

**NARRATIVE PATTERNS OF ILLEGITIMACY AND  
INFANTICIDE IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
NOVEL**

**CAROLINE EMERY**

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## SUMMARY OF THESIS

This thesis is concerned with the relationship between illegitimacy and infanticide as it is negotiated and explored in predominately nineteenth-century texts. It discusses illegitimacy and infanticide not just as themes but also as engendering narrative patterns that are powerful within their own cultures and which change over time and may often reappear in different periods but shaped by new issues and attitudes. While the examination of patterns of illegitimacy and infanticide concentrates on a chronology that begins with Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and Jane Austen's novels, discussion at times necessarily reaches back further to the eighteenth century where narratives of foundlings and of female sexual transgression are common, in order to provide an historical and literary context against which the impact of changes in social, legal and moral attitudes on literary and non-literary treatments of the consequences of sexual transgression may be judged. All the principal texts explored are written in English and published in Britain.

Illegitimacy is a disruptive presence in Victorian fiction both in a real sense - the existence of illegitimate children in society represents a challenge to authority - and in a symbolic sense: illegitimacy can work as an effective metaphor for social exclusion and 'Otherness'. Cultural representations of illegitimacy and infanticide are subject to change over time and are not fixed absolutes. Examining this slippage, the multiple ways in which different eras construct illegitimacy and infanticide, often building on previous patterns, can offer an illuminating insight into prevailing anxieties. The narratives examined in this thesis reveal tensions and even contradictions in the conceptualization of illegitimacy and infanticide. It takes as one of its starting points an interrogation of the assumption in both literary and historical treatments that illegitimacy is a 'natural' antecedent of infanticide.

The principal methodology of this thesis involves the use of close and sustained textual analysis to reveal narrative patterns as they relate to illegitimacy and infanticide. What a narrative pattern means for the purposes of this study involves not simply identifying an established template, such as the eighteenth-century foundling narrative, and examining its relevance and significance to nineteenth-century texts in which illegitimacy occurs. It might also be applied to elucidate narratives where neither literal illegitimacy nor literal infanticide ostensibly disrupt the dominant story. It is an argument of chapter one, for example, that Austen invokes the pattern of the exiled fallen woman and associations with seduction, exile and illegitimacy on the borders of the privileged dominant narrative in order to 'haunt' or refigure the foregrounded plot, and to suggest tragic possibilities that are, ultimately, eluded.

Chapter two considers historical attitudes towards, and legislation for, illegitimacy. It argues that legislative provisions and their official justifications themselves express narrative patterns. It examines a range of historical sources, including texts associated

with the 1834 Poor Law legislation, the records of the Coram Foundling Hospital, and accounts of infanticide trials held at the Old Bailey. Chapter three revisits the key narrative patterns identified in chapter one as the foundling narrative and the seduced maiden narrative, in its discussion of their later treatment in Ruth (1853) and Adam Bede (1859). It explores the use of the seduction narrative both in a disciplinary function and as a means to interrogate conservative social responses to illegitimacy. The final chapter deals with novels, which, in important respects diverge significantly from established narrative patterns. It shows novelists such as Wilkie Collins and Thomas Hardy explicitly questioning authoritative structures of law and morality, yet the approach here is one that assumes that it is also inevitable that other fictions will never be wholly monologic but will be found to debate, implicitly if not explicitly, rather than simply reflect, contemporary conditions and concerns.

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## Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the relationship between illegitimacy and infanticide as it is negotiated and explored in predominately nineteenth-century texts. It discusses illegitimacy and infanticide not just as themes but also as engendering narrative patterns that are powerful within their own cultures and which change over time. While the examination of patterns of illegitimacy and infanticide concentrates on a chronology that begins with Frances Burney's Evelina (1778) and Jane Austen's novels, discussion at times necessarily reaches back further to the eighteenth century where narratives of foundlings and of female sexual transgression are common, in order to provide an historical and literary contexts against which the impact of changes in social, legal and moral attitudes on literary and non-literary treatments of the consequences of sexual transgression may be judged. All the principal texts explored are written in English and published in Britain. This is not to say, however, that all the writers discussed are writing from an exclusively English perspective. The presentation of London society by Anglo-Irish writer Maria Edgeworth in Belinda (1801), for example, might well have been influenced by a political desire to critique the decadence that underpins her depiction of the English ruling elite.

Cultural representations of illegitimacy and infanticide are subject to change over time and are not fixed absolutes. Examining this slippage, the multiple ways in which different eras construct illegitimacy and infanticide, often building on previous patterns,



can offer an illuminating insight into prevailing anxieties. The narratives examined in this thesis reveal tensions and even contradictions in the conceptualization of illegitimacy and infanticide, its assumed corollary. Some depart radically from what might be described as established fictional patterns for their period, while others appear to conform to what have become considered as conventional perspectives. Appearances can be deceptive: apparently conventional texts reveal themselves as distinctly unconventional while conversely, superficially subversive texts can reveal a conservative heart when their treatment of the consequences of unsanctioned sexuality is examined. In fact, what this thesis hopes to show is that terms and concepts such as conventional and unconventional become increasingly strained and ultimately even redundant when narratives are scrutinised through the context of their treatment of illegitimacy and infanticide. In this way, a number of novels are revealed as having unresolved issues or even fault lines that a more dominant pattern, such as the fallen woman narrative, can obscure.

The principal methodology of this thesis involves the use of close and sustained textual analysis to reveal narrative patterns as they relate to illegitimacy and infanticide. My work hopes to develop the readings of critics such as Mary Waldron and Claudia Johnson who, in their studies of Jane Austen, take as their starting point a foregrounding of close textual analysis. Waldron, in particular, is keenly aware of the importance of literary stereotypes in shaping Austen's work. She describes Austen as 'not challenging ideologies but fictions'.<sup>1</sup> It is how these challenges relate in particular to fictions of illegitimacy and infanticide throughout the nineteenth century that this thesis is

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Waldron, *Jane Austen and the Fiction of her Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 63.

concerned with. In many cases illegitimacy does not lead to infanticide and infanticide is not always the consequence of illegitimacy. It takes as one of its starting points an interrogation of the assumption in both literary and historical treatments that illegitimacy is a 'natural' antecedent of infanticide. What a narrative pattern means for the purposes of this study involves not simply identifying an established template, such as the eighteenth-century foundling narrative, and examining its relevance and significance to nineteenth-century texts in which illegitimacy occurs. It might also be applied to elucidate narratives where neither literal illegitimacy nor literal infanticide ostensibly disrupt the dominant story. It is an argument of chapter one, for example, that Austen invokes the pattern of the exiled fallen woman and associations with seduction, exile and illegitimacy on the borders of the privileged narrative in order to 'haunt' or refigure the foregrounded plot, and to suggest tragic possibilities that are, ultimately, eluded.

The dominant narrative patterns of illegitimacy in any period include suppressions and this thesis argues that an important one for nineteenth-century literature and culture is the suppression of the father's role both in Victorian legislation, such as the 1834 Poor Law, which could be seen as figuring the man as the victim, compared with earlier periods' bastardy provisions, and many Victorian novels on the subjects of illegitimacy and child murder. Modern criticism - particularly feminist criticism - which has been instrumental in revealing the importance of these subjects, not only for studies of patriarchy but also for studies of class, has tended to concentrate up to now on the unmarried mother. This thesis makes the male, as seducer, father, surrogate father, bridegroom and, at times, illegitimate child, a central theme. For male offspring questions

of inheritance are more important, though inheritance can be a theme that affects girls too.

Existing critical studies of illegitimacy and infanticide, such as the work of Mark Jackson and Josephine McDonagh tend to privilege historical context over literary text, employing literature in a limited way as illustrative exemplar of historical changes. Literary texts do not necessarily simply and directly reflect historical reality. This thesis has taken nineteenth-century literary and non-literary texts themselves as source material and foregrounded close and detailed textual analysis. This is not to say that historical texts are ignored, but read in the context of literary narrative patterns. Indeed, historical texts themselves involve cultural and narrative patterns. Employing close textual analysis on both literary and historical texts allows for an opportunity to examine the complex interplay between historical and literary reality. The thesis draws on a wide range of historical data. Chapter two explores the 1834 Poor Law legislation in relation to the narrative patterns it draws on and generates. Original research into the records of the application of mothers to the Coram Foundling Hospital reveals that the forms used by the hospital to record the mothers' details impose a narrative pattern or template that reveals and imposes certain key preconceptions about the nature of illegitimate birth. Interestingly, while these narratives conform to certain moral orthodoxies, the points at which they depart from conventional literary treatments, most notably in the absence of the upper-class seducer, signpost potential anxieties in literature, where historical veracity is sacrificed in favour of another kind of truth.

Period and gender create changes in the dominance of certain patterns of inheritance. Before the Victorian period, as chapter one shows, attitudes towards illegitimacy could be more relaxed, less censorious. The fact that Austen never subjects her heroines to the most punitive narrative patterns, but rescues them from complete degradation, illegitimate childbirth and death, presents men as economically vulnerable and certain social environments as the source of danger, raises questions about what is often assumed by critics to be her conservative perspective. Chapter one rejects critical arguments for outright conservatism on this matter and discusses the political ambivalence of her handling of the themes in relation to Opie's Adeline Mowbray (1805), refiguring Austen, through her engagement with the theme of illegitimacy, as a more radical writer than might be expected. The unstable basis on which deep guilt is imputed to women makes these two themes subjects where conservative novels often reveal ambiguities, while radical approaches, as is shown in the final chapter, use these twin themes to raise questions about large social and philosophical issues.

Chapter two considers historical attitudes towards, and legislation for, illegitimacy. It argues that legislative provisions and their official justifications themselves express narrative patterns. The law and society's moral sanctions in the Victorian period make illegitimacy and infanticide particularly oppressive concepts for women. The 1834 Poor Law rewrote illegitimacy as a narrative of women rather than of men, and as a narrative particularly of the working-class woman from a middle-class male perception. It also rewrote illegitimacy as a narrative of guilt rather more than of economic provision. The suppression of earlier constructions of illegitimacy which

simply stressed the responsibilities of fathers leave the father without a fixed role in the Victorian vision of illegitimacy, a situation which can make him a creatively versatile figure for some contemporary novelists. This chapter also considers the records of women applying to the Coram Foundling Hospital and the extent to which these narratives present unsanctioned sexual relationships and illegitimacy in a way that is consistent with their representation in literary works. It is important to keep in mind that such records themselves often preserve narratives, narratives that unmarried mothers told and narratives shaped by contemporary expectations. This chapter surveys some modern interpretations of Victorian attitudes towards illegitimacy and infanticide. Many of these stress the influence of middle-class attitudes and Evangelical beliefs.

Chapter three revisits the key narrative patterns identified in chapter one as the foundling narrative and the seduced maiden narrative, through discussion of their later treatment in Ruth (1853) and Adam Bede (1859). It explores the use of the seduction narrative both in a disciplinary function and as a means to interrogate conservative social responses to illegitimacy. As previously discussed, the representation of women became increasingly subject to divisive ideology. This chapter considers the ways in which and possible reasons why the figure of the woman increasingly became the locus for a debate about the boundaries of political and moral orthodoxy and dissent. It also considers the importance of the child within narratives of illegitimacy and repositions the child as more central to the narrative than previously considered since feminist criticism tends to ignore the child, choosing instead to focus on the fallen woman and mother, two states whose ideological incompatibility become a focus for anxiety and tension. The conventions

surrounding the representation of the seducer, particularly the seducer as father, are also considered, as well as those strategies, which seem to depart from predictable patterns. Infanticide is clearly one option open to women who feel themselves to be burdened both materially and morally by an illegitimate child. The brutality of such a statement could be seen to highlight how desperate those burdens were in the Victorian period. This chapter examines the assumed link between illegitimacy and infanticide by looking at both literary texts and contemporary court transcripts of infanticide trials. Eliot herself is conscious of the historical influence on sexual matters. The trial of Hetty in Adam Bede is deliberately placed in 1800, in order that Hetty might be tried under the apparently harsher 1624 Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murthering of Bastard Children, which took concealment of birth as evidence of murder rather than the 1803 repeal of this statute. In this way, then, Eliot is conscious of constructing a historical as well as a literary text.

The role of the father is central to chapter four, though the theme occurs in other chapters too. It argues that, while criticism has stressed the importance of the ideal of motherhood in Victorian fiction, there is a case to be made for novelists' recurrent interest in the father's role and in the transfiguring potential of loving fatherhood. It explores the extent to which the surrogate father in particular helps to restore a legitimate male line and neutralises the contaminating influence of the fallen mother – a strategy used to make safe the unstable illegitimacy plot. The recurring pattern of the father bridegroom in foundling narratives raises interesting points of difference between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts. Chapter four returns to the significance of

children within narratives of illegitimacy, looking more specifically at the different ways in which male and female children are treated. That they merit different treatment in the first place supports the argument I make in chapter three that they are important to the philosophical preoccupations of the texts and not simply an easily ignored by-product of the fallen woman. Male children, in particular, raise questions of inheritance and the legitimate transfer of property.

The final chapter deals with novels, which, in important respects diverge significantly from established narratives. It shows novelists explicitly questioning authoritative structures of law and morality, yet the approach here is one that assumes that it is also inevitable that other fictions will never be wholly monologic but will be found to debate, implicitly, if not explicitly, rather than simply reflect, contemporary conditions and concerns. Wilkie Collins, Thomas Hardy and Henry James handle themes of illegitimacy and infanticide in radical ways that raise large philosophical questions: in Collins' No Name (1862), questions about the authority of the law, in Hardy's Far From the Madding Crowd (1874), issues of the inherent instability of legitimacy, and in James' The Other House (1896), published at the end of the time span covered by this thesis, questions about society and individualism. So-called 'New Woman' narratives that begin in the *fin de siècle*, such as Grant Allen's The Woman Who Did (1895), and Olive Schreiner's Story of an African Farm (1883) are also considered in the context of earlier nascent feminist texts. This looks back to chapter two and the arguments here that the legislation that defines illegitimacy is not only time-dependent and mutable but constructs an intrinsically unstable concept. Some novels themselves can be seen as

illegitimate or mutant in relation to generic expectations. While illegitimacy is a concept that stereotypically constructs women as weak morally, economically, and legally, and threatens the identity of both mother and child, several of the fictions in this book portray a counter movement, a narrative in which women become strong and men become marginalised in the face of their strength and generous denouements replace punitive outcomes for fallen women. In some cases, including the early Memoirs of Emma Courtney (1795) by Mary Hays and also the late-Victorian Far From the Madding Crowd, the standard, punitive narrative of illegitimacy is circumvented because women act generously to other women, identifying with their fall. In other cases, women who could be stigmatised by the legal accusations of illegitimacy or infanticide contrive to survive with ruthless strength. The final chapter argues that such women can be seen as an expression of a nascent spirit of individualism in moral theories.



## Chapter One: Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Attitudes

### I

#### Sense and Sensibility: The Seduced Maiden narrative

The thesis begins with four novels by Jane Austen, partly because their treatments of illegitimacy belong more to the moral climate of the eighteenth century than that of the Victorian era: thus they provide a point of comparison with novels discussed in later chapters. We also, however, find conflicting moral evaluations. That illegitimacy is an unstable concept is not a fact confined to the Victorian era. Narratives of the dangers of female transgression are both present in these novels by Austen and excluded from her heroines' stories. They illustrate what this investigation means by narrative patterns of illegitimacy, the foundling or infanticide, and show Austen using them with great subtlety. Such patterns can be significant in a narrative in which there is no literal unmarried mother, illegitimate or abandoned child or child-murder. In Mansfield Park (1814) none of these are found, yet a foundling narrative, familiar in the eighteenth century from Tom Jones (1749) and less famous examples, proves illuminating in the analysis of the novel's treatment of Fanny. Jo Alyson Parker comments on parallels between Fielding and Austen; both authors develop plots that challenge the traditional inheritance plot. While Tom Jones is centred on a male hero, however, Parker argues that Austen pushes literary boundaries further by applying the traditional inheritance plot to female concerns:

Austen delves into something that Fielding does not address at all in Tom Jones ... the question of woman's relation to an inherited tradition and the nature of woman's authority.<sup>1</sup>

The motif of the exile or marginalisation of the unmarried mother can be traced in the judgements bestowed in the text on the married but sexually errant Maria. In Emma (1815) the literary narrative of the romantic and aristocratically-born foundling is present as an imagined pattern, presented in satiric conflict with what the novels finally reveals as the far from exciting story of Harriet's origins. In Sense and Sensibility (1811) and Pride and Prejudice (1813) a narrative of seduction on the edge of the plot seems a displacement of dangers inherent in the heroine's own experience of sexual desire. That so many patterns associated with illegitimacy can be seen to be mediated in Austen's fiction supports Waldron's view, that:

Because Austen wrote consciously against the grain of contemporary didacticism but within a familiar fictional framework, her narratives become not only ironic but richly contrapuntal; we are conscious of a number of points of view at every turn.<sup>2</sup>

All the novels convey conflicts; of moral judgements, and around issues of gender and class, in their handling of these narrative patterns of sexual irregularity. This chapter will argue that criticism that attributes to Austen a straightforward conservatism in her handling of such themes disregards the tensions evident within her writing on these matters.

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<sup>1</sup> Jo Alyson Parker, The Author's Inheritance: Henry Fielding, Jane Austen and the Establishment of the Novel (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998), p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> Waldron, op. cit., p. 14.

## Jane Austen and Narrative Patterns of Sexual Danger

Austen's first two published novels, Sense and Sensibility (1811) and Pride and Prejudice (1813) seem at first to avoid the contentious yet popular subject of illegitimacy, even when both novels contain protagonists who engage in high-risk behaviour with men whose pasts identify them as sexual adventurers. That Austen's heroines manage to avoid the traditional literary consequences of sexual disobedience is an anomaly identified by Marilyn Butler in her discussion of Sense and Sensibility:

Another contemporary novelist – Mrs West, Mrs Hamilton, or the young Maria Edgeworth – would almost certainly have had Marianne seduced and killed off, after the errors of which she has been guilty.<sup>3</sup>

Claudia Johnson too views Austen as distinguished from her contemporaries by a refusal to allow sexual scandal to dominate her novels:

The depiction of illicit sexual behavior was a possibility always open to Austen. The refusal to center her fiction on problematic sexual passion distinguishes Austen from her contemporaries, conservative and progressive alike.<sup>4</sup>

While it may be true that Austen does not 'center her fiction on problematic sexual passion', that is not to say that it does not permeate the foregrounded romance narratives, as a set of shadowy possibilities, possibilities that seem to haunt the conventionally successful love stories.

In fact, although the consequences of prohibited sexual behaviour do not dominate the novels, they do reflect more accurately their liminal position on the

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<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Butler, Jane Austen and the War of Ideas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 189.

<sup>4</sup> Claudia Johnson, Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novels (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 55.

periphery of socially-sanctioned relationships by existing on the borders of the well-established romance narratives. In the four novels that I intend to consider: Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park and Emma, the most visible consequence of sexual disobedience, that is, illegitimacy, is present albeit often as a shadowy presence, expressed as a 'might have been' or displaced onto a cameo, as is the case in Sense and Sensibility. Nonetheless, even as this shadowy presence, illegitimacy has the disruptive potential to haunt those more orthodox relationships.

### Finding the Unconventional in the Conventional

Butler assumes that not only was the conventional literary consequence of Marianne's high-risk behaviour seduction followed by death but also that this process serves a primarily disciplinary function, as suggested by her phrase, 'after the errors of which she has been guilty'. In Butler's analysis, Austen's refusal to comply with convention implies a somewhat rebellious perspective. In fact, the guilt that Butler assumes as automatically attaching to Marianne requires a reading back of more punitive values, promulgated in Victorian England, as chapter two will show. Female authors contemporary to Austen such as Amelia Opie, Mary Hays and Mary Brunton used the established literary convention of the 'seduced maiden' to interrogate rather than simply to present a guilty and tragic figure. Radical writers such as Wollstonecraft exploited the link between loss of honour and prostitution to advance a proto-feminist agenda. As Vivien Jones comments:

The 1790's represents a new moment of crisis in the story of anxious redemption. It is also the moment at which prostitution becomes for the

first time explicitly a feminist issue, through the radical Dissenting inheritance of writers like Wollstonecraft and Hays ... Their contribution is to expose the story of economic injustice which is always the more or less explicit subject of the conventional sexual narrative, where the blame for female ruin is attributed to innocence and the libertine's sexual opportunism.<sup>5</sup>

If, then, the conventional seduction narrative is put to work by women writers predominately as a subversive rather than disciplinary form in the period during which Austen was writing, then Austen's apparent failure to engage with feminist issues by avoiding the consequences of a well-established seduction narrative familiar to her readers could be interpreted as Austen eschewing subversion in favour of conservatism. It is important, however, to acknowledge that Marianne's escape from ruin sets Austen apart from her conformist as well as radical contemporaries and is in itself a political statement: a determination to avoid established literary patterns, even if those patterns appear to offer the opportunity for subversion and a challenge to patriarchy.

It is not only critics who note this irregularity. In Pride and Prejudice Austen herself challenges the expected consequences of seduction, by self-consciously sketching-out then rejecting conventional assumptions associated with out of control female sexuality. The return of Lydia to Longbourn as a married woman is described wryly by Austen as a disappointment to the villagers:

The good news quickly spread through the house; and with proportionate speed through the neighbourhood. It was borne in the latter with decent philosophy. To be sure it would have been more for the advantage of conversation, had Miss Lydia Bennet come upon the town; or, as the

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<sup>5</sup> Vivien Jones, 'Placing Jemima: women writers of the 1790s and the eighteenth-century prostitution narrative', Women's Writing, 4:2 (1997), 201-220 (p. 206).

happiest alternative, been secluded from the world, in some distant farm house.<sup>6</sup>

Austen makes a tongue-in-cheek criticism here, of the desire of the villagers for a sensational conclusion to Lydia's story, involving either prostitution, 'come upon the town', or the concealed birth of an illegitimate child, 'secluded from the world in some distant farmhouse'. It is not only the villagers' desire that Austen confounds but that of the reader, who is implicated as complicit with the villagers in anticipating and possibly even hoping for, a dramatic conclusion to Lydia's predicament. The villagers' gossip here functions as a meta-fictional comment on the expectations of the genre, expectations that Austen baffles.

The issue, however, is not ignored by Austen. The politicised function of novels that require the fall of their heroines into pregnancy, prostitution and death to advance their own reformist or reactionary position receives a more nuanced treatment in Austen. Far from avoiding 'problematic sexual passion', she allows those elements of sexual passion that are 'problematic' to remain unresolved. This is seen in her treatment of illegitimacy where she relinquishes the dramatic and shocking potential of literary illegitimacy and the rigid set of consequences it seems to entail in favour of what I would term a kind of phantom illegitimacy, which haunts the actions and behaviour of the main protagonists while simultaneously allowing Austen to rehearse an alternative, less certain and arguably more realistic set of endings for women who challenge sexual convention.

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<sup>6</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Donald Gray (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 201. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

## The Seduction Narrative

In Sense and Sensibility, while Marianne herself avoids being seduced by Willoughby, the threat of illegitimacy and the tropes of removal from society and the destruction of the victim haunt her disappointed relationship with Willoughby through the story of the two Elizas told by Colonel Brandon to her sister, Elinor. These interpolated female tragedies introduce the more conventional pattern of the traditional seduction narrative into Austen's more complex unfolding. Illegitimacy links Brandon to Willoughby through the older Eliza, a cousin of Brandon's whom he loved but who was "married against her inclination",<sup>7</sup> to Brandon's brother for purely financial considerations. The marriage was not happy and Brandon blames his brother for this: "My brother did not deserve her" (p. 194). Having committed adultery she was divorced and sank into debt:

"Can we wonder that with such a husband to provoke inconstancy, and without a friend to advise or restrain her, she should fall? ... The shock which her marriage had given me ... was of trifling weight - was nothing - to what I felt when I heard, about two years afterwards, of her divorce".  
(p. 195)

When Brandon discovers her, she has sunk "deeper in a life of sin" (p. 195), and is on her deathbed. Note the introduction here of a recognition of the moral complexity of the adulterer's situation – Brandon blames in turn her husband, whose behaviour is sufficiently bad to incite his wife's adultery, and her social isolation. The conventional

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<sup>7</sup> Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility, ed. Ros Ballaster (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 194. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

literary punishment for the fallen woman, death, appears here. Unable to help Eliza, beyond providing for a comfortable death, he takes responsibility for her illegitimate daughter, the younger Eliza. This younger Eliza, seduced by Willoughby, is deserted by him even though pregnant with his child:

“He had left the girl whose youth and innocence he had seduced, in a situation of the utmost distress, with no creditable home, no help, no friends, ignorant of his address! He had left her promising to return; he neither returned, nor wrote, nor relieved her.” (p. 198)

That Willoughby was attempting to seduce Marianne at precisely the time that Brandon discovered the fate of the young Eliza creates a kind of sympathetic parallel between the two women, before a speech by Brandon makes explicit the connection between them:

“Little did Mr. Willoughby imagine, I suppose, when his looks censured me for incivility in breaking up the party, that I was called away to the relief of one, whom he had made poor and miserable; but *had* he known it, what would it have availed? Would he have been less gay or less happy in the smiles of your sister? No, he had already done that, which no man who *can* feel for another, would do.” (p. 198)

In its most straightforward context, then, the fate of this young Eliza is put to what might be described as conventional use by Brandon as a cautionary tale that disturbs Marianne’s disappointed love affair with Willoughby and suggests the threat to innocent young women that lies behind established courtship rituals. Brandon is certainly also eager that this narrative should be received in a compensatory way: to make Marianne resigned to the loss of Willoughby and even relieved at surviving a relationship with him so materially unscathed. We can also, however, see the Eliza stories as parallels that bring into the novel dangers, many of them inherent, for women, and perhaps for over-romantic visions of love, in the unequal power between men and women.



