will.’

If to strike and adversary dumb is the tongue’s triumph, Mrs. Gaunt was victorious; for Griffith gasped, but did not reply. (...) During all the years they had lived together she had never once assumed the proprietor. On the contrary, she put him forward as the Squire, and slipped quietly into the background. *Bene latuit*. But, lo! let a hand be put out to offend her saintly favourite and that moment she would waken her husband from his dream, and put him down into his true legal position with a word. The matrimonial throne for him till he resisted her priest; and then, a stool at her feet, and his. (Reade 92)

Although Kate immediately regrets having said this to Griffith, it is nevertheless true that she is superior in this marriage. The text makes this very clear when it is said that Griffith shall have “a stool at her feet.” In their marriage Kate is dominant and Griffith is submissive. Given Kate’s aggressive sexuality as discussed previously, it is not unreasonable to assume that this dominance stretches to the bedroom as well.

### **Sexual and spiritual adultery**

Griffith assumes that Kate has committed adultery with Father Leonard. She has not, but not because she was not attracted to him. She is initially attracted to him because of his orations in the pulpit:

Mrs. Gaunt sat thrilled, enraptured, melted. She hung upon his words; and when they ceased, she still sat motionless, spell-bound; loath to believe that accents so divine could really come to an end. (Reade 71)

This is the first time that Kate has felt sexual attraction. It also leaves her dominated, sitting motionless, rather than being the dominant one herself. The courting scene in the beginning of the book between Kate and Griffith is romantic, but not erotically charged. She tells him quite frankly that she does not really love him as she thinks she ought to, but that she will marry him anyway because she does not want him to be unhappy. It is also she who commands Griffith to ask her to marry him and she who sends him away after sharing one kiss. Kate is completely in control of that situation:

Quelled by a menace so mysterious, Griffith promised blind obedience; and Kate thanked him, and bade him good night, and ordered him peremptorily to bed. He went.

She beckoned him back.

He came. (Reade 61)

This scene demonstrates that Griffith is entirely submissive to Kate's will. In Father Leonard, for the first time, Kate has found someone who completely captivates her and makes her the submissive one instead, even though he is not an intimidating man at all. If at first she does not realize that she is attracted to him, the text makes it abundantly clear that she is in fact sexually attracted to him. Right after she hears him preach for the first time she goes home: "And by this means she came hot and undiluted to her husband; she laid her white hand on his shoulder, and said, 'O Griffith, I have heard the voice of God'" (Reade 71). A short while later, Kate's ladies maid Caroline Ryder sees something happen between Kate and Leonard that has her convinced that the two are having an affair:

Mrs. Gaunt, in the warmth of the discourse, laid her hand lightly for a moment on the priest's shoulder. That was nothing, she had laid the same hand on Ryder; for, in fact, it was a little womanly way she had, and a hand that settled like down. But this time, as she withdrew it again, that delicate hand seemed to speak; it did not leave Leonard's shoulder all at once, it glided slowly away, first the palm, then the fingers, and so parted lingeringly. (Reade 88)

Richard Fantina points out that Kate's attraction to Leonard –because she refuses to acknowledge it- is played out through her admiration for his spirituality. This led to the fact that the text displays "the overlapping of spiritual and carnal desire," something that was shocking to Victorian readers (*Daring Works* 133). Kate desires both the spiritual enlightenment that she hopes to reach through her faith, but also the messenger of the faith himself, "melting" and becoming "hot" when she hears him speak. However, despite her desire she never becomes an adulteress and sends Leonard away the moment she learns he is in love with her, being once again in control.

Griffith, however, does become an adulterer and a bigamist when he knowingly marries Mercy Vint. In doing so he ruins Mercy's good reputation, even though she does not know that he is a bigamist. Their marriage was not lawful, meaning she had his baby out of wedlock. To the Victorians she would have been viewed as a fallen woman, or a Magdalen, even though she lost her virtue through no fault of her own. However, in *Griffith Gaunt* she is never judged this harshly (Vitanza 21). Although Kate automatically assumes that the woman who married Griffith must have known that he already had a wife and was therefore of low moral character, the text makes it clear that Mercy is a credit to her name and as virtuous a

woman as has ever lived. Mercy is not vilified for losing her character, because she essentially did nothing wrong. Fantina also asserts that the text places the blame for the bigamy and adultery on Griffith. Mercy is considered a fallen woman by society, but not by the text (“Chafing at the Social Cobwebs” 133). The clearest evidence for this is the fact that she gets her happy ending by marrying George Neville, a man with a huge estate, and her unlawful child conveniently dies before the wedding. Of extra-marital sex Reade himself had said that “[i]llicit connections are vicious but they are no more unclean than matrimonial connections” (Reade qtd. in Fantina *Daring Works* 83). Adultery and extra-marital sex are wrong because of the moral and emotional harm they can cause, but sex in itself is not immoral even if committed in an illicit relationship. Therefore, Reade does not consider Mercy a fallen woman. She has had extra-marital sex, but without her knowledge and so her conscience is clean.

So while Kate commits spiritual adultery and must pay for her crime by suffering through many hardships, she is eventually allowed her happy ending when she and Griffith make up. Mercy and Griffith commit physical adultery, but only Griffith knows that they are committing adultery. As such, the blame for the transgression is placed fully on Griffith’s shoulders. He is the one who is shunned by both his wives and must spend a considerable amount of time proving himself to Kate before she will have him back. Mercy is fully acquitted of any wrongdoing and is allowed a happy and advantageous marriage even though society would have considered her a fallen woman. All of the illicit connections in this text are treated with surprising leniency, especially the female ones. It is the men who are portrayed as incompetent, especially Griffith Gaunt himself. For his crimes he ends up, as Laura Hanft Korobkin puts it, a “permanently submissive husband” to his dominant wife (50).

### **Same-sex desire**

Fantina also argues that *Griffith Gaunt* contains themes of same-sex desire between Mercy and Kate. It is certainly true that once Kate gets over her initial distrust of Mercy the women instantly form a deep connection that could be construed as something more than friendship:

‘O give me the one thing that can do me good in this world, - the one thing I pine for, - a little of *your* love.’

The words were scarce out of her lips, when Mrs. Gaunt caught her impetuously round the neck with both hands, and laid her on that erring but noble heart of hers, and kissed

her eagerly. They kissed one another again and again, and wept over one another.

(Reade 197)

They then spend the night sleeping in the same bed in Kate's jail cell, with Mercy's illegitimate child between them. Mercy also explicitly refers to Kate's "beautiful eyes" (Reade 197). Fantina argues that the scene in which the two women look over Mercy's baby together "not only suggests the centrality of Griffith as the father of the child and husband to both women but also highlights his irrelevance" (*Daring Works* 135). Mercy and Kate are now looking after the baby together, without the need for Griffith's help or protection and so they have "essentially displaced Griffith (at least temporarily)" (Fantina *Daring Works* 136). Griffith is no longer of importance to these two women once they have each other. Mercy herself states that "I'd liever ten times be beside you than beside him" (Reade 197). Charles Dickens opposed the scene in which the two women have the baby on their lap:

Asked if I should have passed the passage where Kate and Mercy have the illegitimate child upon their laps and look over its little points together? I should again be obliged to reply No, for the same reason. (Dickens qtd. in Pollard 223)

The reason he refers to is that "what was pure to an artist might be impurely suggestive to inferior minds" (Dickens qtd. in Pollard 223). At first glance it seems hard to find something about the scene that might in any way be thought of as impure, even to suggestive minds. The scene simply features two women acting on their maternal instinct. However, Fantina suggests that to modern readers the sight of two women with a baby on their lap might signal a lesbian couple as parents (*Daring Works* 136). Same-sex desire was unacknowledged throughout Victorian society except in pornography and medical discourse (*Daring Works* 102) so it might seem a bit farfetched that a Victorian reader would have thought of lesbian parents upon reading the scene. Fantina, however, suggests that "Dickens's keen perception may nevertheless have detected something radically unsettling in this chapter with its simultaneous depictions of bigamy, illegitimacy, sensuality, and women working together to disprove a patriarchal accusation" (*Daring Works* 136). Since Dickens never explicitly states what exactly he finds immoral about the scene, it is very well possible.

## Conclusion

Kate Gaunt and Mercy Vint are what a critic referred to as Mr. Reade's *repertoire* of two stock characters, Kate a "brilliant, splendid woman, full of noble instincts, of passion and generosity, and pride and humbleness" and Mercy a "simple, tender, wise, feminine creature



who is the rival, the conqueror, the defender, the only being who fully comprehends the first” (“Charles Reade’s Novels” 490). This paints Kate as the passionate one and Mercy as the submissive one and to a certain extent this is true. Mercy is certainly more tender and less furious than Kate, but she nevertheless does what is right and sends Griffith packing. Both women dominate over their husband, Mercy by being tender and caring and Kate by being more aggressive. Kate is painted as more openly and more aggressively sexual, primarily through her association with horses. While she is dominant and aggressive, she does not achieve her goals through physical aggression. She refrains from whipping George Neville and instead uses her tears in order to achieve her goal just as she later faints in what the text constructs as a calculated move. Mercy equally does not use physical violence, but quiet disappointment and contentiousness to make Griffith see the error of his ways. Both women are dominant over Griffith and both achieve their dominance in the same way. Kate and Mercy achieve dominance in their relationships not by using their masculine traits, which Kate at least certainly possesses, but through weaponizing their femininity in little ways such as crying, fainting, and sighing that are socially acceptable as female behaviour. Their very femininity becomes the whip they use to achieve a certain superiority to the men in *Griffith Gaunt*. This shared feeling of inadequacy on the part of their husband also brings the two women closer together in a relationship that could be construed as homoerotic. Given the fact that Charles Reade would later go on to write a novel based on the romance between a cross-dressing girl and her sweetheart (*Androgynism*) as well as a novel based on a lesbian doctor (*A Woman Hater*) it does not seem entirely unlikely that this implication was not accidental.

### Chapter Three: Aurora Floyd

This chapter will examine Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel *Aurora Floyd* in light of female sexuality. The focus of the examination will be on the two main characters: Aurora Floyd and her cousin Lucy Floyd. Other female characters in the book are less interesting due to the fact that they are less developed. The close reading of this novel will be informed by Denise Hunter Gravatt's theory of masochism, because Gravatt applies this theory specifically to *Aurora Floyd* in light of the presence of masochistic feelings in this novel, which do indeed seem to be present.

Gravatt argues that masochism, even in a heterosexual relationship, is a form of non-normative sexuality because it is not heteronormative (112). Feelings of masochism occur mostly in men, reversing the "sexual hierarchies strictly within heterosexual relations" (111). Especially in the mid-Victorian period, when the woman was supposed to be submissive and the man dominant, male masochism was considered "perverse" because it involves a male exhibiting typically female behaviour and a woman exhibiting typically male behaviour (110). This means that masochistic heterosexual relationships with a dominant woman are a form of non-normative sexuality that is empowering for the woman as well as pleasurable for the man (113). Gravatt reads the relationship between Aurora and John Mellish as such a relationship and states that "Braddon's narrative ... exposes the conflation of femininity/passivity and masculinity/activity as unnatural and proffers "antinormative forms of sociality," through its positive portrayal of male characters whose erotic predilections involve sexual submission to a dominant woman" (111).

