

**“Andromeda is having a rather bad time of it just now”: Stories of Sacrifice in Caird’s  
*The Wing of Azrael*.**

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<1> While New Woman criticism has traditionally focused on writing of the 1890s, Mona Caird’s “Marriage,” published in the Westminster Review in August 1888, provides a “back story” to much of the fiction and journalism produced over the next decade. In the words of Ann Heilmann, “That Caird’s arguments hit the raw nerve of the age is illustrated by the extraordinary resonance her 1888 article found among the late-Victorian public” (165-6). As this comment suggests, Caird remains more famous for her article, which led to a sustained correspondence in *The Telegraph*, than for the more sustained arguments of her fiction (Heilmann 165-6). As a young journalist, Jerome K. Jerome, put it resignedly at the time:

I’ve had three columns of it with breakfast every morning, and a few articles later on in the evening papers, and an essay every now and then in a magazine, and three ‘bus drivers have given me their views of the subject, and I have discussed it with seventeen men whose names I shall never know; and everybody that has come to our house has talked about it. (235)

<2> Caird’s first novel *The Wing of Azrael*, published the following year, pursues the question of social training in greater depth, but picks up quite specifically on a little quoted phrase from her article, “the violent instincts created by this distorting process” (240). Through this apparently contradictory model, in which an instinct can be created through social process, Caird is able to examine the tensions behind late century gender ideology in minute detail, self-consciously setting the responses of the heroine Viola against mid-century literary models of the sacrificial or rebellious protagonist. Regenia Gagnier has recently argued that New Woman writers “took the individual, rather than the type or class, as the primary social unit, thereby differing from the social models of mid-century” (155). However, she goes on to suggest, “relationships are scrutinized self-consciously as if with thermometers of pleasure and pain” (155-6). In her genre based study *The Improper Feminine* Lyn Pykett similarly argued that New Woman fiction as a genre “focused minutely on subjective realities,” and in reversing the terms of perceived feminine subjectivity as irrational, “challenged both the gendered discourse on the form and content of fiction, and the dominant forms themselves” (196).

<3> This article will show how the proto-New Woman text *The Wing of Azrael* uses metafiction and story-telling, both to position the individual within a closed community and to suggest the inadequacy of previous treatments of the heroine’s dilemma. Like other New Woman writers,

including Mary Cholmondeley and George Egerton, Caird deploys metanarrative less to signal her place in a literary tradition than to question the conventions of the marriage plot as traditionally depicted in fiction. Although, in the caustic words of Mary Braddon “the perfect women are those who leave no histories behind them” (*Aurora Floyd* 393), nonetheless a woman’s life is often presented in Victorian fiction as a culturally inscribed story. In its ghostly setting of the midnight scene the very first lines of the novel alert the reader to its exploitation of tropes and narrative traditions:

The great stable-yard clock was slowly striking the hour – midnight. ...

The mist was thick, but one could see through it a large white house with innumerable majestic windows, very broad and very high. Even in this dim light it was evident that everything was falling into decay. ... The house stood hushed in the moonlight, with blinds drawn, windows closed; all but one blind and one window on the first floor, on that side of the house which faced the garden, and beyond it a steep avenue of elm-trees.

At that open window a small figure was kneeling; a dark-haired little girl... (*The Wing of Azrael* 9)

This scene most obviously evokes the Gothic or fairy tale setting, but also surely references the decayed country houses of sensation fiction, such as *The Woman in White*’s Blackwater Park. Given this opening, the reader is not surprised to learn that Viola Sedley is virtually imprisoned in the crumbling house; indeed, despite her imaginative association with the sea, before her marriage she rarely manages to get beyond the park gates.

