

WOMEN AND SELF-SACRIFICE IN THE MID-VICTORIAN NOVEL

CAROLINE MARIE-THÉRÈSE NETHERTON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of the West of
England, Bristol, for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of English and Creative Studies, Bath Spa University College

May 2004

Abstract

This thesis offers a new reading of that commonplace of mid-Victorian literature, female self-sacrifice. Rather than accepting self-sacrifice as a given of womens' nature, it explores its fictional representations to show that it was actually a preoccupation of the period, the subject of constant and fascinated attention. The proposition that self-sacrifice performed the function of providing women with a grand purpose in otherwise domestically-confined lives provides a new perspective on the literature of the period. The thesis explores the paradox at the centre of self-sacrifice - that self-negation actually entails a constant self-awareness, not self-forgetfulness. In its examination of the fiction of the period it shows the extent to which the notion of self-sacrifice underpinned portraits of acceptable womanhood.

I consider a range of texts, both fictional and non-fictional. The non-fictional texts discussed reflect a spread of opinion from the conventional to the progressive which contextualises the whole mid-Victorian debate about womanliness. The novels chosen for consideration are representative of several different ways of presenting self-sacrifice, dealing with different types of women and different ways of working out their eventual fates. The texts chosen include both the canonical and those novels which, whilst popular in their time, are no longer widely read. I have concentrated mainly on works by female authors, but for the purposes of comparison I have included a chapter on male novelists' treatment of female self-sacrifice. I use *Middlemarch* to introduce the themes of the thesis, and I expand the argument in later chapters to engage with different aspects and different illustrations of female self-sacrifice. I have also included a chapter on male self-sacrifice in order to show that, although self-sacrifice formed part of the mid-Victorian gentlemanly ideal, it was treated very differently from female self-sacrifice.

I feel confident that this thesis' treatment represents an original contribution to the study of mid-Victorian literature.

Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to Paul Davies and the Graduate School, Colin Edwards, Professor Paul Hyland and to Tracey Hill for suggesting I do a PhD in the first place.

To my dear friends Carol Jenkins, Grahame Macaulay and Fiona Orr for support and practical assistance.

To my tolerant husband David Heath, who never complained about how much I spent on books (perhaps he didn't know how much I spent on books) and who read the whole thing for me, and to my wonderful if neglected children Beth and Tom.

I have been blessed with a fantastic supervisory team. I am enormously grateful to my second supervisor, Tracy Brain, whose continued and scholarly interest and attention has been of immeasurable help to me; I know my appreciation was sometimes disguised by my grumpiness.

Lastly, my love and thanks to my Director of Studies, Tessa Hadley. Tess, I can truly say that I could not have done this without you. Your enthusiasm and constant support, your assistance and engagement with this project have been a huge part of the pleasure of it. I will miss our chats. You have been that semi-mythical being, the perfect supervisor.

Thank you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.
2. Non-fictional writing.
3. Charlotte Yonge, *The Clever Woman of the Family*.
4. Dinah Craik, *Olive* and Geraldine Jewsbury, *The Half Sisters*.
5. Mary Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife*.
6. Margaret Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Phoebe Junior*.
7. Sensation Novels: Rhoda Broughton, *Not Wisely But Too Well*; Mrs Henry Wood, *East Lynne*; Mary Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*.
8. Men Writing Women's Self-sacrifice.
9. Self-sacrificing Men.
10. Conclusion.

Chapter One

Introduction

I

To state that the notion of womanly self-sacrifice is integral to any literary representation of Victorian women may sound so obvious as to be verging on the platitudinous. References to the ‘angel in the house’ have been so commonplace in discussions of Victorian womanhood, both popular and scholarly, that until recent years her image has been taken by many to represent the only kind of ‘good’ woman recognised by literary Victorians. This thesis focuses on the concept of women’s self-sacrifice and martyrdom as being crucial to an understanding of what underpins representations of women in the mid-Victorian popular novel. However, instead of accepting the self-sacrificing woman as a given of mid-Victorian literature, it considers the idea of self-sacrifice in depth. There are two main aspects to the study. First, it will discuss the peculiar satisfactions to be gained by embracing self-negation for a mid-Victorian woman dealing with the sorts of constraints society imposed. Some scholars have seen the fact that so many Victorian writers based their fiction in the home as demonstrating some sort of acquiescence with a patriarchal system, merely asserting the mitigating power of women’s emotions in a manly world. This thesis, however, will explore women’s self-sacrifice, not merely as the essential Victorian womanly virtue, but as a strong and positive reaction to the domestic role for women whose options were severely limited by the nature of the society in which they lived. Second, it will analyse the apparent contradiction that the supposed elimination of self actually strengthens the concept of self, and the ways in which a conscious denial of a particular desire necessitates a knowledge of that desire. Abasement and glorification of self are not mutually incompatible; they can happen at one and the same time, and can be, in fact, mutually dependent, each a product of the

other. The idea of women's martyrdom, usually seen as a negation of self, often imposed out of societal expectations, will be shown to form part of the whole questioning of women's role in society which was such a live issue in the mid-Victorian era.

The discourse which was constructed around the idea of women's self-sacrifice and other supposedly inherent female characteristics informed every part of the ongoing debates that made up the 'Woman Question' (which addressed issues such as those of marriage, motherhood, sex, work, education and women's legal and political rights), whose origins are usually located in the period covered by this study. This thesis will demonstrate how closely the idea of self-sacrifice is bound in with ideas of women's happiness and fulfilment, and reveal something about the presumptions about women's psychology which underpin representations of their desires and needs, and of their satisfactions. It will be shown how pervasive the notion of women's self-sacrifice in mid-Victorian discourse is, in many differing kinds of texts, and with considerable variations of treatment; and that self-sacrifice, rather than being a negation of women's happiness, is, in the mid-Victorian novel, integral to it.

Representations of women's desires and satisfactions in the mid-Victorian novel tend to be based on the notion that women have essential female qualities. Individual characteristics, differences of temperament or personality, are less important than the state of being a woman. Differences in class or position, for example, may mean that women's lives may differ widely, but all women were imagined as being united by their womanliness, no matter what their talents might be, or where their interests might lie; this is what Nancy Armstrong calls 'the universality

of any particular form of desire.’¹ It would be misleading, however, to claim that there were no differences in representations of working-class and middle-class women. In many literary representations working-class women are shown with all the supposed vices of women (gossip, lack of self-control, spite, duplicity and so on) and few of their redeeming features, but often they are portrayed as unnatural or failed women. This thesis concentrates on middle-class women because, as Susan Johnston has put it, ‘the nineteenth century novel is predominantly a middle-class genre. As such it is middle-class political philosophy that forms its discursive background’.²

The mid-Victorian period is particularly significant to a study of women’s self-sacrifice³ because the Victorian cult of domesticity was at its height and the issue of women’s happiness and fulfilment had not become an overt part of the feminist scheme, as it had begun to do in the New Woman novels of the 1880s and later.⁴

Susan Morgan points out the apparent contradiction in this period that

in a culture where women, both in life and in art, have continually been conceived of as less central to human concerns than men, one of the major periods of fiction should be so rich in novels that locate their centre of consciousness in a woman.⁵

¹ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: a political history of the novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.91.

² Susan Johnston, *Women and Domestic Experience in Victorian Political Fiction* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 9.

³ It is not intended to claim that the notion of female self-sacrifice was new at this time. Chaucer, for example, presents a picture of complete female subjugation in Griselda, in *The Clerk’s Tale*. Gilbert and Gubar trace the origins of the ‘angel in the house’ from the Middle Ages, through Dante, Milton and Goethe to Ruskin. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

⁴ Deborah Gorham, for example, says that ‘The cult of domesticity helped to relieve the tensions that existed between the moral values of Christianity, with its emphasis on love and charity, and the values of capitalism, which asserted that the world of commerce should be pervaded by a spirit of competition.’ *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 4, whilst Jenni Calder points out how women ‘had, at all costs, to be protected from the world because men were only too knowledgeable about human temptation and fallibility... Home with a woman in it was cherished as a refuge in a world where the harsh realities of life were becoming increasingly difficult to disguise.’ *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), pp. 88-89. Karen Chase and Michael Levenson refer to ‘an intensifying of the private domain’. *The Spectacle of Intimacy, A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.7.

⁵ Susan Morgan, *Sisters in Time: Imagining Gender in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.4.

What is being considered here is the new deployment of an ancient rhetoric; the bourgeois domestic effort to contain women within a traditional form of family and gender arrangement, in the face of increasing pressure on the edifice of separate spheres.

There is, of course, a large religious element in the idea of self-sacrifice, particularly in the Christian tradition. Sarah Lewis, in the conduct book *Women's Mission* (1839) sees the association as almost inevitable. She asks 'What was the reason that so many women were among the first converts to Christianity? Because those pure and loving, and self-denying doctrines found a ready echo in woman's heart.'⁶ This strong religious element serves to cloak the self-obsessiveness of self-denial by legitimising the preoccupation with the inner life. Christianity encourages self-examination as a route to self-improvement, not for selfish reasons, but as a way to add to the provision of general happiness. Charlotte Yonge, for example, warns against the misuse of self-study. Ethel May, in *The Daisy Chain* (1856), is told that 'self-examination notes the symptoms and combats them; self-contemplation...dwells on them and perpetually deplores itself'.⁷ The concept of self-sacrifice involves contemporary religious ideals (not necessarily confined to women) of duty, learning through suffering, submission, trial through endurance and adaptation to the inevitable, and a reading of the novels of the period which centralises these issues will yield rich insights into the wider culture.

The aim of this study is not to concentrate on how mid-Victorian society oppressed women in the ways it represented them; rather it attempts to show how what we see in those representations is evidence of women's struggle to take control

⁶ Sarah Lewis, *Woman's Mission* (London: John W. Parker, 1839), p.144.

of their own lives by using the role generally assigned to them, that is, the role of self-sacrificing martyr, and turning it into something purely their own. In 1993, Robin Gilmour observed that feminist interest in Victorian culture 'has passed well beyond an interest in the woman-as-rebel to an interest in woman-as-other, a suppressed voice heard in the distortions of the male culture's attempt to ventriloquise it.'⁸ This project takes its place as part of the next stage beyond that consideration of 'otherness', providing a new, positive perspective for feminist analysis of the mid-Victorian novel. The whole concept of 'otherness' helps to perpetuate a rhetoric which contributes to the idea of women's powerlessness. This thesis rejects readings such as that of Anthony H. Harrison, who, writing as recently as 1992 said

with regard to institutionalized modes of discourse and the power structures of Victorian society, women for the most part constituted a suppressed or marginalized underclass whose victimization was a political fact of life.⁹

Harrison does go on to claim that his volume of essays intends to make clear the ways in which women resisted and challenged society's gender ideologies, but this women-as-victim account, in questioning the legitimacy of the male controlling gaze, implies a need to 'defend' the female. Terry Eagleton, in a recent review, expressed his own impatience with 'otherness':

The bad news is that otherness is not the most fertile of intellectual furrows. Indeed, once you have observed that the other is typically portrayed as lazy, dirty, stupid, crafty, womanly, passive, rebellious, sexually rapacious, childlike, enigmatic and a number of other mutually contradictory epithets, it is hard to know what to do next apart from reaching for yet another textual illustration of the fact. The theme is as theoretically thin as it is politically pressing.

⁷ Charlotte Yonge, *The Daisy Chain* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1856), p.283.

⁸ Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890* (London: Longman, 1993), p.189.

⁹ Antony H. Harrison, 'Introduction' in *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*, ed. Antony H. Harrison and Beverly Taylor (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992), p. xii.

Nothing is now more stereotyped in literary studies than the critique of stereotypes.¹⁰

This does not mean that this project will indulge in spurious attempts to find hidden instances of latent feminism in the most conservative of novels. It is more interesting and productive to explore the ways in which mid-Victorian novels attempted, within their own terms and without the radical political critique which came in the later New Woman novels, a working out of new possibilities for women, and tried to make sense of the questions about women which were beginning to exercise the wider society.

In order to contextualise some mid-Victorian ideas of self-sacrifice, the first part of the thesis will explore some non-fictional texts. Some works of prescriptive literature, including the conduct books of Sarah Stickney Ellis, Sarah Lewis and Elizabeth Sandford, will be discussed. These books have been chosen not only because their authors were very prolific and widely read, but also because their work is representative of a certain vociferous body of opinion. This chapter will explore some of the contradictions inherent in the 'ideals' of femininity in this culture, and will also go on to consider how those 'ideals' are tackled in some other, very different works of non-fiction, including the much more radical writings of Harriet Taylor Mill and Emily Shirreff. This will allow a consideration not only of the polarisation of opinion one might expect from such seemingly opposite perspectives, but also an exploration of notions of femininity they have in common. It will also provide a starting point to a study which goes on to explore how these polarisations and similarities are refracted into the novels of the period; that is, in the culture's imagining of itself.

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton 'A Spot of Firm Government' in the *London Review of Books* vol. 23, no. 16 (23.8.01), p.19.

Certain novels of the period suggested themselves as particularly significant for this project because they can stand as representative of particular ways of presenting the idea of self-sacrifice, showing differing treatments of a variety of types of women and of ways of working out their fates. *Middlemarch* is pivotal to the argument; in a project dealing with that sort of female happiness achieved by the pursuit of glorious martyrdom, Dorothea Brooke seemed to be the obvious starting point. The portrait of Dorothea presents a complex, fascinating treatment of the opposition at the centre of this thesis; that is, the conflict between the notion of self and the notion of self-sacrifice. A discussion of the contradiction between Dorothea's desperate desire to be of service to others, and her need to live life intensely for herself will serve to establish the fundamental thrust of this thesis. The centrality of *Middlemarch* allows elements of the argument to be introduced which are later expanded with reference to other and (in terms of literary value) lesser works. Most of the novels considered in depth are non-canonical, because the problem with *Middlemarch* for a project such as this one is that Dorothea is exceptional, not only in her difference from other women, but in the depth and subtlety of Eliot's characterisation. It seemed important to look at representations of women in novels which were less complex, in order to build a sense of the cultural context against the background of which Eliot opened up her debate about women's fulfilment; to establish a sense of the commonplaces of cultural imagining of women's satisfactions that fed into Eliot's statement of the problem, and of its solution.

Each of the texts chosen for in-depth consideration illuminates different aspects of the issue of self-sacrifice and happiness. Charlotte Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* is significant not only because the character of Ermine Williams first triggered the thinking behind the project concerning the grandeur of self-sacrifice,

but also because the novel is representative of a certain type of didactic literature, and the working out of the eventual fates, happy or otherwise, of the four main female characters reveals much about the assumptions behind the representation of women in the high-Church, high-Tory novel.

Dinah Craik's *Olive* and Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters* will be discussed together, because they invite a consideration of the problem of the reconciliation of the self-sacrificing woman and the artist. Both novels are concerned with the nature of genius, and the contradictions between the selflessness of the woman and the necessary self-expression of the artist reveal the extent to which the notion of self-negation underpinned ideas about the Victorian woman. There is an additional element here, that is the paradox of these successful and presumably ambitious women writers dealing with such equivocation with issues of female success and ambition, whilst apparently advocating subordination to men and glorifying the domestic role.

Mary Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* has been included because it gives a representation of the imagined glories of self-sacrifice made absolutely explicit. Isabel Gilbert, in an attempt to forget her boring domestic life, fantasises constantly about spectacular martyrdom and renunciation, putting herself constantly at the centre of mental dramas of selflessness whilst ignoring her dull but loving husband.

Margaret Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Phoebe Junior* are significant for the extent to which they overtly parody the notion of self-sacrifice, which is particularly interesting in a novelist many feminist critics have decried for being insufficiently radical. *Miss Marjoribanks*, in particular, directly ridicules the idea, whilst Phoebe, far from sacrificing herself, determinedly puts her needs and desires first.

Some sensation novels will be discussed; amongst others, Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely But Too Well* and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* have been included because they deal with self-denial and renunciation in the lives of women who have apparently sinned - Kate Chester by falling in love with a married man, and Isabel Vane who, famously, leaves her husband and children for a blackguard.

All the works mentioned so far are by women. Although there will be some discussion of some male authors' representations of self-sacrificing women - notably Dickens's in *Bleak House*, *Dombey and Son*, *Little Dorrit* and *David Copperfield* - the body of the thesis will concentrate on the female authors listed. On the whole, and for fairly obvious reasons, male authors do not seem to approach the notion of women's self-sacrifice in the same emotional depth as do the female authors. In the main, the male authors' self-sacrificing females seem flat, predictable, and often unbelievable; a given, rather than an exploration of a difficult subject.

Although primarily perceived as a virtue of women, self-sacrifice was not, of course, confined to women alone, and it would be misleading for this thesis to suggest as much. Self-denial and duty were elements present in portraits of the ideal mid-Victorian middle-class male, but there were very real differences in the way in which these male portraits were realised, and in the assumptions underpinning them. These differences will be examined in a section on self-sacrificing men. This will include Guy Morville, Charlotte Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*, Sydney Carton (from Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*) and Ozias Midwinter (from Wilkie Collins's *Armadale*).

This thesis takes its place as part of the ongoing work of Victorian cultural and literary studies which seek to explode the view that the Victorian era was one of complete social cohesion, work to which feminists have contributed so much. As

such, it builds on the work of scholars such as Mary Poovey, Ruth Bernard Yeazell and Nancy Armstrong. It contributes to the body of recent work in the area of Victorian domestic fiction which concentrates on the notion of separate spheres. Nancy Armstrong, for example, sees domestic fiction, and more specifically the place of the women within it, as the place where class ideologies competed to represent forms of female sexuality. For Armstrong domestic fiction, rather than trivialising women's lives, represents an alternative form of political power, different from men's but still significant. It provides an arena to resolve conflicts between the aristocratic and the middle-classes, between town and country, and between labour and capital. This resolution of conflict can ensue because

by enclosing such conflict within a domestic sphere, certain novels demonstrated that despite the vast inequities of the age virtually anyone could find gratification within this private framework.¹¹

It is the aim of this study to explore this notion of the private gratification provided by self-sacrifice. Armstrong points out how many Victorian novelists represented 'the self' as having certain natural elements, thus separating the subject (and in particular the female subject) from the conditions of its political history. Interestingly for this project, she touches on the notion of altruism, saying that it is 'a form of labor that is no labor at all, but a form of self-regulation that serves as an end in itself'.¹² This thesis follows that idea through; in this analysis self-regulation becomes self-negation, and it will be shown how and why it becomes an end in itself.

Mary Poovey, in *Uneven Developments*, also sees representations of gender as the site of struggles for authority. She contends that middle-class ideology (which is, she says, most often associated with this period) was in the process of being

¹¹ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 48.

constructed, and therefore was always vulnerable to contest and revision. Poovey discusses how the idea of the 'naturalness' of the sexual division of labour was constructed in mid-Victorian medical and legal discourse. For Poovey, the theory of separate spheres is an illusion designed not only to govern the different kinds of work of men and women, but also to ensure the continuing opposition between the domestic and the public domain.

Only as long as women remained in the home and did not claim a sexuality more aggressive or other than maternal could this form of (apparent) nonalienation seem to emanate from womanly nature. Only as long as her domestic labour was rhetorically distinguished from paid labour could the illusion persist that there *were* separate spheres, that there *was* an antidote to the alienation of the marketplace, that men *were* fundamentally different from women. The ground of this circular logic, in other words, was the definition of female nature as self-consistent and self-sacrificing, but this definition assumed exactly what it was invoked to prove - that social behaviour *reflected* nature, not constituted it.¹³

This thesis differs from both Armstrong and Poovey in that where they see female self-sacrifice as being necessary to the continuation of separate spheres, it is argued here that it is actually also a reaction to the sort of existence that the notion of separate spheres imposed on middle-class Victorian women. The ideological thrust of the analyses of Armstrong and Poovey is not disputed here, but the concentration of this work is not upon an over-arching theory of the social or political conditions which led to the production of the discourse of separate spheres, but rather upon a more minute examination of the sorts of strategies of self deployed by women in response to that discourse, as represented in literature.

¹² Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 91.

¹³ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), p.4.

Ruth Bernard Yeazell's *Fictions of Modesty* has been fascinating and inspirational. Her work on the contradictions inherent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideas about women's modesty was invaluable in formulating the discussion of conduct books which follows. Her analysis of the paradox at the heart of any notion of female modesty prompted the recognition of similar paradoxes in notions of women's self-sacrifice within the conduct books. She points out how

countless authors of printed advice for middle-class readers exhorted Englishwomen to guard their modesty - even while insisting that true modesty is not conscious of itself and knows nothing of what might violate it.¹⁴

The chapter dealing with conduct books will discuss the similar contradiction between behaviours which are supposed to be natural and the complex cultural apparatus which is in place to teach and enforce them.

Laura Morgan Green's work on the intersections and conflicts between domestic ideology and girls' education in *Educating Women: Cultural Conflict and Victorian Literature* explores the way in which the domestic novel validates women's experience, even to the extent of valorizing the domestic role. She claims that the conventions of the domestic novel require that it must be concluded by marriage, and that 'within this structure there was little room for the alternative narrative that was emerging from the women's higher education movement.'¹⁵ She argues that there was a particular conflict between 'the values of domestic ideology and those of an emergent liberal individualism'¹⁶ and that the nature of the domestic novel meant that it could not reflect this individualism, which she sees as being largely a result of women's education. The contention of this thesis is that domestic ideology and liberal

¹⁴ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.5.

¹⁵ Laura Morgan Green, *Educating Women: Cultural Conflict and Victorian Literature* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2001), p.xii.

individualism can be reconciled, at least in literature; not least because of the concentration on the self which is an essential part of self-sacrifice. Morgan Green observes that

Recently, feminist critics have stressed that the apparent stringencies of the marriage plot do not preclude, and perhaps enable, expressions of women's desires of various kinds. Unlike debates over education, for example, the domestic novel included and validated women's experience.¹⁷

She goes on to show how the work of educationalists such as Emily Shirreff and her sister Maria Grey still assumes that the woman's place will be in the home. *Educating Women* touches on the notion of women's attainment of happiness through intellectual pursuits, and discusses the contradiction inherent in promoting education and domesticity at the same time.

Shirreff's simultaneous commitment to a domestic role for women and 'development of [the] whole moral and intellectual nature' for 'every human being' causes her some difficulties. Viewing the domestic world women must inhabit as essentially confining, but unwilling to question the necessity of that confinement, she seeks to enlarge it through 'cultivation'. Yet this same cultivation may make women unhappy by reminding them of their exclusion from opportunities for 'greatness'.¹⁸

The argument in this thesis proposes that, if domesticity made them feel excluded, it was women's embrace of the notion of self-sacrifice which allowed them to experience opportunities for greatness. Also material to this project is Morgan Green's discussion of George Eliot, and her 'devotion to the theme of renunciation'¹⁹ which will be discussed later in relation to Dorothea Brooke.

This study focuses on the concepts of self-sacrifice and martyrdom in terms of women's search for a useful, happy, even noble existence. Domestic discourse

¹⁶ Morgan Green, *Educating Women*, p. ix.

¹⁷ Morgan Green, *Educating Women*, p.14.

¹⁸ Morgan Green, *Educating Women*, p.73.

¹⁹ Morgan Green, *Educating Women*, p.71.

insisted that happiness for middle-class women was anchored in the day-to-day, mundane and trivial pursuits which made up their everyday lives. For conventional middle-class mid-Victorians (men and women) happiness and duty, at least in theory, (and almost always in literature) were virtually inseparable. True happiness was underpinned by doing right, by religion and by resignation to the will of God, or to social conformity (which were more often than not presented as one and the same thing). Happiness also came to the deserving; it was earned, it was not a right. The direct pursuit of happiness was equally not right; it was not a legitimate aim in itself, but came by virtue of a life well lived. There was also a strong adherence to the notion that earthly happiness was short-lived; it was only fleeting, and real happiness came in the next world. As Sir Guy Morville, probably the pattern-card of mid-Victorian self-sacrificing men, put it, happiness ‘gleams from another world, too soon eclipsed or forfeited...Gleams from another world, brightening as it gets nearer.’²⁰

This is not to claim that notions of duty and satisfaction were the same for men and women. Whilst certain ideas concerning happiness were common to both, ideas of fulfilment were definitely gendered. It is too simple to state that in mid-Victorian novels and in prescriptive literature, women’s happiness is anchored only in other people and in the home. Even such conservative works as Sarah Stickney Ellis’s, or Charlotte Yonge’s show themselves to be riddled with inconsistencies, exposing the authors’ unresolved anxieties about the position of women. It is on the whole true to say, however, that in mid-Victorian literature, any woman who is made happy in ways which are not considered to be conventionally womanly is seen as aberrant; her

²⁰ Charlotte Yonge, *The Heir of Redclyffe*, ed. Barbara Dennis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 431.

happiness will be revealed to be false or transient, or both. Happiness for women is rooted in what *should* make women happy, the detail of their domestic lives.

The aim of this work is to show how this notion of women's happiness, rather than aiming at a dull sort of humdrum content in the everyday, can be and has been in the mid-Victorian novel, grasped, appropriated and turned into something glorious. The daily suppression of one's own interests and desires, instead of being dreary and irritating, becomes, in the hands of these writers, heroic and even glamorous. The mundane is elevated to the realm of the noble, the bored housewife to the glorious martyr, the convention of obedience to the path of saintly submission. Here a sense of exciting purpose is given to a life spent on repetitive and dull domestic routine; even the dullest of tasks can become imbued with glamour if they can be incorporated into a greater scheme of things, into a constantly striving inner life. This must have provided an incredibly seductive picture of personal power to women who had none, and of an exciting purpose to an otherwise pedestrian existence; presenting a sphere in which women could be heroic. This was the heroism of self-sublimation; the sublimation of everything which might be perceived to make women happy - energy, passion, ambition, comfort, desire. And yet, oddly for a heroism based on sublimation, it is not passive; on the contrary, it wrests action and excitement from the apparent negativity of denial and suppression. It is this concentration on the notion of self-sacrifice as active rather than passive which allows a new and different reading of apparently conventional female characters and plots.

II

As previously stated, in order to introduce the ideas central to this thesis in some depth, *Middlemarch* seemed to provide an illuminating stepping-off point. In speaking of Eliot's work Dorothea Barrett has said

Desire of all kinds, sexual desire, vocational desire, the desire for freedom, the desire for a new order, is submerged, but only just beneath the surface of her texts...the need registered in George Eliot's novels is for vocation, not merely occupation, for a task engrossing enough to preclude obsession with the self and the pain to which the self is constantly subjected.²¹

This sense of submerged desire, of vocation rather than occupation is essential to the notion of self-sacrifice on which this work focuses. In the analysis offered here, however, the engrossing activity becomes not just a task, but a way of looking inward which transforms and transcends the ordinary day-to-day tasks from occupation to vocation.

Middlemarch is a strange hybrid; the story of Dorothea Brooke embodies what seems to be a strong critique of domestic ideology but with a final capitulation to that ideology. The novel is brilliant but ultimately unsatisfying; the reader feels somehow let down, because the ending seems inconsistent with the body of the novel, and we are left wanting more for Dorothea than she apparently wants for herself. The novel's significance for this project is clear; at its centre lies the contradiction of a woman whose fervent wish to lose herself in a greater good causes her to become aware of her own desires; whose attempts at self-sacrifice cause her to concentrate on her own needs; and whose attempts at self-effacement reveal her greatness.

Eliot begins *Middlemarch* with an epigraph from Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*:

Since I can do no good because a woman,
Reach constantly at something that is near it.

These lines suggest both the limitations and the strivings which characterise Dorothea's existence; enacting an acceptance of the limitations of a woman's

²¹ Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* (London: Routledge, 1989) p.x.

position, whilst at the same time encouraging a constant striving to do the best one can within those limitations. And yet surely there is some irony intended here; the claim that one could 'do no good because a woman' is so palpably untrue (certainly in the case of both Eliot and Dorothea) that it foreshadows Eliot's attitude to Dorothea. Eliot makes fun of Dorothea's determination to take the difficult road always (her addiction to renunciation, for example) and of the relentlessness of her principles. For Celia Brooke, 'stifled in the depths of her heart was the feeling that her sister was too religious for family comfort. Notions and scruples were like spilt needles, making one afraid of treading, or sitting down, or even eating.'²² The two sisters are very different: whilst Dorothea is known for her cleverness, Celia is generally thought to have more common sense. This is not to claim that Eliot represents either of the sisters as the feminine ideal; part of the agenda of *Middlemarch* is a critique of all notions of perfect femininity (the conventional example of which we see in Rosamond). Eliot is not particularly critical of either of the sisters; Celia is sometimes a little dull, but she is not stupid, and if Dorothea is often rather intense, she is admirable in many ways. But neither the reader nor Eliot is particularly interested in Celia; ironically, given her desire for self-negation, it is the complicated, fascinating Dorothea who dominates the novel.

The main problem for this project, which deals in part with representations of women's happiness, is the fact that Dorothea is exceptional. It is hard to take Dorothea as representative of a type of happiness when she herself is not recognised as a type. Her exceptional nature is stressed throughout the book; she is not like other women. None of the other women understand her, nor do most of the men. People

²² George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. W.J. Harvey (London: Penguin, 1965), p.43. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

may admire her, but they do not feel like her, nor imagine themselves in her position. And certainly, none of them envy her. Eliot's working out of Dorothea's story is fascinating and valuable as representing the restraints on women, but in making Dorothea so different from the other women in the story, she is particularised - the other women do not feel constrained in the same way. She is so different from all the other women of the novel that her resentment of the limitations placed on her seem too specific. Celia, for example, could not be happier with her husband and child. It is difficult then, in some ways, to adopt this novel as many have done, as a feminist text, although Dorothea's dilemma is a powerful expression of the restraints of society on a talented woman. This almost weakens the case as a feminist one; it does not recognise the constraints on ordinary women. Of course, in Dorothea, Eliot is dealing with notions of genius - of the exceptional individual - and the fact that this singularity occurs in a woman is radical in itself.

Dorothea is frustrated by her existence because she desires to live on a higher plane:

Her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world...she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects, likely to seek martyrdom (p.30).

Dorothea seeks grandeur in her life, not physically through display, but in a sense of purpose, some grand scheme in which she can take part. We learn very early on of the limits of this grand scheme. She hopes that this 'lofty conception' might 'frankly include the parish of Tipton' (p.30), she seeks grandeur within her sphere, she does not seek to move outside it. Dorothea is no iconoclast. She wants to live life with fervour and spirituality, but within the domestic sphere. She does not crave excitement for its own sake, but she does crave something greater than that which

everyday existence provides. Eliot regards her extremes with affectionate forbearance. She tells the reader that nothing could hinder Dorothea's prospects of marriage except this love of extremes

which might cause a wary man to hesitate before he made her an offer...A young lady of some birth and fortune, who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer and prayed fervidly...who had strange whims of fasting like a Papist, and of sitting up at night to read old theological books! (p.31)

Dorothea's goodness may not be in question, but, as Celia secretly believes, the comfort of living with her certainly is.

Eliot also pokes gentle fun at Dorothea's tendencies towards martyrdom:

'Riding was an indulgence which she allowed herself in spite of conscientious qualms; she felt that she enjoyed it in a pagan sensuous way, and always looked forward to renouncing it'(p.32). When Celia claims that she 'likes giving up', however, Dorothea replies that if that were in fact the case, it would be 'self-indulgence, not self-mortification' (p.41). Whichever it is, it is clear that the concentration on 'self' is neither obvious nor straightforward. Whether indulgence or mortification, the self is still central to Dorothea's notion of a life worth living. (We see here an early manifestation of the sort of anti-sensuous asceticism, the Christian mortification of the flesh, which leads Dorothea to deny her sexuality by marrying Casaubon.) Dorothea's yearning for self-sacrifice is no more straightforward. Her desire to help others cannot be denied, but where she sees it as self-negation, it can equally be seen as self-glorification. She is certainly unselfish in the ordinary sense, but in an eloquent passage Eliot makes it clear that Dorothea puts her own needs very centrally. At this stage there is not even any mention of 'doing good'; in fact, there is an outright rejection of the conventional ways that young women could 'do good'. Far

from being selfless, this passage concentrates on Dorothea's satisfaction, her desires for an effective life.

For a long while she had been oppressed by the indefiniteness which hung in her mind, like a thick summer haze, over all her desire to make her life greatly effective. What could she do, what ought she to do? - she, hardly more than a budding woman, but yet with an active conscience and a great mental need, not to be satisfied by a girlish instruction comparable to the nibblings and judgments of a discursive mouse. With some endowment of stupidity and conceit, she might have thought that a Christian young lady of fortune should find her ideal of life in village charities (pp. 50-51).

Eliot makes the point that her wish to do something is driven by her 'great mental need', her 'desire' for 'satisfaction' and an 'ideal of life'; it comes from within her, not from a burning sense of injustice in the world around her. She is careful to try to release Dorothea from accusations of conceit by associating conceit with conventionally charitable young ladies. Perhaps she does this because she sees how egocentric Dorothea may sound here. After all, a desire to make one's life 'greatly effective' suggests that one feels one has the capacity to be 'greatly effective'. Dorothea is not conceited, but she does have a very strong sense of herself, and the waste of her talents.

The descriptions of Dorothea's frustrations with her life are written in very self-centred terms; she suffers because she has

a nature altogether ardent,...struggling in the bands of a narrow teaching, hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses, a walled-in maze of small paths that led no whither...she wanted...not to live in a pretended admission of rules which were never acted on (p.51).

She desires a grand scheme to ensure her emancipation from her conventional lot.

Dorothea is a woman of some means, and if helping others was her only aim she could do it; philanthropy was, after all, one of the few public areas open to women. In fact, Eliot is rather vague throughout the novel as to where Dorothea's ambitions actually

lie. We hear several times about her designs for cottages, but nothing comes to fruition. She chooses to make Dorothea's interests lie in that most grounded, practical area of architecture and buildings, and yet her feelings of emptiness seem to come much more from a spiritual or intellectual yearning, a yearning to act, to be effective, to participate beyond the domestic sphere. Dorothea cannot find an outlet for her talents, but the suspicion is that she doesn't actually try terribly hard to find something she could do. Why could Eliot not make her a Florence Nightingale, or a Josephine Butler or Emily Davies? Perhaps Dorothea's very desire for self-effacement is what prevents her living a public life. She seeks a purpose to her life, which, whilst putting her needs centrally, still sees the helping of others as its aim because her yearning to be effective comes so explicitly out of a Christian tradition of self-abnegation and self-sacrifice. She sees her marriage to Casaubon as answering all her needs: 'the union which attracted her was one that would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grander path' (p.51).

Although her notion of living a grand life is far from self-aggrandising, we see again the centrality which Dorothea accords her needs; whilst talking about submission, this passage is all about what Dorothea will get out of marriage: deliverance, freedom, the 'grander path'. And submission is, of course, voluntary. When she has agreed to marry Casaubon she says 'It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works' (p.51). Yet it is certainly convenient that what she perceives as her duty is also the thing that she wants most to do; she has legitimised her pursuit of the things that most interest her, studying and learning, in terms of her grand scheme of submitting herself to a noble life of service to a great man.

It would be wrong to suggest that Dorothea is completely deluding herself as to her motives, however. Eliot tells us that 'it was not entirely out of devotion to her future husband that she wished to know Latin and Greek. These provinces of masculine knowledge seem to her a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly' (p.88). Yet she goes on almost to prefigure her failure: 'she had not reached that point of renunciation at which she would have been satisfied with having a wise husband; she wished, poor child, to be wise herself' (p.88). Why 'poor child'? The suggestion is that she will not attain her wish. The answer is perhaps, that having a wise husband is the best she can hope for; wisdom in the sense that Dorothea wants it, was, apparently, not available to a woman.²³ Dorothea feels, most of all, her exclusion from the cultural hegemony. And 'poor child' also because Casaubon turns out not to be the wise husband she was seeking.

It is clear why marriage to a man like Sir James Chetham was unappealing to a woman like Dorothea. Sir James is a good, principled, easy-going man, keen to put in place on his estate the sort of improvements that Dorothea wants to make. Her life with him would require no sacrifice, no fervour, and most of all, no devotion. Dorothea does not just want to help, she wants to work. She sees marriage as a 'state of higher duties', which it would never be with Sir James; he is too grounded in the ordinary, physical world. Dorothea needs to live passionately; she does not want to live comfortably. She looks forward to abandoning her sense of self in her complete devotion to Casaubon's interests. It is ironic that before they marry, Casaubon and Dorothea both think that they want the same thing from marriage. Casaubon tells

²³ And yet Eliot the writer cannot have believed this to be true; we see here the distancing of the narrative voice from Dorothea's aspirations and desires. Eliot ironically separates herself - from inside the cultural hegemony - from the woman's intellectual aspirations, and perhaps, in so doing can be said at this point, to be writing like a man, speaking with the third person authorial voice that implicitly has the [male] wisdom that the 'poor child' cannot hope to attain.

Dorothea that 'the great charm of your sex is its capability of an ardent self-sacrificing affection, and herein we see its fitness to round and complete the existence of our own' (p.73). This 'ardent self-sacrificing' is precisely what Dorothea wants to do. The marriage is apparently going to be based on mutual benefit, recognised by Mrs Cadwallader in her pithy, 'I wish her joy of her hair shirt' (p.85).

The reader has cause for concern long before Dorothea. Before they are married, Casaubon

observed with pleasure that Miss Brooke showed an ardent submissive affection which promised to fulfil his most agreeable previsions of marriage. It had once or twice crossed his mind that possibly there was some deficiency in Dorothea to account for the moderation of his abandonment; but he was unable to discern the deficiency (p.87).

The reader realises both his self-obsession and his lack of passion. He approves her 'ardent submissive affection' but still perceives his own shortcomings in response as a lack of ability on Dorothea's part to evoke the correct feeling, not a sign of his own inability to feel.

So why does her marriage not make Dorothea happy? What is to blame? Is it her expectations, her husband, her own character, or the institution of marriage itself? If Dorothea's expectations were misguided, so were Casaubon's. Dorothea expected something greater, Casaubon something less. Dorothea expected someone she could revere, Casaubon expected reverence; and neither could cope when the near-deity turned out to be a man with feet of clay. Her husband is undoubtedly partly to blame, and not just because of the pointlessness of his life's work. He fails to appreciate Dorothea's great gifts; he is self-obsessed, unreasonable and cold. But he has a lot to live up to. Dorothea expects him to give her whole life purpose; she looks forward to sacrificing her self to his needs. *Middlemarch* is not only about the pressures that

society puts on women. If women were supposed to live for and through their husbands, what kind of pressure did that put men under? The fear of failure must be doubled, as well as the glory of success. The question of women's submission to bad husbands was certainly an issue, but so too were the unrealistic expectations men laboured under. And whilst it may not have been easy for women to live through others, what would happen if those others did not want you to live for them? We can certainly pity Casaubon, even if we cannot like him. As the narrator says,

For my part I am very sorry for him. It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self - never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of thought, the ardour of a passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted (p.314).

Clearly, he is everything that is opposite to Dorothea; he has no passion for living.

Dorothea, however, is far from perfect. She is opinionated, with a tendency to superior high-mindedness.²⁴ She has the capacity for self-delusion, and she is quick to take offence. When Casaubon rather bad-temperedly assumes in Dorothea a wish for a visit that would distract him from his work

this gratuitous defence of himself against selfish complaint on her part, was too sharp a sting to be meditated on until after it had been resented...the flash of her eyes... 'Why do you attribute to me a wish for anything that would annoy you? You speak to me as if I were something you have to contend against. Wait at least until I appear to consult my own pleasure apart from yours' (p.316).

Dorothea finds that her notions of submission do not come as readily as she imagined. She had imagined submitting to something great, not the fractious irritations of a selfish man. But it is part of Dorothea's real goodness, and also Eliot's complex

²⁴ Eliot tells us that when Dorothea gives most of their mother's jewellery to Celia, saying that she would not wear it 'There was a strong assumption of superiority in this Puritanic toleration,

treatment of the undoubted attractions of martyrdom, that Dorothea does not blame Casaubon and feel she has been released from the bonds of self-submission by the knowledge that her husband does not deserve her sacrifice. If it is noble to submit to a worthy mind, how much more noble to submit to a lesser one in the certain knowledge that the submission is undeserved? It would be too easy to submit to greatness (certainly for a woman like Dorothea), but it would not be sacrificial.

Eliot is clear about the egoism involved in martyrdom. In a letter of 1842 to Maria Lewis she said

The martyr at the stake seeks its gratification as much as the court sycophant, the difference lying in the comparative dignity and beauty of the two egos. People absurdly talk of self-denial - why there is none in Virtue to a being of moral excellence - the greatest torture to such a soul would be to run counter to the dictates of conscience, to wallow in the slough of meanness, deception, revenge or sensuality.²⁵

So subtly nuanced is Eliot's treatment of the seductiveness of self-sacrifice, that at no point, despite her intensity and fervency, does Dorothea appear melodramatic, and this letter helps explain why. Eliot's undoubted awareness of the attractions of the excitement of self-sacrifice do not lead her to trivialise Dorothea's situation; at no stage is the reader left in any doubt of the integrity of her motives. The conflicts she finds within herself, prompted by her marriage, are never treated as anything less than real and true; Dorothea does not create false dilemmas for the sake of drama. If Casaubon were the great man Dorothea had initially thought him, there would be no self-denial; it is his pedestrian meanness, his petty jealousies and selfishness that makes her attempt to submit to him so moving; there is no glory in the submission of her 'moral excellence' to this tetchy old man. Unlike Rosamund for example,

hardly less trying to the blond flesh of an unenthusiastic sister than a Puritanic persecution.' p.35.

²⁵ Quoted in Barrett, *Vocation and Desire*, p.46.

Dorothea is not self-conscious, she does not live her life with a view to how she, and her sacrifice to Casaubon, appears to others. Celia and others think that Dorothea idealises and craves an imagined experience of self-sacrifice, but the supposed fantasy that she wants to embrace is actually translated in her real life into a real virtue.

An awareness of the attractions of this complete self-abnegation is necessary for us to understand why Dorothea finally decides to promise Casaubon that she will abide by his posthumous wishes, pledging herself to obedience without knowing what she is agreeing to, but suspecting that it will be something that she will not like. Her struggle with the issue is a fight between what she owes herself, and complete subjection to Casaubon. She starts by telling him 'I desire with my whole soul to do what will comfort you; but I cannot...pledge to do I know not what' (p.519). The reader's sympathy is with Dorothea completely here; we know Casaubon is bitter and unreasonable. We do not think that Dorothea should agree with him purely for the sake of obedience or duty, because we do not trust his judgment. Eliot could easily have made Dorothea refuse, without her losing any sympathy from the reader because Casaubon himself is such an unattractive character; we suspect his motives. Dorothea herself 'saw clearly enough the whole situation, yet she was fettered: she could not smite the stricken soul that entreated her' (p.523). Rather than saving Dorothea by allowing her sense of self-protection to prevail, and having her refuse her agreement, Eliot saves her by killing Casaubon. Dorothea, whilst willing to make the final sacrifice is saved from doing so, and thus allowed to have her traditional happy ending. She acquires all the virtue of self-sacrifice, without having to suffer the consequences. So strong is the will towards self-sacrifice, and the power of that imperative in the Victorian imagination of 'good' women, even such a woman as Eliot cannot face forcing Dorothea into having to choose to disobey Casaubon, despite the

fact that he is totally unsympathetic at this point. This of course raises the issue of the inseparability of the notions of duty and self-sacrifice. There is not a straightforward choice between the unjust Casaubon and the right but self-sacrificing Dorothea. We know that Dorothea would have agreed to Casaubon's request against the dictates of logic, reason and justice. Because of the association with the idea of duty, this does not seem like a pointless, illogical and dramatic gesture. We can imagine Dorothea refusing to sacrifice herself to a whim, but we cannot imagine her refusing to do her duty.

Because Dorothea's pursuit of grandeur in her life is never for public glory, the thought does sometimes occur to the reader, in the early stages of the novel at least, that Dorothea should have become a nun. She feels 'in this solemnly pledged union of her life, duty would present itself in some new form of inspiration and give a new meaning to wifely love' (p.307). All this talk of solemn pledges and inspiration reflects Dorothea's yearning for spirituality, and when she outlines her beliefs, she could be describing the aims of prayer and the contemplative life. She thinks 'that by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil - widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower' (p.427). Dorothea, though, is not conventionally religious. Despite the invocation of St Theresa in the Prelude, and an early comparison between the simplicity of her clothing with that of the 'Blessed Virgin' (p.29), Dorothea does not claim self-sacrifice as a Christian virtue. Her quest is written in conventionally theological terms - she wants to engage in nothing less than the fight of good against evil, light against dark, but allegiance to the Christian God does not underwrite her actions. She says she has a belief of her own,

which comforts her, but when Will tries to label her belief system ‘a beautiful mysticism’ she replies

‘Please not to call it by any name... You will say it is Persian, or something else geographical. It is my life, I have found it out, and cannot part with it. I have always been finding out my religion since I was a little girl. I used to pray so much - now I hardly ever pray.’
(p.427)

Part of Dorothea’s restless yearning after some great purpose is a result of her having been let down by religion; she has not accepted the Christianity she was reared to and she cannot pray to God. There are few direct references to Christianity; even though, in the first chapter we are told ‘Dorothea knew many passages of Pascal’s *Pensées* and of Jeremy Taylor by heart; and to her the destinies of mankind, seen by the light of Christianity, made the solitudes of feminine fashion appear an occupation for Bedlam’ (p.30). This has the effect however, of distancing Dorothea from Christianity; she sees it in the light of her reading about religion, not her feeling for it. There is almost a suggestion here that Christianity is only one light that the ‘destinies of mankind’ can be seen in. Although she specifically talks about ‘divine power’ (p.427) and ‘the grander path’ (p.51) it is noteworthy that she looks for her satisfactions in the human, not the religious world. Her desire to work for the greater good comes from a certain objective morality in her, not from her allegiance to a religious code of conduct. Dorothea does not need God to make her good. Her gradual disillusion with Casaubon, the clergyman, reflects and represents her disillusion with the church.

Without wishing to conflate author and character, it is interesting to note that, according to Kathryn Hughes, Eliot’s expressed purpose was ‘to show readers “those vital elements which bind men together and give a higher worthiness to their existence” while trying to wean them off their dependency on “an outworn teaching”

based on “transient forms”²⁶ Karen Chase points out the importance of Ludwig Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* (1854) to Eliot’s thinking. She translated it from the original German, and, Chase says, was deeply influenced by

its great sceptical claim...that religion is a human construction which has prevented social progress by diverting reverence from humanity itself to the theological images it has made...Humanity, not divinity, must become the object of worship...With Feuerbach she held that human capacities are the source of any divine promise.²⁷

What is fascinating in *Middlemarch* is the centrality accorded the notion of female self-sacrifice in a text which clearly rejects a conventional religious framework. For Eliot, female self-sacrifice, whilst recognisable as part of a long Christian tradition of self-abnegation, has been absorbed into a humanist questioning of the roles of women, and of the relations between the self and others.

The irony of Dorothea’s position after her marriage to Casaubon is that the act that was supposed to make her subsume herself in the life and needs of another has actually caused her to concentrate more on herself. She finds herself ‘plunged in tumultuous preoccupation with her personal lot’ (p.224) as she struggles to understand her feelings of desolation. This leads us to consider the major weakness of *Middlemarch*, which is Dorothea’s eventual fate. For such an undoubtedly exceptional woman, Dorothea ends up with a completely unexceptional life. When Ladislav becomes an ‘ardent public man’ and gets himself elected to Parliament, Dorothea, we are told, is perfectly happy because she could ‘give him wifely help’(p.894). It is not only the reader who may find this dissatisfying; Eliot pre-empts criticism by stating

²⁶ Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot, The Last Victorian* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999), p. 365. She is quoting from a letter from Eliot to Dr Clifford Allbutt.

²⁷ Karen Chase, *George Eliot: Middlemarch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.4-5.

Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done (p.894).

Eliot, having so eloquently conveyed throughout the novel the frustrations of exclusion from the cultural hegemony for at least a certain sort of woman, seems to have finally accepted the status quo, even if reluctantly. Here, the narrator is almost daring the reader to come up with an alternative future for Dorothea; as if aware that she has wasted Dorothea, but could not come up with anything better for her. Eliot is not, after all, attacking marriage, nor even, it seems, marriage for exceptional women like Dorothea. She is made happy in the end by that most conventional of means, by using her influence for good in the domestic sphere. Her desire to live a grand life has been assuaged, we are led to believe, by helping her husband. All that has changed is the husband. Will is Dorothea's reward for her life with Casaubon. The narrator is amused by Will in many respects; she gently makes fun of his 'romantic hero', pretentious elements - the way he shakes his hair back, his extravagant gestures - but she seems to think he is right for Dorothea. They are similar in many ways; Will too has a desire for grandeur. When he accepts the post on Mr Brooke's paper he is sorry that it is 'not that indeterminate loftiest thing which he had once dreamed of as alone worthy of continuous effort' (p.501) and they are both driven by the concept of the grand impulse; Will worships Dorothea because she represents for him some notion about the perfect woman, an ideal of womanliness.

But Will provides more than a conventionally happy ending for Dorothea. She has to learn painfully what she has missed out of her vision of her perfect life with Casaubon. The main reason that her marriage with him fails, and her marriage to Will succeeds is that she loves Will passionately. Although she does not recognise it at the

time, what she feels for Will is no less than love at first sight, and when she suspects that he is having an affair with Rosamond, she is frantic with jealousy. In other words, in love, the exceptional Dorothea is much like any other woman. Passion intervenes to make Dorothea the dissatisfied outsider into Dorothea the happy wife. This is why Dorothea could never have been a nun, nor indeed a contented wife to Casaubon; she is a sexually passionate woman and can only be truly happy when she is able to express that strong element within herself. But still, the ending feels unsatisfactory, because Eliot has made Dorothea exceptional and then conventional. One feels she could almost as easily have married James Chetham, and done good works on his estate. All the yearnings of her earlier life, her greatness, her grandeur, are suddenly diminished; resolved by the imposition of mere sexual fulfilment, mere personal happiness. The whole notion of women's happiness seems to be, at the end of the novel, tied up in the sphere of interpersonal relationships, not in the wider world. If the eventual happiness of Mary Garth and Celia (who represent the 'ordinary' woman, neither driven like Dorothea, nor obsessively selfish like Rosamond) can be said to represent Eliot's notion of happiness for women (that is, grounded in the affections and family life, not in the public sphere) then perhaps it may be more understandable that Dorothea ended as she did.

Having said as much, however, Dorothea's end still feels like a waste of a magnificent woman, an acceptance of the status quo which does not sit well with the Dorothea we have known. From being a strong, vital character she seems to just dwindle and disappear. It is not quite convincing to say that the critique of the limitations of women's lives is implicit in the story - that in Dorothea's end Eliot is criticising the paucity of Dorothea's options. Although Dorothea Barrett claims that Eliot's 'feminism is to be found in the tension between the monumental

characterizations of her heroines and the inadequate options available to them'²⁸, the fact that at the end Eliot underwrites Dorothea's contentment so insistently belies this opinion. She does not suggest that Dorothea is settling for the best she can do under trying circumstances. Nor is it enough to say that Eliot was forced into the ending she chose by the conventions then current. It is not true to say that the audience of the time would not have accepted a different ending, as even contemporary reviewers found Dorothea's end unsatisfying. Laura Morgan Green quotes the criticism of Sidney Colvin from 1873 in which, speaking of the marriage of Will and Dorothea he says 'There is no sense of triumph, there is rather a sense of sadness in a subdued and restricted, if not now thwarted destiny'.²⁹

Some critics have concluded that the novel ends as it does purely because of the demands of realism. Karen Chase, for example, draws on the work of Suzanne Graver to assert

George Eliot endures a tension between the desire to record facts and the longing to invoke ideals; in Graver's terms this leads to a strain between 'idealism of conception and realism of presentation'...it is right to follow Graver and to see the epic life in opposition to a realist method that appropriates grandeur into the context of the local, the small, the sordid.³⁰

However, this fails to recognise the extent to which Dorothea merely fades out of the novel. There is certainly some conflict between realism and the epic, but Dorothea's ending could have felt less 'tidied away' with no sacrifice of realism. What Chase later refers to as Dorothea's 'success-in-failure' could just as easily have been called her 'failure-in-success'.³¹

²⁸ Barrett, *Vocation and Desire*, p. 178.

