

**“Unblessed by Offspring”:  
Fertility and the Aristocratic Male in Reynolds’s *The Mysteries of the Court of London***

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<1>Though rarely read today,<sup>(1)</sup> G.W.M. Reynolds was one of the Victorian era’s most popular authors: his “writing became increasingly popular in the colonies, across Europe and in the United States, where he was widely pirated, plagiarized and imitated” (Humpherys and James 6) and his obituary in *The Bookseller* called him “the most popular writer of our times” (“Obituary” 600). His most widely-read texts, *The Mysteries of London (MoL)* and its prequel, *The Mysteries of the Court of London (MoCL)*, were radical melodramas serialized from 1844 to 1856. They were published in their own individual penny numbers which generated weekly sales estimated between 30,000 and 40,000 (Chevasco 140) at the beginning of their runs, and later estimated by Reynolds around 200,000 (3:91). These serials were equal parts silver fork novel, Newgate novel, radical propaganda and soft-core pornography, and their plots rewarded the virtuous while illustrating the many ways criminals and decadents could be punished. With dozens of characters and storylines bridging the gaps between classes from the monarchy to the poorest of criminals, *MoL* and *MoCL* attracted just as diverse a readership (Thomas “Introduction” xv-xvii). *MoCL*, however, which revolves around twenty years in the life of George IV during his days as Prince of Wales and Prince Regent, focuses far more heavily on the lives of the aristocracy than *MoL* does.<sup>(2)</sup> This focus enables Reynolds, who had a background in Chartism and French republicanism, to disburse of a major part of his political agenda, namely to unmask aristocrats as unhealthy voluptuaries ill-suited to the government of a nation: “By the living God, all this is intolerable . . . it assuredly is far more than sufficient to make ye chartists, republicans, and communists” (3:186).

<2>Of all Reynolds’s varied arguments against the aristocratic establishment, his richest and most complex point of attack is found in his focus on impotence and infertility. The phrase “unblessed by offspring”, from which the title of this article is derived, is found, in some form or another, in reference to nearly every aristocratic couple in *MoCL*.<sup>(3)</sup> In addition, as this article will demonstrate, Reynolds’s text frankly and bluntly places the blame for sterility upon the male partner, creating an underlying message that “the miserable husband is impotent” (4:392). The purpose of this article is to analyze the manifestations of endemic aristocratic infertility in Reynolds’s work and to explore why Reynolds thought it necessary to promote such an extreme, medicalized perspective of upper class men.

<3>Children are conspicuous by their absence from the text. Until the very end of the series, none of the dozens of aristocratic characters is able to produce a single child in wedlock. Though many illegitimate children are begotten by both male and female nobles, the aristocrats’ socio-legal emphasis on primogeniture only qualifies children by their legitimacy, with legitimate male children being the surest means of the line’s survival and the most definite proof of masculine virility. As we will see, Reynolds states in several ways that the infertility lies with the male, and this statement seeks to undermine the aristocracy in popular opinion, since the attack on the male engages directly with Victorian mores of masculinity, including effective leadership and control. Though Reynolds theorizes more on the moral roots of male infertility rather than any scientific causes, notions of aristocratic male sterility did have a medical precedent: *The British Medical Journal* stated it was a well-known fact that “aristocracies and families living in luxurious social conditions do not habitually keep up their numbers” (“The Pathology of Genius” 400-1), though no medical justification was provided for the opinion. In addition, the famous Victorian surgeon and fertility researcher T.B. Curling reported that “sterility oftener depended upon males than females” and that “a man who is unable to fulfil [sic] the command, “to be fruitful and multiply” is . . . periling the happiness and perhaps health of a woman” (12). In his opinion, men so “incompetent to their marital duties” (12) are candidates for divorce. This moralizing “which, while irrelevant to the problems at hand, was a characteristic tendency . . . [of] many well-intentioned medical practitioners of the time” (Halliday 115).

<4>Infertility inside of wedlock is presented by Reynolds as a badge of both immorality and ill-health, and follows in the moralistic footsteps of Victorian physicians like John Sutherland and Thomas Southwood Smith who theorized that “suffering and, by implication, disease

and Thomas Southwood Smith, who theorized that "suffering and, by implication, disease resulted from disobedience to the divine will" (Halliday 112). By impugning aristocratic reputations on the basis of fertility, Reynolds is able to underscore some very real concerns of the populace—many of his readers were still able to remember the various succession crises from 1817 to 1837 which were brought about by the infertility of George III's children (of his fifteen children, only three produced any living, legitimate offspring, not counting George IV's daughter, Princess Charlotte, who survived until adulthood only to die in childbirth). It is against this background that Reynolds presents his argument—that rule by primogeniture does not work even at its most basic, biological level and should be eradicated from the political system.

<5>Undoubtedly, not all of Reynolds's readers agreed with his propaganda against the aristocracy, nor sought out the texts for that purpose. However, Reynolds was notably adept in the business of newspaper publishing. He founded many publications, his *Reynolds's Newspaper* "stood alone as the most popular and stable radical weekly" (Shirley 75), and the serials enjoyed twelve years of continuous popularity; his anti-aristocratic writings catered to a large audience, and the texts may be interpreted today as representing a section of popular opinion against the titled class at that time (Thomas "Introduction" xvi).