#### **Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Aurora Floyd**

Mary Elizabeth Braddon was born in Soho, London on October 4, 1835. When she was four years old her mother left her father because of his infidelities and from then on she was raised only by her mother. She received a decent education and moved to Bath when she was seventeen, where she began an acting career. She remained in this profession for eight years, even though it caused controversy within the family. After publishing her first novel, *Three Times Dead* (1860), which was not a financial success, she moved to London in order to establish herself as a writer. *Lady Audley's Secret* was published in 1862 and it solidified her reputation as a sensation writer. She moved in with her married editor, John Maxwell, in 1861. He and his wife were separated at the time. Braddon bore Maxwell six illegitimate children while they were living together. When Maxwell's wife died in 1874, he and Braddon

married as soon as they could. They remained married until Braddon died on February 4, 1915 (“Biography”).

*Aurora Floyd*, the novel that this chapter will focus on, was written and published in the same period of time as *Lady Audley's Secret*. It first appeared in *Temple Bar Magazine's* January issue of 1862. *Aurora Floyd* tells the story of a young lady of the same name who is the daughter of Archibald Floyd, a rich banker. Her mother, a former provincial actress dies during her infancy, forcing the banker to raise his child alone. Mr Floyd is not quite equal to this task and Aurora grows into a spoiled and impetuous teenager. Following an argument with her father, she is sent away to a Parisian finishing school from which she returns a year later, seemingly more subdued than when she had left. Shortly afterwards her father organizes a ball in her honour, where she meets Talbot Bulstrode, an army officer. Bulstrode falls in love with Aurora, despite his reservations about her suitability as a wife. A short while later the book introduces John Mellish, a country squire who also becomes a suitor to Aurora. Talbot, jealous of the attention John Mellish receives, proposes to Aurora but is turned down. He later finds out that John Mellish has been similarly rejected. Given new hope by this news, he once again goes to see Aurora. She has just received a newspaper account detailing the death of a jockey and appears much shocked by it. This time she accepts Talbot's proposal, much to the disappointment of her cousin Lucy Floyd, who is also in love with Talbot. When Talbot hears from a niece, who went to the same Parisian school as Aurora, that his fiancé had run away after only a few weeks and had been missing for a year, he demands an explanation. When Aurora refuses to give him one and instead asks that he trust her, he breaks off the engagement. Aurora falls dangerously ill following this shock and is transported to a seaside resort in order to regain her strength. John Mellish follows her there and after several months proposes to her again. She accepts him and they are married shortly after, less than a year after Aurora first became engaged to Talbot. They seem to be quite happy together, even though John is domineered by his wife. An unhappy Talbot comes to visit the couple at Mellish Park, where he proposes to Lucy Floyd, because he realizes that she better represents his vision of an ideal wife. All seems well for some time, until a new horse trainer, James Conyers, arrives at Mellish Park. The man is strikingly handsome, but lame and appears not to get along with Aurora. Less than a week after his arrival at Mellish Park Conyers is found shot to death. Aurora almost immediately becomes a person of interest because of her suspicious behaviour in the week leading up to the trainer's death. One of the policemen finds a note sewn into Conyers's jacket lining which proves to be a marriage license. It is revealed

that Aurora had run away with her father's groom and had married him in France. After he proved a worthless husband she had returned to her father and told him that her husband was dead, knowing him to be still living. She only agrees to marry Talbot after she receives an account of her first husband's apparent demise. The fact that he is not actually dead makes her marriage to John Mellish an unintended bigamous one. John forgives her and the two marry again, legally this time. Talbot later proves that it was Softy, a stable hand who Aurora had whipped and fired for kicking her dog, who murdered the trainer in order to get the blackmail money Aurora had just given him. Aurora and John as well as Lucy and Talbot go on a tour of France and domestic bliss is restored.

### **Horsewomen**

As explained in the previous chapter, women with a keen interest in horses and horse riding were viewed with suspicion. They were considered by some as unsexed and viewed by most as a sexual threat (David 180). Like Kate Gaunt, Aurora is an accomplished rider with an apparent interest in hunting. The reader is told explicitly right at the beginning of the story that:

[a]t age six she rejected a doll, and asked for a rocking-horse. At ten she could converse fluently upon the subject of pointers, setters, fox-hounds, harriers, and beagles. ... At eleven she talked unreservedly of the horses in the Lenfield stables as a pack of screws; at twelve she contributed her half-crown to a Derby sweepstakes amongst her father's servants, and triumphantly drew the winning horse; and at thirteen she rode across country with her cousin Andrew, who was a member of the Croydon hunt. (Braddon 21)

In rejecting the doll for a rocking-horse, Aurora symbolically rejects a domestic life for that of a 'fast' girl. Her father deems his daughter to be well versed in "doubtful accomplishments" (Braddon 21) and when, upon first meeting her, Aurora starts talking to Talbot of horse races he deems her "a horrible woman" and a Cleopatra with a taste for horseflesh (Braddon 34-35). Aurora's interest in horses is definitely viewed with suspicion and is also mingled with distaste. A woman was expected to ride well (Dorré 78), but such a passionate interest coupled with an interest in hunting and betting on races is evidently regarded as unfeminine, especially by Talbot. Aurora's unfeminine interests are partially blamed on her father's incompetence in child-rearing (Braddon 21), but they are also seen as being inherited from her mother.

Eliza Prodder, Aurora's mother, was a mediocre provincial actress before she married Archibald Floyd. To the Victorians, actresses were fundamentally different from other women, from wives and mothers (Powell 3). In fact, actresses were seen as "unassimilated by the domestic ideal and could still be seen as incompatible with it" (18). Aurora rejecting the doll for the rocking-horse is then a direct result of her lineage and her biological unsuitability to occupy a domestic space. Moreover, according to Powell, the Victorians regarded prostitutes and actresses as so much the same that 'actress' became a euphemism for prostitute in the press (33). The text is aware of this prejudice. When Archibald first brings his bride home his neighbours speculate about her origins:

[T]here was scarcely any one debased station of life from which Mrs Floyd was not reported to have sprung. She had been a factory girl, ... [s]he was an actress, and he had seen her on the Manchester stage. ... Sometimes they said she was an equestrian, and it was at Astley's, and not in the manufacturing district, that the banker had first seen her; nay, some there were, ready to swear that they themselves had beheld her leaping through gilded hoops, and dancing the cachuca upon six bare-backed steeds, in that sawdust strewn arena. There were whispered rumours that were more cruel than these. (Braddon 8)

In progressive order the text relates the rumours about Eliza Prodder's origin. Actress ranks below factory girl, but equestrian ranks even below that, though still not as low as prostitute. The reference to Aurora's mother riding six bare-backed steeds, mastering six horses instead of just one, is especially empathic about people viewing her as a dominant and threatening woman. The text is also explicit about the fact that Aurora has inherited these characteristics from her mother, saying that she "had the taint of the play-acting and horse-riding, the spangles and the saw-dust, strong in her nature" (20). Acting and horse-riding is here referred to as a 'taint,' something decidedly negative. Aurora is explicitly linked with acting and horse-riding, and so with sexual promiscuity, but not only through her mother. After their marriage, John Mellish's friends refer to Aurora as a "high-bred filly" (144). Mellish also purchases a bay-filly which he names Aurora, after his wife. A filly is a very young female horse, still in need of training. Aurora herself, like the fillies she is linked too, is still untamed.

Yet for all that the text connects Aurora to horses and other questionable interests, the text offers no descriptions of Aurora on a horse. Whereas one of Kate Gaunt's riding excursions is described in eroticized detail, all of Aurora's riding trips happen 'off-stage.' We are only ever given a general description, like that of her riding with her cousin Andrew, or a

description of her riding in a carriage instead of being on a horse herself. Aurora's sexual passion and dominance over the man in her life, although signalled through the use of horses, are not necessarily visible through scenes of riding. Right before she is sent away, she went on a six-hour riding trip with no-one but her groom in attendance. Gravatt asserts that in the mid-Victorian period "ride" was also slang for sexual intercourse. It is therefore likely that she was sent away because of "sexual impropriety during her long afternoon with the groom" (114). This groom is the same one she eventually married, simply because "he had dark-blue eyes, and long eyelashes, and white teeth, and brown hair" (Braddon 352). She does not marry him for love, but because she is sexually attracted to him. Even so, when they return from their long afternoon together, she "sprang lightly to the ground before the groom could dismount to assist her" (22). Even her groom, who was specifically hired to help her with her horses and who she is sleeping with, is not permitted nor needed to help her dismount her horse.

### **Sexual Dominance**

There is one more way in which Aurora and Kate are similar. Kate expresses a private wish to horsewhip a man who is getting on her nerves. Aurora actually follows through with the threat. When she sees Softy the stable hand kick her lame dog she:

sprang upon him like a beautiful tigress, and catching the collar of his fustian jacket in her slight hands, rooted him to the spot upon which he stood. The grasp of those slender hands, convulsed by passion, was not to be easily shaken off; and Steve Hargraves, taken completely off his guard, stared aghast at his assailant. Taller than the stable-man by a foot and a half, she towered above him, her cheeks white with rage, her eyes flashing fury, her hat fallen off, and her black hair tumbling about her shoulders, sublime in her passion. (Braddon 138)

Gravatt links the act of whipping a man to aggressive sexuality and says that "when Aurora brandishes the horsewhip, she exerts female sexual dominance and power" (115). Gravatt also reads this scene as Aurora symbolically whipping John Mellish. She asserts that there are many similarities within the narrative between the Softy and John Mellish. Steve Hargraves nickname, Softy, denotes sexual incompetency, maybe even impotence. This scene is therefore Aurora symbolically whipping her husband because of her frustration over his being unable to sexually satisfy her (120). This reading makes sense in terms of the narrative. When John sees what his wife is doing he "turned white with horror" (Braddon 139). If Aurora and

John's relationship is indeed a masochistic one it would be more reasonable that he would be aroused or impressed, as the other people in the scene are, rather than horrified. However, if this scene is indeed a symbolic chastising of a sexually incompetent husband it would seem less strange that he is not pleased with his wife's behaviour.