²⁹ Morgan Green, *Educating Women*, p. 91.

³⁰ Chase, *George Eliot*, p.30.

³¹ Chase, *George Eliot*, p.35.

Many feminist critics have objected to the fact that Eliot never allowed her heroines the successes she herself enjoyed. Morgan Green thinks that this is completely comprehensible. She says that

Because Eliot's relationship to liberal individualism was ambivalent, combining a concern with individuals at intellectual and emotional odds with their social situations (such as Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke) with an emphatic sense of the importance of social interrelations, her ambivalence about the project of transferring individualist values to women is not surprising. 'I care so much about individual happiness that I think it is a great thing to work for, only to make half-a-dozen lives rather better than they might otherwise be.'³²

So individual happiness is apparently to be gained by making others happy, which sounds dangerously close to the writings of Sarah Stickney Ellis, which will be explored in chapter two. Morgan Green suggests that Dorothea has the ending she does because

Eliot...was thoroughly imbued with the opposition between individual and social needs inherent in the individualist view of the subject... Subjectivity for Eliot is essentially interior, feminine and defined by renunciation - that is to say, by the vision of domestic ideology rather than liberal individualism.³³

Morgan Green seems to suggest that for Eliot at least, Dorothea's ending would not be a failure, nor even a compromise. It is, instead, the acceptance of the triumph of social relations over the needs of the individual, of selflessness over selfishness, of domestic ideology over liberal individualism.

Dorothea Barrett claims that the novel

anticipates modernism in the tepidness of its ending. In Victorian novels, generally speaking, we leave protagonists either happy or dead. The assumption that *Middlemarch* conforms to this

³² Morgan Green, *Educating Women*, p.73. The sentence quoted comes from a letter written by George Eliot to Emily Davies on the opening of Girton College, and is cited in Barbara Stephen, *Emily Davies and Girton College*.

³³ Morgan Green, *Educating Women*, p.99.

convention has led to the many misreadings of Dorothea's second marriage as a failed attempt to make a happy ending.³⁴

This seems too simplistic; the objection is not that Eliot failed to construct a happy ending, but that it is inconsistent and trivialises the novel as a whole. It is not the unconventional ending that disturbs the reader, but the denial of the central issues of the novel which it implies; the nature of Dorothea's fate negates all her painful questing in the rest of the book. Dorothea's ending remains unsatisfying because it feels as though Eliot did not believe in it herself. Surely if Eliot had been convinced that a woman such as Dorothea Brooke would have been happy sacrificing all her deeply held beliefs for life as a wife and mother Dorothea would not have drifted off beyond the margins of the novel so tamely. It is significant that we do not see what happens to Dorothea; we are told about it. She can no longer be trusted to tell her own story. The narrator reports on her, disposing of her in a very few paragraphs, but we never see her again.

Dorothea Barrett observes that 'George Eliot focuses on selflessness, submission, renunciation and meekness, although it is important to remember that these attributes are the hard-won achievements of heroines by nature anything but meek'.³⁵ This suggests the extent to which Eliot at least believed that these sorts of attributes were at the centre of mid-Victorian ideas of womanhood. She may not have believed that they were natural attributes, but she seemed to believe that they were essential for her audience to recognise a good woman. It is indicative of the power that these conventional elements of mid-Victorian imagining of the essential attributes of womanhood had, even over the unconventional and liberated imagination of a George Eliot, that she felt forced to give Dorothea the ending she did.

³⁴ Barrett, *Vocation and Desire*, p.125.

In *The Ideology of Conduct*, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard

Tennenhouse point out that 'information about women...is still used primarily to essentialize women, to fix their natures, and in this way to remove them from the theater of political events that nature has apparently designated for men'.³⁶ So many literary representations of women were thus constructed because of the underlying importance of the self-sacrificing woman to mid-Victorian culture. It is important to remember that, as well as reflecting ideologies, literature can also modify and help to produce them. By concentrating on other key treatments of the fundamental notion of female self-sacrifice that Eliot outlined in *Middlemarch*, we will see how the concept was not a given, but a dynamic, fluid, vital working through of the possibilities of female power.

³⁵ Barrett, *Vocation and Desire*, p.50.

³⁶ Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, 'The Literature of Conduct, the Conduct of Literature and the politics of desire: an introduction', in *Ideology of Conduct* (London: Methuen, 1987), p.4.

Chapter Two

Non-fictional writing

Considering that in mid-Victorian discourse, women's self-sacrificial nature was often assumed to be a given, sexually essential, the thing that no real woman could be without, it is perhaps surprising that it should actually feature so prominently in non-fictional discourse. For something that was seemingly an integral part of the commonsensical view of women, it generated a great deal of discussion. This suggests that it was not actually a given at all, but that it was constantly subject to revision and reaffirmation. In order to give some context to the novels which will be discussed later, this chapter will consider the treatment of the idea of self-sacrifice in a range of non-fictional texts, including conduct books, polemical writings, reviews and articles.

Perhaps the most interesting of these, despite being the most apparently conventional (or perhaps because of that) are the conduct books. This is largely because of the paradoxes that lie at the heart of most of these apparently straightforwardly didactic works. Most conduct books, as we will see, are based on the idea that there is a certain sort of 'natural' woman, but the proliferation of this type of literature illustrates the dilemma; that what is natural also seems to need to be taught. Nancy Armstrong claims that conduct books were highly instrumental in creating this vision of natural female characteristics. She says

The new curriculum [provided by the conduct books of the late seventeenth century]...aimed at producing a woman whose value resided chiefly in her femaleness rather than in traditional signs of status, a woman who possessed psychological depth rather than a physically attractive surface, one who, in other words, excelled in the qualities that differentiated her from the male.¹

¹ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.19.

Although Armstrong refers here to the origins of conduct books in the last two decades of the seventeenth century, she does not see the gradual decrease in the number of conduct books over the next two centuries as a sign of the decline of the potency of that particular female ideal. Rather, she takes this decline to be because 'the ideal had passed into the domain of common sense'.² This acceptance of an ideal of womanhood, Armstrong asserts, allows the assumption of 'horizontal affiliations'³ within society, by making gender, not birth or class or status, the most important difference between individuals. While it may be true to say that this sort of 'domestic' woman had entered the realm of commonsense, it is by no means certain that her persistence there could be taken for granted. In fact, many of the conduct books of the mid-nineteenth century take on a tone of exhortation to persuade woman to return to an earlier, more natural state of womanhood which is in danger of being lost.

According to Sarah Stickney Ellis her task is motivated by a desire 'to win back to the homes of England, the boasted felicity for which they were once famed'⁴ because 'the greater portion of the young ladies (for they are no longer **women**) of the present day, are distinguished by a morbid listlessness of mind and body, except when under the influence of stimulus' (p.12). Sarah Lewis, in *Woman's Mission* (published 1839) harks back to the age of chivalry when

the name of woman is not associated in the degrading catalogue of men's pleasures, with his bottle and his horse, but is coupled with all that is fair and pure in nature, - the fields, the birds, the flowers;

² Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 63.

³ Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, p. 65.

⁴ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England of England. Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (London: Fisher, Son & Co., 1839), p. 3. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

or high in virtue and sentiment, - with honour, glory and self-sacrifice.⁵

Both Ellis and Lewis look back to a better time, to an idyll when women still knew what it meant to be a woman. For both Ellis and Lewis, the name of woman has been degraded, because women have lost their true nature. Lewis explicitly makes a connection between womanhood and nature - fields, birds, flowers - and Ellis decries the modern young lady's dependence on unnatural stimuli. Both texts operate by seeming to remind women of their proper, natural role; they are apparently not asserting anything new for women, merely recalling them to their real selves. These reminders to women of their true role could be seen to some extent as attempts to resolve the paradox of the natural needing to be taught; they are not teaching anew, but recalling the forgotten. In the main, however, the conduct books appear not to notice that they are paradoxical in this way. These authors refuse to recognise that they have any part in the construction of the Victorian woman's domestic ideal - they are telling it like it always has been - attempting thus to naturalise women's role within the home and family, as part of the apparently eternal universal domestic scene; the always already.

Elizabeth Sandford in *Female Improvement* (1848) recognises that all women may not possess the 'natural' womanly characteristics. She accommodates this within her vision of true womanliness, not by expanding the ideal, but by removing these unfortunate creatures from the sex. In talking about 'tenderness of heart' she says that it is

a grace which we expect to find in her. We say of one who is deficient in it that she is *unnatural*, - an alien from her sex. And this

⁵ Sarah Lewis, *Woman's Mission* (London: J.W. Parker, 1842), p.46. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

quality is understood to be independent of education or external circumstance. It is part of *woman*.⁶

Ellis too stresses the idea of woman and her supposedly essential qualities when she asserts that 'the woman herself is nothing in comparison with her attributes' (p.30), which seems to suggest that a woman consists merely of a list of these womanly particulars. Her womanly features are what make her a woman; she has, apparently, no intrinsic self, and if she is lacking in these features, she is unnatural. Ellis appears not to notice the disjunction between her advocacy of the natural charms of woman - her 'personal attentions arising spontaneously from the heart' (p.16) - and her advice to women to

lay aside all her natural caprice, her love of self-indulgence, her vanity, her indolence - in short, her very self - and assuming a new nature, which nothing less than watchfulness and prayer can enable her constantly to maintain, to spend her mental and moral capabilities in devising means for promoting the happiness of others, while her own derives a remote and secondary existence from theirs (p.45).

This hardly smacks of the spontaneity of woman's 'ever-flowing and inexhaustible fountain' (p.16) of love. Women must lay aside their 'natural' tendencies, and a new nature must be 'assumed'.

Rather than the involuntary outpouring of human kindness which we have just been asked to believe that a woman cannot prevent, 'nothing less than watchfulness and prayer' can enable to her to maintain her stance, and she spends herself in devising means for promoting the happiness of others. This is not intuitively artless, it is meticulously planned, and, furthermore, very hard work. Paradoxically, a woman can only be happy if she is unconscious of the real reason that she wants others to be happy; if she actually sets out to make herself indispensable she becomes too knowing

⁶ Elizabeth Sandford, *Female Improvement* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman,

and manipulative. Ellis is very strict on those women who display ‘caprice [which] refers more to a weak and vain desire to be important; affectation to a desire to make ourselves admired’ (p.291). She seems unaware of the contradiction, and thus does not specify how a woman is supposed to be consciously unconscious, selflessly self-interested and naturally unnatural. These writers do not attempt to explain how a woman can attain an ideal of womanliness which is supposedly underpinned by self-forgetfulness, but which state can only apparently be arrived at by a complete and constant self-awareness.

Women, by moving away from their real womanliness, have not just offended against the laws of nature, but of God. Ellis claims that ‘the women of England were once better satisfied with that instrumentality of Divine wisdom by which they were placed in their proper sphere’ (p.15). Their proper sphere is that of ‘home comforts and fireside virtues’ (p. 10); and these virtues are, of course, the natural feminine ones.

All these conduct books talk of women’s work in extremely energetic terms. Whilst ostensibly urging women to find their focus in the domestic sphere, they tend to deploy the language of public engagement, a physically strenuous rhetoric of battle. Urging confinement, they give a sense of acting on the public stage. Ellis, for example, starts with a rallying call to action; she makes it sound as though there is essential, exciting work to be done. She ‘urgently demands a fresh exercise of moral power...to win back to the homes of England, the boasted felicity for which they were once famed’ (p.4), while Sarah Lewis exhorts women in even more vigorous terms.

Here is an inexhaustible field of effort, an inexhaustible field of happiness; and here women are the undoubted agents, and they

complain of having no scope for exertion! The happiness without which wealth, honours, nay, intellectual pleasures, are but gilded toys, it is theirs to produce and foster; and they have no mission! The only bliss of Paradise that has survived the fall is deposited in their keeping, and they have no importance! (p.21)

Here Lewis specifically elevates the woman's realm above the man's, by calling *his* satisfactions - wealth, honours, intellectual pleasures - 'gilded toys' which can only be given meaning by being put within a framework of something which is within the woman's gift; domestic happiness. She asserts that

if women could once be made to understand their real mission in this world, and to feel their own importance and responsibility, a surprising change must immediately take place in society, giving it a higher tone and a purer spirit (p.ix).

And yet, even as she claims such heights for woman's mission, she feels forced to diminish its aspirations. Although Lewis is proposing here a radical change for the better in the whole of society, she refers to *Woman's Mission*, her manifesto for this scheme, as 'this little work' (p.viii). Again, this apparently modest and self-effacing little woman sets herself up against (male) political theorists by claiming that

Political theorists expect moral results from the amendment of political institutions; whereas it is obvious that such improvements are the effect, and not the cause, of the moral progress of the governed (p.20).

She privileges the ways that women know over the ways that men know. Women know because their thinking is based in real life, in the common-sense ('it is obvious') rather than men's way of positing meaningless theories easily disproved by life. The nebulous world of the intellect (men's sphere) is seen as inferior to real life (women's sphere).

This echoes another of the major difficulties of conduct books; they attempt the difficult task of expanding and contracting women's sphere at the same time. It is perhaps unsurprising that these texts contain inconsistencies. Their whole *raison*

d'être is based on a contradiction; they insist on women's physical confinement in the home, whilst extending their sphere of influence to 'inexhaustible fields', simultaneously recognising women's need for exertion, and reining it in to the limits of their own fireside. Unusually, Sarah Lewis does recognise the contradiction. She says that

it is an apparent inconsistency to recommend at the same time expansion of views and contraction of operation; to awaken the sense of power, and to require that the exercise of it be limited...that intellect is to be invigorated only to enlighten conscience...that accomplishments and graces are to be cultivated only, or chiefly, to adorn obscurity; a list of somewhat paradoxical propositions (pp.52-53).

She does not try, however, to resolve the paradox; she merely observes that it must be accepted. It could be argued that the idealisation of women's self-sacrifice represents an attempt to reconcile these two oppositions. As Chase and Levenson have observed, in a discussion of Ellis's work, 'whatever the immediate interests served by an ideology of confinement, the wife grows into a figure of looming consequence', and it this contradiction of simultaneous 'looming consequence' and invisibility which makes the idea of self-sacrifice so complex.⁷

Some of the conduct books directly associate the notions of happiness and self-sacrifice. Lewis, for example, sees happiness, self-sacrifice and Christianity as inseparable:

Christianity is the only scheme which has annexed happiness to self-renunciation...This doctrine of self-renunciation, as a source of happiness, is at first very surprising...because it is in direct opposition to the natural impulses of the human heart...love produces self-forgetfulness, and self-forgetfulness produces happiness (pp.138-139).

⁷ Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), P.81.

What is fascinating is the open expression of the element of self-interest here; self-forgetfulness as a way to the happiness of the individual woman. This is in direct contradiction to Lewis's earlier expressed ideal of 'that divine spirit of unselfish rectitude, which has love for its origin, and the good of others for its aim' (p.23). In this circular argument, love produces self-forgetfulness, and self-forgetfulness produces love.

Ellis reflects the same confusion. She claims that a woman's quest for personal happiness can only be maintained in direct opposition to the general happiness of humanity. In pursuing her own happiness a woman must necessarily detract from the happiness of others. She insists on the selflessness of womanly behaviour, but at the same time points out that

The personal services she is thus enabled to render, enhance her value in the domestic circle...they not only dignify the performer, but confer happiness as well as obligation (p.16).

Elizabeth Sandford, in her 1839 *Woman in Her Social and Domestic*

Character, is even more direct:

in proportion to her endeavours to make those around her happy, she will be esteemed and loved. She will secure, by her excellence...interest and regard...it is both her duty and her interest to cultivate those qualities which will render her most agreeable...neither will her opinion be of weight, or her wishes much respected, unless, by her own amiable and judicious conduct, she merits such attention.⁸

All this seems to reveal great anxiety about the precariousness of the dependent position of women. It suggests not just a fear of being overlooked or disregarded; the very idea that 'value enhancement' is needed, or a sense of 'obligation' necessary,

⁸ Elizabeth Sandford, *Woman in her Social and Domestic Character* (London: Longman, Orne, Brown, Green and Longman, 1839), pp.2-3.

introduces nothing less than the fear of abandonment. Self-sacrifice becomes a necessary weapon in a woman's armoury, and the maintenance of love and regard essential for the dependent woman.

What will happen to women who fail to evoke this sense of obligation? Ellis paints a tragic, threatening picture:

What pen can describe the wretchedness of that woman, who finds herself doomed to live unloved; and to whom can she look for confidence and affection, if shut out from the natural sources of enjoyment at home? There is no loneliness...bearing the slightest comparison with that of an unloved wife (p.277).

Rather than displaying the selflessness of women's services, Ellis's and Sandford's advice seems far from disinterested; it surely rather advocates women to entrench their position and become indispensable by their attentions to others. It seems hardly compatible with the claim made by Ellis earlier in her text where she states that women's administering to others makes them happy, not because it ensures their secure position at the heart of the family, but because it allows an outlet for 'the overflow of those floods of human kindness, which it is one of the happiest and most ennobling duties of women to administer.' (p. 21) But this insistence that women care for others because self-sacrifice is what women naturally do, and must do to be happy, somehow fails to conceal the fear of the bleak prospects for any woman who fails to please. Ellis has an explicit warning to the woman who obviously puts her own needs first:

if, in the first instance, they are induced by selfish feeling to consult their own immediate interest or convenience, they are, in a secondary manner, undermining their own happiness by failing to consult that of the being whose destiny is linked with theirs (p.277).

What is most striking throughout all of this, is the centrality accorded the idea of women's happiness in texts which, ostensibly at least, deny women all right to pursue

happiness. All of the advice, all of the exhortations to think of others, are, in the end, based on what will best serve the woman. Woman's happiness can only be attained by her willingness to sacrifice it.

The conduct books though, are very critical of women's direct pursuit of happiness as an end in itself. The modern woman or Girl of the Period is not really happy, because she lives for herself. She is a discontented flibbertigibbet, pining for excitement and constant stimulus. There is a very definite distinction between excitement and true happiness. Excitement is a sort of false happiness, not based on what is right and good, whereas women's true happiness comes from the provision of general happiness to humankind. Contentment, according to Ellis, is conspicuously absent in modern young women, who are 'lively when excited, but no sooner does the excitement cease, than they fall back into their habitual listlessness' (p.89).

This attitude was still being expressed some twenty five years later. In 1864, in an unsigned article in *Townsend's Monthly Selection of Parisian Costumes* the writer is equally stern.

The gay, the rattling and laughing, are, unless some party of pleasure, or something out of the domestic life, is going on, generally dull. Some stimulus is always craved after by this description of women; some sight to be seen, something to see or hear other than what is to be found at home, which, as it affords no excitement, nothing 'to raise and keep up the spirits', is looked upon merely as a place to be at for want of a better.⁹

To combat this concentration on self, Ellis advocates a system of 'seeking my own happiness only in the happiness of others' (p.91) because ' "What shall I do to gratify myself - to be admired - or to vary the tenor of my existence?" are not the questions a woman of right feeling asks' (p.23).

⁹ 'Flighty Girls and Good Wives', from *Townsend's Monthly Selection of Parisian Costumes*, no. 142, (1864), in *Victorian Women's Magazines*, ed. Margaret Beetham and Kay Boardman (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001), p.117.

This seeking of other's happiness is not necessarily to be found in charitable works; Ellis is suspicious of philanthropy for women, because she realises that there is very little sacrifice involved. She worries because

there appears to me some ground to fear, that the amusement of doing public good, the excitement it produces, and especially the exemption it purchases from domestic requirements, has something to do with the zeal evinced by some young females (p.246).

Sandford too, identifies activity with excitement, suggesting that

it is not the excess, but the misapplication of zeal that we lament; - it is not, that such persons do too much for religion, nor that they have it too much at heart;...but...that they identify it...with mere excitement...there is often more to attract in what is uncommon and extravagant than in genuine piety (p.103)

She warns:

The young woman who is versed in romances will, no doubt, acquire the language of sentiment. She will have a sigh and a tear for every occasion...even imagine it very pretty and picturesque to appear in a cottage, - and to drop a guinea on a poor man's table, and to receive, with blushing modesty, his lavish thanks. But when the effort is really to be made, - when she finds that charity involves self-denial and exertion...that all this is to be done without observation or applause, - that there is no one to overhear her gentle voice, or to watch her gliding footsteps, or to trace her fairy form as she passes down the village street, - then her philanthropic ardour cools...There is a romance in grief which is highly poetic' (pp.156-157).

What is striking in this passage is not her apparent criticism of misguided philanthropy, but her understanding of the attractions of the staging of it - the voice, footsteps and fairy form. Sandford is torn, in this picture, between ridicule and enjoyment. Again, we see here the general failure of the conduct books to explain how a woman is supposed to be constantly aware of the motives which prompt her actions and thoughts, and yet, at the same time, self-forgetting.

Ellis has no time for that nervous sickliness so often associated with stereotypes of the Victorian woman. She derides those women who feel themselves

possessed of 'nerves'. Here again we see exhortations to action; Ellis feels that energy and vigour are needed for women's great work, and warns against

that assumption of delicacy which unfits them for the real business of life, [which] is more to be dreaded in its fatal influence upon their happiness, than the most agonizing disease by which they could be afflicted (p.107).

This 'fatal influence' is women's lack of ability, if they are too delicate, to make themselves indispensable; the very fact of their reliance on others means that far from clinging dependency being recommended, active consolidation of their position is promoted. The effect produced is a peculiar mix of fear and bravery which is hard to reconcile.

That said, the conduct books do recognise the need for a purposeful, important existence for women, and, in their concentration on the grandeur of self-sacrifice, do offer it. Their treatment of the attractions of self-sacrifice seems to come from a deep understanding of the blankness at the centre of the lives of many mid-Victorian women, and the confusions and lack of consistency in their analyses of the situation do nothing to undermine this. These are not cold, polemical works. These women are passionate advocates of a way of living which, for all their protests against the pursuit of happiness, puts women's needs and desires at its centre.

Lewis is clear about the connection between the domestic and the grand. She asserts:

There are, morally speaking, no small duties. Nothing that influences human virtue and happiness can really be trifling, and what more influences them than the despised, because limited, duties assigned to women (p.72).

As Chase and Levenson put it, 'The trembling sense of constant crisis, the thrill of permanent emergency, the demand for an ever vigilant readiness - this is the pervasive

image.¹⁰ Here is a framework that elevates the small tasks of domestic routine into something greater. Sandford understands so completely the seductiveness of existence conceived as drama that it is worth quoting her at length.

Romance...is that poetry of sentiment which imparts to character or incident, something of the beautiful or the sublime; which elevates us to a higher sphere; which gives an ardour to affection, a life to thought, a glow to imagination: and which lends so warm and sunny a hue to the portraiture of life, that it ceases to appear the vulgar, and cold, and dull, and monotonous reality which common sense alone would make it...Life has its romance, and to this it owes much of its charm. It is not that every woman is a heroine, and every individual history a novel; but there are scenes and incidents in real life...that we need not be indebted to fiction for the development of romance...And although a Quixotic quest after adventures is as silly as it is vain; and to invest every trifle with importance, or to see something marvellous in every incident, is equally absurd, there is no reason why the imagination should not grasp whatever is picturesque, and the mind dwell upon whatever is affecting in the changes and chances of our pilgrimage. There is, indeed, a great deal of what is low and mean in all that is connected with this world, - quite enough to sully the most glowing picture; but let us sometimes view life with its golden tints, - let us sometimes taste its ambrosial dews, - let us sometimes breathe its more ethereal atmosphere (pp.144-146).

This piece is extraordinarily moving. It admits that a middle-class woman's life under mid-nineteenth-century conditions could be a dreary, meaningless affair, and recognises the desire to make it significant. This mixture of poignancy and determination is both touching and despairing, pessimistic and positive. It recognises that most women cannot find a meaningful life outside the home, and condones a view of life which accepts the inevitable and turns it into something sublime. It is this sort of need that feeds the desire to embrace self-sacrifice with which this project is concerned. It is interesting to note that this most eloquent expression of the shortcomings of women's lives comes, not from any early feminist tract, but from a work which seeks to stress the importance of women's place in the home.

¹⁰ Chase and Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy*, p.81.

Another conflict inherent within the conduct books lies in the fact that texts insist on the private, invisible nature of the work of women, whilst at the same time drawing attention to the public display of their domestic virtues. Ellis, for example, talks of the homes of England and 'the boasted felicity for which they were once famed' (p.4), and of the character of the English woman and 'the fireside virtues for which she is so justly celebrated' (p.10). English women are at the same time invisible and celebrated; a difficult tightrope to walk. There is no attempt to reconcile these two conflicting aspects of the ideal woman's role; at the same time as we are being asked to believe that virtue is its own reward, the promise of celebrity is held out. Ellis says

Look at all the heroines, whether of romance or reality - at all the female characters that are held up to universal admiration - at all who have gone down to honoured graves, amongst the tears and lamentations of their survivors. Have these been the learned, the accomplished women...No: or if they have, they have also been women who were dignified with the majesty of moral greatness (pp. 26-27).

Again, there seems to be no recognition of the irony that a text designed to entice women back into the enjoyment of the domestic, private sphere promises 'universal admiration'. Universal admiration, of course, would lead to self-awareness, not selflessness, and thus is only available posthumously. Lewis seems equally confused. On the one hand she says that 'it ought to be no part of the training of women to consider, with any personal views, what effect they shall produce in or on society at large' (p.55), (this, despite having opened her book with an explanation of the 'surprising change' which will take place in society if women's mission is understood). Then, however, she joins Ellis with promises of posthumous celebrity; 'her reward (her task being done) is not of this world, nor will she wish it to be - ...enough for her that generations yet unborn shall rise up and call her blessed' (p.72).

And what touching funeral scenes might not a bored Victorian girl imagine for herself, where her greatness was finally recognised, amidst ‘the tears and lamentations of her survivors’.

The insistence on the private nature of women’s work is closely related to one of the chief attractions of self-sacrifice as dealt with in the novels; that is, the unrecognised nature of it, where selflessness is taken to the point of self-negation. Ellis warns us that ‘a selfish woman may not improperly be regarded as a monster’ (p.73). True Englishwomen, on the other hand, are possessed of that ‘peculiar charm...of diffusing happiness, without appearing conspicuously as the agent in its diffusion’ (p.202). Unfortunately ‘those quiet unobtrusive virtues which are ever the most lovely in the female character must necessarily be the most difficult to define’ (p.172). Unseen, indefinable, and yet essential.

Again it is Sandford who displays a deep understanding of the theatricality of self-sacrifice. Her drama is always internalised, and largely, it is its secret nature which *makes* it dramatic, or ‘romantic’ to use her word. For Sandford, the most attractive of female characteristics is ‘uncomplaining meekness’. Again, she presents imagined scenes of great drama:

What more beautiful picture is there than that of the religious and retiring woman, who is struggling, perhaps, with domestic trial, and standing, perhaps alone in sentiment and duty? Her path is one of difficulty, but she neither makes her trials a theme of gossiping complaints, nor avails herself of the faults of others to excite pity for herself. And, if want of congeniality in those most near to her, is her sore burden, - if even opposition to the appointed exercise of her faith, - she neither seeks notoriety by the cry of persecution, nor looks to the applause of others as a compensation for her trials at home (p.52).

Sandford is not just alive to the attractions of the nobility of suffering in silence, she is desperate for the chance to indulge in it. She is so anxious for the opportunity to

submit to something ignoble that she invokes something which would surely have been alien to most of her projected readership; the religious persecution of the middle-classes was not a major feature of the mid-Victorian period. Sandford does not think she is writing for an audience of Jews, or Catholics, but she loves the idea of persecution. She is desperate to be misunderstood and overlooked: her path of 'uncomplaining meekness'

awakens little interest; it encourages no meddling interference; it asks for no human sympathy...But how great is its reward! For, if there be a recompense to consistency on earth...it is when piety receives the accomplishment of its wishes, - when the indulgence that has excused faults, the delicacy that has forborne complaint...are at length appreciated, - when these reiterated acts...[are] recognised...It is then, even in this world, that the secret prayer is answered, and the secret tears are wiped away (p.53).

It is clearly a nonsense for these writers to claim that women seek no reward, or, that if they do, it is the happiness of others that they look for. They are quite plainly desperate for recognition, if not by those around them, by God or by posterity. Of course, for the self-negating, silently suffering women of novels, we, the readers, provide recognition. They can be allowed their disappearances, their deaths in obscurity, because we have seen it all, we have legitimised their suffering and self-denial. Our recognition is their reward.

A superficial reading of most of these conduct books may suppose that they saw their task merely to educate women in the proper womanly virtues, to teach them how to be suitably submissive and selfless. In fact, their job was nothing less than to teach women how to be important, how to be significant, essential and most of all, not overlooked. Self-sacrifice and self-interest become inseparable; a response to, and appropriation of, conditions of life.

It is important to realise that, although the sorts of attitudes the conduct books appear to promulgate may have been dominant in the mid-Victorian era, they were certainly not the only views being expressed. It is illuminating after looking at apparently conventional didactic work like that of Ellis, Lewis and Sandford, to consider the writings of some very different women. What is notable is the extent to which the preoccupations within such ostensibly polarised works are similar. The issues of women's self-sacrifice, happiness and duty, whilst apparently treated in very different ways, are fundamental to a great variety of texts.

Harriet Taylor Mill, a very early advocate of complete equality for women, takes the issue of happiness to be central to a consideration of human life. She was an adherent of the doctrine of utilitarianism, to which the notion of happiness was fundamental. Utilitarians believed that human happiness (which they take to mean pleasure or the satisfaction of desires) was the ultimate aim of every human being, and that therefore the morality of all acts should be judged on their contribution to human happiness. The notion of duty within utilitarianism is based on the notion that an individual has a duty not to encroach on the happiness of other people. Yet utilitarianism did not preach the necessity of sacrificing one's own happiness to that of another individual.

Taylor Mill herself, in an essay of 1832, declared that she thought happiness 'a desirable and virtuo[u]s aim'¹¹ which was unlikely to be achieved in the case of women without 'the fullest development of the mental & physical capabilities with which nature had endowed them' (p.13). Her idea of duty encompassed one's duty to

¹¹ *The Complete Works of Harriet Taylor Mill*, ed. Jo Ellen Jacobs (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p.xx. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

oneself to fulfil one's own potential. She felt that women would never achieve personal happiness without both formal education and exposure to the sorts of life experiences which society did not allow them. Total fulfilment for women, according to Taylor Mill, would not be found in the home. Nor were the issues of the pursuit of happiness and self-sacrifice mutually exclusive, as Ellis, Sandford and Lewis preached.

In 1831 she wrote that 'every human being has a right to personal freedom which does not interfere with the happiness of some other' (p.xx), which seems to recognise the right to pursue happiness, but what is interesting is the extent to which she feels that duty comes before her personal happiness. When she fell in love with John Stuart Mill she felt that, in order to protect her husband and children, she could not leave and openly set up home with him. She maintained the forms of family life, whilst spending as much time with Mill as she could. In an undated letter to Mill, which must have been written before she and her husband arrived at this accommodation, she says

I do not hesitate about the certainty of happiness - but I do hesitate about the rightfulness of, for my own pleasure, giving up my only earthly opportunity of 'usefulness'. You hesitate about your usefulness & that however greater in amount it may be, it is certainly not like mine marked out as duty. I should spoil four lives and injure others...Now I give pleasure around me, I make no one unhappy, and am happy tho' not happiest myself (p.xx).

Although Taylor Mill does not feel that she can pursue her own happiness at the expense of that of her husband and children, there is none of that sense of glory in her self-sacrifice which appears in the conduct books. She understands her very real dilemma in terms of utilitarianism; her sense of duty is strong, but it is the duty of a loving mother and a reasonable human being, one who recognises the legitimacy of her own needs. Her own happiness is clearly important to her, and she eventually

reached a workable solution to a difficult situation without abandoning her own desires. There is no sense of grandeur in her acceptance of what she sees as her duty, and no extravagant claims of moral greatness. It is significant that there is also none of the fearfulness which is so evident in the work of Ellis, Sandford and Lewis. For Taylor Mill, duty and self-sacrifice do not necessarily go hand-in-hand.

Ellis and Taylor Mill are in agreement to the extent that they both believe that the current state of education for women was not conducive to their happiness, but, unsurprisingly, for rather different reasons. Ellis believed that women in England were perfect when they were mentally improved by some education and still had moral discipline, but that now

when the cultivation of the mental faculties had so far advanced as to take precedence of the moral, by leaving no time for domestic usefulness, and the practice of personal exertion in the way of promoting general happiness, the character of the women of England assumed a different aspect (p.11).

Education, for Ellis, has taught women to move away from their natural domestic role, leading to a diminishing of the general happiness. Taylor Mill questions the whole purpose of the education of women, but for her the issue is rather different. She wonders whether

the end desired is to make us better ministrants to the pleasures of men...We hear nought of [sic] in disquisition on mens [sic] education of what sort of instruction will produce the greatest happiness [for] women (p.7).

Emily Shirreff, a pioneer of women's education, and Mistress of Girton College, appears to feel that these apparently opposite views are not irreconcilable. She feels that education for women is necessary both for their own happiness and that of the domestic circle. In her 1862 work *Intellectual Education and its Influence on the Character and Happiness of Women* she says

It is not indeed difficult to show how many of woman's home duties, both as wife and mother, would be far better discharged by more cultivated minds, and how far her sphere of enjoyment and influence is increased by extending to men's intellectual life the

power of sympathy she exercises so strongly...but it is not sufficient to rest the plea for female education even on such grounds as these. In educating a young girl we must feel that her future is too uncertain, too much beyond her own control, to venture to train her altogether for a position that may never be hers.¹²

She also sees education as a way of reconciling women to a lack of purpose in their lives, asserting that

the suffering of women from the want of animating pursuit is of too serious importance not to be carefully considered in their education...making love of knowledge for its own sake the very spring of their intellectual life, and giving habits of mental exertion which shall help to counteract the many dangers of leisure and the narrowing tendencies of small cares and occupations amidst which women must unavoidably live (p.19).

Where Ellis thinks that education distracts women from the domestic sphere, Shirreff thinks it gives them the tools to be able to tolerate it. Yet it is interesting to note how these very different women employ similar language; they are all preoccupied, for example, with 'usefulness' and 'exertion'.

As already seen, the conduct books encourage an acceptance of an ideal woman, possessed of natural womanly attributes, which, if lacking, make a monster. Shirreff, despite her undoubted dissimilarities with the rigidly conservative Lewis and Ellis, still relies on a picture of women which relies on a series of fixed characteristics. She talks about the 'self-denying, self-devoted character of the true woman' (p.84) and claims that 'Nature is stepmother to women' (p.276). Her recognition that domesticity might leave women with unfulfilled needs does not lead her to question the nature of their confinement. She does not think that women should look outside the domestic sphere for their satisfactions. She claims that

What society wants from women is not labour, but refinement, elevation of mind, knowledge, making its power felt through moral

¹² Emily Shirreff, *Intellectual Education and its Influence on the Character and Happiness of Women* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1862), p.20. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

influence and sound opinions. It wants civilizers of men, and educators of the young. And society will suffer in proportion as women are either driven by necessity or tempted by seeming advantages to leave this their natural vocation, and to join the noisy throng in the busy markets of the world (p.273).

Shirreff is, as Laura Morgan Green has put it 'indebted to the assumptions of domestic ideology'¹³. Although Shirreff does not question the assumption that there is a certain sort of 'normal' woman, it is significant to note that, in the words of Morgan Green

the well run household becomes the site of an engaged pedagogy for girls and women, and moral seriousness emerges not from self-denial but from contemplation of scientific discoveries.¹⁴

It would be misleading to suggest that there was no resistance to the idea that women were naturally possessed of a certain set of characteristics. In an 1866 article which appeared in *The Englishwoman's Review*, Bessie Parkes said that she

believed that the most effectual help which could be rendered by literature towards advancing the education of women, or extending their capacities of usefulness, was that of presenting numerous conceptions of what they really are in some few of their innumerable types, showing that the stuff out of which it is desired to create a better average is not a dull or even beautiful uniformity of nature, but something extraordinarily diverse in its kinds, and capable of infinite modification by circumstances ...[what should] be allowed to rouse a strong sense of the absurd in the listener...would be those which are based upon the supposition that all women possess (or ought to possess) a fixed type of nature, from which any deviation is a sin against true beauty and true strength.¹⁵

What is extraordinary is the extent to which other overtly feminist writers appeared to disagree with Parkes.

In an 1862 article entitled 'Celibacy v. Marriage', for example, Frances Power Cobbe, a supporter of women's suffrage and higher education, discusses women's position within marriage.

¹³ Laura Morgan Green, *Educating Women: Cultural Conflict and Victorian Literature* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2001), p. 12.

¹⁴ Morgan Green, *Educating Women*, p. 131.

¹⁵ Bessie Parkes, 'Types of Character', from *The Englishwoman's Review*, vol. 1,(1866), in ed. Beetham and Boardman, *Victorian Women's Magazines*, p. 65.

If she encourages him in every noble aim and disinterested action, it will hardly happen but that he will keep up to his former standard - nay, rise far above it. On the other hand, if she urge selfish considerations at every turn; if she palliate meanness and deprecate self-sacrifice; - then indeed the natural temptations of avarice and selfish ambition have a most powerful, almost an invincible ally in the wife, faithless to her holy duty of sustaining her husband's soul in life's great battle.¹⁶

This piece is striking for its resemblance to the sorts of arguments used in conduct books and other didactic literature, and yet Cobbe was a great advocate of women's engagement in the public sphere. Susan Hamilton explains the similarities between these apparently very different types of women writers by pointing out that

women like Cobbe, for example, argued for an essentialist or biological understanding of sexual difference and the nature of woman, that granted her a distinctive moral status because of her special gifts of compassion and nurturance. It was precisely on the basis of this special moral status that Cobbe argued for the extension of women's work and responsibilities into the public sphere.¹⁷

Harriet Taylor Mill, in another undated essay, engages with the argument about the naturalness of women's domesticity by pointing out that domestic management is the only job for which it is felt necessary to 'dedicate a multitude of people from their birth to one exclusive employment' (p.32). She says that, despite the necessity for coalheavers, ploughmen, sailors and so on, no-one requires them to be born into these occupations, and not allowed to leave them. Equally, it is not thought that because a shoemaker may be a shoemaker by profession, he should have no thoughts outside shoemaking. Taylor Mill's solution to the problem of women's dependency in marriage, her lack of engagement in society, and thereby her lack of opportunity to pursue her chance of happiness to the full, is perfect equality.

She actually mentions Ellis by name, and ridicules her opinions.

¹⁶ Frances Power Cobbe, 'Celibacy v. Marriage', *Fraser's Magazine* (February 1862) in 'Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors': *Nineteenth-Century Writing by Women on Women*, ed. Susan Hamilton (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995), p.79.

‘The Lord protect us from our friends! [’] says the old proverb and truly of all instances might the saying be applied by women of the books about women written by women - The wolves in sheep’s clothing, the Ellises & Jamesons¹⁸ - they write as if their object was to bribe their masters into allowing, a very little freedom to their bodies by telling that they have no idea how voluntarily servile their minds shall be (p.32).

She mocks Ellis by claiming that the only excuse for her effusions could be if she were violently in love, in which case, says Taylor Mill, she should keep her nonsense for the object of her love, and not inflict it on other more sensible women. She quotes a critic from the *Quarterly Review* who has obviously been amused by the stereotyped picture of men which Ellis presents, in which ‘ces messieurs’ are much moved by the sight of a ‘favourite dish’ and adds herself

What solemn aldermanic creatures must these worthy old ladies be accustomed to...one long apology is all they have to say for themselves or for women (undated, p.35).

It was noted earlier that many of those women advocating even radical reforms in women’s education and roles nonetheless employed a language which is remarkably similar to self-professed conservatives such as Ellis. Taylor Mill, for example, sees the separate male and female natures as culturally constructed rather than naturally endowed, but even she seems to suggest that women’s sexuality is intrinsically and naturally different from men’s. In the following passage, Taylor Mill seems to have questioned the inherent nature of sexual characteristics in a discussion of men and women’s attitudes to sex:

Whether nature made a difference in the nature of men and women or not, it seems now that all men, with the exception of a few lofty minded, are sensualists more or less. Women on the contrary are quite exempt from this trait, however it may appear otherwise in the case of some...it may be only that the habits of freedom and low indulgence in which boys grow up and the contrary notion of what is

¹⁷ Susan Hamilton, *Criminals, Idiots*, p.14.

¹⁸ Anna Brownell Jameson was the author of such works as *Characteristics of Women* (1832) and *Visits and Sketches* (1834).

called purity in girls may have produced the appearance of different natures in the two sexes (undated, p.22).

Despite this acknowledgment that men and women may not be 'naturally' different, and that any impressions of their differences may be merely superficial - an 'appearance' - Taylor Mill nonetheless sees women as naturally non-sexual beings. She sees marriage as akin to prostitution, and the cause of the greatest unhappiness for women, because she perceives that the satisfaction of male sexual needs is its primary purpose.

Taylor Mill was not alone in her condemnation of the work of Ellis and others like her, but it would be foolhardy to suggest that she and Parkes, for example, represented an equal body of opinion. Although it is difficult to assess how widely the conduct books were actually read, anecdotal evidence suggests that they were very popular.¹⁹ Taylor Mill, on the other hand, only published a few articles in the *Westminster Review*, amongst others, and various pamphlets, and was the target of much invective during her lifetime.²⁰ And although it is easy to laugh with her at the 'solemn aldermanic creatures' that other women were accustomed to, it must be remembered that not everybody was living with a John Stuart Mill.

It would be a mistake to represent the ways of thinking about women discussed here as forming two diametrically opposed camps: feminism did not take one single form; nor did resistance to it. What might initially appear to be completely

¹⁹ Walter E. Houghton refers to the works of Ellis as 'standard manuals'. *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 351. Helsinger, Lauterbach Sheets and Veeder refer to 'the enormously popular *Wives of England*'. *The Woman Question, Vol. 1. Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1983), p.66. In the same volume they assert that 'Periodicals representing a range of opinions on the Woman Question gave enthusiastic reviews to [Lewis's] *Woman's Mission*.' p. 13.

²⁰ According to Jo Ellen Jacobs's 'S. E. Henman announced in 1874, "Men have been blinded by affection and bewitched by womankind,...[but] John Stuart Mill out-Herod's them all." Biographers extend the view that John was 'besotted', 'bewitched' and 'charmed' by Harriet,

polarised works can be seen to have certain things in common. They share the same sorts of preoccupations and, as we have seen, are often based on very similar readings of women's characteristics. The notion of female self-sacrifice, however it is treated, is fundamental to those readings of women which fix their characters in the realm of some natural feminine state. Even those, who like Harriet Taylor Mill, try to resist this notion, find themselves speaking the same language, because of the profound assimilation of ideas of female self-sacrifice into mid-Victorian discourse on gender roles.

It would equally be a mistake to present the novels of this period as different representations of polarised opinion; they were not necessarily didactically intended, nor necessarily conceived by their authors as presenting a particular argument. Although each of the novels was, inevitably, a product of its time, it does not necessarily follow that all readers respond as the author may have intended or hoped. Perhaps the author may not even be sure what she or he intended. It is necessary to guard against falling into the misconception that representations of women in novels, however popular, necessarily met with unquestioning approbation. Whilst a novel may reflect a dominant discourse, it is not a servant of some mysterious ruling order; as well as reflecting ideologies, it can also modify and help produce them.

The following chapters will ask how the same wide range of opinion expressed in non-literary discourse manifests itself in the novels. To what degree was the concept of women's self-sacrifice a contested notion? To what extent were the range of possibilities for women's happiness offered by the novelists underpinned by the idea of self-sacrifice? How ambivalent could the treatment of conventionally

whom Thomas Carlyle called "a dangerous looking woman and engrossed with a dangerous passion." 'Introduction' to *The Complete Works*, (p.xi).

sanctioned ideas of happiness be? How autonomous and self-interested could women be in their search for happiness? Such an exploration will open up the essential instability of a culture which invested so much importance in women's fulfilment yet constricted and hedged with prohibitions their possibilities of choice and movement.

Chapter Three

Charlotte Yonge, *The Clever Woman of the Family*

Charlotte Yonge was an overtly didactic writer whose professed opinions and pedagogical thrust were unapologetically conservative. Yonge described her writing as ‘a sort of instrument for popularizing Church views that might not otherwise have been taken in’.¹ Keble was her lifelong hero; she was a fervent Tractarian and a supporter of the Oxford Movement. Jane Sturrock points out that she had ‘the Tractarian reverence for establishment, hierarchy and tradition, and she valued existing situations, structures, relationships and behaviours as part of a providential disposition’.² Alethea Hayter notes that ‘the virtues most inculcated by the Tractarians were truthfulness, self-sacrifice, true courage, self-control, filial piety...humility’³ and it is this strongly proselytising quality, this conscious desire to educate her readership in these desirable virtues, which makes her work pertinent to this thesis. Her novels have much in common with the conduct books discussed earlier; indeed, sometimes the sentiments of Ellis, particularly, seem to be regurgitated wholesale in the novels of Yonge. If it were the case, however, that Yonge provided merely an example of a conservative novelist writing, with deliberate intent, a manifesto of acceptable behaviour, then the novel *The Clever Woman of the Family* would have little interest. The overt narrative does, certainly, seem to be conventionally edifying and moralising, a story of redemption through suffering of the most orthodox type, and yet the text contains numerous tensions that are only ostensibly resolved within the framework of the story. Almost because of the relative unsophistication of the artistic intention, the text, in spite of the imposed solutions,

¹ Quoted in Jane Sturrock, ‘Heaven and Home’: *Charlotte M. Yonge's Domestic Fiction and the Victorian Debate over Women* (Victoria: English Literary Studies, 1995), p.20.

² Sturrock, *Heaven and Home*, p. 16.

displays in several areas the ways in which, as Poovey has pointed out, representations of gender are constructed and contested; it does not always tell quite the story it seems to set out to tell. Its particular interest for this thesis lies in Yonge's treatment of the issue of the female self. Yonge is interested less in extravagant notions of female self-sacrifice, than in ideas of female self-value and self-awareness.

The novel contains several female characters who, between them, cover most of the novelistic female stereotypes of the time. We are offered the mother, the girl of the period, the angel in the house, the prototype new woman, the dutiful daughter, the supportive sister and the saint. Yonge seems gropingly aware of the idea that self-sacrifice actually involves a centralising of the self, and for her, the ideal female moves beyond a conscious self-sacrifice to complete self-forgetfulness.⁴ This idea is not overtly explored, but the working out of the eventual fates of the four main female characters in *The Clever Woman of the Family* shows that their final happiness (or otherwise) depends entirely on their attitude to female selfhood. Stated at its most superficial level, in this novel, for women, self-abnegation brings reward, self-assertion brings punishment. Self is seen as diametrically opposed to womanliness; self-consciousness is pitted against unconsciousness, and the apparently instinctive always comes out on top.

The novel, published in 1865, tells the story of Rachel Curtis, an independently minded young woman who starts out dissatisfied with the life available to her as a young lady. She is desperately looking for something to fill her life; having failed as mentor to her widowed cousin's young children, she addresses herself to the

³ Alethea Hayter, *Charlotte Yonge* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996), p.18.

⁴ Yonge seems aware of the issue in *The Daisy Chain* where Ethel May asks what the difference is between self-contemplation and self-examination. The reply is 'The difference between your brother and yourself,...self-examination notes the symptoms and combats

iniquities of the cottage industry of lacemaking. She becomes involved in the setting up of an industrial school for the lacemaking girls, which, she believes, will better fit them to earn their own living, in an industry which is not so harmful to their health and wellbeing. Unfortunately, Mauleverer, the man who helps her set up the school, turns out to be a charlatan who embezzles all the money provided, and causes the girls to work harder than they ever did in their cottage industry. When all this becomes evident, and Mauleverer is taken to court, Rachel has a nervous breakdown. She is rescued by the love of a good man, Alick Keith, who marries her and teaches her that all she really wants is to be a wife and mother. Although the narrative devotes itself to delineating the ways in which the women differ from each other, in the end, they all (except Aleck's sister Bessie, whose transgressions are beyond rehabilitation) appear to attain their happiness in the same way. The novel ends, unsurprisingly, with most of the female characters happily settled, not necessarily in marriage, but in caring for others. In Yonge's ideal universe, happy women think only of others and thinking of others makes women happy.

Yonge's didactic intent means there is a certain heavy-handed inevitability about the ending of the novel. As an acerbically funny anonymous contemporary review of the novel put it:

The process of conversion, as conducted by an authoress who labours under a mission, or has a general conviction that the world is beginning to turn round the wrong way, is one of the most entertaining devices with which the discriminating novel-reader is ever gratified. The delicate but quite inevitable chain which drags the misguided hero or heroine round to the right view of things, the means by which he or she is gently metamorphosed from being the prey of all manner of evil spirits, and is finally exhibited clothed and in a right mind, serve to display an ingenuity at once marvellous and delightful. People who prefer to take the blunt view of such matters

them; self-contemplation... dwells on them and perpetually deplures itself.' Charlotte Yonge, *The Daisy Chain or Aspirations: a family chronicle* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1856), p. 283.

can see nothing very funny in setting up puppets merely for the pleasure of knocking them down again.⁵

Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in a comparison of the female characters, who Yonge sets up as a series of foils to Rachel. Fanny, Rachel's cousin, exists only to hammer home the contrast between Rachel and herself. Fanny is the angel in the house; she is the young widow of a much older husband, with seven children. She appears to have no sense of self at all; she is presented throughout as being completely unselfish with no self-consciousness whatsoever. Her lack of self-consciousness is due, apparently, to both her natural womanliness and her likeness to a child. She has been looked after by her mother and her husband as though she were an infant. Her late husband 'still regarded the young mother of his children as almost as much of a baby herself'⁶ and the point is made that, notwithstanding the seven children, she is childlike and asexual. Fanny stays faithful to the memory of her husband, despite being courted by several other men. Of course, Fanny does not realise she is being pursued; one feature of her lack of self-consciousness is a sexual unawareness, unusual perhaps in a woman with seven children. Fanny cannot become part of a romantic plot without losing her innocence and her position as the perfect mother.

Any sense of self Fanny might have resides in her state as a mother. All it takes for her to be happy is for her children to be happy. Her children never tire her, despite their being demanding, loud and argumentative.⁷ She is not very bright, but nature serves her better than brains; she is naturally womanly, and her womanly

⁵ *Saturday Review* (April 8, 1865), p.419.

⁶ Charlotte Yonge, *The Clever Woman of the Family*, ed. Georgina Battiscombe (London: Virago, 1985), p.24. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

⁷ In the *Saturday Review* the anonymous reviewer states 'as usual in all stories from the same hand, children are brought into very unnecessary prominence.' In fact, of course, it is Yonge's intention to show the 'unnecessary prominence' of Fanny's children.

instincts never lead her wrong. She is quietly spoken and everything about her is soft; in fact, 'soft' is repeated three times in one paragraph of description of her. She is also a curiously static figure; she seems unchanged by the experience of marriage, travel and childbearing. She has

the same imploring, earnest sweetness; no signs of having grown older, no sign of wear and tear, climate or exertion; only the widow's dress, and the presence of the great boys enhancing her soft youthfulness. The smile was certainly changed; it was graver, sadder, tenderer, and only conjured up in maternal affection or in grateful reply; and the blitheness of the young brow had changed to quiet pensiveness, but more than ever there was an air of dependence almost beseeching protection (p.8).