<4> *The Wing of Azrael* is insistent to the point of obsession on the social currency of tales; representing its heroine’s dilemma through a series of competing narratives, it draws alternately on the mysterious foreshadowings and shocking events of sensation fiction to present the fictional history of a woman’s life as predetermined cultural myth. In Marlene Tromp’s analysis, “sensation both derived from and revised realist fiction, a revision that long outlasted sensation’s seemingly temporary sway over the public” (3). Specifically I will argue that Caird’s choice of recognizable sensation tropes, such as “supposed madness,” over current media topics challenges the reader’s acceptance of “timeless” motifs of female sacrifice. Caird’s innovation is to render such coercion more visible by paradoxically suggesting alternative endings to the tale even as she argues that the ending is already determined. In her obsessive returns to social interaction as story telling, Caird reveals supposedly ineluctable cycles as socially constructed.

<5> But *The Wing of Azrael*’s rewritings of realist as well as sensational conventions of exploitation and sacrifice question the authority of both genres, relocating responsibility for her oppression largely to the heroine herself. Where a sensation novel critiques the mores of domestic realism by highlighting its own narrative as unexpected or even unlikely to be believed, and its most compelling characters as socially rebellious, Caird presents the plot of her novel as predictable and cyclical rather than disruptive, and the figure of the rebellious woman is never central to the action of the novel. Significantly the shock effects are carefully framed by narrative

commentary on female sacrifice as repetitive and already known. To be surprised by the plot is in a sense to miss the point.

<6> Critics have previously noted the text's invocation of mythic female cycles of sacrifice and abuse. In this context Lisa Surridge comments that despite the overwhelming public response to Caird's own article on "Marriage" exemplified in the *Telegraph's* "Is Marriage a Failure?" debate and the wide coverage of the Jack the Ripper murders, the novel eschews media presentation of its stories of sexual exploitation in favour of "timeless" tropes derived from the literary Gothic (195). Apparently in line with the pessimistic fatalism of much New Woman fiction, in which to use Pykett's phrase, "women's lives are presented as inherently problematic" (148), Caird presents the struggles of the heroine as doomed to failure. However the narrator of Viola's story makes it clear that such fatalism itself contributes to the endless tragedy of women's lives. Ultimately Caird's overblown deployment of literary tropes, including the Gothic symbols of blood and ancient weaponry (the dagger Viola wears in her hair) registers a highly sophisticated response to contemporary debates on social instability. In locating power in such symbols, the impressionable heroine becomes a party to her own destruction. After all, Viola's dagger is both weapon and hair accoutrement, and its dried blood stain may indeed be just rust. Titillating claims about past violence are ultimately "just stories," and the reader is led to recognize that the real danger to the heroine lies in culturally sanctioned forms of oppression such as the enforced mercenary marriage.

<7> Throughout the novel the theme of marriage is mediated through myths of sacrifice, as the ideal of female self abnegation is repeatedly reworked as the immolation of innocent victims, who in turn offer up the next generation to be "devoured." That such sacrifices may by sheer luck turn out well, as in the loveless marriage of Adrienne Lancaster to an eccentric but wealthy suitor, or the apparently happy marriage of Lady Clevedon, ironically perpetuates the cycle by offering credible examples of successful unions based on expediency rather than passion. This exposure of the self-sacrificing woman as the object of sacrifice by others (and doubly complicit in perpetuating the cycle) is effected through a range of literary features, as well as what the proto-New Woman Sibella calls "The Book of Doom." As a number of critics have noted, allusions to fictional Pagan ritual and other historical motifs permeate the novel, suggesting the endless cycle of feminine self-sacrifice. Patricia Murphy argues that "The marriage is contextualised within a historical sequence to highlight Viola's reinscription of an exhausted past" (183) and that it constitutes "a predestined repetition of that past" (185).

<8> The weight of this feminine past overshadows the prospects of every major character in the novel. Nonetheless in Heilmann's account, "The panoramic overview of centuries of female subjection was calculated to make readers aware of the continuity of oppression, reinforcing the message that it was not enough to address existing shortcomings in the system, but that a much more far-reaching overhaul of social and ideological structures was required" (159). As Surridge crucially notes, the text ultimately creates a space for a New Woman to respond to a situation she may be unable to change. While the novel "depicts violent marriage as a recurrent feature of a hereditary cycle" Surridge argues that "What does change within the fictional time frame is women's response to this abuse" (189-90). Tromp, in her study of marital violence in sensation fiction, suggests that in such narratives the law itself becomes a text available for scrutiny, as

novels “challenged the identification of the law as a coherent, seamless text that provided unity to social articulations of violence, gendered identity, and social control. They exposed the law as a scripted social text...” (72). This is the text that Viola finally exposes as itself abusive in its treatment of the women it exists partly to protect.