<6>In fact, there are many vagaries and contradictions in Reynolds's treatment of his aristocratic characters which reflect the same contradictions inherent in such a broad and complex matter as public attitude. Though he encourages an uprising of those who "are oppressed, enslaved, and trampled upon by the arrogant, indolent, and tyrannical aristocracy" (7:113) and disparages monarchs like "[t]hat dreadful King, George III, in comparison with whom Nero was an angel and Caligula a saint" (5:54), Reynolds glamorizes the aristocracy, and thereby encourages his readers' envy of and desire to emulate them. Rohan McWilliam succinctly summarizes these innate contradictions by saying that, to Reynolds and his readers, the aristocracy was "the one group in society that is perceived as truly free" (46); while freedom on one hand implied glamour and empowerment, it also spoke of aristocratic independence from feudal responsibility and a denial of the obligations they owed to the populace. This simultaneous reinforcement and undoing of the cultural hegemony of the nobility is precisely what makes Reynolds's sensational and extreme melodrama provide so interesting an insight into popular class politics.

### **Masculinity and Mysteries**

<7>Though Reynolds's use of gender and sexuality in *MoCL* is complex, it is not necessarily sophisticated; he often confuses biological function with contemporary cultural mores and provides no definitions nor adheres to any strict word choice. Since he relies on reproductive biology as a baseline for subjectively calculating health, normality and social suitability, quotations from *MoCL* may contain terminological overlap; however, in the framework of my criticism on Reynolds, I have applied a strict biology/culture schism between the terms "male" or "man", and terms such as "manhood," "unman," "manliness" and "masculinity". The former implies a biological classification, the latter a set of cultural ideals or identities. While such a definition might go without saying in the realm of modern gender studies, it is necessary to define in the context of my own work so the definition may therein provide clarity to that of Reynolds's.

<8>The masculine models celebrated or disparaged in *MoCL* are more clearly defined by Reynolds, who venerates the working-class men who "[r]ise early, toil hard all day" (3:186) and are productive, while he abhors "the pampered, insolent, overbearing aristocrat" (3:186). As James Eli Adams explores, the idealized roles of manhood in the Victorian era included but were not limited to the "gentleman, dandy, priest, prophet, soldier, and professional" (15). There is, of course, no single, unified Victorian concept of what it meant to culturally embody one's sex. Manhood could be in contrast to womanhood, boyhood, or animal baseness; for Reynolds, manhood was in contrast to all three. As seen in his works, Reynolds was a purveyor of republicanism, middle-class morality, and the Protestant work ethic. As such, he subscribed to a type of heteronormative masculine identity which was best summarized by John Ruskin—though there is otherwise no connection between Ruskin and Reynolds—in his 1865 essay "Of Queen's Gardens": that "man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest" (107). This is a vision of masculinity which many critics consider characteristic of the Victorian period: that the "Victorian period registered the most extreme form of gender segregation yet seen in an industrialized nation" (Danahay 2); that "the meaning of masculinity was self-evident and it involved emotional reserve and physical discipline" (Dowling 1); that the "healthy man is strong, assertive, tolerant, moderate in his appetites, hard-working, adventurous, responsible, and wise" (Warsh viii).<sup>(4)</sup>

<9>Reynolds challenges the manhood of his aristocratic characters and deprives them of fertility through a combination of two processes: feminization and emasculation. Reynolds

does not name them as such, but the processes are very distinct in his work. Feminization occurs when Reynolds applies traits he considers feminine to a male character: physiological frailty, vanity, and lack of agency. Emasculation is characterized by the symbolic neutering of a male character by depriving him of that which Reynolds considers masculine: sexual virility, reproductive potency, and personal agency, strength and hardiness. Feminization adds traits, emasculation subtracts; the former creates a character with the capacity to be either gender, the latter neither. As my analysis will show, both are utilized by Reynolds for the same end: to imply a disrupted or disturbed physiology which has a direct impact on one's health, fertility and suitability to rule.

<10>Though Reynolds plays with notions of gender, sexuality and identity throughout the bulk of his work, there are three characters who represent three distinct junctures within his arguments about aristocratic fertility and gender polarity: Lord Florimel, the Earl of Desborough and the Prince Regent. The lives of these men and their inability to produce children in wedlock characterize the potential outcomes of the aristocratic life cycle, as perceived by Reynolds. He uses their fates as proof of the validity of his republican politics, which argue strongly against inherited power, since “[d]epravity would seem to run in their blood, and to be as traditional as their titles and estates” (7:11). By pairing gender and medicine in his critique of the aristocracy, Reynolds is able to manipulate his reader's assumed conventional mores regarding family values and gender binaries into a nuanced political argument. As Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla argue in their work on bodily deviance, there was a strong nineteenth-century belief that one's moral character was rooted in biology (1), which led to society's “feverish desire to classify forms of deviance, to locate them in biology, and thus to police them in the larger social body” (12). The following sections on feminization and emasculation, therefore, explore forms of deviance in the aristocratic male, how deviance affects fertility, and how Reynolds classifies and polices these individuals in the larger social and political body.