### Parallels with The Victim of Prejudice

This pattern of illegitimacy as outlined by Brandon in Sense and Sensibility shares many points of similarity with the revelations made by Mr Raymond to his ward, Mary in The Victim of Prejudice (1799) by Mary Hays. Raymond writes to Mary to explain his connection to Mary's mother and includes a letter written by Mary's mother, which explains her fall into poverty and crime and, by extension, the younger Mary's own inferior status as the illegitimate child of a murderess. His principle reason for subjecting Mary to this knowledge is to make clear to her that a marriage to the man she loves is an impossibility, given the social prejudice that exists about her kind:

Must I add – You can never be the wife of William Pelham?  
“Let him be preserved from humiliating connections”, said Mr. Pelham, when he entrusted him to my charge. In the opinion of those who class with the higher ranks of society, poverty, obscure birth, and the want of splendid connections, are the only circumstances by which he can be degraded ... William is destined for the theatre of the world; he will imbibe the contagion of a distempered civilisation. Mary must not be contemned by the man she loves.<sup>8</sup>

Although Raymond expresses more obvious outrage at the prejudices of those he considers his social superiors he, like Brandon, is unwilling to challenge those prejudices and is ultimately prepared to sacrifice the happiness of his ward in order to conform to the unreasonable demands of a repressive and patriarchal society, as represented by Mr. Pelham.

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Hays, The Victim of Prejudice, ed. Eleanor Ty (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1996), p. 32. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

Hays is clearly making a political point about the status of women as illegitimate members of society, where illegitimacy in its strictest legal sense is only one of several ways in which a woman may be isolated and rejected, Eleanor Ty points out:

In the eyes of the world, the degrading circumstances surrounding Mary's birth are enough to exclude her from respectable society. Hays is critical of a society which ranks people mainly according to their class and economic circumstances. The young heroine's education and accomplishments, her dignity and character, signify nothing in such a culture.<sup>9</sup>

Although Brandon's tale does not explicitly link Marianne with a shameful maternal history, his sympathetic identification of Marianne with both Elizas at various points in the narrative reveals the disturbing possibility that all women have the potential within them to fall. Similarly, although Mary's relationship to Raymond and to her mother seems to identify her most closely to the younger Eliza, similarities are suggested between Marianne and Mary. Both men are attempting to reconcile women with whom they perceive themselves to be in a protective relationship, to the failed expectation of marriage to the men they love. Although Marianne is not illegitimate, she shares with Mary the relative 'poverty, obscure birth, and the want of splendid connections', which would inevitably lead to an unhappy marriage with Willoughby. Marianne would eventually be 'contemned by the man she loves' when her lack of material assets restricted Willoughby in his extravagant pursuit of pleasure, a situation predicted by Elinor:

"Beyond *that*, had you endeavoured, however reasonably, to abridge *his* enjoyments, is it not to be feared, that instead of prevailing on feelings so selfish to consent to it, you would have lessened your own influence on his heart, and made him regret the connection which had involved him in such difficulties?" (p. 327)

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<sup>9</sup> Victim of Prejudice, Introduction., p. xix.

That women of apparently vastly different backgrounds and expectations might share characteristics and even seem interchangeable at times, raises the unsettling possibility that the security domesticity appears to confer on women is largely illusory – that little separates these women and that Marianne is much closer to destitution than she seems. While both women are denied marriage to the men they love, Marianne is allowed to recover and make a good match with Brandon, whereas Mary is condemned to the conventional fate mapped out for her by her mother: seduction and death. It is at these moments, where Austen exploits similarities between her narrative and more obviously radical versions of the seduction theme to ‘haunt’ Marianne’s tale with the suggestion of what might have been, that she is at her most interesting because she really does seem to be doing something different with the genre, while recognising and accepting its limitations.

Raymond’s narrative takes the epistolary form, explaining the sordid history of her mother. Like Brandon, Raymond was ‘the younger brother of a respectable family’ (p. 58), whose interest in the elder Mary was initially romantic. When he is rejected in favour of another suitor who proves as disastrous a husband as Brandon’s older brother, he travels abroad. On his return he discovers Mary in the most unfortunate of circumstances, similar to those Brandon finds Eliza in:

A woman with a wan and haggard countenance, her clothes rent and her hair dishevelled, had fainted into the arms of a ruffian who supported her. “Secure them,” exclaimed the master of the hotel ... “those are the murderers!” (p. 59)

Raymond recognises Mary and she him and while she awaits execution for the murder of her original seducer she writes to him, blaming her fall on society and man in language that foreshadows that of Brandon when seeking to justify the first Eliza's fall:

I found myself suddenly deserted, driven with opprobrium from the house of my *destroyer*, thrown friendless and destitute upon the world, branded with infamy, and a wretched outcast from social life. (p. 63)

Both Brandon and Mary make clear that, once the protection of a husband is lost, a woman is condemned to destitution. Without any other avenues for self-sufficiency available, prostitution becomes the only means of support:

Unable to labour, ashamed to solicit charity, helpless, penniless, feeble, delicate, thrown out with reproach from society, borne down with a consciousness of irretrievable error, exposed to insult, to want, to contumely ... From whence was I to draw fortitude to combat these accumulated evils? (p. 65)

Both novels introduce the figure of the benevolent surrogate father, a figure we shall find recurring in novels examined here. As in Sense and Sensibility, it is the former innocent lover, Raymond who is charged with becoming a surrogate father to the orphaned baby girl. Raymond and Brandon are unable to protect their respective charges from conforming to the narrative pattern of seduction waiting from them from the moment of their identification with their mothers. The sharing of names between mother and daughter in both novels serves to emphasise the sense that the individual women are almost indistinguishable in terms of the way they are perceived by society. While the second Eliza and the second Mary are ultimately doomed by their circumstances, their individual awareness of the fate that awaits them is significant. The reader is never allowed to hear directly from either of the two Elizas – their story is controlled all the time by Brandon's narrative. In The Victim of Prejudice, however, the reader experiences

the young Mary's struggle unedited by the controlling medium of an overlaid and overwhelming masculine commentary and has access to her mother's candid feelings as revealed in her letter. Further, Mary is allowed the dubious power of comprehending the fate that awaits her, although even with this knowledge she too eventually succumbs to the great behemoth of social and literary convention:

Despite her determination not to fall prey to seduction like her mother, the second Mary ends up with an equally tragic fate ... As she peruses her mother's memoirs, Mary becomes the reader within the narrative, whose reactions to the tale help to define our own. She is unable to transcend the confining web of the story, and becomes enmeshed by the words.<sup>10</sup>

By demonstrating that women remain trapped even when, or perhaps because, they appear to enjoy a measure of self determination, Hays' novel offers little in the way of compromise where the demands of a necessarily masculine narrative, designed to reinforce the status quo, are impossible for an illegitimate woman to avoid. The tale of the two Marys is useful because it provides simultaneously a blueprint for a radical retelling of the conventional seduction narrative while self-consciously and defiantly succumbing to its authority. It is at those points of divergence from both the radical and the conservative narrative provided by Hays that Austen's altogether more ambivalent attitude both to illegitimacy and to the issue of women with which illegitimacy is inextricably linked, is revealed.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. xix.

## The Seduction Narrative and Masculine Values

The story of the two Elizas has come under scrutiny by critics, both to support and undermine the characterisation of Austen as essentially conservative in outlook.<sup>11</sup> Claudia Johnson, for instance, comments that:

For Austen ... to have foregrounded the tales of the two Elizas would have entailed earmarking a progressive stance, which she evidently did not want to do ... As if to defuse the sensitivity of the subject matter, Austen distances herself from the story of the two Elizas by tucking it safely within the center of Sense and Sensibility and delegating its narration to the safe Colonel Brandon.<sup>12</sup>

This essentially conservative reading of the Eliza narrative emphasises both the position of the episode within the text and the apparently conservative and trustworthy credentials of the narrator. After all, 'Eliza is consigned to silence and isolation, and Austen does not bring Eliza in from the margins of her proper novel and invite her to tell her own story'.<sup>13</sup> The content of the tale itself seems to conform to what might be described as the key features of what was emerging as the standard illegitimacy discourse, a discourse whose conservative ideology was not yet fixed but subject to radical rewriting and subversion, a process identified in The Victim of Prejudice. In Brandon's story, as in many later texts, the mother of the illegitimate child dies which simplifies the issue of guilt since her death can be viewed as a straightforward consequence of sin. Furthermore, the illegitimate child is a girl and, therefore, does not threaten the masculine line of inheritance so

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Marie E. McAllister in "'Only to Sink Deeper': Venereal Disease in Sense and Sensibility', Eighteenth Century Fiction, 17: 1 (2004), 87-110.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

significant in Austen's novels. Finally, that both a mother and daughter are guilty of subversive sexual behaviour suggests, on the most basic of levels, that there is a 'type' more likely to fall - that such behaviour is 'caught' from one's background and as such, cannot be transmitted to individuals rooted in solid domesticity: she mentions a lack of restraining friends surrounding the victim as a crucial factor in preventing a woman from succumbing to the other factors that prompt her towards illicit actions and away from the security offered by domesticity.

And yet, the novel provides another reason for illegitimacy to exist on its borders like this, that is, to reflect more accurately the contemporary reality in the two embedded narratives: Austen does not foreground the story of the two Elizas in my analysis, not because their function is to represent conservative values nor because she is shying away from dealing with issues of sexual passion, but because illegitimacy, while not being entirely safe as a topic of conversation, has not yet moved centre-stage as the emblem of sexual disobedience. In fact, Austen does introduce the subject of illegitimacy to middle-class conversation, as Mrs Jennings raises the subject of Brandon's 'little love-child':

"Two thousand a year without debt or drawback – except the little love-child, indeed; aye, I had forgot her; but she may be 'prenticed out at small cost, and then what does it signify?" (p. 186)

'Little love-child' evokes, both in the adjective and the noun, a sympathetic, maternal and accepting attitude towards the offspring of an illicit union. The only reservation Mrs Jennings expresses in relation to 'the little love-child' relates to the potential economic claims she may make on Brandon's fortune. Sense and Sensibility can be seen as a novel on the cusp of the evolving process that took literature and society from a more pragmatic

eighteenth-century view of illegitimacy to a view that expresses absolute moral censorship. It was this emerging view of absolute moral censure that early feminist writers were keen to subvert and expose. The universal language of moral censure that frames later references to illegitimacy is absent here. Earlier in the novel, when Brandon is forced to leave the house party, having been called away by knowledge of Eliza's whereabouts, Mrs Jennings raises the subject of Brandon's love child in a manner that could be described as playful:

"I can guess what his business is, however," said Mrs Jennings exultingly.

"Can you, ma'am?" said almost every body.

"Yes; it is about Miss Williams, I am sure."

"And who is Miss Williams?" asked Marianne.

"What! Do you not know who Miss Williams is? I am sure you must have heard of her before. She is a relation of the Colonel's, my dear; a very near relation. We will not say how near, for fear of shocking the young ladies." Then lowering her voice a little, she said to Elinor, "She is his natural daughter."

"Indeed!"

"Oh! yes; and as like him as she can stare. I dare say the Colonel will leave her all his fortune."

Lady Middleton's delicacy was shocked; and in order to banish so improper a subject as the mention of a natural daughter, she actually took the trouble of saying something about the weather. (p. 67)

Even the substitute term 'natural daughter' (also used when introducing Harriet in Emma), is a term conveying a non-censorious attitude, that of the existence of children of nature alongside those who fall into the formal categories that society adds to the human situation. Austen seems to be poking fun here at the kind of delicacy that considers natural daughters an improper subject of discussion for polite society. Mrs Jennings only lowers her voice 'a little', having provoked universal attention to the secret. While acknowledging that position and appearing to concur with it, Austen simultaneously challenges that timid view of conversational appropriateness by having this view



expressed by Lady Middleton, who is not a sympathetic character. Lady Middleton is a younger woman and her shocked delicacy might reveal something of the conflict developing between new more morally censorious values and the older values as epitomised by Mrs Jennings whose mode of speech marks her out as somewhat out of step with the modern world. The use of anti-climax in this passage is particularly humorous: the subject of illegitimacy is so shocking that only a discussion of a subject as banal as the weather can restore equilibrium to the group. Austen's handling seems to leave the subject of illegitimacy unresolved – between seriousness and banality.

Mrs Jennings articulates a pragmatic, worldly view of illegitimacy that operates effectively as a foil to Brandon's more subjective response. While her open reference to it emphasises her characteristic lack of discretion, it also invites a sense of confidence that her audience shares similar attitudes. As far as Mrs Jennings is concerned, any threat that illegitimacy poses to polite society is entirely matter-of-fact and restricted to considerations of inheritance and economic provision. There is no sense of illegitimacy being viewed as exposing a wider, generalized social malaise. Sense and Sensibility as a whole appears to sanction the attitude of Mrs Jennings: that as long as gentlemen take the responsibility of their natural children seriously and make financial provision for them, they represent no wider threat to society as a whole. The problems come when this expectation of gentlemanly behaviour is disappointed, as is considered in far more sensational terms in Pride and Prejudice. This passage repays detailed attention, when read in conjunction with the later narrative about the two Elizas because in both style and

content it indicates how multivalent, complex and unresolved the subject is in Austen's treatment.

Austen further undermines expectations and widens the moral parameters within which female transgression may be judged by suggesting that for neither Eliza was their 'fall' an inevitable consequence of personality, but rather a product of their environment and individual experiences. In this way, I would argue that Austen seeks to interrogate the male role in illegitimacy. Brandon's character as 'safe' is called into question here as he must assume a degree of personal responsibility for the fall of each. Of the older Eliza he says "But can we wonder that with such a husband to provoke inconstancy, and without a friend to advise or restrain her, she should fall?" (p. 195). In fact, it is his deliberate absence that robs her of a friend that could have protected her. Even he momentarily considers that his presence could have prevented her fall: "Had I remained in England, perhaps – but I meant to promote the happiness of both by removing from her for years" (p. 195), although he is quick to reassure himself that he acted for the best. Once again we see Austen allowing for multiple moral options. Rather more worryingly, Johnson accuses Brandon of disappointment when the behaviour of the older Eliza does not remain true to a romantic pattern of death after ruin:

He yearns for the safety from further harm which the heroine's death affords. He complains with rather disturbing directness that instead of delicately languishing to an early grave out of disappointed love for him, Eliza survives: "Happy had it been if she had not lived to overcome those regrets which the remembrance of me occasioned". Happy for whom? one wonders.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

Johnson places a rather limited construction on the expression “Happy had it been if she had not lived to overcome those regrets which the remembrance of me occasioned”. Johnson has taken “lived to” solely in a literal life-or-death sense, but the expression was a popular idiom of the time, which could have also meant simply that Brandon is sad that as her life became more contaminated by her experiences, she changed her attitude towards the innocent relationship she shared with him. Again, we actually have Austen introducing uncertainty into what can be interpreted as convention. Idiom is used here to show that even the most conventional of responses might be subject to multiple interpretations. Of the younger Eliza he comments that his own lack of judgement had a part to play in her seduction: “I had allowed her, (imprudently, as it has since turned out,) at her earnest desire, to go to Bath with one of her young friends” (p. 197). But earlier than this, as Seeber points out, ‘even when “the possession of the family property” provides Colonel Brandon with a home, he “place(s) her under the care of a very respectable woman, residing in Dorset shire”,<sup>15</sup> rather than take responsibility for her himself. In both cases, it is nurture rather than nature, which leads to social ostracism. It is, moreover, the absence of male nurture or care that is seen to be critical to creating an environment where women can be abused by predatory males. In Sense and Sensibility, then, it is not only Willoughby, the traditional bounder, who is held responsible by Austen for the consequences of seduction and illegitimacy, but Brandon too, who fails to live up to the demands of domestic hierarchy headed by a man. Brandon himself seems to support the view that illegitimacy is a male problem as well as a female one when he says of Willoughby’s behaviour to Eliza, expressing, in passing a version of the morality of

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<sup>15</sup> Barbara Seeber, General Consent in Jane Austen (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), p. 72.

true sensibility in contrast to Willoughby's shallow, fashionable pose of sensibility: "No, he had already done that, which no man who *can* feel for another, would do" (p. 198). The measure of a gentleman is not determined here simply by avoiding any direct responsibility for a woman's seduction and fall but also in the quality of care given, not only to vulnerable women themselves but also to their illegitimate children. As we shall see, the perception of illegitimacy as a man's responsibility, beyond that of simply being the seducer, but as a negative reflection on his role as protector of the family, is avoided in the majority of Victorian novels where the issue of the extent to which men can be held responsible for a failure to protect female family members is neatly sidestepped by having the majority of single mothers orphans themselves.

### Marianne

In this context, Marianne too can be seen as more vulnerable as she at first appears. Her father dies; her half-brother, John Dashwood, relinquishes all responsibility of the female members of his extended family, to the extent that he denies them their inheritance and the economic security that this would have represented. She is removed from the invulnerable respectability of the grand house to the relative poverty of a country cottage. Brandon himself who emphasises the similarity between Marianne and both Elizas:

"Your sister, I hope, cannot be offended," said he, "by the resemblance I have fancied between her and my poor disgraced relation. Their fates, their fortunes cannot be the same; and had the natural sweet disposition of the one be guarded by a firmer mind, or an happier marriage, she might have been all that you will live to see the other be." (p. 196)

Although Marianne is not an orphan, she is effectively without male protection which makes her easy prey in the eyes of Willoughby; at least, that is the construction put on his behaviour later. When Elinor tells Marianne of her interview with Brandon, Marianne is conscious of the fact that Willoughby might well have intended to seduce her as well and that she had a lucky escape:

She felt the loss of Willoughby's character yet more heavily than she had felt the loss of his heart; his seduction and desertion of Miss Williams, the misery of that poor girl, and the doubt of what his designs might once have been on herself, preyed altogether so much on her spirits, that she could not bring herself to speak of what she felt even to Elinor. (p. 200)

A lucky escape. Yet Austen conveys a very real sense here of Marianne feeling haunted by an alternative version of her life, as represented by the younger Eliza. Although there is 'doubt' surrounding what Willoughby's 'designs might once have been on herself', an even bigger doubt has been raised in terms of what Marianne's reaction might have been had he tried to seduce her. That she cannot even talk to Elinor may suggest that what really preys on Marianne's mind is the possibility that she would not have resisted an attempt at seduction, had Willoughby made one. Seeber makes the point that what Marianne and Austen find to be literally unspeakable in the context of middle-class domestic security, Austen expresses through the tale of the two Elizas:

Marianne's fear of what his designs might once have been on herself represents the unspeakable, that which the main narrative cannot accommodate. The main narrative elides this unspeakable fate – seduction, pregnancy, prostitution, and exile.<sup>16</sup>

What makes this so progressive in relation to later Victorian texts dealing with illegitimacy is that it opens up the possibility that the threat of seduction is one that endangers apparently domesticated middle-class girls, albeit in a space at the fringes of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

the dominant narrative. What is startling about Austen's treatment is the openness of the text to multiple views of sexual irregularity.

In fact, Brandon's narrative introduces a series of disruptive elements whose potential to unsettle is manifested by their absence from later Victorian reworkings of the standard illegitimacy plot. The most surprising of these elements concerns the marital status of the older Eliza. Eliza commits adultery within marriage, a state traditionally supposed to protect women from the unwanted attentions of the opposite sex. She is not a naïve virgin, seduced by an more experienced and socially superior man, who holds out the possibility of marriage in order to seduce her, but a financially comfortable and sexually aware woman who seeks out the attention of other men in order to gain the affection conspicuously absent from her marriage. Her behaviour is excused if not condoned by Brandon, who blames his brother's cruelty for her behaviour: "My brother had no regard for her; his pleasures were not what they ought to have been, and from the first he treated her unkindly" (pp. 194-95). Again, we see men being held accountable for the fall of their female dependants, a responsibility that largely disappears from Victorian treatments of illegitimacy and which points to a significant shift in attitudes towards the domestic and responsibilities of men.

Mid-way through his story, Brandon breaks off to exclaim: "Ah! Miss Dashwood – a subject such as this – untouched for fourteen years – it is dangerous to handle it at all!" (p. 196). Of course, the force of illegitimacy to effect change is precisely that it cannot be relegated to the past but remains a problem for the present in the continuing

presence of the child. While later Victorian novels often kill off the child, particularly if it is a girl, in order to be able to draw a line under the potential for disruption that an illegitimate child can cause, Austen does not do this. She chooses that both the young Eliza and her child will remain as uncomfortable reminders of the consequences of male profligacy. It is precisely in this low-key approach towards illegitimacy, that relinquishes the mawkish convenience of sudden death in favour of a more mundane life lived on the margins of conventionality that Austen is at her most progressive.

## II

### Pride and Prejudice: The Seduced Maiden Narrative Subverted

Where Sense and Sensibility features a critique of the seduction narrative, highlighting the limitations of the form when pressed into the service of both conservative and radical writers, Pride and Prejudice appears to offer a far more orthodox version of the necessity of marriage to domestic and social stability. In a letter to her sister, Austen pre-emptively what later critics identify as a strength of Pride and Prejudice when she raises the concern that it lacks the suffering necessary to make it a complete success:

Upon the whole however I am quite vain enough & well satisfied enough.  
– The work is rather too light & bright & sparkling; it wants shade.<sup>17</sup>

It is the ‘markedly fairy-tale-like quality’<sup>18</sup> of the marriage of Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet that critics such as Johnson see as offering the reader what amounts to a conservative endorsement of conventional values:

Pride and Prejudice is thus a profoundly conciliatory work, and of all Austen’s novels it most affirms established social arrangements without damaging their prestige or fundamentally challenging their wisdom or equity.<sup>19</sup>

Barbara Seeber broadly agrees: ‘their union ... is achieved by displacing class and economic realities onto secondary characters and plots’ ensuring in the process that Pride and Prejudice, ‘of all the novels ... comes closest to reconciling the individual with

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<sup>17</sup> Jane Austen’s Letters, ed. Deirdre David (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 203.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson., p. 73.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.



society'.<sup>20</sup> It is precisely those 'secondary characters and plots' onto which class, economic and sexual realities are displaced and who exist in the shadows cast by the glare of the fairy-tale romance of Darcy and Elizabeth who offer an alternative and altogether more unresolved view of society.

### Lydia

Critics such as Seeber and Johnson recognise Lydia's interrupted courtship as a potential source of disruption within the novel, but chose to dismiss Lydia simply as a foil to Elizabeth, assigning her a somewhat mechanical role in the text. Johnson comments:

Lydia is a decoy who attracts the disapproval to which Elizabeth herself could otherwise be subject, and by lamenting Lydia's glaring excesses, Elizabeth is cleared for her less egregious but still 'improper' rambles, conceit, and impertinence without arousing our discomfort of incurring our censure.<sup>21</sup>

Seeber too dismisses Lydia as a character who functions much like the cameo of the two

Elizas in Sense and Sensibility:

The cameo narrative points out the vulnerability of the heroine. Like Marianne Dashwood and Anne Elliot, who closely escape the villains of their respective novels, Elizabeth narrowly avoids the dangerous consequences of her flirtation with Wickham.<sup>22</sup>

The immediate problem with Seeber's analysis is that Elizabeth's flirtation with Wickham never moves beyond just that – unlike Marianne's flirtation with Willoughby, which turns into mutual love. In addition, Wickham does not tempt Lydia to run away

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<sup>20</sup> Seeber., op. cit., p. 87.

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, op. cit., p. 77.

<sup>22</sup> Seeber, op. cit., p. 89.

with him: in fact, he is annoyed when she follows him unbidden. More generally, there are several problems with relegating Lydia to the role of a cipher always on the borders. Unlike the two Elizas, who are never received within the drawing rooms of Sense and Sensibility, Lydia is Elizabeth's sister and as such is positioned at the centre of the action. Austen does not distance Lydia's experiences from the reader through time or geography, a technique she did employ in Sense and Sensibility. Nor are her experiences interpreted and made safe by a man's narrative. We hear her voice, not only through her letters but also through reported conversations. Lydia's story might seem to function in ways that mimic the dynamic observed in Sense and Sensibility, but this similarity is rather superficial. Lydia is a far more dangerous and potentially disruptive presence altogether.

Having asserted that Pride and Prejudice is essentially conservative in outlook,

Johnson admits contradictions and disruptions exist within the novel:

The very method of the novel obstructs the impulse to make a tidy moral. Instead of opposing "good" liveliness to "bad" liveliness, "good" education to "bad" education, the intricately counterbalanced construction of Pride and Prejudice obliges us to regroup and reassess characters and issues, to broaden our judgements and to accept contradiction.<sup>23</sup>

The relationship between Lydia and Wickham is handled in such a way and Lydia's experience is voiced, by her, in such terms as to offer a far more radical challenge to the prevailing morality of the narrative than Johnson admits. While the text seems to be preoccupied by the more conventional courtship rituals played out by Jane and Elizabeth, the two eldest sisters, it is Lydia, the sixteen year old, who temporarily disturbs the conventional progress of these romances by engaging in far more hazardous behaviour in

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

order to satisfy her anti-social desires for sex and fun. When Lydia runs away with Wickham her family and friends are horrified by her behaviour, particularly when it becomes clear that she and Wickham have not gone directly to Gretna Green to get married. Although never mentioned explicitly by her family, the fear that lies behind the shock of her 'elopement' is the possibility that she might become pregnant without being married.