All Fanny's experiences have left little impression on her, it is tempting to think, because there is no self upon which to leave an impression. She is a cipher, moved only by external stimuli, by her children, or by the need for 'grateful reply'. She is delicate, sweet, tender, but has 'no signs of wear and tear' - again, despite the seven children. Presumably she is in such a fine state of preservation because she has been engaged on the natural work of women.

The portrait of Fanny is not quite as unambiguous as it first appears, however. Here we see the first signs of tension in the text, a tussle between the didactic intent and the demands of the narrative: on the one hand Fanny is constructed as the perfect patient, selfless mother; on the other her children are spoilt, uncontrollable, and in need of discipline. When Rachel meets Fanny and her brood at the station after they come back from Australia,

Then began a conversation under difficulties, Fanny trying to inquire after her aunt, and Rachel to detail the arrangements made for her at Myrtlewood, while the two boys were each accommodated with a window; but each moment they were claiming their mother's attention, or rushing across the ladies' feet to each other's window, treating Rachel's knees as a pivot, and vouchsafing not the slightest heed to her attempts at intelligent pointing out of the new scenes. And Fanny made no apology, but seemed pleased, ready with

answers and with eyes, apparently ignoring that Rachel's toes were less insensible than her own (p.8).

So, in Yonge's own word, Fanny's lack of self-consciousness could also be seen as being 'insensible'.

It appears that Yonge presents Fanny as the archetype of the perfect selfless Victorian mother and then immediately undermines this idealised representation by showing the consequences of her being such a mother. Her children are boisterous and unmanageable, and although they respond instantly to Fanny's womanly feebleness, it is because of their natural instincts as gentlemen, not because she has taught them obedience, or consideration for others. Her eldest son, Conrade, is actually an opinionated bully, but 'whatever he was doing, his keen, black eye was always turning in search of her, he was ever ready to spring to her side to wait on her, to maintain her cause in rough championship' (p.13). Although Rachel's ineffectual attempts at robust management of the children are presented as Rachel's failure, it can equally be seen as Fanny's inability to instil discipline. Elsewhere, Fanny's limitations are made clear in the most explicit way; 'her interests and intelligence seemed contracted to Conrade's horizon, and as to everything else, she was subdued, gentle, obedient, but slow and obtuse' (p.47). So despite apparently typifying the perfect Victorian mother, she sounds almost mentally retarded, because her lack of sense of self causes her to identify with her nearest male relative - an eight year old boy. Even Colonel Keith, who is Rachel's fiercest critic, and deeply attached to Fanny, says that he would prefer his wife to be less helpless than she is.

However, in the main, Fanny comes out best in any comparison between herself and Rachel. Fanny is charitable where Rachel is pedantic: she sends broth to the needy; Rachel argues about the philosophical basis of the charity system. (Yonge

does not allow the possibility that this could be a legitimate start to the question of the relief of need; if Rachel thinks it, it must inevitably be overblown and misled.) Fanny is selfless and maternal; Rachel is neither. The most striking thing about Fanny though, is how often she does the right thing by instinct. When she intervenes in an argument, defusing the conflict by introducing one of her children 'it was from instinct rather than reason' (p.12) and later, 'in fact, very little as she knew it, she could not have defended herself better than by this humble question' (p.85), and again, 'If she had done it on purpose she could not have done better' (p.107). Because Fanny is a true woman, instinctively and unselfconsciously, her softness and humility always lead her naturally to do the right thing; Rachel's reliance on reason and 'system' always alienates.

Although there are innumerable references to Fanny's weak, submissive, non-assertive character, it is actually she who rescues the girls from the industrial school, not Rachel. Because she is driven by the natural womanly instinct of caring, particularly for children, she does not accept the logical version of events which satisfies Rachel; she feels that the girls are being abused, and, despite her weakness, acts upon her fears. Fanny acts with quiet force, and gains access to the school where others, much stronger than she, had been denied. She visits the school with Alison, and engineers a situation where she is left alone with the girls. 'Alison was the more surprised at the simple statecraft of the General's widow, but it was prompted by the pitiful heart yearning over the mysterious wrongs of the poor little ones' (p.216). That is, Fanny is not prompted by her intelligent use of strategy; the strategy suggests itself to her because of the promptings of her heart. Despite being frightened, she takes the girls away with her. This provides another opportunity to compare Rachel and Fanny, to Rachel's detriment. Mrs Rawlins, the superintendent of the industrial school, is

cowed by Fanny's 'gentle dignity' and is no match for her; 'A woman of thrice Fanny's energy and capacity [that is, Rachel] would not have effected her purpose so simply, and made the virago in the matron so entirely quail' (p.217). The harridan is faced down by the superiority of Fanny's womanliness, whilst remaining unmoved by Rachel, because she recognises and can match those elements of the virago in Rachel.

Fanny's final happiness is attained in a way which satisfies all the aspects of her situation. Alison, who has been governess to her children, decides to join her household permanently. She and Fanny have become like sisters because of their common interest in the children. The narrator uses this as yet another opportunity to point out Rachel's shortcomings; Alison provides Fanny with 'the strong hearted, sympathising, sisterly friend she had looked for in Rachel' (p.250), but did not find. It is interesting to see that Alison's strong heart is a good thing, where Rachel's strong mind is not; hearts, not minds, are the place where women's strength lies.

So Fanny ends up with someone who is as interested in her children as she is, who is strong and reliable, and, best yet, does not violate her virgin widowhood. She has the perfect sexless marriage, and there is no necessity for her own needs to be met; Fanny has few needs, and Alison, presumably, has even fewer. Fanny's happiness is attained, like the conduct book paradigm, through the happiness of others. She is good, loving, modest and unaffected. And yet, despite her uncharacteristic efficacy in the rescue of the girls, she is deadly dull. Her selflessness is not based on the sort of constant striving for self-denial advocated in the conduct books, but more on a sort of vacancy, a lack of a sense of her own self, which, as displayed in relation to her children, is not necessarily presented in a favourable light. Rachel, in fact, is the only female character who displays any development throughout what is a very long book. Fanny is exactly the same the first time we meet her as the last. She is idealised and

dismissed, a commonplace conclusion for a commonplace character. Here we see the problem that lies at the heart of the novel for Yonge the moralising writer; the whole story is reliant on the apparently erring Rachel. Despite condemning her faults throughout, the novel relies on Rachel and the transgressive Bessie for any liveliness it contains.

Bessie Keith, Alick's sister, is the only major character who does not achieve happiness. She is lively, garrulous and rather racy. Her description suggests voluptuousness and coquetry. She has

a face of the plump contour and slightly rosy complexion that suggested the patches of the last century; as indeed Nature itself seemed to have thought when planting near the corner of the mouth a little brown mole, that added somehow to the piquancy of the face, not exactly pretty, but decidedly attractive under the little round hat (p.113).

She is witty, charming and worldly, and takes the quiet community by storm. Her talk can be somewhat warm and indecorous; she jokes about marriage and her designs on officers and curates, and at one point Fanny feels constrained to 'quietly change the conversation' (p. 117). Bessie is obsessed by croquet, a game which Alick sees as nothing but a cover for flirtation. She takes an interest in everybody with 'gay good humour and eager sympathy' (p.121), but she is basically selfish. Rachel envies her the ability to always say the right thing to everyone, but Alick calls it 'a snare' (p. 182). In Fanny's case, being able to say the right thing at the right time is admirable, because she does it through instinct, but Bessie does it out of a desire to please, and thereby to manipulate; with her it becomes a skill, consciously honed, consciously used, and therefore to be deplored. Bessie manipulates events so that she does exactly what she wants to do, whilst convincing others that she is acting for their

good. When she decides to marry the elderly Lord Keith,⁸ Alick tells her that he is sorry for him because 'You will always find it good for him to do whatever suits yourself' (p.186). Alick is, again, the only person to see the true character behind the facade. He knows that Bessie, unlike Rachel, has no underlying good principles; she is given up completely to selfishness and worldly things.⁹

Bessie cannot be allowed to be happy because she violates so many of the essential feminine characteristics. Not only is her fidelity - one might almost say her virginity, as the reader is never quite sure of her relationship with her old friend Carleton - called into question, not only is she shown to be selfish and undutiful, but perhaps, worst of all, she is knowing. Bessie is self-aware, both socially and sexually. Fanny is led right by instinct, Rachel is misled through ignorance and blindness, but Bessie knows exactly what she is doing throughout, and furthermore, she is not what she seems. She cannot be trusted; she assumes the features of 'real' women; sympathy, 'meek simplicity and unconsciousness' (p. 115) and affection, and uses them to get what she wants. She is the woman Ellis has in mind when she warns that

Affectation is in practice a species of minute deception; in effect, a palpable mockery of that which is assumed. I am aware that it is often the accompaniment of...diffidence of self; but this is seldom or never the case, except where there is a secret, yet strong desire, if it were possible, to be the object of admiration to others...The affectation most frequently detected in the behaviour of women, is that which arises from an inordinate desire of being agreeable (p.293).

Ruth Bernard Yeazell's work on female modesty is illuminating when considering why Bessie's shortcomings mean that she cannot be allowed to be happy.

⁸ Comprehension is not helped by the fact that there are four characters with the surname 'Keith' - even aside from the women who marry into the family in the course of the novel.

⁹ Of course, despite the text's insistence on Bessie's unwomanliness, she provides a representation of another type of 'naturalness' in woman, that of the Eve-like temptress of men.

Although Yeazell is referring specifically to the assumption of the appearance of modesty, the idea can be usefully applied to a more general assumption of conventionally accepted womanly qualities. As she says in *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel*, a woman who pretends modesty 'is actively engaged in manipulation, a manipulation all the more dangerous for being concealed...a woman who knows her own desires always threatens to take secret charge of the scene.'¹⁰ Perhaps then, Bessie's chief offence is that she 'knows her own desires'; she decides what will suit her and sets out to get it. She doesn't seek her happiness in the happiness of others, she doesn't wait for happiness to come to her, and she doesn't particularly care who she injures on her way to get it. She marries Lord Keith for position and because she knows she will be able to go her own way, particularly in continuing her relationship, whatever it is, with Carleton. Bessie meets her comeuppance in a particularly suitable if unsubtle way; in running away from Carleton the pregnant Bessie trips over a croquet hoop and falls. She dies a day later, in Rachel's arms, leaving a sickly baby. Unlike Rachel, Bessie cannot learn from her mistakes. Rachel's desire to do good has only to be reined in from the public sphere to the private; the morality of her impulses and her principles is never in question. Bessie, however, is governed by nothing but self-interest; she is ultimately uncaring and definitely sexual; she will never be a 'good' woman, and can therefore never be happy. Bessie and Rachel both provide models of women who resist the boredom of the life of the middle-class woman and refuse to be guided by men. Bessie, however, cannot be allowed to be happy because her boredom and vanity, based on self-interest

¹⁰ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 51.

as they are, lead her into sexual errors, whereas Rachel's faults, based on a desire to do good for others, are social and intellectual. She, therefore, is redeemable.

The novel's greatest failure occurs in the character of Ermine Williams. She is an idealised picture of the perfect woman, an invocation of the domestic ideal, and completely unbelievable. As the anonymous review in the *Saturday Review*, put it, Ermine is

an unfortunate lady, who was permanently crippled by a burn in her youth, and who writes wonderful essays from her arm-chair, and is a very amiable and good-natured person. That is, the writer tells us all this. Really the poor cripple is a good-natured lay-figure, with a perpetual kind smile on her face.¹¹

The representation of Ermine is too obviously a novelistic convenience; not only does she possess all of the supposed ideal qualities of the ideal Tractarian Victorian woman (the *real* Clever Woman of the Family, as she is hailed in the last line of the novel), she is an embodiment of the private domain within the doctrine of separate spheres. Her confinement to the home is almost total. She rarely ventures out because she has been crippled in a fire, but she is perfectly happy in her seclusion because, as she says, 'There is a wonderful charm in a circumscribed view, because one is obliged to look well into it all' (p.33). This is not the first point in the novel where the reader suspects Yonge's familiarity with *The Women of England*. Ellis makes exactly the same point when, observing that women's 'sphere of observation was microscopic', she adds

an acute vision directed to immediate objects, whatever they may be, will often discover as much of the wonders of creation, and supply the intelligent mind with food for reflection as valuable, as that which is the result of a widely extended view, where the objects, though more numerous, are consequently less distinct (p.14).

¹¹ *Saturday Review*, p.420.

It is noticeable that however constrained Ermine's view may be, her 'food for reflection' is never herself and her own position.

Ermine is kept in her place, literally and figuratively. She is intelligent and disagrees with Rachel in intellectual ways because her arguments are, unlike Rachel's, grounded in common sense. She is contented and cheerful, gentle and humble but with womanly strength. She never blames her sister, Alison, whose fit of pique caused the accident which crippled Ermine. When her family thought she was going to die as a result of her injuries, Alison tells Rachel's sister, 'there she lay, all calmness, and comforting us all, and making Papa and Edward promise to forgive me' (p.41) and when her fiancé came to see her, also thinking her on her deathbed, 'she found words to cheer and soothe him' (p.42). She puts others before herself and bears her own pain with courage and fortitude. She never wants anything for herself. When her lover finally returns after twelve years of thinking her dead, she will not allow them to become engaged because she feels that she could not be a proper wife to him; thus, we are led to understand, Ermine need not descend from the ideal to indulge in the carnal, even after she and Colonel Keith are married.

Ermine's voice most closely echoes the narrator's; it is she who warns Rachel, and the reader, about Mauleverer, and the reader takes note, even if Rachel does not. We suspect Rachel's judgment, but never Ermine's, because she never seeks to step outside her sphere of engagement. Her strength lies in never over-reaching herself or the bounds of her knowledge. Of Rachel she says, 'I believe that all that is displeasing in her arises from her being considered as the clever woman of the family; having no man nearly connected enough to keep her in check' (p.96). Ermine does not have a man 'nearly connected enough to keep her in check' either, but, because she never attempts to cross the acceptable boundaries of womanly behaviour, or to engage in

unwomanly public concerns, she does not need one. She dismisses Rachel's 'little absurdities'(p.96) and defends her from the accusation of being a strong minded woman. Ermine, inevitably, gets what she apparently deserves; she marries Colonel Keith, adopts Bessie's baby (thereby becoming a mother without ever having to have sex) and is recognised as the real Clever Woman. Ermine has never stepped out of line (or anywhere else, conveniently); her job is to stay at home, be the recipient of other people's confidences, sympathise with and love everyone and be cheerful, selfless and reasonable. She fills the role to perfection, and in so doing, fails utterly to convince. This is because of the inherent contradiction between the sort of moral strength the reader is required to believe that Ermine possesses, and the vacuum at the centre of a portrayal which relies on a lack of sense of self. Yonge fails to address the problem that, for a character in Ermine's position, housebound, inactive and forced to a life which is largely internal, a sense of self is essential. Yonge's determination to leave Ermine no sense of self is what makes her representation a vapidly smiling puppet.

Having said as much, it must be noted that Ermine represents something central to this thesis, that is, the notion of the heroics of sacrifice. Yonge's determination to make Ermine selfless leads her into confusion and contradiction here. Ermine's self- immolation, bordering on the masochistic, has the capacity for grandeur; but without self-awareness, there is no grandeur. Fanny, for example, is not grand because her selflessness is no sacrifice, because it is unconscious. Self-sacrifice can only be grand if it is self-aware, because otherwise it is no sacrifice at all. There is no credit in giving something up if you did not want it, or even knew you possessed it, in the first place. The credit comes in knowing its value, and giving it up anyway.

Alethea Hayter has pointed out that Yonge

in her novels of contemporary life...tackled...the task of making her readers want to emulate heroism in everyday life, to find glamour in steadfast duty and self-denial. It was perhaps her greatest triumph as a novelist that she was able to make her readers feel that duty was romantically desirable rather than stern.¹²

This is certainly what Yonge set out to do, but the effect on her readers was not quite as predictably consistent as Hayter implies. Some contemporary critics found her work questionable. R.H. Hutton, for example, in the *National Review*, thought that Yonge's characters' 'blind acceptance of authority' was 'morally stultifying'¹³.

Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström discusses Yonge's 'morbid tendency', which

was even attributed by W.G. Greg [the critic] to the misplaced stress upon self-sacrifice in women's lives and to the limited experiences allowed them. Indeed he seemed to sense that the morbid elements in women's texts might be a muted expression of dissatisfaction with the circumstances under which women lived and worked.¹⁴

However, whilst it is important to realise that Yonge's treatment of self-sacrifice was by no means uncontested, it must also be noted that her novels were enormously appealing to women. In an 1866 survey of what women read, Yonge came third.¹⁵

Rachel is the eponymous clever woman. She is the New Woman *avant la lettre*, and it soon becomes apparent that the 'clever woman' label is not intended to be flattering. Cleverness and femininity are presented as being mutually exclusive throughout the novel; women are permitted a quiet understanding, but cleverness, at least for a woman, is presented as somehow showy and misguided; too clever by half.

Colonel Keith calls Rachel

¹² Hayter, *Charlotte Yonge*, p. 20.

¹³ R.H. Hutton, *Ethical and Dogmatic Fiction: Miss Yonge in The National Review*, XII (1861) cited in Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, *Be Good Sweet Maid, Charlotte Yonge's Domestic Fiction: A Study in Dogmatic Purpose and Fictional Form* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1984), p. 18.

¹⁴ Sandbach-Dahlström, *Be Good Sweet Maid*, p. 172.

a detestable, pragmatical, domineering girl...this girl to battle every suggestion with principles picked up from every catch-penny periodical, things she does not half understand, and enunciates as if no one had even heard of them before (p.95).

Rachel's faults all have their root in her overwhelming sense of self; she is opinionated, over-confident and egotistical. She is unwomanly, even in her own mind; she, who prides herself on her cleverness, thinks of herself as an aberrant being because she considers femininity, cleverness and 'capabilities' as inevitably incompatible. However, rather than questioning an orthodoxy which excludes her, Rachel is proud of her separateness; her unwomanliness becomes proof of her intellect. Her cleverness, however, is both freakish and illusory; it soon becomes apparent that, although her supposed intelligence makes her exceptional, Rachel is not as clever as she thinks. She is forceful to the point of pushiness, discontented, and prone to pomposity and hyperbole. She is unfulfilled by the usual charitable duties of a young lady, and feels frustrated by a lack of purpose in her life.

The success of the narrative is dependent on the reader distancing themselves from Rachel; we, like the narrator, can see that she is blind because she is opinionated, and that her opinions are usually wrong. When Rachel is expounding on the evils of the lacemaking system to Fanny, for example, she

was eloquent over the crying evils of the system...- holding Fanny fast to listen by a sort of fascination in her overpowering earnestness, and great fixed eyes, which, when once their grasp was taken, would not release the victim (p.12).

When Fanny is finally called away from the lecture to attend to her children, Rachel exclaims 'I do declare...poor Fanny's a perfect slave. One can't get a word in

¹⁵ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 158. Dickens came 1st, Scott 2nd and Kingsley joint 3rd.

edgeways' (p.13). Even where Rachel is discussing a legitimate and very real problem, she is made to look faintly ridiculous.

It is significant that the reader experiences Rachel's thoughts and feelings directly only after she is tormented by the guilt and humiliation that lead to her true self-knowledge and the abandonment of her old ways. Up to that point we see Rachel only as she appears to others, we have few insights into her inner life. But 'that night was the most painful one of her whole life' (p.267), and we see it through her eyes. She imagines that she is one of the lacemaking girls, sharing their hunger and beatings, or Mrs Rawlins being sentenced, or herself being sentenced for manslaughter. She falls into a fever and suffers visions of magnified faces gazing at her, her mother weeping, a mob shouting for vengeance on her. It is as if only then, when she has come to recognise her own weakness, can Rachel be trusted to tell her own story; perhaps Yonge felt that if the reader had always been able to see things from Rachel's point of view, the necessary distance could not be maintained. The reader needs the narrator to tell us what we should be thinking; otherwise, perhaps, we might not perceive Rachel to be quite as misguided as the novel requires us to. It is necessary for the success of the moral outcome that no attempt is made to legitimate Rachel's separateness; she cannot be allowed to be merely a different sort of woman. She is always, at least until the very end of the novel, held responsible for her difference from other women, wilfully, self-righteously in error. Ironically, Rachel is willing to make any sacrifice of her time, her money, her energy; what she will not sacrifice is her sense of being right.

From the beginning, the slightly melodramatic way in which she states her discontent provokes an ambivalent reaction to Rachel, and this reaction is essential for the success of the novel. The reader is both sympathetic to and impatient of Rachel at

the same time. There is no doubt that her intentions are good, but, we are apparently supposed to conclude, her arrogance blinds her to her own limitations. She recognises only those of her position:

‘I have pottered about cottages and taught at schools in the dilettante way of the young lady who thinks it is her duty to be charitable; and I am told that it is my duty, and I must be satisfied...And here I am, able and willing, only longing to task myself to the uttermost, yet tethered down to the merest mockery of usefulness by conventionalities. I am a young lady forsooth!’ (p.3).

What is fascinating is that of all the female characters considered, Rachel’s expression of the problem of the limitations of a woman’s life is actually more measured and more grounded in real life, in real aspirations to do practical good than most. She displays, for example, neither Dorothea Brooke’s desire to live on a higher plain, nor, as we shall see, Isabel Gilbert’s silly yearnings after martyrdom. All Rachel desires to do is to ‘task myself to the uttermost’. It is only the strength of the narrative voice in *The Clever Woman of the Family* that leads us to collude in the narrator’s negative judgment of Rachel. And yet, in the above passage, Rachel is far from ridiculous; her plea for occupation is heartfelt. We see both her passionate desire to be of service and the frustration which she feels.

Yonge expresses Rachel’s hunger eloquently and fervently:

‘Here is the world around one mass of misery and evil! Not a paper do I take up but I see something about wretchedness and crime, and here I sit with my health, strength and knowledge, and able to do nothing, *nothing* - at the risk of breaking my mother’s heart!’...The quiet Lady Bountiful duties that had sufficed her mother and sister were too small and easy to satisfy a soul burning at the report of the great cry going up to heaven from a world of sin and woe (pp. 3-6).

The scenes in which Rachel’s frustrations are described reveal the painful tensions within the text. Not only is Rachel’s position expressed with a vigour and ardour which is impossible to write off, the character of Rachel’s mother does not convince

us that her judgment, which Rachel portrays as in direct opposition to her own, must necessarily be good. Her mother is nervous, timid and cautious, and she controls Rachel and her sister Grace, not by example or respect, but through their fear of upsetting her.

Gentle Mrs Curtis had never been a visible power in her house, and it was through their desire to avoid paining her that her government had been exercised over her two daughters...the mother...never disputed with her [Rachel's] opinions or principles, only entreated that these particular developments might be conceded to her own weakness (p.6).

Here we witness both Rachel's dilemma and Yonge's uncertainty. We have heard Rachel's eloquent and convincing description of the work she wants to be engaged upon, and we realise that she is prohibited from engaging in it by something which may not be worthy or significant. We see again the kind of masochistic contortion in the model of obedience and sacrifice set up here which we have seen between Dorothea and Casaubon, where the sacrifice to an unworthy end becomes the test; where obedience comes despite a doubt as to whether the authority demanding sacrifice either deserves or commands it. Yet Yonge has no intention of exploring this issue; the mother must be right because Rachel is always wrong.

A great deal of sympathy is evoked for Rachel in this very early part of the novel, but in order to avoid too much rapport with her views, this is undermined. Whilst we might find Rachel admirable, we do not find her likeable. These passages make difficult reading, especially for the modern feminist reader. Of course we must agree with Rachel; she is wasted on the life mapped out for her. She is strong, ardent, ambitious and intense. At the same time she is pompous, combative and exhausting. Despite her irritating qualities however, there is no doubt that she has set out her case very convincingly, and yet the rest of the novel is devoted to showing both Rachel and

the reader how wrong she is. A similar point is made by Nancy Fix Anderson in an article which discusses Eliza Lynn Linton's *The Rebel of the Family*:

What makes *The Rebel of the Family* so extraordinary, however, and what makes it so different from the other antifeminist novels at this time, is the passionate and persuasive argument at the beginning of the novel for women's emancipation. It is not structured as a straw argument which could then be easily refuted. Perdita's anguish with the empty life of Victorian young ladies...was so genuinely and poignantly expressed, coming as it did from Linton's memories of her own experiences, that many readers must have strongly sympathised with Perdita's desire for emancipation, and then been frustrated by the ending.¹⁶

This is equally true in the case of Rachel, but whereas logic may be on her side, the reader has already begun to find her vigour, her contrariness and the fact that she is so opinionated quite wearing.

This ambivalent reaction to Rachel is maintained throughout the novel; she is contrasted with the 'quiet' of her mother and sister, her decisiveness is eccentric, and we are encouraged to suspect that her charitable impulses are driven by vanity and boredom.¹⁷ Unfortunately for Yonge's didactic intent, she has undermined the strength of her criticism of Rachel's motives by her earlier statement of her plight. She is forced to make Rachel personally objectionable purely because of the legitimacy of her complaints. The ambiguity is maintained in that sometimes Rachel is employed to express rational opinions - particularly about society - in a calm, reasonable style; she is the only character, certainly the only female character, available to do so. She is the only female sufficiently engaged with the wider world to

¹⁶ Nancy Fix Anderson, 'Eliza Lynn Linton: *The Rebel of the Family* and other Novels' in *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*, ed. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (New York: Garland, 1996), p.130.

¹⁷ Here again can be seen a significant likeness between the views of Ellis and Yonge; Ellis's suspicion of the motivations of women and girls keen to engage in public good works has been noted in chapter two.

have convincing opinions on such matters. All the others are too unworldly or too quiescent. Of governesses, for example, Rachel says

‘whether she have a vocation or not, every woman of a certain rank, who wishes to gain her own livelihood, must needs become a governess? A nursery-maid must have a vocation, but an educated or half-educated woman has no choice; and educator she must become to her own detriment, and that of her victims’ (p.16).

Yonge departs from her usual narrative strategy here by offering no narrative comment - no direct or implied criticism. This sort of inconsistency in the narrative voice reveals the uncertainty of Yonge’s treatment; although for the bulk of the text Rachel’s opinions are decried and ridiculed by the narrator and most of the other characters, Yonge still feels the need to employ her when she wants to express a strong moral judgment.

Even so, Rachel’s eventual downfall comes about as a direct result of her self-belief and self-reliance. She is misled by her opinionated blindness and her refusal to listen to any other point of view. She will not take note of Ermine’s warnings about Mauleverer; she is more than taken in by him, she is instrumental in precipitating disaster. In her keenness to assist him in setting up the industrial school, she sets up the very situation by which he can not only embezzle all the money, but escape prosecution. Rachel’s lack of womanly qualities are directly responsible for her situation. She is misled, wilfully or otherwise, by her apparent reliance on reason, whereas Ermine, Alison, Mrs Curtis and all the other women have been suspicious of Mauleverer all along, almost by instinct. Rachel dismisses any reservations about him as prejudice. She denies what should be her most effective tool - feminine intuition. A woman is, apparently, better guided by intuition than by reason, because she is too easily led into intellectual error. Rachel is fooled by Mauleverer because she has been ‘charmed at having the most patient listener who had ever fallen to her lot’ (p.136). It

is her vanity as much as her self-delusion that blinds her. Rachel is so anxious not to be thought small minded and suspicious, that she ignores all the things which lead the others to be uneasy about Mauleverer.

Women's powers of judgment are not denied within this novel, but they are confined to the sphere of the so-called natural; they are different from and complementary to the powers of men, and women who try to think like men - that is, women who rely on reason - are bound to be wrong. As Ermine tells Rachel, she is often misled because she relies on 'preconceived notions...your theory suffices you and you don't see small indications'. Rachel replies 'There may be something in that...it accounts for Grace always seeing things faster than I did' (p.200). That is, Grace 'sees', despite being less intelligent than Rachel, because she relies on her natural gifts of womanly perception, not on masculine theorising. Rachel puts her sense of self - her belief in the powers of her mind - before her sense of womanhood and is always led wrong by it.

The most disturbing aspect of the novel is the extent to which Rachel has to be brought down before she earns her happiness. Her punishment is harsh; not only is she publicly humiliated in the court which tries Mauleverer, but also one of the girls from the industrial school dies, nominally of diphtheria, but mainly because of neglect and abuse, (Rachel narrowly escapes a charge of murder, implicated because of her attempt to nurse the girl, Lovedy, with homeopathic remedies) and Rachel herself and two of Fanny's children contract diphtheria. Yonge seems to relish Rachel's punishment. Her turmoil is both mental and physical; she is wracked with guilt and self-loathing, and Yonge is determined not to let her off the hook. She rams home the issue of Rachel's accountability through 'headstrong blindness' relentlessly. She allows her no success in any of the available jobs for women; Rachel finds Fanny's

boys unteachable, her essays are turned down by the *Traveller's Review*, her nursing does not prevent the death of Lovedy, and her attempt at philanthropy is disastrous. The narrator tells us with a certain satisfaction, 'The Clever Woman had no marketable or available talent' (p.243). Her humiliation in the public court is compounded by the rumour that she only acted as she did out of love for Mauleverer.

The fact of her being the clever woman of the family is made to make her situation worse; there is a cruel relish in the description of Rachel's anguish in the court scene.

This being the Clever Woman of the family, only rendered her the more sensible both of the utter futility of her answer and of the effect it must be producing...here was she, the Clever Woman of the family, shown in open court to have been so egregious a dupe that the deceiver could not even be punished...To her excited, morbid apprehension, magnified by past self-sufficiency, it was as though all eyes were looking in triumph at that object of general scorn or aversion, a woman who had stepped out of her place (pp.252-253).

Here lies the heart of it; this is Rachel's crime. She has 'stepped out of her place' by relying on her own 'self-sufficiency'.

Rachel's sense of self is indivisible from her intellect and she is punished, not for her mistakes, but for asserting her sense of self. It is this that makes her punishment so severe, because she has denied the self-sacrifice that Yonge feels should be at the heart of womanhood. Rachel's crimes, after all, are few. She has tried to find a purpose beyond domestic duties, to find meaningful occupation and to employ her energies productively. There is never any suggestion in the novel that she has acted maliciously. On the contrary, she has always tried to act for the best as she saw it. She has many good qualities; she is very patient with her irritating mother, for example, and tries to be supportive of her relatives. The severity of her punishment, indeed one might almost say the glee with which the narrator describes Rachel's fall,

could be said to reveal the extent of Yonge's anxiety about her, perhaps 'the anxiety of authorship', to use the term employed by Gilbert and Gubar, who wrote 'Even when they do not overtly criticize patriarchal institutions or conventions...these writers almost obsessively create characters who enact their own, covert, authorial anger.'¹⁸ Yonge is, after all, the woman who had all her work 'passed' by her father until he died.¹⁹

Rachel is, perhaps, required to act out all the tangled contradictions of Yonge's attitudes to her own 'authority'. As a 'clever woman' herself, Yonge may be anxious to distance herself from Rachel; by the zealous over-punishment of Rachel she attempts to display her supposed lack of empathy with the character. Even Maria, the superintendent of the factory school who has an illegitimate child, and who has physically abused the children and is therefore legally and morally culpable, is not punished like Rachel is; some pity is shown for Maria, both by the narrator and other characters. Maria's crimes have come about because of over-reliance on the opinions of a man, and are therefore forgivable. Rachel is punished very publicly because it is an appropriate penalty for her attempt to engage with the public sphere, but this too is extremely problematic for Yonge. Her apparent condemnation of Rachel for her invasion of the public sphere cannot hide the fact that as a bestselling author Yonge herself had an extremely public role. In her punishment of Rachel then, Yonge attempts to vindicate herself. However, the extremes which are reached when the real clever woman seeks to condemn the fictional one suggest the extent to which the

¹⁸ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p.77.

¹⁹ 'Her father read, criticised and changed at will everything she wrote.' Georgina Battiscombe, 'Introduction' to *The Clever Woman of the Family*, np.

author fails to separate herself from Rachel. As George Eliot said of Yonge, 'one has a sense...of the incomplete narrative which cries out for further explanation.'²⁰

The fact is too, that for all Rachel's apparent faults, she is by far the most interesting character in the novel. This is really the crime for which Rachel is being punished so extremely; the fact that it is her possession of her so-called unwomanly characteristics that makes her interesting. After her nervous breakdown, however, Rachel acquires all sorts of 'womanly' qualities, and consequently becomes rather dull.²¹ She is feeble and tremulous in her movements, totally reliant upon Alick, and, predictably, completely unselfish. Her sense of self has been well and truly crushed out of her. She tells Ermine, 'Don't talk of what I wish...talk of what is good for him' (p.282). She has become a completely conventional woman and has attained a conventional happiness; her horizons have shrunk to the private sphere, and, more importantly, she has turned her back on the self-reliant woman that she previously was.

I did think I should not have been a commonplace woman...I used to think it so poor and weak to be in love, or to want any one to take care of one. I thought marriage such ordinary drudgery and ordinary opinions so contemptible, and had such schemes for myself. And this - this is such a break down, my blunders and their consequences have been so unspeakably dreadful, and now instead of suffering, dying - as I felt I ought - it has only made me just like other women, for I know I could not live without him (p.283).

This is another problematic area for this novel, because of the tension between self and acceptable womanhood. Rachel has gone through her suffering and thereby earned her happiness. She has fully recognised her faults and the fact that, underneath it all, she is just like other women, and only really wants someone to love her. And yet, as a character, she is suddenly diminished; the interest of the reader in her has

²⁰ Quoted in Hayter, *Charlotte Yonge*, p. 12.

shrunk along with the boundaries of her life. She ends up 'a thorough wife and mother' (p. 365), ashamed of her former self and grateful for being put in woman's proper place; she has found happiness in an acceptance of her limitations. Or, as the *Saturday Review* put it, 'at length the puppet has been fairly knocked down, and every female reader dismissed with a warning against attempting to do anything or think on anything without the guidance of the masculine intellect, "the master of her soul"'.²²

Although in many ways Rachel's capitulation to a conventional model of womanhood in which satisfaction is irretrievably tied up with self-denial seems complete, Yonge's underlying and unacknowledged dissatisfaction with this result is revealed in the character of Alick. Alick has three functions. First, he provides the partner Rachel needs for her final, conventional happy ending. Second, he defends her, recognising her good points and sympathetically explaining her less appealing side to the reader and the other characters. Third, he begins to educate Rachel by making her question her own certainties, even before the disaster of the industrial school and her nervous breakdown. Rachel appears to have earned her happiness with him as a result of her suffering and the recantation of her former opinionated self, yet Alick is far from being a conventional Victorian hero. It appears that Yonge, in forcing Rachel to accept conformity to the domestic ideal, cannot bring herself to make her give up her exceptional qualities completely; here, one wonders at what level of unconscious awareness Yonge is recognising the unacceptable limits of the conventional role for an exceptional woman such as Rachel. Here again we see the problematic nature of the text in that the stock happy ending reveals its limits.

²¹ 'The heroine, who comes in like a lion, is left at the end of the story a most satisfactorily gentle lamb.' *Saturday Review*, p.420.

²² *Saturday Review*, p.420.

Alick is not conventionally manly in the way that Rachel is not conventionally womanly; he is quiet, diffident and pale (although in case the reader is in any doubt about his true masculinity he has usefully been awarded the Victoria Cross), and he is the only character who likes her for her strength and 'unconventionalities'. In an unwittingly revealing speech he says he admired her the first time he met her when she was 'manfully chasing us off' (p. 273); he, with his slightly 'feminine' ways, can afford to admire her 'masculine' ones. He is one of the few people she can bear to have near her when she is ill; his footfall sounds 'firmer though softer than those she was used to' (p.274); he is an excellent nurse, and a sympathetic friend. When Rachel talks of 'surrendering her judgment' and confesses 'I don't think I am that kind of woman', Alick replies that he is not 'that kind of man' (p.276). Somehow Alick and Rachel both combine the womanly and the manly; instead of the complementary characteristics normally ascribed to men and women within the system of separate spheres, this unusual couple seem to hold out the possibility of a mutual happiness which goes against conventional ideas of ascribed sexual characteristics; perhaps rather surprising in what appears to be a supremely conventional text. Although the trappings of the conclusion, the children and the happy domestic scene, appear on the surface to provide the most trite of Victorian happy endings, the relationship at the heart of it is far from conventional.

In exploring the treatment of four quite different women within this novel it has become clear the extent to which, for a conservative writer like Yonge, the notion of female selfhood was incompatible with ideas of what constituted 'natural' womanliness. Sexual characteristics were considered to be intuitive, and a sense of self in women seemingly went against nature, in attempting to put reason over intuition. The 'good' women, Fanny and Ermine, behave as they do because they

follow their natural womanly instincts to be self-forgetful. Only the 'bad' women seem to have, let alone recognise, their needs. Jane Sturrock has noted, 'self-absorption is the essential fault against femininity in Yonge's fiction'²³ and Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström observes that 'the crime that exceeds all others is "wilfulness", or, to put it in modern terminology, the attempt to assert the rights and needs of the ego.'²⁴ The overt message of the novel appears to be that a sense of self in a woman appears only to lead to unhappiness; Rachel has apparently to abandon hers to be happy, and Bessie dies pursuing hers. *The Clever Woman of the Family*, which sets out so unequivocally to claim self-sacrifice as essential to womanhood, ends up by revealing all kinds of contradictions and confusions. Essentially, despite Yonge's heavy-handed attempts to condemn a sense of self in women, the text betrays a recognition that true self-sacrifice and self-awareness are inseparable.

²³ Sturrock, 'Heaven and Home', p. 84

²⁴ Sandbach-Dahlström, *Be Good Sweet Maid*, p.126

Chapter Four

Dinah Craik, *Olive* and Geraldine Jewsbury, *The Half Sisters*

Having in the previous chapter touched on the anxiety of authorship, and the tensions between self-effacement and celebrity which were perhaps inherent for the woman writer in the mid-Victorian period, this chapter goes on to discuss two novels which deal specifically with the idea of women's genius. The two writers were apparently completely dissimilar, Craik known for her 'sentimental and didactic piety'¹ whilst Jewsbury, whose crisis of faith was central to several of her works, 'deliberately sought the outrageous, smoking cigarillos, indulging in "profane talk" and adopting men's clothes'.² Craik produced forty-five books, including poetry for adults and children, and essays. Eliot was an admirer of her work. In an 1864 letter she alluded to a young man of whom she approved because of

the venerating affection he expressed for Miss Mulock [Craik was her married name] - for her earnest religious feeling, and her strength of character. 'She has taught me,' he said, 'to see good in other women - good that I never saw before.' Wasn't that pretty?³

Jewsbury published only six novels, but was a prolific reviewer and essayist and the first woman to earn her living as a publisher's reader.⁴ John Sutherland refers to her as 'the most accomplished all-round lady of letters of the nineteenth century'.⁵

It is notable for this thesis that two such different women, with very different attitudes to women's desires and needs, should engage with the issue of women's genius in

¹ Cora Kaplan, 'Introduction' to Dinah Craik, *Olive*, ed. Cora Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.ix. This edition will be referred to throughout; subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

² Shirley Foster, 'Introduction' to Geraldine Jewsbury, *Zoe*, ed. Shirley Foster (London: Virago, 1989), p.6.

³ Letter to Sarah Hennell, 22 January 1864, in George Eliot, *Selections from George Eliot's Letters* ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p.292.

⁴ Eliot admired Jewsbury for her 'insight and sincerity', but disliked her novel *Contance Herbert* for teaching 'copy-book morality'. George Eliot, *Westminster Review*, LXIV (July 1855) reprinted in George Eliot, *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p.134.

ways which reveal how very similar their underlying assumptions about women actually were. Both writers' heroines, the eponymous *Olive* (published 1850) and Jewsbury's Bianca (*The Half Sisters*, published 1848), are women with a vocation; Olive to paint, Bianca to act, and although the two characters are very different, the issues that the both authors feel compelled to deal with are the same. Both novels reveal the tensions between the ideal and the desire for realism; the difficulty in concentrating on their heroines' vocations without making them selfish, and in making them excel without making them unwomanly. The resulting descriptions of and simultaneous denials of genius, for the modern reader at least, at times border on the hilarious.

It is unsurprising that Craik and Jewsbury should have found the issue of female genius so problematic, even aside from the implications of concentration on the self. Scientific opinion at the time was based on the idea that women 'depart less from the normal than men'⁶; that is, the range of women's abilities was so limited, there could be no women geniuses. Women were all too much like each other to be exceptional. Their capacities were perfectly suited to a domestic existence, and did not need, and were not able, to be otherwise. Even a feminist like Frances Power Cobbe maintained that she was

very far indeed from maintaining that *during* marriage it is at all to be desired that a woman should struggle to keep up whatever pursuit she had adopted beforehand...The great and paramount duties of a mother and wife once adopted, every other interest sinks, by the beneficent law of our nature, into a subordinate place in normally constituted minds.⁷

Emily Shirreff, whose devotion to female education might have led one to expect otherwise, asserted that 'I believe devotion to one pursuit not to be desirable for women.

⁵ John Sutherland, *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction* (Harlow: Longman, 1988), p.335.

⁶ Psychologist Edward Thorndike, cited in Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.100.

⁷ Frances Power Cobbe, 'What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids', *Fraser's Magazine*, (November 1862), in 'Criminals, Idiots, Women & Minors': *Nineteenth-Century Writing By Women On Women*, ed. Susan Hamilton (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995), p.90.

They are not designed to 'achieve greatness' and the means of doing so are seldom open to them, even if they had the power'.⁸

Women's role in the artistic world was as facilitator of men's work, as wife or mother, by acting as inspiration or, if position enabled it, as patron. Helsinger et al point out that

In 1864 the *London Review* asked women to abandon their own writing and to return to their proper mission 'of keeping alive for men certain ideas and ideals.' It was easier - and far more comfortable - to see woman as the muse instead of the maker.⁹

Given this consensus, it is hardly surprising that both *Olive* and *The Half Sisters* are characterised by an uncomfortable-seeming awareness of transgression, which is apparent throughout. *Olive* is ambivalent right from the start. In a novel which takes the heroine's name as its title, which contains barely a scene in which she does not appear, and which is narrated (although nominally in the third person), entirely from Olive's point of view, it is ironic that one of its main themes should be self-sacrifice and the negation of self. On a superficial reading, *Olive* looks like the paradigm of a certain sort of didactic Victorian novel, and Olive Rothesay, its heroine, as the paradigm of Victorian heroines.

The story is quickly told; Olive is born with a slight curvature of the spine which causes her mother, a young, flighty Englishwoman, and her father, a dour but noble Scot, to recoil from her. She is reared as a young child by her Scottish nurse, Elspie, who dotes upon her, but who dies when Olive is about twelve. When her father dies, practically bankrupt and a drunkard, ruined by speculation and an unhappy marriage, her mother turns to Olive, and begins to love her. They are forced by poverty to move to London where they lodge in the house of a painter, Vanbrugh, and his sister, where Olive discovers her talent

⁸ Cited in Laura Morgan Green, *Educating Women: Cultural Conflict and Victorian Literature* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2001), p.12.

for painting. Here Olive meets Christal Manners, supposedly the daughter of aristocratic parents lost at sea, but who later turns out to be the illegitimate child of Angus Rothesay, Olive's father, and a quadroon woman whom he met on his business travels abroad. Olive receives a letter from Harold Gwynne, who is both the husband of Olive's childhood friend, and the son of an old friend of her father's, Alison Gwynne. Harold claims the money that Angus borrowed from them just before he died. Olive, largely from the proceeds of the sale of one of her pictures, eventually pays him back. The household (which by now consists of Olive, her mother and Christal - although her true parentage is still not known) moves to Farnwood, which turns out to be in the parish where Alison Gwynne and Harold live, and where Harold is the minister. His wife had died some years previously, and the marriage had been far from happy. Harold has lost his faith, and is in deep emotional and spiritual torment. Harold and Olive become friends, and Olive gradually realises that she is in love with him. Eventually he realises it too, and they get married and live happily ever after.

So far so conventional. And in the character of Olive, Craik has constructed what must surely be one of the most priggish, long-suffering, self-effacing individuals in Victorian fiction. The young Olive is 'patient, gentle and good - more like an angel than a child' (p.27) and, despite being rejected by both of her parents, she is never bitter. Even when she overhears herself described by her best friend as 'deformed' she is not angry, only upset. When, looking for comfort, she brings her tears to her mother, Sybilla Rothesay cries and describes herself as punished by heaven. Olive does not feel aggrieved at her mother's reaction, she

had to cast aside all other feelings in the care of soothing her mother.
She succeeded at last; but she learnt at the same time than on this one

⁹ Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America 1837-1883. Vol.1. 'Defining Voices'* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p.8.

subject there must be silence between them forever. It seemed, also, to her sensitive nature, as if every tear and every complaining word were a reproach to the mother that bore her. Henceforth her bitter thoughts must be wrestled with alone (p.68).

The reader has actually witnessed few tears or complaining words from Olive, nor even any bitter thoughts; as well as hiding them from her mother, Olive apparently even hides them from herself. Her repression of any negative feelings is so complete that she appears to have none, or at least, none that the narrator is willing to allow us to see. She does not feel resentful of her parents' lack of interest in her, she merely finds another outlet for her feelings; 'Her little heart was not positively checked in its overflowings; but it had a world of secret tenderness that, never being claimed, expended itself in all sorts of wild fancies' (p.37).

Olive is not the only character in the novel constructed as a model of long-suffering female self-sacrifice. The characters for whom the reader is encouraged to feel sympathy are all women who hide their feelings; the characters of whom we are not encouraged to approve make no secret of theirs. Good women suffer in silence. As well as Olive we have Meliora Vanbrugh, sister of the artist the Rothesays lodge with in London, who gives up her whole life to looking after her brother so that he can concentrate on his art, and Alison Gwynne, who is careful not to question her son's actions or beliefs, despite the misgivings she feels. The portrait of Alison Gwynne, whilst in some ways supremely conventional, actually creates some moments in the text where the idealised picture of womanly self-sacrifice feels most under threat. Unlike Olive, Alison has had to school herself into this apparently desirable repression of her feelings; to her it does not come naturally. Rather than question her vacillating son's decisions, she

folded her hands over her breast, less in meekness than to press down its swelling emotion. Well she knew that woman's deepest love, as mother, sister, wife, is often but another name for self-denying martyrdom (p.91).

This passage makes two very significant points for any consideration of the Victorian notion of women's self-sacrifice. First, the narrator here presents this view of 'woman's deepest love' as universal; it is Alison's view, it is the narrator's own, it is that of every 'mother, sister, wife'. Craik feels no need to justify, defend or explain the notion of women's love as 'self-denying martyrdom' because it already forms part of the accepted 'common-sense' view of good women. However, here the narrator, through Alison - and somewhat inadvertently perhaps - allows for the possibility that whilst women's self-sacrifice may be a matter of fact, it may not be a matter of nature. Alison consciously represses her instinctive reactions; we are told that she spoke with 'the quick impulse of the mother's unconscious jealousy. But she repressed it at once' (p.90). Here, as in the whole novel, the female characters display a willing, but not necessarily instinctive acquiescence in a patriarchy which includes God (Alison, for example, is compared with 'one of the holy Hebrew mothers') (p.90). The second point of interest is that the martyrdom which Alison refers to is the martyrdom of silence. For her, women's sacrifice comes less in the sacrifice of self-interest than in the sacrifice of her own opinion. In order to fit her own ideas of what she knows a real woman to be, she knows she must deny herself the right to her own real feelings; a true self-sacrifice.

The representations of the different female characters in *Olive* provide further evidence of a central confusion within this and many other Victorian texts, that is, between nature and artifice. The acceptable woman is always associated with nature, but in fact there is nothing natural in her. It is the bad women who are true to their own natures; here we have Sara Gwynne, flighty, inconsistent and faithless, and Christal Manners¹⁰, whose

¹⁰ In the character of Christal the case is further complicated by the connections between the impurity of race and imperfect womanhood.

uncontrolled rages border on violence. Even Olive's own mother loses the love of her husband by revealing rather than hiding her feelings.

At first she tried to win him back, not with a woman's sweet and placid dignity of love, never-failing, never-tiring, yet invisible as a rivulet that runs through deep green bushes, scarcely heard and never seen. Sybilla's arts - the only arts she knew, were the whole armoury of girlish coquetry, or childish wile, passionate tenderness and angry or sullen reproach (p.47).

Craik's uncertainty is displayed here; coquetry and wiles are artificial, knowingly employed, but passionate tenderness and anger are surely genuine emotions. Craik's implied criticism in this passage seems to be directed as much towards women who assert any kind of strong feeling as it is towards women who try to manipulate through fakery. This shows more than the narrator's apparent disapproval of women who reveal their true feelings; we see here the sort of anxiety already discussed in relation to Sarah Stickney Ellis's advice to women to make themselves indispensable. There seems to be a fear lurking somewhere behind the overt narrative that a woman cannot afford to show her true self for fear of the consequences; the narrator has already warned 'would...that every wife knew that her fate depends less on what her husband makes of her, than what she makes herself to him!' (p.32). This does not so much accept the supposed naturalness of women's self-sacrifice, as, like Ellis, warn women of the consequences of being other than self-sacrificing. It is nothing less than bizarre that the women who keep a check on their feelings are celebrated as somehow more naturally womanly - Craik uses the natural imagery of bushes and rivulets - than those women who show exactly what they feel. Even Craik admits that Sybilla's 'arts' are useless; that is, she is not good at artifice. Does that not make her more, not less, natural? No wonder the cohesion of the text breaks down at points where it has to force women to be simultaneously natural and superficial. The text

refuses to recognise the association between natural and wild; this nature is the nature of a manicured, controlled garden, calm and unthreatening.

As a child, Olive is prone to the sort of imaginings which have also been discussed with reference to the work of Ellis and others, whereby one puts oneself at the centre of an imaginary drama of the emotions, a secret world of delicious melancholy:

She...clad the imaginary shape of grief with a strange beauty. It was sweet to be sad, sweet to weep. She even tried to make a few delicious sorrows for herself, and when a young girl - whose beautiful face she had watched in church - died, she felt pensive and mournful, and even took a pleasure in thinking that there was now one new grave in the churchyard which she would almost claim to weep over as her own (p.39).

The point here is that Olive's emotions are completely false; she actually feels nothing for the dead girl, who just provides a vehicle for Olive's bitter-sweet self-imposed feelings.

Even an apparently self-effacing girl like Olive craves the sort of excitement which comes with starring in one's own drama. Unlike Alison, whose silence almost threatens to choke her, Olive is a prime candidate for the joys of silent self-sacrifice; in the early part of her life at least, her pleasures are all internalised and mainly invented from the very unpromising material around her.¹¹

Such is Olive's selflessness, we are told, that 'her yearning was always *to love* rather than *to be loved*' (p.61).¹² She never blames others for their shortcomings, even when they are presented as being obviously wrong. An episode occurs which nicely illustrates the notion of the increased pleasure of sacrifice to an unworthy object discussed earlier in relation both to Dorothea Brooke and Rachel Curtis - if sacrifice to a decent character is sweet, how much greater the sacrifice, and therefore the nobility, when the sacrifice is to the unworthy. The narrator has long established the saintly, loving, kind nature of Olive when her father comes home drunk and calls her a 'white-faced, mean-

looking hunchback'. She 'recoiled - a strong shudder ran through her frame; she moaned one long sobbing sigh and no more.' This sobers her father slightly, and when he asks whether she is vexed with anything he might have said 'She looked sorrowfully into his hot, fevered face, and stroked his arm with her pale hand. "No - no - not vexed at all! You could not help it, poor father!...God! teach me to endure!"' (p.76)

This is a strange scene, where the modern reader actually has no sympathy with either of the protagonists. Angus is drunk, cruel and weak, but Olive is not really morally defensible. Rather than blaming her father for his lack of control (something which is insisted upon for the women), Olive, considering herself 'painful to look upon' (p. 68), absolves her father from all blame. But he is to blame; no-one forced him to drink, and perhaps by being so understanding, Olive is condoning his drunkenness. This scene illustrates why the book as a whole does not really work, because of the flawed character of the heroine: flawed not in moral, but in human terms. Olive is completely unbelievable because she is completely abject. She never puts up any resistance to others' views. Unlike Alison Gwynne who has to physically restrain herself from intervening, Olive's passivity is natural; we are told 'her nature was formed to suit her apparent fate, and that if less fitted to enjoy, she was the more fitted for the solemnity of that destiny, to endure' (p.39). She accepts judgments of herself with no complaint, and apparently with no desire to defend herself, even when the judgments are made by those with no power to judge; the drunk, the foolish, the vain.