<9> In the novel familiar images of melodrama, such as the adulteress and the murderess, are set against Blue Beard’s chamber and faux Pagan histories of women being walled up alive for the blessing of cities. Crucially, Caird also draws strategically on more recent realist and sensation writing such as Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860), either to dispute their narrative stance or to invoke the repetitive cycle of female sacrifice. Realist novels, as the authors themselves complained, were necessarily limited in their scope because of reader expectation that the plot would be resolved through marriage, the very institution Caird attacks. But her most radical contribution to the “woman question” lies in a further reworking of sensation’s preoccupation, famously identified by Henry James, with “those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors.” Where sensation fiction insists on the aberrant passions of its central characters and the extraordinary nature of the crimes to which they are subjected, *The Wing of Azrael* ironically uses the same techniques to highlight the torture of female victims as not exceptional but entirely *normal*. As SurrIDGE remarks, “Viola’s loveless marriage seems paradigmatic and unexceptional” (210). In this formulation a sensational treatment of the theme becomes necessary simply to render the diurnal visible at all.

<10> It is largely for this reason that Viola is accorded such high symbolic status. More than any other character in the novel, she is determined metaphorically, as when her “shrine” in the woods is inadvertently destroyed by the gardener: “In its destruction Viola dimly saw a type of the degrading of all loveliness, the crushing of all exquisite and delicate things. A lonely life had fostered in her this poetic tendency to read figurative meanings into outward objects” (37). Just as Viola’s solitary condition leads her to read images of death into the trajectory of her own life, so the reader is encouraged to construct “figurative meanings” within the text, through a series of related incidents in this period of Viola’s late childhood. In the early chapters Sir Philip’s clumsy attempt to kiss her foreshadows the marital rape that his son will inflict on her; Philip himself jokes that he will marry her when she grows up, and he too tries to kiss her, “combining the ideas of punishment and betrothal” (52).

<11> The circulation and acceptance or rejection of tales and fables thus becomes a key feature of Caird’s positioning of the major characters and of the implied reader. At various points in the novel the narrator draws attention to this strategy through showing characters themselves in the act of telling tendentious stories. Notably Viola’s fury when she sees Philip tormenting her dog is lulled by the stories he goes on to tell her. In this pivotal scene he describes his murderous ancestor, another Philip Dendraith, who stabbed his wife because she loved another man. Incapable of correctly interpreting his stories, Viola fails to accept the warning Philip himself has given of his own temperament. Her naivete is further demonstrated when she is fascinated rather than amused by his related account (for which there is an obvious modern parallel in Monty Python) of a mediaeval Dendraith who so mutilated and was in turn mutilated by his opponent, that the two knights were left with no arms or legs. But while he is an expert story teller, Philip

himself is impervious to the emotional appeal of narrative, “He could listen to a tale of cruelty without the slightest thrill of anger against the perpetrator of the deed, or of pity for the sufferer” (85). Philip in other words has no interest in decoding narrative symbols, because he has no empathy with others.

<12> Viola by contrast is Romantic in her response to both narrative and the natural world, rendering her vulnerable to manipulation by others. Ironically she is first persuaded that she owes reparation to Philip because she regards him as a victim of her fury – over confident in his own powers of narration, he attempts to kiss her again and she murderously pushes him over the window ledge of a ruined tower, on to the rocks below. As Andrew Mangham points out, “Medical, legal, and journalistic texts exchanged ideas and images relating to the explosive nature of female adolescence and found that it was a volatile and dangerous time for all women” (23). But in the novel this incident is not contained by current thinking on the volatility of adolescence. Viola herself correctly interprets her behavior as a dramatization of her murderous potential, “that memory makes me frightened of myself. I don’t know what may be in me” (92).(1) However Philip’s instinctive reading of situations ‘on the ground’ does not equip him to read such grand narratives. A few years later he uses this incident to persuade her of his own morality, professing himself shocked when she admits that she had meant to kill him. His insight into Viola’s character allows him to make a strategic use of her guilt, but it does not extend to predicting her future behavior under similar circumstances, a limitation that later proves fatal to them both.