To return to the quotation referred to earlier in the thesis:

The good news quickly spread through the house; and with proportionate speed through the neighbourhood. It was borne in the latter with decent philosophy. To be sure it would have been more for the advantage of the conversation, had Miss Lydia Bennet come upon the town; or, as the happiest alternative, been secluded from the world, in some distant farm house. (p. 201)

Johnson suggests that:

By leaving censorious reflections on Lydia's elopement to the "spiteful old ladies in Meryton" and to the pompous Mary, for example, Austen distances herself from prescriptive pronouncements on this subject.<sup>24</sup>

It is true that the ironic tone in which the villagers' desires are revealed undercuts the possible tragedy underpinning Lydia's story. The disastrous consequences described are framed within the context of social gossip rather than actual human experience and in that sense, the power to shock is contained. But by raising these alternatives at all within the context of this, the happiest of Austen's novels, Austen ensures that Lydia's narrative recognises and is haunted by those other narratives of feminine marital denunciation, such as Adeline Mowbray (1805) by Amelia Opie, that end far less happily. That Austen emphatically rejects the conventional tragedies waiting for disobedient women like Lydia

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

suggests that her intention here is more than simply to 'distance herself from prescriptive pronouncements on this subject'. By taking a position at odds with orthodox literary expectation she is actively challenging that expectation.

### Pride and Prejudice and Adeline Mowbray

Unlike Austen, Opie's work is typically viewed within a contemporary political context. Adeline Mowbray acquires its political resonance by offering a critique of the philosophical milieu with a fictionalised account of the relationship between William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. Opie was a friend of the couple and was romantically involved with Godwin.<sup>25</sup> She thus had a privileged position observing the dynamic of their connection. Roxanne Eberle comments:

In 1805, Amelia Opie wrote a novel that expressed many "Jacobin" concerns: free love, free speech, and abolition. Furthermore, her Adeline Mowbray ... was widely recognised as a *roman à clef* about Wollstonecraft and Godwin.<sup>26</sup>

Godwin had earlier scandalised society by publishing The Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft, which documented not only her extra-marital relationship with Gilbert Imlay, the result of which was an illegitimate daughter, Fanny, but also his own relationship with her which involved testing out his own principles of free love, before putting his philosophical objections aside and marrying Wollstonecraft when she was

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<sup>25</sup> See Claire Tomalin, The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p. 206.

<sup>26</sup> Roxanne Eberle, 'Amelia Opie's Adeline Mowbray: Diverting the Libertine Gaze; or, The Vindication of a Fallen Woman', Studies in the Novel, 26:2 (Summer, 1994), 121-52. Available at <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk> (accessed August 2005).

four months pregnant with her second daughter, Mary. As Eberle comments, on its aftermath:

Recent literary scholarship tends to identify the publication and reception of the *Memoirs* as a watershed moment in the late eighteenth-century “backlash” against outspoken “philosophical women”...Yet too often literary criticism has erred in assuming that the eighteenth-century revolutionary woman immediately became the Victorian angel in the house. Modern critics often focus on conservative Regency voices because in retrospect they seem to have won the ideological battle waged over the construction of femininity.<sup>27</sup>

Both Austen’s and Opie’s work exist in this overlooked and contested space between conservative and radical positions. Of Opie, Gary Kelly asserts:

Her fictions exhibit ... contradictory qualities, preaching conformity to the conventional sexual and family roles, but fascinated by deviations from those roles.<sup>28</sup>

Arguably, both Opie and Austen’s narratives offer multiple responses and highly ambivalent attitudes to women who venture boldly into irregular liaisons.

Adeline Mowbray shares with Lydia Bennet, though through more intellectual motives, a rejection of social conformity in favour of individualism. For both women, this individualism is expressed through a rejection of marriage. Adeline falls in love with Frederic Glenmurray long before she meets him, having been deeply impressed by the philosophical arguments against marriage he advances in his books. So impressed is she, that she rejects marriage herself:

She began to declaim against marriage, as an institution at once absurd, unjust, and immoral, and to declare that she would never submit to so

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 121-52.

<sup>28</sup> Gary Kelly, ‘Amelia Opie, Lady Caroline Lamb, and Maria Edgeworth: Official and Unofficial Ideology’, *Ariel*, 12 (1981: 5), 3-24 (quoted in Eberle).

contemptible a form, or profane the sacred ties of love by so odious and unnecessary a ceremony.<sup>29</sup>

She elopes with Glenmurray and consistently holds him to the logic of his arguments, even when he appears to be wavering in his philosophical idealism. They are happy together and their relationship is presented positively:

In her knowledge of the French and Italian languages, too, she was now considerably improved by the instructions of her lover; and while his occasional illnesses were alleviated by her ever watchful attentions, their attachment was cemented by one of the strongest of all ties – the consciousness of mutual benefit and assistance. (p. 66)

Unfortunately, society's condemnation becomes an insidious and powerful threat to their happiness as Adeline becomes an isolated figure, cut off from both family and friendships with other women, who consider her a corrupting and dangerous influence. Adeline's mother, her only source of support and protection apart from Glenmurray, renounces Adeline and rejects her repeated attempts to heal the rift:

“Shame to thy race, disgrace to thy family!” she exclaimed, spurning her kneeling child from her ... “Hence! ere I load thee with maledictions.”  
(p. 105)

The couple travel abroad where they hope to avoid the censure of those who know their history. When they meet Glenmurray's male friends, however, Adeline's contradictory and difficult social status is revealed. On the one hand, men like Maynard are impressed by Adeline's natural modesty and innocence; on the other, her problematic domestic situation means that socially she is not fit company for the sisters of such men and it is Glenmurray himself who has to police her contact with the outside world:

“Adeline, it is impossible for you to form an acquaintance with Mr Maynard's sisters: propriety and honour both forbid me to allow it ...

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<sup>29</sup> Amelia Opie, *Adeline Mowbray*, ed. Shelley King and John B. Pierce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 28. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

pure-minded and amiable as I know you to be, how can I bear to tell these children of prejudice that you are not my wife, but my mistress?" (p.69)

Eberle comments:

Adeline's consistent purity of motive and virtuous countenance continually challenge the parade of men who first admire her as an honourable woman, but who can only desire her sexually after she is identified to them as Glenmurray's "mistress." Opie's narrative cleverly plays with the conventional attempts to categorize feminine sexuality based on reputation and appearance.<sup>30</sup>

Simultaneously as Opie appears to be supporting a conservative view of illicit sexual relationships, by having Adeline rejected and isolated from polite society, she undermines that support by drawing attention to the double standard that supports it.

In line with tradition, Adeline 'falls' pregnant. It is hard not to read what follows as predominately reactionary in tone. Adeline is drawn to a child sitting alone in the park: 'the child was beautiful' (p. 130). When she asks the other children why they won't play with him when they claim to like him, they explain: "because he is not a gentleman's son like us, and is only a little bastard" (p. 130). An illegitimate child raises similar problems as Adeline presents to the men she encounters. Adeline is deeply upset by this experience – it provides a parallel narrative to her own - and her distress is made worse when the boy expresses clear hostility towards his parents, hostility that is not condemned as unreasonable but rather, viewed sympathetically through the eyes of Adeline:

"My dear child, you had better go home," said she, struggling with her feelings; "your mother will certainly be glad of your company."

"No, I won't go to her; I don't love her: they say she is a bad woman, and my papa's a bad man, because they are not married." (p. 131)

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<sup>30</sup> Eberle, op. cit., pp. 121-52.

Adeline clearly now identifies the child's resentment with the potential feelings of her own unborn child. This powerful foreshadowing leads Adeline to bow to social pressure and accept marriage to Glenmurray. It also explicitly raises and foregrounds the significance of marriage in relation to the contested issue of illegitimacy. Unfortunately, the redemptive power of mother-love is denied to Adeline; she loses her baby the next day. Eberle sees the effect as psychological:

It is this stillbirth which, perhaps most significantly, condemns her as truly a "fallen woman" in her own mind ... If Adeline's pregnant body serves as a marker for her sexual relationship with Glenmurray, the stillbirth of her child acts as an indictment of that relationship.<sup>31</sup>

It is not only, however, in Adeline's mind that she is condemned as a fallen woman but within the narrative itself which circumscribes her here within the conventional imagery and experiences associated with women of little or no reputation. Pregnancy and illegitimacy are essential to identifying the extent of a woman's estrangement from conventional society. True to those narrative expectations, Adeline dies for her daughter, Editha, 'thereby freeing her from the "dangerous example" of a redeemed fallen woman'.<sup>32</sup> If Opie could be said to subject an increasingly resonant set of conservative values to a degree of scrutiny, while never quite abandoning those values, then I would argue that Austen seems by comparison to be surprisingly radical in her approach.

While being the opposite of a principled intellectual, Lydia's attitude, in its insouciance, might be described as a comic yet valid reflection of the revolutionary spirit of her age when she elopes with Wickham. As is the case with Adeline, her experiences

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 121-52.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 121-52.



are presented multiply in the narrative through others' views and circumscribed by the moral judgements of others. First, Austen presents a letter from Jane to Elizabeth, conveying the family's distress at the prospect of Lydia running away to get married: 'something has occurred of a most unexpected and serious nature' (p. 177). As if 'so imprudent a match' (p. 177), wasn't shocking enough, a second letter reveals the true nature of Lydia's situation and places marriage, even a bad one, in an altogether more optimistic light:

My head is so bewildered that I cannot answer for being coherent. Dearest Lizzie, I hardly know what I would write, but I have bad news for you, and it cannot be delayed. Imprudent as a marriage between Mr Wickham and our poor Lydia would be, we are now anxious to be assured it has taken place, for there is but too much reason to fear they are not gone to Scotland. (p. 177)

Far from reducing the impact of the news, the combination of understatement and hope in this passage serves to emphasise the fact that Lydia is facing a fate that dare not speak its name. Elizabeth's reaction of shock forces her to confide in Darcy:

She sat down, unable to support herself, and looking so miserably ill, that it was impossible for Darcy to leave her ... at length she spoke again. 'I have just had a letter from Jane, with such dreadful news. It cannot be concealed from any one. My youngest sister has left all her friends – has eloped; - has thrown herself into the power of – of Mr Wickham. They are gone off together from Brighton. You know him too well to doubt the rest. She has no money, no connections, nothing that can tempt him to – she is lost for ever. (p. 179)

Elizabeth expresses a conventional sense of horror at her sister's behaviour, employing a melodramatic lexis, 'dreadful', and phraseology, 'she is lost for ever'.

Austen adds, simultaneously, a highly pragmatic assessment of the worldly considerations that will make a marriage between Lydia and Wickham a near

impossibility. Elizabeth is able to view her sister's situation not only in moral but also in hard economic terms and does not naively imagine that ethical considerations could be bought to bear on Wickham. Later on, in a discussion with her uncle, she is even more forthright on the subject of her sister:

“What claims has Lydia, what attractions beyond health, youth and good humour, that could make him for her sake, forego every chance of benefiting himself by marrying well.”

“But can you think that Lydia is lost to every thing but love of him, as to consent to live with him on any other terms than marriage?”

“It does seem, and it is most shocking indeed,” replied Elizabeth, with tears in her eyes, “that a sister's sense of decency and virtue in such a point should admit of doubt. But, really, I know not what to say. Perhaps I am not doing her justice.” (p. 183)

Despite the word ‘shocking’, Austen downplays the moral considerations that make marriage desirable when compared with the financial considerations that would militate against it, all the while seeming to conform to outward expectations of principled outrage. In this way, Austen's heroine views the world in a far less naïve way than equivalent women in earlier and later novels, who concentrate on formulating an appropriate moral response to the proximity of seduction and its corollary, illegitimacy. Financial innocence seems a literary equivalent to moral purity – a motif we shall meet again in retellings of the foundling narrative. Even Adeline only becomes aware of the financial implications of her unregulated relationship when she is widowed and unable to inherit Glenmurray's estate: financial virtuousness is integral to true purity.

## Masculine Responses

One of Austen's most powerful approaches to the seduction narrative is to introduce the theme of the morally responsible man:

Darcy made no answer. He seemed scarcely to hear her, and was walking up and down the room in earnest meditation; his brow contracted, his air gloomy. Elizabeth soon observed, and instantly understood it. Her power was sinking; everything must sink under such a proof of family weakness, such an assurance of the deepest disgrace. She could neither wonder nor condemn, but the belief of his self-conquest brought nothing consolatory to her bosom, afforded no palliation of her distress. It was, on the contrary, exactly calculated to make her understand her own wishes; and never had she honestly felt that she could have loved him, as now, when all love must be vain. (p. 180)

At this point in the novel, Elizabeth cannot step outside the orthodox moral framework she has developed for herself and imagines that men will respond to her and the fallen Lydia as men like Maynard respond to Adeline. Further, her primary concern is with the way that her opportunities might be circumscribed by Lydia's disgrace. Austen's narrative here has displaced conservative moral judgment onto Elizabeth, at one remove, leaving Lydia free to behave as she wants. In this way, then Elizabeth is able to prove her purity to Darcy by articulating what might be described as the conservative moral line, and Austen can simultaneously suggest the social advantage implicit in conforming to convention.

Darcy does, however, confound Elizabeth's expectations and, by extension, the expectations of convention as expressed by Elizabeth. It is ironic that the events that lead Elizabeth to believe that 'all love must be in vain' actually give Darcy a chance to prove his love for Elizabeth by paying for Wickham to live up to gentlemanly expectations of behaviour and marry Lydia. Further, Darcy does not view Lydia with the 'sexual gaze' with which men view Adeline. Eberle comments on this:

Adeline is constantly at risk; once her reputation is compromised she is fair game for all men – including her stepfather. The most pernicious result of Glenmurray's theory – when adopted by Adeline – is that it puts her in very real sexual danger. The world Opie uncovers is one that teems with male desire, not rational and unprejudiced judgment.<sup>33</sup>

Austen, on the other hand, seems to support a Godwinian ideal of a world governed by 'rational and unprejudiced judgment', as implied by Darcy's rational response to Lydia. She does not become a victim of male desire; they simply adopt a pragmatic approach to her for the greater good of the family as a whole. There is a strong sense here of a disconnect between the language employed by Elizabeth to describe the expected consequences of Lydia's behaviour and the rather less predictable set of actual outcomes. Elizabeth's vocabulary is circumscribed by a predominately conventional view of the seduction plot, defined by the well-rehearsed literary stereotypes she superimposes on an altogether more subversive set of consequences when considering Lydia's circumstances. This disconnect could be said to represent the difference between the neat designs of literature and the rather more unpredictable patterns of life, patterns that Austen seems to give priority to.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 121-52.

## The Unconventional Seduced Maiden

As Darcy acts against Elizabeth's expectations, Lydia, too, is key in subverting the role that the narrative seems to have set up for her. Jane's letters emphasise her sister's vulnerability, prefixing her name with 'poor' and ascribing her a role in her drama as innocent victim to Wickham's scheming seducer:

Though Lydia's short letter to Mrs F. gave them to understand that they were going to Gretna Green, something was dropped by Denny expressing his belief that W. never intended to go there, or to marry Lydia at all... Colonel F. is not disposed to depend upon their marriage; he shook his head when I expressed my hopes, and said he feared W. was not a man to be trusted. (p. 178)

The reality of the situation, however, is unexpected and somewhat refreshing: Lydia plays against narrative pattern and becomes the author of her own fortunes. Her letter to Mrs Forster expresses none of the shame or embarrassment the reader has been expecting but rather a tremendous sense of excitement at the prospect of an adventure:

My Dear Harriet,  
You will laugh when you know where I am gone, and I cannot help laughing myself at your surprise to-morrow morning, as soon as I am missed. I am going to Gretna Green, and if you cannot guess with who, I shall think you a simpleton, for there is but one man in the world I love, and he is an angel. I should never be happy without him, so think it no harm to be off. You need not send them word at Longbourn of my going, if you do not like it, for it will make the surprise the greater, when I write to them, and sign my name Lydia Wickham. What a good joke it will be!  
(p. 189)

Lydia places her behaviour firmly within the context of 'a good joke', and appears to anticipate no serious moral objections, although her desire to keep her movements temporarily secret from Longbourn might suggest a vaguely defensive comprehension of their possible displeasure. Lydia is motivated entirely by her own selfish desires and inclinations, as suggested by her explanation as to why she has gone off with Wickham: 'I should never be happy without him, so think it no harm to be off'. If there is a conflict between her morality and her desire for self-satisfaction it is not expressed here. Her description of her feelings for Wickham introduces a note of seriousness at the beginning of the letter: 'there is but one man in the world I love, and he is an angel'. This impression is undermined somewhat at the end, however, when she reveals that she had booked to dance with 'Pratt' and owes him an apology for not being there to honour her obligation to him. The potentially disastrous revelation of sexual misconduct is undermined by the fact that it appears in the context of a letter characterised by brevity which gives moral considerations less significance than the propriety of a missed appointment and a torn dress. Though Darcy's money saves her, Lydia remains indifferent to economic pressures.

The letter does, at least, suggest that Lydia's objective is marriage and that her failure to comprehend the possible consequences of her actions derives from innocence rather than conscious wickedness, a fact that her sisters derive some comfort from. Elizabeth uses this to try to fit Lydia into the stereotype of the vulnerable female:

"What a letter is this, to be written at such a moment. But at least it shews, that *she* was serious in the object of her journey. Whatever he might afterwards persuade her to, it was not on her side a *scheme* of infamy."  
(p. 189)

This perspective is shattered when Elizabeth receives a letter from her Aunt Gardiner that reveals Lydia's very casual attitude towards marriage, even when she is confronted by the official moral line in the person of Darcy:

He found Lydia absolutely resolved on remaining where she was. She cared for none of her friends, she wanted no help of his, she would not hear of leaving Wickham. She was sure they should be married some time or other, and it did not much signify when. (p. 209)

Lydia's could be seen as an ultra rational perspective. It is justified by the outcome, though Darcy's generosity creates the happy ending for her. One could argue that this ending, however, represents a kind of endorsement by Austen of Lydia's refusal to accept the role that others have determined for her. Any attempt to impose a set of essentially abstract moral and social values on her seems destined to fail. While her overwhelming egocentricity prevents her from being a wholly sympathetic character, she is not punished by the narrative, for the frustration she causes by not conforming to the expectations of the negative outcome her story might be expected to provoke.

Multiple responses continue to pour in, confirming the fact that the fallen woman is a construct that contains contradictory responses only fragilely. Conventional morality is expressed by Mr Collins:

I feel myself called upon, by our relationship, and my situation in life, to condole with you on the grievous affliction you are now suffering under...Be assured, my dear Sir, that Mrs Collins and myself sincerely sympathise with you, and all your respectable family, in your present distress, which must be the bitterest kind, because proceeding from a cause no time can remove...The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison of this...You are grievously to be pitied, in which opinion I am not only joined by Mrs Collins, but likewise by lady Catherine and her daughter, to whom I have related the affair...Let me advise you then, my dear Sir, to console yourself as much as possible, to

throw off your unworthy child from your affection for ever, and leave her to reap the fruits of her own heinous offence. (pp. 193-94)

Just like the villagers quoted at the beginning of this section, Collins takes enormous vicarious satisfaction in what he describes as the 'heinous offence' of Lydia and the subsequent shame he enthusiastically supposes to have contaminated the entire Bennet family. The emphatic sense of *schadenfraude* that pervades this letter is exemplified in his barely-concealed delight in having discussed the matter with Lady Catharine and discovered that her own views are as conservative as his own. This letter bears comparison with Lydia's earlier letter because both are defined by the overwhelming egocentricity of their authors. Yet Collins' letter is far more odious because it attempts to ascribe a pursuit of high moral values to what Austen is keen to expose as essentially self-seeking considerations. That the most punitive responses to Lydia's behaviour should come from Mr Collins and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, the two most pompous and ridiculed characters in the novel suggests that Austen herself does not seek to promote these kinds of attitudes, attitudes that closely resemble those that do, in fact, triumph in Adeline Mowbray. Austen's sympathies lie with the more considered response of the Bennet family who act out of affection for their daughter and a pragmatic awareness that far from 'proceeding from a cause no time can remove', Lydia's indiscretion will soon be forgiven and forgotten, since it has been made right by marriage. The support of a close family who restrain their judgement is critical to Lydia's successful rehabilitation. By contrast, when Adeline loses the confidence of her mother it is only a matter of time before she falls because there is no-one else to look after her. Austen again rejects the melodrama inherent to a punitive perspective in favour of a more pragmatic and arguably



more realistic approach that recognises the power of the domestic to triumph over the need to conform to external moral strictures.

### Consequences

Although Mr Bennet does say that he will never receive the Wickhams at Longbourn, he is talked around by Mrs Bennet. Furthermore, Lydia and Wickham receive a handsome financial inducement to marry, far more than they could have expected had they gone about their courtship in the traditional way. Mr Bennet's remark that, "Wickham's a fool, if he takes her with a farthing less than ten thousand pounds" (p. 197), confirms that the brinkmanship employed by Wickham, in addition to having no discernable moral consequences, has proven to be a canny financial move on the part of the couple, who have been able to exploit the conventional feelings of shame that those associated with their behaviour suffer. Orthodox moral values could be viewed satirically as a handicap here, in the sense that they lead to a damaging inflexibility of thought that may be manipulated by those with fewer scruples.

In these ways, then, Austen's interrogation of conservative moral values is far more radical than might be supposed. According to Eberle:

Opie's novel examines the confusion which ensues when a woman's philosophical beliefs conflict with society's notions about female sexuality. Adeline Mowbray is about naming a woman a "whore" not only

because she is sexually transgressive or lacks traditional feminine virtues, but because she is intellectually transgressive.<sup>34</sup>

Where Opie earnestly provides some justification for Adeline's behaviour by providing her with strong philosophical motivation, Lydia simply fancies Wickham and is blind to the social consequences of her actions. Even so, where Opie's heroine finally gets dragged down by social convention, Lydia's willed ignorance protects her from the normal consequences of female sexual transgression. The most significant of these consequences is illegitimacy, because it visibly marks the woman as 'fallen' and passes the guilt from mother to child. Austen intends Lydia's narrative to be haunted by stories of women like Adeline. In this way, she highlights the significance of the fact that Lydia does not get pregnant and, therefore, recovers safely from her indiscretion. Not only does this highlight the fact that illegitimacy is a key literary indicator of sexual fall and disgrace, but also that it is unrealistic to imagine that every woman who finds herself in Lydia's and Adeline's situation will get married. Austen undercuts more serious narratives not only to highlight their shortcomings but also in order to offer the reader a more subtle and, therefore, more realistic narrative. Where Adeline Mowbray is circumscribed by two opposing ideologies that are impossible to reconcile, Austen transcends political and literary dogma because her point is that any ideology misses the essential subtlety of human experience. To return to Austen's point, that Pride and Prejudice 'wants shade', it is, in fact, the absence of shade that makes her revision of the mistress narrative so powerful and unconventional, existing as it does in that forgotten space between radical and conservative definitions of the feminine.

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<sup>34</sup> Eberle, op. cit.

### III

#### Mansfield Park: The Foundling Narrative

Although Mansfield Park (1814) does not appear to engage explicitly with contemporary concerns about illegitimacy, two key elements of the novel, namely the sexually wayward behaviour of Maria Bertram and the similarities between Fanny's narrative and eighteenth-century foundling narratives, rehearse and subvert conventional literary methods for containing the threat that illegitimacy poses to families. Firstly, the narrative features a revision of Lydia Wickham's story in the analogous conduct of Maria Bertram, whose transgressive sexual behaviour seems to transpose the comedic elements of Pride and Prejudice into something altogether more sombre. Maria Bertram's story, attracted to Henry Crawford, but later marrying the rich Mr Rushworth, could be seen as a repetition of the pattern of Elizabeth's love stories, even including rivalry with a sister for the attention of a superficially more exciting man. The many differences (Rushworth's stupidity and Maria's moral shallowness) are less significant, for any consideration of how Austen treats the dangers that haunt the situation of women in the experience of sexual desire, than this plot's divergence from the Elizabeth Bennet story: Maria's decision to run away with Henry, the Wickham equivalent.

## Extra – Marital Illegitimacy

Maria's marriage may have been born of morally weak motives:

Henry Crawford had destroyed her happiness, but he should not know that he had done it; he should not destroy her credit, her appearance, her prosperity too.<sup>35</sup>

But adultery is a narrative that provokes other issues than seduction. Adultery raises the stakes as far as illegitimacy is concerned, because it introduces problems about legitimate inheritance. Writing of this consideration in relation to the eighteenth century, Schmidgen summarises this:

One central function of the bastard figure was to threaten the patrilineal transmission of status, wealth and power by challenging the rules that govern such descent and by exposing the notion of illegitimacy.<sup>36</sup>

It is this greater threat to continuity and security that a baby, real or imagined, represents that leads to the figuring of Maria as infected and to her enforced exile from the family.

Parker notes:

The potential threat of bastardy lies at the margins of the text, symbolically reinforced by the fact that Maria plays an unwed mother in Lover's Vows.<sup>37</sup>

Just as in Pride and Prejudice, where the threat of illegitimacy is never fully realised, Austen exploits the disruptive force of illegitimacy within marriage, without actually

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<sup>35</sup> Jane Austen, Mansfield Park, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 187. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>36</sup> Wolfram Schmidgen, 'Illegitimacy and Social Observation: The Bastard in the Eighteenth-Century Novel', ELH, 69:1 (Spring, 2002), 133-166 (p. 133).