Despite John's unhappiness about his wife's actions, the narrative depicts it in positive terms. Aurora, as the dominant woman, is "sublime in her passion" and a "beautiful fury" (138-139). This is also a heavily eroticized dominant woman. Her "tangled hair had fallen to her waste" (138) and is tumbling down her back and her cheeks are flushed. It has already been mentioned that the Victorians saw blushing as a sign of sexual arousal (Heller, "Ambivalence about the Body" 97) and that loose hair was a sign of sex, because it would normally only be unrestrained in the bedroom (Ofek 74). This scene combines elements that would represent sex and the bedroom with violence, a phallic object used to beat a man, and a woman towering over a man who she restrains with one hand. The way the scene portrays Aurora as dominant over the Softy signals her sexual aggression and dominance. If the Softy can indeed be read as a symbolic replacement for John then it can be inferred that she is sexually dominant over him as well. We are told that John is "cruelly henpecked" yet "[h]e submits to the pretty tyrant with a quiet smile of resignation" (Braddon 142-143). Aurora is the dominant one in their marriage and according to Gravatt "John's joking remark to Aurora about 'whether solemn Talbot beats [Lucy] in the silence of the matrimonial chamber,' underscores his opinion that whoever dominates the marriage, undoubtedly does so in the conjugal bed." Since it is undoubtedly Aurora who dominates in their marriage it is also undoubtedly Aurora who dominates in the bedroom (119), an assumption strengthened by the evidence of sexual dominance found in the whipping scene.

However, this display of dominance and aggression later proves nearly fatal to Aurora. When Conyers is murdered, Aurora is the only suspect. Women in general were not quickly suspected of crime, because the Victorians considered "female villainy" to be "by definition unsexing" (Allen 407). A normative Victorian woman would not be able to commit a crime, and female criminals were considered something less than female, indeed unsexed. However, the text has already established Aurora as not quite a normative woman. She is a 'fast' woman with a suspect passion for horses and she is therefore suspect herself. Furthermore, Gravatt mentions that she has a "reputation as a woman capable of inflicting physical pain on a man" (120). So while John has no apparent difficulties with Aurora's dominance and aggression and instead "followed his mistress around like some big slave, who only lived to do her

bidding” (Braddon 129) some people are instead threatened by her. Her former fiancé, Talbot Bulstrode, is one of those people. While he ultimately recognizes that he is in love with Aurora, he admits this against his better judgment. He does not think that she would make a fit wife or mother and is both attracted to and repulsed by her. When he first sees her he “could not help fancying that the beauty of this woman was like the strength of that alcoholic preparation: barbarous, intoxicating, dangerous, and maddening” (33). He compares her to a cup of bang, Indian liquor, and calls her “everything that is beautiful and strange, and wicked and unwomanly, and bewitching” (47). He figures her as an unwomanly enchantress, a stereotypical femme fatale, and the demon to the Victorian ideal of the angel. Of course, it later comes to light that she is innocent of all the charges held against her and she is indeed an angel who merely looks like a demon to Talbot, because with her black hair and flashing eyes she does not resemble the image of the Victorian ideal (Gravatt 117).

Talbot’s constant mentions of Aurora’s unwomanly behaviour, Gravatt remarks, suggest that he is threatened by her dominant and masculine behaviour, especially her interest in horses. John, on the other hand, asserts that he loves the woman who “looks at you with two flashes of lightning, and rides like young Challoner” (Braddon 91). Challoner was a male jockey who rode in women’s clothing. Rather than being threatened by her interest in horses and masculine behaviour, this seems to suggest that John is attracted to her, not in spite of, but because of her dominance (Gravatt 118). He certainly is not alarmed by her dominance in their relationship, because “[h]e loved her, and he laid himself down to be trampled upon by her gracious feet” (Braddon 143). Talbot, who breaks off their engagement because Aurora will not tell him her secret, rejects her because she will not allow him to be dominant over her. John, however, simply accepts the fact that his wife wants to be in control and trusts her explicitly. It is for this reason that John and Aurora are allowed a happy marriage with Aurora in the dominant role, whereas Talbot and Lucy’s marriage is a happy one because Talbot occupies the dominant position.

### **Female Domestication**

To the Victorians a woman’s chief goal in life was to become a wife and subsequently a mother. This dependence on a man was thought to be natural and was a component of respectable femininity (Gordon & Nair 126). Yet even though every respectable woman felt the need to get married, Mason asserts that marriage was not an advantageous situation for most women:



One claim about English marriages made with astonishing frequency by foreign observers is that English wives, by comparison with their continental peers, lost freedom when they married. They had more before marriage, and less afterwards. ... [W]ives were much more subordinate: according to some without coldness in the relationship, but, according to others, to an extent as made the wife a stranger and slave. (116)

Granted, these observations were made by foreigners and it is entirely possible that they simply misinterpreted the inner workings of the English household, but Mason observes that native Englishmen who had lived abroad for some time supported these claims (116). One would certainly expect these observations to hold true for Aurora, at least to some degree. In her father's house she has been allowed to do whatever she pleases and it would be only natural to lose some of that girlish freedom now that she is a married woman with a household to run, but not to the degree of becoming a slave in her own house. However, Lucy's expectations of what she will find at Mellish Park seem to support the idea that wives were generally not very highly regarded within a household:

Poor Lucy had expected to find Aurora held as something better than the dogs, and a little higher than the horses, in that Yorkshire household; and was considerably surprised to find her dark-eyed cousin a despotic and capricious sovereign, reigning with undisputed sway over every creature, biped or quadruped, upon the estate. (Braddon 141)

Lucy is very much surprised to find that Aurora has such a dominant influence over the household, strongly suggesting that Mason's view is correct and that it is not normal, even for a wife who is expected to run the domestic side of a marriage, to have such a big influence and be so dominant in a marriage. Lucy's own marriage to Talbot is certainly nothing like this. She worships her husband and does exactly what he expects her to do:

Perhaps, if stern truth must be told, Lucy's chief charm in the captain's eyes lay in that reverence for himself which she so *naïvely* betrayed. He accepted her worship with a quiet, unconscious serenity, and thought her the most sensible of women. (Braddon 162)

Talbot is happy in his marriage to Lucy precisely because she is not like Aurora. Lucy is feminine and submissive, rather than masculine and dominant. Talbot is once again secure in his role as the dominant party, something which he was denied in his relationship with

Aurora. Lucy does not have strong passionate feelings, is scared of horses, and lets him dictate her every move.

That is, at least, how the other characters in the novel perceive her. Lucy is childlike, naïve, and wholly innocent:

Purity and goodness had watched over her and hemmed her in from her cradle. She had never seen unseemly sights, or heard unseemly sounds. She was as ignorant as a baby of all the vices and horrors of this big world. She was lady-like, accomplished, well-informed. (Braddon 48).

Lucy's childishness is made explicit by referring to her as a baby. This also makes her an even better representation of the Victorian ideal. Beller explains that child-like women were fetishized in Victorian culture, because childishness also represented the sexual purity and innocence of the child. By being childlike they are perceived as less of a sexual challenge to the male, as well as more easily submissive (116-117). Talbot is then attracted to Lucy, because she poses less of sexual challenge than Aurora. She is more easily dominated. However, Lucy is also consistently perceived as more dull than her cousin, precisely because she represent the Victorian ideal of childlike innocence: "There are so many Lucy's but so few Aurora's" (Braddon 48). Beller argues that this "adult female childishness" is not a natural expression of female identity: "A woman suffering under cultural pressure to remain a child must live in a state of arrested development, and consequently, be forever vulnerable" (119).

Lyn Pykett also presents evidence from the 1860s that reveal there was a genuine fear that femininity as an ideal, as a fixed category, simply did not exist. Femininity was a role to be acted in order to gain cultural acceptance (71). It is certainly true that Lucy's childlike innocence and naive behaviour are not a direct consequence of her deeper nature, but rather of nurture. While Aurora has had a relatively carefree childhood and has grown up to be her own person, Lucy "was exactly the sort of woman to make a good wife. She had been educated to that end by a careful mother" (Braddon 48). Lucy has been moulded into the Victorian feminine ideal by education, not by a natural inclination. Despite what the other characters seem to think, Lucy is anything but passionless. Her outward appearance as passionless is a consequence of repression (Curtis 87). When Aurora is engaged to Talbot, while Lucy is in love with him as well, she actively conceals and represses her agonies. However, she does feel them passionately:

Mrs Alexander's daughter had been far too well educated to betray one emotion of her heart, and she bore her girlish agonies, and concealed her hourly tortures, with the quiet patience common to these simple womanly martyrs. (Braddon 55-56)

Again, her education is blamed for her apparent inability, or unwillingness, to betray her emotions.

Although Aurora is happy with Talbot, she does not really love him but "she admired and esteemed him; she was proud of him" (76). She also shares these sentiments with Talbot, keeping nothing hidden from him but that one secret of her past. Lucy, on the other hand, "bore her cross meekly, this pale Elaine of modern days; and she never told Talbot Bulstrode that she had gone mad and loved him, and was fain to die" (77). Lucy feels much more strongly than her cousin, but is much less able to express her feelings, causing her to lose the man she loves to her cousin, who does not truly love her. The text itself criticizes this repression of feeling displayed by the well-educated women of the world:

How hard it is upon such women as these that they feel so much and yet display so little feeling! The dark-eyed, impetuous creatures, who speak out fearlessly, and tell you that they love or hate you – flinging arms round your neck or throwing the carving-knife at you, as the case may be – get full value for all their emotion; but these gentle creatures love, and make no sign. ... They are always at a disadvantage. Their inner life may be a tragedy, all blood and tears, while their outer existence is some dull domestic drama of every-day life. The only outward sign Lucy Floyd gave of the condition of her heart was that one tremulous, half-whispered affirmative; and yet what a tempest of emotion was going forward within! The muslin folds of her dress rose and fell with the surging billows; but, for the very life of her, she could have uttered no better response to Talbot's pleading. (160)

Concealment of emotions "feeds on their damask cheeks," literally making these gentle creatures ill (160). They are compared to stone statues: beautiful, but unnatural. The only sign of emotion Lucy Floyd gives is her heaving bosom, and that is meant to express all the "blood and tears" that are going on inside of her. The text argues that Lucy is "always at a disadvantage." Lucy's way of expressing herself is not genuine, because her outward emotions do not match up with what she actually feels, whereas "[t]he dark-eyed, impetuous creatures (...) get full value for their emotions" (160). Essentially, Lucy is playing a role. Her representation of femininity is a product of her education, not her inner nature. She is just as passionate as Aurora, feels just as aggressively as her cousin, but is afraid of showing these

emotions for fear of society's repercussions. Aurora's masculinity and dominant sexuality are represented as a much more genuine and positive expression of female identity. Lucy, for all that she represents the Victorian ideal, is the one who in actual fact exhibits unnatural behaviour.

Lucy, always timid and submissive outwardly, has no chance of ever expressing her true feelings. The one instance where she does, she is expressing anger on behalf of her cousin, anger that Talbot dares suggest that Aurora has done something untoward:

[F]or the first time in his life, Mr Bulstrode saw an angry light kindled in his wife's blue eyes. 'Why should you prevent my seeing Aurora?' Lucy asked; 'she is the best and dearest girl in the world. Why shouldn't I see her?' Talbot Bulstrode stared in blank amazement at his mutinous wife. (349)

Bulstrode instantly regards her as mutinous, because she is going against his authority for the first time in her life. It is telling that the first time Lucy displays assertive behaviour, she does so in order to assert that Aurora's behaviour has not been wrong. Lucy looks up to Aurora and does not regard her passionate behaviour as transgressive at all. Aurora, we are told, is "the best and dearest girl in the world" (349). Aurora, therefore, represents the positive feminine identity in this novel, for all her masculine and non-normative behaviour, too such an extent that even a woman who can never be like her will throw off the yoke of her education for a moment in order to stand up for her.