### Feminization

<11>Lord Florimel is a construct of feminization. He is one of Reynolds's least gender-polemic males, who takes sexual pleasure in dressing as a woman, “Gabrielle”, in order to gain the trust of and then seduce honorable women: “[W]e will be friends, bosom friends, Gabrielle, will we not? ‘Till death!’ Replied the nobleman. ‘And now let us seal our friendship with a kiss’” (1:175). To Reynolds's assumed reader, this single predilection not only makes Florimel a cad, but also a sexual deviant. Apart from denoting homosexual(5) tendencies (which we now know may overlap but are inherently unaffiliated with transvestism—a distinction which Reynolds does not and could not make),(6) it also conjures thoughts of lesbianism, since Florimel is performing femininity during the sexual conquest of another woman. The heterosexual character thus performs homosexuality on the part of both genders, creating a sub-duality even inside his already-present man/woman dyad.

<12>One is able to see his duality on the very surface, beginning with his names: “Florimel” is his ancestral surname which should grace the sons who will continue his line, but “Florimel” is also a translation of the Latin for “honey flower” and is the name of a female character in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. His first name, Gabriel, should indicate that he, like the archangel, is a harbinger of the births of important men. Florimel instead feminizes his name by the addition of feminine qualities onto the masculine base: Reynolds specifically draws attention to Florimel's addition of extra letters to the pronunciation of his name: “with that stress upon the final syllable of the Christian name . . . “Gabrielle Florimel,” said the nobleman . . . laying a stronger emphasis on the “e!”” (1:170).

<13>The reader discovers that depictions of Florimel's physicality are almost caricatures of feminine beauty:

a razor had never touched his cheeks, which has all the damask and peachlike loveliness peculiar to the softer sex . . . His neck was long and gracefully turned, his ears remarkably small and delicate. He wore his rich chestnut hair flowing in a wavy mass over his shoulder . . . For beautiful he indeed was,—not handsome . . . Florimel was very short for a man . . . His voice corresponded with this feminine style of beauty. (1:134)

The long accounts of Florimel's delicate beauty are purposefully gender-ambiguous, which only emphasize their transgressiveness. In his first series, *MoL*, one of Reynolds's main plots involved an attractive young man, solely referenced with the male pronoun until “he” is eventually revealed to the reader to be secretly a woman: “He was a youth, apparently not more than sixteen years of age . . . his countenance, which was as fair and delicate as that of a young girl . . . [He had] long, luxuriant hair, of a beautiful light chestnut colour” (*MoL* 1:7). Since Reynolds constructs many of the same ambiguities around Florimel in *MoCL* (even their hair is the same color and worn in the same way), it is not immediately clear to the reader that Florimel is actually male.

<14>Describing Florimel as “peachlike” further perverts his gender and fertility—by relating his good looks in terms of fruit, Reynolds subverts a common metaphor for a sexual and fecund woman, indicating youth, beauty and a literal ripeness.<sup>(Z)</sup> Florimel is the embodiment of a fertile woman, though it is impossible for him to bear children. This infertility is compounded when the text simultaneously admits that he will never father children. Early in the series Reynolds indicates that, since Florimel’s roguery and depraved habits render him incompatible with a gender-normative marriage, his line would almost assuredly end with him: “Possessed of immense wealth, and with no parents nor elderly relatives to advise him, he devoted all his time and all his thoughts to the pleasures of love” (1:135). Florimel too well enjoys his autonomy away from the pressures of the family unit. He also lacks the loyalty, reliability or maturity which *should* be requisite for marriage and the successful rearing of children; instead he is “[f]ickle, inconstant, and easily excited by a new and pretty face” (1:134). Everything about Florimel revolves around transitory pleasure and transgression, in direct opposition to the wholesome and long-lasting happiness that Reynolds implies is found in gender-binary family life, and with which he rewards his gender-binary characters:

not a care has disturbed their felicity . . . In them virtue has been well rewarded, and in the conduct of their sons and daughters do they behold the bright reflection of their own example . . . [They are] supremely happy in the marriage state. (10:447)

Creating a clear link, Reynolds introduces Florimel as a transvestite and then states, “He was unmarried and likely to remain so; for the idea of linking himself to one woman was, in his estimation, something too dreadful to contemplate” (1:135), the implication being that if Florimel marries, it might impede his association with the other women in his life—both the ones he conquers and the one he performs.

<15>The redemption of Florimel’s fertility becomes one of the major subplots during the first five volumes of *MoCL*. Having met the beautiful but stubbornly virtuous Pauline Clarendon, one of the protagonists of the series, he chooses to reject his empty aristocratic life and prove his masculine worth to her. From that moment, his character rebuffs all that is feminine—Reynolds’s focus transfers from Florimel’s looks to his actions. Reynolds celebrates Pauline as one half of a gender binary, repeatedly referencing her feminine beauty “with lips red and ripe as cherries, and . . . teeth of pearly whiteness” (1:24) and her “excellence of *female* virtue” (1:94, italics mine). There is no ambiguity surrounding Pauline’s gender, and her idealistic womanhood inspires Florimel into idealistic manhood: “If I be thus changed, Pauline . . . it is your bright example that has worked so salutary an effect” (1:194). Their relationship undergoes several tests, but he never falters in his new devotion to middle-class morality and they ultimately marry at the end of Volume 5.