<sup>37</sup> Parker, op. cit., p. 172.

producing the baby, because it legitimises her characters' adoption of apparently radical moral and social points of view and allows her to engage in a debate where illegitimacy, whether real or implied, becomes a trope for exploring social and cultural dynamics. Rather than conclude with a (re-)marriage and eventual forgiveness from the family, which would be a parallel to Lydia's case, Maria ends cut off from society. Henry and Maria separate; Sir Thomas refuses to receive Maria at the family estate, believing her to be a source of moral pollution, specifically to the order of family morality:

Maria had destroyed her own character, and he would not by a vain attempt to restore what never could be restored, by affording his sanction to vice, or in seeking to lessen its disgrace, be anywise an accessory to introducing such misery in another man's family, as he had known himself. (p. 432)

She is sent away to live a curious kind of exile, 'in an establishment being formed for them in another country – remote and private' (p. 432), with her Aunt Norris.<sup>38</sup> The reference to the pair being sent to 'another country' is used by Austen in a deliberately suggestive manner, since, as we have seen, in Sense and Sensibility, Austen makes it clear that she is well aware of the expression commonly used as an allusion to the birth of an illegitimate baby. When women of a certain class were pregnant with illegitimate children, they would be sent out of the immediate neighbourhood to give birth and would eventually return home without the child, who would have 'disappeared'.

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<sup>38</sup> Early nineteenth-century understanding of the expression, 'in another country' would be 'in another district' and would not mean that Maria and Aunt Norris had been sent abroad.

## The Cultural Context

An analysis of the treatment of women involved in sexual scandal during the Regency period, whose situation is roughly analogous with that of Maria, reveals a far more tolerant society than that in Mansfield Park: much more in line, in fact, with those attitudes embraced in Pride and Prejudice. In his biography of Maria Fitzherbert, James Munson gives the following overview of the sexual climate among fashionable society:

Adultery and illegitimacy were the talk of the town and it was said that every fifth child in London was illegitimate, compared to every sixth in Paris and every ninth in Dublin. Illegitimacy seemed to be an especially prominent feature of Whig society by the 1780's. As Lady Campbell later observed to her friend, Emily Eden, 'Does it not strike you that vices are wonderfully prolific among the Whigs? There are such countless illegitimates among them, such a tribe of Children of the Mist.' The children she had in mind belonged to the famous *ménage a trois* of the beautiful Duchess of Devonshire, her husband and her friend, Lady Elizabeth Foster. Among them they had four illegitimate children, while Georgiana's sister, the Countess of Bessborough, had two misty children herself. The Royal Family was not immune: Lord Wentworth told his sister that the Duchess of Gloucester's Lady of the Bedchamber, Lady Almeria Carpenter, had 'produced', that is, given birth to a child whose father was the Duke.<sup>39</sup>

Lord Egremont's witty recollection that: 'there was hardly a young married lady of fashion, who did not think it almost a stain upon her reputation if she was not known as having cuckolded her husband; and the only doubt was, who was to assist her in the operation',<sup>40</sup> is particularly telling in relation to Maria, since it refers specifically to married women having sexual relationships with men who were not their husbands. The ironic tone used to invert conventional standards of morality, so that not to cuckold one's husband becomes a 'stain', has the quite deliberate effect of trivialising what, in Maria's

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<sup>39</sup> James Munson, Maria Fitzherbert (London: Robinson, 2002), pp. 60-61.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

case was treated as an act of unforgivable sexual transgression. Maria's experience, particularly in the face of the laissez-faire attitudes and behaviour recorded by contemporary accounts seems to foreshadow later Victorian representations of subversive sexual desire in women to a far greater degree than Pride and Prejudice by describing Maria's behaviour consistently in terms of disgrace and by concluding her narrative in an overwhelmingly mordant way. The question then becomes not only one of why Austen evokes illegitimacy, however discreetly, but also why she frames her interrogation of sexual transgression with a rigid moral code that seems at odd with the behaviour and attitudes of the contemporary upper-class setting of her novels.

One explanation would lie in a closer examination of the function of class within the narrative. Writing about Fielding's Sir Charles Grandison (1753), Lisa Zunshine makes a point that could be applied to Mansfield Park: 'Richardson projects the familiar economic fear of the middle-class family threatened by illegitimacy onto the upper class family'.<sup>41</sup> In other words, the upper classes could adopt a more tolerant approach to illegitimacy because they had sufficient wealth not to be seriously affected by it:

The system could also accommodate the illegitimate offspring of landed families so long as paternity was acknowledged and the parent was prepared to pay a portion large enough to compensate. Where there were only illegitimate children and they were all well endowed they could make very good marriages. All three daughters of Sir Edward Walpole, Sir Robert's second son, married into the aristocracy with the full panoply of settlements. Anne Newcomen, illegitimate daughter of Sir Francis Wortley, married the second son of the first Earl of Sandwich. Rachel Bayton, illegitimate daughter of John Hall, married the eldest son of the Earl of Kingston. Anne Wellesley, the natural daughter of the Marquess

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<sup>41</sup> Lisa Zunshine, Bastards and Foundlings: Illegitimacy in Eighteenth-Century England (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2005), p. 123.

Wellesley, married in 1806 Sir William Abdy, baronet of an ancient family.<sup>42</sup>

The same pattern applies to the illegitimate offspring of Dora Jordan, the actress, and the future King George IV:

One by one the girls found aristocratic husbands. Eliza was the first; she became Countess of Errol ... Charles Fox, the illegitimate eldest son of Lord and Lady Holland, had been in love with Eliza, but when she jilted him he turned to Mary, and they married in 1824 ... The next year Sophy married Sir Philip Sidney ... Augusta took the son of the Marquess of Ailsa, who died of tuberculosis after only four years; from a second husband, Lord John Frederick Gordon Hallyburton, she also had children. Lastly Mely married Byron's grandson, Viscount Falkland.<sup>43</sup>

Sir Thomas, a knight with overseas estates, voices a view closer to middle-class anxieties than the high-society attitudes suggested by the examples above.<sup>44</sup>

### Mary: The Pragmatic Approach

Austen, once again, provides multiple reactions to female sexual transgression. Here, however, there is a stronger sense that multiple reactions are subsumed, in the moral vision of the novel, by a single focus of judgement. Feminine interpretations of Maria's behaviour are provided by two central figures: Fanny Price and Mary Crawford, who could be said to embody two opposing attitudes to female sexual disobedience. Fanny assumes an explicitly moral position when considering Maria's 'crime', Mary a far more worldly, pragmatic one. It could be argued that while Mary views sexual misbehaviour from the confident point of view of a member of the wealthy and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>43</sup> Claire Tomalin, *Mrs Jordan's Profession* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 310.

<sup>44</sup> Zunshine links this to the middle-class market for novels, op. cit., pp. 138-9.



fashionable upper-classes, Fanny, as an outsider to the wealth that surrounds her and whose social class is somewhat obscure, assumes the nervousness and insecurity of the middle-classes. While Elizabeth Bennet when considering the behaviour of her sister, Lydia, variously adopted both these attitudes in Mansfield Park, it seems impossible that one single character could assimilate such apparently incompatible positions. This fracture might be said to represent a kind of consolidation of the two opposing positions and highlights an increasing dissent between the two ways of thinking and consequently, the growing significance of a middle-class value system beginning to make itself felt.

The only direct communication between Mary and Fanny on the subject is an ambiguous note written by Mary to Fanny, while Fanny is staying with her family in Portsmouth and which she fails to understand:

A most scandalous, ill-natured rumour has just reached me, and I write, dear Fanny, to warn you against giving it the least credit to it, should it spread into the country...Say not a word of it – hear nothing, surmise nothing, whisper nothing, till I write again. I am sure it will all be hushed up, and nothing proved but Rushworth's folly. If they are gone, I would lay my life they are only gone to Mansfield Park, and Julia with them.  
(p. 406)

Just as in Pride and Prejudice, there is a gradual build-up to the full revelation of sexual indiscretion and this revelation is described through letters. The next report is a gossip column from a newspaper:

It was with infinite concern the newspaper had to announce to the world, a matrimonial fracas in the family of Mr. R. of Wimpole Street; the beautiful Mrs. R. whose name had not long been enrolled in the list of hymen, and who had promised to become so brilliant a leader in the fashionable world, having quitted her husband's roof in company with the well-known and captivating Mr. C. the intimate friend and associate of Mr. R. and it was not known, even to the editor of the newspaper, whither they were gone. (p. 409)

As in Pride and Prejudice, Austen draws attention to the public appetite for tales of sexual misadventure, an appetite that she herself could be considered to be exploiting while simultaneously exposing it to censure. Letters are an essentially private form of discourse, revealing the writer's private feelings apparently unmodified by the authorial voice; a newspaper gossip column introduces a shockingly public and objectifying tone. In Pride and Prejudice Lydia's reputation remains relatively unsullied because her exploits do not reach beyond her immediate circle. In Mansfield Park, however, public exposure makes Maria's position far more difficult. In fact, when Edmund describes his interview with Mary what horrifies him is Mary's attitude that it is the public detection of the 'crime' that makes it so serious:

"She saw it only as folly, and that folly stamped only by exposure. The want of common discretion, of caution – his going down to Richmond for the whole time of her being at Twickenham – her putting herself in the power of a servant; - it was the detection in short – Oh! Fanny, it was the detection, not the offence which she reprobated." (p. 422)

Edmund's horror at Mary's pragmatic approach does not seem to be wholly supported by Austen herself. If the relative fates of Lydia and Maria are a measure of Austen's own sense of the importance of discretion when handling private family indiscretions, the fact that Lydia survives unscathed from her ordeal certainly supports the view that public exposure is integral in determining lasting guilt.

Furthermore, Mary's down-to-earth response to the crisis seems to be broadly consistent with the attitudes expressed by Elizabeth in Pride and Prejudice and which are not condemned by Austen. For example, they both describe their siblings' behaviour as thoughtless rather than deliberately and calculatedly sinful. When Elizabeth receives

Lydia's letter, she responds by saying: "Oh! thoughtless, thoughtless Lydia!" (p. 189), and is then, despite appearances to the contrary, eager to see the best in Lydia: "What a letter is this, to be written at such a moment. But at least it shews, that *she* was serious in the object of her journey. Whatever he might afterwards persuade her to, it was not on her side a *scheme* of infamy" (p. 189). She is also keen to see Lydia married to Wickham, even though he has shown himself to be dishonourable and mercenary in the extreme. Even though Elizabeth's family are well aware of the limitations of Wickham and the probable unhappy consequences of a marriage between Wickham and Lydia, they work tirelessly to trace the couple and eventually bribe Wickham to marry Lydia. They are simply not prepared to see Lydia 'ruined', even if she seems unconcerned at her possible fate.

Mary too, sees such a denouement, marriage between Henry and Maria as the only honourable and practical way out of their predicament:

"We must persuade Henry to marry her," said she, "and what with honour and the certainty of having shut himself up for ever from Fanny, I do not despair of it... My influence, which is not small, shall all go that way; and, when once married, and properly supported by her own family, people of respectability as they are, she may recover her footing in society to a certain degree. In some circles, we know, she would never be admitted, but with good dinners, and large parties, there will always be those who will be glad of her acquaintance; and there is, undoubtedly, more liberality and candour on this points than formerly." (p. 424)

Again, her pragmatic approach stuns Edmund, who perceives the situation quite differently and, rather than engage in an endeavour to help his sister to 'recover her footing in society', identifies his role as ensuring that Maria is punished for her behaviour and that she does not end up profiting from her 'crime':

‘That the manner in which she treated the dreadful crime committed by her brother and my sister – (with whom lay the greater seduction I pretended not to say) – but the manner in which she spoke of the crime itself, giving it every reproach but the right, considering its ill consequences only as they were to be braved or overborne by a defiance of decency and impudence in wrong; and, last of all, and above all, recommending to us a compliance, a compromise, an acquiescence, in the continuance of the sin, on the chance of a marriage which, thinking as I now thought of her brother, should rather be prevented than sought – all this together most grievously convinced me that I had never understood her before...’ (p. 424)

Edmund compares rather badly to Darcy on two counts here. First, when Darcy’s sister elopes with Wickham, he does his utmost to get her back before she marries him and ensures that the incident remains deeply private so that her ‘name’ is not damaged. He behaves with similar concern for Lydia when she elopes with Wickham. He pays Wickham a large sum of money to ensure that he goes through with the marriage. In neither case does he see his function as primarily an upholder of punitive moral codes, whatever the personal cost might be to his own flesh and blood. Second, he has the conviction of his love for Elizabeth to do what is personally distasteful to him, pay Wickham off, in order that a possible marriage between them is not complicated by the sexual misadventure of a sibling. Furthermore, he does what he thinks will bring peace of mind to Elizabeth. That a character like Edmund, who negotiates the world through a series of uncompromising moral judgements, has replaced Darcy, who was capable of recognising and responding to the ambiguity inherent to most human behaviour, as the novel’s romantic hero suggests a profound shift in the moral landscape of the two novels. Mansfield Park asserts a conservative, polarised interpretation of human behaviour as opposed to a more morally ambiguous interpretation in Pride and Prejudice.

## Fanny: The Moral Approach

This shift to what appears to be a more conservative interpretation of morality is advanced through the character of Fanny. Fanny is the audience to whom Edmund pours out his heart and she is certainly not a disinterested observer. Her initial reaction to the news of her cousin's adultery is shock:

The horror of a mind like Fanny's, as it received the conviction of such guilt, and began to take in some part of the misery that must ensue, can hardly be described. At first, it was a sort of stupefaction; but every moment was quickening her perception of the horrible evil. She could not doubt; she dared not indulge a hope of the paragraph being false ... Fanny seemed to herself never to have been shocked before. (p. 409)

She is numbed, but quickly comprehends the 'horrible evil'. While Lydia's behaviour is described in terms of social disgrace, words like 'evil' suggest a sense of religious censure, of a crime not just against society's shifting moral values but also against a set of altogether more substantive ethics:

The event was so shocking, that there were moments even when her heart revolted from it as impossible – when she thought it could not be. It was too horrible a confusion of guilt; too gross a complication of evil, for human nature, not in a state of utter barbarism, to be capable of! – yet, her judgment told her it was so. (p. 410)

The lexis used here is much more extreme than that employed by Elizabeth and suggests a genuine revulsion.

As Fanny's thoughts turn to how the news will affect her family, the sense is reinforced that moral weakness in a woman has far more serious consequences in the moral landscape of Mansfield Park than it did in Pride and Prejudice:

What would be the consequence? Whom would it not injure? Whose views might it not affect? Whose peace would it not cut up for ever? Miss Crawford herself – Edmund; but it was dangerous, perhaps, to tread such ground. She confined herself, or tried to confine herself to the simple, indubitable family – misery which must envelope all. (p. 410)

This orthodox view, that sexual misbehaviour in one member of the family contaminates all is parodied in Pride and Prejudice through being the view of Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mr Collins, as well as Mary Bennet, who says:

“Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this useful lesson; that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable – that one false step involves her in endless ruin – that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful, - and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behaviour towards the undeserving of the other sex.”

Elizabeth lifted up her eyes in amazement, but was too much oppressed to make any reply. Mary, however, continued to console herself with such kind of moral extractions from the evil before them. (p. 188)

Paradoxes here express the shallowness of inflexible moralising ('console' versus 'evil') and the more complex mixture of sorrow ('oppressed') with a rational rejection of simple solutions ('amazement') that characterises Elizabeth's, and it seems the novel's, approach.

Like Elizabeth, Fanny soon contemplates how news of the fallen woman might affect her own position, both generally, in terms of her relationship with the Bertram family and more particularly with Edmund. Indeed, Fanny's self-censorship is in place from the first moment that the truth about Maria's behaviour is confirmed:

Whose peace would it not cut up for ever? Miss Crawford herself – Edmund; but it was dangerous, perhaps, to tread such ground. She confined herself, or tried to confine herself to the simple, indubitable family – misery which must envelope all. (p. 410)

This is not the straightforward altruistic concern for her friends and family that it initially appears to be. Far from viewing Maria's fall as an insurmountable hurdle to her romantic

ambitions, Fanny acknowledges that, since the architect of Maria's fall is Mary's brother, Henry, the prospect of a marriage between Edmund and Mary is increasingly unlikely. It is 'dangerous' to tread such ground because Fanny is conscious that to explore this possibility too freely would be to appear to be profiting from the misfortune of another as well as giving hope to a long-concealed fantasy.

In believing that a marriage is made impossible between Mary and Edmund as a consequence of the sexual transgression of their siblings, Fanny is again allied with Lady Catherine De Bourgh, who, despite her aristocratic status, articulates decidedly middle-class views when denying the possibility of a marriage between Darcy and Elizabeth:

"I am no stranger to the particulars of your youngest sister's infamous elopement. I know it all; that the young man's marrying her, was a patched-up business, at the expence of your father and uncle. And is *such* a girl to be my nephew's sister? Is *her* husband, is the son of his late father's steward to be his brother? Heaven and earth! – of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?" (p. 233)

But, while Lady Catherine's views on the contagion of sexual transgression are repudiated through the successful marriage between Elizabeth and Darcy, Mary loses Edmund to Fanny, at least in part because of her relationship to Henry. Furthermore, when Edmund rejects Mary, he rejects not only her, but also the louche aristocratic values she represents, in favour of the unwavering moral superiority of Fanny. As Eagleton remarks:

If one way in which women can help regenerate the gentry is by writing about it, another is by marrying into it. Both Catherine Morland and Fanny Price bring precious resources to the upper classes by grafting their sound qualities on to it through marriage.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 119.

Elizabeth Bennet could also be included in this group of women given the power of moral rejuvenation through marriage to men their social superiors. The explicit rejection of corrupted aristocratic values remains implicit in Pride and Prejudice, however, where Darcy's choice of middle-class Elizabeth is not really a choice at all, since she is the only woman he loves. The absence of a genuine aristocratic rival diminishes the social- and class-implications of his choice, implications that are more forcefully examined in Mansfield Park.

### The Foundling Narrative Revisited

Austen evokes certain conventions of the foundling narrative to Fanny's story. Zunshine sees the eighteenth-century foundling narrative as 'a cultural code for both expressing and deflecting the period's anxiety about a host of difficult social issues bound up with illegitimacy'.<sup>46</sup> Looking at those aspects of the narrative that Austen was keen to retain, as well as those that she changes or subverts, highlights the ways in which she engaged with those 'difficult social issues' raised by real or implied illegitimacy. First, foundling narratives involve predominately female protagonists, whose legitimacy is in doubt at the beginning of the novel and confirmed at the end.<sup>47</sup> This is not necessarily the pattern for male foundlings. The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling (1749) by Henry Fielding, the most famous foundling novel, provides an interesting

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<sup>46</sup> Zunshine, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 155.



counterpoint to the fate of female foundlings.<sup>48</sup> Unlike foundlings such as Evelina, who are not foundlings in a literal sense, because their parentage is known only not recognised, Tom is a true foundling. In line with the conventions of foundling narrative, Tom discovers his true parents and inherits Allworthy's estate. He is also reunited with his true love, the heiress of Western Hall, Sophia Western. But, the offer of marriage is only sanctioned by Sophia's father *after* he has discovered that Tom is Allworthy's heir – money, rather than Tom's innate goodness is the motivating force here: 'No sooner then was Western informed of Mr Allworthy's intention to make Jones his heir, than he ... became as eager for her marriage with Jones, as he had before been to couple her to Blifil'.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Tom remains illegitimate, he does not have to be recognised as legitimate to inherit a fortune. Tom Jones is both a reassuring and unsettling creature. While he does not follow the conventional route of the foundling, nor does he meet the unhappy end of the bastard, destined to repeat the mistakes of the fallen mother.

The quest for identity through the assertion of the right to be considered legitimate forms the central plot motivation of the foundling narrative. Unlike Frances Burney's *Evelina*, however, whose father does not recognise her as his legitimate daughter until she is forced into his sight and he cannot fail but see the likeness between her and her mother, his wife, Fanny's legitimacy is not in doubt from the beginning of the novel. In departing from what constitutes the principal source of tension and dramatic possibility in foundling narratives, Austen seems to be asserting a more conservative

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<sup>48</sup> See Parker, *The Author's Inheritance*, pp. 93-116, for a discussion of the points of comparison between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Tom Jones*.

<sup>49</sup> Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones*, ed. R. P. C. Mutter (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 801. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

interpretation of convention but this is far from the case. Fanny's quest is for a legitimate identity too, but not defined in the kind of narrow terms associated with origins of birth. As such, Austen replaces the conventional tension produced by the heroine trying to assume her birthright and replaces it with an altogether more comprehensive and complex analysis of what constitutes identity.

Zunshine's summary of the eighteenth-century foundling narrative provides a useful template:

A typical foundling would be raised by strangers, leave her adopted family upon reaching marriageable age, go through numerous ordeals (during which she acquired an eligible suitor while retaining her chastity), and finally discover her true kin, reassert her legitimate status, and re-establish herself as part of her biological family.<sup>50</sup>

The foundling, we might generalise, more than the bastard, tends to be characterised by moral purity, as well as frequently being female. In fact, both Evelina and Fanny express this moral purity in terms that stress their lack of ambition and humility. Both wish for anonymity, to simply disappear, at various points in the narrative. This desire for self-effacement is viewed as consistent with their goodness and attempts to make safe any threat to the established order they might represent. When Fanny discovers the full details of Maria's sexual transgression, she feels the shame by association so strongly that she wishes simply not to exist: 'It appeared to her, that as far as this world alone was concerned, the greatest blessing to every one of kindred with Mrs Rushworth would be instant annihilation' (p. 410). It is interesting that she also imagines this to be the kindest thing for everyone related to Maria – there is a curious kind of egoism to her self-

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<sup>50</sup> Zunshine, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

effacement, in the sense that she cannot imagine anyone not agreeing with her. Evelina refers to herself as 'nobody' when in the company of her social superiors and deliberately ignored:

Since I, as Mr. Lovel says, am *Nobody*, I seated myself quietly on a window, and not very near to any body: Lord Merton, Mr Coverley, and Mr. Lovel, severally passed me without notice, and surrounded the chair of Lady Louisa Larpent.<sup>51</sup>

Burney uses the expression 'nobody' provocatively here, associated as it is with illegitimacy. In both cases, Fanny and Evelina assume a role that seems far more meek than strictly necessary. Zunshine claims that, in the case of Evelina, this represents a canny understanding of the author of the needs and concerns of her readership:

Mr. Villars's and Evelina's conviction that illegitimacy would unquestionably doom Evelina's social aspirations mirrors not so much the heartfelt belief of the hypothetical real-life daughter of a rich baronet, who would almost certainly not think in these self-abasing terms, but rather the subjectivity of the author writing for middle-class audiences and understanding too well their financial worries.<sup>52</sup>

Fanny, however, is in a situation both more and less legitimate than Evelina. Although the status of her birth is not in question, she assumes the role of 'nobody' within the Bertram family much more comprehensively than Evelina does in the drawing rooms of her friends, because she comes from humble beginnings and is reliant on their charity. Furthermore, Aunt Norris is aware of the potential risk Fanny might present to the 'unpolluted' Bertram household if she is brought up as her cousins' equal and acquires marital ambitions above her station in the shape of her cousins. In this way, then, the financial threat represented by the foundling is re-enacted, but with Austen shifting the focus from accident of birth to the concerns about wealth that lie behind it.

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<sup>51</sup> Frances Burney, *Evelina*, ed. Margaret Anne Doody (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 320. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>52</sup> Zunshine, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

Fanny conforms to the foundling pattern.<sup>53</sup> She is separated from her family and raised by strangers, even if those strangers are her uncle, aunts and cousins. Fanny acquires an eligible suitor in Edmund and an ineligible suitor, Henry Crawford, who becomes one of her ordeals to be suffered when he pursues her to Portsmouth, much to her shame and embarrassment. Similarly, Evelina attracts both a genuine suitor in the form of Lord Orville and a selection of seductive rakes such as Sir Clement Willoughby. That Fanny and Evelina are tested and prove their innocence through resisting the worldly pleasures that these men offer, both challenges the convention that children of illegitimate birth are bound to repeat the sins of their mothers and simultaneously emphasises their innocence by playing their purity against the convention of the dubious morality of women of uncertain birth. A further ordeal for both women involves a return to their known biological family, whom they compare unfavourably to their adopted family. When Fanny returns to her family in Portsmouth she feels a sense of dislocation and compares her home unfavourably with Mansfield Park:

She could think of nothing but Mansfield, its beloved inmates, its happy ways. Every thing where she now was, was in full contrast to it. The elegance, propriety, regularity, harmony – and perhaps, above all, the peace and tranquillity of Mansfield, were brought to her remembrance every hour of the day, by the prevalence of every thing opposite to them *here*. (p. 363)

When Evelina returns to London with her vulgar French grandmother, she too compares her present situation with the one that she had previously enjoyed:

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<sup>53</sup> See, on this point, Parker, who notes the influence of the foundling narrative on Austen's presentation of women, in particular Elizabeth Bennet in Pride and Prejudice: 'Elizabeth is not an actual foundling; nevertheless the romantic aura of that condition clings to her... Austen's heroines are often foundlings in spirit, if not in truth, and Elizabeth is no exception, with her improvident and often remote father and her silly and querulous mother.' The Author's Inheritance, p. 97.