<13> By this stage of the story the ruinous extravagance of Mr Sedley and two of his sons has left a wealthy marriage for Viola as the only viable means of saving the family home. Harry Lancaster, her appropriate but penurious suitor, is unable to compete either with Philip’s hypnotic story telling or with her mother’s coercion. The narrator is unflinching in ascribing blame to the mother as much as to the father, linking the familiar trope of the market in young girls as cultural myth, “She was ready, with hands that trembled and quailing heart (but she was ready), to give that nerve-thrilled being to the flames – for Duty’s sake – and quickly that insatiate woman’s Idol was advancing to demand his victim” (66). Caird apparently draws indiscriminately here on both Christian martyrdom and classical legend. Significantly in this formulation “Duty” is both monstrous devourer of women and object of their worship. Reinforcing the complicity of married women in such sacrifices, the shy but defensively voluble Arabella Courtney helps to engineer Philip’s courtship of the reluctant Viola. In one scene Viola has lingered in her aunt’s house rather than come out to meet her guests and Arabella flippantly declares that she “will go and lead the lamb to the slaughter” (85). That Arabella fully understands the enormity of the sacrifice she helps to engineer is made clear later in the novel.

<14> The brutal Mr Sedley alone of the promoters of this marriage, struggles with metaphor and finally abandons it as useless, shouting at Viola:

Do you know what a woman is who does not marry? I will tell you: she is a cumberer of the ground, a devourer of others’ substance, a failure, a wheel that won’t turn; she has no meaning; she is in the way; she ought never to have been born. She is neglected, despised, left out; and who cares whether she lives or dies? She is alone, scorned and derided, without

office, without object, without the right to exist, all doors are closed to her and all firesides forbidden. (69)

In this verbal assault Mr Sedley moves from the traditional threat that a single woman has 'failed' to marry to implicitly allying her with the outcast figure of the prostitute, 'all doors are closed to her and all firesides forbidden, "before spluttering in exasperation that such a woman is 'a ramrod without a gun, a key without a lock, – a – a ship without a sail – she's – she's a a DAMNED NUISANCE"' (70).

<15> The gap between private experience of the domestic sphere and the conventional language used to denote it is a keynote of the novel, and it is made explicit in Harry Lancaster's musing on Viola's impending marriage to Philip Dendraith, "Society is every day bringing about these inconceivable things. The woman marries and gives no sign; no one knows how the unthinkable is worked out in daily detail" (80). Allying himself with the strategies of the omniscient narrator, Harry turns to mythical tropes to articulate Viola's plight. Significantly he invokes the myth of Andromeda, who was chained to a rock by her own community in order to avert the vengeance of a sea monster. "Andromeda has been chained to the rock, for the gods are angry, and must be appeased by sacrifice. And the monster is about to devour her, so that Andromeda is having a rather bad time of it just now" (124). Like Arabella, Harry registers the mythical nature of female sacrifice, although with far less understanding of what it will actually entail.