<16>Though he is rescued from his decadent lifestyle by their marriage (which presumably also puts an end to his transvestism), the damage to his fertility seems to already have been done. When Volume 6 begins, set nearly twenty years later, they “remained unblessed by offspring” (440), though the logistics of the plot would not have been impeded by the presence of children. Reynolds is quick to blame his characters for their infertility, and the evidence he provides makes Florimel culpable, instead of his wife, Pauline. Where Florimel is in fact the last of his line (indicating a hereditary struggle with fertility), Pauline has a sister who gave birth to a daughter, Florence. In later volumes, Florimel makes Florence his heir, for lack of a better candidate. As “Lord Florimel had no children of his own, he soon learned to love little Florence as dearly as if she were his daughter” (6:441). Her heiress status, along with the details of her aristocratic birth and upcoming aristocratic marriage, means that Florence is the last hope for the continuation of at least four noble lines. Her untimely death in the last volume means the complete extinction of those lines, of which Florimel’s is chief.

<17>Denying Florimel the capacity for reproduction, Reynolds casts a pall on the character’s health. The childless life Florimel had predicted for himself before marriage became the life he could not alter after marriage. Transvestism was punishable under the law, as it was associated at that time almost solely with homosexuality (Davies 393; see footnote 6). Therefore, Jennifer Terry’s argument in her work on nineteenth-century science and homosexuality can easily be applied to Florimel, whose early transvestite activities could be seen as a homosexual act of “self-pollution [which] drained the male body of its vitality and left no offspring to show for it . . . [It led] to a point of no return, leaving the ‘youthful sinner’ . . . in a state of ‘physical impotence’ that made an adjustment to heterosexual relations impossible” (132-133). To Reynolds, deviant behavior is inextricably linked with one’s biological make-up and immorality is a form of incurable sickness; one can be socially redeemed, but physiology cannot be amended.

### Emasculation

<18>On the opposite end of Reynolds’s gender-deviance spectrum is the Earl of

Desborough, the most clearly emasculated character in the series. He is also the only character around whom Reynolds centers a frank and largely non-symbolic discussion about reproductive issues. Where other characters' infertility is only alluded to, the Earl's situation is described in language of remarkable clarity as "the lamentable physical misfortune which rendered me unfit for marriage, well knowing, in fact, that ten thousand sources of misery would eventually be summed up in the terrible word impotency" (3:93).

<19>Much like Lord Florimel, the Earl's entire existence is viewed as a vehicle for producing offspring: when production fails, his existence fails. Unlike Florimel, however, the Earl is not infertile because of feminization, but because he is medically impotent and therefore, to Reynolds, emasculated. Even medical literature of the day relates sexual ability to manly agency: in 1857, Dr. Marris Wilson wrote of "the anxiety that might occur on [a man] discovering, for the first time, a failure of power" (377). That he considered "power" a synonym for sexual capability is highly reflective of the Victorian mores which surrounded masculinity. The Earl's inability to participate in sexual activity denies him status as a man, which Reynolds demonstrates by constantly undermining the descriptions of the Earl's handsome, manly exterior: "the strong, powerful, vigorous man was weeping like a child" (1:379), reclassifying him not as a man, but as a boy; his wife had "been sacrificed to him [in marriage] on account of his enormous wealth" (1:275), reclassifying him not as a man, but as a monster or pagan deity requiring sacrifice; she thinks of him as "a horrible spectre" (5:264), reclassifying him not as a man, but as a ghost. "Not as a man" is perhaps the single most frequent metaphor applied to the Earl. The Earl has neither feminine nor masculine qualities, but is rather a wraith-like void who speaks jealously of his wife "in whose veins coursed the rich warm blood of a vigorous youth" (3:93), indicating his own contrast with portraits of virility. The cause of the impotence is implied to be a congenital fault or symptom of childhood disease: he does not recall a time without it, and when he asks the physician, "Then there is no hope . . .?", the answer is: "None, my lord" (2:103).<sup>(8)</sup> The Earl is the only character seen to consult a physician on a non-life-threatening issue, and the only character whose physician is completely unable to provide any treatment. Since all other appearances of doctors in the series involve either childbirth or impending fatality, Reynolds singles out the Earl and traps him somewhere between life and death—he is repeatedly called a "corpse" (e.g. 1:378, 3:93 and 4:458), and is yet still alive.

<20>Much of Reynolds's frankness surrounding the Earl is composed through the Earl's own cognizance of his medical issues—a self-awareness that Florimel does not share. This knowledge, and his inability to move either fully into life or death, prompts an anxiety-ridden breakdown, while Florimel and other aristocrats remain happily ignorant of the medical implications Reynolds writes into their lives.