This raises some interesting questions concerning the whole nature of self-abnegation. We see constantly in this novel the submission of the noble mind to the mean, but this almost inevitably leads the reader into a consideration of the idea that a little more

¹¹ It is fascinating to speculate what a different novel would have been written fifty years later, post-Freud, and what would have been the result of all of this repression.

¹² Italics in original.

robust resistance might be more effective, and furthermore, morally desirable. Olive's acceptance of bad behaviour could be seen as collusion. Her lack of criticism means that Angus's drinking, Sara Gwynne's thoughtlessness and her young brother's cruelty go unchecked; but Olive does not appear to consider the idea that ignoring such behaviour may perpetuate it. This further fuels the suspicion that the attraction of self-sacrifice as visualised here is actually for the personal gratification of the martyr, not for the greater good, as it is so often presented. This is certainly not to claim that this sort of questioning formed part of Craik's agenda in this novel, but she makes Olive such an unbelievably accepting character that it seems almost perverse not to make her resist at some point. In fact, all Olive's 'enemies' do not reform, they die, or disappear from the action. She is never required to face up to the question of whether her self-sacrifice achieves anything apart from her own saintliness.

Unsurprisingly, Olive prevails in the end by example - the Dorothea model of spreading goodness in a small circle, the 'ripples in ponds' theory of benevolence. But as most of the 'bad' characters have disappeared one way or another, the only characters left to respect Olive and take her as their example were fairly good anyway, and not in need of redemption. The role of martyr, in this case, could be seen to be just an easier road to take than that of teacher. These sorts of questions are obviously connected to the issue of the centrality of self in the notion of self-sacrifice which is fundamental to this thesis, where the concentration on self entails looking inward, not outward towards other people. It could perhaps be argued that because the reader sees all of Olive's internal feelings, her self-denial and self-abasement, her lack of resistance becomes for the reader an active thing, rather than just an absence of action in her own interest. Rather than just being a nebulous notion of grandeur, in the reader's experience it becomes more than a notion and becomes an event, a happening. We, the reader, with our privileged perception of Olive's

thought processes, see her as more active than the other characters in the novel would, because all they see is an unruffled surface. This harks back to an earlier discussion of how the reader is the witness to the quiet lives of these self-sacrificing women. In the case of Olive, at least, perhaps the reader is not just a witness, but even colludes in the practice of making self-sacrifice active; self-struggle, not self-denial; not nothing, but something.

In the character of Olive, Craik attempts to straddle the divide at the centre of this thesis; that is, between self and self-sacrifice. Like Sarah Stickney Ellis's invisible celebrated women, Olive is to reconcile all contradictory demands. Craik tells us she is 'at once gentle and strong, meek and fearless, patient to endure, heroic to act', although, and perhaps rather unsurprisingly therefore, she is amongst those 'of whom the world contains few' (p.100). Craik here recognises the didactic nature of her writing and the futility of offering Olive as some kind of aspirational model of behaviour; the reader is invited to admire, possibly even to try to emulate, but not to identify with Olive, because she is so completely unbelievable, a construct of perfect womanly self-sacrifice, not a person.

Interestingly, Olive's greatest success comes when she is *not* passive. She tackles Harold Gwynne's loss of faith head on, with argument, prayer, and constant discussion and eventually he regains his faith. And in fact Olive herself seems to propose a more active kind of ideal womanhood when she visits the convent of St Margaret, when

Olive thought, though she did not then say, that good St Margaret, the mother of her people, the softener of her half-savage lord, the teacher and guide of her children, was more near the ideal of womanhood than the simple, kind-hearted, but childish worshippers, who spent their lives in the harmless baby-play of decking her shrine with flowers (p.251).

However, although Olive claims to support a more active model, we actually see her condoning women's passivity in almost everything she does.

The sphere where Olive is really active is that of her painting, and here we see the divisions in the text most clearly. Craik is torn between the notion of genius as exclusively

male, and Olive's particular genius. The narrator appears to concur with what Vanbrugh, Olive's fairly unsuccessful painter friend says about genius:

‘I am not such a fool as to say that genius is of either sex, but it is an acknowledged fact that no woman ever was a great painter, poet or musician. Genius, the mighty one, does not exist in weak female nature, and even if it did, custom and education would certainly stunt its growth’ (p.123).

Even this is not straightforward. First, genius has no sex, but then it does not exist naturally in females. So genius is not in female nature, but could be stunted by custom and education. An unsympathetic reader might derive some satisfaction at this point in witnessing Craik tie herself in knots. Craik is anxious to deny the possibility of genius occurring naturally in women, but cannot bring herself completely to do so. The narrator tries to deny the possibility of genius in women whilst simultaneously considering the possibility that, if custom and education were to change, the potential might be there. She claims that women could never free themselves from the ties of affection and the duties of the household to concentrate on their art.

Herein man has the advantage. He...can make it his all in all, his life's sole aim and guerdon...But there scarce ever lived the woman who would not rather sit meekly by her own hearth, with her husband at her side, and her children at her knee (p.126).

Although purporting to claim that nature bounds women's ambition, this passage actually has the effect of making it sound as though it is women's circumstances rather than their spirit that limits them, and that it is men's selfishness that allows them to concentrate on their art. As well as having other tasks to do, she is not selfish enough to ‘trample on all human ties’ (p.126).

Even the selfish, egotistical Vanbrugh seems confused; having just denied the possibility of women's genius he thinks that Olive might be ‘more free to work the glorious work of genius’ (p. 125). Craik is particularly anxious not to present Olive as having any

personal ambition. She claims that it is pointless for her to aim for the highest, and yet cannot bring herself to belittle her talent. The narrator puts it thus:

Vanbrugh had said truly, that genius is of no sex; and he had said likewise truly, that no woman can be an artist - that is, a great artist. The hierarchies of the soul's dominion belong only to man, and it is right that they should. He it was whom God created first, let him take the pre-eminence. But among the stars of lesser glory, which are given to lighten the nations, among sweet-voiced poets, earnest prose writers, who, by the lofty truth that lies hid beneath legend and parable, purify the world, graceful painters and beautiful musicians, each brightening their generation with serene and holy lustre - among these, let woman shine! (p.127).

This passage appears to be written as an affirmation of the notion that women cannot approach genius, and even explains how it is a correct and God-sent law that they should not. And yet it feels as though this is merely paying lip-service to convention, as it goes on to make great claims for women artists; the claims of 'lofty truth', of the purification of the world with their 'serene and holy lustre', and the reader is left wondering what more that a talent legitimately labelled 'genius' could offer; these women cannot be called geniuses, and yet by their art they can change the world. We see here shades of the problem which can be found at the heart of Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*; just by telling the reader a thing is so, no matter how persistently, does not make it so if the action of the narrative shows otherwise.

It is also true to say that in *Olive* none of the men do approach genius. Vanbrugh, who has devoted his life to art, is a failure, believed in only by his down-trodden sister. Lyle (a childhood friend and later admirer of Olive) is actually described in the sort of dismissive terms that the narrator has tried and failed to apply to Olive.

In his boyhood, [Olive] had thought him quite a little genius; but the bud had given more promise that the flower was ever likely to fulfil. Now she saw in him one of those not uncommon characters, who with sensitive feeling, and some graceful talent, yet never rise to the standard of genius (p.178).

In the end, Craik cannot bear to deny Olive her genius. She does claim greatness for her, whilst still hedging her claims around with qualifications and rebuttals:

sometimes chance or circumstance of wrong, sealing up her woman's nature, converts her into a self-dependent human soul. Instead of life's sweetesses, she has before her life's greatnesses...her genius may lift itself upward, expand and grow might; never so mighty as man's, but still great and glorious (p.127).

She is still insisting that woman's genius cannot compare with man's, although claiming that it is great and glorious, and the question is inevitable. Just how much more elevated can man's genius possibly be? All her insertions such as 'never so mighty as man's' sound like bolt-on additions, damage limitation, sops to a conventional view.

Craik cannot claim genius for Olive, because genius and self-sacrifice do not mix. She is frightened that Olive may appear unnatural and unwomanly because she is ambitious and driven by something within her self, so she makes the normal interests of womanhood apparently unavailable to her, because of her deformity. We are told throughout that Olive is unlikely to marry and have children. Otherwise, Olive's genius, and its necessary concentration on the individual, threatens the whole basis upon which the edifice of the notion of separate spheres is built, because it suggests that self-sacrifice is not natural, but acquired. Craik does not claim exceptionality for Olive's genius but for her physical state, which denies her the usual life mapped out for women, and which therefore allows her to follow her ambition. So Olive is not exceptional because she is a female genius, she is exceptional because her situation allows her to pursue her genius.¹³ Is genius therefore still incompatible with woman's nature? Olive must become 'self-dependent' and unwomanly. She has an 'almost masculine power of mind' (p.127) which allows her to concentrate on her art. Again, the narrator is torn between an insistence on the non-gendered nature of

¹³ Although it is true to say that we never really believe that Olive is not beautiful. When Harold proposes to her, her 'deformity', despite apparently being bad enough to exclude her from all

genius, and the necessity of ensuring that Olive is not seen to have lost her womanliness; she is both sexless and womanly at the same time. She

mingles among men, not as a woman, but as one who, like themselves, pursues her own calling, has her own spirit's aim; and can therefore step aside for no vain fear, nor sink beneath any idle shame. And wherever she went, her own perfect womanliness wrapped her round as with a shield (p.127).

Here we see the defence of the woman artist - Olive or Craik? - where genius excuses the concentration on 'her own calling...her own spirit's aim', but where she is still protected by her womanliness; she has, apparently, bridged the divide between woman and artist, 'not as a woman' but yet with 'perfect womanliness'. The contradiction appears, not for the first time, not to be noticed by the author.

The central irony of Olive's artistic nature is that the self-effacing, self-denying woman that the reader has come to know desires fame. She has a 'great aim' that she 'might perhaps achieve a success under shadow of which the lonely woman might go down to the grave not unhonoured in her day' (p.133). Art is supposed to compensate Olive for her lack of a meaningful life; the fact that her sense of self is supposed to be completely denied in her 'normal' life means that her art is the more important. The only time we do get any sense of her bitterness is when she fails, because of lack of time to herself, to finish her painting in time for it to be exhibited. She is bitter because she cannot display her work; we see here that she is not content with art as a personal experience, she wants to reveal her talent. The sense of self that she has suppressed in her day-to-day existence comes out in her art, and she wants it to be recognised. Craik's inability to deal with the contradiction between fame and self-effacement is manifested in the way she more or less ignores it; we are told that Olive's painting has been sold, but are told nothing of its

expectation of marriage, is not mentioned and she tells him, where he is physically weak from illness, 'I am strong' (p. 314).

reception in the wider world. We have no idea whether she is renowned or not. We learn at the end of novel from one of Olive's friends who humorously remarks that Harold Gwynne's influence on his wife was 'robbing the Scottish Academy of no one knew how many grand pictures' (p.325) and so we assume that she has become successful, but there is no reference to the outside world impinging on the domestic world we have witnessed throughout.

Again, Craik is anxious to show that Olive still has all the 'normal' womanly feelings of inferiority; despite her worldly success she still feels she wants to abase herself to her man. She wants him to be her superior; 'He was a great and learned man, and she a lowly woman; in her knowledge not worthy to touch his garment's hem' (p.194). In fact, Harold Gwynne is not the Christ-like figure that this might suggest. Olive is, after all, a successful artist, whilst Harold is religiously confused, a bad preacher, a misguided father and a troubled son. Olive still reveres him, she has remained unchanged by public success. The public never encroaches into the private sphere; apart from the first painting that gets sold by the good offices of Vanbrugh, we never see her selling a picture, or employing an agent, or mounting an exhibition, or even much of her actually painting. Olive can only be allowed her work and her fame if it can be demonstrated that it does not change her or her way of life. She is supposed to be that unlikely beast, an artist without ego. Craik cannot engage with a more fully articulated view of Olive's artistic life without revealing that the work of an artist necessarily involves not only a strong sense of self, but a strong sense of one's rights, if only in terms of time spent on a solitary pursuit. Rather than admit this, she chooses to ignore it. Self-sacrifice is too central to the notion of a 'good' woman for her to be able to fully explore the representation of 'woman as artist'.¹⁴

¹⁴ This reminds me of writers such as Margaret Oliphant and Elizabeth Gaskell, and their insistence that they wrote on the corners of kitchen tables and such like places, suggesting that they never

Having said as much, the novel throughout privileges women's ways of thinking and acting and being over men's. We have seen how Vanbrugh's selfish pursuit of his art leads him and his sister merely to ruin and oblivion whilst Olive's almost incidental career brings her fame (even if offstage), and how Olive's deeply religious feeling is presented throughout as superior to Harold's analytical, intellectual questionings. And in a letter to Olive Harold says

‘You say that, like most women, you have no power of keen philosophical argument. Perhaps not; but there is in you a spiritual sense that may even transcend knowledge. I once heard - was it not you who said so? - that the poet who ‘reads God's secrets in the stars’, soars nearer Him than the astronomer who calculates by figure and by line’ (p.221).

Olive wins all by not abandoning her womanly instincts; she brings Harold back to belief, she is universally loved and she is (we suppose) a famous artist. The novel ends with Harold achieving his own kind of fame as a scientific researcher, and characteristic of the novel as a whole, the narrator tells us ‘it was a natural and womanly thing that in her husband's fame Olive should almost forget her own’ (p.325). Almost, but not quite, and Craik makes sure that we, the reader, do not forget it either. She gives it the last word, sneaked in after the mock-elevation of the lesser man's importance.

Many of the issues Craik addresses in *Olive* are pursued by Jewsbury in *The Half Sisters*. Bianca, too, is in love with a less than worthy man, but Conrad Percy serves the essential role of providing Bianca with a focus outside herself upon which to concentrate her artistic endeavours. Bianca is the illegitimate issue of a relationship between an English soldier and an Italian woman. Bianca and her mother come to England when Bianca is, presumably, in her late teens, in order to find her father. He has died, leaving a widow and Bianca's half-sister, Alice. Bianca, forced to support herself and her ailing mother, falls

into work almost by accident, first as a circus performer, and then as an actress. She becomes betrothed to Conrad, but sends him away for three years in order that she can work her way up in her profession and thus prove herself worthy of him in the eyes of the world. She becomes increasingly successful and celebrated, before being abandoned by Conrad, who falls in love with the now married Alice, when Bianca falls in love with and marries Lord Melton.

In *Olive*, Craik spends much of the novel showing proofs of Olive's selflessness before she can deal with the idea of her talent. She has to be proved to be the perfect self-sacrificing woman in order to be allowed to have her art. Jewsbury, unlike Craik, does not feel constrained to deny Bianca's genius. What is notable is how Jewsbury deals with what her talent means to Bianca, and what she does with it. Jewsbury insists that there is no element of self-gratification or self-glorification; Bianca's genius is excused less in a universal display of self-sacrificing benevolence, than in a determination on the part of Jewsbury to show that there is no personal ego involved. She does not do this by claiming that Bianca serves as merely a vessel, a channel for the words she speaks, which might perhaps have been a way of showing her to be great but without making her self material to the process of greatness. This would, after all, be a familiar formulation; it is not unknown for actors, whether in mock-humility or otherwise, to claim that they merely speak the words. But Jewsbury is not content with making Bianca a mere conduit; she is a strong, opinionated, driven woman. Any sense of self she may have, though, is subsumed in her feeling for Conrad. Bianca, we are told

might possibly have become too self-reliant, too much self concentrated, had not her efforts been consecrated to a purpose out of herself; it was not fame for *herself*, it was not success for her own sake, that she sought; it was to make herself worthy of Conrad.¹⁵

¹⁵ Geraldine Jewsbury, *The Half Sisters*, ed. Joanne Wilkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 165. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

Jewsbury here seems to be more than merely pre-empting criticism of an egotistical, and therefore unnatural heroine. She recognises the possibility of self-gratification, and quickly displaces it by assuring the reader that Bianca's desire for fame is entirely acceptable for a woman; all her efforts are for another.

The insistence on Bianca's motivation here is particularly significant, because she has already been offered what might seem to be sufficient motivation. The leading actor of the day has told her

'You must not only take the head of your profession, but you must make that profession what it has never been made yet. There are wonderful and glorious resources in our art, and they have never been recognised nor developed; it has never risen to be considered more than an amusement...I believe you have it in you to raise it from its meretricious degraded state' (pp. 160-161).

Jewsbury, clearly uncomfortable with the centrality of self seemingly accorded legitimacy here, does not deem this to be enough for Bianca. Despite the actor's insistence that her genius must not be 'for the glorification of yourself' (p.160), Bianca replies that his idea of motivation means nothing to her. She tells him

'I can conceive no higher motive, or more ennobling, than the desire to become worthy of one we love. I love my profession; I would grudge no labour to perfect myself in it...But if there had been no one to whom, in my soul, I might dedicate my efforts...I could not have worked. I could not work from a mere personal motive - it needed something to take me out of myself to induce me to aspire to excellence' (p. 161).

Far from causing her to concentrate on herself, then, Bianca's art necessitates that which will 'take me out of myself'. Clearly, the lack of a sense of self is so essential to mid-Victorian ideas of acceptable womanhood, that even a radical writer like Jewsbury cannot bring herself to construct a heroine whose obvious immense strength of character can be allowed to contain any hint of self-interest or self-gratification.

Jewsbury is, however, in no doubt about the attractions of Bianca's life. She contrasts the lives of the two half-sisters. In learning her art, Bianca 'began to feel a fascination... There was a constant excitement and sense of adventure... A sense of her own powers gradually made itself felt, and there was a pleasure in the exercise of it' (p.34). On the other hand, in Alice's world 'to manage the house well, and to see that the dinner was punctual and well appointed; to be very quiet, and not talk nonsense, or rather to talk very little of any thing, were the principal qualities desired in wives and daughters' (p.42). Even Conrad, who comes to disapprove of Bianca's public career, thinks 'anything better than the decent stagnation in which [Alice] seemed to live' (p.141). In the character of Alice, Jewsbury does seem to try to contest her own treatment of woman's genius. She constantly criticises society's expectations of women, and the lives which middle-class women are forced to lead, but she does not go as far as questioning the ideas of womanhood upon which these expectations are built. The two half-sisters, both, apparently, have the capacity for genius, but the constraints of her life have crushed it out of Alice.

She had the sensibility of genius without the creative power; she had not force enough to break through the rough husk of her actual life and assert her inner soul; she had not the gift of utterance in any way, and the life was almost choked out of her by the rank, over-fed, material prosperity which surrounded her (p.42).

Bianca's talents, by contrast, have been allowed to develop because she is outside respectable society - foreign, illegitimate and a public performer; but still, in many ways, no different from the most conventional of Victorian heroines.

Judith Rosen claims that

actresses appear frequently as heroines in fiction of the mid and late nineteenth century, a prominence that seems at odds with their marginalized place in society. As characters whose desires and talents did not fit dominant, middle-class norms of female behaviour, however, they often proved strategically useful, allowing authors to present possibilities not found in women's usual plots. By dwelling on actresses' lives, at a time when resistance to domestic restrictions was growing,

writers explored pressing questions about middle-class women in general, whether women could or should step outside the bounds of their accepted role to act a more public and self-centred part; whether female identity might form itself through work as well as through love.¹⁶

This is an interesting argument, and, although it is true to say that deploying actresses allowed authors to explore new possibilities for women, it is based on two incorrect premises. Actresses do not feature frequently as the heroines of mid- and late-Victorian fiction, certainly not in English fiction. Apart from Bianca, perhaps the only actress heroine is Magdalen Vanstone in Wilkie Collins's *No Name*, and she is actually only an actress for a very short time within the action of the novel. There are examples of actresses acting as foils to the heroine - Vashti to Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, for example - and actresses may appear incidentally, figures peripheral to someone else's story, (as in, for example *Nicholas Nickleby*, during his spell with a travelling theatre troupe), but to say that they 'frequently' appear as 'heroines' is somewhat misleading. More significantly, in the character of Bianca Jewsbury does *not* address ideas of the forming of female identity through work. Bianca is almost completely untouched by the world of the stage. The novel touches on areas which are never really explored; we hear little of Bianca's working life,¹⁷ and Jewsbury's insistence that Bianca works only for Conrad and love - unconvincing as it may be - means that she is confined to the most conventional ideas of womanhood. The silence about artistic work which is manifested in *Olive* and *The Half Sisters* suggests the problematic nature of the subject for the authors. It is as though Craik and Jewsbury both, at some level, recognise that they themselves have chosen to follow their vocation, and are aware that they want critical success and that they care about

¹⁶ Judith Rosen, 'At Home Upon A Stage: Domesticity and Genius in Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters*' in *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*, ed. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (New York: Garland, 1996), p.18.

¹⁷ In both *Olive* and *The Half Sisters*, another art seems to 'stand in' for the art of writing, as though to distance the authors from the desire for work, and possibly celebrity, but also perhaps neither

their achievements in ways that they deny to Olive and Bianca. In both books, another art stands in place of writing, but the question 'whether female identity might form itself through work as well as through love' is skated over and avoided, not explored. By contrasting the lives of Bianca and Alice, Jewsbury does deal with the question of occupation for women, but on the most superficial level.

As has been seen, what is striking about her treatment of female identity is how little she does actually question conventional ideas of its fundamental nature. Bianca's chief characteristic, after all, is her lack of self-awareness. She loves Conrad to the point of self-forgetfulness:

Her own sentiment was so engrossing, so all-absorbing, that it left no room for considering whether Conrad returned her love or not. With the deep humility of a true passion, she did not venture to aspire to being beloved as she herself loved...She only desired to be allowed to worship him without repulse (p.89).

Whilst acting she is equally unselfconscious.

She had no idea of vanity, or of getting admiration, or of displaying herself in any way; her sole idea of the circus was, that it was the means of earning a certain number of shillings on which she might support her mother (p.31).

Jewsbury legitimises Bianca's display of herself by making it necessary (she needs the money) and almost unwitting.

In the character of Bianca, Jewsbury appears to have set out to explore the possibility of a different, unconventional and superior womanliness. The conventionalities of her half-sister, Alice, are described as weaknesses:

the weak part of Alice's character, although the source of much in her that was delicate and graceful...gave that confiding, clinging, beautiful helplessness...but still it is *strength*, and not graceful weakness, that is to be desired: defects of character have often a beautiful aspect (p.67).

Bianca is compared favourably with Alice, she is a free spirit, unbound by a conventional upbringing. Most women, according to the narrator

are crushed down under so many generations of arbitrary rules for the regulation of their manners and conversation; they are from their cradle embedded in such a composite of fictitiously-tinted virtues, and artificial qualities, that even the best and strongest amongst them are not conscious that the physiology of their minds is as warped by the traditions of feminine decorum, as that of their persons is by the stiff corsets which, until very recently, were *de rigueur* for preventing them 'growing out of shape'. Bianca had been left to nature and chance, and nobody had ever taught her propriety (pp. 159-160).

Having created this unconventional, untrammelled heroine then, it is testimony to the dominion of notions of the inherent nature of self-sacrifice to the mid-Victorian woman that Jewsbury feels completely unable to allow Bianca to find motivation within herself. She seems to try to set up a new model of 'good' womanhood in which self is recognised as being central and legitimate. Bianca claims

'I was kept clear of ENNUI, which eats like leprosy into the life of women. I was leading a life of my own, and was able to acquire a full control over my own faculties; and I have always had a sense of freedom, of enjoyment of my existence' (p.249).

Self-determination then, seems to be at the heart of this model, and yet further on in the same speech, Bianca is whipped back into line, when she asserts 'if you could furnish women with a definite object...you would have a race of wives and daughters...able to aid men in any noble object by noble thoughts, by self-denial' (p.250).

Nowhere is this capitulation to the restrictions of a conventional idea of womanliness more evident than in the presentation of Bianca's final destiny. She has agreed to marry Lord Melton, and has pleaded for time to fulfil her outstanding professional engagements. Melton's sister asks her not to appear on the stage again, now that she is to be a member of their family. The whole of the rest of the novel has been full of descriptions, explanations and justifications of the strength of Bianca's vocation, and

Jewsbury feels it sufficient to allow her to give it all up with a mere 'So be it, then' said Bianca, gracefully; 'arrange all as you wish it to be, and I will be conformable' (p.389). Jewsbury obviously feels this to be lacking somewhat in conviction, and realises that it requires further resolution, but her solution serves to diminish Bianca even further.

The narrator claims

It is a great mistake to suppose that genius is shown in one special mode of manifestation alone; - it inspires its possessor, and enables him to feel equal to all situations. Bianca might have been born to her new position, so easily she sustained her dignities, and so well ordered and appointed was her household (p.391).

This resolution of the novel strains both belief in the narrative and the goodwill of the reader almost to breaking point. We are asked to believe that Bianca, this unique, driven genius of the stage, gives it all up, without a backward glance, to keep house. When her husband tells her that he is amazed at the dexterity of her household arrangements she replies

'Is this positively the first time you have discovered that I am a clever woman? You are like the rest of men, and have no faith in a woman's genius, until it is shown in the practical manifestation of arranging your breakfasts, dinners and servants...But with all that', continued she, looking at him affectionately, 'you cannot think how it pleases me to hear you say that I manage my house well' (pp.392-393).

Bianca's genius is simultaneously confirmed and made irrelevant. She is a good housekeeper, nothing more, nothing less. She is like every other woman with a houseful of servants and a pleasant, if unremarkable husband.¹⁸

In her introduction to *The Half Sisters* Joanne Wilkes explains the ending thus:

it was difficult for women writers in the early nineteenth century to avoid accommodating themselves in some way to prevailing assumptions about female ambition. Besides, women writers also internalized such assumptions themselves, so that their inconsistencies were not the result

¹⁸ Bianca tells Melton that 'a woman can only love when she fancies that on the whole the object is endowed with a greater and nobler character than her own.... She must find in him something that supports her best and noblest impulses, and which strengthens her weakness' (p.392), but in fact, Melton is little more than a nice sort of man.

of hypocrisy, but evidence of very real inner doubts about the validity of what they were doing (p. xxii).

It is undoubtedly true that prevailing notions about femininity forced Jewsbury into such an ending, but it is equally true to say that the plot solution is incompatible with the rest of the novel and is therefore, deeply unsatisfying for the reader. Reminiscent of *Middlemarch*, the ending negates the thrust of the whole of the rest of the novel. All Bianca really needed was a man and a home to make her happy. How ironic that the conventional Dinah Craik, having expended so much effort on denying the genius of Olive, allows her to retain at least the possibility of pursuing her career, whereas the so-called radical Jewsbury, having celebrated Bianca's genius throughout, seems content to abandon her to the previously denigrated joys of household management. Once again, it is difficult not to see this capitulation to a supremely dominant mode of discourse about women as a failure of the writer's nerve which leaves Jewsbury unable or unwilling to explore fully the alternative model of femininity which she presents, however hesistantly, throughout the novel. In the end, she turns Bianca into a completely different person, nothing more than an acquiescent wife and mother. She has turned into Alice, her sister.

A useful term in discussing the vacuum at the centre of both Craik's and Jewsbury's portraits of genius is one employed by Dorothea Barrett in relation to George Eliot. Barrett speaks of 'the negative space of female vocation', which 'could only be defined by the surrounding positive forms of men's vocations'.¹⁹ Both novelists, because of their refusal to allow a sense of self to occupy centre-stage in their representations of women's genius, are left with portraits of women at the centre of which is so much 'negative space'. There is, inevitably and yet bizarrely in two novels which set out to

¹⁹ Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 18.

construct representations of exceptionally talented women, a failure to engage with the nature of women's genius. Craik refuses to recognise it, Jewsbury appears to accept its possibility, but then allows it to make no difference. Entirely because the discourse of self-sacrifice is intrinsic to ideas of mid-Victorian womanhood, the subject of women's vocation and genius can only be skirted around, fudged and avoided. All the female protagonists considered in previous chapters have shared a lack of a sense of purpose in life; Olive and Bianca are the only characters who know exactly what they want to do. Ironical then, that this is sufficient reason for them not to be allowed to do it.

Chapter Five

Mary Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife*

Kate Flint refers to *The Doctor's Wife* as 'the most sustained investigation of [women's] reading in relation to sensation fiction'.¹ It has been included in this exploration of female self-sacrifice because, in its attempt to articulate the notion in a specifically literary framework, it makes absolutely explicit the seductiveness of grand ideas of self-sacrifice to a woman whose life offers no purpose. Its self-conscious examination of the effects of novel reading offers an account of self-sacrifice as a displacement activity. The novel explores the function that fantasies of martyrdom perform, both as a reaction to the sort of existence that the notion of separate spheres imposed on middle-class Victorian women, and as a way of making significant a life which had little meaning.

It is not a very complex, or indeed, a particularly engaging novel, but it articulates very simply one of the central tenets of the thesis, and its attendant critique of the concept of separate spheres. Further, the whole novel is self-reflexive, refracted through other novels. Not only was the plot openly borrowed from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, but its critical treatment of the problem of female reading is sometimes reminiscent of Austen in *Northanger Abbey*, and that of Charlotte Lennox in *The Female Quixote*. Perhaps its chief interest lies in Braddon's attempt to challenge the legitimacy of an orthodoxy in which the notion of female self-sacrifice is confined to the domestic sphere, where it had been so firmly placed by prescriptive writers such as Ellis and Lewis. For Isabel Gilbert, the eponymous doctor's wife, domesticity is incompatible with the kind of self-sacrifice she desires; she craves extravagant, public displays of selflessness, not real, day-to-day self-denial. The novel is concerned with

¹ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 288.

the notion of female selfhood within conventional marriage, and with the pressures which women feel to abandon their sense of self in order to conform to some idealised picture of wifedom. Braddon sees women's self-sacrifice as essential to the working of a system which divides the public and the private so rigorously. She presents the survival of the whole dogma as reliant on a disregarding of women's needs, on a subsuming of the identity of particular women to a prescribed idea of womanhood.

An examination of *The Doctor's Wife* (first published 1864) also allows the discussion of an aspect of self-sacrifice which is rarely directly addressed in these novels, that is, the resentment which can be a direct result of the denial of self. This resentment often betrays itself as a sort of silent rebellion, a superficial concurrence with the husband which is subverted by a knowledge of unspoken resistance. This silent rebellion gives a secret frisson to apparently unquestioning obedience; where he sees self-sacrifice, her secret knowledge gives her an unseen advantage which undercuts his superiority, and allows her, despite all appearances to the contrary, to patronise him. Perhaps in the hands of a more capable writer the novel would be as original, subtle and radical as it may sound, but actually, Braddon fails to achieve any deep penetration of these issues.

With Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as its model, *The Doctor's Wife* cannot be an archetypal novel about self-sacrifice, although the bizarre thing is that Braddon seems to have tried to approach it as such. Lyn Pykett, in her introduction to the Oxford University Press edition of the novel has noted that

Braddon frankly admitted her indebtedness to Flaubert's novel, which had enjoyed a *succès de scandale* in France but was, in 1864, not yet well known

in England: 'The idea of *The Doctor's Wife* is founded on *Madame Bovary*, the style of which struck me immensely, in spite of its hideous immorality'.²

It is Braddon's attempt to write a narrative which relies heavily for its plot on a very differently imagined novel (in the much more sexually explicit and less moralising French tradition) which leads to most of its dissatisfactions for the reader. Braddon tries to force an essentially amoral heroine into a very different mould from that of Emma Bovary, leaving her with the same grievances and very similar life-events, but with one essential difference. Braddon cannot bring herself to write Isabel Gilbert like Emma, and it is this desperation to construct a portrait of a supremely selfish woman as a hard-done-by heroine which makes the novel ultimately disappointing.

Like Emma Bovary, Isabel Gilbert is the discontented, bored wife of a provincial doctor. The main difference between Emma and Isabel is that Isabel is not actually adulterous; she never has a physical relationship with her 'lover'. The novel is structured around a number of sets of competing oppositions; male versus female, aristocracy versus bourgeoisie, rationality versus feeling, married love versus passion. It is Isabel's refusal to abandon her sense of self within a conventionally oppressive marriage which shapes the story, and which finally provides some sort of mediation between all these oppositions.

We first meet Isabel Sleaford as a single girl. She is the only daughter in a socially-precarious family of five children, the father of whom is engaged in an unexplained but obviously financially questionable business. Isabel escapes the drudgery of her life by immersing herself in novels, from which she takes the ideas which feed her sense of dissatisfaction. Isabel's taste for novels has two apparently contradictory effects; it makes her

² Lyn Pykett, 'Introduction' to Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife*, ed. Lyn Pykett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. viii. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

life both endurable and unendurable. Her reading takes her out of her dull life, whilst at the same time making it unacceptable to her by comparison with the sort of romantic nonsense that she reads.

Her stepmother would call her in by and by, and there would be a torn jacket to mend, perhaps, or a heap of worsted socks to be darned for the boys; and there would be no chance of reading another line of that sweet sentimental story...which haunted the reader long after the book was shut and laid aside, and made the dull course of common life so dismally unendurable (p. 27).

She is lazy and ineffectual; as well as trying to avoid her household duties, her personal appearance is slovenly. Isabel wears a dress 'a good deal tumbled and none too clean' (p.23) because she is too immersed in novels to care.

We are told that she lives upon her imagination.

Poor Izzie's life was altogether vulgar and commonplace, and she could not extract one ray of romance out of it, twist it as she would. Her father was not a Dombey, or an Augustine Caxton³, or even a Rawdon Crawley. He was a stout, broad-shouldered, good-tempered-looking man, who was fond of good eating...There was nothing romantic to be got out of him. Isabel would have been rather glad if he had ill-used her, for then she would have had a grievance, and that would have been something (p.29).

There is irony in Isabel's choice of romantically oppressive father-figures. She, desperate for attention, identifies with the daughters of fathers who ignore or otherwise sideline their children. What makes Florence Dombey's, young Rawdon Crawley's or Pisistratis Caxton's plight touching is the reader's sympathetic observation of it. The experience of being overlooked - as Isabel finds when she is marooned in the country in her job as governess - is painful and tedious, not enviable.

³ Augustine Caxton is the neglectful father in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Caxtons* (1850). He is scholarly and other-worldly, interested chiefly in his book *The History of Human Error*, expected to run to five quarto volumes.

Isabel does have a real grievance, a grievance against a world that confines her to a life she detests, but rather than contending against it, she prefers to escape from it into novels. She yearns for some difficulty to strive with, some huge obstacle to overcome, but she never thinks of battling with the boredom of her dull domestic existence. The sacrifice of her book-reading for household chores is not glamorous or exciting; no would-be heroine imagines herself quietly darning, unless, of course, under the yoke of an oppressive father.

Unlike Dorothea Brooke, Isabel does not so much desire to *do* something as to *be* something. Her desire to make something of her life is based on complete selfishness, a need for excitement and diversion. Isabel does not want an occupation because she wants to suffer, and she sees this as occupation enough in itself. All her ideas of suffering put herself at the centre of the most affecting tableaux: 'She wanted her life to be like her books; she wanted to be a heroine, — unhappy perhaps, and dying early. She had an especial desire to die early, by consumption, with a hectic flush and an unnatural lustre in her eyes' (p.29). Like the writers of many of the conduct books, Isabel is obsessed with the idea of posthumous fame. She wants 'a revolution, that she might take a knife in her hand and go forth to seek the tyrant in his lodging, and then die; so that people might talk of her, and remember her name when she was dead' (p.73). Although the particular form that Isabel's fantasies take is ridiculed, and she is presented as being passive and idle, the narrator never judges her very harshly. In fact, she goes to great lengths not to blame Isabel for her considerable shortcomings; her faults are not presented as faults of personality, but inevitable circumstances of the nature of her life. Her failure to fill her expected role is presented as a failure of the role, not of Isabel.

Equally, Braddon resolutely refuses to engage with the notion of duty; Isabel has, apparently, done all that was required of her when she married George:

if a man chooses to marry a girl because her eyes are black and large and beautiful, he must be contented with the supreme advantage he derives from the special attribute for which he has chosen her: and so long as she does not become a victim to cataract...he has no right to complain of his bargain. If he selects his wife from other women because she is true-hearted and high-minded and trustworthy, he has ample right to be angry with her whenever she ceases to be any one of those things (p.160).

The narrator seems here, albeit in a humorous way, to relieve women from any real responsibility for the success or failure of marriage. She seems to support a kind of *caveat emptor* view of marriage which puts it on the level of a purely commercial transaction. There is almost a warning implied against male assumptions that certain womanly attributes come as standard; each woman must be perceived individually. Perhaps this is Braddon's attempt to critically engage with a picture of womanliness which relies on certain supposedly natural characteristics, but it reads more as a refusal to condemn Isabel's very obvious deficiencies.

Nowhere does Isabel consider, nor indeed the narrator suggest, that Isabel's desire for self-sacrifice may be assuaged by denying herself her dreams of grandeur, and submitting to the self-denial that would make George truly live the life that he thinks he is living. Isabel, despite her desire for martyrdom, does not accept the whole myth of domestic martyrdom; the only kind available to her. The problem with this insistence on denying the attraction of female self-sacrifice in the domestic sphere is that Braddon is left only with the notion of dramatic self-sacrifice in which Isabel indulges - matter only for an over-active imagination. This, again, has the effect of trivialising the issue; in the hands of another writer perhaps this separation of self-sacrifice and the domestic may have seemed challenging, but Isabel seems petulant, not profound.

Braddon displays an understanding of, and sympathy with, the kind of frustrations with her life that cause Isabel to feel as she does, and particularly of the attraction of the grandeur of

self-sacrifice. For Isabel, self-sacrifice appeals as one glorious gesture, not the dreary reality of constant self-denial. It is not the sacrifice itself which has merit, but the approbation which follows. It is a major failure of the novel that Braddon does not convince the reader that Isabel is anything more than a fractious, self-centred child. Her refusal to abandon her sense of self, rather than appearing something noble, glorious and true, often seems like childish sulkiness. We are told throughout the novel that Isabel is exceptional; Mr Raymond, the voice of the reasonable man, says, for example, that she 'has mental imitation - the highest and rarest faculty of the human brain, - ideality and comparison' (p.82). Braddon herself seems unsure just how Isabel is unique, as this almost meaningless sentence betrays. The fact is that Isabel is very far from unique; on the contrary, she hasn't a thought in her head that was not put there by a novel. She is not clever, and her mind is not original. This is a failure of Braddon's imagining of an unconventional woman. She tries to present a picture of a woman so intellectually rare and elevated that she is unsuited to the domestic life forced upon her, but aside from telling the reader directly on several occasions that Isabel is exceptional, she provides no other evidence for it. We are apparently supposed to take her word for it, but this lack of depth and interest in the central character means that the subsequent treatment of the very real issue of the vacuum at the centre of some women's existence is rendered somewhat trivial and shallow. The problem is real, but Isabel Gilbert is not the woman to address it. This proves unsatisfying for the reader because the heroine cannot support the story constructed round her.

Braddon's refusal to recognise that female-sacrifice in the domestic sphere may have a function — that of giving the domestically-confined woman purpose — leads her to ignore it as a possible source of satisfaction. There is certainly no indication that Braddon considers the

idea that self-denial may have some intrinsic value. The narrator describes Isabel's aversion to all things domestic in terms of what comes 'naturally' to her: 'There are some young women who take kindly to a simple domestic life, and have a natural genius for pies and puddings, and cutting and contriving...Isabel had no liking for these things; to her the making of pastry was a wearisome business' (p.156). This is, apparently, sufficient reason for her not to try to do anything. The fact is that Isabel makes very little effort; if she can't do what she wants, she won't do anything at all. This failure on the part of Braddon to attempt to reconcile duty and self-fulfilment makes the novel less intellectually probing and explorative than its subject needs it to be. It lacks depth and substance, particularly, one would imagine, for a contemporary readership so thoroughly imbued with notions of duty.

In some ways Braddon seems aware of the shortcomings of her heroine for the job in hand. Sigismund Smith, the sensation novelist who is a friend of Isabel's claims that 'No wise man or woman was ever the worse for reading novels. Novels are only dangerous for those poor foolish girls who read nothing else, and think that their lives are to be paraphrased of their favourite books'(p.30). Whilst Isabel is certainly associated with the 'foolish girls', this passage is ambivalent. Braddon seems uncertain whether she wants to blame the girls, the dull lives or the books. Has Isabel's addiction to romance led her to neglect her worldly duties, or has the dullness of her existence caused her to become addicted to romance? Kate Flint points out that 'the reader is never encouraged to identify directly with Isabel: it is assumed that she will be wiser, with a far more self-critical attitude towards the fiction she reads'.⁴ And yet Braddon's equivocation is evident here. Her unwillingness to hold Isabel to account for her

⁴ Flint, *The Woman Reader*, p. 289.

silliness is surely a result of her own position as a writer of sensation fiction. She cannot condemn Isabel without condemning her own readers, and by extension, herself.

If there is one thing Braddon is certain of it is that Isabel's education is largely responsible for her dependence on extravagant fantasies.

She had been taught a smattering of everything...She knew a little Italian, enough French to serve for the reading of novels that she might have better left unread, and just as much of modern history as enabled her to pick out all the sugarplums in the historian's pages...She played the piano a little, and sang a little, and painted wishy-washy looking flowers...If there had been any one to take this lonely girl in hand and organise her education, Heaven only knows what might have been made of her (pp.27-29).

This then, is the explanation for Isabel's complete lack of judgment or application. Isabel is prone to hyperbole, and because of her lack of education she cannot think of anything useful or realistic to occupy her. She wants a role for which she has no role-models, except those within the covers of her books; she can only think in terms of her novels because her education has not provided her with anything else. It has not harnessed her (apparently superior) mind, or given her the tools to achieve anything herself. Isabel's only answer to the shortcomings of her life is to dream of a prince to transform it, or of an early, glamorous exit from it.

Isabel's lack of judgment is nowhere made more apparent than in her relationship with Roland Landsell, the local squire. Roland is everything that Isabel thinks she wants in a man. He is well-travelled, well-read, aesthetic, decadent, fashionable and cynical. He is also, however, feckless and useless, too rich to need to apply himself to any career, too intelligent to be happy with nothing to do. He starts up a flirtation with Isabel, and she is completely dazzled.

Did she think of him as what he was, — a young English gentleman, idle, rich, accomplished, and with no better light to guide his erratic wanderings than an uncertain glimmer which he called honour?...But she never thought

of him in this way. He was the incarnation of all the dreams of her life; he was Byron alive again...Napoleon the First...a shadowy and divine creature, amenable to no earthly laws (p.139).

She is intoxicated by him, and 'no consciousness of wrong or danger had any place in her mind' (p.29).

What Roland and Isabel have in common is a lack of occupation; in Braddon's bourgeois world, all people, not just women, need something useful to do. Like Isabel, Roland finds his life 'weary, flat, stale, unprofitable' (p.153). Her obsession with Roland leads her to become even less sensible than she was before, despite the fact that there is, initially, no relationship between them. Although she thinks about him all the time, he is barely aware of her existence. It is only when he decides to go away that 'she understood the utter hideousness and horror of her life' (p.154). The point is that her life is neither hideous nor horrible, it is just dull. Her taste for high-drama is being fed from her imagination, not from actual events. When she decides her life is a horror, her reaction is to stand in front of her mirror, pushing her hair about and trying out different facial expressions to decide whether she could look more like Edith Dombey, Juliet or Desdemona. Now she is a wife, her literary models are no longer daughters, but wives themselves, tragically misunderstood and misjudged, and all of whom come to bad and tragic ends. Edith and Desdemona are both wrongly accused of adultery, Juliet is kept from her true love by familial and societal pressures.

In all this role-playing, Isabel closely resembles Emma Bovary. The most obvious difference between the two women can be seen in the contrast between the Roland/Isabel and the Rodolphe/Emma relationships. Braddon's insistence throughout on absolving Isabel from all blame leads her to underline her childishness, her lack of intent to do wrong, and the fact that she is led astray by those who ought to know better. This is the reason, just as much as the

inability of the English novel to make such things explicit, that Roland and Isabel do not have a sexual relationship. Emma's sexually passionate nature makes her a knowing partner in her affair; Isabel must be seen to be merely a victim of her own innocence.

Mr Raymond warns Roland that Isabel will fall into a pit not of her own making, but of his; 'the bottomless pit of sin, and misery, and shame, and horror that you are digging before that foolish woman's feet' (p.208). Isabel's reaction when Roland leaves for the second time again underlines her still-childish imaginings.

To inspire one pang of remorse in that hard heart, she would have freely given her life. But when a sentimental young lady of nineteen is half inclined to make herself briefly famous by the crime of self-murder, she is apt to be deterred not so much by any pious horror of the crime, as by a difficulty in getting into the water...There was laudanum in the surgery...but she had taken laudanum for the toothache once or twice, and had found that opiate very nauseous. And death by poison was only a matter-of-fact business as compared to the still water and the rushes, and would have a very inferior effect in the newspapers (p.226).

Isabel is still playing at life, her wrong-doing is still not real; again, although this is an amusing passage, and gently ironical about Isabel, Braddon is still almost relieving her of all blame, stressing her need for help and guidance. The reader is invited to laugh at Isabel, even be exasperated with her, but not to hold her completely responsible for her actions. The narrator repeatedly mentions Isabel's youth; when she has made up her mind to try and forget Roland and 'be good', the narrator observes 'how short a time it seemed since Isabel Gilbert had been a child...how short a time since to 'be good' meant to be willing to wash the tea cups and saucers' (p.232).

When Roland comes back and declares his love for her, Isabel feels 'She was beloved; for the first time in her life really, truly, sentimentally beloved, like the heroine of a novel' (p.247). She imagines that the love he feels for her is the same as that which she feels for him

— ‘a beautiful, useless, romantic devotion, — a wasted life of fond regretful worship’ (p.249).

Isabel is still seduced by the notion of self-sacrifice, upheld by the idea of loving in silence, giving up her true love on the altar of marital fidelity. She is completely appalled then, when she finally realises that Roland, not sharing her literary tastes, is far from being satisfied with sentimentally romantic meetings in some sylvan glade. He wants them to run away together.

Mrs Gilbert stared at Roland Landsell in utter bewilderment. He had spoken of shame and degradation... Why should she be ashamed, or humiliated, or degraded?... Degraded! ashamed! - her face grew crimson all in a moment as these cruel words stung her poor sentimental heart (p.252).

In fact, this is stretching the belief in Isabel's unknowingness somewhat. We are told ‘Isabel Gilbert was not a woman of the world. She had read novels while other people perused the Sunday papers’ (p.254). In other words, she has no idea what Roland has in mind because she has not been exposed to scandal. But Isabel has not always been a quiet country miss; she was brought up in London, and we were told, read unsuitable French novels. Braddon is so anxious to relieve Isabel of any guilt that she makes her seem stupid rather than innocent.

So why *is* Braddon so desperate to maintain Isabel's complete innocence? Partly it is to retain the reader's sympathy, partly it is to make clear society's role in her errors, partly too, to vindicate the practice of female reading in which Braddon is complicit, but also so that she can attain her final happy ending. If she has not knowingly, or actually, offended by the nature of her relationship with Landsell, she can still be rewarded. She could not reach her final destiny if she was guilty of sin, but she can if she is guilty of stupidity; simple, not evil. For this reason also, Isabel's sexual need for Roland has been completely subsumed into a spiritual need for him. In other words, Isabel translates her desire to sexually submit to Roland into a desire to sacrifice her happiness to him.

Elizabeth Langland makes this point in her discussion of Anne Brönte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. She is talking about Helen Graham, but the point could equally be made about Isabel Gilbert. According to Langland, Helen's

perception initiates a process, first of dissembling her desire and then, more significantly, of coding a physical urge as a spiritual need. In the first move, the desire becomes a subterranean force, something not openly expressed; in the second move, the desire is no longer recognized or accepted for what it is. A woman sublimates her physical desire for a man... Women's physical desires, because illicit, are often encoded in literature as spiritual ones.⁵

Braddon dares not bring sex overtly into their relationship, but in some ways she does not need to — she already has. We already know that Isabel's marriage is sexually unfulfilling, from the account of their honeymoon. The incompatibility of Isabel and George is not mentioned in sexual terms, but it can be guessed at by the complete dullness of their trip to Murlington. They have nothing to say to each other and Isabel feels that 'the dull wet day, the lonely pavement...were not so dull and empty as her own life seemed to her...she was married, her destiny was irrevocably sealed, and she was tired of it already' (p.109). She refers several times to her 'passion' for Roland, and yet the reader is still, apparently, meant to believe that there is no sexual element to her feelings. This English fudging of the sexual issue which is so central to the French novel means that Isabel herself believes her feelings to be above the sordidly physical. When Lady Gwendoline, Roland's cousin, tries to warn Isabel off, she remains unmoved.

She was proud of her love, which was so high above the comprehension of ordinary people. It is just possible that she was even a little proud of the slander which attached to her. She had all her life been pining for the glory of martyrdom, and lo, it had come upon her (p.261).

⁵ Elizabeth Langland, 'The Voicing of Feminine Desire in Anne Brönte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*', in *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*, ed. Antony H. Harrison and Beverly Taylor (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992), p. 118.

Except that it has not - all that has come upon her is the gossiping attentions of the village.

Isabel's dissatisfactions are not felt by George. In a description of Isabel's relationship to her husband the narrator observes that George is happy because he has

a beautiful creature waiting to receive him - a lovely and lovable creature, who put her arms around his neck and kissed him, and smiled at him. It was not in his nature to see that the graceful little embrace, and the welcoming kiss, and the smile, were rather mechanical matters that came of themselves (p.118).

And the reader knows, even if Isabel does not, that the missing ingredient is passion. 'She was fond of him, as she would have been fond of a big elder brother' (p.118), but Isabel is a sensuous, passionate woman. She is often described in voluptuous terms, with images more suitable to a brothel than a country doctor's wife. She imagines herself 'queen of a lamplit boudoir, where loose patches of ermine gleamed whitely upon carpets of velvet pile' (p.119).

Braddon is also anxious to alleviate the blame attributed to Isabel because she has another, much more significant, target in her sights. The marriage of George and Isabel is Braddon's articulation of the problem of the ideology of separate spheres. This was based on the belief that men and women occupied divided but complementary spheres, both mentally and emotionally. Men, rational, business-like, ruthless and materialistic, operated in the public sphere of work and business, whilst women, emotional, loving, moral, and caring, were confined to the home. As Deborah Gorham has noted,

While female subordination has been a traditional element of Western European civilisation, pre-modern methods of enforcing it had relied largely on brute force or on an appeal to biblical injunction. But since the end of the eighteenth century, the concept of femininity, which is based on a conception of human psychology that assumes that feminine qualities are 'natural', has been the major ideological agent in enforcing the subordination of women.⁶

⁶ Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p.5.