London now seems no longer the same place where I enjoyed so much happiness; everything is new and strange to me, even the town itself has not the same aspect: - my situation so altered! my home so different! – my companions so changed! Indeed, London now seems a desert; that gay and busy appearance it so lately wore, is now succeeded by a look of gloom, fatigue and lassitude. (p. 192)

This real or assumed identification with the foundling enables Fanny and Evelina to occupy the role of outsider, capable of a more objective analysis of their environment than their solidly legitimate peers. The position of illegitimates (and foundlings, since Schmidgen does not distinguish between foundlings and illegitimates in terms of their function within the novel) on the borders of society is something that Schmidgen considers as providing a privileged standpoint, allowing writers to critique society:

Against this basic social horizon of an increasing diversification held uneasily in check by a hierarchical separation of ranks, the bastard's ability to be at the same time inside and outside, elusive and solid, with and without an origin, acquires a distinct representational value. His essential doubleness ... allows the bastard to cross hierarchical divisions and to enact a radicalized social mobility, but a mobility that remains curiously disembodied, simultaneously traversing and leaving inviolate the boundaries of an uneven social space.<sup>54</sup>

In this way, then, by giving their heroines the chameleon-like qualities of the foundling, Burney and Austen are able to: 'transform the hierarchy that usually restrains the movements of a young unmarried woman into an observational vehicle through which various positions can be occupied'.<sup>55</sup>

Mansfield Park also includes the figure of the surrogate father. The quasi-foundling, Fanny, discovers her biological parents to be inadequate yet finds, at the end, a

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<sup>54</sup> Wolfram Schmidgen, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

nurturing, high-status and wealthy, father in Sir Thomas. Her moral purity makes Fanny an idealised replacement for his 'lost' daughter, Maria:

Fanny was indeed the daughter that he wanted. His charitable kindness had been rearing a prime comfort for himself. His liberality had a rich repayment, and the general goodness of his intentions by her, deserved it. (p. 438)

The problem is, that although Sir Thomas is rich, he is in no position to claim Fanny as his legitimate child (though she becomes his daughter-in-law), and the heiress to his fortune. If, as Zunshine suggests:

Part of the appeal of the "first find a rich husband and *then* a rich father" motif of the eighteenth-century foundling narrative was indeed this motif's capacity to both express and assuage the cultural anxiety about the ability of bastards to disrupt the transmission of property to legal heirs.<sup>56</sup>

then it would seem that something rather interesting is going on in Mansfield Park. On the one hand, the reader has known all the way through the novel that Fanny is legitimate, and in this way, Austen could be said to be rather conservative since, in terms of 'cultural anxiety' extending only to bastards, Fanny was never a real threat to established modes of inheritance. Except that Fanny's legitimacy does not make her any the less problematic. On the other, Austen is more progressive than her contemporaries, because she does not seem to be wholly concerned about optimising the function of the foundling narrative, that is, to 'assuage the cultural anxiety about the ability of bastards to disrupt the transmission of property to legal heirs', given that Fanny remains poor and socially insignificant and does not discover a fortune that makes her need for Edmund's wealth and status superfluous. Although Fanny's legitimacy is not in question throughout the novel, unlike her foundling doubles, in that her need for money and social status remain,

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<sup>56</sup> Zunshine, op. cit., pp. 34-5.

she actually has more in common with the 'greedy mercenary bastards' than the 'lucky foundlings' she seems to be identified with. In this way, then, Austen exploits the close association of Fanny with the archetypal foundling narrative and its capacity to suppress and contain the threat embodied by those attempting to disturb established social rank, in order to conceal the subversive upward mobility of Fanny. The essential social conservatism defended by the foundling narrative is used by Austen to conceal the real threat to aristocratic ideals and fortunes, that is, the middle class.

## IV

### Emma: The Foundling Narrative Subverted

Emma (1815) sees Austen return to test further the foundling narrative, the conventions of which are challenged by the presence of an unambiguously illegitimate daughter. Harriet Smith, befriended by Emma Woodhouse, is described as, ‘the natural daughter of somebody’.<sup>57</sup> She is not the only illegitimate daughter to be present in an Austen novel, but her fate is quite different from that imagined for the second Eliza in Sense and Sensibility, whose destiny is far more consistent with the conventional fate of illegitimate girls. The contrast is noted by Michael Kramp, whose reading of Eliza is reductive:

The novel identifies Harriet as an illegitimate female child, a troublesome figure whom Austen had earlier dismissed from a narrative. In Sense and Sensibility, Colonel Brandon simply informs Elinor that he “removed” the daughter of the second Eliza and her mother “into the country”. In Emma, however, the novelist is much more concerned about Harriet, and Highbury seems determined to prevent her participation in such a deplorable cyclic drama.<sup>58</sup>

Harriet’s originality derives not only from her sustained presence in the text but also, somewhat paradoxically, from the sheer normality of her experience. She meets a suitable man, Robert Martin, they fall in love and he asks her to marry him. On the advice of Emma, who has more illustrious plans for Harriet, she rejects him and considers a range of other men as possible suitors. Having flirted with the possibility of romance with men socially superior to her, she accepts Martin’s proposal and is happily married, having

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<sup>57</sup> Jane Austen, Emma, ed. Fiona Stafford (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 23. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Kramp, ‘The Woman, the Gypsies and England: Harriet Smith’s National Role’, College Literature, 31:1 (Winter, 2004), 147-168 (p. 148).



neatly sidestepped the ‘unspeakable fate – seduction, pregnancy, prostitution, and exile’<sup>59</sup> - that traditionally awaits the illegitimate daughter, destined to repeat the mother’s mistakes.

### Harriet in Context

Harriet is not the first illegitimate heroine in literature to avoid a tragic fate and end in a sensible happy marriage and social position, although this has been claimed.<sup>60</sup> Charlotte Temple and Lucy Temple (1794) by Susanna Rowson, tell the story of an unfortunate mother, Charlotte and her daughter, Lucy. With the assistance of her treacherous French governess, La Rue, the innocent and somewhat naïve Charlotte is seduced and abducted by Montraville, a soldier on leave, who returns to America with her. Having promised marriage, he installs her in a cottage and occasionally visits her. She ‘falls’ pregnant but in the meantime, Montraville has fallen in love with a rich heiress, Julia Franklin, whom he marries. Piqued at the fact that Charlotte will not sleep with him, Montraville’s best friend, Belcour, tricks Montraville into thinking that the baby Charlotte is carrying is not his. Montraville subsequently abandons Charlotte, who is left destitute and appeals to her governess who has since married well. She turns her out of her house and Charlotte dies in the lodgings of a kindly servant, reunited with her father, who has come to America to search for her. Mr Temple returns to England with Lucy, the baby girl.

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<sup>59</sup> Seeber, op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>60</sup> Zunshine erroneously sees Harriet as unique, op. cit., p. 158.

So far, so conventional seduction plot, but Lucy Temple marks an abrupt departure from the 'eighteenth-century literary tradition of signalling the virtue of daughters via the virtue of their mothers'.<sup>61</sup> Charlotte writes to her mother, asking her to 'protect my innocent infant: it partakes not of its mother's guilt',<sup>62</sup> and this belief is successfully tested in the life of her daughter. We first meet Lucy living with kindly adoptive parents, having taken the surname of her benevolent godfather, Blackeney. Despite her mother's dying admonition, to "'tell her the unhappy fate of her mother, and teach her to avoid my errors'" (p. 85), Lucy grows up unaware of the 'stain' of her birth. Sensational tragedy appears but is avoided. She falls in love with Lieutenant Franklin, who turns out to be her half-brother. The engagement is broken off and Lucy never marries. Instead, she throws her energy into establishing schools for girls. True, Lucy does not make a successful marriage at the end of the novel, which might suggest tolerance of the idea that an illegitimate female can 'by no means be trusted with the property and genes of a good man',<sup>63</sup> but Rowson is able to imagine a constructive and socially useful future for Lucy, where marriage is not the sole option for a woman who wishes for an 'establishment' of her own.

Given that plots where poor girls win rich husbands are particularly products of societies where women are deprived of wealth, security, and position except through marriage, education could be seen as a more rational equivalent, since women before the modern era were also deprived of the benefits of education. If Lucy avoids the dangers

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>62</sup> Susanna Rowson, Charlotte Temple and Lucy Temple, ed. Ann Douglas (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. 84. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>63</sup> Zunshine, op. cit., p. 156.

attendant on sexual desire by escaping from incest, education could also be seen as a way to circumvent those dangers both by literally giving her an income separate from marriage and also by representing the acquisition of rational and moral principles by young girls, which may help to arm them against the ever-present perils. Jane Eyre, having extricated herself from the perils of a desire that cannot end in marriage, throws herself into educating girls.

Teaching, one of the few careers open to women at this time, is not necessarily viewed by characters in literary texts as a positive route to independence, Emma Courtney's reaction to the idea in the Memoirs of Emma Courtney (1796) by Mary Hays being typical:

The small pittance bequeathed to me was insufficient to preserve me from dependence. – Dependence! – I repeated to myself, and I felt my heart die within me. I revolved in my mind various plans for my future establishment. – I might, perhaps, be allowed to officiate, as an assistant, in the school where I had been placed in my childhood, with the mistress of which I still kept up an occasional correspondence; but this was a species of servitude, and my mind panted for freedom.<sup>64</sup>

Within the context of the two novels, Charlotte Temple and Lucy Temple, however, it assumes social and moral significance. Rowson continually emphasizes the naivety and innocence of Charlotte, factors that are seen as leading directly to the ease with which she is seduced and abducted: ““She (Madame Du Pont) loved Charlotte truly; and when she reflected on the innocence and gentleness of her disposition, she concluded that it must have been the advice and machinations of La Rue, which led to this imprudent action””

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<sup>64</sup> Mary Hays, Memoirs of Emma Courtney, ed. Eleanor Ty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 31. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

(p. 51). By rejecting romance in favour of education, Lucy not only avoids the fate of her mother but makes a positive ethical point. Implicit to her choice of teaching is a rejection of the belief that bad choices, indicative of lax morals, are inherited flaws, in favour of the view that they are simply the result of ignorance. Lucy takes pride in her achievement and describes it thus:

“I hope it has effected some good ... There has been a considerable number from the school who have proved useful and respectable so far; several of the pupils are now married, and others are giving instruction in different parts of the country.” (p. 263)

The success of her school and the terms that describe this success, that is, the happy marriages of her former pupils *and* the decision by some to become teachers, confirm the principle that education is the way to protect women from seduction and unhappy marriages and even from marriage altogether.

Within the strict terms laid out by Zunshine, then, Lucy is not entirely successful at avoiding the ignominy of her birth. Although she does not ‘suffer seduction, or infamy, or rape’,<sup>65</sup> nor does she challenge the prejudice held against illegitimate daughters within the rather narrow parameters allowed by Zunshine, that is, by ‘making a good common-sense marriage’.<sup>66</sup> Zunshine appears to have been convinced by the disciplinary necessity of marriage as advanced by some of the novels she refers to. Even Emma allows for the possibility that a single woman may be an asset to society, although it is accompanied by a telling caveat: “‘A single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else’” (p. 83). Rowson imagines a woman’s life,

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<sup>65</sup> Zunshine, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

unfettered by the stigma of an unfortunate birth and one where the opportunities for fulfilment and social usefulness can extend beyond the narrow confines of marriage. It could be argued that in doing so, not only does she challenge the social handicap of being illegitimate but also of being female.

### The Foundling and the Bastard

Although it is Harriet who attends Mrs. Goddard's school, described somewhat mockingly by Austen as an establishment: 'where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price, and where girls might be sent to be out of the way and scramble themselves into a little education, without any risk of them coming back prodigies' (p. 22), it is generally considered to be Emma who undergoes a process of education. Seeber points out, however, that Harriet is an essential part of this process:

Crucial to the taming of Emma's imagination is the figure of Harriet, who, both "imagined" and "real" becomes the site for Emma's education process.<sup>67</sup>

Harriet's illegitimacy and her undefined position in Highfield society allow her to be a powerfully chimerical figure to Emma. In Emma the romantic patterns of the illegitimacy narrative are present in Emma's imagination and also in Emma and Harriet's reading, to be contrasted with the eventual truth about Harriet's real-life narrative. When Emma learns of Harriet's history, she immediately recognizes her romantic potential, imagining her to be 'a gentleman's daughter' (p. 31), and identifying her with the foundling

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<sup>67</sup> Seeber, op. cit., p. 38.

heroines of literature. Harriet physically resembles and has the same 'natural' reticence and grace that characterizes founding heroines such as Evelina:

She was a very pretty girl, and her beauty happened to be of a sort which Emma particularly admired. She was short, plump and fair, with a fine bloom, blue eyes, light hair, regular features, and a look of great sweetness; and before the end of the evening, Emma was as much pleased with her manners as her person, and quite determined to continue the acquaintance ... those soft blue eyes and all those natural graces should not be wasted on the inferior society of Highbury and its connections. (p. 24)

Emma forgets that Harriet's illegitimacy marks her as one of the 'inferior society of Highbury'. Her desire to save Harriet from being 'wasted' involves disrupting her courtship with Robert Martin, an eligible young man, whose only fault is that he is a farmer and who, in Emma's eyes, must be 'coarse and unpolished' (p. 24). Her warning to Harriet on this subject makes a romantic reference to Harriet's illegitimacy, simultaneously as it allows for her identification with gentlemen:

"The misfortune of your birth ought to make you particularly careful as to your associates. There can be no doubt of your being a gentleman's daughter, and you must support your claim to that station by every thing within your own power, or there will be plenty of people who would take pleasure in degrading you." (p. 30)

Emma shows herself conscious of the importance of appearances. She recognizes that as well as being a hindrance to social success, illegitimacy can also facilitate social mobility on a scale near impossible for those whose background is clearly acknowledged. It is the element of the founding narrative, which briefly allows for the possibility of illegitimate daughters to make highly successful marriages that Emma most identifies with and wishes to reproduce in Harriet's own personal history. To return to the point made by Seeber that two Harriets exist for Emma, one 'imagined' and one 'real', Emma is able to hold both views of Harriet simultaneously and successfully here. Moreover, she shows

herself to be highly sensitive to the fact that the space between the two exists within society's construction of the bastard and is open to exploitation.

Emma may cling to a romantic fictional template for illegitimacy but she never loses sight of Harriet's illegitimacy and offers rational arguments she advances to Mr. Knightley, in particular, to defend Harriet's awkward social position:

"As to the circumstances of her birth, though in a legal sense she may be called Nobody, it will not hold in common-sense. She is not to pay for the offence of others, by being held below the level of those with whom she is brought up." (p. 61)

Though the romantic insistence that Harriet is a gentleman's daughter represents an attempt by Emma to graft the conventional foundling background onto Harriet, the key point in traditional foundling narratives is that the loss of status is temporary, dependent only on the legitimacy of the daughter being recognized, which it inevitably is. Gentleman-father or not, Emma aims for a superior marriage for Harriet without ever having recourse to the fantasy that Harriet's illegitimacy might be only temporary. Emma, in effect, deliberately mis-reads the foundling romances. Given what Mr. Knightley says about her reading, it is possible that she never got to the end of the novels and enjoyed the restored legitimacy of the heroine:

I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to anything requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding. (p. 36)

As Knightley undertakes a disciplinary role in regard to Emma, the character, Zunshine sees Austen undertake a disciplinary role in Emma the novel:

By the end of the novel, Austen has to make a point of introducing her own "common-sense" interpretation of Harriet's situation, thus overriding

Emma's complicated emotional dependence on the trappings of the foundling romance.<sup>68</sup>

Neither Knightley nor Zunshine, however, give Emma credit for being able to successfully critique and reject those elements of her romantic identification with the foundling narrative that do not fit Harriet's own situation. In this way then, it is Emma as well as Austen who actively interrogate the foundling narrative and offer a more radical alternative.

It is significant that when Harriet and Emma meet Robert Martin, he admits that he "has not been able to get the Romance of the Forest yet" (p. 31). This is a foundling romance.<sup>69</sup> Education, out of the false reality of the romance, into true love comes first for Harriet. It is not Emma who suggests Knightley as a suitable partner for Harriet, but Harriet herself who recognizes that his gentlemanly qualities far exceed those of any of her other potential suitors:

"I was thinking of a much more precious circumstance – of Mr Knightley's coming and asking me to dance, when Mr Elton would not stand up with me; and when there was no other partner in the room. That was the kind action; that was the noble benevolence and generosity; that was the service that made me begin to feel how superior he was to every other being upon earth." (p. 381)

Romance notions of a gentleman are replaced by a recognition, by Harriet, of truly gentle qualities. Rejection of the dangerous illusions of romance come later with Emma:

How Harriet could ever have had the presumption to raise her thoughts to Mr. Knightley! – How could she dare to fancy herself the chosen of such a man till actually assured of it! But Harriet was less humble, had fewer scruples than formerly. – Her inferiority, whether of mind or situation, seemed little felt ... Alas! Was not that her own doing too? Who had been

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>69</sup> See Richard Cronin; Dorothy McMillan, 'Harriet Smith's Reading', *Notes and Queries*, 49:4 (2002), 449-50 (p. 450).



at pains to give Harriet notions of self-consequence but herself? (pp. 387-88)

Because Emma is so keen to take complete responsibility for Harriet's transformation, the reader is happy to accept her word, particularly since it conforms so neatly to the expectations that Emma must learn the hard lesson inherent to the process of education she undertakes throughout the novel and that Harriet has no independent life of her own. The novel itself, in trying to impose Emma's authority on Harriet's subversion seems to reproduce the unsettling power dynamic that Knightley identifies as operating between Mrs Weston, Emma's governess and Emma, where, under the conventional appearance of governess and student, it was actually governess and not student that was most influenced:

“You might not give Emma such a complete education as your powers would seem to promise; but you were receiving a very good education from her, on the very material matrimonial point of submitting your own will, and doing as you were bid.” (p.37)

To imagine that Harriet might have been attracted to and thought herself equal to Knightley independent of Emma, provides the kind of 'gap' in the narrative that Seeber identifies, a gap where Harriet's potential for disturbance is revealed but never fully explored.

### Finding the Conventional in the Unconventional

Not only is Emma not in control to the extent that both she and the reader imagine, her ambitions for Harriet are ultimately unfulfilled. Although Emma allows for

the possibility that an illegitimate woman might make a successful match, the novel ultimately seems to support Knightley's more conventional reading of society:

“Harriet Smith may not find offers of marriage flow in so fast, though she is a very pretty girl. Men of sense, whatever you may chuse to say, do not want silly wives. Men of family would not be very fond of connecting themselves with a girl of such obscurity – and most prudent men would be afraid of the inconvenience and disgrace they might be involved in, when the mystery of her parentage came to be revealed. Let her marry Robert Martin, and she is safe, respectable and happy for ever.” (p. 63)

Harriet does marry Robert Martin and in doing so, appears to conform to Knightley's conservative outlook, an outlook that Elizabeth Langland, among others, suggests derives from: ‘a security about his and his neighbors’ status that belongs to an earlier age’.<sup>70</sup> And one that Austen seems eager to impose. Even Emma, when she discovers that Harriet is the daughter of a tradesman rather than a gentleman is forced to agree with Knightley, that: ‘The stain of illegitimacy, unbleached by nobility or wealth, would have been a stain indeed’ (p. 451). The fact that the common sense view has taken priority over the romantic possibilities offered by the foundling narrative and embraced by Emma is seen as a failure not only on Emma's part, but also in more general terms, as a rejection of the romantic and potentially democratic promise of the foundling narrative. But if we look again at the ending of the novel, as Emma is forced to look again at Robert Martin, Harriet's ending is closer to the conventional foundling romance than Emma might imagine. In fact, in trying to find Harriet high-status but ultimately unworthy suitors Emma has mis-read the foundling convention yet again and assumed that Harriet's suitor must be socially superior to her. In fact, foundlings always marry men their social equal, there is only ever a temporary inequality of status until the foundling has been restored to

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<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 225.

her rightful place in society. To return to Zunshine's assertion that:

By the end of the novel, Austen has to make a point of introducing her own "common sense" interpretation of Harriet's situation, thus overriding Emma's complicated emotional dependence on the trappings of the foundling romance.<sup>71</sup>

In fact, the end of the novel places Harriet back within those reassuring conventions she temporarily seemed to escape from, simultaneously as it seems to reject Emma's romantic visions for Harriet. But, as we have seen, Emma's reading of the foundling myth was fundamentally flawed. Austen replaces Emma's misreading with a more literal interpretation that nonetheless has the potential to disrupt the neat set of social certainties she has been busy constructing. Harriet is reunited with the man she loves, who, even Emma has to accept, is a gentleman and fully worthy of and equal to her:

As Emma became acquainted with Robert Martin, who was now introduced at Hartfield, she fully acknowledged in him all the appearance of sense and worth which could bid fairest for her little friend. She had no doubt of Harriet's happiness with any good tempered man; but with him, and in the home that he offered, there would be the hope of more, of security, stability, and improvement. (p. 451)

In this radical revision of Robert Martin in the eyes of Emma, he becomes the hero of Harriet's foundling romance while Mr Elton and Frank Churchill become transformed as the ordeal she must go through before being reunited with her true love. Ultimately, then, although Emma might not realise it, she has managed to participate in a foundling romance where the heroine can remain illegitimate and still achieve a happy ending. In this context, the conventional foundling narrative takes on a radical role, undermining and subverting the dominant storyline and its apparent support for a return to the security of a rigid social hierarchy.

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<sup>71</sup> Zunshine, op. cit., p. 159.

## Chapter 2: Contemporary Attitudes and Modern Interpretations

### I

#### Illegitimacy Legislation

Legislation and cultural attitudes themselves embody narratives. In law and moral evaluations the Victorian period expresses a narrative of illegitimacy different from that of the eighteenth century. After the 1834 Poor Law, particularly, illegitimacy becomes a more a narrative about the woman rather than a narrative about the man, and a narrative of guilt rather more than one about economic provision for bastards. Illegitimacy narratives are not fixed over time. Besides dealing with sexual irregularities and their offspring, they also invoke patriarchal inequalities, as well as anxieties about legitimate inheritance. Since illegitimacy is not a fixed or universal state, the novels of the Victorian period and the preceding century reveal tensions and suppressions in the narrative patterns associated with illegitimacy.

#### A History of Controlling Illegitimacy

The Victorians were by no means the first to recognise the disruptive potential of the illegitimate child, or to attempt to invoke the law in order to stigmatise its existence. Early legislation recognised specifically the economic threat that the bastard introduced to the domestic unit, a threat made safe by denying the child any economic protection:

The status of the bastard as fillius nullius had been established in civil and in common law in England since the early middle ages. This defined the bastard as literally nobody's child, a 'stranger in blood' who had neither

automatic right of inheritance nor legal claim on either of his parents for support.<sup>1</sup>

Early legislation had a straightforward function: to protect the wealth and, therefore, the stability of the legitimate family. Enshrined in such laws is the belief that identity, existence even, may only be determined by an economic presence. By removing all such rights from the child, the child becomes, in effect, absent from society. The notion of identity, the state of being a nobody, recurs in the language of novels examined here: we have seen Burney's provocative use of it and, in chapter five, it appears in the title of Wilkie Collins' No Name; Fanny Price feels a nobody in the Bertram family but Maria, after sexual transgression, destroys 'her own character' in her father's words (p. 432).

In addition to laws which dealt explicitly with limiting the destabilising consequences of the birth of an illegitimate child by concentrating on removing all traces of the child once it had been born, laws which attempted to discourage illegitimate births set out to stigmatise the parents of the child, and increasingly, during the centuries, the mother. In 1607 an Act was introduced which effectively criminalised mothers of illegitimate children. The punishment for a first 'offence' was a year in the house of correction. The laws relating to bastardy from the middle ages onwards had recognised, consciously or otherwise, the complicated dynamic between economics and morality when attempting to regulate and to a certain extent, rationalise the public face of bastardy. As bastardy itself was articulated as both an economic and a moral threat, so the laws relating to bastardy introduced prior to the 1834 New Poor Law aimed to

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<sup>1</sup> Jenny Bourne Taylor, 'Representing Illegitimacy in Victorian Culture', in R. Robbins and J. Wolfreys (ed.), Victorian Identities (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 129.

circumscribe the disruptive potential of bastardy through a combination of economic and moral censure.

In so far as the New Poor Law as a whole was 'prompted by fiscal crisis as much as by the utilitarian desire to regulate and discipline the poor',<sup>2</sup> bastardy continued to be regarded as a two-fold threat to social stability. The Bastardy Clauses of the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, however, represent an attempt by the state to define and formalise a set of attitudes to illegitimacy, and, further, to make that definition peculiarly Victorian by setting contemporary attitudes against those that had preceded them. The most significant recommendation of the Commissioners was to remove the right of mothers to name the alleged father, and, consequently, to make them financially responsible for the child. Prior to 1834, it had been possible for the courts to force alleged fathers to pay support to the mothers.<sup>3</sup>

The Commissioners were horrified by this practice for several reasons. Their objections were concerned primarily with the possibility that innocent men could be victimized and, indeed, criminalized on the word of a manipulative female:

If there were no other objections to these laws than that they place at the mercy of any abandoned woman every man who is not rich enough to give security or find sureties ... we would still feel it our duty to urge their immediate abolition.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor details the eighteenth-century law on this, *ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> S.G. and E.O.A. Checkland (ed.), The Poor Law Report of 1834 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 260.