<21>The key difference between the Earl and Florimel is that the Earl's condition is not behavior-based, but is rather a result of bad lineage. He and, by extension, his position and estate are infirm and not self-sustaining. There is no insinuation that the Earl's condition was the result of decadence, for he is presented as a truly decent, if pathetic, character. His lamentation that he "was madman enough to think and to hope that there might be such a sentiment as a love of divine nature [i.e., romantic love], apart from gross enjoyment, and existing rather as an essence than a sensuousness" (1:380-1) is in direct contrast with the profligate speeches of other aristocratic males, but it serves the same function. The Earl reveals a characteristic that renders him unsuitable for fathering offspring. Where Florimel initially rejects standard family life for the duality of being both genders, the Earl wants embrace family ideals but does not have the capacity of even *one* gender to make it a reality.

<22>The inverse relationship between the Earl and Florimel continues: Florimel's dissoluteness causes infertility, while the Earl's infertility causes dissoluteness. This connection is established early in the series when the reader is introduced to his wife, the Countess. She, being of a naturally sensual disposition, is furious that he has not been able to consummate their relationship after so long a marriage and refuses to participate as a wife inside the family unit: "a cold, imperceptible tremor swept over her frame the instant that the earl appeared upon the threshold of the apartment" (1:377). Racked with guilt for his inability to satisfy her, the Earl encourages and even arranges for his wife to take a lover. Though he is sickened by the idea, his wife's happiness and the need for an heir (legitimate or otherwise) are too strong an inducement to resist, further breaking down the idea of the aristocratic family into the cynical combination of mere alliance and appearance.

<23>Dominic James posits that in Victorian England, "the rational mind was gendered male and the dependent body as female" (7); this is a model which perfectly encapsulates why the marriage between the Earl and the Countess is dysfunctional. She, "whose passions were, however, more potent than her reason" (3:28) is a slave to her bodily appetites and relies upon his strength of character and reason to keep her from straying. Since his emasculation renders him passive, he has no strength of character or rational masculine mind to restrain her irrational feminine body: he never "seek[s] to penetrate her [his wife's] private thoughts, but to wait patiently until she might choose to reveal them"

(4:433). Further, he never curbs the bad behavior of his wife, whom he still “adored despite of all she had done outrageous to his dignity as a husband” (3:91). He fails to fulfill his part of the gender-binary, leading to imbalance and domestic havoc.

<24>As with Florimel and Pauline, Reynolds again gives hope of a happy ending before ultimately destroying the lives of his sympathetic aristocrats. The Countess repents, reconciles with her husband and together they undergo a marital rehabilitation. However, the Earl is never able to recover from his shame and from the dishonor he allowed his wife to pursue. The constant fear of his impotence being made public drives him to despair and suicide. Throwing himself from the roof of his stately home in the presence of his wife, the manner of his death parallels his plummet in her eyes, as well as the descent of his family and class. He prefers a swift death to a long life filled with the knowledge of his shortcomings. His last words, ““You will make the world believe it was an accident, Eleanor”” (269), implore his wife to maintain their public face and do the best she can for their class—even to the last, he cannot bear the indignity of a revelation and must maintain the appearances required of his station.

<25>Reynolds refuses to give most of his aristocratic characters the joyous and fulfilling resolution he begins to set up, seeing the aristocracy’s downfall as inevitable. That he creates tragedy more frequently for his *sympathetic* aristocrats—men he describes as “charitable in the extreme” (1:134) and “affable and gracious” (1:377), but “ill-fated” (5:376), underlines the harshness of the aristocratic institution, which makes victims of both its members and the lower classes it oppresses. While Reynolds expresses cathartic pleasure in the fictional punishment of an unpleasant leader (as we will see with his treatment of the Prince Regent), destroying his sympathetic aristocrats is the means by which he advocates change.

### Feminization and Emasculation in Unison

<26>As the core antagonist to a series of revolving protagonists, the Prince Regent suffers the brunt of Reynolds’s criticism: not only does his status as future king attach the most serious political ramifications to his infertility, but he also embodies emasculation and feminization in equal parts. The Prince was feminized in popular culture: the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan said the Prince had ““the most womanish mind’ he had ever come across” (Hibbert, *George IV* 127) and the Duchess of Devonshire reported that he was “too much like ‘a woman in men’s cloaths [sic]” (Hibbert “George IV”). This feminization was partly due to the Prince’s adherence to the model of the dandy. The dandy was, by the time of Reynolds’s writing, becoming what Adams calls a “grotesque icon of an outworn aristocratic order, a figure of self-absorbed, parasitic existence” (21); Danahay goes so far as to say that “being a dandy was about as close as any man could come to rejecting his masculinity” (6), and even medical literature at this time supports the notion that the health of dandified aristocrats was generally “delicate” (“London: Saturday May 10, 1851” 523), and therefore without masculine hardiness. The Prince’s admission in *MoCL* that “I was formed and fashioned to spend my existence pleasurably, and not in the routine of business and serious affairs” (7:142) implies a feminized rearing; while this claim does not seem to be founded in truth, the Prince Regent blatantly prioritized pleasure over his obligations, in clear contrast to the masculine Protestant work ethic which Reynolds espoused for his readers. It is for these reasons that Reynolds is able to target the Prince with such ease and panache.