### **Transgression and Punishment**

Aurora's first marriage with James Conyers is the source of all the misfortune that later befalls her. Marrying someone of such a lower social standing goes against Victorian morality, making this her first transgression (Gravatt 113). Garrison points out that because Aurora admits that she "cannot plead the excuse which some women urge for their madness" (Braddon 352) it is unlikely that she marries Conyers because she has become pregnant. She instead marries him because of her strong sexual desire for him and his handsome features. The fact that no child results from this union, which lasts almost a year, suggests that Aurora has used some form of contraception (Garrison 149). This seems to tie in with Mason's assertion that the 1860s was the period in which people first started using birth control on a regular basis (45). Also, even in her marriage to Conyers, Aurora is the dominant partner. She is referred to as "more than a match for James" (Braddon 385) and a "tiger-cat, whose claws have left a mark upon me" (208). Aurora has apparently used physical violence against

Conyers and left a scar upon his forehead. Furthermore, having born Conyers' brutality towards her throughout their marriage, it is also for sexual reasons that she leaves him again:

‘I discovered that I had been wronged, deceived, and outraged by a wretch who laughed at my ignorant confidence in him. ... Within half an hour of obtaining this knowledge I acted upon it.’ (354)

She tolerates his physical abuse, fights back even, but the minute she discovers that he has been sexually unfaithful to her she leaves him. It seems clear that Aurora's attraction and involvement with the man was entirely based upon sexual passion.

This in itself is a transgression against the Victorian moral code which sees women as sexually passive. Coupled with her physical aggression and the fact that she had married someone so much her social inferior, it would have made her entirely unfit as a wife. Even if her first husband had indeed been dead, she would have been considered a fallen woman by many. This is why Edwards suggests that Aurora could have been made more acceptable to “squeamish readers” if she had felt so guilty and ashamed after her first marriage as to have felt no desire for a second marriage. Aurora, however, feels no such thing (xvi). It is only the knowledge that her first husband is still alive which keeps her from seeking a second engagement. The moment she thinks that she is free to marry again she happily accepts Talbot's proposal. John, too, does not judge her for her first marriage when he learns of her secret. He does not cast her aside, but instead marries her again, making her his lawful wife.

All of the characters as well as the narrator assert on multiple occasions that her “worst sin had been to mistake a bad man for a good one” (Braddon 327) and that “she was only a schoolgirl when this certificate was first written: an innocent child; ready to believe in any lies told her by a villain” (335). Everyone forgives Aurora for the mistake she had made when she had been only seventeen, even Talbot, once he finally learns the nature of her secret. Aurora, then, is not punished for her sexual transgression with Conyers, nor for her sexually dominant position in her relationship with John Mellish. Instead, as Tromp points out, she is “returned to the center of the domestic space” (106). She regains her second husband and keeps the love and respect of her cousin and her husband. In the final pages of the story, conveniently after all her troubles are over (once again suggesting birth control (Edwards xxi)), she is even rewarded with a “black-eyed child – a boy” (Braddon 458), suggesting, according to Fantina, that Aurora's genes are as dominant as her personality (*Daring Works* 145).

## Conclusion

Mary Elizabeth Braddon does indeed prove that the “conflation of femininity/passivity” (Gravatt 111) is unnatural throughout *Aurora Floyd*. Aurora is a passionate, dominant, and at times physically aggressive woman who says what she thinks and acts on her feelings. This seemingly goes against every Victorian idea of acceptable femininity. Yet the novel goes some way to suggest that it is in fact Lucy, dull and impassionate little Lucy, the perfect representation of everything mid-Victorian culture praised in a woman, who represents unnatural femininity. Lucy is forced to hide and repress her actual feelings, putting on a performance of femininity that she has been taught to play since childhood. This means that it is not Aurora, who is expressively linked to stage through her mother’s heritage, but Lucy who is an actress and therefore representative of suspect femininity. Aurora is dominant over every man in her life: her father grants her every wish, Talbot cannot help but love her against his better judgment, and John loves her so much that he would do anything she asked of him. John, the only one who accepts Aurora, her masculine behaviour, and sexual dominance unconditionally, is rewarded with a happy marriage with his dominant wife, while Talbot, although happily married to Lucy, leads a much duller life with his much less expressive wife. Despite her sexual transgression with Conyers, Aurora is posited as the ideal to live up to. It is Aurora and her dominant behaviour that is portrayed as positive throughout the entire novel, while Lucy is almost always referred to as “poor Lucy.” The inversion of the normative heterosexual power relations in Aurora and John’s marriage leads to happiness and domesticity. Aurora might not represent the Victorian ideal, but held up next to Lucy it becomes clear that the Victorian feminine ideal is so much less interesting. After all, “[t]here are so many Lucy’s but so few Aurora’s” (Braddon 48).

#### Chapter Four: *The Moonstone*

This chapter will deal with Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868). The story is told through multiple first person narrations, only one of which is written by a woman. As such, this chapter will focus mainly on the sexuality of the two most important female characters, Rachel Verinder and Rosanna Spearman. Of these two characters, Rosanna is the only one who gets to tell a piece of her own story in the form of a posthumous letter. Rosanna is also the most obviously subversive character, Rachel less so.

*The Moonstone* is a novel that has not been the subject of many scholarly works on gender and where it has, the focus has been on masculinity rather than femininity. This is perhaps so because issues of femininity are less present in the novel, making it a less obvious and more difficult choice. Nevertheless, this chapter will give an overview of those issues that are present in the novel, although it may be slightly shorter than other chapters in this thesis.

#### **Wilkie Collins and *The Moonstone***

Wilkie Collins was born on January 8, 1824 as the eldest son of William Collins and Harriet Collins née Geddes. He was briefly apprenticed as a tea importer but he would ultimately study law at the behest of his father. His first novel, *Antonina, or the Fall of Rome*, was published in 1850. In 1851, Collins met Dickens and the two would remain lifelong friends. At times they would critique each other's work. In 1859 Collins began living with a woman called Caroline Graves and her daughter Harriet. Although they never married, they would live together for the rest of their lives. Additionally, Collins also began seeing a woman called Martha Rudd. They, too, never married but remained together until Collins died in 1889 at the age of 82. Martha bore him three children, but only Caroline was buried with Collins when she died in 1895. Collins reached the height of his popularity when *The Woman in White* was serialized in *All the Year Round* in 1860. It is still his most famous novel today (Taylor xiii-xix).

*The Moonstone* was first serialized in *All the Year Round* in 1868. It tells the story of the moonstone, a large Indian jewel of religious significance to the Hindus of the region. It gets stolen by Rachel's uncle, who murders two people to get the stone. After he dies he bequeaths the stone to Rachel who is to receive it on her eighteenth birthday. Franklin Blake, her cousin, takes the stone with him to Rachel's birthday party. The first part of the story is narrated by the house-steward Gabriel Betteredge. He meets Franklin Blake before the ladies of the house come home and Blake reveals the diamond to him. After Blake has told

Betteredge that he suspects he was being followed by several Indians, Betteredge suggests placing the diamond in a bank vault until the party. Blake does so and picks up the diamond again on the morning of the birthday party. During the party the Indians, disguised as jugglers, visit the house, but they leave again without an incident occurring.

However, the next day it is revealed that the diamond is missing. Rachel locks herself in her room and refuses to talk to anyone. Blake summons the police. The first provincial officers on the scene do not make as much progress as hoped. Sergeant Cuff from the newly established London Detective Force is called in. He quickly reveals that the perpetrator has brushed against a newly painted door and must have gotten paint on his or her nightshirt. Betteredge and Sergeant Cuff thus proceed to try and find a nightgown with paint on it. Sergeant Cuff suspects that Rachel and Rosanna Spearman, a housemaid who used to be a thief, are in cahoots and that Rachel has stolen her own diamond to pay some private debts. However, before they can either confirm their suspicions or confront Rosanna, she commits suicide by throwing herself into the Shivering Sands, a patch of quicksand near the house. Unable to solve the investigation, Sergeant Cuff leaves for London. Rachel, who seems to be furious with Franklin Blake for calling the police, departs for London soon after.

In London, the narrative is taken up by Miss Clack, an impoverished spinster relative of Rachel. She learns that Lady Verinder, Rachel's mother, is dying from a previously undiagnosed heart disease. She is a witness to the signing of Lady Verinder's will, which states that Rachel's future husband shall be unable to get any large sums of money from her inherited estate. A short while later she is a witness to Godfrey Ablewhite, another cousin of Rachel's who was courting her, asking for Rachel's hand in marriage. Rachel accepts him. However, the engagement is quickly called off by mutual consent.

The next part of the narrative is contributed by Lady Verinder's attorney, Mr Bruff, who discovers that Ablewhite only wanted to marry Rachel for her money. Upon learning this, Rachel breaks off the engagement.

The third narrative is contributed by Franklin Blake himself. He orchestrates a meeting between him and Rachel, where he learns that Rachel believes that he stole the diamond. Rachel tells him that she saw him take the diamond with her own eyes. Dejected, Blake leaves for Yorkshire, back to the scene of the crime, to find out if he can solve the mystery. Through a letter that Rosanna Spearman had concealed in the Shivering Sands they learn that she had seen the paint streak on Blake's nightgown in the morning. Rosanna was in love with Blake and, not wanting him to be discovered, had concealed his nightgown. Later on, Blake learns,



with the help of the district doctor Ezra Jennings, that another doctor had given him opium without his knowledge on the night of the birthday party. Jennings proposes the theory that Blake took the diamond in an opium fuelled haze. In the fourth narrative, taken from Jennings' diary, they conduct an experiment to test this theory. When the experiment works, it is proven that Blake was the unknowing thief of the moonstone.

However, the diamond is still in London and Blake has no idea how it got there, as the diamond had not been in his room in the morning. The thief is eventually revealed to be Godfrey Ablewhite. Blake had taken the diamond and Ablewhite, who slept in the room next to him, had seen him do it. Ablewhite lived a double life and had severe money troubles, so he took the diamond from Blake's room and brought it to London. He was murdered by the Indians, who returned the moonstone to India. Franklin Blake, having proven his innocence, marries Rachel and at the end of the story they are expecting their first child.