They included in their report a series of statements by ‘witnesses’ that supported their premise that regulations intended to relieve the parish of the economic responsibility of illegitimate children were being exploited:

At Exeter, an apprentice under eighteen years of age was recently committed to the house of correction for want of security. It was admitted that there was no chance of his absconding, but the overseers said he had been brought for punishment. The woman stated that she was only three months gone with child; and thus the boy is taken from his work, is confined five or six months among persons of all classes, and probably ruined for ever, on the oath of a person with whom he was not confronted, and with whom he denied having any intercourse.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, it was claimed that illegitimate children became an economic asset to women as a result of these regulations. If the court decided that a putative father ought to pay two shillings a week, for example, then the parish would pay in default of the father who had in all likelihood done a runner:

The order of maintenance is from 2s. to 3s. per week, according to the circumstances of the father, and is paid to the mother whether received from the father or not; to the mother of a legitimate child, if in distress, the weekly allowance is 2s.: thus the mother of a bastard is, at all events, as well provided for, and it may be better.<sup>6</sup>

Some witnesses went further in their acknowledgement of a child as a form of economic currency by attempting to invoke statistics as ‘evidence’ of the value of the bastard: ‘a bastard child is thus about 25 per cent more valuable to a parent than a legitimate one’.<sup>7</sup> This obsession with the economic consequences of the birth of an illegitimate represents an interesting moral paradox: it relies upon a shared set of moral values, values that judge an illegitimate child as a badge of shame, while simultaneously failing to engage with the moral debate surrounding illegitimacy by displacing moral opprobrium into ‘safe’

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 264.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

economic issues. In this way, placing a financial value on a bastard becomes at once an act of engagement with and a detachment from illegitimacy.

The Commissioners believed that existing law, besides punishing men financially on the suspect word of the mother, additionally encouraged women in 'vice'; that is, in giving birth to lots of illegitimate children for financial advantage. But this was not all. Men were framed as innocent victims of the manipulations of scheming females, who not only cynically named them as fathers of their offspring for financial advantage, but also used the fact of their pregnancy and the threat of prison to acquire, 'what every woman looks upon as the greatest prize - a husband'.<sup>8</sup> Viewed in this way, the old bastardy clauses could be seen as removing much of the moral stigma of illegitimacy, either by encouraging early marriages or requiring economic compensation. In addition, it has been claimed the old system was an inducement to illegitimate intercourse.<sup>9</sup> This view is, in fact, supported by the evidence of the pattern of pre-nuptial conception revealed through the comparison of dates of marriages to dates of baptisms of the first child:

Given the fact that between a third and a half of all brides were pregnant (at least in many parts of England) it seems right to think of the common ground as courtship, or relations between the sexes - readily including full intercourse - which were expected to lead to marriage, or at least of which marriage was understood to be a possible outcome.<sup>10</sup>

It was the bond between the bastard and his father that the commissioners determined to break, and in doing so, the cultural significance of the illegitimate child was fundamentally altered.

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<sup>8</sup> Ursula Henriques, 'Bastardy and the New Poor Law', *Past and Present*, 37 (1967), 103-129 p. 106.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 67.



The recommendations of the Commissioners are framed within a concern for improving the moral fabric of society. The fact that these recommendations are justified on primarily moral grounds represents a significant shift in emphasis. While the original weaknesses of the Old Poor Law were represented as primarily economic, the improvements suggested take advantage of moral rhetoric in order to advance the case for change. The Commissioners themselves were aware of their multiple intentions when drafting new Bastardy Clauses: 'the objects of these laws appear to be two: the diminution of the crime; and the indemnity of the parish when it has occurred'.<sup>11</sup> Illegitimacy is here described explicitly as a 'crime'. It is no longer a potentially disruptive fact of life, often indicative of an interrupted, conventional courtship, but something that exists entirely outside conventional domestic experience. By describing illegitimacy as a crime, it becomes more acceptable to seek to protect the economic interests of the parish rather than those of the now criminalized child.

The Commissioners made three main recommendations: that unmarried mothers should no longer be imprisoned, that illegitimate children should follow their mother's settlement until the age of sixteen, and, crucially, that fathers should be absolved from all responsibility of bastard children. The first recommendation is interesting in that, while it appears to signal a more liberal attitude extended to the mothers of bastard children, it was, in fact, motivated by a conservative fear: of neutralising the potentially complicated feelings of sympathy that might attach themselves to the mother. As the report explains,

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<sup>11</sup> Checkland, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

‘we may add, however, that the effect of any such punishment would probably be mischievous, not only by imposing unnecessary suffering on the offender, but by making her an object of sympathy’.<sup>12</sup> The Commissioners wanted to control and subdue the power of the mother and child to destabilise conventional moral responses. The second and third recommendations had the effect of making the illegitimate child the sole responsibility of the mother:

In affirming the inefficiency of human legislation to enforce the restraints placed on licentiousness by Providence, we have implied our belief, that all punishment of the supposed father is useless.<sup>13</sup>

The Commissioners were guided by the belief that until the illegitimate child became a burden on its mother, illegitimacy rates would never decline. The Commissioners assert that they are, in fact, restoring the bastard to its natural place in a divine dispensation: ‘what Providence appears to have ordained that it should be, a burthen on its mother, and, where she cannot maintain it, on her parents’.<sup>14</sup> This invocation of ‘Providence’ asserts the religious approach that the Commissioners wished to be associated with.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 482.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 482.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 482.

## II

### Social Consequences

These amendments had a profound effect on the public and private status of the bastard. Prior to the late eighteenth century the bastard had been associated primarily with masculine forces: Taylor comments 'it was the visible product of an unstable paternal narrative, and at the same time the sign of patriarchal power and sexual prowess over both wives and concubines'.<sup>15</sup> The bastard now became feminized and, consequently, stigmatised through its connection with the mother:

One of the factors both arising from and contributing to the growing stigmatisation of bastardy is that it becomes 'feminised'; the illegitimate child becomes increasingly linked to the mother as women become increasingly economically and socially marginalised and positioned within marriage, as the centre of the home.<sup>16</sup>

The New Poor Law provided a framework around which middle-class society could develop a consistent set of responses to illegitimacy. A rhetoric and a set of terms were introduced to the 'problem' of illegitimacy that could be used to establish hegemony of response. But it was a two-way exchange: the new Poor Law also articulated, in its indirect way, the values that a respectable public wanted, and which, even if only implicitly, were already part of the unconscious thinking of early Victorian England.

Henriques suggests influence from Malthus on the Commissioners' philosophical rationale. An Essay on the Principle of Population, published in 1793, includes the statement:

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<sup>15</sup> Bourne Taylor, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

Where the evidence of the offence was most complete, and the inconvenience to the society at the same time the greatest, there, it was agreed, the largest share of the blame should fall.<sup>17</sup>

Henriques also attributes the shift towards regarding illegitimacy as a predominately female offence also to Malthus' ideology based on the idea of Natural Law.<sup>18</sup> Illegitimacy becomes a feminine offence for Malthus for primarily pragmatic reasons: because a woman is unable to support herself and a child, whereas a man has an economic value to his society, and because pregnancy makes it possible positively to identify the mother of a child, whereas the identity of the father is less easy to confirm: 'her offence was more conspicuous, and the inconvenience to society greater'.<sup>19</sup> The philosophical position on illegitimacy provided by Malthus represents an intellectual antecedent to the later, legal effort to define illegitimacy. They are particularly consistent in their view of the illegitimate child as a representative of disordered, disruptive private sexuality and of the economic threat to social stability that private sexuality realises: the illegitimate child, born outside the 'contract' between man and woman becomes an economic liability.

The New Poor Law and the philosophy that informed it created a cultural and moral hegemony, or at least the appearance of a cultural and moral hegemony, surrounding the issue of illegitimacy. Certain key reforms advanced a reassuring ideology that is reflected in and consistent with the philosophy of a wide and disparate selection of social commentators. The fundamental area of agreement concerns the regulation of sexuality: that the way to control aberrant sexual behaviour is by regulating

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Henriques, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

and controlling the expression of female desire. But this has some odd, even alarming consequences. As in the New Poor Law, the product of unsanctioned sexuality, the child, and its problematic status is revealed not as a source of dissenting opinion in public discourse but simply through an eerie absence in a range of texts and philanthropic work. The child, the visible evidence of an illicit relationship, is ignored and attention is concentrated on the problem of the fallen woman instead. In this way, the feminization of bastardy becomes a metonymy for the wider movement to feminize sexual desire itself, that is, sexual desire that remains outside officially sanctioned, 'masculine' modes of sexual expression.

All of this is evident in a wide range of reports, commentaries and social activity. The Evangelical Church helped to define an acceptable form of sexuality through philanthropy. Their work, Mason shows, was guided by a belief in individual responsibility, consistent with the rhetoric of the Commissioners of the New Poor Law. To this end they concentrated on reforming female sexuality, the 'doctrine of a transformable libido', as Mason puts it.<sup>20</sup> The philanthropic schemes included those that focused on the reforming of prostitutes.<sup>21</sup> The most celebrated example is Urania Cottage, a home for fallen women established by Dickens on behalf of Angela Burdett Coutts, a wealthy Evangelical philanthropist. Historically, the working classes had been stereotyped as not feeling any stigma concerning illegitimacy. The work of the Evangelical Church, focused as it was on reform amongst the poor, is credited with having made illegitimacy an increasingly stigmatised moral 'crime' amongst the working

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<sup>20</sup> Mason, *op. cit.*, pp. 225, 285.

<sup>21</sup> See Mason, p. 255.

classes. Furthermore, illegitimacy, constructed as a product of unregulated female sexuality, becomes symbolic of degenerate working-class culture.

This association becomes clearer in the writings of William Acton, a key figure in the public discourse that attempted to define acceptable and unacceptable forms of sexuality throughout the Victorian period. Originally a physician, he wrote extensively on the subject of sexual behaviour: 'he chose ... to become a writer, taking as his subject not only the diseases in which he was expert, but the social questions that were allied to them, such as illegitimacy and prostitution'.<sup>22</sup> Acton concurred with the principles advanced in the New Poor Law in so far as he believed that there were biological imperatives that required the regulation of female rather than male sexual desire:

In Acton's view, nature and culture have combined to make the female stance of repugnance/willingness just the right one for ensuring the continuity of the species yet saving men from depleting themselves by dangerous indulgences.<sup>23</sup>

As a section in The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive System, published in 1857, which, incidentally, contains only two passages specifically about female sexuality, makes clear, Acton believed that the key to controlling male sexuality lay in regulating the behaviour of the female:

I should say that the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled by sexual feeling of any kind. What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally ... Many men, and particularly young men, form their ideas of women's feelings from what they notice early in life among loose or, at least, loose and vulgar women ... Such women however give a very false idea of the condition of female sexual feeling in general ... The best mothers, wives and managers of households, know little or nothing

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<sup>22</sup> Steven Marcus, The Other Victorians (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1967), p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Jill L. Matus, Unstable Bodies (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 47.



of sexual indulgences. Love of home, children, and domestic duties, are the only passions they feel.<sup>24</sup>

This passage is interesting for several reasons. It advances the now notorious view that 'the majority of women ... are not very much troubled by sexual feeling of any kind', yet, crucially, Acton goes on to qualify this statement. Although this view seems to run counter to the depiction of women as sexually predatory, in fact, both Acton and the Commissioners agree that women are capable of counterfeiting sexual feelings in order to lure a (wealthy) man into a sexual relationship for financial gain. Acton then elaborates on the supposed connection between uncontrolled female sexuality, termed 'loose and vulgar' by Acton, poverty and lack of morality amongst the working classes. By extension, if the only women prepared to engage in sexual intercourse outside marriage are 'loose and vulgar', illegitimacy becomes linked explicitly to class, more specifically, the working class. Illegitimacy becomes, then, not only feminized but also evidence of essentially unfeminine behaviour, alien to male, middle-class notions of femininity.

While the 1834 New Poor Law Amendment Act established the connection between the mother and illegitimate child, a connection intended to negate the disruptive potential of illegitimacy, it was left to a range of social commentators to make this theory a social reality. On the surface at least, it is possible to identify a set of common attitudes shared by, crucially, the articulate middle class. It is precisely the social status of the most cited social commentators that becomes significant at this point: not only did the feminization of illegitimacy facilitate it becoming 'Other' to conventional middle-class values, the version of the feminine it invoked was that of 'loose and vulgar' morals. In

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<sup>24</sup> Marcus, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

other words, the morals of the female working class. In this way, then, illegitimacy became defined doubly as that which is other to the middle class: both feminine and working class.



### III

#### Opposition and Resistance

It is the testimony of individuals that begins to cast doubt on the apparent rigidity of these frameworks. Michael Mason goes so far as to suggest that those who constructed and advocated a 'moralistic code' were, in fact, a minority, albeit a powerful one:

Perhaps the men and women who voiced a moralistic code in the nineteenth century lived by it, but this code had little impact on behaviour because they only composed a small, if salient minority ... There were certainly dissenting sexual cultures within Victorian England ... The heterodox cultures were inaudible, and in a sense suppressed.<sup>25</sup>

Yet these so-called heterodox cultures found a voice when the New Poor Law threatened their culture. The Bastardy Clauses of the New Poor Law became the locus for opposition to the ill-conceived morality that informed all the acts of social reform applied to the working classes. Furthermore, it was not simply the working class who expressed hostility to the reforms but members of both the middle and upper classes, dissenting from the 'salient minority' of their own class who had imposed this moralistic code. The Quarterly Review summed up the undercurrent of opprobrium that met the new law:

To relieve the man from punishment, and to leave his unhappy victim to shame, infamy and distress, is a law discreditable to our national character, impious, cruel, ungenerous, unmanly and unjust.<sup>26</sup>

The criticisms, though proceeding from a wide range of disparate groups, were remarkably consistent between these groups. Three key issues became the focus for resistance: the double standard formalised by the law between men and women, the

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<sup>25</sup> Mason, op. cit., pp. 43-44.

<sup>26</sup> Bourne Taylor, op. cit., p. 131.

possibility that harsh penalties for illegitimacy might lead to infanticide, and, more pragmatically, that there was no evidence the Bastardy Clauses had succeeded in reducing the number of illegitimate births.<sup>27</sup>

Official, formal resistance to the Bastardy Clauses came from an unexpected quarter - Parliament itself. The concerns voiced in the House of Commons concentrated on the possibility that the new law 'would operate as a premium on vice and immorality, by withdrawing all curb upon young men'; reference is made too, to 'still worse crimes', infanticide.<sup>28</sup> It was considered that women, who had no means of supporting themselves with a child would be forced into the desperate measure of killing their baby. Interestingly, the House of Lords, not known for its proletarian sympathies, also resisted the Bill. While its reservations were couched along the same lines as those expressed in the House of Commons, the motivation for resistance was somewhat different and introduced a rather more philosophical element to the debate. The Tory, High Anglican, bishop of Exeter led the opposition, attacking the sexual double standard the Commissioners appeared eager to exploit:

He drew attention to the animus of the report, its emotive phrases, in which the fathers of bastard children were uniformly spoken of as 'unfortunate persons', while whenever the mother was mentioned, allusion was made to 'vice'.<sup>29</sup>

Henriques' research demonstrates that the Bastardy Clauses met with opposition not only in Parliament but also among a wide range of disparate communities is reflected in the

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<sup>27</sup> See Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture 1720-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), for an extensive analysis of the multiple meanings that have been attached to infanticide over time.

<sup>28</sup> Henriques, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

number of petitions handed to the House of Commons. Among many petitions, one signed by 882 inhabitants of Tiverton invokes the danger of infanticide as an almost inevitable consequence of the Act. The Bastardy Clauses were also named as a factor in the Rebecca Riots at the enquiry into the riots, with poverty threatening some women with recourse to an immoral life.<sup>30</sup>

Quite apart from the moral outrage, lawmakers themselves had problems proving the law was a success. This was due to the inherent instability of statistics concerning the birth status of babies. Census figures for 1830 and 1840 show an increase in illegitimate births from one in twenty to one in seventeen. Far from having the repressive effect the Commissioners had hoped for, the reverse seemed to be true. While it would be dangerous to use illegitimacy statistics as some kind of absolute guide to moral attitudes, what the figures do indicate is a disjunction between legal interest, official intent and social effect. This disjunction is symbolic of the whole element of appearance and reality in Victorian culture that distorts conventional attitudes to the Victorians. What appears on the surface of society does not necessarily bear any relation to the social reality of life for the vast majority. The instability of figures on illegitimacy seems, ironically, to underline this - the subtlety of the structures put in place by the very communities those in power hoped to control defied and subverted the requirement for accurate figures.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 118. See also Amy Dillwyn, *The Rebecca Rioter*, introd. Katie Gramich (Dinas Powys: Honno, 2004), where the male foundling narrative is invoked in the final chapter in an explicitly political context. Bill Jones, the friend of the working-class hero and narrator is revealed to be Owen Tudor, the heir to Penfawr. Dillwyn exploits this somewhat unrealistic device to suggest that more positive relations between the classes are possible.

There is an argument, and Henriques makes it powerfully that what the Bastardy Clauses did, in fact, was to disturb a crucial and delicate social balance, a balance that existed between men and women in the courtship ritual. That the supporters of the Commissioners were completely out of touch with public feeling is highlighted by the fact that while country girls were often singled out for particular criticism for their allegedly loose morals, folk songs of the period reflect popular sympathy for the behaviour of such 'anti-social' individuals. The majority of society had, in fact, turned a blind eye to pregnancy prior to marriage, viewing it as an integral part of the courtship ritual. By placing pressure on the father to marry the mother of his child, the Old Bastardy Laws both recognised this fact and protected society from the disruptive potential of the inevitable outcome of such practices. Henriques' analysis regards the desire for marriage as an absolute, the right and desired outcome. This imposes exactly the same sort of limited moral judgement that the Commissioners were themselves guilty of. The Commissioners failed to appreciate the subtle dynamic surrounding illegitimacy in what remained 'strongly conservative communities', resistant to change.<sup>31</sup> The measures that they imposed succeeded only in introducing an element of instability into a finely balanced, largely intuitive social framework, which had often produced marriage after pregnancy.

Beyond the immediate social consequences of the attempt to formalise a set of acceptable responses to illegitimacy, the Bastardy Clauses had a profound effect on the public, conventional view of women. The Commissioners' Report sought to justify the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

harsh treatment of the mothers of illegitimate children by imposing an homogenous version of single mothers as universally vicious, a fact that the Bishop of Exeter had drawn attention to. By extension, the Commissioners implied that all women had the potential, not only for lascivious behaviour but also for hardheaded exploitation of men, 'unfortunate persons'. This blatant attempt to vilify women as the source of all social evil was met with considerable hostility. Taylor has linked this hostility to the development of an alternative narrative of the fallen women: she sees it as channelled into advancing an alternative view of women as innocent victims of unredeemed male sexuality:

The criticisms often counterpoised an alternative model of femininity to the predatory one of the Commissioners; the language which both positions employed at once deployed and helped to form the melodramatic rhetoric that was so central to the discourse of class exploitation in radical writings, centring on the poignant image of the innocent working-class girl preyed upon by the upper-class rake.<sup>32</sup>

She argues that, rather than replace one negative version of femininity with an alternative, positive model, critics of the double standard succeeded only in polarising views of women and were as guilty as the Commissioners in manipulating a highly emotive rhetoric in order to repudiate wholly negative stereotypes. What critics of the Bastardy Clauses failed to do was to provide a more balanced view of the dynamic of the relations between men and women. Furthermore, their perception of men as sexual aggressors rather paradoxically concurred with the view of the Commissioners in that it represented male sexuality as 'a natural, irresistible force'.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Bourne Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

While Taylor suggests that this dichotomy of female stereotypes was a bad thing, limiting the opportunities of women to mere conformity to rigid stereotypes, Nina Auerbach argues that 'women's very aura of exclusion gave her imaginative centrality in a culture increasingly alienated from itself'.<sup>34</sup> That is, by being marginalised at either end of the social spectrum, women became central figures as representatives of a culture increasingly defined by alienation and 'Otherness' rather than by a sense of social inclusion. In their efforts to challenge the conventional, authoritative view of women as articulated in the Bastardy Clauses, those who propagated an alternative view of women as angels of the hearth may have contributed to the marginalisation of women but, in doing so, they created a mythic image of femininity both powerful and subversive yet also curiously symbolic of the insecurity at the very heart of Victorian society. Furthermore, opposition was powerful enough to assert an equally emotive alternative model of femininity, demonstrating the power of dissenting voices just under the surface of what appears to be a stable, homogenous society.

The model of the working class as defined by the Commissioners was of a group who attached little or no stigma to illegitimacy, and who, in addition, were exclusively responsible for illegitimate births.<sup>35</sup> Working class responses to illegitimacy were, in fact, far more complex than the Commissioners allowed for. The most significant complication relates to the misconception that the working class were simply a mass whose behaviour was the same in urban and rural communities. In fact, there are

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<sup>34</sup> Nina Auerbach, Woman and the Demon: the Life of a Victorian Myth (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 188.

<sup>35</sup> See John R. Gillis, 'Servants, Sexual Relations, and the Risks of Illegitimacy in London', Feminist Studies, 5.1 (1979: Spring) 142-173. Gillis' important study of the London Foundling Hospital records pays particularly close attention to the responses of female servants to illegitimate birth.

significant differences in the way that families responded to illegitimacy, these differences depending on the demands of particular environments. Evidence of the complex, even contradictory urban attitudes to illegitimacy is reflected in the records of the Coram Foundling Hospital. When a mother brought her infant to the Institution she had to undergo a rigorous interview and prove that, among other things:

Her good faith had been betrayed, that she had given way to carnal passion only after a promise of marriage or against her will; that she therefore had no other children; and that her conduct had always been irreproachable in every other respect. She must also be without any sort of material aid. Finally, the child had to be under one year old.<sup>36</sup>

That only one child in five conformed to these criteria would seem to represent a view of the working class consistent with the one the ruling class endeavoured to manufacture. Barret-Ducrocq has summarised many of these mothers' petitions received by the Hospital: many express neither shame nor repentance, a conclusion my own research in the Coram foundling archives underlines. Barret-Ducrocq argues that mothers were more concerned with more immediate material considerations than any rather abstract feelings of shame that they simply did not have time for.<sup>37</sup> Economic considerations were, however, critical: girls in service were sacked by previously sympathetic employers who exhibited ruthless determination to maintain appearances.<sup>38</sup> Yet the mothers often show deep care and concern for their children, in the face of enormous economic hardship, and despite the rarity of expressions of shame. It would appear from a limited number of testimonials that women did not give up their babies simply for economic reasons, but because it was seen as the honourable way out, although Barret-Ducrocq goes to some

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<sup>36</sup> Françoise Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 39.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

lengths to emphasise the rareness of such testimonials.<sup>39</sup> Some of the evidence suggests the influence of feelings of shame by the families of the girls, where they lived with their parents. Statements about parents' wishes, however, concentrate on the reactions of the family as a whole rather than on the feelings of the woman who is actually pregnant. Again there is a sense that a blank surrounds the woman at the centre of such an apparent disgrace; in this case, the blank is filled in by the comfortable, conventional feelings of her family who express a set of responses conveniently similar to those the committee members would like to see.

Whatever the reason, responses that had more in common with idealised bourgeois moralistic codes than working-class stereotypes did exist. Barret-Ducrocq rejects the traditional explanation of these sort of class anomalies, that 'this attitude is most often found in specific class subcategories',<sup>40</sup> that is, the artisan element of the working class, the 'almost' middle class. Evidence from the Coram Institute refutes the view that only those members of the working class who had aspirations to the middle class expressed attitudes of conventional shame:

The reasons for secrecy seem to have been much more complex and subject to numerous variables: regional background, religious beliefs, ages of parents and children, relations between family members, circumstances of the seduction and so on.<sup>41</sup>

Barret-Ducrocq does, in fact, also come to the conclusion that, 'petitioners' families were much less permissive, less indifferent to illegitimacy, than the standard ruling-class view

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 169.



would have us believe'.<sup>42</sup> This would seem to contradict her earlier assertion; that little conventional shame was revealed by working-class girls for the benefit of the reformers. This suggests that working-class responses to illegitimacy were complex to the point of being contradictory. There is, however, clear evidence that, far from feeling nothing, what the mothers of illegitimate children did feel did not fit any of the responses expected by their reformers or, to some extent, the officials at the foundling hospital. I would argue that the foundling records themselves present inevitably, their own narratives about illegitimacy. The forms, and the questions that mothers had to answer, themselves shaped the narratives that emerge.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

## IV

### Foundling Hospital Evidence

In what follows, reference should be made to the table at the end of this chapter. I examined in particular the Coram Foundling Hospital records held by the London Metropolitan Archive for one complete year: 1850. The records include those petitions that were accepted and those rejected. There are existing records of one hundred and thirty eight petitions made for this year, although some records are missing, the final record in the sequence being numbered 152. The table places them in numerical order, rather than on the basis of the acceptance or rejection. Of the surviving petitions, thirty-two were accepted and one hundred and six rejected. This suggests a higher acceptance rate in 1850 than Barret-Ducrocq identifies throughout the existence of the Foundling Hospital as being approximately one in five children accepted.

The evidence of the records reveals the fathers conforming to literary representation by being represented as abandoning the mothers in nearly all cases. The only other reason given for the absence of the father was death. In fact, one father went so far as to fake his own death in order not to be held responsible for his child. This letter, received by the Foundling Hospital, represents the only evidence from a father about his feelings towards illegitimate birth and fatherhood in the 1850 collection. When Sarah Milward, petitioner number five in the list, applied to the Foundling Hospital, she set in

motion an extensive search for the father on the part of the Hospital. Jacob Evans, the father had been a schoolteacher. Although he claims in his letter not to have known Sarah was pregnant when he left for Manchester to join the 30<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot Soldiers as a teacher, when an official for the Foundling Hospital made enquiries, he persuaded an officer to write a letter claiming that he had died. Further research was carried out and it transpired that no inquest had taken place. It was then that a letter appeared from Evans to the Hospital:

Sir,

In reply to your letter which I just received – I must confess I have been guilty of a conspiracy of the foulest nature, although not a villain by nature – it was fear and shame that prompted me to get the letter you speak of written – had Sarah Milward told me that she was pregnant when I left London rather than this, I would have married her instantly – an aunt of hers has but this minute left me. I have engaged to make every reparation in my power.