<27>In *MoCL* the Prince Regent is first introduced as a feminine character. He is in delicate health (being severely hung-over) while gingerly attempting a long bath and toilet at his vanity table. The implication by Reynolds is clear: decadence breeds weakness, and weakness is womanly. The Prince is interrupted by some close friends, one being Lady Letitia Lade, known as “the Amazon” (1:160). Though a real-life friend of the Prince Regent, her portrayal in *MoCL* is far from biographical; rather, she is a mirror image of the Prince, her masculinity underscoring his femininity. Letitia revels in her marriage to a lord who “is well-nigh in his dotage . . . He lets me do just as I like” (1:253), and repeatedly takes advantage of her husband’s frailty, as well as the weaknesses of the aristocratic men in her circle. She dresses in men’s apparel in striking contrast to the Prince, who is still in his dressing gown. The Prince’s dress immediately places him in the confines of the feminine body as defined by Reynolds; part of the pornographic element in the text revolves around beautiful female characters being voyeuristically presented to the reader in an early-morning state of undress. As he sits in bed, indecent but for the bed sheets, Letitia says: “[H]ave your bath, by all means. Here, I will give you your dressing-gown and slippers’ . . . ‘And you mean me to rise in your presence?’ asked the prince” (1:159). When he does, she lasciviously leers at him for being “in *dishabille*,’ she added, with a significant glance at the prince’s figured silk dressing-gown and embroidered red morocco slippers” (1:162). The Prince’s introduction is also the first introduction of this “dressing gown nudity”, and he is the only man to join Reynolds’s coterie of semi-nude women.

<28>The Prince and Letitia soon draw back into the Prince’s bathroom to consummate

their relationship. He is vulnerable and frail, she is strong and well; he is undressed in the manner of other female characters, she is dressed as a man; for the sexual act, he retreats further into his suite while she moves forward, invading his space. He even compares his bathroom to “the harem of a Turkish palace” (1:162), an appropriated living space solely for the female (in this instance, the Prince), and of which the male (Letitia) is only a visitor.

<29>This scene is crucial in the medical analysis of the Prince in subsequent volumes. By placing him in the confines of a weakened feminine body, Reynolds is able to construct a correlation between the Prince’s fertility and venereal disease—specifically syphilis, which often had feminine connotations.<sup>(9)</sup> The language used to describe the Prince’s debauched escapades can almost always double as language of the sick room, with his “fevered brow and burning cheeks” (2:406) depicting sexual arousal or his “breath [which] was most sickly and nauseating” (7:211) illustrating his drunken state. Reynolds repeatedly connects gender transgression and dissoluteness with poor health, which fell exactly in line with many medical views of the day: namely, that syphilitic contagion “was characterized by a virtually complete perversion of moral sense” (Showalter 91), a diagnosis of which Reynolds’s representation of the Prince was most definitely guilty. The Prince, who does not have the desired masculine hardihood or temperance present in Reynolds’s more admirable male characters, is trapped in an ouroboros: femininity leads to sickness, which leads to further femininity, which leads to further sickness. As the narrative continues and one sees the results of his many liaisons, the evidence of syphilis begins to accumulate, most notably that many of his sexual conquests have fertility issues after exposure to him. Mrs. Fitzherbert and Venetia Trelawney are never able to give birth at all, while Queen Caroline, Octavia Clarendon and Agatha Owens each give birth to a single girl and never conceive again.

<30>More than fertility issues, his mistresses and children struggle with mental and physical health in a way that suggests syphilitic contagion. Agatha Owens gives birth to his still-born child before dying in an asylum. After his ruination of Octavia Clarendon, she goes mad, feeling his “coils environ me! . . . a terrible laugh which pealed from her lips spoke out the appalling truth. Octavia Clarendon was a maniac!” (2:422). The “coils” are in reference her growing madness, an illness for which she and her friends blame the Prince exclusively. She never fully recovers and dies young. Twenty years later, their illegitimate daughter encounters the Prince for the first time and grows madder with each new exposure to him, finally running from him in a frenzy and throwing herself to her death: “‘Perdition!’ ejaculated the prince. ‘She is mad! She will do herself a mischief!’ . . . At this instant a terrific cry burst forth . . . Down she had fallen, down, down” (10:434) Even his legitimate daughter, Princess Charlotte, is presented with an unspecified mental condition which frequently gives her pensive bouts of melancholy and anxiety over her heredity, believing she came from “a race whose infamies had rendered it accursed in the sight of Heaven, and whose punishment had to some extent, in the person of the lunatic king, commenced upon earth” (8:211). The Prince’s femininity is tied tightly to the concept of ill health, since “nineteenth-century culture seems to have actually admonished women to *be ill*” (Gilbert and Gubar 54); the exposure of others to his feminine sickness leads to the contagion and destruction of those closest to him: his mistresses and children. By placing the Prince Regent in a feminine form and moralizing about all of the physiological and fertility issues that this transgression entails, Reynolds takes arguments against the aristocracy into areas where typical political discourse could not tread.