### **The Flaw in the Diamond**

The moonstone is described as a yellowish diamond with "a defect, in the shape of a flaw, in the very heart of the stone" (Collins 42). Incidentally, this is also an apt description for some of the characters appearing in the novel: good women, but with a flaw. Collins' portrayal of women, specifically that of disabled women, is especially sympathetic for a male Victorian novelist (Heller, *Dead Secrets* 3). Martha Stoddard Holmes asserts that a physically disabled female character in a Victorian novel was generally treated as being removed from the normative "sexual economy" (61). They were never destined for marriage or a lover. Disabled women were never main characters and their only function in the plot was:

to generate emotion and moral development in others by being innocent and saintly, surprisingly cheerful, justifiably melancholy, tragically frustrated from achieving her goals as woman, suicidal or dead – or *simply by being disabled*, without any of these other conditions. (61)

Holmes points out that there were some disabled characters to be found who became wives and mothers. However, these characters achieved their "womanly goals" not by being passionate and sexual, but specifically by being passionless and asexual. They were never sexualized or described as being sexual and they become mothers through adoption rather than reproduction (61). This in turn leads to these characters being unable to fit into the Victorian binary construction of good versus bad. They are disqualified from becoming wives and mothers, the chief aim of every Victorian woman, so they do not fit the stereotype of the

domestic angel. However, because they are constructed as asexual they cannot fit the category of the fallen woman or the prostitute either (86). Physically disabled characters are thus in an odd category all of their own where they are consigned to celibacy and childishness or “hysterical frustration” (61).

Wilkie Collins’ characters often do not conform to this template for disabled characters. Holmes points out that he does engage in the same type of sentimentalizing behaviour by pitying his deformed characters and he also pathologizes disabled sexuality. However, his disabled characters are not consigned to the margins of the plot and they are allowed to enter the domestic realm through marriage and motherhood without much comment (61). Although Rosanna is denied this entry in *The Moonstone* it is present in some of his other novels. In his novel *Hide and Seek* (1854) the main character, Madonna, is a deaf mute. While her plans of marriage are eventually thwarted, this is because of a discovery of incest and not because of her disabilities. In *Poor Miss Finch* (1872) the main character is blind and at the end of the novel she gets married and starts a family. Her husband is also disabled, his skin having turned blue from swallowing silver as a cure for epilepsy.

Holmes also asserts that the structure of *The Moonstone* is that of the twin courtship plot. Rosanna, the deformed and socially disadvantaged servant, is paired with Rachel, the beautiful heiress, as both women love the same man (70). While Rachel eventually wins his love and marries him, she does not narrate any part of the story and never gets to speak for herself. It is Rosanna who gets to tell her own story through the letter found after her suicide. Reading this letter forces Franklin Blake to confront Rosanna’s feelings for him. These feelings are not just romantic, but also sexual in nature. Her reaction when she first sees Franklin, before having spoken a word to him, was that she “turned of a beautiful red, which I had never seen in [her] before; she brightened all over with a kind of speechless and breathless surprise” (Collins 32). Her flushing and breathlessness indicate sexual arousal and since she does not know who Franklin is at this point it is clear that she is reacting purely to his physical appearance. Later, when Franklin reads her suicide note, he comes to resent her for being fiercely jealous of Rachel. Rosanna writes that when she first found the smear of paint on his nightgown, which was red, she suspected him of having slept with Rachel and that she hated Rachel for this. Presumably because she would have liked to have been in Rachel’s place. At that point Franklin stops reading her letter and passes it to Betteredge.

Franklin is not only upset with Rosanna for slandering Rachel, but also for loving him. Many characters throughout the novel state that Rosanna’s love for Franklin is

transgressive not just because she is physically disabled, but also because she is socially beneath him:

You have heard of beautiful young ladies falling in love at first sight and have thought it natural enough. But a housemaid out of a reformatory, with a plain face and a deformed shoulder, falling in love, at first sight, with a gentleman who comes on a visit to her mistress's house, match me that, in the way of an absurdity, out of any story-book in Christendom, if you can! (49-50)

Betteredge, who speaks these words, does not only seem to consider it improper for Rosanna to fall in love with Franklin, he considers it an impossibility, something that just does not happen in real life. However, it is established throughout the story that Betteredge's views are somewhat old-fashioned. Immediately after speaking these words he bursts out laughing and his daughter Penelope chastises him for it. While she also considers Rosanna's feelings to be improper, she feels this is more down to their different stations in life and at least acknowledges the possibility of Rosanna having feelings for Blake (138). Betteredge feels ashamed of himself after his daughter's rebuke and it seems that at least on the subject of a disabled woman's sexuality he has changed his views. When Franklin thrusts Rosanna's letter away from him in disgust, Betteredge states that "[i]t's natural, sir, in *you*! And, God help us all! [I]t's no less natural in *her*" (295).

Rosanna wrote the letter while not yet knowing if Franklin was going to reject her. If he does, she plans to kill herself:

Yes. If I miss my next opportunity – if you are as cruel as ever, and if I feel it again as I have felt it already – good-bye to the world which has grudged me the happiness it gives to others. Good-bye to life, which nothing but a little kindness from *you* can ever make pleasurable to me again. (306)

The chief aim of a woman's life was to become a wife and mother (Pykett 57). Although Martha Stoddard Holmes has claimed that disabled women were practically barred from achieving these goals (61) it is not inconceivable that they would still long to achieve them. Yet this does not seem to be the case for Rosanna. There are no indications that she wants to become a mother and live an ordinary domestic life. "The happiness it gives to others" is most likely being loved by Franklin, in which case the "other" would be Rachel, of whom she is fiercely jealous. Rosanna does not desire marriage or a child, all she wants is "a little kindness" from Franklin, to make her life "pleasurable." She even imagines that when he reads her letter after she is gone he will finally speak kindly of her, the same way she speaks

of Rachel. If that happens “I believe my ghost will hear it, and tremble with the pleasure of it” (Collins 306). Rosanna’s desire for Franklin Blake is not a desire for domesticity, but a desire for pleasure and happiness.

Unfortunately for Rosanna, Franklin does not speak kindly of her after he reads the letter. In fact, he refuses to finish reading it. More so, in a footnote he continues to call her a “poor creature” and asserts that he never noticed her (302). As in life, when he refused to hear her speak, he does not notice her in death, when he refuses to read her letter. It is therefore fitting that he is forced to confront her sexuality when he retrieves the letter and the nightgown from their hiding place. Rosanna had hidden them both in a sealed teapot that she submerged into the Shivering Sands. Tamar Heller claims that the Sands are a female sexual symbol, situated as they are between “two spits of rock and deriving its name from its parody of female orgasm” (Heller, *Dead Secrets* 149). Franklin is made to penetrate the Sands with a stick and when the stick strikes the teapot he is “throbbing with excitement from head to foot” (Collins 287). This eroticized description of the discovery of the pot makes the sexual symbolism of the Sands quite clear. Moreover, Heller points out that this erotic encounter, this coupling of male and female, leads to two more erotic discoveries: a stained nightgown, and Rosanna’s account of her desire for Franklin (*Dead Secrets* 150). Rosanna’s desire then, is transgressive not just because it defies class boundaries, not just because she is disabled and should rightfully be chaste and innocent, but also because it is a purely sexual desire.

However, Rosanna is not the only flawed diamond the narrative has to offer. Her friend, Lucy Yolland, who everyone calls Limping Lucy, is another female transgressive disabled character. She is described by Betteredge as having “some pleasing qualities in the eye of a man. A dark, keen, clever face, and a nice clear voice, and a beautiful brown head of hair counted among her merits. A crutch appeared in the list of her misfortunes. And a temper reckoned high in the sum total of her defect” (Collins 172). Franklin, on the other hand, describes her as wild and haggard, but concurs that she has beautiful hair (282). Hair had become an important symbol of sexuality to Victorian sensation novelists (Ofek 74), even though Lucy’s brown hair is, according to Margaret Oliphant, “in a strictly subordinate position” (269). Still, the fact that it is described explicitly as beautiful reveals that Lucy is considered attractive despite her disability.

According to Holmes and Mossman, physical disability had become a shorthand used by Victorian novelists to denote immorality (498). Of course, in Rosanna’s case the immorality was related to her past as a thief. In Lucy’s case, however, the immorality

signalled by her deformity might be something else entirely. Betteredge, upon meeting her after Rosanna's suicide, notices her temper, but he notes specifically that it is aimed at him because he is a man: "It was my misfortune to be a man – and Limping Lucy enjoyed disappointing me" (Collins 175). Lucy herself exclaims that if Rosanna had only "thought of the men as I think, she might have been living now!" (173). She seems to suggest that she would never be sexually or romantically attracted to a man, as this is what led to Rosanna's downfall. Yet she speaks differently of Rosanna:

‘I loved her,’ the girls said softly. ... ‘She was an angel. She might have been happy with me. I had a plan for our going to London together like sisters, and living by our needles. That man came here and spoilt it all.’ (172)

Later, when she confronts Franklin about his cruelty towards Rosanna, she speaks angrily except when she speaks of Rosanna: "'Oh, my poor dear!' she said, in the first soft tones which had fallen from her, in my hearing. 'Oh, my lost darling! what could you see in this man?'" (283). Franklin says that the only explanation he could think of for her behaviour is that she had gone mad. However, Franklin is notoriously unreliable when it comes to judging any situation in which Rosanna is involved. This remark is therefore meant to illustrate that his analysis is wrong. Every reader should be able to see that she is angry with him because she has lost a loved one. Tamar Heller states that Lucy's feelings for Rosanna are erotic and it certainly true that she seems to reject heterosexuality in her hatred of men (*Dead Secrets* 148). Lucy's story, then, might be similar to that of Mercy and Kate outline in chapter two. Same-sex desire between women was unacknowledged virtually everywhere (Fantina *Daring Works* 102), but Lucy's deformity might signal this kind of immorality that perceptive readers could have picked up on nevertheless.

### **Sensational Appearances**

Jessica Cox argues quite convincingly that Wilkie Collins was familiar with the work of Lavatar on physiognomy, the pseudoscience that purports to be able to tell a person's character from their physical appearance, and used this in the descriptions of his fictional characters (110-111). This is of interest when it comes to analysing the one female character in the novel who never gets to speak for herself. Not a lot is known about Rachel, except that she is frequently described as stubborn and not like other girls (Collins 55-56). Rachel's physical appearance is described by Betteredge as:

[S]mall and slim, but all in fine proportion from top to toe. ... Her hair was the blackest I ever saw. Her eyes matched her hair. Her nose was not quite large enough, I admit. Her mouth and chin were (to quote Mr Franklin) morsels for the gods; and her complexion (on the same undeniable authority) was as warm as the sun itself, with this great advantage over the sun, that it was always in nice order to look at. Add to the foregoing that she carried her head as upright as a dart, in a dashing, spirited, thoroughbred way – that she had a clear voice, with a ring of the right metal in it, and a smile that began very prettily in her eyes before it got to her lips. (55)

It is later also mentioned that she has quite a dark complexion (142). Now, according to physiognomy the perfect woman would have blue eyes, which are a sign of effeminacy and submissiveness, and pale skin, a sign of dreaminess (Cox 111). Rachel, instead, has black hair, suggesting intense feelings, and black eyes, a sign of a firm and courageous mind (112). On top of that she has a dark rather than a pale complexion. Rachel, then, is the exact opposite of what a Victorian angel of the house should look like.