This powerful form of social authority was reliant on the 'double standard' which Linda Nead describes thus:

This concept refers to a code of sexual mores which condones sexual activity in men as a sign of 'masculinity' whilst condemning it in women as a sign of deviant or pathological behaviour. The double standard had particular significance for the regulation of middle-class women; the notion of female chastity was most rigorously applied within the middle classes and was an important aspect of bourgeois ideologies of home and marriage.⁷

She goes on to claim that 'in general terms, female sexuality was organised around the dichotomy virgin/whore'⁸ and this allows us to understand why Braddon felt constrained to make Isabel sexually unknowing, neither virgin nor whore. This could, perhaps, be seen as Braddon's admirable attempt to evade these stereotypes, but her insistence on Isabel's innocence makes this seem unlikely. It seems more the case that if Isabel had been personally culpable her story would have been specific to her, a tale of personal morality, not able to carry the weight of a critique of a whole social ideology. Nead explains

Female adultery was frequently identified as the most transgressive form of sexual deviancy. This attitude towards adultery was predicated on the social and economic position of middle-class women. According to domestic ideology woman's moral purity maintained the home as a spiritual haven for her husband and children, and for women who were defined in this way adultery was seen to have the most serious social consequences not only in relation to their own social position, but also, and more critically, in terms of its effects on husband, children and home.⁹

Isabel could not, in line with such thinking, be permitted to be adulterous, in thought or deed.

Isabel's marriage to George is based on misjudgment; he is a thorough believer in the doctrine of separate spheres, and so he thinks he knows what he wants in a wife.

⁷ Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p 6.

⁸ Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, p.6.

⁹ Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, p. 48.

George further informed his humble friends that he was not likely to enter the holy estate of matrimony for many years to come, as he had so far seen no one at all who approached his ideal of womanly perfection. He had very practical views upon this subject, and meant to wait patiently until some faultless young person came across his pathway; some neat-banded, church-going damsel; with tripping feet and smoothly banded hair; some fair young sage, who had never been known to do a foolish act or say an idle word (p.59).

George is led astray by sexual desire. Isabel is like no woman he has ever met, and although he recognises that 'she'd never make a good wife for any man' (p.60), he marries her. Here again Braddon is anxious to apportion blame; if George knows how unsuitable Isabel is to be his wife and still marries her, more fool him. He is guilty, not for loving her, but for believing that the very act of becoming a wife will make her into the only kind of wife he can imagine. Before they are married, he

had already pictured her...making weak tea for him in a Britannia-metal teapot, sewing commonplace buttons upon commonplace shirts...George pictured Miss Sleaford the heroine of such a domestic story as this, and had no power to divine that there was any incongruity in the fancy; no fineness of ear to discover the dissonant interval between the heroine and the story (p.78).

George, like Isabel herself, imagines her the heroine of a story, but what a different story. Isabel does not fit the idea he has of a wife, a fact he chooses to forget or ignore. He does not see Isabel as an individual, with a personality of her own. If she is to be his wife, this is the sort of wife she must be; there is no other kind imaginable to him. She is to be, as Basch puts it 'forced into a system that takes no account of the complexity of human behaviour'.¹⁰ George is happy in his marriage only because he does not see that there is anything lacking. The narrator blames him for falling in love with things in Isabel which do not fit with his idea

¹⁰ Francoise Basch, *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel 1837-67* (London: Allen Lane, 1974), p.xiii.

of a wife, and then expecting her to be one. He can be pompous and is certainly blind to the realities of his marriage, grounded in 'that moral flat-iron called common-sense' (p.116). She blames his superficial, conventional mind, which means that he 'loved her and admired her, and he was honestly anxious that she should be happy; but then he wanted her to be happy according to his ideas of happiness, and not her own' (p.116).

In marriage under a system of separate spheres there is, for a woman, no self - there is only the state of being a wife. Deborah Gorham explains it thus:

As a feature of Victorian middle-class ideology, the idea of femininity had a life of its own, independent of the individual experience of particular women. As an idea, it reinforced the Victorian conception of masculinity, and helped to maintain the system of dividing the moral, intellectual and emotional universe into separate spheres.¹¹

George is held responsible for the failures in his own marriage because of his collusion with such a system. He embodies the indifference to, perhaps even the wilful ignoring of, variations of character upon which the ideology of separate spheres is based. The narrator paints a fairly bleak picture of the reality of separate spheres. Isabel and George 'had very little to say to each other... Together day by day, they live as much apart as if an ocean rolled between them; they want the subtle link that would have made them one' (p.107).

That 'subtle link' which is so clearly missing, is, as has been noted, sexual love, (although of course the point is never overtly made) but it is also common interest. Braddon does not just blame the marriage failure on the two individuals, but on the whole system of separate spheres which ensures that the two have nothing in common. Braddon makes clear that she is not only blaming Isabel and George when she directly addresses the issue of the complete separation of the spheres. She says

¹¹ Gorham, *The Victorian Girl*, p.209.

Have they ever tried to understand each other?...has the woman ever said to herself, 'My husband works very hard, and comes home at night very weary from that abominable counting-house; and yet I expect that his face will light up with rapture when I talk to him about the last novel that has been sent from Mudie's, the Beethoven quartet that I heard at the morning concert. Wouldn't it be more interesting to him if I asked whether Crashem and Smashem - that shaky firm, whose paper he has unwisely trusted on - have taken up the last bill of exchange?' (p.107)

Of course, this is a very real question. Would he prefer her to talk about business, or should the home be sacrosanct, a haven away from the business world? For the benefits of separate spheres to work for the man, at least, must there not be complete separation of the two?

Mary Poovey describes the advantages of separate spheres for the man in this way:

One of the functions of the opposition between the private, feminized sphere and the masculine sphere of work outside the home was to mitigate the effects of the alienation of market relations. In the home,...a man...was promised economic and social dominance, as well as both sexual gratification and spiritual reinforcement...The illusion that freedom and autonomy existed for the man within the home therefore depended on the illusion that within the home no-one was alienated - and this depended on believing that the woman desired to be only what the man wanted her to be...selfless and domestic.¹²

Even Braddon's questioning of the system assumes that all the sacrifice of self-interest is on the woman's part. When the narrator wonders whether ill-suited couples have 'ever conscientiously endeavoured to assimilate the tastes that seem so opposite' (p. 107), she suggests a change in thinking for the woman:

'it will be better for him to open his heart and discourse at his ease upon the flatness of things in the city...than that he should sit patiently, sighing mournfully now and then, while I discourse about the last volume of the novel, or the delicious *arpeggio* movement in the quartet' (p.108).

¹² Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments : The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), pp. 77-78.

The man is not given similar advice to make an effort to sympathise with the interests of his wife. The narrator adds

There is no trade so vulgar or commonplace, no study so recondite, no science so difficult, in which a tolerably clever woman cannot interest herself, if she seeks and wishes to be interested...she learns enough, if she learns to listen intelligently when her husband talks to her, to hazard a judicious question that may lead him a little farther on that pleasant road which he travels when he rides his own hobby horse (p.108).

Braddon does not go as far as suggesting that things might be improved if the woman was able to empathise with her husband by her own engagement in the public sphere. For Braddon, the unifying factor, the fragment which makes the system work, is love.

This is why, despite appearances, this novel is far from radical. It is a fairly powerful critique of the system of separate spheres as something which ignores woman's sense of self, but Braddon's solution still centralises the transforming nature of love for women. A solution to Isabel's problems would, apparently, have been to have married a more understanding man, one to whom she would not mind sacrificing herself; which is, in fact, no sacrifice at all. In her bitterness Isabel sounds quite radical:

She had sold her birthright for a vulgar mess of pottage. She had bartered all the chances of the future for a little relief to the monotony of the present, - for a few wedding-clothes, a card-case with a new name on the cards contained in it, the brief distinction of being a bride (p.110).

Again, this employs the language of the public sphere, of the market place - selling and bartering - a jarring insertion of sales and goods into the would-be private sphere of love and marriage. She has sold her sense of self, 'her birthright', for the dubious attractions of the bride.

When Isabel and George return from their honeymoon, she does little but cry in their ugly little house, while he goes off to be cheerful at work. And yet still Braddon refuses to

blame her. She does not point out that Isabel does not try to live up to her side of the bargain. Isabel is presented as silly, but never as unwifely because of her failings as a housekeeper. Braddon employs a sort of limited, anodyne irony, which seemingly advocates a kind of 'safe' feminism, making the novel appear to assume a set of postures which never feel real. The narrator seems to concur in Isabel's own view that she has no responsibilities; she need not do anything, she can just be. She is deluded by romance, but sympathetically drawn. In fact, the most sympathetic reader must surely eventually find Isabel rather irritating. The narrator's attempts to absolve her from all blame almost inevitably lead the reader to provide the criticism. We start wishing she would stop moping around and pull herself together; like Sigismund Smith, the reader feels that 'I can't help thinking that if you were to occupy yourself a little more than you do, you'd be happier' (p.229). But Isabel merely starts things without finishing them; she desires diversion, not work.

As suggested earlier, the novel is structured round several sets of competing oppositions. George and Isabel represent either side of each set of oppositions, and all the things which George represents are presented negatively in this novel. His bourgeois nature is small-mindedness, his rationality is lack of imagination, his idea of married love is boring and restrictive, and his masculinity is asserted only at the expense of Isabel's femininity. The narrator's attitude to George is sometimes ambiguous; she feels she must give him his due as a plain, good sort of man, but despite this, George is not really a sympathetic character. It feels as though the narrator feels she must appear to appreciate his virtues as they are the conventionally approved ones; he is worthy and hard-working, honest and moral. He has all the traditional male virtues; but he is dull, and completely lacking in imagination.

George's character is significant in Braddon's treatment of the resentments attached to self-sacrifice. The strange attraction of submission to an inferior man has been touched upon in previous chapters, and Braddon engages more openly than most of the authors with the idea that this may not always be an unalloyed satisfaction. Even before they are married, Isabel learns to suppress herself.

Miss Sleaford had tested her lover's conversational powers to the utmost; but as she found that he neither knew nor wished to know anything about Edith Dombey or Ernest Matravers, and that he regarded the poems of Byron and Shelley as immoral and blasphemous compositions...Isabel was fain to hold her tongue...and to talk to Mr Gilbert about what he did understand...Her life had never been her own yet, and never was to be her own, she thought; for now that her stepmother had ceased to rule over her...here was George, with his strong will and sound common-sense, — oh, how Isabel hated common-sense! —and she must needs acknowledge him as her master (pp.102-105).

The tone of this passage is extremely resentful. George is compared with her stepmother as a ruler, but a ruler not by consent but by the pressure of something unreasonable - common sense.¹³ She 'must needs' acknowledge him as her master, but she does not thus acknowledge him. She patronises him secretly, by pitching her conversation to that which he would understand, like one does for a child. Isabel does not accept the basis of George's superiority - the superiority of common-sense, is, for her, and for the narrator, no superiority at all, rather a lack of originality.

The novel generally privileges feeling over common-sense, the feminine over the masculine. Isabel's rebellion is usually silent. When George returns from work, after supper he is happy to sit and talk to his wife.

¹³ Kate Flint points out that 'Braddon foreshadows Nancy Miller's understanding of a nineteenth-century woman's plot being one in which closure is resisted as long as possible in order to allow heroine, and reader, a sense of power and autonomy.' Flint, *The Woman Reader*, p.289.

If she had an open book beside her plate, and if her eyes wandered to the page every now and then while he was talking to her, she had often told him that she could listen and read at the same time; and no doubt she could do so. What more than sweet smiles and gentle looks could the most exacting husband demand? (p.118)

Her internal life is Isabel's reproach to her husband. She thinks that, as long as she continues the outward show of a contented, affectionate wife, she is fulfilling her side of the bargain, but the irony is that George actually asks for nothing more. He does not require great shows of self-sacrifice or self-denial from her. Where she feels 'blank despair' with 'the bread and cheese, the radishes, - and oh, how George could eat radishes, crunch, crunch, crunch!' (p.135), George feels the joys of domestic bliss. Whilst she is passionately obsessed with Roland Landsell,

Mr Gilbert was quite satisfied. He had never sought for more than this: a pretty little wife to smile upon him when he came home, to brush his hat for him now and then...and to walk to church twice every Sunday hanging upon his arm. If any one had ever said that such a marriage as this in any way fell short of perfect and entire union, Mr Gilbert would have smiled upon that person as on a harmless madman (p.186).

Despite constantly thinking about another man, both George and Isabel think that she is 'a very good wife, very gentle and obedient' (p.183). She thinks if she accords him the external attentions that convention dictates are his, her thoughts are her own. In an extraordinary counter-textual reading of Desdemona she tells herself 'If she gave her duty and obedience to Othello, surely Cassio might have all the poetry of her soul' (p.250).

In fact, Isabel clearly, if secretly, despises George, and in showing him an agreeable face, makes her deceit part of her subversion of the conventional relations of marriage. If he had possession of the same knowledge that she has, it would completely undermine the

position he assumed he had. Judith Rosen makes the more general point in a discussion of Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters*. She says,

The only power a domestic woman can exercise over her meaning is the limited resistance of the mask; she preserves some sense of internal self-possession by turning herself into a blank surface upon which men project their own desires and visions.¹⁴

Isabel does not resent the assumption of sovereignty by a man over a woman, she resents the sovereignty of *this* man over *this* woman; she resents his sense of his superiority; 'He *was* her lord and master, though his fingers were square at the tips, and he had an abnormal capacity for the consumption of spring-onions' (p.183).

Her resentment of George occurs precisely because she represents the opposite of all the things George represents. Part of her attraction to Roland Landsell is his aristocratic background. She feels constrained and hemmed in in her own ugly little house, and feels more at home in his large one, filled with beautiful things. She is attracted by his elegance, where she is repelled by the homeliness of her husband (his radishes and onions). In Graybridge she is gossiped about and criticised, at Mordred Priory she is petted and listened to. George's interest in science (rationality) contrasts sharply with her interest in art (feeling), and not, as we have seen, in George's favour. Isabel is resentful because George's certainty of superiority assumes that these things cannot live in mutual harmony, but that one must be obliterated for the other, and all the sacrifice must be on her side.

Isabel achieves her happy ending by mediating between these oppositions, and where she cannot, the oppositions are removed. In what feels like a perfunctory late rounding off, both George and Roland die, and Isabel is left with the bulk of Roland's property. She puts the

money to charitable use, building model cottages and a school on his estate. But she is not the same childish Isabel she has been throughout the novel. She is no longer selfish, nor does she live on fantasies.

Braddon causes Isabel to grow spiritually and educate herself before she can become the woman she is at the end of the novel. Her reading in Roland Landsell's library begins the process. She starts with 'poems and popular histories, biographies and autobiographies, letters and travels' (p. 235) and eventually moves onto more demanding reading.

She took some of the noble folios...and read the lives of her favourite painters, and stiff translations of Italian disquisitions on art. Her mind expanded amongst all the beautiful things around her, and the graver thoughts engendered out of grave books pushed away many of her most childish fantasies, her simple sentimental yearnings....The consciousness of her ignorance increased as she became less ignorant; and there were times when this romantic girl was almost sensible (pp.235-236).

Sensible then, because she has moved on from the literature of Braddon and her like.

The process is completed by the deaths of George and Roland.

She is altogether different from the foolish wife who neglected all a wife's duties...There is a great gulf between a girl of nineteen and a woman of five-and-twenty; and Isabel's foolish youth is separated from her wiser womanhood by a barrier that is formed by two graves. Is it strange, then, that the chastening influence of sorrow has transformed a sentimental girl into a good and noble woman (pp.402-403).

Isabel has abandoned the excesses which placed her in such polar opposition to George. She has become a rational but feeling being, combining the best of male and female, and therefore no longer subject to the governance of any man - her money is her own, but she has learned to use it for the good of others, not for her own selfish pursuit of distraction. She has moved into

¹⁴ Judith Rosen, 'At Home Upon A Stage: Domesticity and Genius in Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters*' in *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*, ed. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (New York: Garland, 1996), p.24.

the aristocracy (literally, she takes up residence in Mordred Priory), but ameliorates patrician idleness with a bourgeois sense of purpose, of making her money work.

The only opposition which Isabel cannot successfully mediate - that of married love versus passion - is removed by the deaths of Gilbert and Roland. Here we see perhaps the chief difference between the English and the French novel. In its neatly tied up ending, *The Doctor's Wife* makes safe the dangerous ideas it has played with and borrowed from the more subversive French tradition. The ending, like so much of the novel, sounds like a fudging of some very real issues, a solution too easily imposed on the problems flirted with, but never satisfactorily addressed, in the novel.

The novel ends with Isabel having found her true self. It is not the self she was at the beginning of the novel, but she has not achieved it by sacrificing herself. She has grown - or more realistically been hoisted by the manipulations of the narrative - into it, and the pressures on her to abandon her sense of self have gone. The fact that Isabel is not punished, not chastened, shows the extent to which Braddon feels her refusal to abandon her sense of self to be vindicated. It is Isabel, not Roland or George, who achieves the position of most usefulness. And yet, comparison with *Madame Bovary* shows that, where the French novel is an intensely serious novel about a silly woman, *The Doctor's Wife* remains little more than a silly novel about a silly woman, *Madame Bovary* written by Madame Bovary. It is this feeling that hidden somewhere within this novel is a better one that makes it such a frustrating read. Braddon does attempt a critique of a very real issue at the centre of many women's lives, occasionally employing an ironic and humourous narrative distance which is effective and amusing. Unfortunately, the character of Isabel Gilbert is too slight and superficial, and the

narrator too closely and uncritically entangled with her, to allow the depth of investigation that Braddon seems sometimes to hint at achieving.

In *The Doctor's Wife*, Braddon has attempted to address several aspects of female self-sacrifice; its grandeur, its place within the ideology of separate spheres, the resentment it can engender. The fact that the novel is unsatisfactory in many ways, not least in the person of its main character, cannot disguise the importance of the theme of female self-sacrifice in the novels of the mid-Victorian period. Its failure to fully engage with the issue comes mainly perhaps as a result of Braddon's refusal to incriminate herself and other writers like her in Isabel's faults. However, the novel's simplistic expression of the issue, with its openly wish-fulfilling ending, perhaps allows a more immediate engagement with the question than would be the case in a more complex novel.

Chapter Six

Margaret Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Phoebe Junior*

Margaret Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* and *Phoebe Junior* have been included here for two reasons. First, all of the novels discussed so far deal with the issue of female self-sacrifice, either consciously or as embedded in the text, in a serious way, but Oliphant's ironic treatment of the conventions of female self-sacrifice is central to both novels. Second, a reading informed by an analysis of this treatment can offer a new perspective of Oliphant's novels.

Margaret Oliphant has been badly treated by much feminist criticism of the recent past. As Joseph H. Mealy put it,

Perhaps Gilbert and Gubar do not place Oliphant in their 'great tradition' of women's writing because her novels do not question or challenge the prevailing patriarchy, nor does she treat her women characters as the repressed 'other'.¹

Elaine Showalter, not alone amongst critics of the late 1970s and early 1980s, reserved her censure not for Oliphant's novels, but for the woman herself. She claimed 'the feminine novelists [in which category she included Oliphant] tended to reinvest their income in providing luxuries for their sons, as if in atonement for taking over the role of wage-earner.'² In fact, Oliphant was responsible, through much of her lifetime, for the support of her extended family. Her husband, an unsuccessful stained-glass window designer, died in 1859, leaving her with two young children, and in 1870 she also took on the burden of the support of her eldest brother and his children.

Showalter's criticism seems both mean-spirited and wrong-headed. She appears to be chiefly exercised by the middle-class preoccupations of the 'feminine novelists' -

¹ Joseph H. O'Mealy, 'Mrs Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, and the Victorian Canon' in *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*, ed. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (New York: Garland, 1996), p.68.

Oliphant sent her sons to Eton - but it is difficult to see why Oliphant, or others like her, should be expected, any more than any other Victorian middle-class mother, to be in the vanguard of feminism or any other movement for social reform. It is perhaps surprising that Oliphant should not be rather some sort of feminist heroine for supporting herself and others through her writing. It is not only recent criticism that has treated her harshly. Showalter quotes Virginia Woolf, who said, 'Mrs Oliphant sold her brain, her very admirable brain, prostituted her culture and enslaved her intellectual liberty in order that she might earn her living and educate her children'.³ Like Showalter, Woolf blames Oliphant. Rather than admiring her ability to support her family, she blames her for subsuming her own artistic needs to the necessity of earning her living. Perhaps earning a living did not seem quite as important as culture and intellectual liberty to the upper-middle-class Woolf.

Oliphant's spending of her money on her sons' education has continued to be almost a staple of criticism. Kathryn Hughes, in her 1998 biography of George Eliot calls Oliphant 'the hackish churchwoman' and says, 'It would be so easy to follow the example of a popular Blackwood novelist like Margaret Oliphant who paid her sons' Eton fees by churning out 200-odd novels which bore more than a family resemblance.'⁴ As Woolf's comments show, this sort of statement from those who appear to feel themselves to be inhabiting the literary high ground is not new. Such a mindset infuriated Oliphant sufficiently to refer to Eliot in her *Autobiography* as being kept 'in a mental greenhouse' and untroubled by the cares of the household, unlike herself.⁵ Yet Oliphant herself was not

² Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (London: Virago, 1999), p.48.

³ Quoted in Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, pp. 47-48.

⁴ Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot, the Last Victorian* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), p. 378, pp. 290-291.

⁵ *Autobiography and Letters of Mrs Margaret Oliphant*, ed. Mrs Harry Coghill (Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1974), p.5.

free of the suspicion that she might have sacrificed her talent for no good reason. In her *Autobiography* she observes, rather sadly,

When my poor brother's family fell upon my hands...I remember that I said to myself, having then perhaps a little stirring of ambition, that I must make up my mind to think no more of that, and that to bring up the boys for the service of God was better than to write a fine novel, supposing that it was in me to do so...It seemed rather a fine thing to make that resolution (though in reality I had no choice); but now I think that if I had taken the other way, which seemed the less noble, it might have been better for all of us...I might have done better work.⁶

And contrary to Hughes's sneering and dismissive remark, it was not, of course, easy for Oliphant.

The apparent preoccupation of critics with the education of the Oliphant sons seems to be somewhat misplaced. To criticise a novelist of the mid-Victorian era because she does not live up to the hopes of late-twentieth-century feminists seems both misguided and unsisterly. It also concentrates more on the woman than the work. Undoubtedly, Margaret Oliphant was not a radical - she was completely opposed to women's suffrage, for example - but to dismiss all of her many novels as Kathryn Hughes has done seems (perhaps wilfully) short-sighted. It is difficult to decide whether Oliphant is being more vilified for being prolific or for being middle-class. Her best-known novels were, and remain, those which form the *Chronicles of Carlingford*. Of these, *The Doctor's Family* (1861), *Salem Chapel* (1863) and *The Perpetual Curate* (1864) do, perhaps, show some signs of hasty writing. The plotting is sometimes loose and meandering, occasionally betraying a flatness absent in her better novels, but even so, her ironically amused detachment always ensures a slightly unconventional read. Lucy Soulsby, an educationalist, recognised as much when

⁶ *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, ed. Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 16.

she observed that Oliphant's novels 'may safely be recommended...though in some of them one could desiderate a more hopeful tone, and a firmer expression of belief'.⁷

In very recent years, more sophisticated readings of Oliphant have started to appear.

Critics have abandoned Showalter's rather sanctimonious

Mrs Oliphant never faced the dangers of a social myth that places the whole weight of feminine fulfillment on husband and children...[with reference to Oliphant's novel *The Ladies Lindore*] old fashioned Victorian moralists might have recommended a good dose of duty; twentieth century feminists would insist on divorce. But a third possibility, present in both centuries, is that the heroine stop searching for her happiness in others, and begin trying to generate it through her own accomplishments.⁸

Instead, we have Elizabeth Langland's rather more perceptive 'Oliphant's vision of reality, however faithful to quotidian affairs, pierced myths of the domestic sphere that were sedulously guarded in other depictions of Victorian life.'⁹ The intention here is not to prove that Oliphant can be seen, with the right sort of reading, as a social radical. She was not. But readings of Oliphant which conclude that she is merely parroting a particular type of bourgeois conservatism rely too much on the notion of domestic realism as pure mimesis.

Oliphant does not just unquestioningly describe a world where a particular type of social relation was the norm, she constructs a world which puts women at its centre, which sees the important things of life as the things which women do. The men are material to the action, but they are not where the action lies. Their lives outside are shadowy and rather dull. It is the women who make things happen which matter; the men just attend to business. It is here, perhaps, that feminist criticism of Oliphant has its roots. Her novels do not attempt to make some large point about the uselessness of the lives of middle-class

⁷ Lucy Soulsby, *Girls and their Ways*, (1881), cited in Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p.85.

⁸ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, pp. 179-180.

women. But that does not mean that they form part of a discourse which sees the lives of women as insignificant. Nor do her heroines' own lives gain significance by their relation to others. Contrary to what Showalter claims, Oliphant's heroines are not, in the main, and certainly not in the two novels under consideration here, trying to find fulfilment in husband and children. They may not challenge the patriarchal system at its roots, but they make it work for them, not least by putting their own needs first.

Miss Marjoribanks (1865) parodies the whole notion of self-sacrifice by presenting a heroine whose (repeatedly) stated aim is 'to be a comfort to papa', when in fact, all papa really wants is to be left alone. However, Dr Marjoribanks is essential for his daughter's plans to take the society of Carlingford in hand, and to make herself its guiding light.

Chase and Levenson have commented,

She is to be 'a comfort to papa', a phrase that she self-consciously makes her tag, abetted by the narrator of *Miss Marjoribanks*, who never fails to put the motto within winking quotation marks. These marks are the typographical signs of a dated domestic rhetoric; what had seemed vigorous in the young Sarah Ellis...now seems quaint.¹⁰

This seems to miss the point somewhat; *Miss Marjoribanks* is not funny because it pokes fun at an archaism. It is funny because it ridicules something - the notion of dutiful self-sacrifice - that is ingrained in literature, and which would be recognised by the reader. The 'winking quotation marks' are a sign of the collusion between the reader and the narrator almost behind Lucilla Marjoribanks's back; both reader and narrator see through her, and what is more, we know that in some important sense, she sees through herself. The humour of Lucilla's constant repetition of her stated intent comes not because the idea of female self-sacrifice is quaintly anachronistic, but because, as Elizabeth Langland has put it, 'this

⁹ Elizabeth Langland, 'Women's writing and the domestic sphere', in *Women and Literature in Britain 1800-1900*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 134.

personal mantra silences her critics, who fail to grasp her staging of the role of dutiful daughter and who understand less perfectly than she does how to manipulate images to one's advantage.'¹¹ It is Lucilla's appropriation of the cliché which is funny, not the cliché itself. *Miss Marjoribanks* parodies just the kinds of self-dramatising excesses of sacrifice which we have seen uncritically promoted in other texts, and it is this which sets Margaret Oliphant apart.

The first chapter of *Miss Marjoribanks* places Lucilla Marjoribanks firmly at the centre of a drama of her own creating. She is fifteen and away at school when her mother dies and 'could not have it in her power to soothe her dear mamma's last moments, as she herself said.'¹² That is, Miss Marjoribanks says so, not the narrator. Lucilla has already started writing the script of the tragedy in which she is intended to take a starring role, and it bears little relation to the true state of affairs. We are told that in fact she barely knew her mother, and scarcely missed her at all, but, unlike her stoic and practical father Dr Marjoribanks, she 'was only fifteen, and had floods of tears at her command' (p. 3). She has clear intentions:

She made up her mind...to a great many virtuous resolutions, for, in such a case as hers, it was evidently the duty of any only child to devote herself to her father's comfort, and become the sunshine of his life, as so many young persons of her age have become in literature... Thus, between the outbreaks of her tears for her mother, it became apparent to her that she must sacrifice her own feeling, and make a cheerful home for papa, and that a great many changes would be necessary in the household - changes which went so far as even to extend to the furniture (p.4).

This passage displays a type of self-reflexiveness about life and art which has not been apparent in any of the other texts already considered, except *Middlemarch*. The narratorial

¹⁰ Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 216.

¹¹ Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p.155.

¹² Margaret Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, ed. Elisabeth Jay (London, Penguin, 1998), p.3. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

tone is more knowing than that of the uncritical Braddon in *The Doctor's Wife*. Oliphant here ridicules the sort of saccharine conventional literature in which golden-haired children brighten the lives of curmudgeonly old people, and at the same time makes explicit the self-obsession which is so often found at the centre of self-sacrifice. Lucilla's sacrifice, reminiscent of Dorothea, accords with what she wants to do anyway. Miss Marjoribanks wants to leave school and wants her new furniture, and she wants the sort of drama that living nobly can give her.

Oliphant's parody of conventional Victorian literature rings very true; some of the scenes Lucilla imagines for herself closely echo a novel like *Olive*, for example, where parody and irony are conspicuously absent.

Miss Marjoribanks sketched to herself...how she would wind herself up to the duty of presiding at her papa's dinner parties, and charming everybody by her good-humour, and brightness, and devotion to his comfort; and how, when it was all over, she would withdraw and cry her eyes out in her own room, and be found in the morning languid and worn-out, but always heroical, ready to go down-stairs and assist at dear papa's breakfast, and keep up her smiles for him till he had gone out to his patients (p.4).

Oliphant displays her understanding of the attractions of the heroism of self-sacrifice, and subverts it by poking fun at Miss Marjoribanks's charming picture, which has actually nothing to do with her father and everything to do with herself. With this image of herself as ministering angel, she disrupts her father's life, causes a fire to be lit in the library where he likes to sit alone in the evenings, and orders tea instead of dinner assuming that he will be too upset by his wife's death to face food. In fact, he comes home hot and hungry, and instead of the solitude of his cool library, which he craves, he is met by the sight of Lucilla weeping there. The comfort she offers is not for him, it is for her, and the part she has decided to play. It is not based on an understanding of her father's needs and desires, but on the conventional picture of self-sacrifice which Lucilla has picked up from literature.

Unfortunately for Lucilla, her father does not want her sacrifice. He tells her,

It is very good of you to propose sacrificing yourself for me...if you would sacrifice your excitement...it would really be something...I am not fond of sacrifices, either one way or another; and I've a great objection to any one making a sacrifice for me (p.10).

The doctor is perfectly aware that his daughter's notion of self-sacrifice is designed only to bring her 'excitement'. His rejection makes clear the burden of obligation, perhaps unwanted, that the sacrificer lays on the supposed beneficiary of the sacrifice. It becomes like an expensive but unwanted gift; undesired, but too costly to throw away, a responsibility never sought. The doctor, recognising both the falsity and the pointlessness of her desire, sends Miss Marjoribanks back to school for another couple of years. He fails to recognise Lucilla's need to find a purpose; the novel here undermines the daughter's idea of her role and puts it in a subordinate relation to the father's maturer, patient, deserving and put-upon male decency. The doctor has no need of grand gestures - he has his place and his purpose in the world - and dismisses Lucilla's desire for them as 'excitement'. The narrator makes no attempt here to defend Lucilla; like the doctor, the narrator dismisses her as a silly schoolgirl. There is, though, affection for both characters displayed in the narrative. The reader likes Miss Marjoribanks, if not her wrong-headed ideas.

Q.D. Leavis, who championed Oliphant's novels in the 1960s, has pointed out Lucilla's resemblance to Jane Austen's *Emma*. Leavis wrote that 'Lucilla has long seemed to me a triumphant intermediary between...Emma and Dorothea [Brooke], and, incidentally, more entertaining, more impressive and more likeable than either'¹³. The character of Lucilla does not accord with that of a sacrificial victim. She is egocentric, self-confident and completely convinced of her own superiority.

Miss Marjoribanks went straight forward, leaving an unquestionable wake behind her, and running down with indifference the little skiffs in her way. She was possessed by nature of that kind of egotism, or rather egoism, which is predestined to impress itself...upon the surrounding world...Miss Marjoribanks [was] too much occupied with herself to divine the characteristic points of other people (p.14).

Despite her constantly restated intention of being a comfort to her papa, the reader is under no illusion; Miss Marjoribanks's main concern lies in exercising her power in the sphere she chooses to govern, 'the domain in which she intended her will to be law' (p. 26).

She intends to put herself at the centre of Carlingford society, and to make that society worthy of her. She begins a weekly 'at home', in which her genius for organisation and improvisation become evident, and she becomes the undoubted queen of her chosen court. Her stated plan of daughterly duty gives her a convenient frame within which to build her empire. Miss Marjoribanks's notion of self-sacrifice differs from a more conventional view in that normally, self-sacrifice is presumed to be for the good of another at the expense of oneself; in her case, the situation is complicated by the fact that Lucilla always feels she knows what is best for others, even though it may be contrary to what they deem is best for themselves. When she wants the sulky, dissatisfied, socially ambitious Barbara Lake to sing with her at her 'evenings' she tells her, 'It is not as if I was asking you for mere amusement to myself; my grand object in life is to be a comfort to papa'. Barbara remarks 'I am sure he does not care in the least for music. I think you must be making a mistake.' To this Lucilla replies, 'Oh no. I never make mistakes.' (p.35)

The reader, like Barbara, feels that Miss Marjoribanks imposes her own notion of what is best on to her father, who has always enjoyed his quiet dinners with the men of his acquaintance. The point is that, despite our clear view of the selfishness of her motives, she does succeed in her stated aim; her father, to his own surprise as much as that of the

¹³ Q.D. Leavis, 'Introduction' to the Zodiac Press edition of *Miss Marjoribanks* (London: Zodiac

reader, does enjoy his evenings. He is proud of his daughter and her undoubted talents of organisation, hospitality, and not least, diplomacy. She makes things happen the way she wants them to. Far from being a self-sacrificial victim, she orchestrates everything that happens in Carlingford society, from musical evenings to marriages to the election of her chosen candidate to Parliament. She does not question her sphere, or think her talents wasted. It is not even that she works effectively within her limitations; she does not recognise any limitations. Oliphant sidesteps the issue of separate spheres by making the action, apparently centred in the domestic sphere, a public spectacle. Lucilla has opened up the doctor's house so that it is no longer a private space; most of what happens has an audience. Miss Marjoribanks uses all the commonplaces about self-sacrifice to construct her own life in the way she wants it.

Her attitude to religion sums up the ways in which she uses convention to serve her own ends. She has no particular religious belief, but says 'It is one of my principles never to laugh about anything that has to do with religion. I always think it my duty to speak with respect...I make it a point never to speak of anything about religion except with the greatest respect' (pp. 57-58). And, the narrator tells us, 'Miss Marjoribanks was quite unquestionable in her orthodoxy' (p.80). She would not dream of being other than orthodox; equally, she would never think of being religiously fervent. She does not fight convention because she knows that her plans are best served by embracing it. Her way is to work with what she has, and it is this, Oliphant's collusion with the preservation of the status quo, which so annoys Showalter et al.

This sort of criticism fails to recognise the ways in which Oliphant does subvert the status quo. Her privileging of the woman's sphere has already been mentioned, but at

many points in the narrative the reader is left in no doubt as to the extent of Miss Marjoribanks's ambition. At one point in the novel, it seems very likely that she will marry the candidate whose campaign for Parliament she orchestrates. 'There was something in the very idea of being MP for Carlingford which moved the mind of Lucilla. It was a perfectly ideal position for a woman of her views, and seemed to offer the very field that was necessary for her ambition' (p.93). Nowhere does she mention the fact that she would be the MP's wife, not the MP; nor does she mention the man who will be the MP. Miss Marjoribanks does not see herself as the supportive wife of a powerful man, indeed, she does not even see the man; she sees the power, and it is her power. Miss Marjoribanks loves power. Unlike Oliphant, she says she wishes she did have a vote, but her reasons for her acceptance of the fact that she does not have one is not that she recognises the superiority of men but that 'If we were going in for that sort of thing, I don't know what there would be left for the gentlemen to do' (p.367). In other words, that women would so self-evidently be better at politics than men, men's place in the political world must be protected, otherwise they would be good for absolutely nothing. Of course, Oliphant is here making fun of Lucilla and her boundless self-confidence, but it should be noted that, although in many respects Lucilla sounds as if she must be a distinctly unlikeable character - her arrogance, her bossiness, her complete lack of self-doubt, for example - in fact both Oliphant and the reader do like her. Oliphant has not made her into the sort of monster whose views the reader must automatically discount. On the contrary, as well as responding to her energetic spiritedness, we can see that she is rational and intelligent.

This knowledge gives all the more weight to passages such as the following, which occurs towards the end of the novel, and is worth quoting at some length;

To have the control of society in her hands was a great thing, but still the mere means, without any end, was not worth Lucilla's while...she had come to an age at which she might have gone into Parliament herself had

there been no disqualification of sex, and when it was almost a necessity for her to make some use of her social influence. Miss Marjoribanks had her own ideas in respect to charity, and never went upon ladies' committees, nor took any further share than what was proper and necessary in parish work; and when a woman had an active mind, and still does not care for parish work, it is a little hard for her to find a 'sphere'. And Lucilla, although she said nothing about a sphere, was still more or less in that condition of mind which has been so often and so fully described to the British public - when the ripe female intelligence, not having the natural resource of a nursery and a husband to manage, turns inwards, and begins to 'make a protest' against the existing order of society, and to call the world to account for giving it no due occupation - and to consume itself...there is little good in the existence of a Power unless it can be made use of for some worthy end (p.390).

This passage serves to position Miss Marjoribanks.

She distances herself from two particular and, perhaps, commonplace forms of response by women to the constraints of a domestic existence. Her attitude to 'parish work' seems to belittle it by an implied questioning of its efficacy and purpose¹⁴, but the narrator also takes care, without complete success perhaps, not to align her with a more radical critique. Lucilla's conscious use of the terminology employed by radical women (the repetition of 'sphere') and her immediate repudiation of it (Lucilla 'said nothing about a sphere') ensures that the reader knows that Lucilla is aware of, but chooses not to align herself with, this feminist rhetoric. Still, she places herself in that body of women, familiar to any reader of novels such as *The Clever Woman of the Family*, who desire occupation, but can see no role for themselves in mid-Victorian society. And, of course, Lucilla's thoughts here can be said to echo those of Dorothea Brooke, but it is notable that Oliphant, unlike Eliot, is careful to place Lucilla as belonging to an already familiar literary type. The difference is perhaps one of tone. It is as though Oliphant must justify her heroine's

¹⁴ Lucilla's (and perhaps Oliphant's) attitude to charity is shown earlier in the novel when she is accosted by a female beggar with six children. She does not give her any money 'for that was contrary to those principles of political economy which she had studied with such success...but she stopped and asked her name, and where she lived, and promised to inquire into her case. 'If you are honest and want to work, I will try to find you something to do,' said Miss Marjoribanks; which, to

dissatisfaction by including her with other similarly disaffected women, where Eliot, in making Dorothea exceptional, feels no need to include her as a part of something larger.

Lucilla's fate, in fact, echoes Dorothea's early yearnings, when Tom, her cousin and fiancé, buys the house at Marchbank which is in the neighbourhood of a disreputable village:

It gave her the liveliest satisfaction to think of all the disorder and disarray of the Marchbank village. Her fingers itched to be at it - to set all the crooked things straight, and clean away the rubbish, and set everything, as she said, on a solid foundation... If it had been a model village, with prize flower-gardens and clean as Arcadia, the thought of it would not have given Miss Marjoribanks half so much pleasure. The recollection of all the wretched hovels and miserable cottages exhilarated her heart. 'They may be as stupid and ungrateful as they like' she said to herself, 'but to be warm and comfortable instead of cold and hungry always makes a difference.' Perhaps it was not the highest motive possible, and it may be more satisfactory to some people to think of Lucilla as actuated by lofty sentiments of philanthropy; but to persons acquainted with Miss Marjoribanks's character, her biographer would scorn to make any pretence. What would be the good of a spirit full of boundless activity and benevolent impulses if there was nobody to help? (p.486)

If it were not for the inconvenient fact that *Miss Marjoribanks* appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* from February 1865 to May 1866, and Eliot did not start the work originally called *Miss Brooke* until December 1870, this would seem very obviously to be Oliphant's riposte to Eliot's unsatisfactory ending for Dorothea.

The passage quoted above offers resolution; measured, confident and immovable, in the way that Eliot did not. Where Dorothea drifts off to become the helpmeet of Ladislaw, spreading benevolence by her influence, Lucilla, still at the centre of the action, gets on and actually makes a difference. This is certainly not to claim that *Miss Marjoribanks* is a better novel than *Middlemarch*. *Miss Marjoribanks* lacks the tension of the unanswered, perhaps unanswerable questions about women's lives which exercise

be sure, was a threat appalling enough to keep her free from any further molestation on the part of

Eliot. However, it seems fair to say that, in creating a heroine who is active, self-confident, and above all, effective, Oliphant subverts conventional notions of self-sacrifice by directly attacking its apparently passive nature. Miss Marjoribanks's notion of self-sacrifice is not passively to negate her own needs, but to work for the greater good in ways that she (and she always knows best) thinks necessary. Miss Marjoribanks is not a terribly self-knowing woman, but because of this she is not subject to Hamlet-like prevarications; a stranger to self-doubt, she just does it.

Phoebe Beecham, the eponymous heroine of *Phoebe Junior*, is another striking Oliphant creation. The novel was first published in 1876, and, in some ways, Phoebe seems to be a forerunner of the New Woman, however unlikely that may sound in an Oliphant heroine. According to Elizabeth Langland, Phoebe, like Lucilla Marjoribanks, 'dramatizes the process by which a young woman seizes control of local society through a dexterous manipulation of domestic discursive practices and a clever staging of class and femininity.'¹⁵ Phoebe is organised, ambitious, self-knowing and manipulative, and she knows what she wants. Unlike many New Woman heroines, she does not aim for a job in her own right, but she definitely sees herself as having work to do. Phoebe thinks her job is marriage, and her ambition is to marry well. She is anxious not to waste her undoubted talents, and so she chooses to marry the rather dense Clarence Copperhead, whose career she can mastermind, rather than the more talented Reginald May. She feels that she could certainly love Reginald, but that he does not offer her the same potential for the employment of her talents, nor, indeed, the money and position she wants.

that interesting family' (p.54).

¹⁵ Langland, *Nobody's Angels*, p.156.

Like Lucilla Marjoribanks, Phoebe plays the system; she does not question women's position in society directly, she just pushes it to its limits, and makes it work for her.

Phoebe, junior, was a very well-instructed young woman, and even in the point of dress had theories of her own. Phoebe had...every advantage in her education...she had attended lectures at the ladies' college close by, and heard a great many eminent men on a great many different subjects. She had read too, a great deal. She was very well got up in the subject of education for women, and lamented often and pathetically the difficulty they labour under of acquiring the highest instruction; but at the same time she patronized Mr Ruskin's theory that dancing, drawing and cooking were three of the higher arts which ought to be studied by girls.¹⁶

Although Oliphant here seems to side with the male perspective in the way that she is subtly denigrating of the conventions of female complaint, she gives Phoebe the tools to circumvent her situation. Phoebe recognises the shortcomings of the system, but works within it; she is educated but - theoretically at least - domesticated. In fact, she has been held back in both areas; her father refuses to allow her to go in for the Cambridge examinations, and her mother refuses to allow her to cook because the family has someone to cook for them.

Phoebe, appearing ten years later than Miss Marjoribanks, reflects a different reality for women. Where both were intelligent women seeking a purpose in their existence, Lucilla found hers by manipulating and governing her social sphere, whereas Phoebe reflects more explicitly the kinds of concerns about women's sphere that were becoming increasingly apparent in general society. During the course of the novel, for example, Phoebe involves herself in business matters in order to rescue her friends, the Mays, from the consequences of the discovery of their father's forgery of bills. Her grandfather, representing the conflicts of both age and class (he is a grocer, Phoebe is a lady) protests

¹⁶ Margaret Oliphant, *Phoebe Junior*, ed. Penelope Fitzgerald (London: Virago, 1989), p.17. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

strongly at her interference in men's work, but Phoebe faces him down because she knows she can help. 'She was not afraid that she was going wrong...neither was she troubled by the idea of going beyond her sphere by interfering' (p. 305). Phoebe is nothing if not pragmatic, and finds ways to subvert the system within its limits, or even, when it suits her, to ignore the limits which convention (her grandfather) puts on her. For example, when she decides to go to a ball dressed in black, she says to her mother, 'The question is, am I to look my best...or am I just...to look a little insipidity - a creature with no character - a little girl like everybody else?' (p.20) She uses her rebellion against the conventional to her advantage; to be different in the matter of dress is hardly likely to change society (although Amelia Bloomer might disagree), but it serves to make her distinct from other young girls. Phoebe is anxious to present a self which is different, but not to the point of singularity and eccentricity. She does not want to change the system; she wants to succeed within it, and, perhaps more significantly for this thesis, she does not want to change herself.

The surprising thing for such an apparently conventional novelist as Oliphant is that Phoebe, who is effectively a gold-digger, is presented in such a sympathetic light; she is honest and very likeable. In a fascinating inversion of the conventional principle of having concern for others, Oliphant is bold and unusual. Phoebe is so clear about herself and what is due to her, that she can afford to be unselfish.

Phoebe was not mercenary in her own person, but she had no idea of giving up any 'right'...Phoebe felt it a matter of course that she should marry, and marry well. Self-confidence of this assured and tranquil sort serves a great many excellent purposes - it made her even generous in her way. She believed in her star, in her own certain good fortune, in herself; and therefore her mind was free to think and to work for other people (p. 74).

This presents a totally different take on the conventional Victorian idea of working for others; not that the self should be sacrificed to others, but that the self should be so solidly

centred and accounted for that one can afford to think of others. This neatly addresses the contradiction at the centre of the idea of self-sacrifice which does not negate the self, but makes it the epicentre of the notion. Here, in a surprisingly modern-sounding way, Phoebe is able to think of others because she is so confident that her own needs are taken care of she can be truly self-forgetful.

Although Phoebe is affectionate, she is not in the least sentimental. She rejects Reginald May with a few pangs, but she sees her life in terms of more than love. This refusal to put love at the centre of her existence makes Phoebe a subversive heroine in itself, particularly in the arena of the domestic novel. She chooses Clarence Copperfield over Reginald May because the sacrifice of love seems to her a lesser sacrifice than that of a purpose. Phoebe only appears to stay within the domestic sphere by marrying; in actual fact she engages completely in the public world of politics, to the extent of writing Clarence's speeches to the House of Commons.

She decides to marry him although 'he was not very wise, nor a man to be enthusiastic about' because

he would be a career to Phoebe. She did not think of it humbly like this, but with a big capital - a Career. Yes; she could put him into parliament, and keep him there. She could thrust him forward (she believed) into the front of affairs. He would be as good as a profession, a position, a great work to Phoebe. He meant wealth... and he meant all the possibilities of future power. Who can say that she was not as romantic as any girl of twenty could be? only her romance took an unusual form. It was her head that was full of throbbings and pulses, not her heart (p. 234).

Langland makes the interesting comparison that

Oliphant, unlike George Eliot, does not indulge in regrets that a woman with Phoebe's talents will be wasted in middle-class management. Oliphant's text inhabits a different ideological universe than Eliot's *Middlemarch*. That kind of regret is built upon conventional ideologies of the Angel in the House. It presupposes that, except in their roles as wives and mothers, middle-class women are idle, dependent, and

ineffectual. It affords no recognition of their managerial positions, either at home or in the larger society.¹⁷

In her treatment of marriage in *Phoebe Junior* Oliphant makes a direct attack on the whole basis of the Victorian notion of domesticity, which is reliant on the theory of romantic love and the family unit, into which feed ideas of self-sacrifice, separate spheres and the like.

It has been noted that Oliphant was politically strongly conservative, particularly in the field of women's rights, but this novel seems to contain a more severe attack on the prevalent domestic ideology than that produced by many a self-declared radical (Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters*, for example). It is difficult to see how Phoebe's position could fail to raise questions about women's lack of access to power and the means of engagement in the public domain. Like Lucilla Marjoribanks, Phoebe is far more intelligent than most of the men she knows, but she knows that she will wield more power in society as it stands by running her husband's parliamentary career, than by following a career of her own. The significant point is that, although Phoebe openly prefers Clarence (head) to Reginald (heart), there is never any criticism of her choice by the narrator. Throughout, Phoebe is presented as an intelligent, pragmatic woman, but not a selfish one. Despite perhaps coming from the same stable, she is no Becky Sharp. Oliphant cannot leave the marriage as a purely business arrangement. When Clarence's father refuses to allow him to marry Phoebe, there is a moving scene when the usually buffoonish Clarence defends her.

'Phoebe knows I'm fond of her, but that's neither here nor there. Here is the one that can make something of me. I ain't clever, you know it as well as I do - but she is. I don't mind going into parliament, making speeches and that sort of thing, if I've got her to back me up. But without her I'll never do anything'...He was stupid - but he was a man, and Phoebe felt proud of him, for the moment at least...He was a blockhead,

¹⁷ Langland, *Nobody's Angels*, p.181.

but he was a man, and could stand up for his love, and for his own rights as a man, independent of the world (pp. 327-329).

The reader can see the potential for a happy, if not passionate, mutually beneficial marriage. What is interesting is that Phoebe chooses the husband who will most allow her to be herself. Had she married Reginald, who is very clever, she would have had no scope for her own talents; she would have been merely an audience for his talk about Greek poetry and philosophy. But Clarence has always appreciated her; he prefers her to Ursula May because 'they are both pretty girls, but for amusing you and that sort of thing, give me Phoebe...As sharp as a needle and plenty to say for herself' (p. 78). He does not want Phoebe to be a supportive, self-sacrificing little woman; he wants her to tell him what to do.

An interesting contrast is drawn between Phoebe and her friend Ursula. Ursula is a very conventional girl, shy and shrinking, 'a pale little maiden' (p.21), whereas Phoebe is 'a decidedly pretty young woman' (p. 21). Phoebe is altogether more definite. In the course of a conversation about girls who marry rich men, Ursula is told 'Don't think of it Ursula; it is not the sort of thing that good girls ought to think of' (p. 29) but of course the reader knows that Phoebe has thought of it. She is too bright and too concerned with her own fate to be conventionally 'good'. Oliphant does not, however, make a simple comparison between the two girls.

Although we are told that 'Ursula was as different as possible from Phoebe Beecham' (p. 21), Oliphant does not use Ursula as a complete foil for Phoebe, nor to criticise Phoebe's unconventionalities. For example, Ursula is not presented as naturally and womanly self-sacrificing in order to provide a contrast to Phoebe's consciousness of 'her rights'.

Had Ursula been of the kind of those who suffer and deny themselves by nature, she would have had her hands full, and abundant opportunity

afforded her to exercise those faculties. But she was not of this frame of mind. She did what she was obliged to do as well as time and opportunity permitted; but she did not throw herself with any enthusiasm into her duties (p. 31).

She may not be as openly self-interested as Phoebe, but it does not mean she is any better at looking after others. It is Phoebe, for example, who comes to the rescue of Ursula's father when his forgery of a bill is about to become public knowledge, to his inevitable ruin and disgrace.

Phoebe is perfectly aware of the impression she makes, and stage manages it to its best effect:

Phoebe...gathered up her shawl in her hand with a seeming careless movement, and let it drop lightly across her knee, where the gold threads in the embroidery caught the light; and she took off her hat...Her complexion and her hair, and the gold thread in the rich Indian work, thus blazed out together upon the startled audience (p.124).

Ursula, on the other hand, is not self-conscious. When, with tears in her eyes, 'she turned those two little oceans of trouble piteously, without knowing it, upon Northcote...[he] fell in love with her there and then' (p. 213). Phoebe is knowing and manipulative, but she is a much more engaging character than Ursula. She 'was perhaps not a perfect young woman, but had her own ends to serve like other people; yet she had a friendly soul' (p. 214).

Oliphant heroines are not punished for being self-interested. On the contrary, they attain happy endings. They are rewarded for knowing what will make them happy, and what will make them happy is rarely a romantic marriage, but a purpose and an occupation. Oliphant heroines do not use their energies in railing against a system which does not favour them; they use their skills, their brains and their wits to make the system work for them. Above all, Oliphant heroines are effective.