<16> Unlike earlier formulations of the self sacrificing virgin, such as Madeleine Bray in Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*, Viola is presented as both outwardly passive and capable of moral resistance. Her highly sensitive and nervous disposition predisposes her to acts of violence but also signals her capacity for endurance. In commendation of the Russian nihilist Sophie Wassilieff a few years later Caird tellingly noted that:

One felt in her a vast reserve force and a dauntless courage of a kind that is almost terrible, for it accompanied a highly organised and imaginative temperament, a nervous temperament, be it observed, which implies *controlled* and *ordered*, not *uncontrolled* and *disordered* nervous power. The half-hysterical persons who class themselves among the possessors of this temperament are apt to overlook that important distinction. (*The Idler* vol 3 (February - July 1893), 430-434, p.434)

For Caird, the difficulty of fathoming the "vast reserve force" of a woman's nervous temperament is itself "terrible"; such women cannot be dismissed as "hysterical," but are to be admired and feared in equal measure. In *The Wing of Azrael* Viola is described as possessing just such a temperament:

This was a nature, like a deep sea, capable of profound disturbances. ... the nature with material for such storms has generally within it also a strange cohesion and power of endurance which enable it to stand together through crises that would seem more than enough to shatter the most firmly-knit intellect. (54)

The inference is that Viola has the potential for violent or revolutionary behavior. Nonetheless she is trapped by her adherence to social convention, as one of what Harry terms “that vast band who suffer from what I call the disease of *words*; who are eaten up by words, as some wretched animal is devoured by parasites” (197). Throughout the novel words or stories are used to instill what is then perceived by the character herself as an ‘instinct’.

<17> Viola’s natural instincts are preserved only in scenes where she is horrified by Philip’s treatment of animals, a symbolic projection of his sadistic treatment of women. Just as she attacked him openly as a child when she found him tormenting her dog, so her most determined attempt to escape marriage to him follows the scene where she finds him thrashing a horse. She assumes that her mother will sanction her withdrawal from her engagement when she hears of this incident, but to her horror she insists that it is a woman’s place to endure or reform male brutality. As Harry Lancaster exclaims on hearing that Mrs Sedley has urged Viola to go through with the marriage, “Strange beings that good women are!” (128) Viola, who has largely internalised Mrs Sedley’s principles of female submission and male dominance, cannot understand how Philip’s outbreak of violence can be absorbed into this model. To the reader this ignorance simply underscores Mrs Sedley’s offence – she *does* know how to decode Philip’s behaviour, and her systematic teaching has ensured that her daughter does *not*. Like Wilkie Collins before her, Caird suggests that a man who mistreats animals is not to be trusted. Through the experience of her marriage, Viola will subsequently move through a series of meta narratives, from her mother’s lectures on duty with their recycling of mid-century “conduct manual” principles, through the sensational trope of individual powerlessness at the hands of her villainous husband, to seeming paralysis conveyed in the language of fairy tale. A key strategy of the sensational mode is its focus on the plight of an individual, temporarily removed from the care of a watchful community (or appropriate lover), to which the victim is restored at the end of the novel having finally escaped from the villain and regained a social identity. In *The Wing of Azrael* Caird imposes this plot device on a realist setting, the rural community in which Viola moves during the period of her marriage. In this formulation very little escapes the notice of the women she visits, and her identity and social status depend on her remaining within the metaphorical prison they have helped the villain to construct.

<18> Adding yet another layer of intertextual argument to the novel’s protest against convention, the narrator subsequently shows Viola and Harry setting themselves adrift in a boat just as Maggie and Stephen do in Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*. Harry is almost successful in convincing Viola, just as Maggie initially listens to Stephen’s “low broken tones” that are like “nectar held close to thirsty lips: there was, there *must* be, then, a life for mortals here below which was not hard and chill – in which affection would no longer be self sacrifice.” In both cases the lover’s representations are closely connected to the image of water, as “the vision for the time excluded all realities – all except the returning sun-gleams which broke out on the waters as the evening approached” (*The Mill on the Floss* 469). Eliot’s conclusion, that Maggie behaves heroically only to find herself shunned as a fallen woman, makes it doubly ironic that, as the narrator points out, the same community would have welcomed her back had she actually eloped and reappeared as a married woman. While the narrator pities Maggie, there is no solution to her dilemma within the confines of a mid-century realist novel, dependent as it is on the assured moral stance of the narrator. In an oblique reworking of this motif, Caird offers the reader a similarly principled young woman who insists on returning to her perceived duty but whose suffering is likewise

socially sanctioned. In this version, the disloyalty to another woman (in Eliot's account Stephen is engaged to Maggie's cousin Lucy, the "good woman" of the story) is excised, allowing the narrator to present Viola's rejection of Harry as utterly mistaken.