That Rachel is indeed strong-willed and independent is made clear by Mr Bruff who states that Rachel likes to think problems over in her own head, rather than sharing them with someone, something which he sees as a masculine quality (254). Zieger describes Rachel's love for Blake as "self-destructive", an illness akin to hysteria (212) and Heller suggests that her hysterical outbursts are not just a result of keeping Franklin's secret, but of Rachel's "sexual frustration" over their separation (*Dead Secrets* 153). Zieger also mentions that female sexuality is commonly linked to otherness and foreigners (209), and Rachel's dark complexion, eyes, and hair certainly link her to the Indians who are after her diamond. Heller also links Rachel's need for independence to inherent female transgressions. The stained nightgown found in the moonstone was based on a real life murder case, the Road Hill murder. In that murder case a nightgown stained with blood played an important part. The sister of the victim eventually confessed to the crime and, according to Heller, her father claimed that "his daughter's criminality stemmed from her wish 'to be independent,' a claim paralleling men's uneasiness about Rachel's 'defect' of 'self-dependence' in *The Moonstone*" (*Dead Secrets* 148). In fact, the real murderess had, in her wish for independence, tried to run away from home disguised as a boy and was therefore considered unsexed (Hartman 110). Of course, the Victorians considered female criminals to be unsexed by definition (Allen 407), so the fact that Rachel was for a long time the main suspect in the diamond's disappearance is also significant. Rachel does not get to tell her own story and, in fact, very little is told about

her feelings because all of the characters impose their own viewpoints onto her actions. However, all of the information readers do get about her makes it clear that she does not conform to the standard ideal of Victorian femininity and she most definitely does have ideas and a sexuality of her own.

### **Conclusion**

While Collins' novel is less explicit in voicing its female character's sexuality it is nevertheless interesting, particularly in its portrayal of the sexuality of its disabled characters. Rosanna Spearman is never demonized for her sexual feelings towards Franklin Blake, as was the norm in most Victorian fiction at the time. Betteredge first expresses the opinion that it is completely impossible for Rosanna to like Franklin, but he is quickly chastised by his daughter. He, together with Limping Lucy, in turn chastises Franklin Blake for his cruelty towards Rosanna. Franklin does not take this rebuke as seriously as Betteredge, but it is made clear that the reader should. Holmes and Mossman point out that "Collins even revised the novel to emphasise the young man's lack of consideration" (499). Limping Lucy, who might be harbouring transgressive lesbian desires towards Rosanna, is also treated with sympathy. Readers are made aware that they are to pity her, not because she is disabled, but because she has lost someone she loved. Whereas Holmes claims that disabled characters are usually pushed to the margins of the plot (61) Rosanna is the one who gets to speak out about her own feelings. She gets to assert her sexuality, while we can only infer some details about Rachel's inner feelings. In a time when disabled women were to be pitied and certainly not to be sexualized, it is remarkable that in *The Moonstone* Rosanna gets to tell her own story, while the beautiful, rich heiress is the shadow figure at the margins of the plot.

### Chapter Five: Cometh Up as a Flower

This chapter will discuss Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867), a novel that caused quite a stir upon publication because of its frank portrayal of female sexuality. The chapter will focus on the two main female characters, Nell Lestrangle and her sister, Dolly Lestrangle. Other female characters in the novel are mentioned only in passing, although they are often also non-conforming in their behaviour. Rhoda Broughton and her novels have been almost entirely forgotten by readers and scholars alike until recent years, unlike Mary Elizabeth Braddon. However, her early novels, including *Cometh Up as a Flower* created the same sensational response as Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*. *Cometh Up as a Flower* even contains a scene that, like *Aurora Floyd*'s whipping scene, has often been singled out by both nineteenth-century critics and contemporary critics as being scandalous because of the behaviour of the female protagonist. Since there is not much scholarly research available about this novel, most of the close reading analyses stem from individual research. However, Basil Meyer's interpretation of the consumptive heroine will be briefly used.

#### **Rhoda Broughton and *Cometh Up as a Flower***

Rhoda Broughton was born in 1840 as the third child of Reverend and Mrs Delves Broughton. She had two older sisters and one younger brother. She was born in Wales, at Segrwyd Hall, near Denbigh. Her family had an ancestral home in Staffordshire, Broughton Hall, where she lived for most of her life. Her father was a learned clergyman and taught her Shakespeare, English literature, and the basics of Latin and Greek. When her father died in 1860 and subsequently her mother in 1863, all of the Broughton women were still unmarried and they lived together in Surbiton. In 1864, one of Rhoda's sisters married and she was invited to live with the newlyweds. In 1865 Rhoda Broughton went on a visit to her uncle-in-law, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, in Ireland. At the time he was editor of the *Dublin University Magazine* and he published her first novel, *Not Wisely but Too Well* as a serial in that magazine. When her sister's husband died in 1878, the two women moved to Oxford together where they lived until 1889. They lived in Richmond from 1890 until 1899, when Rhoda's sister died. She then moved to Headington Hill, near Oxford, where she lived with a cousin until her death in 1920. There is a story that sometime during her life a captain Markham of H.M. ship *Alert* named a mountain in the Arctic 'Mount Rhoda' as a tribute to one of his favourite authors. There are no records of this mountain, so the story is either fictional or the name has since fallen out of use.



Broughton wrote and published novels up until the day she dies. Her final novel, *A Fool in Her Folly*, was published posthumously in 1920 (Jones 210; Wood 190; Black 55-57).

*Cometh Up as a Flower* opens with Nell sitting in a churchyard thinking about where she would like to be buried when she dies. It is in this churchyard several moments later where she meets Major Richard M'Gregor, who she will refer to as Dick throughout the rest of the novel. At home, her father is worried about money, as the family is heavily in debt and he has very little income from his position as a clergyman. Nell's sister, Dolly, is staying with friends. Later, Nell and her father go to a ball thrown by the Coxes, a nouveau rich family who have made their money in the Manchester industry. Here Nell meets Dick for the second time and they strike up a conversation.

The day after the ball, Nell goes into the garden at night, where Dick comes to see her. He makes her promise that she will be his friend after which they are interrupted by her father, who does not approve of Dick spending time alone with his daughter without a proper introduction. However, the two have fallen in love already. When Dolly comes home she quickly figures out what is going on, but she does not approve of the match as neither Nell nor Dick have any money. Her father, too, would like Nell to marry someone of fortune to restore the family's good name to its former glory. A suitor her father thinks acceptable presents himself in the form of Sir Hugh. Nell, however, does not care for him at all. She continues to meet with Dick in secret, while Dolly tries to make Dick jealous by making him think that Nell prefers Sir Hugh. Dolly's schemes all fail however and the two lovers make plans to marry. Before they can carry out their plans Dick's regiment is recalled to Ireland and he must leave Nell, but he promises to write to her.

Months go by and Nell hears nothing from Dick. She fears he has forsaken her for a pretty Irish girl. Meanwhile, the family's finances as well as her father's health have taken a turn for the worse. The doctors tell Nell that should her father's financial worries be eased and he be made happy he might live a few more months. In desperation over her father's health and the fact that she has not heard from Dick in a long time she agrees to marry Sir Hugh on the condition that he will settle her father's debt. Sir Hugh agrees to this and they are married in the winter. Nell's father dies a few days later.

Nell, miserable and completely alone, is now living with Sir Hugh and his mother on his estate. She still does not care for her husband and finds him repulsive. One night, when Sir Hugh and his mother are out, Dick comes to see her. They discover that Dolly had forged a letter from Nell in which she asked Dick not to contact her for a year. When Nell finds out

what Dolly has done, and that she has married Sir Hugh in error, she begs Dick to take her away with him, but he refuses. Nell faints and when she comes to she resolves to try and be a good wife to Sir Hugh.

Dolly, meanwhile, has found herself a rich fiancé. However, Nell threatens to reveal to him that she is a forger and a bad woman. Nell eventually relents and promises not to tell her sister's wealthy groom-to-be. At Sir Hugh's insistence the wedding is held at their estate. During the banquet Nell hears that Dick's regiment was posted to India where he had subsequently died. She once again faints. She tries to make the most of her life with Sir Hugh now that she knows she can never be together with Dick again, but a little over two years after Dolly's wedding she dies of consumption.

### Physically Sensational

Margaret Oliphant, a critic who was vehemently opposed to sensation fiction and heavily criticised *Aurora Floyd*, says of *Cometh Up as a Flower* that it "is not a stupid book. There is a certain amount of interest and some character in it. The young lover is, in his way, a real man ... and so is the middle-aged husband" (265). She goes on to praise the novel for portraying a young woman from her own point of view, as the previous female novelists tended to portray all of their characters as extremely feminine. However, Rhoda Broughton has gone to the other extreme, according to Oliphant, and has "moulded [her] women on the model of men" (265). Oliphant goes on to say that while Nell is not "so disagreeable, so vulgar, so mannish, as at the first beginning she makes herself out to be" (265) she does act quite indecorously when it comes to Dick, meeting him outside late at night whenever he wants and not objecting to being kissed (267). While Oliphant does not think Nell's pleas to Dick to take her away from her husband are disgusting, only "sinful, ruinous" (267), other reviewers disagreed. One reviewer for *The London Review* did not just object to this adulterous plea, but also to the descriptions of physical desire found in the text:

The unmaidenly manner in which the heroine constantly dwells upon her lover's physical charm is not pleasant; and her conduct after she has married another man, with whom she can find no fault except that he is too fond of her, in entreating that lover to elope with her, is simply abominable. (qtd. in "Appendix B" Gilbert 339)

In fact, for many reviewers it was this description of physical desire and sexuality that repulsed them. Geraldine Jewsbury, in a review for *Athenaeum*, insisted that the novel had to have been written by a man, because no woman could so misrepresent a woman's feelings.

She was particularly disgusted by what she calls “slang and sensuality” (qtd. in “Appendix B” Gilbert 339). Tamar Heller explains that “Victorians linked women’s use of slang to sexual immorality” (“Rhoda Broughton” 283). So what Jewsbury mostly saw as problematic was the candid portrayal of a young woman’s sexuality, something that was not considered a suitable subject for writing about in novels. Monica Fryckstedt says that although Jewsbury condemned Broughton’s novels, she was positive about the writing of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, because her novels were less candid, even though they did contain murder and other crimes (23). It seems that it was a bigger crime to write about a woman’s sexuality than it was to write about actual crime.