His letter is of interest because it shows the shame response, traditionally attributed to women, was felt, or at least exploited, in real life, by men and could be ascribed as a motivation for abandonment. In the novels the men are presented as not so much ashamed of the pregnancy but either unaware (Bellingham in Ruth) or simply unwilling to commit to marriage (like Dalton in Jessie Phillips).

In contrast to all the novels considered here (with the possible exception of Far From Madding Crowd), where the seducer / father is of higher class than the mother, and in most cases upper class, a gentleman, the social status of real-life seducers is rather more mundane, with only six of the fathers described as 'Gentleman'. The vast majority have lower middle-class, even working-class, occupations. Their position in society is often compatible with that of their seduced victims, suggesting that these relationships

were much more equal than is represented in fiction. The novels' pattern of gentleman seducers seems to invoke a more glamorised romance narrative than the records indicate. It can also invoke anxieties about inheritance and the encroaching threat of the working class. Finally, it can be argued it removes them somewhat from the sphere of normal responsibility, since society has traditionally turned a blind eye to gentlemen's pleasure, yet it also makes them potentially more guilty because the novels' moral thrust often holds them accountable at the end, for neglecting duties where they were in a position to have materially help the mother and child. Gentlemen are often held responsible, by the narrative, if not by the law, for the death of the mother and often the child. In fact, the impulse to hold a gentleman responsible is observed in the case of at least one petitioner, Sarah Spinks. Her statement is as follows:

The Father was a visitor staying at my mistres'. He came from the College at Norwich where he was a Cadet a fortnight after I entered the service – about then following he began to pay me attention by following me about the house and soon after he made a proposal of an improper kind which I resisted – one evening he deigned me to make up his fire and he locked the door and used violence and effected his purpose. This was early in January – I did not consent but did not like to mention it to any one – I did not cause any alarm. The (situation) was repeated once after in the same manner with violence – on the 17<sup>th</sup> January he left and went to Brussels and returned in February but not to stop in the house – I knew at this time of my pregnancy but did not like to tell him – Mrs Davis knows what has happened ... I remained till September at which time Mrs Davis discovered my situation and had previously given warning – I went then to my present residence where I was confined ... I have corresponded with Mrs D since my confinement and she advised me to come here – Mrs D will give me a character. The father never mentioned marriage.

Spinks claims to have been raped: he 'used violence and effected his purpose'. As we shall see, her claim was believed by the Governors of the Foundling Hospital who interviewed her. This accusation condemns the man at the same time as it removes responsibility from the mother. Interestingly, none of the novels examined in this thesis

exploit this strategy: the women are all, to varying degrees, willingly seduced. When the Governors wrote to the Norfolk Academy where the father, Malcolm Drummond de Melfort, was believed to be stationed, they received the following reply:

Capt Yardly Wilmot

Begs to inform the Governors of the Foundling Hospital that there has never been any cadet at the Norfolk Academy named Malcolm Drummond de Melfort.

As we have seen in the case of Jacob Evans, there is some evidence that officers appear to have been prepared to lie to the Foundling Hospital in order to protect one of their own. Certainly, at least one of the Governors of the Hospital believed Spinks' story sufficiently to write her a private letter explaining the decision of the Board to reject her application on the grounds that the family of the father of the child had enough money to support her and that morally it was their responsibility to do so:

I beg to acquaint you that the application of Sarah Spinks for the admission of her illegitimate child has been rejected by the Governors of this Hospital on the grounds that the Father of it and his Family are in a station in life competent to maintain the child.

Sarah Spinks failed in her application from no want of earnestness on her part in making her appeal and I feel it due to her to state ... no doubt remained in my mind of the truth of her allegations as to the paternity of her child... Allow me to express a hope that the family will take compassion on her and save her and her child from destitution by complying with her very reasonable request of a small weekly allowance.

J Brownlow

Brownlow asserts very clearly here that it is the moral responsibility of the father and his family to support both the illegitimate mother and her child, a sentiment that is generally consistent with the position adopted by Victorian novelists.

As for the women, in 1850, every applicant had to fill in a blue pro-forma, stating their name, how long they had known the man and where he was presently living. The section of Sarah Spinks' form relating to the father's details reads as follows, the underlined sections being those parts filled in by the mother herself:

That Malcolm Drummond de Melfort is the Father of the said Child, and was, when your Petitioner became acquainted with him, a Gentleman at Kingsbury and your Petitioner last saw him on the Feb 9 Day of 1849 and believes he is now on the Continent.

The information required on these pro forma highlights the Foundling Hospital's objective, which was attempting to track down the fathers and force them to pay for the care of mother and child. In addition, many of the individual petitioner's records contain reports of interviews with the women. One result seems to be that this essentially bureaucratic approach normalises the individuals' experiences into one over-riding narrative, which is circumscribed by externally imposed and narrowly defined notions of guilt and responsibility. For example, in Spinks' statement, there is a single line at the end, 'The father never mentioned marriage'. Since she was raped, it is clear that her experience is not consistent with that of the interrupted courtship, yet she is still required to answer such a question, a question, moreover, heavy with implied guilt and innocence.

The Coram mothers tend to be considerably older than the young seduced maiden common in fiction: up to 36. The average age of mothers was 24. Whereas in novels, the seduced maidens are maidens and the 'fall' is consistent with their first sexual experience, a significant number of women who petitioned the Founding Hospital were in long-standing relationships with the father or even had children from previous relationships. Consistent with fiction, however, many of the applicants whose petitions

were accepted, claimed that marriage had been promised. This seems to be a narrative pattern that fulfilled a significant moral requirement the inspectors insisted on if the petition was to be successful. Several women admitted that their child or children were the result of affairs with married men. Their petitions were always rejected. Again, this represents a discomfoting aspect of the illegitimacy debate that few authors dare to approach.

There is a sameness too about the narrative presented in letters preserved with the records: were the women and their advisors (perhaps other women in the close-knit working communities in London? midwives?) aware of the criteria most likely to produce acceptance by the Foundling Hospital? Finally, of the applications that were rejected, one significant factor seems to have been the number of pieces of accompanying documentation with the application. The accepted petitions are thick with letters of recommendation from employers, midwives, family members and even vicars. Those of the unsuccessful women are often blank or contain only the barest outline of the situation. It is my speculation that these women were not committed to giving up their children but rather invoked the services of the Founding Hospital to find their missing partners. They had a different agenda, one that exploited the resources of the Founding Hospital. The fact that the hospital managed to track down Jacob Evans shows how efficient the hospital was at finding missing fathers and that this could be a successful strategy as far as the mothers were concerned. Where the father has deserted, there is normally a letter from an inspector detailing the measures and searches undertaken to try to find the errant father and whether or not this was successful.

In most novels this remains a purely domestic issue. Members of the family or the mother's closest friends uncover the location of the father, as in Jessie Phillips, where it is Frederic's sister, Ellen who discovers his guilt, or the father himself owns up. It is a domestic narrative of discovery, not a bureaucratic one. It implies that truth will come to light through personal, domestic and moral effort rather than the machinery of bureaucratic exigencies. Such qualities are, of course, far more the dynamics with which powerful fiction deals than are the painstaking checks made by officials. The crime novel was beginning to focus on the work of paid officials to detect the whereabouts of wrongdoers and bring their actions to justice. Wilkie Collins' The Woman in White (1860), where the detective, Walter Hartright's pursuit of the truth leads to the revelation of male illegitimacy, is perhaps the best example of illegitimacy put into the service of the nineteenth-century detective novel. It is important to note, however, that Walter is an amateur detective and the consequences of his detection are framed more by issues of inheritance than of moral responsibility. Comparisons of the Foundling Hospital records with contemporary novels show that there are several narratives of illegitimacy and these differ not only between fact and fiction but are also discernable within the documents of real-life illegitimacy. The institution's questions show one set of priorities, and the women's responses sometimes point to narratives that differ from these priorities. For example, the indications that, for some, the dynamics of what the mothers did were motivated by a search for the child's father, with the hope of marriage and family life, not the abandonment of the child to an institution.



**Figure 1: Table of Results from the Foundling Hospital 1850**

Letter numb	Mother occupation /status	Age of mother	Status of father	Occupation of father	Location of father	Petition status	Notes
1			Deserted	Journeyman/ Tailor	Unknown	Rejected	Mother already has 2 children
2	Servant	25	Deserted	Gentleman	The continent	Rejected	See additional notes
3	Servant		Deserted	Unknown	Unknown	Rejected	
4			Deserted	Enlisted soldier	56th regiment, Ireland	Rejected	Mother has another child by another man
5			Deserted/dead	School master/soldier	Pretending to be dead	Rejected	See additional notes
6	Spinster	22	Deserted	Baker? Servant?	Abroad with master	Rejected	Mother has another child by married man 3 years ago but claims she did not know that he was married
7	Unmarried	28	Deserted	Gentleman	Vienna	Accepted	
8	Spinster		Deserted	Painter	Unknown	Rejected	Child born in St Pancras workhouse
9	Unmarried		Deserted	Leather seller	Unknown	Rejected	Several letters covering case
10	Unmarried		Deserted	Doctor	Unknown	Rejected	Father was married. Mother knew
11	Unmarried servant		Deserted	Servant page	Regents park, address known	Rejected	Father 17, servant for same family as mother
12	Unmarried		Deserted	Cabinet maker	Unknown	Rejected	Child born in workhouse
13	Unmarried		Uncertain	Greengrocer's servant	Camberwell, address known	Rejected	Father married, mother claims that she did not know
14	Unmarried		Deserted	Diamond merchant	Australia	Rejected	Had another child 3 years ago by another man and has been kept by the father since

15	Unmarried		Deserted	Harness maker	Unknown, "somewhere in the country"	Rejected	
16	Married		Deserted	Gardener	America	Rejected	
17	Married		Dead	Weaver	Dead	Rejected	Father died of cholera
18	Unmarried		Deserted	Painter	Australia	Rejected	Another illegitimate child by another man
19	Dead. Petition by sister		Deserted	Unknown	Unknown	Rejected	See additional notes
20	Unmarried	22	Deserted?	Medical assistant	Does not state	Accepted	
21	Married		Deserted	Unknown	Unknown	Rejected	Women admits to no knowledge of husband/father
22	Unmarried		Deserted	Cabinet maker	Abroad	Rejected	
23	Unmarried	24	Deserted	Carpenter	Unknown	Accepted	
24	Unmarried	21	Deserted	Carpenter	New York	Accepted	
25	Unmarried		Deserted	Painter	Abroad	Rejected	
26	Unmarried		Deserted	Farmer	Unknown	Rejected	
27	Unmarried	25	Deserted	Carpenter	At sea	Accepted	
28	Unmarried		Deserted	None	Cumberland, address unknown	Rejected	
29	Unmarried		Uncertain	Law student	Employment address known	Rejected	
30	Unmarried		Deserted	Grocer	Unknown	Rejected	
31	Unmarried		Unknown	Smith	Swindon, address unknown	Rejected	Father claimed no knowledge of affair
32	Unmarried		Deserted	Unknown	Unknown	Rejected	
33	Unmarried	30	Deserted	Language teacher	Unknown	Accepted	
34	Unmarried		Deserted	Tailor	Unknown	Rejected	
35	Unmarried		Deserted	No trade	Unknown	Rejected	
36	Unmarried	25	Deserted	Student	India	Accepted	Father=minor
37	Unmarried	22	Deserted	Journeyman butcher	Unknown	Accepted	Letter from incumbent supporting application
38	Unmarried		Deserted?	Painter "residing"	Brunswick Lynne	Rejected	Child born in St Pancras workhouse
39	Unmarried		Deserted?	Clock and watch maker	Ellsham Lynne	Rejected	
40	Unmarried		Deserted	Servant	Unknown	Rejected	
41	Unmarried	33	Dead	Carter	Dead	Rejected	
42	Unmarried	21	Deserted	Gun maker	America	Rejected	
43	Unmarried	27	Deserted	Journey man/boat maker in	Australia, East India company,	Rejected	Child born in Mary Le

				the army	3rd Light dragoons		Boise workhouse
44	Unmarried	24	Deserted	Glassy man	Unknown	Rejected	
45	Unmarried	35	Deserted	?	Unknown	Rejected	
46	Unmarried	17	Deserted	Unknown	America	Accepted	
47	Unmarried	22	Deserted	Sailor	Dublin	Rejected	
48	Unmarried	20	Deserted?	Tobacconist	London, address unknown	Rejected	Child born in workhouse, father was mothers master and was married
49	Unmarried	20	Dead	Warehouseman	Dead	Rejected	Father died of cholera. Father was married man. Women knew this, but claimed he drugged and raped her
50	Unmarried	36	Deserted	Servant/footman	Unknown, but traced to Eaton Square	Rejected	
52	Unmarried	24	Deserted	Gentleman's servant	Unknown	Accepted	
53	Unmarried	24	Deserted	Servant	New York	Rejected	
54	Married	25	Deserted	Soldier	Abroad	Rejected	Married, pregnant by another man before marriage, the child born five months afterwards. Husband ignorant of her previous criminality
55	Unmarried	21	Dead	Servant	Dead	Rejected	
56	Unmarried	23	Deserted	Valet	Westmorland	Rejected	
57	Widow	33	Dead	Steward	Dead	Rejected	Had a fit, died suddenly
58	Unmarried	24	Deserted	Gentleman	Unknown	Rejected	Already had child by deceased husband
59	Married	27	Deserted	Soldier	Unknown, with regiment	Rejected	
60	Unmarried	25	Deserted	Waiter	Unknown	Rejected	
61	Unmarried	19	Deserted	Labourer	Foley	Rejected	
62	Unmarried	19	Deserted	Gardener and groom	Highbury	Rejected	
63	Unmarried	18	Deserted	Footman	"The country"	Accepted	
64	Unmarried	20	Deserted	Hairdresser	Unknown	Rejected	

65	Unmarried	29	Deserted	Tailor	Unknown	Rejected	
66	Unmarried	25	Deserted	Clerk		Rejected	Father married
67	Unmarried	29	Deserted	Traveller	Abroad	Rejected	
68	Unmarried	28	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Rejected	
69	Unmarried	30	Deserted	Sailor	Abroad	Rejected	
70	Unmarried	28	Deserted	Lawyer	Unknown	Rejected	
71	Unmarried	21	Deserted	Sailor	"Cannot say where"	Rejected	
72	Unmarried	24	Deserted	Traveller	Unknown	Rejected	
73	Unmarried	21	Deserted?	Groom	Roystan Castle	Accepted	
74	Unmarried	22	Deserted	Commercial traveller	Paris, uncertain	Rejected	
75	Unmarried	18	Deserted	Commission agent	Unknown	Accepted	
76	Unmarried	25	Deserted	Milkman	Enlisted as soldier	Rejected	
77	Unmarried	25	Deserted	Servant	Southampton	Rejected	
78	Unmarried	24	Dead	Servant	Dead	Accepted	
79	Unmarried	26	Deserted	Sapper/miner	Gibraltar	Rejected	
80	Unmarried	22	Deserted	Lawyer	Reading	Rejected	Petitioner has another child by the same man
81	Unmarried	21	Deserted	Carpenter	Unknown	Rejected	
82	Unmarried	16	Deserted	Gentleman	Unknown, believed Gloucestershire	Accepted	Hospital discovered who the father was - see additional notes
83	Unmarried	25	Deserted	Clerk at distillery	Unknown	Rejected	Petitioner has another child by the same man
84	Unmarried	19	Deserted	Footman	Unknown	Accepted	
85	Unmarried	24	Dead	Grocer	Dead	Rejected	
86	Unmarried	24	Deserted	Clerk	Abroad	Accepted	
86	Spinster	24	Deserted	Gas fitter	Unknown	Rejected	
87	Unmarried	21	Deserted	Barrister	Unknown	Rejected	Rich, Lydia Sarah Essex, father of child is brother in law
88	Unmarried	23	Deserted	Doctor	Unknown	Rejected	
89	Unmarried	24	Deserted	Carpenter	Unknown	Accepted	
90	Unmarried	28	Deserted	Servant	Gone abroad	Accepted	
91	Unmarried		Deserted	Labourer	Unknown	Rejected	
92	Unmarried	23	Deserted	Gentleman	Cublington, Warwickshire	Rejected	
93	Widow	30	Deserted	Labourer	Living with relations at known address	Rejected	
94	Unmarried	22	Deserted?	Servant/valet	Living at known address	Rejected	

95	Unmarried	24	Deserted?	Baker	Entry illegible	Rejected	Child born in Marylebone infirmary
96	Married	21	Deserted	No trade	Unknown	Rejected	
97	Unmarried	23	Deserted	Solicitor	America	Accepted	
98	Unmarried	24	Deserted	French polisher	Cannot tell what has now become of him	Accepted	
99	Married	27	Deserted	Cabinet maker	Abroad	Rejected	
100	Unmarried	23	Deserted	Coachman	Unknown	Accepted	
101	Unmarried	20	Deserted?	Servant	Address known	Rejected	Father is married, mother knew
102	Unmarried	23	Deserted?	Labourer	Address known in Shepard's Bush	Rejected	
103	Unmarried	15/16	Deserted	Apprentice	Unknown	Accepted	
104	Unmarried	20	Deserted?	Soldier, home guard	Windsor	Rejected	
105	Unmarried	22	Deserted	Valet	South Australia	Accepted	
106	Unmarried	27	Unknown	Shoemaker	Address known in Grays Inn Lane	Rejected	
107	Unmarried	27	Deserted?	Man servant	Brighton, address known	Rejected	Father is married
108	Unmarried	23	Deserted	Bricklayer labourer	Scotland? Unknown	Accepted	
109	Unmarried	27	Deserted	Servant	Derbyshire	Accepted	
110	Unmarried	20	Deserted?	Draper	Kennington, address known	Rejected	
111	Unmarried	23	Deserted?	Farm bailiff	Maidenhead	Rejected	
112	Unmarried	27	Deserted?	Illegible	Address known	Rejected	
113	Unmarried	23	Deserted	Clerk	Unknown	Rejected	Child born in Union Grays workhouse
114	Unmarried	26	Deserted	Baker's man	Unknown	Rejected	
115	Married	25	Deserted	Nautical gentleman	Unknown	Rejected	Woman deserted husband two years ago, then met nautical gentleman
116	Unmarried	24	Deserted	Clerk	London, address unknown	Rejected	
117	Unmarried	19	Deserted	Solicitors clerk	Unknown	Rejected	
118	Unmarried	21	Deserted	Military officer	Unknown	Rejected	
119	Unmarried	22	Deserted?	Coachman	Finsbury, address unknown	Rejected	
120	Unmarried	26	Deserted	Painter	Unknown	Rejected	
121	Unmarried	23	Deserted	Sailor	On the sea	Rejected	Woman has another illegitimate

							child by another man
122	Unmarried	33	Deserted?	Gentleman	4 Park Village Regents Park	Rejected	
123	Unmarried	29	Deserted?	Wash houseman	London	Rejected	Several letters covering case
124	Unmarried	22	Dead	Soldier, private	Dead	Accepted	
125	Unmarried	18	Deserted	shop man Seeds man	Cannot tell	Accepted	
126	Unmarried	19	Deserted	Commission agent	Unknown	Rejected	Child born in St Pancras workhouse. Father was woman's master
127	Unmarried	30	Deserted		Scotland	Rejected	Child born in Mary Le Boise workhouse
128	Unmarried	26	Deserted	House servant	Brighton	Rejected	
129	Unmarried	29	Deserted	Soldier	Unknown, 6th Norwegian Royals	Rejected	
130	Unmarried	24	Deserted?	Servant	Address known, Brighton	Rejected	
130	Unmarried	26	Deserted	Gentleman's servant	Unknown	Accepted	
132	Widow	35	Deserted	Bootmaker	Unknown	Rejected	
134	Unmarried	28	Deserted?	Clerk	Address known, London	Rejected	
134	Unmarried	30	Deserted	Sailor	At sea	Accepted	
147	Unmarried	22	Deserted	Manufacturer of waterproofing	Paris, uncertain	Accepted	
151	Unmarried	26	Deserted	Baker	Unknown	Rejected	
152	Unmarried	22	Deserted	Painter	Abroad/dead	Accepted	
57a	Unmarried	21	Deserted	Sailor	Sydney	Rejected	Lied about marital status

## Chapter Three: The Victorian Seduction Narrative

### I

#### The Victorian Seduction Narrative: Ruth by Elizabeth Gaskell

To start with the seduction narrative as it is employed by Victorian novelists. The plot of Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth (1853) appears to define the conventions of the Victorian seduction narrative, recording the fall, repentance, rehabilitation and subsequent death of the eponymous heroine. Recently orphaned, Ruth is apprenticed to a seamstress, Mrs Mason. Her beauty brings her to the attention of Bellingham, a local gentleman. He cynically exploits their friendship; when she is seen with him by Mrs Mason, who terminates her employment, he offers her refuge. Ruth falls in love and is happy until Bellingham becomes seriously ill and she is shamed and rejected by Bellingham's mother. She is rescued from suicide by Benson, a Unitarian Minister who, along with his sister Faith, offers Ruth, and later her son, Leonard, a home. Benson and Faith decide to tell a lie - that Ruth is a widow - in order to facilitate her acceptance into society, and for many years this appears to be the best course of action. Ruth becomes a governess to the rich and morally upright Bradshaws. She also receives a belated marriage proposal from Bellingham, which she refuses. When Bradshaw discovers the truth of Ruth's background, he violently condemns both her and the Bensons. Leonard is deeply affected by the truth of his birth and becomes withdrawn. He is only able to overcome his shame when he hears his mother being praised by strangers for her selfless bravery in caring for typhus patients. Ruth hears by accident that Bellingham is dying of typhus. She goes to

nurse him and contracts the fever herself. While he makes a full recovery she dies, much to the grief of all those who knew her.

Gaskell herself saw the novel as a morally pioneering one. Although she rather dramatically felt her position to be analogous to that of St. Sebastian when Ruth was published - 'the only comparison I can find for myself is to St Sebastian tied to a tree to be shot at with arrows'<sup>1</sup> - the majority of contemporary reviews were sympathetic to her aims. Gaskell's presentation of herself here as a victim of harsh criticism suggests an interesting desire to cast herself as a moral crusader, challenging the platitudes of the ruling classes, using her writing as an act of disobedience and falling victim to unmerciful judgement in much the same way as the heroine of her novel.<sup>2</sup> As Elsie B. Michie suggests:

Gaskell conflates her position as author with that of the "fallen" heroine of her novel... The public response to Ruth makes Gaskell feel the contradictions of being a woman out in public.<sup>3</sup>

Gaskell's own duality of response to her critics, which shows her both as hurt by the criticisms and somewhat proud of them, suggests an ambivalence of feeling, an uncertainty of knowing not only what the correct response should be to the novel but also a discomfort about her own identity. Michie stresses the domestic side of Gaskell and sees it influencing her attitude to her radical views:

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<sup>1</sup> J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (eds), The Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966), pp. 220-1.

<sup>2</sup> Jenny Uglow cites the example of Gaskell's criticism of a professional writer, Dinah Mulock, as evidence of her ambivalence about radicalism as it related to issues of femininity, preferring instead to describe her own writing as 'the feminine view of spontaneous, undeniable creativity', in Elizabeth Gaskell (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 311.

<sup>3</sup> Elsie B. Michie, Outside The Pale: Cultural Exclusion, Gender Difference, and the Victorian Woman Writer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 82.



As a domestic woman who became a professional writer, Gaskell, too, crossed the boundary between private and public, but found, as she did so, that it was impossible for her to be out in public and not have her behaviour characterized in terms of deviance, waywardness, or impropriety.<sup>4</sup>

As we shall see, Gaskell's endeavour in Ruth - to oppose and subvert the increasing social pressure on women to conform to restrictive stereotypes of either domestic angel or social outcast - was at its most challenging when it allowed for the possibility that women might be a more complicated mixture of these two extremes. This was a position that had personal significance for Gaskell herself. Further, her conscious and defiant use of the seduction stereotype to interrogate conservative social responses to extra-marital sex and illegitimacy, rather than viewing these in a disciplinary role, places her very much within the radical tradition of subverting conventional sexual narratives to advance a proto-feminist agenda established by writers such as Hays and Wollstonecraft. Her own personal uncertainty, however, suggests that she felt less sure of her radical ground than did earlier female writers, perhaps because her radicalism was directed towards more social issues, such as problems of poverty and working or housing conditions, rather than specifically towards questions about the role of women or the structure of marriage.