<19> The later scene in which Viola marries Philip under the watchful eyes of her lover and the local community derives its force from the framing devices of sensation fiction. The narrator plays with the idea that even now it is not too late to rescue "Andromeda," but that this opportunity will be allowed to pass. It is surely no coincidence that this scene apparently draws on the failed warning in *The Woman in White*, in which the only woman who tries to prevent a fatal marriage is ignored because she is considered insane. Anne Catherick's letter to Laura notably details a dream of her wedding day, in which two arcs of light irradiate her innermost soul and that of her proposed husband Sir Percival Glyde, revealing his corruption and foreshadowing her doom at his hands (77-8). In *The Wing of Azrael* the narrator describes Viola as "standing in the line of the sun's rays, and the colours stained her dress, passing across her in a broad band of radiance, and falling on the cold stone floor behind her, and on the half-effaced brasses at her feet. Upon her bosom a deep blood-red stain glowed in fiery brilliance, like the symbol of some master-passion in her heart, or perhaps a death-wound" (147). These two wedding scenes, with their shared emphasis on arcs or rays of light illuminating the inner soul of the protagonists, both rely on the reader / observer to decode and correctly value textual symbols. In *The Woman in White* it is only Anne who appreciates the significance of her dream, and her written testimony is rejected as worthless in a novel deeply concerned with the deceptive possibilities of the written word. *The Wing of Azrael* places the reader in a similar position – primed by a reading of sensational texts to interpret the "blood-red stain" as a portent, but powerless to intervene as events unfold. In the later novel the symbolic mode is rendered powerless because the closely bound community has every reason to suspect a tragic outcome and yet does nothing to prevent it.

<20> Immediately after her marriage Viola is consigned to a life of apparent stagnation, signalled by the Sleeping Beauty motif. Abrogating one of her few rights as a married woman to the housekeeper, Viola says that:

"It seems to me impossible that any of the furniture could stand in any other position. I do not wish it altered."

And from that moment it seemed as if a spell had been cast over the place, as over the palace of the Sleeping Beauty; not a chair or a table, or so much as a footstool, budged by a hair's-breadth from its accustomed spot. (155)

Traditionally Sleeping Beauty is rescued by a daring male adventurer, and sensation fiction likewise figures women trapped in brutal marriages, from which they must ultimately be rescued by a faithful lover. The reader's expectation in these texts is that the plot will literally solve the problem, reinstating a desirable status quo and accommodating the dissident heroine within it. However in Caird's rendering the fairy tale prince is either absent or ineffectual, and the social order itself becomes the problem. Viola is deliberately presented as representative (significantly the exceptional Sibella plays only a minor role) and the plot is concerned precisely with the

monotony of her lived experience. The focus therefore shifts in this account to the daily infliction of torture on the heroine, rather than an account of the hero's manoeuvres to rescue her. Just as Viola's sphere of action contracts, the conflict between herself and Philip actually intensifies, as the gap between social language and lived experience starts to close. After her marriage Viola belatedly acquires the knowledge that allows her to engage in verbal fencing on more equal terms. Notably Philip attempts to contain her protest by pre-empting and implicitly belittling the terms he expects her to use:

Do you think that you have only yourself to consult? Let me remind you that you bear my name; that, in fact (to speak so that you can understand), it is branded upon you, and by that brand I can claim you and restrain you wherever you may be, so long as you live. Now are matters clear to you? (185)

In pre-empting the terms of feminist protest, Philip assumes that he has silenced his wife, literally denying her a mode of expression. But vehemently rejecting his subsequent call for affection, she shows a heightened awareness of the exploitative terms of gendered role playing, 'You would have me act two parts at the same time. That cannot be, even at *your* command. ... You take your stand on your authority, and there you must remain.' (187). After finding Viola and Sibella Lincoln together, Philip ironically resumes this divided address but while his brutality is designed to assert mastery, his ironic deployment of the dual mode reveals its instability:

"You will see nobody, man or woman, without my knowledge; you will make no acquaintance, man or woman, without my knowledge. You will receive no letter that is unseen by me. And now" – Philip held open the gate into the garden gallantly – "now to the home of which you are the sunbeam." (224).