With *Miss Marjoribanks*, Oliphant was attacked by her contemporaries for what her publisher, Blackwood, called 'a certain hardness of tone'¹⁸. It seems apparent that this contemporary disquiet can be seen quite clearly to be a result of Oliphant's unconventional refusal to put self-sacrifice at the centre of the portrayal of her heroines. In the characters of Lucilla Marjoribanks and Phoebe Beecham, Oliphant contests the prevailingly orthodox view of women. For Oliphant, unlike writers like Charlotte Yonge, being different does not make her heroines wrong. The self-interestedness of Lucilla and Phoebe does not make others unhappy; rather the opposite.

This, within the context of the mid-Victorian novel, is surely nothing if not radical. As Harman and Meyer put it in a discussion of *Miss Marjoribanks*, which has equal relevance to *Phoebe Junior*

Feminist critics have been reluctant to champion a writer of such apparent political conservatism, a writer in whom one finds no emancipated heroines, no challenges to patriarchy. But the carefully controlled, ambivalent ironies of *Miss Marjoribanks* show a real literary sophistication...and the novel is centrally, and sympathetically, concerned with the limitations placed on the lives of Victorian women.¹⁹

A reading of Oliphant's novels which treats as fundamental the notion of female self-sacrifice provides an analysis of her work which makes clear that, although Oliphant may not have explicitly attacked conventional views of women, she did unpick, carefully and deliberately, a whole language and range of attitudes to do with womanhood and the so-called 'natural' state of finding fulfilment in perverse forms of self-sacrifice and self-denial.

This process does not have its outcome in angst and impasse, but in the provisional accommodations which, she convinces us, real women have made for themselves within the system, finding fulfilment and space in which to be powerful. Susan Hamilton explains

¹⁸ Quoted in Elisabeth Jay, 'Introduction', p. xvi.

the seemingly polarised views of Oliphant's work by pointing out that it 'can be used to authorise both a feminist commitment to change and a non-feminist rejection of social change.'²⁰ Having said as much, it is still true to say, as did Penelope Fitzgerald in the introduction to the Virago edition of the novel, 'I cannot bring to mind any other novelist of that date who would have dared to make a heroine out of Phoebe, junior.' (p. vii).

¹⁹ Harman & Meyer, 'Introduction' to *The New Nineteenth Century*, p. xxx.

²⁰ Susan Hamilton, 'Introduction' to *'Criminals, Idiots, Women & Minors': Nineteenth-Century Writing By Women on Women*, ed. Susan Hamilton (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995), p. 15.

Chapter Seven

Sensation Novels: Rhoda Broughton, *Not Wisely But Too Well*; Mrs Henry Wood, *East Lynne*; Mary Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*

It is essential for a project which investigates female self-sacrifice to consider sensation novels, a genre in which the heroines are notoriously transgressive, and to explore whether the notion of self-sacrifice underpins portrayals of even these women. The 1860s saw the real explosion of the popularity of the sensation novel, after the huge impact of the 1859 appearance of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* in serial form in the magazine *All the Year Round*. Robin Gilmour quotes Dickens's comment on the opening chapters of Collins's *The Moonstone*, 'Wild yet domestic': which, as Gilmour says, 'aptly sums up the yoking together of romance and realism'¹ which characterises the sensation novel. Sensation novel plots typically centred on themes such as bigamy, adultery, murder, violent crime, scandal and family secrets. Sensation heroines were equally shocking: assertive, passionate, wilful and independent. Perhaps above all, and most threateningly, they put their own needs centrally, at least for some part of the narrative. The popularity of the novels, which was considered to be chiefly although not exclusively amongst women, provoked debate about their appeal, and whether it revealed 'suppressed anti-social impulses among female readers'.²

Recent years have seen an increased critical interest in sensation fiction, and many feminist critics have argued that the novels provided a new space for a critique of mid-Victorian gender politics, encouraging in women a new questioning of the fundamental nature of womanhood and women's position in the family. As Katherine Newey has put it,

¹ Robin Gilmour, *The Novel in the Victorian Age* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), p.112.

a space was created for an independent, articulate and passionate female voice in a time and society in which women were idealized into passivity and silence...these female characters indicate realms of experience and emotion beyond the quotidian and limited notion of the domestic sphere, and in this gesture towards broad experience, they provide a partial model for liberation of female experience.³

Even putting aside this debatable notion that mid-Victorian women were idealised as passive and silent, this passage seems to contain some generalisations which are not borne out by the novels. Whilst it is certainly demonstrable that sensation heroines do portray a range of emotions which are perhaps not present in many earlier novels, the novels are still based within a domestic framework. Whilst there may be a partial model for the liberation of female emotion evident in the sensation novels, the model for the liberation of female experience is less conclusive. This is not only because the sorts of experience portrayed within the novels are outlandish, but that the exclusion of the heroine from the domestic scene which is the result of most of the novels, is not portrayed as victorious or liberating, but rather threatening and disabling.

Having said as much, it would not be fair to discount the very real debate which the sensation novels engendered about the changing role of women, a debate which recognised and allowed discussion of dissatisfactions with a conventional female role. Deborah Wynne sees the novels as having a more general function.

'Sensations' were not empty of meaning, but constituted an important response to the issues of the day, particularly anxieties surrounding shifting class identities, financial insecurity, the precarious social position of single women, sexuality, failed and illegal marriages, insanity and mental debilitation, fears of criminality, and perceptions that modernity itself was undermining domestic life.⁴

² Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883. Vol. 3. Literary Issues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. xii.

³ Katherine Newey, 'Women and the Theatre' in *Women and Literature In Britain, 1800-1900*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.202.

By addressing such matters, the sensation novelists, she claims, 'succeeded in raising readers' awareness of the fragility of the domestic ideal'⁵, and Kate Flint refers to 'the imaginative threat which they offered to the perceived sanctity of the middle-class home' as evidenced in what she calls the 'rhetoric of anxiety' present in the novels.⁶ Nor must the fact be ignored that the threat to the sanctity of the middle-class home was perceived as coming, not only directly from the content of the novels, but also from the fact that they were popular with all classes. For the first time, perhaps, the same novels were being read . . . above and below stairs. W.Fraser Rae, in an article about Mary Braddon in the *North British Review* protested that she 'may boast, without fear of contradiction, of having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the kitchen the favourite reading of the drawing-room'⁷. However, whilst recognising the disruptive nature of the novels, it is important to realise that, as pointed out by Helsinger et al, 'now that recent scholarship has recognised the subversive element in sensation fiction, there is a danger of swinging to the other extreme and dismissing the orthodoxy of these novels.'⁸

If recent critical recognition of this subversive element has tended to overstate the radical nature of sensation texts, a reading of sensation novels focused on female self-sacrifice has a real contribution to make to the discussion. The main area of contention between feminist critics seems to be the extent to which sensation novels form a radical critique of mid-Victorian ideas about women. An examination of the treatment of female self-sacrifice in novels in which the heroines are undoubtedly extremely unconventional, or at least behave in unconventional ways, also allows a real insight into the extent of the

⁴ Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 2-3.

⁵ Wynne, *The Sensation Novel*, p. 10.

⁶ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 276.

⁷ W. Fraser Rae, 'Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon', *North British Review* 43, NS 4 (1865), pp. 180-205. Cited in Flint, *The Woman Reader*, p. 278.

⁸ Helsinger et al, *Woman Question Vol. 3.*, p. 125.

disruption of conventional notions of womanhood that these apparently transgressive women are permitted. Lyn Pykett sees the subversiveness of sensation heroines in terms of their concentration on self. She sees them as providing a threat to ideas of proper femininity by presenting women who are 'self-assertive; desiring and actively pleasure-seeking; pursuing self-fulfilment and self-identity'⁹ but this seems to ignore the extent to which some sensation heroines have, in terms of self-sacrifice at least, more in common with the most conventional of mid-Victorian heroines.

There are two aspects of female self-sacrifice in which an exploration of the sensation novels prove useful and enlightening. One of the features of female self-sacrifice as discussed so far has been in its silent, internal nature. The seductive drama of self-sacrifice has partly depended upon its outwardly unseen nature; its excitements are manifest only to the particular woman, a delicious secret. In the case of the sensation novels, it is this very idea of suppression, the idea of things being not what they seem, which becomes threatening.

What made them sensational depended, in part, on depictions of devilish corruption beneath an angelic demeanor. In the words of Eliza Lynn Linton, writing for the *Saturday Review*, 'their worst sinners are in all respects fashioned as much after the outward semblance of the ideal saint as [the sensation novelists] have skill to design.' The heroine is, according to the *Westminster Review*, 'no longer the Angel, but the Devil in the House.'¹⁰

It is this apparent fear of women's hidden self, featured in so much contemporary criticism, which is important here. The discussion so far has dealt with the attractions of the hidden, and the approbation with which the suppression of self has been treated. In the sensation novels, however, this becomes the central criticism - that women are not what they seem: an apparently deliberate collision with the dominant ideology.

⁹ Lyn Pykett, *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.16.

A study of sensation novels allows an exploration of another aspect of female self-sacrifice, that of renunciation. The novels discussed so far deal rather with self-sacrifice as repression of self, but the sensation novels seem to put the concept of renunciation much more centrally. The distinction between self-sacrifice and renunciation is perhaps not immediately obvious. The main difference between the two is that self-sacrifice is built on a denial of self, whereas renunciation necessitates an acknowledgement of self, preceding the denial of the self's gratification. Self-sacrifice, as discussed so far, is defined in terms of interiority, a way of looking and feeling, whereas renunciation involves action.

Although female self-sacrifice could provide an active response to an apparently passive existence, that action is still largely in the mind of the individual woman. Renunciation usually means an actual event, a repudiation or putting aside, and therefore has a much more visible outcome. In conventional representations of female self-sacrifice, desire is not recognised or admissible, whereas in the case of renunciation, desire is necessarily central. Without any recognition of the desired object, renunciation is meaningless. Mid-Victorian novels which concentrate on female self-sacrifice tend to concentrate on the grandeur of self-sacrifice. Novels dealing with renunciation, however, are much more likely to deal with the grim realism of loss.

Perhaps the concentration on self-sacrifice is more usual in novels because renunciation is dependent on a recognition of self-interest which many mid-Victorian novelists found difficult to address, although George Eliot, theoretically at least, ascribed the same grandeur to renunciation as she did to the sort of self-sacrifice which has been previously discussed here. In a review of Geraldine Jewsbury's *Constance Herbert Eliot* observed that 'it is this very perception that the thing we renounce is precious, is something

¹⁰ Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 233.

never to be compensated to us, which constitutes the beauty and heroism of renunciation.’¹¹ There does seem, however, to be some contradiction between what Eliot says here and what actually happens in her novels. Although it is arguable that Eliot’s heroines actually do very little in the way of renunciation - Dorothea marries Will, Maggie does not give up Stephen, and even Dinah’s ceasing to preach upon her marriage does not feel like any real loss - her novels do explore the bleak reality of deprivation, rather than the ‘beauty and heroism’ of redemption. As Gillian Beer has observed, ‘George Eliot mocks renunciation’s virtue in other novelists, [and] returns again and again to it as problem, not as satisfaction.’¹² In the sensation novels renunciation is the mechanism that governs redemption. It is the extent of their renunciation of their own interests which determines the nature of sensation heroines’ endings.

The three novels discussed here are Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne*, Rhoda Broughton’s *Not Wisely But Too Well* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*. These texts were chosen because they each seem representative of the three main strands of sensation novels. *East Lynne* deals with sensational events - adultery, bigamy, murder - whilst *Not Wisely But Too Well*, although holding out the possibility of adultery and bigamy, is sensational more in its fairly explicit treatment of passionate emotions. *Lady Audley’s Secret* combines the two; sensational events and a sensationally depraved heroine. The Wood and Broughton novels both deal with the issues of renunciation and sacrifice, although the circumstances are very different. The Braddon novel does not deal directly with the issue of renunciation, but does serve as a useful illustration of the impossibility of redemption for a heroine whose ‘womanly nature’ is so distorted and unnatural.

¹¹ George Eliot in *Westminster Review*, LXIV, (July 1855), pp. 288-296. Reprinted in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 134-135.

¹² Gillian Beer, *George Eliot* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), p. 4.

Each of the first two novels deals with the effects of the act of renunciation on the life of its heroine. Here there is no sense of the grandeur of self-sacrifice which has been such a feature of the texts discussed previously. The lives of Kate Chester and Isabel Vane, after their central acts of renunciation, are unrelentingly bleak and grim. Wood, particularly, is relentless in her insistence on the agonies of Isabel's existence - partly, certainly, for moral effect - but both authors seem to be rejecting the idea that self-sacrifice is its own reward. For Kate and Isabel there is little comfort in doing their duty. It is nowhere suggested that this is because they are aberrant women; in both cases, their taste of passion has not made them unwomanly. It is not their unnatural femininity which prevents them from feeling womanly compensations; more a feeling they recognise that truthfully there is no compensation in self-sacrifice. It is notable that of all the novels discussed, the sensation novels are the only ones in which there is no happy-ever-after, as though, once having recognised the bleakness of a renunciation for which there is no compensation, the resolution of a glamorous, noble self-sacrifice cannot be employed as a device. These heroines are not observers of their own greatness, they are participators in their own misery, the misery they themselves have caused. This is not to claim that the main narrative thrust of either novel is necessarily consciously designed to attack a notion of femaleness which its authors have felt to be false and misleading, but the effect is certainly that. Lyn Pykett believes that the process was a conscious one. She claims that the sensation novelists

participated in a rewriting of the script of the feminine, as, in various ways and to varying degrees, they self-consciously explored or implicitly exposed the contradictions of prevailing versions of femininity, or developed new styles and modes through which to articulate their own specific sense of the feminine.¹³

¹³ Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, p. 5.

Published in 1870, *Not Wisely But Too Well* tells the story of the passionate but doomed love affair between Kate Chester and Colonel Dare Stamer. Kate is a middle-class girl living fairly contentedly with her sister and brother and their uncle and aunt. Dare is a son of the local aristocratic family, ruthless and spoilt, and the novel centres on the effect of her all-consuming passion for him on Kate's life. Fairly typically of sensation novels, Kate and Dare cannot marry because Dare is already married to a wife he has abandoned, but who still loves him. When he confesses as much, Kate leaves him and goes to London with her sister where she embarks on a life of good works. She meets Dare again and is tempted to run away with him, but finally resists because of the influence of James Stanley, a clergyman who has befriended her. Dare walks out in a fury. When we next see him he is dying as the result of a carriage accident in the street outside a ball which Kate is attending. Kate is with him when he dies, after which the whole of the rest of her life is compressed into the remains of the same last chapter.

From the first words of the novel the narrator claims the moral high ground for her story, as if to pre-empt criticism of the possibly sordid tale which follows. The language employed is exaggeratedly poetic and stuffed with classical allusion; in fact, the whole of the first chapter is so self-consciously intellectual and meandering, the reader has very little idea what the story is actually about. We are told

The subject I am going to write about is to my mind 'a thing of beauty;' for what is more pre-eminently so than a tender 'loving, passionate, human soul, made more tender, more loving, by many a sore grief,' by many a gnawing sorrow, till towards the hour of its setting, whether calm or whelmed to the last in storm-clouds, it shines with a chaste mellow radiance such as our earth lamps do not afford us here, borrowed (oh, priceless loan!) from the fountains of life above!¹⁴

¹⁴ Rhoda Broughton, *Not Wisely But Too Well* (London: Macmillan, 1899), p. 1. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

There is much more in the same vein¹⁵, until what may be taken as the first intimation of the appearance of Kate, when the narrator tells us

I too have, this night, had a 'Dream of Fair Women.' My fair women were not celebrated ones though. The world never heard, never will hear of them. Indeed, there is nothing for it to hear. Their voices were too low and gentle to be audible above its dull roar (p.3).

This presents what is by now a familiar theme; the insistence on the lack of celebrity, the absence of outward show, the muted unobtrusiveness of 'fair women'.

How much the more surprising then, is the reader's first encounter with Kate. She is sitting 'very comfortably' alone on the beach; 'She was not in any peculiarly graceful attitude; in fact, ease seemed to have been more in her thoughts than elegance when she chose her position' (p.10). We realise that she is not conventionally ladylike, and we are told that, not only is she attractive to men, but the shape of her mouth betrays 'an immensity of latent, undeveloped passion' (p.11). She moves quickly, laughs heartily, and is altogether nothing like the 'tender', 'mellow', 'low and gentle' voiced creature which we were expecting. Broughton's first chapter is apparently intended to serve the function of introducing the reader to Kate in a way which insists on her essential womanliness, despite later appearances. It is as though she fears the reader will take Kate's vitality and liveliness to denote some sort of 'girl of the period', as described by Eliza Lynn Linton, with their 'slang, bold talk and fastness' and their 'love of pleasure and indifference to duty'.¹⁶ The success of the novel depends on the reader experiencing the story with some sympathy for Kate and so Broughton, on the first page of the novel, equates passion with loving tenderness, as though to protect Kate from accusations of unwomanliness.

¹⁵ The narrator actually says 'I could babble on, on this theme for ever' (p.3), which seems, unfortunately, entirely accurate.

¹⁶ Eliza Lynn Linton, 'The Girl of the Period', in the *Saturday Review* (March 14, 1868), reprinted in *'Criminals, Idiots, Women & Minors': Nineteenth-Century Writing by Women on Women*, ed. Susan Hamilton (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995), p. 173.

The central episode of the novel deals with renunciation, but it is rather oddly prefigured by Kate's dramatically imagined scenario of what actually turns out to be a fairly realistic description of her life. When Dare takes no notice of her at a dinner party, she decides she 'would go home and begin a new life; a sensible, joyless, sorrowless life; for what could cause her sorrow or joy any more now?...and then at last, she supposed, after a great many dreary years marked by no happy landmarks, she should die and be buried, and there would be an end of her' (p.55). The narrator pokes fun at Kate's youthful extreme of emotion, at her over-blown dramaticism; but in fact this is what actually happens to her. It is as though Broughton sets up for irony what she perceives to be the conventional idea of the drama of renunciation, and then proceeds to undermine it by her account of what really happens to Kate when she suffers the real pain of renunciation.

Broughton's treatment of the results of Kate's sacrifice is not quite as straightforward as might be expected in what is, in the end, a fairly superficial novel. Dare tells Kate that he has a great sacrifice to ask of her. She replies that she would like to be asked to do something difficult, so that she could prove her love for him. He warns her that society would judge and exclude her, and she replies that she is 'shamefully willing to give up everything and everybody for you' and calls him 'The Dare for whom I'd have my head cut off, and not mind the axe coming down on it' (p.127). This is the idea of extravagantly dramatic sacrifice, familiar from the fantasies of Isabel Gilbert, but the reality is rather more sordid. Dare tells Kate he is already married and wants her to run away with him anyway. She tells him his test is too strong for her, and asks him why he thinks her capable of 'this unspeakable vileness' (p.139). Dare presents any sacrifice Kate may make in running away with him as though she were merely sacrificing her place in polite society. If such had been the case, it is quite clear that Kate would happily have sacrificed herself, but she cannot take another woman's husband.

Kate does not sacrifice herself as Dare wants her to, but neither does her renunciation of him make her happy in the knowledge that she has done right. Dare cannot see that Kate is not governed by ideas of conventional morality, and that the decision she makes to renounce him is actually far more difficult than a decision to go with him; a decision which makes her much more unhappy, and which actually blights her life for ever. Dare's idea of her sacrifice is compared with James's much more powerful expression of her real sacrifice. Dare wants her to give up her reputation; Kate makes the much harder decision to try and save his soul. Perhaps the most sensational aspect of the novel comes in Broughton's treatment of passion and religion. James tells Kate,

If you do love him, love him truly, love him better than yourself and your own gratification, then, most of all, you'll leave him...Don't you see that you are the bait with which Satan is angling for his soul...Your love is the chain with which the foul fiend binds him fastest. O child, child, break the links of that chain, I implore you, and you'll set him free and yourself too...By your love to that man I charge you to give him up, and never see his face again. It is the strongest proof of love that will ever be asked of you (pp. 299-300).

Broughton inverts conventional notions of a Christian self-sacrifice by the way in which she describes the effect of Kate's feelings for Dare on her religious feelings. Love makes her blasphemous; she sets up Dare as her idol, directly comparing her feelings for him to her feeling for God. There is a shocking inversion of the notion of the willing sacrifice to the love object, which directly challenges the view of self-sacrifice as intrinsically right. Kate makes declarations such as, 'Oh Dare, I'd do anything wicked, anything insane for you' (p.56), undermining conventional notions of self-sacrifice. The narrator is anxious to separate herself from Kate here, pointing out that her love makes Kate blasphemous, and condemning her for finding no comfort in religion. (Yet it could be said that this is just a scandalous reworking of the respectable and conventional Victorian marriage in which the

husband stands in an analogous authoritative relationship to the wife as God does to man.) Again, when praying 'Kate mumbled a few words to God with her lips, and a good many to Dare with her heart' and the narrator exclaims 'Oh unreckoning fool!' (p.99) This is the narrator's conscious separation of herself from Kate, and is fairly typical of the narratorial intervention in this sort of novel. In this way, the writer can appropriate shocking events and feelings for the purposes of the plot, whilst maintaining the moral high ground. It is this sort of heavy-handed moralising which H.L. Manse objected to in his article 'Sensation Novels' in the *Quarterly Review*, when he said that all sensation novels

may be classified under two general heads - those that are written merely for amusement, and those that are written with a didactic purpose. Of the two, we confess that we very much prefer the former....it is better that the excitement of a sensation novel should evaporate in froth and foam, than that it should leave a residuum behind of shallow dogmatism and flippant conceit.¹⁷

The supreme irony of the story is that Kate's renunciation is not enough to save Dare. When he is dying, she urges him to let her pray for him but he tells her it is too late for him. She responds 'It's *never* too late...God's goodness is infinite...The gate of mercy stands always open! O Dare, Dare, at this last moment try to enter there; no one ever yet found it shut' (p.380), but Dare dies without a word of regret or prayer.

The most interesting feature of the novel is Broughton's treatment of the result on Kate's life of her action in trying to save Dare at the expense of her own happiness. Kate is not buoyed up by a noble sense of virtuous glory, and her choice - religion over passion, James over Dare - does not actually bring her much, even in the way of quiet comfort. There is no nobility; she does not rise above her sacrifice, she is crippled by it. She takes to district visiting, because 'one may almost as well do that as anything else' (p.147), but

the satisfactions of her life amongst the poor are insufficient, and after Dare dies, the compression of the rest of her life into the remains of a short chapter emphasises its pointlessness and waste. Her renunciation is not described in the noble language of other novels. She makes the morally right choice, but it does not make her happy. She tries the usual compensations offered to women; she shapes her life according to conventional ideas of the comforts of philanthropy:

This was to be a day of self-abnegation, the beginning of a life of self-abnegation, like James Stanley's, only not quite so rigorous...she would live for other people henceforth, throw herself into their concerns, and try to become identified with them. Her own *rôle* in life had become very dull, very stupid, and there was no possibility of it mending. She would leave it altogether, and enjoy life vicariously (p.179).

This mixture of humour and pathos betrays the fact that the idea of the comforts of self-sacrifice - the seductive idea of living nobly - has let Kate down.

Broughton does not offer a direct criticism of this idea; the reader is left uncertain as to whether this failure is because the notion of self-sacrifice as noble is itself at fault, or whether it is because Kate's personality makes her unable to take any comfort from it ('I'll try and feel as sorry for them as I do for myself' p.155), or whether it is because she has been poisoned by the effects of her illicit love for a bad man. The very gloominess of Kate's life seems to be Broughton's almost half-hearted attempt to engage with the notion of women's lives achieving meaning by working for the happiness of others. For Kate, her work serves only to pass the time: 'Heart and soul, with all the energies of her body, and all the faculties of her mind, she went into that work, with which she had formerly trifled and played. Her great object seemed to be, that no second of her life should be without occupation' (p.305). Broughton does not engage at any point with the effect of Kate's

¹⁷ 'Sensation Novels' attributed to H.L. Manse in the *Quarterly Review*, v. 113, no. 226 (April, 1863), pp. 482-514. <http://gaslight.mtroyal.ab.ca/sensnovl.htm>, p.5

work on others, the intrinsic good of such work; she is interested only in its effects on Kate.

After Dare's death, Kate joins a Protestant sisterhood in Manchester,

And when many days had come and gone, when youth was just beginning to merge into gray beautiful middle age, he who is always reading over the long muster-roll of human names came to the name of Kate Chester; and she, hearing, rose up - yea, rose up very gladly (p.387).

This still does not feel like the attainment of Kate's final reward, but rather, more like an end to her misery.

Not Wisely But Too Well is by far the most interesting novel of the three discussed here, not least because Broughton does not seem quite in control of her material. Kate is by far too likeable and well-realised a character to completely serve a didactic purpose; the reader does not feel a satisfaction in the comforting knowledge that she is being justly punished for her sins. Rather the novel seems to contain an inchoate protest, confused and uncertain perhaps, but in the representation of Kate, acting out confusions about her position, Broughton seems to be trying to articulate a question about what happens to women like Kate, for whom society does not seem to hold a place.

East Lynne (1861) was the runaway bestseller of its time. It spawned several stage adaptations and later, films. The basic story is simple, although there are a number of sensational sub-plots involving murder, mystery and wrongful arrest. Isabel Vane, although previously attracted to the penniless and venal adventurer Francis Levison, marries Archibald Carlyle, a successful and respectable lawyer. After several years of happy marriage, in a fit of jealousy brought on by a series of misunderstandings and her (not necessarily justified) feelings of neglect by her husband, she runs off with Levison, who has nurtured her feelings of jealousy with lies and fabrications. Levison leaves her, she becomes disfigured in the train crash which kills her illegitimate baby, and comes back

to her family in the guise of a governess, Madame Vine. Eventually, she reveals her true identity to her husband, who has in the meantime, thinking her dead, married her 'rival'. Isabel then dies.

Isabel is, in many ways, a picture of perfect Victorian womanhood. When her future husband, Archibald Carlyle first meets her, 'he almost thought [her] more like an angel' than a human being, and although he thinks her beautiful, what attracts him more is 'the sweet expression of the soft dark eyes'.¹⁸ Having been reared in rural isolation in Wales, she is unlike any of the fashionable young ladies he knows: 'Generous and benevolent was she; timid and sensitive to a degree; gentle and considerate to all' (p.11), and it is this hyper-sensitivity which is her eventual downfall. This general lack of experience and sophistication, whilst presented in some ways as attractive and appealing, along with the fact that she has no mother to guide her, is also offered as a reason for Isabel's later jealous fits with regard to her husband and Barbara Hare, the woman she believes her husband prefers to herself.

The portrait of Isabel is by no means straightforward. The narrative viewpoint moves constantly between sympathy and judgment, excuse and condemnation. Isabel is, on the whole, sympathetically drawn, and her act in running off with Levison seems out of character because Wood has not convinced the reader of the strength of Isabel's feelings. Wood is careful too, to allow Isabel no happiness in her choice.

How fared it with Lady Isabel? Just as it must be expected to fare, and does fare, when a high-principled gentlewoman falls from her pedestal. Never had she experienced a moment's calm, or peace, or happiness, since the fatal night of quitting her home. She had taken a blind leap in a moment of wild passion [although there is actually little sign of this in the text]; when, instead of the garden of roses it had been her persuader's pleasure to promise her (but which, in truth, she had barely glanced at, for

¹⁸ Mrs Henry Wood, *East Lynne*, ed. Norman Page and Kamal Al-Solaylee (London: J.M. Dent, 1994), p.9. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

that had not been her moving motive), she had found herself plunged into an abyss of horror, from which there was never more any escape (p.287).

The narrator's frequent overt interventions - aimed directly at the woman reader - reveal that same connection between self-negation and the sort of fear of abandonment which was so apparent in the conduct books. The narrator declares:

Oh, reader, believe me! Lady, - wife - mother! should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so will you awaken! Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though they magnify themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the endurance of woman to bear, *resolve* to bear them, fall down upon your knees and pray to be enabled to bear them: pray for patience; pray for strength to resist the demon that would urge you so to escape; bear unto death, rather than forfeit your fair name and your good conscience; for be assured that the alternative, if you rush on to it, will be found far worse than death! (p.287)

This does not read as a conventionally censorious diatribe, added in just to make a moral issue of perhaps immoral events, rescuing the narrative from accusations of immorality. It is a more emotional and seemingly personal appeal ('Oh, reader, believe me!') than that. As such, it feels more like a very real expression of a very real fear of the complete dependency of women in and on marriage, whatever that marriage may be like, although it is precisely this sort of didacticism which so annoyed Manse.

Isabel Vane's self-sacrifice is, eventually, just that. She sacrifices her identity, becoming another person - Madame Vine - in order to be near her children. She knows she must repress all her natural feelings if she is to live in her old house, with a new mistress, as the governess.

It might be difficult; but she could force and school her heart to endurance: had she not resolved in her first bitter repentance, to *take up her cross* daily, and bear it? No; her own feelings, let them be wrung as they would, should not prove the obstacle... 'Deeper humiliation than ever would be my portion, when they drive me from East Lynne with abhorrence and ignominy, as a soldier is drummed out of his regiment; but I must bear that, as I must bear the rest'... But her hand shook when she wrote to Mrs Carlyle... She - *she* writing to Mr Carlyle's wife! and in

the capacity of a subordinate where she had once reigned, the idolized lady. She must bear that; as she must bear all else (pp.406-407).

Wood is notoriously relentless in her punishment of Isabel. This passage suggests more self-immolation or self-flagellation than self-sacrifice, and betrays an insistence on punishment reminiscent of Yonge's treatment of Rachel in *The Clever Woman of the Family*. Isabel finds out that her suspicions of Barbara and Archibald were unfounded, and that Francis Levison is even more unworthy than she had known (he turns out to be a murderer as well as a liar and a cheat). She repeatedly witnesses the obvious affection between Archibald and Barbara.

But all this is nothing in comparison to what Isabel suffers when she watches her son die, unable to tell him that she is his mother. He asks her why she grieves for him, as 'I am not your child' (p.497).

Down on her knees, her face buried in the counterpane, a corner of it stuffed into her mouth that it might help to stifle her agony, knelt Lady Isabel. The moment's excitement was well-nigh beyond her power of endurance. Her own child; his child; they alone around its death-bed, and she might not ask or receive from him a word of comfort, of consolation!...not even at that last hour when the world was closing on him dared she say, I am your mother (pp. 596-597).

Her sacrifice of her reputation has led to the worst sacrifice of all - that of her maternity.

It is as though Isabel has to sacrifice her identity and her rights as a mother in order to prove to the reader that she is still natural enough a woman to need to be with her children. Her womanliness thus assured, Isabel has to expiate her sin by her suffering, and only then can she be rewarded by a sympathetic rather than a purely condemnatory audience for her eventual demise. The section of the book relating to Isabel's return to East Lynne would not work if the sympathy of the reader were not with Isabel. Wood is careful throughout to associate her misery with her actions, hence Isabel's constant reiteration of the fact that she brought it all on herself; but despite her transgression, the narrator does not

present Isabel's suffering as fit punishment. The suffering of watching her son die is nothing to the pain of having to suffer in silence; the sacrifice of her true self as his mother is what causes her the extreme pain. And yet this is odd in itself; Isabel's concentration is not so much on the dying child, but on herself; the tragedy not that her son dies, but that he does not recognise her before he does so. This privileging of Isabel over her son is more clearly conveyed in the notorious line from one the most successful stage adaptations,¹⁹ in which she cries 'Dead! And never called me mother!' It is almost as though the secret which Isabel hides is not her identity, but her egoism.

In a device characteristic of sensation narratives, criticism is pre-empted by the narrator's attempt to undermine the expected attack from 'our moralist':

I shall be blamed for it, I fear, if I attempt to defend her. But it was not exactly the same thing as though she had suffered herself to fall in love with someone else's husband. No one would defend *that*. We have not yet turned Mormons, and the world does not walk upon its head...She, poor thing, almost regarded Mr Carlyle as *her* husband...I agree with you that she ought never to have returned; that it was an act little short of madness: but are you quite sure that you would not have done the same, under the facility and the temptation? And now you can abuse me for saying so, if it will afford you any satisfaction (p.602).

Lady Isabel's actions are made normal and natural, and criticism unjust. The narrator invites the putative critic into an alliance of the reasonable ('I agree with you') before cutting off the retreat ('are you quite sure that you would not have done the same'). Whilst not condoning Isabel, the narrator has made the critic seem harshly judgmental and smugly self-satisfied.

There is a striking difference in the attitudes of the narrative to Isabel and to Afy, the sexually knowing working girl who is central to one of the sub-plots of the novel. When Afy, having herself run off with Levison, (although, unlike Isabel, she is not already married) comes back to East Lynne and eventually marries a prosperous small shopkeeper,

¹⁹ That of T.A. Palmer in 1874.

she says, 'Because she was the Lady Isabel, and I am plain Afy Hallijohn, of course I can't be compared to her! Everybody thinks they may lance shafts at me: but lady angels go wrong sometimes you see; they are not universally immaculate' (p.338). But Afy does not realise that her dissimilarities to Isabel actually work to her advantage. She is accepted back into the community because she is working-class, and expectations of her are lower. Where Isabel's flight is treated both by the narrator and the other characters as weighty and solemn, Afy's is treated with humour. When she has decided to marry her shopkeeper,

She went into respectable lodgings, and began making her preparations, in the shape of fine bonnets and gowns...Here Afy was the lady, and here Mr Joe Jiffin was permitted the favour of an occasional evening visit, some female friend or other of Afy's always being present to play propriety. Indeed, you might have thought she had just emerged from a convent of nuns, so scrupulous was she (p. 574).

Afy is not burdened with the iconic status that mid-Victorian middle-class women were asked to bear in the cult of domesticity. Equally, she is not considered to be part of the class to whom the novel is addressed; when the reader is addressed directly, she is always assumed to be a 'Lady' (although one might guess there were plenty of 'Afy's' among the book's readers).

There is an interesting minor character in *East Lynne*. Mrs Hare, Barbara's mother, is loving and affectionate, but completely ineffectual. She is always obedient to her overbearing, bullying and rather stupid husband, and has sacrificed all rights to opinion and action of her own. This means that as a mother she cannot protect her children; despite her conviction that her son, Richard, has been wrongly accused of murder, she cannot receive him because her husband has cast him off in shame. She is, as a mother, more of a liability than a comfort. She is 'a pale, delicate woman, buried in shawls and cushions' (p.19), and

Since her husband had first brought her home to that house, four-and-twenty years ago, she had never dared express a will in it; scarcely, on her own responsibility, to give an order. Justice Hare was stern, imperative, obstinate and self-conceited; she, timid, gentle and submissive (p.20).

His rule of absolute power in the household makes him worse and worse.

Mrs Hare is never presented as being utterly correct in her blind obedience, despite 'far from feeling her servitude a yoke' (p.20), she does not always find it comfortable. At one point in the narrative, for example, when Mrs Hare's opinion, in contrast to her husband's, is obviously the correct one, 'Mrs Hare, agreeing with her husband (as she would have done had he proposed to set the house on fire and burn her up in it), yet sympathizing with Barbara, moved uneasily in her chair' (p.315). In the end Mr Hare gets his come-uppance. As a result of the shock of finding that his son is not guilty of the murder, he has a series of strokes, which leave him 'in a state of half imbecility: the most wonderful characteristic being, that all its self-will and surliness had gone. Tractable almost as a little child was Justice Hare' (p.617). Mrs Hare is representative perhaps, of a more realistically mundane sacrifice of self. Where most of the heroines discussed are shown as experiencing dramatic self-sacrifice, Mrs Hare's self-negation is the result of the sort of capitulation to a domestic tyrant which perhaps many women would see as more real. So Justice Hare, in the place of all those over-bearing husbands, is punished, whereas Isabel has to take her own punishment, partly because her crime is, apparently, unforgiveable, but also because it allows much more dramatic staging, a much more exciting treatment. Isabel's expiation *is* the plot, Justice Hare's just a minor satisfaction within it.

Although Isabel Vane commits woman's ultimate sin in her adulterous relationship with Levison, and Kate Chester actually declines to, Kate is, in many ways, a more shocking character. Broughton's descriptions of Kate's feelings for Dare, for example, are much more explicit than the rudimentary description of Isabel's feelings for Levison. Kate has 'within her soul, a bottomless depth, a wild, mad, reckless fervour of passion' (p. 51),

‘frantic passion, utterly uncurbed’ (p.56), and her appeal for Dare is written in even more extraordinarily voluptuous terms. Her beauty has a ‘soft luxuriance’, she ‘pleased his sated taste...quite stimulated his jaded fancy’, and he felt her ‘in his throbbing veins’ (p.39). It is the fairly explicitly defined sexual nature of Kate’s passion which makes her renunciation of Dare feel like a real loss. Early on in their relationship, the narrator tells us, ‘Dare put forth his hand, and took one of the coveted poppies out of its resting place in her deep hair, and having got possession of it, kissed it madly, passionately...Kate sat passive, thrilled through every nerve, and a little alarmed...“You need not have taken it,” she said... “I’d have given it you with pleasure.” ’(p.80) and we surmise she would have given herself as readily. Isabel’s feelings for Levison, however, manifest themselves in a few blushes, one incident when ‘her heart beat wildly’; an insipid ‘it had come to love, or something very near it, in Isabel’s heart’ (p.115) and ‘I do love, or very nearly love, Francis Levison’ (p.121). We are told that ‘she had taken a blind leap in a moment of passion’ (p.287), but it was passionate jealousy of her husband and Barbara Hare, not passion for Levison. Perhaps if Isabel had acted on a passion expressed as explicitly as Kate’s, her eventual rehabilitation would not have been possible; perhaps Kate can only maintain the reader’s sympathy because she did not act on her feelings.

Although the extent of the sexual transgression is fundamental to the working out of the resolution of the plot, it is also true to say that Broughton and Wood had very different attitudes to the writing of sex. Wood never describes passion, even when a sexual relationship is strongly implied. In Wood’s *The Shadow of Ashlydyat*, when George Godolphin is fairly clearly having an adulterous relationship with the flirtatious Charlotte Pain, the relationship is repeatedly hinted at, but even when the two are alone together, nothing explicitly sexual occurs.

'Hush, George,' said she, laying her hand upon his lips, and letting it fall upon his fingers, where it remained. There they sat, it is hard to say how long, their heads together, talking earnestly. Charlotte was in his full confidence... She rose, put her arm within his, and took a step with him, as if she would herself let him out. Perhaps she was in the habit of letting him out.²⁰

In contrast, Broughton's novels were intentionally passionate and provocative. As Alan Walbank put it

When, towards the end of her literary career, Rhoda Broughton observed, 'I began my life as Zola, I finish it as Miss Yonge', she was not intending to pay herself a compliment. To be esteemed unfit for young ladies' reading she did not mind, but to be regarded as innocuous rankled.²¹

Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (which first appeared in serial form in 1861) may be said to combine the sensational elements of both *Not Wisely But Too Well* and *East Lynne*, in that the novel combines a sensational heroine with sensational events. The plot is convoluted, but basically tells the story of the uncovering of the past of Lady Audley, the young beautiful wife of an elderly gentleman, by his nephew, Robert Audley. She is Lucy Graham when we first meet her, just prior to her marriage, but she turns out to be a bigamist, still married to George Talboys, an old friend of Robert's. The narrative follows Robert's attempts to find out the truth about her, running parallel with her attempts to stop him, which include in a catalogue of colourful events, the attempted murder of her first husband, arson and bribery.

Lady Audley is a classic sensation heroine in that she is far from being what she seems.

People [said] it was part of her amiable and gentle nature always to be light-hearted, happy, and contented under any circumstances. Wherever she went she seemed to take joy and brightness with her... For you see Miss Lucy Graham was blessed with that magic power of fascination by

²⁰ Mrs Henry Wood, *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (Stroud: Sutton, 1994), p. 196.

²¹ Alan Walbank 'Introduction' to *Queens of the Circulating Library*, ed. Alan Walbank (London: Evans Brothers Ltd., 1950), p. 20.

which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile. Every one loved, admired, and praised her.²²

Even in this early description there is a hint of things to come. Her full title - Miss Lucy Graham - is given, as though in an insistence of identity; she 'seemed' to take joy and brightness with her, and she has powers which allow her to intoxicate - dangerous powers, if misused, which in the course of the novel, they are. Both Kate Chester and Isabel Vane are other than they appear; Kate, appearing 'bad' (Dare believes she will run away with him) is actually 'good', and Isabel is wife and mother, not governess, but neither of these women is threatening in the overt way that Lady Audley is.

An explanation, if not vindication, of Lady Audley's subsequent actions is offered early on in the novel, when Sir Michael first proposes to her. In one of her few moments of honesty, she tells him that she will not be marrying him simply for love, and that the marriage would necessarily mean more to her than an affectionate union:

'Poverty, poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations!...I cannot be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance. I cannot, I cannot!...I have been selfish from my babyhood...I do not love any one in the world' (p.11).

This passage displays two contradictory impulses. Although Lady Audley certainly turns out to be fairly monstrous, it makes clear the economic basis of marriage for most women. It lays bare the myth of domestic happiness based purely on love, and makes explicit the reality that most women had to be married to survive. The same strain is apparent in *East Lynne*, when Isabel accepts Carlyle's proposal in order to escape from her aunt's house, because there is no alternative. 'Work for [her] living! It may appear very feasible in theory; but theory and practice are as opposite as light and darkness. The plain fact was that Isabel had no alternative whatever'(p.104). As Deborah Wynne has put it, 'these

²² Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. David Skilton (Oxford: Oxford University

writers succeeded in raising readers' awareness of the fragility of the domestic ideal, highlighting the dangers which could assail family life in a modern, urbanized, increasingly anonymous society.'²³ This is undoubtedly true, but the contradictory impulse to blame Lady Audley is manifest here; rather than legitimising and sympathising with her position, Braddon makes her selfishness inherent: it is not the reasonable reaction to a set of circumstances beyond her control which have made her self-interested; it is her nature. Lady Audley's honesty is shortlived. The text constantly reiterates the secret, hidden nature of Lady Audley's true character. For Robert, the real fear is not necessarily what Lady Audley is hiding, but the fact that she has the ability to hide anything at all. This is seen as dangerously powerful in itself. Robert thinks, 'What if this woman's hellish power of dissimulation should be stronger than the truth, and crush him?' (p.274). "I have shown her my cards,' he thought, 'but she has kept hers hidden from me. The mask that she wears is not to be plucked away.'" (p.274). Sensation novels play on the anxieties about women's concealments which were actively encouraged in other, more conventional texts.

Sarah Stickney Ellis, for example, applauds the ability of women to disguise themselves. In a section devoted to teaching a wife to keep her husband happily at home in the evenings, she says the quickest way to drive him away would be

to exhibit symptoms of grief - of real sorrow and distress at his leaving her...The rational woman...tries to recollect some anecdote of what has lately occurred...she tries a little raillery...she gives her conversation a more serious turn...If her companion grows restless she changes the subject and again recollects something laughable to relate to him. Yet all the while her own poor heart is aching with the feverish anxiety that vacillates between the extremes of hope and fear.²⁴

Elaine Showalter explains this feature of sensational novels thus:

Press, 1998), pp. 5- 6. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

²³ Deborah Wynne, *The Sensation Novel*, p. 10.

²⁴ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England. Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (London: Fisher, Son & Co., 1839), pp. 167-168.

The power of Victorian sensationalism derives...from its exposure of secrecy as the fundamental and enabling condition of middle-class life, rather than from its revelation of particular scandals...Without directly confronting the hidden world or explicitly attacking the conventions which protected it from view, sensationalism nonetheless drew attention to the artifice of the facade.²⁵

Showalter rightly observes that the sensation novels do not, in the main, attack these conventions. What they may be said to do is to make clear that the normality of a system which is based on the hiding of female desires can be fairly easily subverted. As in the case of Isabel Gilbert in *The Doctor's Wife*, silence does not necessarily mean acquiescence.

In the end, though, for these novelists, it is only acceptable for women to hide their feelings if they do so to conceal their suffering from others. If they are hiding their feelings so that they are in control, they are inevitably punished. The suffering of Isabel Vane, for example, by which her sins are expiated, is as a result of her silence. It is her inability to reveal her true identity which is, strangely perhaps, the worst torture for her. Kate Chester sees Dare's misjudgment of her as a direct result of her inability to disguise her feelings. She asks him, 'Was it...because I showed you so plainly my love, because I did not cover it up under hollow affectations of indifference, as you told me just now other women would, that you thought me capable of this unspeakable vileness?' (p.127). The irony is that Kate has never hidden her true feelings, and yet Dare still misjudges her character. It is, perhaps, this hint that women are, in the end, unknowable, that accounts for the uneasiness with which the sensation novel was received by its critics.

In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the text swings between blaming Lady Audley's actions on her inherently warped character and then offering some sort of explanation of her motives.

²⁵ Elaine Showalter, 'Family Secrets and Domestic Subversion: Rebellion in the Novel of the 1860s', in ed. Anthony S. Wohl, *The Victorian Family: Structure and Stresses* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 104.

On the one hand she is fatally flawed by an early realisation that she could use her beauty to excuse her anything;

Did she remember the day in which that fairy dower of beauty had first taught her to be selfish and cruel, indifferent to the joys and sorrows of others, cold-hearted and capricious, greedy of admiration, exacting and tyrannical, with that petty woman's tyranny which is the worst of despotisms?...the three demons of Vanity, Selfishness and Ambition had joined hands and said, 'This woman is our slave; let us see what she will become under our guidance' (p.297).

On the other hand, only a page later we are told of the 'ever-recurring fears - of fatal necessities for concealment - of a mind that in its silent agonies was ever alive to the importance of outward effect. It told more plainly than anything else could have told, how complete an actress my lady had been made by the awful necessity of her life' (p.298).

Some contemporary reviewers refused to speculate about Lady Audley's motivation, or her character. For some, the idea that women could be anything other than sincere proved a step too far. David Skilton quotes the same W.Fraser Rae review of *Lady Audley's Secret* in the *North British Review* in which Rae criticises Braddon's attempt to portray 'a female Mephistopheles' on the grounds that

a woman cannot fill such a part. The nerves with which Lady Audley could meet unmoved the friend of the man she had murdered, are the nerves of a Lady Macbeth who is half unsexed, and not those of the timid, gentle, innocent creature Lady Audley is represented as being...Her manner and her appearances are always in contrast with her conduct. All this is very exciting; but it is also very unnatural (p. xviii).

He seems to fail to grasp that this contrast between manner and actions is the point of Lady Audley. So uncomfortable is Rae with the idea that Lady Audley may be dissimulating, that deception may be central to conventional ideas of femininity, that he refuses to recognise it. He decides that women's nerves are not up to it, and that therefore Braddon's realism or characterisation is at fault.

One of the problems with the sensation novels for a project which deals largely with the internal, secret and silent satisfactions of the idea of self-sacrifice is something which is fundamental to this type of novel. David Skilton points out that 'It is the essence of the sensational to submit readers to strange, startling, or puzzling experiences, rather than involving them in the minute analysis of character and a close identification with fully explored fictional persons' (p. xix). The characters in sensation novels do not bear the sort of scrutiny which has proved enlightening in previous chapters, and a reading of these novels which concentrates on self-sacrifice has seemed perhaps as reading against the grain. H. L. Manse was among the first to recognise this feature of the novels.

A sensation novel, as a matter of course, abounds in incident. Indeed, as a general rule, it consists of nothing else. Deep knowledge of human nature, graphic delineations of individual character, vivid representations of the aspects of Nature or the working of the soul - all the higher features of the creative art - would be a hindrance rather than a help to a work of this kind... The human actors in the piece are, for the most part, but so many lay-figures on which to exhibit a drapery of incident. Allowing for the necessary division of all characters of a tale into male and female, old and young, virtuous and vicious there is hardly anything said or done by any one specimen of a class which might not with equal fitness be said or done by any other specimen of the same class.²⁶

However, it would also seem fair to say that a sensation heroine's willingness to undergo self-sacrifice or renunciation, if not a matter for a deeply self-reflexive analysis, does govern her eventual fate in the novels.

Both Kate and Isabel renounce something for someone else in ways that confirm their essential womanliness, and therefore their fitness for the reader's sympathy. Kate renounces Dare in order to try and save him; she is the moral guardian, the controller of his sexual excesses. Isabel renounces her identity in order to be with her children; she is the mother. Lady Audley, whose only interest is her position, renounces nothing. Although like Isabel she sacrifices her identity, she does so for material gain. Every time she changes

her identity, she takes a step up in the world, from poverty in her father's home, to Talboy's wife (a comfortable position, until all his money is spent), to Lady Audley. She will lie, and even murder, rather than give up her position. And so she is denied her womanliness. Robert Audley tells her, 'Henceforth you must seem to me no longer a woman; a guilty woman with a heart which is in its worst wickedness has yet some latent power to suffer and feel; I look upon you henceforth as the demoniac incarnation of some evil principle' (p. 345). It is this unwomanliness which ensures her unhappy ending, locked up for life in a genteel lunatic asylum where she fades away and dies.

Recent scholarship has perhaps focused too narrowly on sensation fiction's radical critique of Victorian ideas of the nature of womanhood; a reading which concentrates on self-sacrifice redresses the balance somewhat. Helsinger et al point out the fact that 'shocking novels boasted morally impeccable endings. Sympathy for the forward woman varies with each novel, but she is finally chastised in almost every case...Adapt to orthodox notions of womanhood or die, is the general rule.'²⁷ Kate and Isabel both fade, but are rescued sympathetically by death. They have expunged their sins on earth, but Lady Audley, by far the most active and 'sinning' of the heroines, is found to be insane. She must be - unlike the others, she has no self-sacrificial motives. In the end, it is this dependence on the plot mechanisms of renunciation, atonement and redemption (or punishment in the case of Lady Audley) which suggests that we must not go too far in stressing the radicalism of the sensation novels. As Helsinger et al put it,

Wood, Broughton and...Braddon...reflect not simply discontent with the old ways, but a tension between discontent and a disinclination to adopt radically new ways...To indulge subversive feelings within a context of still-secure values...The unsatisfying tension between plot and denouement in sensation novels reflects the ambivalence of sensation

²⁶ H. L. Manse, 'Sensation Novels', p.4.

²⁷ Helsinger et al, *The Woman Question*. Vol. 3, p. 125.

readers who feel subversive emotions but still espouse women's sphere.
²⁸

Self-sacrifice was such an intrinsic and deep-rooted feature of the mid-Victorian woman's imagining of herself, that it could not be abandoned, even in these superficially radical texts.

²⁸ Helsinger et al, *The Woman Question*. Vol.3, pp. 125-126.

Chapter Eight

Men Writing Women's Self-sacrifice

In the texts considered so far, both novels and non-fiction, we have seen how complex, involved, even sometimes chaotic, the notion of self-sacrifice was for women writers in the mid-Victorian period, and the extent to which it was subject to a complex, nuanced treatment which was far from straightforward. We have seen a multi-layered picture emerging, even within the most apparently conventional of works. It seems essential then, at this point, to investigate whether female self-sacrifice in the work of male authors is represented similarly or not; is the subject of female self-sacrifice as problematic and complicated for male writers as it is for women? Do male writers deploy models of female self-sacrifice differently?