It is certainly true, as these critics pointed out, that the novel contains a myriad of descriptions and allusions to physical attraction. Garrison points to a passage in which Dick comments on the attractiveness of Nell’s mouth, upon which a shiver ran down her body. He points out that her reaction is purely physical, and she feels heat at that, suggesting that it is a pleasurable sensation and slightly erotic (90). Nell is certainly aware of Dick’s physical beauty. On multiple occasions she refers to him as her Viking, and “pleasant to look upon” (Broughton 55). Furthermore, after first having spoken to Dick at the ball, she goes home and remembers his stares as something that “still stirred my little soul in the newest, queerest, joyfulest fashion” (67), again indicating that her attraction to Dick has a strong physical component. When they kiss for the first time, Nell “forget[s] to be scandalized” (107) because she enjoys it so much. At the end of this meeting Dick will only let her go if she calls him darling and Nell: “made the required concession with less bashfulness than might have been expected of me, and then took to my heels, and reached my room, panting, dishevelled, crimson, but in safety” (109). This scene is a good indicator of the kind of behaviour that outraged the critics. Nell, instead of exhibiting proper womanly caution with regards to her lover, whole-heartedly gives herself up to the passion she feels and behaves in a way that would have been unfitting for a young lady of her rank. She enjoys her little rendezvous with Dick and reaches her room in a state that would suggest strenuous physical activity and at the very least improper behaviour. Furthermore, Nell’s feelings for Dick cause her to behave in a rebellious way, as Garrison points out. She initiates a conversation even though they have not been introduced, she agrees to secret meetings, and, worst of all, begs him to commit adultery with her (99).

Garrison adds that although the passion Dick and Nell feel for each other is a physical one, it is always described as having “spiritual depth” (91). Nell’s initial attraction to Dick is

based purely on his looks, but as she gets to know him, she falls in love with his personality as well. When Dolly asks her how long she has known him, she replies that she has known him for about a fortnight, but “according to the almanac of the soul, a lifetime” (Broughton 128). Furthermore, Nell links spiritual fulfilment to the fulfilment of physical desire. After Nell has learned that Dick had died she wonders if they might meet again in the afterlife. Garrison states that Nell “is pained by the idea that they may pass each other ‘without recognition’, but also without the intense passion they inspire in each other in their physical bodies. Here, the soul’s contentment depends on the satisfaction of the physical body” (95). Nell also states this after she and Dick first kiss: “Anathema Maranatha be upon him, whether he be black or white, young or old, gentle or simple, philosopher or dunce, bond or free, who says we are not intended to be happy in this world” (Broughton 109). She believes that God could not have created humans with such great capacity for feeling if they were not supposed to feel passionately. To her, the physical passion she feels for Dick is neither improper nor sacrilegious, but an expression of humanity and something that is natural.

Nell, then, is a passionate and assertive woman who admits to having erotic feelings. In that respect she is, like Aurora Floyd, a girl of the period, even though she cannot be considered a horsey heroine. Horses feature very little in this novel and Nell herself professes to know nothing about horses; she does not even know how to ride (174). Yet, at a ball at Sir Hugh’s manor “[a] knot of men hang about the door, talking *horsily* and *doggily*, and fling out a careless word of commendation in the equine tongue, as some filly, more promising than ordinary, flies by, wafting twenty yards of tulle against their faces” (219). The men are appraising women as if they were at a horse market and several lines down Nell herself is referred to as a “bay filly” on account of her red hair. By emphatically making Nell a non-horsey heroine, but by describing women as horses and conflating Nell specifically with a horse, she is still associated with the sexual taint of the horsey heroine, without outwardly being one herself.

### **The Marriage Market**

Nell’s sister Dolly appears to be the perfect Victorian woman. She is beautiful, meek, and gentle. Her apparent perfection is evident in a description by Nell from a glance Dolly gives Dick: “The soft fawn eyes seek his with timid depreciation, and then droop suddenly, and the velvet cheeks deepen in colour to the hue of a dogrose’s heart” (Broughton 121). Yet the way Dolly acts in public is all an act. Towards Nell she is cold and often mean. Not only that, but

her aspirations for marriage are entirely mercenary. Dolly and Nell refer quite literally to the marriage market:

‘I would not gnash my teeth if I were you, Dolly!’ say I, ... ‘or you may break them, and that would seriously diminish your value in the market.’ ‘Market indeed!’ echoes Dolly, interrupting herself in the perusal of a *toilette de promenade*. ‘This little pig does not go to market, and very sorry she is for it too.’ (124)

Dolly has no trouble thinking of herself as a pig to be sold at market and in all honesty thinks that money is the most important thing in a prospective marriage partner:

‘Am I more in love with Hugh’s attractions than you are? not I; as I see him, he’s a good-natured, wooden-headed old booby; but for all that, if he were to come in here this minute ... and say to me, ‘Miss Lestranger, will you marry me?’ or, ‘Dolly, will you be mine?’ wouldn’t I respond, ‘Yes, dear Hugh, *that* I will, and thank you kindly’; I’d swear to love, honour, and obey, not *him*, not *him* ... but his £12,000 a year, his French cook, and his opera-box, and I’d keep my vow, too!’ (204)

The way Dolly behaves in public, the way a Victorian gentlewoman was expected to behave, is all an act, calculated to net her the most profit. This gives her the sexual taint of the actress, who lives “by the sale of feigned emotions” (Powell 32) like a prostitute. Dolly is also fully aware of the fact that she is sexually attractive and that she can use her charms to make men fall in love with her, as witnessed by the fact that “she looked upon two women’s kissing one another as a misapplication of one of God’s best gifts” (Broughton 166). Dolly is in essence an actress who is selling the idea of womanhood that she performs to the highest respectable bidder. According to Lindsey Faber, she also represents the “fascinating paradox of womanhood, in which a naïve girl must grow to be a worldly woman only to act again like a naïve girl” (156). Dolly’s ultra-feminine behaviour, the Victorian ideal, is then represented as nothing but an act and not how women behave out of natural inclinations.

This is made doubly clear when Dolly is also represented as a murderess. Before Sir Hugh had shown any interest in Nell, many women in the neighbourhood had attempted to seduce him into marriage because of his wealth, Dolly included. However, Sir Hugh was completely immune to Dolly’s charms, according to Nell:

In Sir Hugh, I think, must have been lacking some one of the ingredients that go to compose a man; he was the sole individual of his species that ever I met with who appeared totally impervious to the beseechments of those maddening eyes that

ordinarily upset the manly reason from its throne, and made the manly head giddy and staggering, as with strong new wine. (Broughton 163)

Sir Hugh, unlike every other man Nell knows, is not sexually attracted to Dolly, who is here depicted, like Aurora Floyd, as a cup of strong liquor and almost siren-like, turning previously sane men mad. Dolly, who is very proud of the fact that she is sexually attractive, hates him from that day onward. This causes Nell to remark that if Sir Hugh and Dolly were ever stranded on an island together, Dolly would have waited some time until, one night, Sir Hugh had gone to sleep and then she “would have stolen to Sir Hugh as he slept under the feathery palm trees, and have cut his throat with a sharpened stone, or strangled him with her strong white fingers” (163) after which she would take off his jewels, thinking it a pity to waste them, and then bury him. According to Emily Allen, the Victorians thought that female criminals were unsexed, since women were not supposed to be violent enough to commit a crime, especially one as extreme as murder (407). The fact that Nell does think Dolly capable of murder, and cold-blooded murder at that, suggests that Dolly genuinely is entirely devoid of proper womanly feelings and that her entire demeanour to the outside world is an act. This means that while Nell may sometimes exhibit inappropriate behaviour for a young lady, Dolly is meant to be the actual villain who reveals that “conventionality is the biggest act of all” (Faber 157).

However, Nell also plays a part in unmasking Victorian conventionality. Although marriages in the 1860s were often marriages of convenience, this was not supposed to be acknowledged, as marriages were “a sacrament supposedly uniting two souls deeply in love” (“Introduction” Gilbert 21). Nell, however, states outright that she only wants to marry Sir Hugh because he is rich, in a move surprisingly reminiscent of her hated sister’s behaviour: “I will – do as you wish, if – if – you will – lend me – give me – some money – *a great deal*; oh dear – oh dear!” (Broughton 259). Of course, Nell only wants the money to pay her father’s debts, not for her own personal gain. If her father did not have debts she would not have wanted to marry Sir Hugh, but penniless Dick instead. Still, the way Nell speaks of her impending marriage is a strong critique of Victorian marriage, as Tamar Heller suggests (“Ambivalence about the Body” 99). Hugh assures Nell that she is welcome to his money even if she does not want to marry him, but Pamela Gilbert points out that such a thing is an impossibility and both Sir Hugh and Nell are aware of this. If Nell wants his money she will have to marry him. When she accepts his proposal, “she might as well be making what Victorian readers preferred to think of as quite a different kind of exchange, one of sex for

cash” (“Introduction” 21). Her marriage to Sir Hugh is a form of prostitution or sexual slavery to Nell, as she would never have married him if she had had a choice, especially because she is not in the least physically attracted to him: “He was not to blame that Providence had made him a little, dark, middle-aged baronet, instead of a great beautiful fair dragoon” (Broughton 291). In fact, this physical repulsion is the primary reason for Nell’s inability to love Hugh, because she herself admits that he is very kind to her and otherwise makes a wonderful husband (291).

Still, throughout the novel Nell acknowledges the fact that she married for purely mercenary reasons, representing her marriage as a business transaction on multiple occasions:

‘No,’ I say doggedly, ‘leave me alone; I won’t be made up for sale; if he chooses to bid for this piece of goods, he shall see all the flaws in it. I don’t want to cheat him in his bargain.’ (258)

When Nell states to Sir Hugh that she will only marry him if he gives her enough money to settle her father’s debts, he is embarrassed and tells her that he does not want her to marry him only for the money. However, Nell does not see why he should react like that, since they both know she is marrying him for his money: “It seemed to me the most matter-of-fact piece of barter in the world; so much young flesh and blood for so much current coin of the realm” (260). This statement indeed resembles the transaction between a prostitute and a client. However, Nell does not have the option to leave again after she has had sex with her client. By agreeing to marry Sir Hugh for money she has become his possession and he can do what he likes with her:

His arm is round my waist, and he is brushing my eyes and cheeks and brow with his somewhat bristly moustache as often as he feels inclined – for am I not his property? Has he not every right to kiss my face off if he chooses, to clasp me and hold me, and drag me about in whatever manner he wills, for has he not bought me? (269).

In *Cometh Up as a Flower* marriage is not a sacrament between two people in love. For one sister it is selling herself to the highest bidder for personal gain and power and for the other it is a way to help those she loves by selling herself into sexual slavery.

### **Sensational Disease**

After learning of Dick’s death and being miserable in her marriage to Sir Hugh, Nell eventually dies of consumption.<sup>1</sup> Basil Meyer notes that a heroine dying of consumption is a

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<sup>1</sup> Consumption is the name Victorians gave to tuberculosis.

common occurrence in Victorian fiction, because Victorians were fascinated with “the Ophelia stereotype of female instability” which has a lot in common with “the fetishized nineteenth century woman wasting away from consumption” (287). According to Victorian medicine there were certain types of people that were predisposed to develop consumption:

[T]hose possessed of a long neck, prominent shoulders or shoulder blades, bright eyes, narrow waist, and fair skin. (...) Such individuals would also be of sanguine temperament, highly intelligent, sensitive, passionate, and artistic or imaginative. (289)

Meyer states that Nell is not predisposed to the disease because she does not fit this image (296), but Nell does in fact seem to exhibit a fair number of the predisposing factors. She is described as having fair skin that never flushes and being slender. While she is not highly intelligent, she is imaginative, spending an entire afternoon imagining how she would commit suicide if Dick were to leave her. Also, if her passion for Dick and the way she feels every time he seems to be angry with her are any indication, she is certainly sensitive and passionate. This would make her predisposed to becoming consumptive. In fact, Nell herself wishes she would die of consumption immediately after she has agreed to marry Sir Hugh (Broughton 263).