<21> In this final mocking reduction of Viola to the image of the "ideal woman," Philip reminds her of the publicly accepted myth of their relationship, a fiction he requires her to promote. Further parodying this gap between the language of courtship and the humiliations of male dominance over women, the text shows Philip commenting that Mrs Lincoln is not a respectable friend for his wife even as he attempts to seduce her himself. The New Woman Sibella exploits her own position as a supposedly "fallen" and therefore vulnerable woman to manipulate Philip in Viola's interests, while ultimately retaining her independence. Strategically encouraging Philip's flirtation she nonetheless subtly undermines and evades his over familiarity, notably following his crass remark that a storm allows him to prolong his visit where if the storm was between them he would afford it little respect. Clearly the lack of respect is aimed at Sibella herself, and she responds wryly with, "You seem to confound me and the storm in your imagination" (204). But if she is figured as a satirical "Lady of Misrule," by definition she can only subvert her opponent's dominant status through her own marginalized position. She resists but equally she is excluded from the legitimising social narratives deployed by other characters in the novel. Elsewhere the division of domestic and social language remains an accepted form of currency, as in Arabella's rather ghastly attempts to flirt with Philip:

"I shall really have to consult Mrs. Dendraith about her system of management. You seem to be in perfect order, and yet not crushed."

“Not at all crushed,” said Philip. “My wife says she doesn’t like to see a man’s spirit broken.” Arabella laughed. (“He rules her with a rod of iron,” she said to herself, and she lives in deadly fear of him.”) (288-9)

This is very much the conclusion drawn by Marion Halcombe in reviewing Fosco’s dominance over his wife, the erstwhile feminist Eleanor Fairlie, but she herself is a deadly antagonist whose scheming against Laura precludes any feminine sympathy. Where Fosco’s assumed cruelty to his wife emphasizes his power as the novel’s main villain, Philip’s sadism has no obvious impact on his social standing and Arabella continues to flirt with him apparently out of sheer perversity. Unlike Laura, Viola has no loving community to which she can finally be restored because the community in question is based on the merciless sacrifice of women.

<22> As she herself is aware, Viola’s predicament echoes that of the murdered Mrs Dendraith, placing her within the cyclical “women’s time” explored by Murphy as a characteristically nineteenth century configuration. However through her childlessness and her partial identification with the proto New Woman Sibella, she is also subject to specifically fin de siècle discourses of neurasthenia. As Jane Wood explains, “The spectre of nervous degeneration loomed large over women’s sexual lives as claims of inferior brain capacity and over-sensitive nervous organization called into question their constitutional fitness for the roles that nature and society had assigned them” (163). Meanwhile in Philip’s terms she has already failed, as he brutally makes clear to her, insofar as she has not provided an heir.

<23> Meanwhile his threat to have her declared mad cynically reworks a classic trope of sensation fiction through the medium of topical medical discourse. In *The Woman in White* Laura’s misidentification as Anne Catherick is made possible through their physical resemblance, and the smooth mechanism of their exchange is so terrifying because it demonstrates how easily a clearly sane character can be incarcerated under the law. Layers of irony are created through the further suggestion that a docile patient does not mimic the domestic ideal so much as create it (in the face of Marian’s thunder stealing performances it is easy to miss the point that for all her rectitude, Laura routinely resists her husband’s bullying and openly dislikes the fascinating Count Fosco). In Caird’s account the danger lies not in the substitution of one character for another or in the idea that a sane character will be driven mad by incarceration in a lunatic asylum; the threat to Viola’s sanity is an intrinsic part of her upbringing and she is characterized as “nervous” long before her marriage. Philip’s melodramatic plot to have his wife watched on the grounds of madness is effective because her mental state is in jeopardy, and he is taunting her with this fear as much as with his legal power when Viola demands that he let her go, “Don’t touch me, don’t touch me, I tell you, or I shall go raving mad!” and he calmly responds, “I fear that I should be unable to detect the moment of transition” (301). The reworking of sensation fiction is at its most horrifying here, in that through his adoption of melodramatic cliché Philip’s story telling incidentally comes close to the truth.