<31>The Prince Regent’s femininity is in many ways the cause of his emasculation, since it traps him in the liminal space between the binaries of manhood and womanhood, making him perform as neither quite one nor the other. Reynolds treats his gender-atypical male characters as almost mule-like in their hybridity: their duality negates their ability to reproduce. While the Prince is certainly capable of the sexual act and precipitates several pregnancies out of wedlock, he is also presented as the anti-father, the destroyer of families and the next generation. Reynolds’s preoccupation with fatherhood as a necessary component of leadership is seen most clearly in the Prince Regent, who is depicted as being capable of neither. The metaphor is at the forefront of Reynolds’s republican politics, portraying the Prince as “the heartless man who is one day to become the Father of his People!” (1:290), as well as literally, as a man who fathers sickly, stillborn or murdered children. During a nightmare about all his sexual crimes against women, he sees the

lovely girls whom he had wooed and either seduced or ravished in his time, fair creatures who had gone down to the tomb with broken hearts and blighted affections . . . some of them appeared to have babes in their arms,—spectral babes, as ghastly as the parents . . . babes which were the fruit of those pleasures that the prince had purchased either by means of the most insidious perfidy or the most heartless violence. And those infants had all died either at their births or soon afterward, some sacrificed to the fatal compression adopted by their miserable mothers to conceal their shame, others murdered outright. (3:142)

These deaths are a pointed attack on the Prince Regent's rule—the Prince, instead of providing fatherly nurture to his subjects, maintains his comfort, power and pleasure through the destruction of their innocent lives. He unmans himself through his refusal to accept the consequences and responsibilities that are the result of his licentiousness. The Prince's illness is "defined in sociological terms as a deviation from a functional optimum" (Bailin 8), leaving him medically and socially neutered from producing legitimate children by his own physiological defects, decadent lifestyle, inability to provide for himself and inability to provide for others.

<32>Further emasculating him, Reynolds depicts the Prince as situationally impotent in several instances. One occurrence was based on the reports of the Prince's real-life wedding night. Reynolds signals the importance of recalling such an event by pulling the narration away from the wedding party and asking the reader to "resume the thread of our narrative in its proper place . . . the Prince of Wales was bearing home his bride to Carlton House" (4:305). That the public's "proper place" is with the newlyweds in their bridal chamber illustrates not only the stakes the nation had in their marital relations, but also the importance Reynolds places on aristocratic sexuality in the confines of his argument. He reports that, despite the huge political importance of the conjugal meeting, the Prince's decadence overcame his responsibilities: he fell down senseless with drink and, come morning, "only one person had lain in that nuptial bed" (4:325). That he could not keep himself upright on his wedding night is a clear double entendre, providing the punch line to Reynolds's long discourse on fertility and debauchery.

<33>The Prince's virility becomes the butt of a second grim joke, this time centering on the Prince's prowess in the face of true middle-class virtue. In what turns out to be an equally farcical and horrifying series of events, he begins kidnapping women who are unresponsive to his wooing. He imprisons them in a secluded domicile with the intention to obtain their favors through violence. He kidnaps women more than half a dozen times, and yet he never once successfully commits an assault—there is always an interruption or escape, as though the universe conspires to keep him from consummation: "And that she would become his prey beyond all possibility of salvation or rescue, he did not doubt . . . [and yet he became] thoroughly baffled by Camilla's heroic flight" (2:319, 326); and again, in Vol. 3: "as every moment saw her struggles becoming weaker and her cries more subdued, while the triumph of the prince appeared more and more certain. But suddenly the door was burst violently open, and Tim Meagles [the Prince's friend] . . . rushed into the chamber" (56). Though the daring escapes are merely wishful triumphs of the lower classes over the abuses of the upper class, it also plays into Reynolds's construction of the Prince as a sexual weakling: firstly by making him resort to such low acts, and secondly by making him unable to perform the acts, even when he is theoretically in total control and domination.

<34>To Reynolds, the Prince symbolizes everything that was wrong in the history of England's leadership, and through the virtue that most aristocratic values and behaviors had remained unchanged, the Prince represented everything that was still wrong with leadership at the time of his writing:

Oh, who would have thought that two-thirds of the great nobles now assembled were, if stripped of all the prestige of their rank and honours, nothing more or less than the most infernal robbers, usurpers, and oppressors that ever preyed upon the vitals of the industrious millions . . . But so it was then, so it is at the present day, and so it will ever be with the British aristocracy until the knell of its corrupt, iniquitous, and accursed existence be rung by the mighty voice of the popular will. (2:213)

By using the Prince, a long-dead and still unpopular figure, Reynolds was safely able to critique contemporary figures for not adhering to the new, middle-class moral code which largely excluded any gendered or sexual deviation, thereby vilifying them further in the popular political mindset.

### Conclusion

<35>Trefor Thomas argues that Reynolds's "fiction can be understood as . . . half weekly newspaper, half romance" ("Rereading" 60). While Reynolds's weekly fiction did include elements of contemporary news stories, *MoCL*'s outlandish plots and overt political agenda provided a far more explicit bias than was seen in other non-radical news sources. It is interesting to note, therefore, the urgency with which Reynolds declares his message and his relentless avowal of its truthfulness. He says: "Reader, this picture of . . . the aristocracy is not too highly coloured, no, nor a whit exaggerated. Ten thousand facts might be brought forward to testify its truth" (9:434).