However, her predisposition does not seem to be the cause of her eventual consumption. In fact, Meyer gives a list of psychological factors that could trigger the disease:

Emotional shocks, protracted or excessive study, long spells of depression, disappointment in love or slighted affections, the loss of a loved one, and excessive sexual activity. (289)

Nell experiences almost all of these triggers and most of them are related to her relationship with Dick. Suddenly hearing of his death causes her emotional shock, her unhappy marriage to Sir Hugh causes her to be depressed for a long time, her inability to be with Dick causes disappointment in love, and the deaths of both Dick and her father qualify as loss of a loved one. In fact, all of her complaints initially stem from her inability to be with Dick which causes her disappointment in love. Meyer points out that Nell faints on two occasions: once during her last meeting with Dick and once when she hears of his death (296). On the second occasion “there sounds a loud buzzing in my ears; a deadly sickness comes over me, and I faint away, as I fainted away five months ago, in those strong arms that will never more embrace any bride but corruption” (Broughton 329). Meyer asserts that because Nell speaks of a “deadly sickness,” this is the start of her consumptive decline and by linking this fainting



spell to that of the lovers' final parting it is signalled that her separation from Dick is what caused her disease. Two and a half years later, Nell literally dies of a broken heart.

## Conclusion

For Dolly and Nell, their sexuality is not something that they can openly express. In fact, the way Nell declares her passion for Dick, often to his face, was thought of as scandalous at the time. Mostly, it was the physicality of her desire that was condemned ("Appendix B" Gilbert 339). Margaret Oliphant condemns not necessarily the fact that Nell wants to elope with Dick - although wanting to elope is wrong it is also natural for two people in love to want to be together - but the fact that she talks about the physical aspects of their relationship and the passion she feels:

If two young people fall honestly and heartily in love with each other, and are separated by machinations such as abound in novels, but unfortunately are not unknown in life, and one of them is compelled to marry somebody else, it is not unnatural, it is not revolting, that the true love unextinguished should blaze wildly up, in defiance of all law, when the opportunity occurs. (Oliphant 267)

Nell is not allowed to express her sexuality because women are only supposed to feel "true love," not sexual desire. Yet this is in part what Nell feels for Dick, as is partially made clear by the fact that she loathes Sir Hugh not because he is unkind, but because she does not find him physically attractive. However, because she is not allowed to express her physical needs as well as her emotional needs, she is compelled to marry Sir Hugh. Eventually her unfulfilled desire will kill her.

Dolly is likewise unable to express her own sexuality. Although the novel makes it clear that she is better than Nell at suppressing her own sexual needs, the fact that she knows that if she marries a rich old lord she will have to sleep with someone whom she does not find attractive tells us that she does experience sexual attraction. She is, however, willing to give up her own sexual needs for the sake of an advantageous marriage. In fact, Dolly cares for nothing but money. This attitude is also seen as condemnable, because it, too, is not an expression of "true love." However, Dolly's attitude is depicted as more villainous than Nell's, because while Nell may act with impropriety she also acts from the heart. Dolly acts like the perfect Victorian woman towards the outside world to get what she wants, but to do that she must ignore her own physical needs as well as her emotional needs. *Cometh Up as a Flower* makes it clear that women do in fact have sexual feelings and by making passionate

Nell the heroine and mercenary Dolly the villain of the story it condemns a society and a marriage market that would strip women of their authentic feelings and make them miserable for life.

## Conclusion

In her examination of Victorian murderesses Mary Hartman writes that:

[i]n their own time the lady killers of the Victorian era, whether excused or vilified, were almost never presented as the women they were. They assumed multiple identities fashioned both by themselves and by others. In legal proceedings the masks they wore proved useful to them in some cases and detrimental in others, but in all they served to shield contemporaries from the disturbing countenances of real women. (255)

The female characters in the novels examined have this in common with the murderesses Hartman discusses, that they were all suspected or guilty of a crime at one point: Kate Gaunt was suspected of murdering her husband, Aurora Floyd was also suspected of murdering her first husband, both Rosanna Spearman and Rachel Verinder were suspected of stealing a diamond, and Nell LeStrange was only guilty of wanting to commit adultery. Most of these women were suspects not because there is any objective evidence linking them to the crimes, but because the narrative makes their moral character suspect: Kate is suspected of cheating, Aurora is suspected of sexual impropriety and bigamy, Rosanna and Rachel are both suspected of improper behaviour with regards to Franklin Blake, and Nell LeStrange objectively exhibited improper behaviour towards Dick. All are suspected because of behaviour directly related to their sexuality and sexual behaviour. In fact, most of the murder cases Hartman examines deal with sexual motives: a cheating wife, a cheating husband, an inconvenient lover, etc.

The most famous case of the 1860s, the decade in which these novels were published, was that of Madeleine Smith, who was suspected of having poisoned her lover and secret fiancé because she wished to marry a more wealthy suitor. According to Hartman, almost everyone wanted to believe she was innocent simply because she was an attractive young lady of good standing and ladies of good standing did not commit murder (54). The love letters she had written to her fiancé and which proved that she had slept with him became important pieces of evidence in the trial and in the end it was her reputation that was put on trial (68). She was spared the noose because there was no evidence that she had been with the man on the night of his death, but also because public opinion considered her to be an innocent victim of a “cad and social climber” (68). Hartman concludes that it is most likely that Smith did in fact poison her fiancé (83). However, because she assumed a different identity and a mask – that of a poor misled girl - she was spared from execution. It is, however, true that her

candidness about sexual matters was condemned at the time. Women were not supposed to be outspoken about such things or sexually assertive and any such behaviour would be punished.

Each of the female characters in the four examined novels must act in the same way as these women who were accused of murder; they have to wear a mask. All of them exhibit transgressive sexual behaviour that they know would be condemned by society and they must perform an act in order to escape punishment. Both Kate Gaunt and Mercy Vint make use of acceptable female behaviour such as crying and fainting to make sure they get what they want, even though, at least in Kate's case, this goes against their natural inclinations of assertiveness. Aurora Floyd enjoys a masochistic sexual relationship with her husband and is quite passionate in general, but she must hide this from the outside world because the discovery of her sexual permissiveness leads her to be suspected of murder. Rosanna Spearman must hide her passion for Franklin Blake because of her social status and Rachel Verinder's passion for the same man causes her voice to be cut out of the narrative of her own story entirely. Nell LeStrange must hide her passion for the man she loves because he is penniless and they will never be allowed to marry. All of these women must perform their sexuality in a way that is acceptable to society in order to escape punishment for their transgressive behaviour. Sexually aggressive or otherwise transgressive women were considered a threat to society, just like the murderesses Hartman describes. Female sexuality was either denied, or it was viewed as something that had to be controlled (Acton, qtd. in Pykett 15; Mason 225; Suthpin 512). In either case, it was something that had to be hidden and something that women had to deny in order to conform to societies standards.

The fact that these women must "act" their sexuality in order to be considered respectable also proves that two of the main points specified in Rudy's outline of queer studies are correct: sexuality and gender are indeed social constructs. All of these female characters do not behave in a way that correlates with their natural inclinations, but act in a way that is acceptable to the society in which they live. Like Lucy Floyd, they have been taught to behave in a certain way that is compatible with their gender and social standing. Had they been born into a different culture or a different time period their behaviour would most likely have been different, because it would be based on different social parameters. This means that the performances of gender and sexuality are not based on certain biological truths, as the Victorians thought, but on the rules of the society in which one lives. This means that Rudy is also correct in assuming that "sexuality [does not have] any normal parameters at all" (205) since each society has an inherently different idea of what normal is, exactly. The

information garnered from these books suggests that queer theory is in fact correct in all of its assumptions.

All four of these novels make the case that female sexuality is not only something natural, but also something positive that does not need to be hidden and which cannot be expected to conform to a set standard. In *Griffith Gaunt* it is ultimately Griffith who is portrayed as being in the wrong, not any of his two wives. In *Aurora Floyd*, Aurora is cleared of any wrongdoing and rewarded with a husband who loves her as well as a son. Furthermore, it is her cousin, Lucy Floyd, who is ultimately portrayed as an actress. She feels just as strongly as her cousin, but because she has been brought up to suppress her unsuitable feelings her outward emotions never line up with how she actually feels. Lucy, then, is the woman most associated with the taint of the actress. While Aurora may act immodestly at times, she is presented as more interesting and in a more positive light than her cousin. In *The Moonstone* Rachel does not get her voice back and Rosanna commits suicide, but not before the narrative makes it clear that their desire was natural and, especially in Rosanna's case, only transgressive because society says it should be, not because of any biological necessity. In *Cometh Up as a Flower* it is Nell who acts defiantly of social conventions, but it is her sister who is portrayed as the villain. In fact, the heavy critique on the marriage market offered by the narrative makes it clear that it is society's fault that Nell dies of consumption. Her consumption is brought on by her disappointment in love caused by her inability to marry Dick, something which society's standards will not let her do.

These novels portray non-normative female sexuality in a positive light. Instead, it is the characters who conform to society's expectations who are portrayed as either boring, or conniving actresses. Lucy Floyd is both, although she may not even realize that she is acting because she has been brought up from a baby to believe that she must suppress her own feelings in order to be a good woman. Dolly Lestrangle is certainly not boring, but her ruthless mercenary ways are meant to be condemned and to underscore the fact that her act of conventionality is just that, an act. As these novels make clear, there is no such thing as a biological standard to which we can expect women to adhere.

It would certainly be interesting to read more about non-conforming gender expressions in sensation novels. Lesbian and homosexual relations have been studied more widely since the emergence of queer theory, but given the fact that sensation fiction has only recently been rediscovered by scholars much is still to be discovered on transgender issues. So far there is one essay on transgender issues in the works of Charles Reade, written by Richard

Fantina, who also includes some information on this issue in his books on that author, but very little comprehensive studies have been done. Considering the fact that Reade wrote at least one novel about a transgender or cross-dressing woman and the fact that there is a throwaway line in *Cometh Up as Flower* which alludes to a cross-dressing and possibly transgender soldier it would seem the possibility for more research is there.

While this research has not dealt extensively with those issues, it has made clear that not one of the heroines in any of these novels is truly confirmative. This is considered a positive thing by novels which condemn the childish behaviour that grown women are expected to comply with as both unnatural and damaging. Furthermore, at least some of the men in these novels are more happy in their domestic arrangements specifically because their wives do not conform to these societal standards, such as John Mellish and Griffith Gaunt. These novels showed their contemporary readers, and they show modern readers, that women do have passionate sexual desires, that these desires are natural and healthy, and, above all, that “conventionality is the biggest act of all” (Faber 157).

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