<24> Notwithstanding the persistent collapsing of social narratives as mendacious or exploitative, story telling itself remains of value in the text. Herself adept at framing language, Sibella exhorts Viola to elope with Harry Lancaster by retelling the story of her own life, which Viola had previously heard filtered through the misconstructions of salacious local gossip. Just as

the narrator's metafictional strategies link generations of women through tropes of suffering and complicity, Viola becomes fascinated by the murdered Mrs Dendraith, making a "room of her own" in the very room where her predecessor is supposed to have met her end, "The two realities: the life of that bygone lady, and that of her not less unhappy successor, – seemed to annihilate between them the empty phantom Time and to touch each other closely" (189). This imagined communion evades Philip's otherwise ubiquitous gaze, reminding the reader that he is less successful than he claims in his threat that "if I wish to know I *shall* know" (266) even as he sneeringly reminds his wife of his villainous role, "You surely don't suppose that I didn't know of your frequent visits to this blue-beard chamber" (192). Female narratives triumph momentarily by slipping under the radar of patriarchal surveillance; nonetheless this community of women is only ever an imagined space, significantly created both through and outside the dictates of ordered time.

<25> Given the text's rewriting of earlier tropes and stories it is utterly appropriate that the climax of the novel should be located in this uninhabited room, where Philip's metaphorical rape of Viola directly references his first attempt to kiss her in the window embrasure, through the phrase "tender punishment." Surridge points out that "Significantly, the assault is narrated from a female point of view, a perspective made current by the campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts" (213). The investigation of cultural myth reaches its apogee as Philip attempts to drag his wife from the Blue Beard's chamber that is also the locus of women's own stories, and reposition his supposedly "mad wife" within the very heart of the domestic realm, paradoxically disguising her status as prisoner by making her body publicly accessible. It is in this scene that Viola finally stabs him and so fulfils the ending of the "Book of Doom" foreshadowed in the early chapters of the novel. In this final retaliation she also brings herself within the terms of assumed insanity he has directly told her he will use to have her confined.

<26> But when Viola finally kills Philip in this very room, reversing the terms of the story he related at the beginning of the novel, it is only to face the look of horror on her lover's face – symbolically Harry has arrived moments too late to prevent this final tragedy. Sibella's question "Are all women who come after you to be worse off, to be heavier-hearted, because of you?" (221) effectually conceals the feminine double bind – to remain in a loveless marriage is to perpetuate the cycle of female misery but to leave it is to place oneself beyond the pale and so lose all useful social influence. As Viola herself becomes the subject of scandalous story telling, the reader is left to infer that the murder of her husband is effectively a substitute for her planned adultery. While Sibella actively promotes the ideal of sisterhood, in attempting to follow her advice Viola simply replaces her as the talk of the town. The attractive but respectable alternative to Sibella, Dorothy Evans, has hero worshipped Viola but she is last referenced as miserably tearing her "idol" out of her heart. Viola's own silence, as she eludes Harry's pursuit and disappears into the darkness in the final scene of the novel (the inevitable inference is that she takes her own life), significantly creates a moral vacuum. In this ultimate withdrawal from the community she finally proves the impossibility of escaping the "disease of words" without destroying herself in the process.

## Endnotes

(1) This fear of her own murderous or at least subversive potential is shared by other New Woman heroines, such as George Egerton's Mary Desmond in *The Wheel of God* and Mary Cholmondeley's Hester Gresley in *Red Pottage*.<sup>(^)</sup>

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