<36>While aristocratic males did not suffer from an infertility epidemic of the magnitude depicted in *MoCL*, their numbers *were* reported as diminishing and doctors associated this attrition with masculine health: "the aristocracy of England . . . are becoming few . . . how



can the unhealthy semen of such produce healthy offspring?" (Corbet 170). While the accuracy of such medical opinion is debatable, what is far more important is that the medical community, at least in part, also subscribed to the popular anti-aristocracy constructs on which Reynolds reports and to which he provides fodder. Antony Taylor writes that "for G.W.M. Reynolds, the British aristocracy was tainted, bearing the historical stain of the Norman Conquest and carrying inherited predispositions toward tyranny" (105). While no one could refute this claim, I posit that Reynolds's critique went a great deal further; Taylor's own use of the words "tainted" and "inherited predispositions" indicates his awareness of Reynolds's fascination with heredity and physiology, and by extension, the influence they had on the state of the nation. His hostile bombardment of noble manhood served as the perfect junction between medical assessment and Victorian values, casting suspicion not only on their ability to rule but on their very ability to survive.

#### Endnotes

(1)For comprehensive overviews on Reynolds's work, see Trefor Thomas's "Introduction" to his edition of *MoCL* (1996) and "Rereading G.W. Reynolds' *The Mysteries of London*" in *Rereading Victorian Fiction* (2008); Anne Humpherys and Louis James's *G.W.M. Reynolds: Nineteenth Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press* (2008); Dick Collins's "George McArthur Reynolds: a biographical sketch" in his edition of G.W.M. Reynolds's *The Necromancer* (2007); Sara Hackenberg's "Vampires and Resurrection Men: The Perils and Pleasures of Embodied Past in 1840s Sensational Fiction" in *Victorian Studies*, 52.1 (2009); Rohan McWilliam's "The mysteries of G.W.M. Reynolds: radicalism and melodrama in Victorian Britain" in *Living and Learning: Essays in Honour of J.F.C. Harrison* (1996); Ian Haywood's "Encountering Time: Memory and Tradition in the Radical Victorian Press" in *Encounters in the Victorian Press: Editors, Authors, Readers* (2005); and Ellen Bayuk Rosenman's "Spectacular Women: *The Mysteries of London* and the Female Body" in *Victorian Studies*, 30.1 (1996).<sup>(△)</sup>

(2)I will be using The Oxford Society's privately-bound 10-volume edition of *MoCL* from 1920 and therefore must cite references by volume and page number instead of by their original weekly publication dates. It is ironic, given Reynolds's stance on the inevitable destruction of the aristocracy, that the few bound volumes of his work produced for middle- and upper-class collectors had more physical longevity than the inexpensive weekly papers produced for lower-class citizens. There are few, if any, complete and surviving collections of *MoL* or *MoCL* in newspaper form.<sup>(△)</sup>

(3)(e.g. 1:376, 3:102, 3:236, 4:146, 6:19, 6:440, 6:441, 7:19 10:446-7).<sup>(△)</sup>

(4)This is, of course, only one half of a binary set up in Reynolds's discourse on gender; he addresses biological and medical issues surrounding his female characters as well. However, since his treatment of femininity is equally complex, but less concerned with fertility, I will discuss femininity only as it directly concerns male reproduction.<sup>(△)</sup>

(5)Though "homosexual" and "lesbian" did not appear as synonyms for "same-sex attraction" until late in the 19th century, I will use these terms (as well as "heterosexual") in the article for the purpose of brevity and for the ease of a modern audience.<sup>(△)</sup>

(6)I will treat this anachronistic term in the same manner as those in the above note. The concept of transvestism did not even appear until the early 20th century. Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, German sexologist, coined the term in his 1910 publication, *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress*. His study was the first scientific work to conclude that the practice of cross-dressing was, in fact, divorced from homosexuality (Bullough 53). Previous to this definition, cross-dressing was viewed as a lewd and criminal act tied almost solely to the realm of homosexual prostitution.<sup>(△)</sup>

(7)"[C]oncepts of girlhood, maturation, and the social dispositions of marriage are buttressed by a botanical language strong and pervasive enough to uphold them . . . Largely because of the simplicity of Linnaeus's *methodus propria*, or "sexual system" of plant classification, botany became a widely practiced and vernacularized science from the 1770s . . . [frequently used for] the female whose social and sexual maturation is expressed" (King 3-4).<sup>(△)</sup>

(8)At the time of Reynolds's writing, *The Lancet* reported six possible causes of impotence, only two of which were incurable: "Old diseases of the organs of generation, or . . . The congenital variety" ("Reviews" 298). Other causes were related to diet, depression and somber sexual habits and views.<sup>(△)</sup>

(9)Though Victorian doctors reported an equal proportion of male and female sufferers, syphilis was persistently regarded as a female-oriented disease. Marie E. McAllister writes that, of the many scapegoats found for the origin of syphilis, "one category of prejudice remained overt. Women could be linked definitively to the spread of syphilis and they were

by extension often linked to its birth" (33).<sup>(A)</sup>

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