Self-sacrifice was, as we have seen, one of the great defining features of mid-Victorian womanliness, sure to appear somewhere very near the top of any list of stereotypical attributes. Until fairly recently, much feminist criticism of Victorian literature had tended towards little more than attacks on male authors' circumscribed portraits of women, and certainly, these stereotypical portraits are not hard to find. Jenni Calder, in her 1976 *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* explains these representations as indicative of male anxieties:

In Dickens, as in Ruskin, Charles Kingsley and many others, there is evident the underlying fear of what might happen to the world if there were no longer women pure and separate to maintain an ideal of morality and religion and social behaviour. Over and over again we come across praise of women in terms of their incomparable importance as standard-bearers of morality.¹

Kate Flint's later *Dickens* argues that views such as Calder's simplify misleadingly, and that to criticise Dickens and others for representing only female

stereotypes is to misread their position and function within the texts. Flint claims that

Feminist criticism of Dickens has tended to concentrate on the simplest issue: his presentation of women as character and, in some cases, as caricatures....They, and their roles, are in fact articulated by the social structures which contain them: they take their identity from the position they occupy in relation to certain commonly held attitudes about love, marriage, motherhood, and so on. Individuality, if it exists, comes through deviance from a gender-determined norm, rather than from the woman being allowed any possibility of personal transcendence.²

Flint believes that feminist criticism has mistakenly viewed these female characters as representations of 'real' women, when 'they are, rather, dramatised points taken from a schematic structuring of the notion of womanhood'.³

It is Dickens's delineation of these 'commonly held attitudes' which is of interest here. Flint's argument that these women were 'articulated by the social structures which contain them' is interesting and persuasive, and the issue of 'personal transcendence' is central to this consideration of male authors' attitudes to the self-sacrificing women, because it seems to be fundamental to the treatment by female authors. For female writers, even those whose overt agenda is to confirm and condone these stereotypical womanly attributes, the personal *is* the issue, and it may be here that any difference between the attitudes of male and female writers is rooted.

Barickman, MacDonald and Stark claim that the existence of these stereotypes in the work of male authors is in itself subversive. They claim that Dickens (along with Collins, Thackeray and Trollope) 'do seem to offer their readers [female stereotypes]...but these same novelists, in a multitude of ways, draw attention to their processes of distortion, so that we become aware of the stereotyped attitudes as well as of the stereotypes

¹ Jenni Calder, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 88.

² Kate Flint, *Dickens* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), p. 113.

³ Flint, *Dickens*, p. 122.

themselves.’⁴ This seems little more than wishful thinking, an almost desperate attempt to rehabilitate these male authors, to try to present them as deliberately performing some sort of quasi-feminist consciousness-raising role. This is not to claim that there is not a level of awareness, at least on the part of Dickens, of these stereotypes, but it could be argued that Dickens, perhaps more than any other mid-Victorian male writer, affirmed them. It also dodges the issue of their claim of ‘subversiveness’; as Marcus Free has put it, ‘stereotypes are not essentially ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, but acquire values only in narrative and cultural contexts’.⁵ The reader can become aware of stereotyped attitudes without this awareness being a result of a deliberate ploy by these male novelists to draw our critical attention to these stereotypes.

This chapter will deal chiefly with Dickens, partly because his portraits of self-sacrificing women still have a tendency to dominate critical debate on his novels, and also because he is perhaps the quintessential mid-nineteenth century male author. It will be enlightening and necessary to examine just what characteristics go to make up these sometimes repetitive-seeming portraits. Florence Dombey (*Dombey and Son*), Agnes Wickfield (*David Copperfield*) and Amy Dorrit (*Little Dorrit*) will be discussed, along with Esther Summerson (*Bleak House*), one of the few of Dickens’s heroines who is permitted to tell her own story. Along with these novels of Dickens, Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet* and Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil* will also be considered. These two are very different novels. Where Dickens’s texts are representative of novels which are intensely engaged with the personal, deploying careful observation of character, both Kingsley and Disraeli represent a quite different novelistic tendency, in which it is the

⁴ Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald and Myra Stark, *Corrupt Relations; Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins and the Victorian Sexual System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 3.

⁵ Marcus Free, ‘From the ‘Other’ Island to the One with ‘No West Side’: The Irish in British Soap and Sitcom’, in *Irish Studies Review* vol. 9, no. 2 August (2001), p. 215.

political and social system which is of interest. Necessarily dealing here with a small sample of all the possible male writers, it seemed most illuminating to consider some very different modes of writing. Equally, the choice of authors conforms in a sense with the selection of women writers discussed previously, ranging from the canonical to those authors who, although little-read now, were popular in their time.

Perhaps an obvious place to begin is with the first entrances of Dickens's women. When Agnes Wickfield appears, David 'saw immediately the placid and sweet expression...Although her face was quite bright and happy, there was a tranquillity about it, and about her - a quiet, good, calm, spirit - that I never have forgotten'.⁶ In the case of Amy Dorrit, 'Arthur found that her diminutive figure, small features, and slight spare dress, gave her the appearance of being much younger than she was. A woman, probably of not less than two and twenty, she might have passed in the street for little more than half that age. Not that her face was very youthful, for in truth there was more consideration and care in it than naturally belonged to her utmost years; but she was so little and light, so noiseless and shy...that she had all the manner and much of the appearance of a subdued child.'⁷ Florence Dombey is 'the child, who had stolen into the chamber unobserved, was now crouching timidly in a corner'⁸ whilst, unusually, Esther Summerson introduces herself: 'I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever. I always knew that. I can remember, when I was a very little girl indeed, I

⁶ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Jeremy Tambling (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1996), p. 213. Subsequent references will appear as *DC* in parentheses in the text.

⁷ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 45. Subsequent references will appear as *LD* in parentheses in the text.

⁸ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970), p. 51. Subsequent references will appear as *DS* in parentheses in the text.

used to say to my doll, when we were alone together, ‘Now, Dolly, I am not clever, you know very well, and you must be patient with me, like a dear!’”⁹

One of the features common to all these portraits is that there is no real description of these women’s looks. This is striking when one considers the wealth of minute physical detail which go to make up Dickens’s descriptions of most other characters. In the same chapter in which Agnes is introduced, for example, the reader also meets Uriah Heep: ‘a cadaverous face...[with] that tinge of red which is sometimes to be observed in the skins of red-haired people...a red-haired person...whose hair was cropped as close as the closest stubble; who had hardly any eyebrows, and no eyelashes, and eyes of a red-brown...high-shouldered and bony...long, lank, skeleton hand’ (*DC*, p. 209) and also Mr Wickfield ‘His hair was quite white now, though his eyebrows were still black...handsome. There was a certain richness in his complexion...growing corpulency...He was very cleanly dressed’. (*DC*, p.210).

The main reason for this lack of physical detail would seem to be that these women can provide a blank canvas onto which both Dickens and the reader can project their own ideal picture. It apparently does not matter what these women look like, because their importance is symbolic, not actual. We are not, as Kate Flint points out, being asked to imagine ‘real’ women. This also means that they can stand for all good women; their virtues are universal, not particular. It is the impression they give, and the air that they possess, rather than the way they look, which is important. These women are beautiful because good and womanly, not because of their physical appearance. Having said as much, there is little doubt that they *are* physically beautiful, although the beauty of their characters is established long before the reader is directly told this. It is not until about half

⁹ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 24. Subsequent references will appear as *BH* in parentheses in the text.

way through *David Copperfield* that we learn that Agnes has 'beautiful soft eyes' (*DC*, p. 344) and a 'softened beauty' (*DC*, p. 471). And even though Esther has apparently lost her looks through illness, we are left in no doubt that she is still beautiful, when her husband says to her 'Do you ever look in the glass?...you are prettier than you ever were' (*BH*, p. 914). It is as though Dickens makes these women beautiful incidentally, as though a concentration on their looks would trivialise them, as in the case of Dora, who we are told immediately was 'the captivating, girlish bright-eyed Dora. What a form she had, what a face she had' (*DC*, p. 364). Little Dorrit, Florence and Esther are all immediately self-effacing, either subdued and timid or verbally self-deprecating. Agnes is 'placid and sweet', no more than her father's 'little housekeeper' (*DC*, p.213). Notably, the only one of these women who is introduced as a woman, not as a child, is Little Dorrit,¹⁰ who is physically the smallest of all of them. From the first then, these women's selfhood, the space they take up either physically or in their own estimation, is diminished. None of them really ever is permitted much of a self to sacrifice, their adult autonomy is denied them.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of these women is the extent to which, Esther Summerson always excepted, they are silent and not allowed - by the narrator or by the other characters - to speak for themselves. This ensures that they maintain that most desirable feature of literary martyrdom, suffering in silence. These women are endlessly patient and tolerant, displaying constancy and fortitude in the face of provocation. Their silence serves as an indication of their complete suppression of self, unlike the female-authored self-sacrificing women, who, whilst supposedly suffering silently, endlessly account for themselves; explaining, justifying, disclosing. We have seen, in the female-

¹⁰ Although her early life as the 'child of the Marshalsea' is briefly described, all we learn of her physical appearance is that she is small with a 'pitiful and painful look' (*LD*, p. 57).

authored texts, the paradox of how self-sacrifice actually entails putting one's own needs centrally, and how the suppression of self necessitates a high level of self-awareness. Even the most overtly and insistently reticent women like Yonge's Ermine Williams or Craik's Olive are allowed to express themselves, not only directly in the narrative, but the one as a writer, the other as painter, at the same time denying and claiming the right to represent themselves.

Dickens's women, conversely, do not defend themselves; but nor can Dickens, apparently, rely on the reader to realise that the women are put upon and overlooked. The narrators of these novels seem to set themselves consciously up as the champions of these downtrodden women; not content merely to describe outrageous instances of neglect and cruelty, they feel the need to comment on them. The narrator values the women as they should be valued, and feels an apparent need for someone to speak for them. The (male) narrator (or his 'spokesman' - the central male character) plays the role of that audience for the benefit of whom the whole drama of self-sacrifice is enacted in the female authored texts; instead of imagining the all-seeing eye - of posterity, or some other sympathetic audience - as the women writers do, the male writers enact and become that audience.

For example, having already described at length both the harsh and cold indifference of her father towards Florence, and her acceptance of it, we are told 'She, his natural companion, his only child, who in her lonely life and grief had known the suffering of a breaking heart; who, in her rejected love, had never breathed his name to God at night, but with a tearful blessing, heavier on him than a curse;...who had, all through, repaid the agony of slight and coldness, and dislike, with patient unexacting love, excusing him, and pleading for him, like his better angel!' (*DS*, p.585). Again, in the case of Little Dorrit, having given a clear picture of the many selfishnesses of her family, Arthur feels it necessary to explain that 'It was not that they stinted her praises, or were insensible to what

she did for them; but that they were lazily habituated to her...although they had before them, every day, the means of comparison between her and one and another and themselves, they regarded her as being in her necessary place' (*LD*, p.78). There is an obvious problem here; all these women are so completely self-effacing and badly-treated that their being wronged could not fail to be apparent to the most obtuse observer, and yet the reader is invited to believe that, without the intervention of the narrator, it would not be noticed, especially not by the woman herself.

Perhaps this insistence on the intervention of the narrator is not so much to point out to the reader (who will already be aware of it) the extent of the ill-treatment and selflessness of these poor women, but to prevent the other characters from having to take particular notice of it. This ensures that the suffering in silence is not mitigated by too much sympathy and understanding from the other characters, which, if present, would mean there was no real story left for the narrative to tell. The intervention of the narrator then, ensures that the self-abasement of the women within the action of the narrative can be total. This joins the narrator and the reader in a conspiracy of superior appreciation against an oblivious imagined 'society'; together they become the redemptive eye, the justice without which the story of the women's sacrifice could not exist.

The seeming unawareness of Dickens's self-sacrificing women means that they are never critical of the people who both the narrator and reader see are deserving of the utmost opprobrium. This refusal to lay blame where it most obviously should lie necessitates the most wilful blindness. Florence, for example, holds that 'her father did not know - she held to it from that time - how much she loved him. She was very young, and had no mother, and had never learned, by some fault or misfortune, how to express to him that she loved him.' (*DS*, p.397) and 'she tried so hard to justify him, and to find the whole blame in herself' (*DS*, p.420). Again, 'Little Dorrit was not ashamed of her poor shoes. He knew

her story, and it was not that he [Arthur] might think, 'why did he [her father] dine to-day, and leave this little creature to the mercy of the cold stones!' She had no belief that it would have been a just reflection; she simply knew, by experience, that such delusions did sometimes present themselves to people. It was part of her father's misfortunes that they did' (*LD*, p.141). Both Florence and Little Dorrit deliberately ignore any construction of events other than the one they are prepared to accept; in the latter case it is quite clear that Little Dorrit knows exactly what a less sympathetic observer would make of events, but she refuses to recognise any possibility of the justice of such an interpretation.

Dickens's anxiety to make these women uncritical makes them appear misguided to the point of simplicity. They are guilty of collusion through their constant vindications and explanations, but the narrators' refusal to recognise this collusion means that these women must be either blind or stupid. Dickens, unlike his narrators, does seem aware of it, as the passage above displays, balancing Amy's affectionately biased point of view with that of the reader's knowingness. Still, Dickens's narrative investment in the convolutions of masochistic self-denial (which requires the superior intelligence and discernment of the narrator/reader to 'correct' the women's self-concealments) makes the narrator/reader all-powerful in disclosures of the 'truth' of her life, and thus necessitates the women's complete lack of self-determination. They are asked to bear the moral weight of the novel, to be truthful, honest, principled and honourable; but are guilty of the most ludicrous lack of judgment in the most obvious ways. This confusion is apparent in the way that they keep family secrets. They refuse to recognise the shortcomings of their men, and yet at the same time actively keep their disreputable secrets - Dombey's inhumanity, Mr Dorrit's selfishness, and Mr Wickfield's drinking. There is no attempt to reconcile or explain this knowing unknowingness; we are left with little more than the rather weak and prosaic conclusion that love *is* blind. This contrasts interestingly with the case of Craik's Olive,

for example, who fully recognises her father's drunkenness and careless cruelty, but excuses him and blames it on herself. The same thing can be seen in the conduct books, where women are held responsible for men's desires to absent themselves from the family circle; men's faults are recognised, but women are willing to shoulder the blame for them.

Barickman et al describe Dickens's glaring instance of narrative ambivalence, pointing out that 'the narrator of *Little Dorrit* exalts Amy Dorrit for the very self-mortifying virtues that are the novel's chief example of outrageous oppression.'¹¹ Little Dorrit, along with Florence and Agnes, is given credit for a willingness to sacrifice herself to a man - a father in all these cases - whom the narrator sees as unworthy. We have already seen several instances of women writers' treatment of this notion of sacrifice to an unworthy object - the idea that if sacrifice to something worthy is noble, then sacrifice to the unworthy must be even more noble - but in the case of Dickens at least, the unworthiness does not increase the extent of the sacrifice for the women. This is because their lack of recognition of the object as unworthy is essential to his portrayal of the self-sacrificing woman; because of his insistence that self-sacrifice, rather than holding any purpose or attraction for a woman, springs from natural, eternal, unchanging love. For example, when David fears that Agnes may give herself to Uriah Heep in a misguided attempt to help her father, he thinks 'I knew how she loved him. I knew what the devotion of her nature was. I know from her own lips that she regarded herself...as owing him a great debt she ardently desired to pay...the self-denial of her pure soul' (*DC*, p.358). Love, devotion, nature and self-denial are inseparable, part of true womanliness.

And yet, despite this insistence on the part of the various narrators that these women suffer silently because their goodness means that they are not aware of their oppression, in the case of Little Dorrit at least, her silence is learned, not natural. She is

described as ‘subduing herself with the quiet effort that had long been natural to her’ (*LD*, p. 143) which is nothing if not confused; is the quiet effort natural to her, or is it the subduing of herself? And in either case, as both require an effort, neither can be considered natural. The most revealing part of the narrative as far as the character of Little Dorrit is concerned comes in her two letters to Arthur, where she does, inevitably, have to speak for herself. Her voice, though, is far from consistent. She states an opinion or describes a situation, and immediately questions both her perception and her right to say anything at all. ‘If this does not seem so to you, I am quite sure I am wholly mistaken.’ (*LD*, p.460). She includes and then immediately excludes herself: ‘We are all fond of the life here (except me).’ (*LD*, p.463). Thus Dickens allows her to speak whilst disallowing the assumption of authority that inevitably necessitates. During the European travels of the Dorrit family, she has been literally silenced. She writes to Arthur, ‘When I say we speak French and Italian, I mean they do’ (*LD*, p. 392) but Little Dorrit, not able to speak for herself in her own tongue, cannot learn other languages. Her lack of self-awareness even affects her ability to enjoy the new sights of travel: ‘They are very beautiful and they astonish me, but I am not collected enough - not familiar enough with myself, if you can quite understand what I mean - to have all the pleasure in them that I might have.’ (*LD*, p. 392). Because she has been deprived of her role of caring for others, she is forced into a state of self-notice which is completely strange to her - she does not know herself, and therefore does not know what she thinks about all the new sights.

Esther Summerson is always the exception. She, paradoxically, explains her own silence. ‘I was such a shy little thing that I seldom dared to open my lips, and never dared to open my heart, to anybody else’ (*BH*, p. 24). Her aunt tells Esther that she must live a life of ‘submission, self-denial, diligent work’ (*BH*, p. 26), and this shows an instance of

¹¹ Barickman et al, *Corrupt Relations*, p. 44.

the kind of 'outrageous oppression' that so exercises Barickman et al. The reader deplores Esther's aunt for being harsh, severe and unloving, but the way of life which she urges upon Esther is actually that experienced by virtually all of Dickens's self-sacrificing women. Although the reader, cast in the role of just observer, inevitably finds herself in opposition to Esther's aunt, Dickens's narratives always seem to be caught in an ambivalent collusion with this sort of view. He seems to be unable to recognise the irony: his 'villains' are deplored for their unreasonable demands, his heroines are admired for their connivance with those villains.

Esther sets out her aims for life very deliberately. She says she decided she would 'strive as I grew up to be industrious, contented and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself if I could. I hope it is not self-indulgent to shed these tears as I think of it. I am very thankful, I am very cheerful, but I cannot quite help their coming to my eyes.' (*BH*, p.27) This is characteristic of Esther's narrative voice, in which her words often tell a different story from that which is apparently intended; here her tears betray her, despite her insistence on her cheerfulness. As Catherine Belsey has noted

The novel has two narrators, Esther Summerson, innocent, generous, unassuming and sentimental, and an anonymous third person narrator, detached, ironic, rendered cynical... The reader is constantly prompted to supply the deficiencies of each narrative. The third person narration, confining itself largely to behaviour, is strongly enigmatic, but provides enough clues for the reader to make guesses at the 'truth' before the story reveals it; Esther's narrative frequently invites an ironic reading: we are encouraged to trust her account of the 'facts' but not necessarily her judgement.... Thus, a third and privileged but literally unwritten discourse begins to emerge, the discourse of the reader which grasps a history and judges soundly.¹²

Esther's narrative does not just encourage an ironic reading as Belsey suggests; it invites a reading which questions the character which Esther tries to present of herself. She

repeatedly reports instances of other people's value of her, and apparently undercuts them by her own refusal to recognise her virtues. This gives an air of faux naivety which seems forced and unconvincing, adding to the sort of skewed psychological pathology of wilful blindness which Dickens's heroines display. It is the voice she uses when she represents what she apparently believes is her true, talentless self to the reader, or which she uses to lecture herself. That is, it is the voice she adopts for public consumption. 'It was not for me to muse over by-gones, but to act with a cheerful spirit and a grateful heart. So I said to myself, 'Esther, Esther, Esther! Duty, my dear!' and gave my little basket of housekeeping keys such a shake, that they sounded like little bells, and rang me hopefully to bed.' (*BH*, p.95). Her constant pronouncements on herself — 'what with being generally a methodical, old-maidish sort of foolish little person' (*BH*, p.105), 'The idea of my wisdom!' (*BH*, p.110) 'I really was frightened at the thought of the importance I was attaining, and the number of things that were being confided to me' (*BH*, p.111) — serve, rather than to confirm her modesty, to suggest her egoism. She seems not ingenuous, but knowing; her self seems merely a role she plays, apparently self-deprecating but actually self-aggrandising. What is less clear is how consciously aware Dickens is that he is creating a pathology here, representing Esther not as straightforwardly self-denying, but as manipulative and fake, even as self-consciously utilising and playing at the character of the self-sacrificing woman.

The ways in which Esther justifies her temerity in choosing to tell her own story resemble the ways in which Little Dorrit speaks for herself in her letters to Arthur. Esther, like Little Dorrit, continually asserts and then denies her voice. She makes statements followed by 'All this I said, with anything but confidence.' (*BH*, p.117) and the most

¹² Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, cited in *The Victorian Novel*, ed. Francis Gorman (Oxford, Blackwell, 2002), pp. 130-131.

disingenuous-seeming 'I don't know how it is, I seem to be always writing about myself. I mean all the time to write about other people, and I try to think about myself as little as possible, and I am sure, when I find myself coming into the story again, I am really vexed and say, "Dear, dear, you tiresome little creature, I wish you wouldn't!" but it is all of no use.' (BH, p.125) Dickens feels it necessary to attempt to deny Esther any desire to take centre-stage, but he seems equally to recognise the impossibility of selflessness when relating one's own story. This means that Esther's voice, like that of *Little Dorrit*, is by no means consistent. She swings from coy self-undermining girlishness to the voice of the reliable narrator. For example, when she meets Mrs Pardiggle she observes her as being chief amongst those women who are 'most distinguished for this rapacious benevolence' (BH, p.113), and both the words and the judgmental tone employed sound completely unlike Esther as she consciously presents herself. Dickens recognises this when he makes Esther qualify this judgment on Mrs Pardiggle by saying 'if I may use the expression' but it really means 'if I may use the expression and still claim to be the silly little Esther I keep presenting myself as being'. Esther's narration of her own story came in for contemporary criticism as being unconvincingly assertive. A review in the *Spectator* claimed that 'Such a girl would not write her memoirs...and certainly would not bore one with her goodness till a wicked wish arises that she would either do something very 'spicy' or confine herself to superintending the jumpots at Bleak House.'¹³

All Dickens's self-sacrificing women are notable for having a beneficial influence over the hero/narrator, but inevitably the influence is felt, not heard. These women do not lecture, but prevail through their very being. Of Agnes, for example, David says, 'She filled my heart with such good resolutions, strengthened my weakness by her example...I

¹³ 'Dickens' *Bleak House*', *Spectator* no. 26, (1853), p. 924 cited in Elisabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and*

know not how, she was too modest and gentle to advise me in many words' (*DC*, p. 480). Arthur says 'how much the dear little creature had influenced all his better resolutions...whom had I before me, toiling on...without encouragement, without notice, against ignoble obstacles...One weak girl!...in whom had I watched patience, self-denial, self-subdual, charitable construction, the noblest generosity of the affections? In the same pure girl! (*LD*, p.602) For Dickens, silence seems to be a pre-requisite of self-sacrifice, hence the problem with the voice of Esther. Their silence extends to their religion. All Dickens's heroines practice a quiet, unostentatious Christian piety. Little Dorrit says 'Be guided, only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were attached and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities. We cannot but be right if we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of him' (*LD*, p. 661), but Dickens does not make any grand Christ-like claims for his heroines. Their strength lies in their influence over others, not in their glorification. Here again, we see a marked contrast to the language of heroism employed by some of the female writers, with their promises of posthumous fame and universal acclaim.

Florence Dombey is perhaps the paradigm of Dickens's self-sacrificing women. She does not convince as a character; her unrelenting self-blame, her constant unquestioning exoneration of her father's cruelty and neglect, even more than her constant self-sacrifice, make her implausible and unbelievable. At no point in the text does she defend herself, or even question her father's attitude. She - the nurturing, loving and endlessly giving female - operates throughout as a contrast to her father, whose hardness, pride and selfishness make himself and all around him unhappy. Her importance lies therefore in structural rather than individual terms; she is more significant for what she is

not than what she is. The comparative simplicity of her characterisation shows how Dickens expected his readers to accept a portrayal which relied on a conventional idea of femininity, based on the notion of self-sacrifice as fundamental to true womanliness.

All Florence wants is to be allowed to love and to give. When her brother goes away to school, she is lodged in the house next door, and spends her nights learning her brother's lessons, 'taught by that most wonderful of masters, love' so that she can help him study. Her reward comes only in 'a startled look in Paul's wan face - a flush - a smile - and then a close embrace - but God knows how her heart leapt up at this rich payment for her trouble.' (*DS*, p. 233). When her brother dies, contrary to Florence's hope that she may be a comfort to her father she is rejected utterly by him. Predictably, Florence bears her suffering in silence.

When no one in the house was stirring, and the lights were all extinguished, she would softly leave her own room, and with noiseless feet descend the staircase, and approach her father's door. Against it, scarcely breathing, she would rest her face and head, and press her lips, in the yearning of her love. She crouched upon the cold stone floor outside it, every night, to listen even for his breath; and in her one absorbing wish to be allowed to show him some affection, to be a consolation to him, to win him over to the endurance of some tenderness from her, his solitary child, she would have knelt down at his feet, if she had dared, in humble supplication. No one knew it. No one thought of it (*DS*, p.320).

What is striking about passages like this one is the extraordinarily voluptuous enjoyment of the scene which Dickens conveys. There is a tremendous physicality in the description which somehow bursts through the picture of Florence's restrained and quiet movements. She is silent, with her 'noiseless feet', her 'scarcely breathing' and yet Dickens seems to luxuriate in the sensuality of Florence's abandon, her softness, her yearning lips, her kneeling supplication. There is a sexuality here which is completely lacking in the works of women writers, whose self-sacrificing women tend more to an upright nobility than a melting seductiveness. Even Elizabeth Sandford, who so clearly imagined, even

revelled in, the visual enactment of self-sacrifice, is fairly contained in her descriptions of a 'gentle voice', 'gliding footsteps' and 'fairy form'.¹⁴ For Dickens the notion of the self-sacrificing woman seems tied in with a total physical submission which cannot help but suggest fantasies of male sexual domination.

There is, too, some suggestion that Florence shares the desire to submit, that she is a willing participant in the sort of masochistic pathology which Dickens seems to be creating for his self-sacrificing women. She does not express her desire as affection for herself, but as a desire to show her father some affection. Having said as much, Florence herself is not actually an interesting character. Once it has been observed that she is self-negating, there is very little more to say about her. Because she is not a fully realised character, the reader never really gets a sense of her, even when the narrative tries to give an account of her internal feelings. She never changes, even when her father strikes her and she runs away. It is, in fact, this constancy which Dombey remembers when he is ruined and bankrupt. 'He thought, now, that of all around him, she alone had never changed. His boy had faded into dust, his proud wife had sunk into a polluted creature...his riches had melted away, the very walls that sheltered him looked on him as a stranger; she alone had turned the same mild gentle look upon him always' (*DS*, p.935). Even when she discovers the bruise he has made 'it moved her to no anger against him. Homeless and fatherless, she forgave him everything' (*DS*, p.772). The text does not question Florence's constant sacrifice to her father, even though he is obviously undeserving; she is presented as pitiful, but not misguided.

A much more interesting character, to the reader and, apparently, to the narrator, is Florence's stepmother, Edith. She is far from straightforward; a woman embittered by her

¹⁴ Elizabeth Sandford, *Female Improvement* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman, 1848), p. 157.

past, she feels herself degraded by her financially and socially beneficial marriage. She is proud and cold to Dombey, but loving and affectionate to Florence. In other words, her judgment is exactly that of the narrator and the reader. She acts out the rebellion that Florence cannot, and yet she is punished for that rebellion, in ways that Dombey is not. First, she tells Florence that she cannot see her, because Dombey has insisted 'that it suggests comparisons to him which are not favourable to himself...your continued show of affection will not benefit its object' (*DS*, p.720), and then, running away with Carker, she virtually disappears from the narrative. Although Dombey is ruined, he ends happily because he and Florence are reconciled, and he lives to dote upon his grandchildren, Paul and Florence. Edith however, is left, although not actually adulterous, exiled to Italy and unseen. This ending is ideologically uncomfortable for the modern reader. Dombey, who has been repellent throughout, is given a happy ending, whilst Edith, who has defied Dombey, to the satisfaction of the reader, is pushed aside.

Kate Flint has observed

One reason why the women with the most power to disrupt in Dickens' novels can wield this power so effectively is that their words or actions are frequently left uncommented on or unassimilated. Edith Dombey, certainly, ruminates bitterly on her past...but her future, in terms of the plot, is to be cast out, an anomaly, into self-imposed but inevitable exiled limbo.¹⁵

Dickens has a tendency to abandon female characters who fit neither into the frame of 'good' women, or of caricatures. In *David Copperfield*, for example, he leaves the uncontrolled, furious Rosa Dartle raining curses on David, torn between berating Mrs Steerforth and comforting her for the loss of her son, and banishes Little Em'ly to Australia forever, not permitting her to return with Peggotty, nor even to marry like the prostitute Martha. Dickens is in no doubt what to do with his 'good', conventional self-sacrificing

¹⁵ Flint, *Dickens*, p. 130.

women; their reward is invariably a happy marriage. He is less certain what to do with his assertive, self-aware and demanding women, usually leaving them banished somewhere to the periphery, unseen and unattended to.

Kate Flint makes the further point that ‘within and outside Dickens’ texts, we do discover the presence of those whose deviance is so pronounced that they have the effect of denying this supposed or desired norm’.¹⁶ The important point is not that Dickens portrayed many women who do not fit the norm of selflessness, but that the self-sacrificing woman was such a culturally compelling norm, that he felt unable, or perhaps unwilling (he does seem to find the norm particularly appealing), to make his ‘good’ women anything but. Even a character like Betsey Trotwood, teetering dangerously on the edge of pure caricature, and demonstrating assertive and unconventional female behaviour, is portrayed as putting David’s and Mr Dick’s needs well before her own.

At one point in *Dombey and Son*, Dickens does seem to display some understanding of the idea of self-sacrifice as active and purposeful, and as giving shape to the daily tasks.

She would be patient, and would try to gain that art in time, and win him to a better knowledge of his only child. This became the purpose of her life... Through all the duties of the day, it animated her; for Florence hoped that the more she knew, and the more accomplished she became, the more glad he would be when he came to know and like her... Sometimes she tried to think if there were any kind of knowledge that would bespeak his interest more readily than another. Always: at her books, her music, and her work: in her morning walks, and in her nightly prayers: she had her engrossing aim in view (*DS*, p. 397).

But crucially for Dickens, unlike the female novelists already discussed, the lack at the centre of women’s lives is love, not something to do. The difference is, women novelists look on self-sacrifice as something which is an end in itself; Dickens sees it as a means to an end. Because he does not or will not grasp the central need which may prompt women

to embrace self-sacrifice, his self-sacrificing women tend to be intensely dull. Helsinger et al believe this to be a problem inherent for male novelists when they 'cast the domestic angel as heroine. Where she shows strength of mind, character of spirit - like Esther writing her memoirs - she may cease to be angelic, and where she does not, she is a small-minded bore.'¹⁷ This would seem to be the case because of the failure to engage with the practical usefulness of a cult of the heroics of self-sacrifice which lies at the heart of male novelists' portraits of self-sacrificing women. Self-sacrifice has a function for women which is lost on men. Men's notion of women's self-sacrifice is passive, not active, with no element of choice involved (unless the pose of self-sacrifice is assumed, as may possibly be argued in the case of Esther). Its effect is important to the receiver, not the giver. Any benefit accrued by the giver is what comes through a grateful receiver, not through anything intrinsic to self-sacrifice.

It would seem a simple task to be critical of Dickens on the basis that his self-sacrificing heroines are dull, too-good-to-be-true and unlikely. This may be the case, but it is important to note that, as Gail Cunningham has said, 'it could also be argued that the twentieth century's automatic suspension of pure virtue blinds the reader to more subtle qualities in Dickens's heroines...[he] had a characteristically Victorian belief in the possibility of unsullied goodness'.¹⁸ This could certainly be argued, but it is notable that there were instances of contemporary criticism expressing very much the same kinds of impatience as a reader is likely to feel today. In 1868 Eliza Lynn Linton complained about the sort of male novelist who, not understanding women, 'paints them as seraphic creatures gliding through a polluted world in a self-evolved atmosphere of purity and holiness and ignorance of evil; creatures all heart and soul and compassion and love; embodiments of

¹⁶ Flint, *Dickens*, p. 113.

¹⁷ Helsinger et al, *The Woman Question*. Vol.3, p. 84.

charity, bearing all things and believing all things, loving even their tyrants, kissing the rod wherewith they are struck'.¹⁹

Dickens was unusual among male novelists in imagining female self-sacrifice with such intensity. There are several male novelists whose self-sacrificing women are more sketchily realised than Dickens's. For example, Eleanor, the heroine of Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, and Sybil, Benjamin Disraeli's eponymous heroine, serve as nothing more than symbols of morality, justice and reconciliation; there is little attempt to humanise them, or manage these ideals inside a 'realist' presentation of psychologically convincing women. In some ways the novels of Kingsley and Disraeli seem to sit less than comfortably within the range of novels already discussed, which have concentrated closely on the nature and, in the case of the women novelists at least, on the experience of self-sacrifice. They are certainly less interesting than the Dickens portraits. What is striking about both of these novels is the extent to which the reader is asked to accept the figure of the self-sacrificing woman, without actually being offered much in the way of evidence of self-sacrifice, nor of much engagement with character.

Alton Locke is about the Chartist movement, and the involvement in it of a tailor (Alton Locke). It is polemical, and because the characters tend to be employed as mouthpieces in order to convey a political idea or standpoint, they often lack conviction. As Elizabeth A. Cripps put it 'Kingsley's characters tend to be diagrammatic - there to illustrate a point.'²⁰ This is particularly so in the case of Eleanor. She is intelligent and

¹⁸ Gail Cunningham, 'The Victorian Novel' in *Victorian Literature from 1830 to 1900*, ed. Jane Thomas (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), p. 39.

¹⁹ Eliza Lynn Linton, 'The Modern Revolt', in *'Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors': Nineteenth Century Writing by Women on Women*, ed. Susan Hamilton (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995), p. 177.

²⁰ Elizabeth A. Cripps 'Introduction' to Charles Kingsley *Alton Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. xvii. Subsequent references to the novel will appear in parentheses in the text.

rational; she engages in political argument with Alton, accusing him of falling into 'confused irregularities' (p. 171). Her job, like that of most mid-Victorian heroines, is to uphold the morals of society. She tells Alton that she has been reading 'one of your favourite liberty-preaching newspapers; and I saw books advertised in it, whose names no modest woman should ever behold; doctrines and practices advocated in it, from which the all the honesty, the decency, the common human feeling which is left in the English mind ought to revolt' (p. 172).

Eleanor represents a conservative, upper-middle class view, but within the novel it is presented as the universal, reasonable view, the view of natural justice and natural morality. Eleanor exists as a vehicle for Kingsley's opinions, but rather than let the narrator present his view, he makes Eleanor do it. This was not a feminist-inspired attempt to show that women were sufficiently educated and intelligent to engage with the questions of the day. Rather it is evidence of an unhesitating elision in Kingsley's imagination between 'the woman' and a set of moral certainties. Eleanor's speeches read like little more than tracts, and although Alton's cousin tells him Eleanor is 'a strong-minded woman... uncommonly well read, and says confounded clever things too' (p. 171), Kingsley does not engage with her as a person. He uses the figure of a woman to express his views to emphasise their supposed universality; because she is not directly engaged in the oppression of the working classes, she has less of an axe to grind; her opinions are purer, truer because she is, supposedly, not politically motivated but motivated by what is good and right. Alton accepts lectures from her which he would resent from a man. She, not engaged in the material world, guardian of the home and its elevated values, can bring the spiritual element to the argument. Eleanor functions as the conscience of society, and, like Sybil in Disraeli's novel, the mediator between two extreme views, that of labour and capital. She is

spoken of as aiding, encouraging, originating - a help-meet, if not an oracular guide, for her husband...she was the dispenser, not merely of alms...but of advice, comfort and encouragement. She not only visited the sick, and taught in the schools...but seemed...to be utterly devoted, body and soul, to the welfare of the dwellers on her husband's land (p. 235).

Initially, Eleanor may seem to be an unlikely candidate for the role of the self-sacrificing woman. She is strong, intelligent, rational, and makes her own life choices. Her failure as a character is due in part to Kingsley's lack of real interest in her. He does not attempt, for example to explain her apparent uniqueness. Where does her obviously superior education come from? How is she so readily conversant with all the public and political events of the day? The fact that Eleanor never holds any interest for the reader means that, despite her apparent strength and intelligence, she offers no disturbance to the text, and no threat to the patriarchal or class systems. Kingsley cannot investigate too closely the self-sacrificing woman she is supposed to be because she has no self; her message, indeed, preaches the disregarding of self-interest. She reconciles the working- and upper-class protagonists by a process of separating herself from her class; she is not a privileged, upper-class person preaching a conservative Christianity, she is universal woman, and therefore inevitably to be admired. When Eleanor nurses Alton after an attack of typhus fever, his friend, Crossthwaite, one of the more radical Chartists, tells him that she is 'an angel out of heaven' (p.351), not merely part of a long tradition of upper-middle-class philanthropy and benevolence. Towards the end of the novel, widowed by now, we find that she has spent all her money on the poor, lived in the East End as a needlewoman, with no servant, and now has a large house with about fifty people living and working co-operatively in it. Here again we see evidence of Kingsley's use of her as signifier, rather than character; there is no explanation of how - or why - she travelled from rich wife, niece of a Cambridge Dean, to embrace utopian socialism.

Her real purpose finally becomes apparent in a very long section - 11 pages, virtually uninterrupted, where, speaking directly to Alton, she expounds on where the Chartists were at fault. She says that they have to be free in their hearts with the help of God before they can be free in society - that political reform comes first with the souls of the working-class, and they must wait until God feels the time is right for equality. And, in her job as mediator, she is, of course, completely convincing. The radical Chartist Crossthwaite, after listening to her, cries 'I see it - I see it all now. Oh, my God! my God! What infidels we have been!' (p.365). Her exhortation - to wait and pray - surely exemplifies the traditional woman's role. She actively advocates the emasculation of the franchise campaign, and such is the cultural significance of the self-sacrificing woman to mid-Victorian culture, that Kingsley seems to expect the reader to accept that these men, starved, brutalised and oppressed, will recognise that Eleanor represents a greater truth, and not the narrowest sort of class interest in preservation of the status quo. Nancy Armstrong describes this sort of practice, in which 'writing...about the female introduced a whole new vocabulary for social relations' as 'a struggle to individuate wherever there was a collective body, to attach psychological motives to what had been the openly political behaviour of contending groups, and to evaluate these according to a set of moral norms that exalted the domestic woman'.²¹ Eleanor attempts to mask political divisions by the imposition of supposedly universal domestic norms.

Cripps points out that 'the conclusion of the novel has been generally considered to be the least successful part. Eleanor's long sermonizing speeches are outside the natural development of the narrative and read like part of a tract on good Christian living'.²² Although this is a failure of Kingsley as a writer, his message is clear. The hard-working

²¹ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: a political history of the novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 4-5.

²² Cripps, 'Introduction', p. xx.

iconic figure of the self-sacrificing woman is both representative of and necessary to social cohesion. It would appear that Kingsley did not feel the need to make her more convincing because the self-sacrificing woman was already culturally significant, recognisable and bearing a whole raft of attributes which were assumed to be inevitable; this desire for moral certainty embodied in female virtue overrides the novel's dependence on believable human interaction.

In her final appearances, Eleanor is no less useful. Having sacrificed all her money to the general good, Eleanor sacrifices her health in nursing Alton back to strength. She tells him, before he emigrates to Texas, 'I shall not see you again before you start - and ere you return - my health has been fast declining lately' (p.387). Her convenience as an angel is apparent even to the end; she is there when the narrative requires her to deliver one of her sermons, or to provide a handy example of pious self-denial, and then she disappears when her usefulness is at an end, therefore not imposing on the plot in any way.

Disraeli's Sybil, like Eleanor, feels like a construct. No attempt has been made to make her realistic. She is, also like Eleanor, an idealised portrait of mediation between two opposing social factions. She acts as both inspiration and restraint. Unlike Eleanor, who comes from the upper classes, Sybil is apparently working class, (except that her father turns out to be a dispossessed lord-turned-radical man-of-the-people, thus allowing her to marry the scion of a noble family) but she mediates between labour and land. She is fervently pro-labour until she begins to be educated, partly through her love for Egremont, the good aristocrat, to see that there is good on both sides, and that violence is no answer to anything.

Sybil is spiritual, beautiful and good, and, again like Eleanor, once she has served her purpose, she disappears. She marries Egremont, the reader is told, but we never see

her again. In uniting the two apparently irreconcilable factions she has done her job, and is no longer needed. Inevitably, Sybil is 'an angel from heaven'²³, a 'ministering angel' (p.160), although she claims that 'there is no merit in my conduct, for there is no sacrifice' (p. 160). Sybil envisages no role or satisfactions for herself. She says 'All I desire, all I live for, is to soothe and support him [her father] in his great struggle' (p. 285). She is merely 'the child who had clung to him through so many trials, and who had softened so many sorrows, who had been the visiting angel in his cell' (p.433).

Despite the grandeur imbued in the notion of self-sacrifice which women writers find so appealing, there is little evidence in the women's novels considered so far of this role of woman as mediator of social conflict which Kingsley and Disraeli deploy. The women, despite their preoccupation with posterity, do not on the whole, imagine so large or so public a task for their heroines.²⁴ Their job is to set an example within the home, to ensure a calm and peaceful hearthside; they are content, like Dorothea Brooke, to have an 'incalculably diffusive' effect, as the 'growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts'.²⁵

There is a great difference too, between the representations of self-sacrificing women by Dickens and those of Kingsley and Disraeli. Dickens's women are subject to an intense, fascinated gaze which contrasts sharply with the perfunctory, uninterested attention afforded Eleanor and Sybil. Dickens is deeply involved and absorbed in his women, whereas so little do writers such as Kingsley and Disraeli engage with the notion of the self-sacrificing woman, they take it so for granted as a cultural norm, that it seems all they

²³ Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil* (London; Penguin, 1985), p. 156. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

²⁴ Perhaps Elizabeth Gaskell comes closest, particularly in *North and South*, where the courtship of Margaret Hale and Thornton 'stands in' for industrial relations; although Martin Dodsworth, in the introduction to the Penguin edition, claims that, like *Mary Barton*, the novel was 'conceived as the story of an individual, not as a story about the relations between employer and employed'. Martin

feel it necessary to do is to observe (repeatedly) that their heroine is an angel. This unquestioning acceptance of the figure of the self-sacrificing woman emphasises the immense significance of the exploration of the model by the female writers. The contrast between the almost lazy employment of the iconic figure by some of the men, and the intense interrogation by the women underlines the importance for female writers and readers of the appropriation of the imposed norm. Daniel R. Schwarz says that this is inevitable because of the nature of the polemical novel. He claims that

critics of the English novel feel most comfortable discussing the novel of manners and morals, with its emphasis on linear character development,...and its explorations of the psychological and moral conflicts within the minds of major characters. Yet an aesthetic that stresses the novel as a prose poem and, as its ultimate standard, measures the structural relationship of every incident to the protagonist's personal history is not appropriate to a kind of fiction which presents a panorama of representative social and economic episodes as its major ingredient.²⁶

The implication of Schwarz's argument, which holds true for Kingsley's as well as Disraeli's novel, is that the self-sacrificing woman acts as an important emblem of reconciliation and an all-inclusiveness, but this importance does not extend to an understanding of, or even an interest in, the character of the individual woman. Perhaps too, this importance was in itself a reason why Kingsley and Disraeli could not make their women too 'real'; such an assertively significant role would be too transgressive for a woman.

The self-sacrificing woman of the novels by women which have been considered so far (with the exception perhaps of the humorous ones by Margaret Oliphant) have been notable for the intensity with which they engage with their heroines, with their thoughts, their frustrations, their self-images, their justifications. In *Sybil* and *Alton Locke* no

Dodsworth, 'Introduction' to Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 17.

²⁵ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. W.J. Harvey (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965), p. 896.

²⁶ Daniel R. Schwarz, *Disraeli's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 105-106.

element of interiority is offered. There is no perception of, or interest in, what the woman thinks or feels, she is nothing more than the sum of her actions and of her cultural significance. Their longest speeches are political, the most telling insight the reader has into Sybil's thoughts is when she discovers that her previous ideas 'that the world was divided only between the oppressors and the oppressed' (p.348) were too simplistic and that 'there was not that strong and rude simplicity in its organization she had supposed' (p.349).

The self-sacrificing woman is the perfect vehicle for expressing ideas of social unity, because she is so instantly recognisable, so instantly knowable by a mid-Victorian audience, bearing all sorts of cultural meanings with her, and with such a power to do what is best for others. The self-sacrificing women of male authors like Kingsley and Disraeli are forced to perform a structurally more arduous role than those of most female-authored self-sacrificing women. They have to stand for a whole raft of positions, which results in tensions between idealism and realism in those novels. They are required to be rather than to do, and the self-sacrificing woman had such currency inside the Victorian ideology of gender, that she only needed to be invoked and not developed. No extraordinary proofs of self-negation or denial are necessarily required - sometimes, merely to be called 'angel' is sufficient to signify the work which the iconographic self-sacrificing woman is required to do. On the whole, male portraits of self-sacrificing women are much less problematic (and less plausible, perhaps) than those of women writers.

It is fascinating, then, to speculate why Dickens, unlike Kingsley and Disraeli, feels the need to explore in such painful detail the extent of his heroines' self-sacrifice. For him, the invocation of the female dream of altruism and sacrifice is never casual or unconsidered; it sets his imagination alight just as it moves Ruskin, who is beguiled by the idea of the woman who was 'enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise -

wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service'.²⁷ Dickens, along with other male contemporaries, fails, however, to address the gap between the ideal woman, and the 'real'. Dickens especially is seduced by the notion of the self-sacrificing women, to the extent that he seems to find it impossible to imagine any other ways in which women could be either good or truly womanly. His almost voyeuristic presentation of female self-sacrifice betrays a physical fascination completely lacking not only in the novels of women writers, but in those of most other mid-Victorian male writers.

The real issue at stake seems to be the extent to which these male authors are engaged in a discourse which portrays women as passive reflectors of men's desires and needs. For Dickens, as for the majority of male novelists, self-sacrificing women act as little more than signifiers, bearers of a cultural meaning. The male writers, certainly the ones discussed here, make little or no attempt in their representations to bring this meaning into relationship with 'real' individual women struggling with the question of their role and identity. They seem to have little interest in describing or understanding what self-sacrifice is actually about; of any function it might serve, of what it might mean to the woman, and of how it might feel from the inside. It is generally sufficient for male novelists to show, not to explain or analyse their women. The most significant difference is the extent to which these women, subject to the male gaze, are spoken for, and do not speak. These women, in the main, show no signs of dissenting from the role thus apportioned them. There is no questioning of the intrinsic value of self-sacrifice, or exploration of why self-sacrifice should be regarded as desirable. Although self-sacrifice is treated as a defining

²⁷ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (London: George Allen, 1907), pp. 138-139.

characteristic for 'good' women in these male-authored novels, it is generally presented as a given, something real women automatically do; women are self-sacrificing because women *are* self-sacrificing.

Chapter Nine

Self-sacrificing Men

Although this thesis deals with the experience of self-sacrifice as far as it concerns mid-Victorian women, it seems clear that in order to fully engage with the question it is necessary to look, briefly at least, at whether male self-sacrifice was perceived and treated differently in novels from that of women's self-sacrifice. This chapter will deal chiefly with Charlotte Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*, and refer more briefly to Sydney Carton from Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* and Ozias Midwinter from Wilkie Collins's *Armada*. Although necessarily limited, this would seem to be a reasonably representative selection, not least because it encompasses both male and female writers, the canonical and the once-popular.

Victorian middle-class ideology emphasised the value of duty and self-denial, and not just for women. The picture of the ideal Victorian gentleman too, was reliant on a self-sacrificing morality, and is widely represented in mid-Victorian discourse. In 1859, for example, in *Self Help* Samuel Smiles claimed that

For Englishmen a real 'gentleman' is a truly noble man, a man worthy to command, a disinterested man of integrity, capable of exposing, even sacrificing himself for those he leads; not only a man of honour, but a contentious man, in whom generous instincts have been confirmed by right thinking and who, acting right by nature, acts even more rightly from good principles.¹

Even decades later, Edward Caird, the Master of Balliol College, Oxford, in an *Address on Queen Victoria's Jubilee* in June 1897, having described the multifarious present threats to society, takes comfort in the idea that the ability to combat them can be evidenced

¹ Samuel Smiles, *The Gospel of Self Help*, quoted at www.eiu.edu/~multilit/English5005-01/shannonthomas

by the deeds of courage and self-sacrifice which often thrill us with sacred joy in our recent military annals; by the justice and truthfulness and simple sense of duty which often makes our civil service so successful in the government of uncivilised races; by the public spirit not seldom shown in our municipal life as well as in the wider sphere of imperial politics, and by the readiness of many of our citizens to devote their best energies to public or social duties connected with education, or the health and general welfare of the community.²

The author of an anonymous review of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* in the *Saturday Review* believes that the experience of self-sacrifice for men and women, commendable for both sexes, was based on their different abilities to judge objectively. He or she (almost certainly he), discussing the differences between men and women, says

Men may be fair, just, self-sacrificing, and heroic in doing their duty, and even more than their duty. But, both at home and in society, it is their habit to look upon their companions of both sexes from without, and to judge of their actions as they appear to the observer, and according to their character of meritoriousness when tested by certain fixed standards of taste or morals. A woman's first impulse, on the contrary, is rather to put herself in the place of those about her, estimating their acts by her own feelings... That this very sympathetic faculty is often a source of serious misconception of the real value of human action, when tried by a perfect test of right and wrong, is of course not to be disputed. It is, indeed, this special peculiarity in women's intellect which makes them less just, though more self-sacrificing, than men.³

According to this writer at least, women's self-sacrifice is driven by love and their essentially sympathetic natures, whereas men's is motivated by duty and rationality. The self-sacrifice of men is based on their judgment, that of women on empathy, measured against a limited, subjective 'How would I feel?' The three writers quoted here seem to suggest that men's self-sacrifice is closely allied with duty, public service and leadership; it is outward looking and easily seen. Women's is essentially internal and necessitating

² Edward Caird *Address on Queen Victoria's Jubilee* at www.mshs.univ-poitiers.fr/saes/AGREG/AGREGHP/EHPO1/EHPO1J/EHPO1J1.RTF

³ From an anonymous review of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, in the *Saturday Review*, vol 21, no. 543, (March 24, 1866).

introspection; their duty is to their homes and families. They are effective within the domestic sphere, but with little in the way of a public role.⁴

Yonge's hero, Guy Morville, the eponymous heir, seems in many ways to be the paradigm of the mid-Victorian self-sacrificing man. The novel was a huge best seller; published in 1853, it went through five editions in its first year. Several critics have mentioned its widespread influence at the time, often citing its popularity with soldiers at the Crimean front. In the *Introduction* to the Oxford University Press edition of the novel, Barbara Dennis says that 'Yonge's younger brother in the Rifle Brigade, serving in the Crimea, declared that every officer in the regiment possessed a copy of *The Heir*, and that in the crowded hospitals of Scutari it was the book most constantly demanded'.⁵ Alethea Hayter claims not only that 'Gladstone, Guizot, Coleridge, Tennyson, Kingsley, Trollope, Lewis Carroll and Christina Rossetti devoured and praised it',⁶ but that

the critic George Saintsbury included Guy Morville in an adolescent list of 'Things and Persons to be Adored', together with Sir Launcelot and King Charles the Martyr. William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, when undergraduates at Oxford, read the novel aloud to each other, chose Guy as the object of their emulation, and took his medieval tastes and chivalric ideas as presiding elements in the formation of the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.⁷

Guy's indebtedness to an earlier mode of chivalry is clear; Catherine Sandbach Dahlström calls the novel 'a Romance fable which takes place in a recognizable social milieu'.⁸

It is not an easy matter for the secular reader of the present time to see the attraction of the novel. Its tone of earnest religiosity, its too-obvious parallels between Guy and

⁴ Even Sybil and Eleanor's status as solvers of the problems of a divided society is purely iconic; they actually operate within the womanly sphere of emotion and love.

⁵ Barbara Dennis, 'Introduction' to Charlotte Yonge, *The Heir of Redclyffe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. viii. Subsequent references to the novel will appear in parentheses in the text.

⁶ Alethea Hayter, *Charlotte Yonge* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996), p. 1.

⁷ Hayter, *Charlotte Yonge*, p. 2.

⁸ Catherine Sandbach-Dahlström, *Be Good Sweet Maid. Charlotte Yonge's Domestic Fiction: A Study in Dogmatic Purpose and Fictional Form* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1984), p. 29.

Christ, its conflicts of faith against reason, all contribute to a novel too relentlessly

Victorian for modern taste. Gavin Budge has said

Yonge's religious position as a Tractarian is not in conflict with the artistic seriousness and self-awareness of her writing. This argument, of course, runs counter to much received critical opinion about Victorian 'moralizing', which is normally seen as detracting from, or damaging to, artistic achievement. However, to assert that expressions of religious commitment are necessarily inimical to a work's status as art is to make an a priori assumption that the domain of aesthetics necessarily excludes practical questions of morality.⁹

This assertion raises two contentious points. First, to really believe that 'artistic seriousness' and 'practical questions of morality' have been seen by critics as mutually exclusive would entail the discounting of virtually the whole body of Victorian criticism. Most critics (and general readers) of Victorian literature would agree that 'moralizing' is deeply embedded in most Victorian texts, rather than being a distracting and deliberate addition. To accept 'moralizing' as damaging to artistic achievement in Victorian literature would surely mean that most Victorian novels must be damaged beyond repair. Secondly, even if one were to accept the implied argument that it is Yonge's incorporation of 'practical questions of morality' into 'the domain of aesthetics' which has meant that her work has been considered less seriously than it might otherwise have been, it does not make *The Heir of Redclyffe* a work of 'art'. The action of the novel is overloaded by the weight of the moral lesson, the allegorical parallels flagrant and tiresome, the narrative secondary to the message.

The Heir of Redclyffe is a moral fable, a tale of the spiritual quest of Sir Guy Morville as he fights to overcome his apparent inherited faults of temper, the curse of the Morvilles. He is paired throughout the novel with his cousin, the apparently moral and rational Philip, whose dislike and jealousy of Guy leads him into repeated attempts to

blacken Guy's reputation. Guy, now married to his cousin Amabel, eventually dies from a fever caught whilst nursing Philip, leaving Philip to his guilty conscience and Amabel to continue his good work.

The main problem for the modern reader is that Guy's supposed faults are negligible, and unconvincing as the basis of some great moral struggle. His repeated guilty agonising and soul-searching seem completely overblown, out of proportion to any offence we ever see. Because what he sees as his sins seem exaggerated or imagined, little more than minor offences, his frequent bouts of conscience-wrestling seem pointless and obsessive. The first such instance occurs when Philip (whom the reader has already seen to be grudging and self-satisfied) lectures Guy, who, irritated, walks off without speaking. He then goes to his aunt, Mrs Edmonstone, to beg her forgiveness for 'this hateful outbreak' (p. 48), telling her 'Oh! I am grieved; for I thought the worst of my temper had been subdued. After all that has passed - all I felt - I thought it impossible. Is there no hope for -' He covered his face with his hands' (p. 49). Yonge, apparently recognising the overreaction here, attempts to pre-empt any criticism. Charles, yet another of Guy's cousins 'thought all this a great fuss about nothing, indeed he was glad to find there was anyone who had no patience with Philip' (p. 49). The narrator recognises the undoubted attraction of such a view, but is swift to point out 'how dangerous might be the effect of destroying the chance of a friendship between Guy and the only person whose guidance was likely to be beneficial to him' (p.50). Philip, though, despite his animosity, can find little more to protest against than Guy's supposed 'impatience of advice, a vehemence of manner' (p. 34). Several critics have found Guy guilty of overreaction. Sandbach-Dahlström noted that 'Guy's introspective nature and his tendency to blame himself for all mishaps have been

⁹ Gavin Budge, 'Realism and Typology in Charlotte M. Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*', in *Victorian Literature and Culture* Vol. 31, no. 1 (2003), pp. 193-223, p. 194.

thought perverse and morbid'¹⁰, and even the calm, sensible Mrs Edmonstone tells Guy when he announces that, because pleasurable things unsettle and over-excite him, he needs 'something unpleasant to keep me in order' (p. 53), that 'Pleasant things do not necessarily do harm'. She says

There is nothing...that has no temptation in it; but I should think the rule was plain. If a duty...involves temptations, they must be met and battled from within...your position in society, with all its duties, could not be laid aside because it is full of trial. Those who do such things are faint-hearted, and fail in trust in Him who fixed their station, and finds room for them to deny themselves in the trivial round and common task (p.54).

It is notable that this sort of explicit intervention, so clearly expressed, so detailed in its instruction, does not occur in the novels dealing with self-sacrificing women. This passage perhaps resembles the conduct books, with their tone of exhortation, but it is striking that Guy's self-sacrifice is placed within the public domain - his duty is to his position in society. Guy's struggle with his so-called temper is, throughout the novel, a very public matter. In marked contrast to the silently battling self-sacrificing women, virtually every character, Guy included, comments persistently on his exertions. There is an ongoing discussion analysing his success in regulating himself and his erratic temper. The conversation between Guy and Mrs Edmonstone takes place on page 53; on page 73 Guy's character is the subject of a conversation between Amy, her sister Laura, and Philip; on page 82 he is being discussed by Philip, Laura and Mrs Edmonstone, and these sorts of discussions continue throughout the novel.

Guy's unconsciousness of his own goodness is, perhaps, reminiscent of the self-sacrificing women, but whereas lack of recognition by other characters is a feature of female self-sacrifice, in *The Heir of Redclyffe*, the other characters are perfectly aware of Guy's goodness. Mr Edmonstone calls him 'the noblest fellow in the world' (p. 334),

¹⁰ Sandbach-Dahlström, *Be Good Sweet Maid*, p. 80.

Charles tells Guy 'You have made a new man of me' (p. 376) and Amy says 'I suppose his goodness would not be such if he was conscious of it' (p.418). This is in conspicuous contrast to the self-sacrificing women, where generally, it is the role of the narrator and the reader to observe their heroines' true merit. Guy is much more explicit, too, than most of the women about his awareness of the attraction of self-sacrifice; when he finds out that Philip gave up his university career for the army in order to provide for his sisters, he says that 'One must almost envy him the opportunity of making such a sacrifice' (p.22), and that Philip 'is as near heroism in the way of self-sacrifice as a man can be in these days' (p.56). This, like certain passages in the conduct books, seems to hark back to a more chivalrous time, but Guy openly and manifestly connects self-sacrifice and heroism in a way that the female characters in the novels do not. It is usually the task of the narrator and the reader to recognise the heroic nature of women's sacrifice; it is only the histrionic Isabel Gilbert and the subversive Miss Marjoribanks who recognise the connection so explicitly.

Perhaps the most significant point, however, lies not in the differences, but in the similarities in representations of male and female self-sacrifice. The most telling feature of these pictures of male self-sacrifice is the extent to which Guy and other self-sacrificing men display 'womanly' characteristics, as though the authors cannot help but link self-sacrifice with feminine characteristics. Guy is 'womanly' in many different ways. We have seen his tendency to emotional outbursts, 'he is sensitive' (p. 68) he has an introspective nature (Mrs Edmondstone thinks Guy is 'an ingenious self-tormentor' p.100), he desires to please (Guy plays chess with the sick Charlie 'for the sake of pleasing him' (p. 24), and later, when he nurses Philip in the illness which finally kills him, he is, like Alick in Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family*, a gentle and caring nurse. 'Guy persevered indefatigably, sitting up with him every night...His whole soul was engrossed: he never

appeared to think of himself, or to be sensible of fatigue; but was only absorbed in the one thought of his patient's comfort' (p.414). Philip, manly and unbending, is suspicious of Guy's gentle nature, putting it down to mollicoddling in his youth when his grandfather 'only thought to keep him out of harm's way. He would never let him be with other boys, and kept him so fettered by rules, so strictly watched, and so sternly called to account, that I cannot think how any boy could stand it' (p.11).

This womanliness is manifested even more clearly in Ozias Midwinter, Allan Armadale's friend in *Armadale*. Midwinter is, unbeknownst to any other character and through an extended episode of unlikely plotting, also named Allan Armadale. He loves Armadale, and as well as sacrificing any claim he may have to Armadale's position, wealth and estates, Midwinter is willing to sacrifice his own passionate longing for the seductively wicked Lydia Gwilt when he thinks Armadale is in love with her. Like a woman, Ozias Midwinter is physically slight; 'young, slim and undersized'¹¹, 'his sensitive feminine organization' (p. 220) makes him 'wiry and nervous' (p. 60) with 'a nervous restlessness in his organization' (p. 64). Like Guy he is emotional, but Midwinter steps beyond the over-excitability to the hysterical; 'His artificial spirits, lashed continuously into higher and higher effervescence since the morning, were now mounting hysterically beyond his own control' (p. 221). As well as being hysterical, he is prone to outbursts of tears. When Lydia's diary tells of his declaration of love for her, she records that 'his head sank on my bosom; and some unutterable torture that was in him burst his way out, as it does with *us* [women], in a passion of sobs and tears...sobbing his heart out on my breast' (p. 418).

Midwinter, like most of the men, and few of the women, is aware of his own self-sacrifice.

¹¹ Wilkie Collins, *Armadale*, ed. John Sutherland (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 59. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

Steadfastly, through the sleepless hours of the night, he had contemplated the sacrifice of himself to the dearest interest of his friend...his heart warned him, in the very interests of the friendship that he held sacred, to go while the time was still his own; to go before the woman who had possessed herself of his love had possessed herself of his power of self-sacrifice and his sense of gratitude as well (p.302).

He, too, is allowed to claim public recognition for his putative sacrifice in a way that the women are not. His sacrifice is displayed not only verbally, but by his incessant public lachrymosity. He asks Lydia to tell Alan “‘how I loved him in another world than this...” His grief conquered him - his voice broke into a sob’ (p. 564) and we see ‘the glistening of the tears, as they trickled through his fingers’ (p. 574). This contrasts clearly with a woman such as Olive with her deliberate repression of tears and emotion which ensures that ‘henceforth her bitter thoughts must be wrestled with alone’.¹²

Yonge, at least, seemed aware of this tendency towards womanliness; in order to emphasise Guy’s compensatory masculinity, he is made very physically active. He prefers riding to studying, and is generally boisterous in a way which was unavailable to women, ‘Guy, leaping, bounding, racing, rolling the dog over, tripping him up, twitching his ears, tickling his feet, catching at his tail’ (p.29). Even in his sacrifices he is permitted a much more active, physical role. He saves the lives of some fishermen and he saves Amy from falling over a cliff, at both times with considerable risk to himself. Again we see here the public nature of male self-sacrifice as opposed to female. Women’s sacrifice is interiorised, men’s is externalised and clearly observable.

In Guy, as in Alick Keith, Yonge seems to attempt to combine the best qualities of male and female sacrifice, but as with Alick and his Victoria Cross, Guy’s essential manliness is never in doubt. It is contrasted with the evident steadfast firmness of Philip:

Philip had been used to feel men’s wills and characters bend and give way beneath his superior force of mind...his calmness always gave him

¹² Dinah Craik, *Olive*, ed. Cora Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 68.

the ascendant almost without exertion, and few people had ever come into contact with him without a certain submission of will or opinion. With Guy alone it was not so;...he had no mastery, and could no more bend that spirit than a bar of steel (p. 255).

Guy is not submissive, he does not bend, and in this his self-sacrifice is not like that of a woman. The difficulty that authors seem to have in imagining a non-womanly self-sacrifice appears in the way that these self-sacrificing men vacillate between the supposedly upright, honest, open manliness of men's self-sacrifice, and the womanly. One of the main ways that men and women differ is in the matter of resistance. This difference is very clear later on in the novel when Guy has died. Mr Ross, a clergyman,

had strong trust in Amabel's depth and calm resignation. He said her spirit of yielding would support her, that as in drowning or falling, struggling is fatal, when quietness saves, so it would be with her: and even in this greatest of all trials she would rise instead of being crushed, will all that was good and beautiful in her purified and refined (p. 489).

Where the woman manifests, and is lauded for, a soft yielding, the man is a 'bar of steel'.

For women the sacrifice of themselves - their will, their desire - is virtue in itself, whereas men have the luxury of only sacrificing to something better than themselves. God or duty are the greater things which men submit to. There is never any question of them submitting to a woman. They might sacrifice themselves because of the higher influence of a woman, (Sydney Carton, for example) but their submission does not entail the loss of self-determination; they never sacrifice their sense of self. They are permitted to use their judgment, to decide for themselves whether sacrifice or defiance is needed; women are never offered this choice. For women, the simple act of sacrifice is enough. This does not manifest itself as a blanket condemnation of women's judgment; after all, sensible, rational women abound in Victorian novels. It is an indication of how essential self-sacrifice was

considered in the womanly woman, that the act is good simply by its presence, not because of its usefulness or justness.

The public nature of men's self-sacrifice is also manifested in the treatment of their deaths. Guy is accorded the sort of glorious death and adulation that is a feature of yearning for some of the women. His deathbed scene takes up a dozen or so pages, and the moment of his death is suitably glorious.

At that moment the sun was rising, and the light streamed in at the open window, and over the bed; but it was 'another dawn than ours' that he beheld, as his most beautiful of all smiles beamed over his face, and he said, 'Glory in the Highest!—peace—goodwill'—A struggle for breath gave an instant's look of pain; then he whispered so that she could but just hear—'The last prayer.' She read the Commendatory Prayer. She knew not the exact moment, but even as she said 'Amen' she perceived it was over (p. 468).

Sydney Carton's death on the scaffold manifests a similar grandeur, with an even more wordy exit. Carton is accorded the opportunity for a noble and meaningful demise, to the extent that, denied by the narrative the chance to make his final thrilling and honourable speech, Dickens allows him his platform by telling us what he *would* have said, if he had had the chance. He explains the narratorial insertion thus:

One of the most remarkable sufferers by the same axe - a woman - had asked at the foot of the same scaffold, not long before, to be allowed to write down the thoughts that were inspiring her. If he had given any utterance to his, and they were prophetic, they would have been these (p.389).

This allows Dickens the opportunity to write the noble and moving speech that Carton, taciturn and reticent, would certainly not have delivered.

These male death scenes contrast notably with the quiet deaths of the women whose deaths the reader witnesses. In the case of Kate Chester, for example, we do not 'witness' her death, it is reported:

And when many days had come and gone, when youth was just beginning to merge into gray beautiful middle age, he who is always reading over

the long muster-roll of human names came to the name of Kate Chester; and she, hearing, rose up—yea, rose up very gladly.¹³

Even in the case of Isabel Vane, whose death provides such a deliciously melancholy climax to *East Lynne*, we do not see her die, nor is she permitted any closing speeches:

[Archibald] went out. On his return his sister met him in the hall, drew him into the nearest room, and closed the door. Lady Isabel was dead. Had been dead about ten minutes.

‘She never spoke after you left her, Archibald. There was a slight struggle at the last, a fighting for breath, otherwise she went off quite peacefully’.¹⁴

In Mrs Henry Wood’s *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* the dying Maria Godolphin is allowed to speak. Here though, Maria does not finish what she was in the middle of saying, and her method of delivery is quite different from that of the dying men. Like Guy, she is quoting scripture:

Her voice was dreamy; her eyes looked dreamily at him whom she would never more recognize until they should both have put on immortality.

‘And the city has no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God lightens it, and the Lamb is the light—’ Even as she was speaking, the last words of her voice dropped, and was still. There was no sigh, there was no struggle... Very, very gently had the spirit taken its flight.¹⁵

Unlike Guy, who is control of his death scene - he knows he is dying, he asks for the Commendatory Prayer - Maria is dreamy, unrecognizing, is taken mid-sentence when ‘the loving expression of those eyes faded into unconsciousness’¹⁶. Dying men, even the ill ones, do not fade, dying women do little else.

Another dying woman who is allowed to talk about it is the subversive, autonomous suicide, Lydia Gwilt. In her dying message to Midwinter, she establishes her credentials, after all, as a self-sacrificing woman. Her letter tells him ‘The one atonement I can make

¹³ Rhoda Broughton, *Not Wisely But Too Well* (London: Macmillan, 1899), p.387.

¹⁴ Mrs Henry Wood, *East Lynne*, ed. Norman Page and Kamal Al-Soyaylee (London: J.M. Dent, 1994), p. 630.

¹⁵ Mrs Henry Wood, *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1994), pp. 461-462.

¹⁶ Wood, *Shadow of Ashlydyat*, p. 461.

for all the wrong I have done you is the atonement of my death. It is not hard for me to die, now I know you will live' (p. 666). It is as though Lydia is permitted her voice to affirm her deathbed conversion to true womanliness, and not least because her action in substituting herself for Midwinter and thus receiving the poison intended for him, whilst undoubtedly self-sacrificing, is also unwomanly: active and decisive.

Dying women in these novels do not change anything in the way that dying men do. Men's sacrifices have a public effect. The death of Carton allows Darnay to escape the guillotine. Guy's death reunites the Edmonstone family and puts an end to the centuries-old feud. In the cases of the women, life goes on exactly as before. Kate's death changes nothing, nor do those of Isabel or Maria Godolphin. Guy's death allows Amy to take back the womanly characteristics which he appropriated in his lifetime. While he lived, she had an inspirational role for him. She was his 'bright angel' (p. 268), 'a guide and guard whose love might arm him, soothe him, and encourage him' (p. 187). 'Amy would be tranquil, pure and good, whatever became of him, and he should always be able to think of her, looking like one of those peaceful spirits, with bended head, folded hands, and a star on its brow (p. 247). Her role was passive, given value only by Guy's perception of her.¹⁷ When he dies, she is left to be the nurturing peacemaker, who has 'the satisfaction of doing his work in the present' (p. 573). She even starts to look like him:

In the faint sweet smile with which she received a kind word or attention, there was a likeness to that peculiar and beautiful expression of her husband's, so as, in spite of the great difference of feature and colouring, to give her a resemblance to him (p. 482).

The difference between Guy and Amy doing the same work is, unsurprisingly, her silence. Where Guy had constantly been the subject of observation and remark, Amy, following his path, is virtually invisible to the public gaze. 'Lady Morville [Amy] herself was a fragile

¹⁷ To her own family she is, as her brother Charles puts it, 'silly little Amy' (p. 13).

delicate creature, very sweet looking, but so gentle and shrinking, apparently, that it gave the impression of her having no character at all' (p. 569). Nor is Amy permitted any of the Christ-like parallels accorded Guy; she is 'an angel of pardon and peace' (p.544). As ever in these novels, any grandeur accorded self-sacrificing women is internalised.

In mid-Victorian novels, the phrase 'self-sacrificing women' sometimes seems almost tautological; self-sacrifice is part of proper women's characters. In the case of men, self-sacrifice is not inevitable, and it often seems to function as a compensation for character faults. In Guy, as we have seen, these character faults are usually exaggerated, but it can be clearly seen in the case of Sydney Carton. He is 'careless and slovenly, if not debauched'¹⁸, his 'manner was so careless as to be almost insolent' (p. 81) and 'something especially reckless in his demeanour...gave him a disreputable look' (p.79). He is cynical, bitter and dissatisfied, 'I am a disappointed drudge...I care for no man on earth, and no man on earth cares for me'(p. 89). His love for Lucie Manette is his only redeeming feature. He tells her, 'For you, and for any dear to you, I would do anything. If my career were of that better kind that there was any opportunity or capacity of sacrifice in it, I would embrace any sacrifice for you and for those dear to you...there is a man who would give his life to keep a life you love beside you!' (p. 159)

Although Carton's sacrifice is presented as noble and altruistic, he receives none of that obsessive attention which Dickens gave to his self-sacrificing women. Carton's story is almost made little of; his love for Lucie a matter of one speech, never repeated, the reasons for his disillusion and cynicism never really explored. He is a shadowy character, often hanging around on the edge of the action; he is not generally foregrounded until the chapters immediately preceding his death. The narrator does not represent him directly to

¹⁸ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. Richard Maxwell (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 77. Subsequent references will appear in parentheses in the text.

the reader, there is no ongoing commentary in which the narrator and the reader join in observing his silent sacrifice. Instead, the description of Carton's preparations are presented in a matter-of-fact way, a series of practical events requiring no narratorial comment. His life is only given meaning by the manner of his death.

Midwinter's willingness to sacrifice himself for Armadale is what finally allows his otherness to be assimilated to the norm. When he first appears, he is little more than savage, almost animal-like:

His tawny complexion, his large bright brown eyes, his black mustachios and beard, gave him something of a foreign look...His dusky hands were wiry and nervous,...lividly discoloured...The toes of one of his feet, off which he had kicked the shoe, grasped at the chair rail through his stocking, with the sensitive muscular action which is only seen in those who have been accustomed to go barefoot. In the frenzy that now possessed him, it was impossible to notice...anything but this (p. 60).

Towards the end of the novel Reverend Brock, who was present at this first scene and surveyed Midwinter with suspicion, has occasion to write to him. By now Brock has come to realise that Midwinter is a faithful and loving friend to Armadale, and he addresses him as 'my well-loved friend' and tells him to encourage in himself 'all that is loving, all that is grateful, all that is patient, all that is forgiving, towards your fellow men' (p. 513). It is his womanly quality of self-sacrifice which has made Midwinter human.

The Samuel Smiles paragraph quoted near the beginning of this chapter encapsulates some of the similarities, and equally, some of the differences between contemporary ideas about self-sacrifice for men and for women. Ideal men and women were both disinterested and capable of self-sacrifice, but where woman's self-sacrifice was associated in novels with passivity, self-suppression and a lack of action, man's was integral to his capacity for command and leadership. Rather than passive, he is 'contentious', he leads less by example than by force of character. Unlike woman, he has no natural weakness of character to act against, he is right in thought, nature and principles.

The main way that this perceived difference manifests itself within novels is that, unlike self-sacrificing women, self-sacrificing men are not submissive, unless to the will of God. They are admirable, brave and upright, and are often shown as actively battling against evil, either literally or against their own bad impulses. This grounding of male self-sacrifice in action is underlined by the fact that for men, the sacrifice of self is often physical - Alick Keith's loss of his hand in the act that earned him the Victoria Cross, Guy Morville and Sydney Carton's loss of life. As a character in Margaret Oliphant's *The Perpetual Curate* observes 'It must be that God reckons with women for what they have endured, as with men for what they have done.'¹⁹

There are undoubted differences in depictions of self-sacrificing men and women which reveal the attitudes underpinning these representations. As we have seen in the case of self-sacrificing women, they are not actually required to do anything; they do not necessarily resist the bad, they just have to be good. Yet it is apparent how integral certain 'female' qualities were to mid-Victorian ideals of virtue. Far from repudiating any 'feminine' qualities in their men, they seemed profoundly interested in the at least partial 'feminisation' of 'male' characteristics, in the name of progressive 'civilising virtues'. The self-sacrificing man is certainly a recognisable mid-Victorian character, but he does not seem to receive the same literary attention as the self-sacrificing woman. But it is the evidence that authors seemed unable to envisage a truly self-sacrificing manly man, which reveals the extent to which self-sacrifice, despite apparently being commended in men, was considered to be a female virtue.

¹⁹ Margaret Oliphant, *The Perpetual Curate* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 147.

Chapter Ten

Conclusion

Barickman et al claim that 'a fictional woman who finds a way to evade stereotypic sexual roles, to transform them into satisfying and creative activities, or to fashion some new sphere for female activity is seldom found'.¹ This thesis has demonstrated something different and fascinating; how women in mid-Victorian novels, by embracing not evading the stereotypic gender roles, did find ways of transforming them into satisfying and creative activities. Accepting the role imposed on them by a discourse which insisted on the naturalness of domesticity, they found ways, not to subvert, but to appropriate the practices imposed on them by mid-Victorian notions of womanliness. Self-sacrifice becomes at the same time a response to, and an exploitation of the imposed. Fundamental to portraits of the mid-Victorian 'good' woman, self-sacrifice develops, in the woman novelists' hands, into something active and exciting. It becomes not a lack of self, but a centralisation of it; self-obsession even, not self-negation. Self-sacrifice, for the women in these novels, is voluntary; they do not resign themselves to it, but delight in it. It is to be hoped that this thesis will enable the twenty-first century reader to fully appreciate the attractions of self-sacrifice for these constricted and thwarted mid-nineteenth-century women readers; the appeal of what Kate Flint referred to as 'the way in which a female character manages to negotiate a plot with self-exalting dignity, proving to be better than her victimizers'.² It will help us to realise that what we may see as only repressive, can contain possibilities of grandeur and nobility.

We have seen the difficulties and confusions which the contradiction between selflessness and self-awareness gave rise to; the perpetual problem of women writing about

¹ Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald and Myra Stark, *Corrupt Relations; Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins and the Victorian Sexual System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 11.

self-sacrifice whilst attempting to maintain the illusion of women's unconsciousness of it: its 'naturalness'. We have seen too, that these confusions were not confined to women writers; male novelists too, found themselves sometimes adrift in this same murky territory between knowingness and spontaneity. The root of the novelistic problem lies in the fact that perfect selflessness is boring; where there is no sense of self there is no interest. Even Olive, Dinah Craik's paragon of self-sacrificing womanhood, has to battle with her artistic ego, and Esther Summerson's attempt to articulate her own worthlessness leads even 'Dickens into narrative uncertainty. It is in this confusion too, that we become aware that what has been seen as given - the acceptance of a self-sacrificial norm - was, in fact, a preoccupation, constantly under renewal and revision; a matter for almost obsessive attention.

This thesis has shown how closely the notions of self-sacrifice and female fulfilment are enmeshed in mid-Victorian discourse. Not only does self-sacrifice provide its own satisfactions for women in these novels, its presence is made to seem essential to ensure their happiness; these women could not attain happy endings unless their self-sacrifice had been sufficiently demonstrated. In all these novels, male- or female-authored, from the conservative to the would-be radical, the canonical to the almost-forgotten, the complex to the banal, self-sacrifice has been shown to be fundamental to underpinnings of representations of good women; *the* defining characteristic of mid-Victorian ideas of womanliness.

It is striking that self-sacrifice is treated primarily as a function of womanliness, rather than being emphasised as an issue of faith. The women in the novels are often pious, but even in the works of an overtly Christian writer like Charlotte Yonge, the emphasis is on self-sacrifice as an inevitable result of true womanliness, rather than of piety. It is love

² Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.35.

and nature that prompts self-sacrifice, not allegiance to a religious code. Nor is there much evidence that these women earn their reward in the afterlife; the reader's recognition is all the accolade they need. And for the woman reader, perhaps these silently suffering fictional women gave her a sense of the intrinsic value and importance of her own quiet life.

The mid-Victorian era was chosen as the period of study partly because, although the debates which constituted 'the woman question' were current, there was little sign of the much more overt agenda of female emancipation which was evident in the later New Woman novels. It would be a fascinating further study to explore how self-sacrifice, the defining characteristic in representations of the mid-Victorian woman, is treated in these later novels. They questioned, often in the most powerful, passionate ways, the idea of what was 'natural' in women. The New Woman novel is not the place to look for happy endings, and on the face of it, most of the heroines seem doomed to failure. Certainly, most of the women in novels such as Olive Schreiner's *The Story of An African Farm*, Netta Syrett's *Nobody's Fault* and Menie Muriel Dowie's *Gallia* are finally defeated by an acceptance of convention, by capitulation or even death. The New Woman novel has often been accused of being some sort of failed rebellion; it is interesting to speculate whether this is because of its heroines' attempts to abandon the insistence on female self-sacrifice.

A woman's sensibility becomes a powerful, urgent, questing and needy thing inside the mid-Victorian novel. The self-sacrificing woman, far from being self-unaware, is in love with herself and her martyrdom. Not only does it give value to what she does and has to do, it also stops her having to look outside domesticity for the satisfaction of her desires. Her collusion with, almost her embrace of, the limits of her position, whilst ensuring her obedience, also frees her from what Dinah Craik called 'the chief canker at the root of

women's lives'³; the lack of something to do. George Eliot puts it thus, when Maggie Tulliver, having read Thomas à Kempis, sees the possibilities of self-sacrifice. Maggie makes

plans of self-humiliation and entire devotedness; and, in the ardour of first discovery, renunciation seemed to her the entrance into that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain...Maggie was still panting for happiness, and was in ecstasy because she had found the key to it.⁴

Here, Eliot perfectly articulates the central argument of this thesis.

³ Dinah Craik, *Women's Thoughts About Women*, cited in Patricia Thomson, *The Victorian Heroine - A Changing Ideal 1837-1873* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 18.

⁴ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p. 235.

Bibliography

Primary Texts

- Ainsworth, William Harrison, *Windsor Castle* (London: Collins, 1953), (first published 1843)
- Ainsworth, William Harrison, *The Lancashire Witches* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1919), (first published 1848)
- Black, Clementina, *A Sussex Idyl* (London: Samuel Tinsley, 1877)
- Borrow, George, *Lavengro* (London: Everyman, 1961), (first published 1851)
- Braddon, Mary Elizabeth, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. David Skilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), (first published 1861)
- Braddon, Mary Elizabeth, *The Doctor's Wife*, ed. Lyn Pykett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), (first published 1864)
- Brontë, Anne, *Agnes Grey*, ed. Angeline Goreau (London: Virago, 1990), (first published 1847)
- Brontë, Charlotte, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Michael Mason (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), (first published 1847)
- Brontë, Charlotte, *Shirley* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), (first published 1849)
- Brontë, Charlotte, *Villette* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), (first published 1853)
- Broughton, Rhoda, *Cometh Up as a Flower* (Stroud: Sutton, 1993), (first published 1867)
- Broughton, Rhoda, *Not Wisely But Too Well* (London: Macmillan, 1899), (first published 1870)
- Broughton, Rhoda, *Not Wisely But Too Well* (Stroud: Sutton, 1993)
- Butler, Samuel, *Erewhon*, ed. Peter Mudford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), (first published 1872)
- Collins, Wilkie, *The Woman in White* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), (first published 1860)
- Collins, Wilkie, *No Name*, ed. Virginia Blain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), (first published 1863)
- Collins, Wilkie, *Armada*, ed. John Sutherland (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), (first published 1866)
- Collins, Wilkie, *The Moonstone*, ed. Anthea Trodd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), (first published 1868)
- Collins, Wilkie, *Miss or Mrs?* (Stroud: Sutton, 1993), (first published 1872)

- Craik, Dinah, *Olive*, ed. Cora Kaplan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), (first published 1850)
- Craik, Dinah, *A Brave Lady* (London: Hurst and Blackett, n.d.), (first published 1869-70)
- Craik, Dinah, *The Head of the Family* (London: Macmillan, 1886), (first published 1851)
- Craik, Dinah, *John Halifax, Gentleman*, ed. Robin Denniston (Collins, 1954), (first published 1857)
- Craik, Dinah, *John Halifax, Gentleman* (Stroud: Sutton, 1991)
- Dickens, Charles, *Christmas Books* (London: J.M. Dent, 1929), (first published 1843)
- Dickens, Charles, *Dombey and Son*, ed. Peter Fairclough (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), (first published 1848)
- Dickens, Charles, *David Copperfield*, ed. Jeremy Tambling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), (first published 1850)
- Dickens, Charles, *Bleak House*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), (first published 1852-53)
- Dickens, Charles, *Little Dorrit*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), (first published 1855-1857)
- Dickens, Charles, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. Richard Maxwell (London: Penguin, 2003), (first published 1859)
- Disraeli, Benjamin, *Sybil*, ed. Thom Braun (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), (first published 1845)
- Eden, Emily, *The Semi-detached House* (London: Virago, 1979), (first published 1859)
- Eden, Emily, *The Semi-attached Couple* (London: Virago, 1979), (first published 1860)
- Edwardes, Annie, *Ought We To Visit Her?* (London, Macmillan. 1900), (first published 1871)
- Eliot, George, *Adam Bede*, ed. Stephen Gill (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1985), (first published 1859)
- Eliot, George, *The Mill on the Floss* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), (first published 1860)
- Eliot, George, *Romola*, ed. Dorothea Barrett (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), (first published 1862-3)
- Eliot, George, *Felix Holt, the Radical*, ed. Dinny Thorold (Ware: Wordsworth, 1997), (first published 1866)
- Eliot, George, *Middlemarch*, ed. W.J. Harvey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), (first published 1872)

- Eliot, George, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Terence Cave (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), (first published 1876)
- Eliot, George, *Selections From George Eliot's Letters* edited by Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985)
- Eliot, George, *Essays of George Eliot* edited by Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968)
- Ellis, Sarah Stickney, *The Women of England. Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (London: Fisher, Son & Co. 1839)
- Flaubert, Gustave, *Madame Bovary*, ed. Terence Cave (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), (first published 1856)
- Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Mary Barton*, ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), (first published 1848)
- Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Cranford/Cousin Phillis*, ed. Peter Keating (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), (first published 1853)
- Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Ruth*, ed. Alan Shelston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), (first published 1853)
- Gaskell, Elizabeth, *North and South*, ed. Dorothy Collin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), (first published 1855)
- Gaskell, Elizabeth, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), (first published 1857)
- Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Wives and Daughters*, ed. Frank Glover Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), (first published 1866)
- Jewsbury, Geraldine, *Zoe*, ed. Shirley Foster (London: Virago, 1989), (first published 1845)
- Jewsbury, Geraldine, *The Half Sisters*, ed. Joanne Wilkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), (first published 1848)
- Kingsley, Charles, *Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet* (London: Cassell, 1969), (first published 1850)
- Kingsley, Charles, *Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983)
- Le Fanu, Sheridan, *Uncle Silas*, ed. W.J. McCormack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), (first published 1864)
- Le Fanu, Sheridan, *In a Glass Darkly* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1995), (first published 1872)
- Lever, Charles, *A Rent in a Cloud* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1865)
- Lewis, Sarah, *Woman's Mission* (London: John W. Parker, 1839)

- Lytton, Edward Bulwer, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (London: J.M. Dent, 1906), (first published 1834)
- Manse, H. L., 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review*, vol. 113, no. 226, (April, 1863)
- Meredith, George, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), (first published 1859)
- Meredith, George, *The Egoist*, ed. George Woodcock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), first published 1879)
- Oliphant, Margaret, *The Doctor's Family* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986), (first published 1861)
- Oliphant, Margaret, *Salem Chapel*, ed. Penelope Fitzgerald (London: Virago, 1986), (first published 1863)
- Oliphant, Margaret, *The Perpetual Curate*, ed. Penelope Fitzgerald (London: Virago, 1987), (first published 1864)
- Oliphant, Margaret, *Miss Marjoribanks*, ed. Q.D. Leavis (London: Zodiac Press, 1969), (first published 1865)
- Oliphant, Margaret, *Miss Marjoribanks*, ed. Elisabeth Jay (London: Harmondsworth, 1998)
- Oliphant, Margaret, *Phoebe Junior*, ed. Penelope Fitzgerald (London: Virago, 1989), (first published 1876)
- Oliphant, Margaret, *Autobiography and Letters* ed. Mrs Harry Coghill (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1974)
- Oliphant, Margaret, *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant. The Complete Text* ed. Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)
- Ouida, *Idalia: A Romance* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1877), (first published 1867)
- Reade, Charles, *The Cloister and the Hearth* (London: Everyman, 1906), (first published 1859)
- Reade, Charles, *Hard Cash* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1892), (first published 1863)
- Ruskin, John, *Sesame and Lilies* (London: George Allen, 1907), (first published 1871)
- Sandford, Elizabeth, *Woman in her Social and Domestic Character* (London: Longman, Orne, Brown, Green and Longman, 1839)
- Sandford, Elizabeth, *Female Improvement* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longman, 1848)
- Shirreff, Emily, *Intellectual Education and its Influence on the Character and Happiness of Women* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1862)

- Surtees, R.S., *Mr Sponge's Sporting Tour* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1995), (first published 1853)
- Surtees, R.S., *Handley Cross* (London: Methuen, 1920), (first published 1854)
- Taylor Mill, Harriet, *The Complete Works*, edited by Jo Ellen Jacobs (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998)
- Thackeray, William Makepeace, *A Shabby Genteel Story and Other Writings*, ed. D.J. Taylor (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), (first published 1840)
- Thackeray, William Makepeace, *Vanity Fair*, ed. J.I.M. Stewart (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968), (first published 1848)
- Thackeray, William Makepeace, *The History of Henry Esmond, Esq* (London: J.M. Dent, 1917), (first published 1852)
- Thackeray, William Makepeace, *The Newcomes* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, n.d.), (first published 1853-1855)
- Trollope, Anthony, *Can You Forgive Her?*, ed. Edward Marsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), (first published 1864-65)
- Trollope, Anthony, *Phineas Finn*, ed. Shane Leslie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), (first published 1869)
- Trollope, Anthony, *The Eustace Diamonds*, ed. Michael Sadleir (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), (first published 1873)
- Trollope, Anthony, *Phineas Redux*, ed. R.W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), (first published 1874)
- Trollope, Anthony, *The Prime Minister*, ed. L.S. Amery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), (first published 1876)
- Trollope, Anthony, *The Duke's Children*, ed. Chauncey B. Tinker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), (first published 1880)
- Wood, Mrs Henry, *Danesbury House* (London: Richard Butterworth and Co., n.d.), (first published 1860)
- Wood, Mrs Henry, *East Lynne* (London: Macmillan, 1902), (first published 1861)
- Wood, Mrs Henry, *East Lynne*, ed. Norman Page and Kamal Al-Solaylee (London: J.M. Dent, 1994)
- Wood, Mrs Henry, *Mrs Halliburton's Troubles* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1895), (first published 1862)
- Wood, Mrs Henry, *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (Stroud: Sutton, 1994), (first published 1863)

- Yonge, Charlotte M., *The Heir of Redclyffe*, ed. Barbara Dennis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), (first published 1853)
- Yonge, Charlotte M., *The Daisy Chain* (Leipzig: Bernard Tauchnitz, 1856)
- Yonge, Charlotte M., *Hopes and Fears* (London: Macmillan, 1874), (first published 1860)
- Yonge, Charlotte M., *The Clever Woman of the Family*, ed. Georgina Battiscombe (London: Virago, 1985), (first published 1865)
- Saturday Review*, vol. 19, no. 493 (April 8, 1865)
- Saturday Review*, vol. 20, no. 507 (July 15, 1865)
- Saturday Review*, vol. 20, no. 519 (October 7, 1865)
- Saturday Review*, vol. 20, no. 520 (October 14, 1865)
- Saturday Review*, vol. 21, no. 539 (February 24, 1866)
- Saturday Review*, vol. 21, no. 541 (March 10, 1866)
- Saturday Review*, vol. 21, no. 543 (March 24, 1866)
- Saturday Review*, vol. 22, no. 566 (September 1, 1866)
- Saturday Review*, vol. 22, no. 568 (September 15, 1866)
- The Spectator*, no. 1916 (March 18, 1865)
- The Spectator*, no. 1930 (June 24, 1865)
- A Cupful of Tears: Sixteen Victorian Novelettes*, ed. Martin Seymour-Smith (London: Wolfe Publishing, 1965)
- Classic Victorian and Edwardian Ghost Stories*, ed. Rex Collings (Ware: Wordsworth, 1996)
- Short Stories from the Nineteenth Century*, ed. David Stuart Davies (Ware: Wordsworth, 2000)
- Victorian Love Stories: An Oxford Anthology*, ed. Kate Flint (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)
- Victorian Women's Magazines* edited by Margaret Beetham and Kay Boardman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001)

Secondary Texts

- Armstrong, Nancy, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: a political history of the novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)
- Ashton, Rosemary, *George Eliot* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1983)

- Barickman, Richard, MacDonald, Susan and Stark, Myra, *Corrupt Relations; Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins and the Victorian Sexual System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)
- Barrett, Dorothea, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* (London: Routledge, 1989)
- Basch, Françoise, *Relative Creatures; Victorian Women in Society and the Novel 1837-67* (London: Allen Lane 1974)
- Beer, Gillian, *George Eliot* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986)
- Beer, Patricia, *Reader, I Married Him; A Study of the Women Characters of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brönte, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot* (London: Macmillan, 1974)
- Bellringer, Alan W., *George Eliot* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1993)
- Bivona, Daniel, *Desire and Contradiction: Imperial Visions and Domestic Debates in Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990)
- Bodenheimer, Rosemarie, *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988)
- Brady, Kristin, *George Eliot* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1992)
- Brownstein, Rachel M., *Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984)
- Calder, Jenni, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976)
- Castle, Terry, *Boss Ladies, Watch Out! Essays on women, sex and writing* (London: Routledge, 2002)
- Chase, Karen, *George Eliot: Middlemarch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)
- Chase, Karen and Levenson, Michael, *The Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000)
- Cox, Don Richard (ed.), *Sexuality and Victorian Literature* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984)
- Cross, Nigel, *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth-century Grub Street* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)
- Eagle Russett, Cynthia, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989)
- Flint, Kate, *Dickens* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986)
- Flint, Kate, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993)

- Frost, Ginger S., *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class, and Gender in Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995)
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Gubar, Susan, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979)
- Gilmour, Robin, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890* (London: Longman, 1993)
- Gilmour, Robin, *The Novel in the Victorian Age* (London: Edward Arnold, 1986)
- Gorham, Deborah, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm, 1982)
- Hamilton, Susan (ed.), *'Criminals, Idiots, Women & Minors' Nineteenth-Century Writing By Women on Women* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1995)
- Gorman, Francis (ed.), *The Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002)
- Hayter, Alethea, *Charlotte Yonge* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996)
- Helsing, Elizabeth K., Lauterbach Sheets, Robin & Veeder, William, *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America 1837 - 1883. Vol. 1. 'Defining Voices'* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983)
- Helsing, Elizabeth K., Lauterbach Sheets, Robin & Veeder, William, *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America 1837 - 1883. Vol. 3. 'Literary Issues'* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983)
- Horsman, Alan, *The Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990)
- Houghton, Walter E, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957)
- Hughes, Kathryn, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999)
- Hunter, J. Paul, *Before Novels: the cultural contexts of eighteenth century English fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990)
- Johnson, Patricia E., *Hidden Hands: Working Class Women and Victorian Social-Problem Fiction* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2001)
- Johnston, Susan, *Women and Domestic Experience in Victorian Political Fiction* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001)
- Kucich, John and Sadoff, Dianne F., *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000)
- Langland, Elizabeth, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995)

- Laver, James, *'The Age of Optimism': Manners and Morals 1848-1914* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966)
- Levine, George, *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002)
- Lootens, Tricia, *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996)
- Mare, Margaret and Percival, Alicia C., *Victorian Best-seller: The World of Charlotte M. Yonge* (London: Harrap, 1947)
- Marantz Cohen, Paula, *The Daughter's Dilemma: Family Process and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991)
- Morgan Green, Laura, *Educating Women: Cultural Conflict and Victorian Literature* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2001)
- Morgan, Susan, *Sisters in Time: Imagining Gender in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989)
- Nead, Lynda, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988)
- Neuburg, Victor E., *Popular Literature: A History and Guide* (London: Woburn Press, 1977)
- Page, Norman (ed.), *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974)
- Parker, Christopher (ed.), *Gender Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995)
- Poovey, Mary, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989)
- Pykett, Lyn, *The 'Improper' Feminine. The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992)
- Rowbotham, Judith, *Good Girls Make Good Wives: Guidance for Girls in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989)
- Royston, Murray, *Victorian Contexts: Literature and the Visual Arts* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996)
- Sandbach-Dahlström, Catherine, *Be Good Sweet Maid. Charlotte Yonge's Domestic Fiction: A Study in Dogmatic Purpose and Fictional Form* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1984)

- Schaffer, Talia, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000)
- Schwarz, Daniel R., *Disraeli's Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979)
- Showalter, Elaine, *A Literature of Their Own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (London: Virago, 1977)
- Siefert, Susan, *The Dilemma of the Talented Heroine; a study in Nineteenth Century fiction* (Quebec: Eden Press, 1977)
- Stevenson, Jan, *Women Writers in English Literature* (Harlow: Longman, 1993)
- Sturrock, Jane, 'Heaven and Home': *Charlotte M. Yonge's Domestic Fiction and the Victorian Debate over Women* (Victoria: English Literary Studies, 1995)
- Sutherland, John, *The Longman Companion to Victorian Fiction* (Harlow: Longman, 1988)
- Sutherland, John, *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995)
- Swindells, Julia, *Victorian Writing and Working Women: The Other Side of Silence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985)
- Symonds, Richard, *Inside the Citadel: Men and the Emancipation of Women, 1850-1920* (Basingstoke, Macmillan 1999)
- Thompson, Nicola Diane, *Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996)
- Thomson, Patricia, *The Victorian Heroine; A Changing Ideal 1837-1873* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956)
- Thomson, Patricia, *George Sand and the Victorians* (London: Macmillan, 1977)
- Vargish, Thomas, *The Providential Aesthetic in Victorian Fiction* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1985)
- Walbank, Alan (ed.), *Queen's of the Circulating Library* (London: Evans Brothers Ltd., 1950)
- Wheeler, Michael, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period* (London: Longman, 1985)
- Wynne, Deborah, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001)
- Yeazell, Ruth Bernard, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991)

Essays and Articles

- Armstrong, Nancy and Tennenhouse, Leonard, 'The literature of conduct, the conduct of literature and the politics of desire: an introduction', in *The Ideology of Conduct*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (London: Methuen, 1987)
- Armstrong, Nancy, 'The Rise of the Domestic Woman', in *The Ideology of Conduct*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (London: Methuen, 1987)
- Budge, Gavin, 'Realism and Typology in Charlotte M. Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*', *Victorian Literature and Culture* vol. 31, no 1 (2003), pp. 193-223
- Clarke, Graham, "'Bound in Moss and Cloth": Reading a Long Victorian Novel', in *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail into Form*, ed. Ian Gregor (London: Vision, 1980)
- Collini, Stefan, 'An Abiding Sense of the Demonic' (*London Review of Books*, vol.22, no.2 (20/1/2000), pp.32-34.
- Cunningham, Gail, 'Society, History and the Reader: the Nineteenth-century Novel'. in *The Novel From its Origins to the Present Day*, ed. Andrew Michael Roberts (London: Bloomsbury, 1993)
- Cunningham, Gail, 'The Victorian Novel', in *Victorian Literature from 1830 to 1900*, ed. Jane Thomas (London: Bloomsbury, 1994)
- Eagleton, Terry, 'A Spot of Firm Government' (*London Review of Books*, vol.23, no. 16 (23/8/01), pp. 19-20.
- Epstein Nord, Deborah, "'Vitiating Air": The Polluted City and Female Sexuality in *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*', in *Sexualities in Victorian Britain*, ed. Andrew H. Miller and James Eli Adams, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996)
- Fix Anderson, Nancy, 'The Rebel of the Family and Other Novels', in *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*, ed. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (New York: Garland, 1996)
- Gregor, Ian, 'Reading a Story: Sequence, Pace and Recollection', in *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail into Form*, ed. Ian Gregor (London: Vision, 1980)
- Harman, Barbara Leah and Meyer, Susan 'Introduction', in *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*, ed. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (New York: Garland, 1996)
- Harrison, Antony H., 'Introduction', in *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*, ed. Antony H. Harrison and Beverly Taylor (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992)

- Harvey, W.J., 'Introduction to *Middlemarch*', in *George Eliot: Middlemarch*, ed. Patrick Swinden (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1972)
- Heller, Tamar, 'The Vampire in the House: Hysteria, Female Sexuality, and Female Knowledge in Le Fanu's *Carmilla*', in *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*, ed. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (New York: Garland, 1996)
- Homans, Margaret, 'Dinah's Blush, Maggie's Arm: Class, Gender, and Sexuality in George Eliot's Early Novels', in *Sexualities in Victorian Britain*, ed. Andrew H. Miller and James Eli Adams (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996)
- Irwin, Michael, 'Readings of Melodrama', in *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail into Form*, ed. Ian Gregor (London: Vision, 1980)
- James, W.L.G., 'The Portrayal of Death and "Substance of Life": Aspects of the Modern Reader's response to "Victorianism"', in *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail into Form*, ed. Ian Gregor (London: Vision, 1980)
- Kettle, Arnold, '*Middlemarch*', in *George Eliot: Middlemarch*, ed. Patrick Swinden (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1972)
- Korobkin, Laura, 'Silent Woman, Speaking Fiction: Charles Reade's *Griffith Gaunt* at the Adultery Trial of Henry Ward Beecher', in *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*, ed. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (New York: Garland, 1996)
- Langland, Elizabeth, 'The Voicing of Feminine Desire in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*' in *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*, ed. Antony H. Harrison and Beverly Taylor (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992)
- Langland, Elizabeth, 'Women's writing and the domestic sphere', in *Women and Literature in Britain 1800-1900*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)
- Lerner, Laurence, 'Dorothea and the Theresa-Complex', in *George Eliot: Middlemarch*, ed. Patrick Swinden (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1972)
- Meyer, Susan, 'Words on "Great Vulgar Sheets": Writing and Social Resistance in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*', in *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*, ed. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (New York: Garland, 1996)
- Melynk, Julie, '"Mighty Victims": Women Writers and the Feminization of Christ', *Victorian Literature and Culture* vol. 31, no. 1 (2003), pp. 131-157.

- Miller, Andrew H. and Adams, James Eli, 'Introduction', in *Sexualities in Victorian Britain*, ed. Andrew H. Miller and James Eli Adams (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996)
- Morgan, William W., 'Gender and Silence in Thomas Hardy's Texts', in *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*, ed. Antony H. Harrison and Beverly Taylor (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992)
- Newey, Katherine, 'Women and the Theatre', in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1800-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)
- O'Mealy, Joseph H., 'Mrs. Oliphant, *Miss Marjoribanks*, and the Victorian Canon', in *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*, ed. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (New York: Garland, 1996)
- Roberts, Doreen, 'Jane Eyre and "The Warped System of Things"', in *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail into Form*, ed. Ian Gregor (London: Vision, 1980)
- Rosen Roberts, Judith, 'At Home Upon a Stage: Domesticity and Genius in Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters*', in *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*, ed. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (New York: Garland, 1996)
- Shattock, Joanne, 'The construction of the woman writer', in *Women and Literature in Britain 1800-1900*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)
- Showalter, Elaine, 'Family Secrets and Domestic Subversion: Rebellion in the Novels of the 1860s', in *The Victorian Family: Structure and Stresses*, ed. Anthony S. Wohl (London: Croom Helm, 1978)
- Sutherland, John, 'Foreword: The Underread', in *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*, ed. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (New York: Garland, 1996)
- Sutherland, John, 'Wife Overboard', (*London Review of Books*, vol.22, no.2 (20/1/2000), pp.35-36)
- Swinden, Patrick, 'Introduction', in *George Eliot: Middlemarch*, ed. Patrick Swinden (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1972)
- Thomas, Jane, 'The Construction of "Victorianism"', in *Victorian Literature from 1830 to 1900*, ed. Jane Thomas (London: Bloomsbury, 1994)
- Wilkes, Jane, 'Remaking the canon', in *Women and Literature in Britain 1800-1900*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

Wohl, Anthony S., 'Introduction', in *The Victorian Family: Structure and Stresses*, ed. Anthony S. Wohl (London, Croom Helm, 1978)

Websites

<http://gaslight.mtroyal.ab.ca/sensnovel.htm>

http://land.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka-19th-authors.html

<http://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch.Lit>

<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/ilej>

<http://www.dur.ac.uk/c.e.schultze>

http://www.ibiblio.org/gutenberg/titles.caxtons_the.html

<http://www.indiana.edu/~ltrs/vwwp>

<http://www.lamp.ac.uk/library/victorian.htm>

<http://www.mshs.unive->

[poitiers.fr/saes/AGREG/AGREHP/EHPO1/EHPO1J/EHPO1J1.RTF](http://www.mshs.univ-poitiers.fr/saes/AGREG/AGREHP/EHPO1/EHPO1J/EHPO1J1.RTF)

<http://www.victorianweb.org>