While Ruth was judged broadly within a liberal context, the unease that Gaskell herself felt with her material is also reflected in the contradictory responses it provoked from both extremes of the political spectrum. G.H. Lewes' review represents the standard, rational response that predominated on the publication of Ruth:

In Ruth there is no confusing of right with wrong; no tampering with perilous sympathies, no attempt to make a new line of action such as the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

world's morality would refuse to warrant, but a clear insight into the nature of temptation, and wise words of exhortation to those who have fallen - showing them, that no matter what clouds of shame have gathered around them, they may still redeem themselves if they will only rise and do honestly the work that still lies before them to be done, and that, in every position, however dark and degraded, there is always a certain right course which, if followed, will lead them once more into light.<sup>5</sup>

Lewes here praises Gaskell for her acceptance of established moral judgement whilst allowing for the possibility of some form of redemption. It is this uneasy partnership that Lewes later challenges in the same review when he considers the nature of Ruth's fall:

The guilt, then, of Ruth is accompanied by such entire ignorance of evil, and by such a combination of fatalities, that even the sternest of provincial moralists could hardly be harsh with her; and this we think a mistake on the part of the authoress ... We think, for the object Mrs. Gaskell had in view, the guilt should not have so many extenuating circumstances, because as it is, Ruth, although she has much to regret, cannot in her conscience have much to repent.<sup>6</sup>

The gentle criticisms that Lewes makes of a certain lack of courage in the presentation of Ruth are taken up by writers such as Charlotte Brontë and W.R. Greg, who ascribes Gaskell's apparently muddled thinking to a certain weakness of vision: 'the author's ideas were not quite clear or positive enough to enable her to carry out boldly or develop fully the conception she had formed'.<sup>7</sup> Arthur Hugh Clough goes further in his criticism of the novel, finding it lacking in breadth and offering a negligible challenge to established hypocrisies. He describes it as, 'rather cowardly and "pokey" in its views'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> George Henry Lewes, 'Ruth', from an unsigned review in *The Westminster Review*, cited in Angus Easson (ed.), *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 266.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>7</sup> William Rathbone Greg, *Ruth*, from an unsigned article, *The National Review*, cited in Angus Easson (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 327.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Hugh Clough on *Ruth*, from a diary letter, cited in Angus Easson (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 272.

On the opposite side of the debate, other reviewers found their sympathies compromised by the feeling that Gaskell had treated Ruth with an excessive and unnecessary amount of sympathy; in other words, as a heroine:

The subject is not a fit one for a novel - not one to treat of by our firesides, where the young should not be aroused to feel an interest in vice, however garnished, but in the triumph of virtue.<sup>9</sup>

The concern for family, for the education of the young woman and the desire for a disciplinary approach to illegitimacy are evident here. It is clear, then, that although Gaskell was judged broadly within the conventions she herself appears to write within, writers at both ends of the social and political spectrum found themselves unsettled by certain elements of the text, which defy neat containment.

That Ruth is intended to be deserving of compassion in a liberal-minded context is clear: she conforms to many literary conventions that classify her as a passive victim figure. The first convention is that she is an orphan, lacking the clear moral guidance of her mother and protection of her father. Gaskell spends some time constructing a moving impression of Ruth's painful awareness of what she is missing:

"Oh, Jenny!" said Ruth, sitting up in bed, and pushing back the masses of hair that were heating her forehead, "I thought I saw mamma by the side of the bed, coming, as she used to do, to see if I were asleep and comfortable; and when I tried to take hold of her, she went away and left me alone - I don't know where; so strange!"<sup>10</sup>

Ruth having once known happiness as part of a family makes her all the more deserving of sympathy. It also makes her recognisable as middle class but outside the conventional

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<sup>9</sup> From an unsigned review of *Ruth*, in *Sharpe's London Magazine*, cited in Angus Easson (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 211.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth*, ed. Angus Easson (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 11. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

family structure. Thus, the majority of Gaskell's readership, the middle classes, would find much to sympathise with in Ruth's isolation while being comforted by the sense that the temptation that threatens her can exist only outside the security of the typical family. In Sense and Sensibility too, the first Eliza is an orphan who lacks the security of a loving family and who is exploited by her surrogate father for financial gain. In Ruth, this financial exploitation, the conventional condition of a woman preceding her fall, is removed from the domestic to the public sphere. Ruth is required to sell her labour rather than her self to ensure her survival. In fact, Ruth has more in common with the second Eliza, who, as the illegitimate daughter of a lady will be expected to work for her keep, as Mrs Jennings helpfully points out: "the little love-child, indeed; aye, I had forgot her; but she may be 'prenticed out at small cost, and then what does it signify?" (p. 186). Further, the connection made here between women on the verge of 'falling' and the public, male world of financial transaction powerfully foreshadows the fate that awaits such women, that is, a more literal selling of self: prostitution. In all three cases, Austen and Gaskell make the point that economic subjection is fertile ground for encouraging female sexual fall. This degrading relationship between women and financial necessity presented in Ruth would seem to challenge the assertion made by Jenny Uglow in her analysis of North and South, which, she claims, shows Gaskell 'expressing her hope that women might assimilate to the new economic order not by changing the pattern of their lives completely but by extending the domestic range of reference'.<sup>11</sup> This rather comfortable view of Gaskell's idealism is challenged in Ruth, however, where women are assimilated

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<sup>11</sup> Uglow, op. cit., p. 369.

to the new economic order through a process of exploitation that domesticity is shown to be woefully inadequate to protect against.

The innocence of Ruth is manifested throughout the novel both explicitly, by her behaviour and actions, and, implicitly, in the symbolic emblems of purity that surround her:

Miss Benson took her upstairs to her room. The white dimity bed, and the walls, stained green, had something of the colouring and purity of a snowdrop; while the floor, rubbed with a mixture that turned it into a rich dark-brown, suggested the idea of the garden-mould out of which the snowdrop grows. (p. 115)

Gaskell appears to be nervous of antagonising the public with an overtly sexual portrait of the relationship between Bellingham and Ruth. She panders to the demands of convention by presenting Ruth in the least challenging way possible. For example, she does not appear to be aware of the sin she is committing until a young child points it out to her:

“She’s not a lady!” said he, indignantly. “She’s a bad, naughty girl - mamma said so, she did; and she sha’n’t kiss our baby.”(p. 62)

Patricia Beer points out:

It is significant that Harry’s first accusation should be that Ruth was no lady. The whole of her redemption can be read as an attempt to win the respect of the world rather than the forgiveness of God.<sup>12</sup>

This subtle distinction suggests that Gaskell quietly intends to challenge those who use religion as an excuse for persecuting fallen women and that her desire not to antagonise does not preclude a subtle but effective redefinition of the ‘sin’ of sexual relationships outside marriage as being motivated predominately by social concerns.

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<sup>12</sup> Patricia Beer, *Reader, I Married Him* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1975), pp. 133-34.

The shame that Ruth feels when confronted with her 'sin' by a child appears to endorse the prevailing morality that castigated 'fallen women' as objects of contamination, to be shunned and excluded: 'Ruth turned away, humbly and meekly, with bent head, and slow, uncertain steps' (p. 62). Ruth herself is not brazen; she appears to commit wrong unknowingly and fully accepts society's condemnation of her. This apparent meekness does, however, allow Gaskell to reprise a powerfully subversive challenge to conventional representations of fallen women first explored in Mary Barton (1848), albeit in a more reticent form. Esther is the aunt of the eponymous heroine, Mary Barton. In a story that provides a negative counterpoint to Lydia's more fortuitous experience in Pride and Prejudice, Esther describes her seduction, initially in terms of happiness:

"He was so handsome, so kind! Well, the regiment was ordered to Chester (did I tell you he was an officer?), and he could not bear to part from me, nor I from him, so he took me with him...I always meant to send for her to pay me a visit when I was married; for, mark you! he promised me marriage. They all do. Then came three years of happiness. I suppose I ought not to have been happy, but I was."<sup>13</sup>

Just like Esther, Ruth is happy in her fall, although her ignorance of any fault does compromise the subversive power of such happiness. That extra-marital sex could provide a woman with a satisfying relationship is traditionally and extensively denied. Fallen women are not allowed a moment's happiness from the instant of their fall. Even a more overtly radical novel such as East Lynne (1861) by Ellen Wood, seems obliged to conform to this convention. Lady Isabel abandons her husband and family to 'fly' with her seducer, Francis Levison. The narrator describes her life following her fall as follows:

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<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Barton, ed. Edgar Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 188. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

Never had she experienced a moment's calm, or peace, or happiness, since the fatal night of her quitting her home...She had found herself plunged into an abyss of horror from which there was never more any escape; never more, never more. The very hour of her departure she awoke to what she had done: the guilt, whose aspect had been shunned in the prospective, assumed at once its true, frightful colour, the blackness of darkness; and a lively remorse, a never-dying anguish, took possession of her soul for ever.<sup>14</sup>

Set against this more reactionary portrayal of the consequences of female sexual disobedience, Gaskell's apparently conventional seduction narrative starts to take on a more radical appearance.

At the moment of Ruth's knowing of her pregnancy, two attitudes to pregnancy are seen, apparently in conflict, as Faith Benson tells her brother of her anger at Ruth's joy. Faith's anger is motivated by a feeling of awkwardness and shame at the visible bodily evidence of Ruth's sexual past and complicated by personal feelings about her own childlessness, a result of her adherence to Christian morality:

"Oh! I was just beginning to have a good opinion of her, but I'm afraid she is very depraved. After the doctor was gone, she pulled the bed-curtain aside, and looked as if she wanted to speak to me. (I can't think how she heard, for we were close to the window, and spoke very low.) Well, I went to her, though I really had taken quite a turn against her. And she whispered, quite eagerly, 'Did he say I should have a baby?' Of course, I could not keep it from her; but I thought it my duty to look as cold and severe as I could. She did not seem to understand how it ought to be viewed, but took it just as if she had a right to have a baby. She said, 'Oh, my God, I thank Thee! Oh, I will be so good!' I had no patience with her then, so I left the room". (p. 99)

Faith's awkwardness with Ruth's condition juxtaposed against Ruth's happiness and optimism works as a metonym for Gaskell's own unease when trying to reconcile her own belief in the redemptive power of motherhood alongside the conventional view that

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<sup>14</sup> Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*, ed. Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 283. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

Ruth's happiness at being a mother given her circumstances is almost 'depraved'. The word 'ought' here, used by Faith in the phrase: 'she did not seem to understand how it ought to be viewed', is significant. It sets a system of learned and, by extension, flawed moral values against a more instinctive sense of right, as felt by Ruth. In this way, then, Ruth occupies an uneasy position both inside and outside social expectation in the same way that sexuality itself does. While maternity is acceptable within social norms, the sexual desire that precedes it is not. Faith is aware of the problem that Ruth's pregnancy manifests:

"Oh Thurstan! I wish there was not the prospect of a child. I cannot help it. I do - I could see a way in which we might help her, if it were not for that."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, it's no use thinking of it, as it is! Or else we might have taken her home with us, and kept her till she had got a little dress-making in the congregation, but for this meddlesome child; that spoils everything."

(p. 104)

The child 'spoils everything' as far as Faith is concerned because it serves as a physical presence, a visible reminder, of Ruth's sexual disobedience.

While Faith finds it impossible to separate the cause from the effect and expresses a desire to deny any disturbing realities, Thurstan, her brother, sees maternity as distinct from sexual misdemeanour to the point where he can view it as a redemptive force:

"If her life has hitherto been self-seeking and wickedly thoughtless, here is the very instrument to make her forget herself, and be thoughtful for another. Teach her (and God will teach her, if man does not come between) to reverence her child; and this reverence will shut out sin, - will be purification." (p. 100)

It is significant that this debate takes place independently of Ruth herself. In an impulse similar to that, which separates sexuality from maternity, thus neutralising its potential



for disturbance, Ruth must remain passive and removed from the ideological debates that surround her. In this case, as in others, Gaskell makes Ruth's passivity, a version of ignorance, a feature that protects her integrity. In Ruth, then, Gaskell appears to provide for the possibility, on the surface at least, that pregnancy can be separated from its cause both ideologically and physically. In this she can be seen as approaching illegitimacy much as some eighteenth-century liberals had done, like Bernadin St Pierre in Paul et Virginie, where—in an ideal society—the illegitimate child can grow up unblighted by a sense that he differs fatally from, and is inferior to, the legitimate. Yet, while seeming artificially to sever the two, Gaskell actually highlights their parallel and emphatic potential for social disturbance. Paradoxically, by negating sexual desire, pregnancy takes on greater significance as a force through which social propriety may be furtively challenged, a significance hitherto negated by the centrality of sexual desire as the deciding factor in any debate on fallen women. This shift allows Gaskell to use a discourse on maternity as a socially acceptable means of confronting fundamental and profoundly unsettling issues of female desire and fulfilment.

#### The Seduction Narrative Subverted

Leonard is born into a community where the penalty for illegitimacy appears to be as harsh for the child as for the mother. Leonard's imminent birth is framed by a cautionary narrative of the fate of another illegitimate child, Thomas Wilkins, for whom the knowledge of his birth was so terrible that death seemed to present itself as a kind of release:

“Do you remember Thomas Wilkins, and the way he threw the registry of his birth and baptism back in your face? Why, he would not have the situation; he went to sea and was drowned, rather than present the record of his shame.” (p. 102)

It is not the illegitimacy itself that leads to desperate measures but the demand of visibility of that state. Wilkins rejects the social law that will force him to ‘present the record of his shame’. Thurstan remembers the violence with which Wilkins responded to the news. The language with which he articulates Wilkins position prefaces Bradshaw’s evaluation of Leonard’s situation:

He remembered more clearly the wild fierceness, the Cain-like look, of Thomas Wilkins, as the obnoxious word in the baptismal registry told him that he must go forth branded into the world, with his hand against every man’s, and every man’s against him. (pp. 102-103)

There is a confidence here in absolutes such as ‘every man’s’ that even Thurstan seems to concur with. The very absolutism of Wilkins’ fate does, however, compel Faith and Thurstan to try to subvert the moral imperatives that govern their society. When Benson and Faith conspire to hide the truth of Ruth’s history they subvert these forces of conventionality: ‘for himself, he was brave enough to tell the truth; for the little helpless baby, about to enter a cruel, biting world, he was tempted to evade the difficulty’ (p. 102). The story of Wilkins also reveals another fundamental deficiency inherent in the so-called moral absolutes of social law. It is not the fact of being illegitimate that debilitates Wilkins but rather the knowledge of that illegitimacy which will mark him in the eyes of his community. While the Wilkins parable seems to endorse the notion of an absolute, inevitable fate for the illegitimate child, Gaskell simultaneously exposes the weakness in such disciplinary rhetoric.

The conservative version of illegitimacy that dominates early in the narrative and which Faith and Thurstan undermine is later complicated further when the doctor, Davies, reveals that he too is illegitimate:

“Of course, I knew Leonard was illegitimate - in fact, I will give you secret for secret; it was being so myself that first made me sympathise with him and desire to adopt him.” (p. 360)

The neat social idea that all illegitimate offspring are condemned to unhappy, unfulfilled lives as a form of warning to potential mothers is exposed as a fiction. Furthermore, Davies has been able to subvert social expectation by successfully concealing his own illegitimacy. His own triumph in the face of convention further endorses the action of Thurstan and Faith. Gaskell suggests, as the narrative progresses from violent absolutes as represented by Wilkins to more subversive areas of contention articulated by Mr Davies, that illegitimacy provokes much less of a homogenised response than the superficial view of society might suggest. This mirrors the progress of the reader's response as neat certainties, even those with the caveat attached that they are objectionable, are progressively undermined by irregularities that fit neither the conservative nor the liberal view. Yet, while one fiction is in the process of being destroyed - one could hardly be more of a model citizen than a doctor - another is affirmed - that secrecy is essential if one's origins are not to prevent prejudice within society. Leonard has to negotiate a path between these two alternatives - between exposure and death or silence and life. He exists as an awkward presence because he neither dies neatly nor keeps his birth concealed absolutely.

Gaskell makes Leonard's maleness a locus for disturbance from the moment of his birth when Ruth is reminded that:

She had wished for a girl, as being less likely to feel the want of a father - as being what a mother, worse than widowed, could most effectively shelter. (p. 134)

Gaskell is talking immediately here about the role of a father, but her choice of gender for the illegitimate child raises other issues. She appears to endorse here, through Ruth, the popular fiction that a girl is the most appropriate offspring for a fallen woman. Zunshine identifies one key way in which illegitimate daughters, rather than sons, could be used by writers, taking as an example Sense and Sensibility:

Austen's story of multigenerational illegitimacy is indebted to the eighteenth-century literary tradition of signalling the virtue of daughters via the virtue of their mothers.<sup>15</sup>

In repeating the same mistakes as the mother, the illegitimate female ensures that her mother's 'crime' cannot be overlooked or concealed. In Sense and Sensibility, the second Eliza is destined to fall a victim to seduction and pregnancy which, in due time, she does. In Mary Hays' The Victim of Prejudice (1799) Mary desperately tries to avoid the fate of her mother but ends up being raped by her potential seducer, Sir Peter Osborne, when she fails to submit to his charms. Gaskell herself draws attention to this stereotype in Mary Barton. Mary's father, John Barton worries that Mary might follow the precedent established by her aunt, recognising a similarity between the two women: 'her father now began to wish that Mary was married. Then this terrible superstitious fear suggested by her likeness to Esther would be done away with' (p. 147). Mary becomes involved with Henry Carson, a wealthy gentleman, and appears to be on the verge of being seduced

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<sup>15</sup> Zunshine, op. cit., p. 156.

when he reveals his true colours and she rejects him: 'now, sir, I tell you, if I had loved you before, I don't think I should have loved you now you have told me you meant to ruin me; for that's the plain English of not meaning to marry me till just this minute' (p. 160). Mary in The Victim of Prejudice shares with Mary Barton a consciousness of her own predetermined fate, but unlike Mary Barton is unable to escape. Far from introducing a significant disruption to the mother-daughter paradigm, however, the fact that Mary's similarity to Esther is cosmetic rather than genetic supports rather than challenges the authority of the classic fate of the illegitimate female child. Having demonstrated familiarity with the conventions that surround female illegitimacy, that Gaskell chose to draw attention to the fact that a female child would conform not only to Ruth's but the reader's expectations only to disappoint with a male offspring, highlights the fact that Leonard's maleness is intended to challenge the comfortable precedents that circumscribe the seduction narrative.

An alternative eighteenth-century method of resolving the problem of an illegitimate girl was often to have her legitimacy restored at the end of the novel, as is the case in many foundling narratives, such as Evelina by Frances Burney and Belinda by Maria Edgeworth.<sup>16</sup> These novels are ultimately successful in their preoccupation with authenticating the legitimacy of the eponymous heroines. In Ruth, it is the authenticity of Leonard's legitimacy that is deliberately obscured. Leonard represents a shift in the locus of anxiety about illegitimacy, particularly in the way that it can be identified and defined, away from girls and onto boys. In fact, the treatment of Leonard seems to invert the

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<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of gender difference and its implications for illegitimate children in literature see Zunshine, p. 9.

classic feminised foundling narrative. In his case, it is his illegitimacy rather than his legitimacy that is confirmed at the end of the novel. It is not then the visibility of maternal sin that Leonard represents, rather the neglected threat of male lawlessness:

She dreamt that the innocent babe that lay by her side in soft ruddy slumber, had started up into a man's growth, and, instead of the pure and noble being whom she had prayed to present as her child to 'Our Father in heaven', he was a repetition of his father; and, like him, lured some maiden (who in her dream seemed strangely like herself, only more utterly sad and desolate even than she) into sin, and left her there to even a worse fate than that of suicide. (pp. 136-7)

The maleness of Leonard complicates a straightforward maternal identification with the child as he becomes identified with his father. This imaginative identification of Leonard with his father rather than mother makes explicit Bellingham's responsibility and consequently challenges the neat social fiction that women must bear all the guilt of illegitimacy. Having rejected the notion that sin can be somehow transferred from mother to daughter, Gaskell resurrects and subverts this tradition in order to highlight male responsibility. In doing so, she introduces an element of male accountability almost entirely absent from earlier seduction narratives. In Sense and Sensibility and in The Victim of Prejudice, for example, we do not even know the name of the second Eliza's or of Mary's father. Further, when Willoughby is given the opportunity to defend his behaviour to Elinor, she is permitted to feel a measure of sympathy for him, whereas, in contrast, when Bellingham explains his behaviour towards Ruth as 'youthful folly' to Benson, Benson replies by saying: "Men may call such actions as yours youthful follies! There is another name for them with God" (p. 371). By manipulating deeply traditional ideas to articulate more subversive ones she is able to appear deeply conformist while simultaneously challenging such conformist views.

## Marriage and Motherhood

Rather than simply show how motherhood within marriage represents the feminine ideal, Gaskell's reader is confronted with the various failings of marriage as a normalising structure for women's desires. This represents a break with earlier seduction narratives where marriage is represented as an ideal and, further, as the only legitimate ambition a woman can have. It also contrasts with writings like Wollstonecraft's and Hays', which had confronted more explicitly the problems of contemporary concepts of marriage. Gaskell's narrative does not endorse an idealised picture of marriage for women. Ruth's mother conforms to sanctioned expectations of women and is, apparently, fulfilled in the sense that she is married with a child. Yet, the reality behind a surface of respectability is that she lives a repressed life full of self-denial, and, to an extent, self-loathing. Her vague, degenerative illness represents a physical act of will, a kind of passive resistance to the state of marriage and the sexual relationship it demands:

Ruth's mother had been the daughter of a poor curate in Norfolk, and, early left without parents or home, she was thankful to marry a respectable farmer, a good deal older than herself. After their marriage, however, everything seemed to go wrong. Mrs Hilton fell into a delicate state of health, and was unable to bestow the ever-watchful attention to domestic affairs, so requisite in a farmer's wife. (p. 33)

For both Mrs Hilton and Ruth then, sexual relationships invoke a 'fall', either internally, as is the case with Mrs Hilton, or externally, in the eyes of society, as is the case for Ruth. The consequences of sex for women appear to be disastrous to physical or moral integrity whether married or not. The history of Mrs Hilton provides a parallel within this novel to that of the heroine's sexual experiences: its effect is to illuminate Ruth's early influences

and acts as a shadowy presence in any assessment of the allegedly normal relationships and assumptions in the novel against which Ruth's transgression is judged. The reasons for the mother's withdrawal from the domestic centre of the home remain elusive. The pressure that Mrs Hilton feels, but keeps suppressed, reflects the strain in Gaskell's own writing, where the pressure to represent women as passive creatures is in conflict with the disruptive ideas that keep breaking the apparently calm surface of life, a strain that is also present in North and South (1854), where the heroine, Margaret's mother, Mrs Hale, is a permanent invalid. Mrs Hilton dies, almost as an acknowledgement that the conflicting demands placed upon her self are too much to sustain.

The long-term consequences of a life of suppression are manifested most dramatically in the relationship between Mr and Mrs Bradshaw, where Gaskell releases the pressure of female passive acceptance and resolves it into explicit defiance. Mrs Bradshaw is described as a 'scared-looking little lady' (p. 125), and the reasons for this self-effacing demeanour are soon revealed. She is oppressed by her husband to the point that she lives in abject fear of him. As an unhealthy corollary to this submissive relationship, expressions of maternal love have been distorted into impulses characterised by guilt and concealment rather than open love:

It was only her simple-hearted mother that she longed to tell. She knew that her mother's congratulations would not jar upon her, though they might not sound the full organ-peal of her love. But all that her mother knew passed onwards to her father; so for the present, at any rate, she determined to realise her secret position alone. (p. 308)

Secrets are, in this case, perceived to be as much a part of 'normal' family life as they are in the life of Leonard and Ruth. Indeed, it is the enforced denial of her mother-love that



forces Mrs Bradshaw to challenge her husband when it is discovered that Richard, their son, has been embezzling the family firm:

“I have been a good wife till now. I know I have. I have done all he bid me, ever since we were married. But now I will speak my mind, and say to everybody how cruel he is - how hard to his own flesh and blood! If he puts poor Dick in prison, I will go too. If I’m to choose between my husband and my son, I choose my son; for he will have no friends, unless I am with him.”  
(pp. 333-4)

Mrs Bradshaw is prepared to ‘fall’ if that is what society dictates is necessary for her to protect her son.

A similar representation of mother-love as a stimulus to female disobedience occurs in Lizzie Leigh (1849), where Gaskell describes the souring of Lizzie’s parents’ relationship as a consequence of Mr Leigh’s brutal rejection of his fallen daughter:

They had been two-and-twenty years man and wife; for nineteen of those years their life had been as calm and happy, as the most perfect uprightness on the one side, and the most complete confidence and loving submission on the other, could make it. Milton's famous line might have been framed and hung up as the rule of their married life, for he was truly the interpreter, who stood between God and her; she would have considered herself wicked if she had ever dared even to think him austere, though as certainly as he was an upright man, so surely was he hard, stern, and inflexible. But for three years the moan and the murmur had never been out of her heart; she had rebelled against her husband as against a tyrant, with a bidden, sullen rebellion, which tore up the old land-marks of wifely duty and affection, and poisoned the fountains whence gentlest love and reverence had once been for ever springing.<sup>17</sup>

In all these cases, as with Ruth, mothers are shown to place their loyalty to their children above their marital fidelity. Gaskell defines an alternative stimulus for female resistance to male authority as developing not from sexual disobedience but from motherhood.

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, Lizzie Leigh (England: Dodo Press, 2007), p. 1. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

Marriage, then, with all its attendant demands, is rejected as the only successful realisation of female ambition. Gaskell seems in these narratives to question the notion of a socially condoned form of sexuality as being satisfactory for women when an absolute loss of self-determination is also required. This ambivalent view of marriage is further developed when Bellingham, now Mr Donne, proposes marriage to Ruth, offering her the chance to legitimize her son and be socially integrated herself. She rejects his offer, saying:

‘Whatever may be my doom – God is just – I leave myself in His hands. I will save Leonard from evil. Evil would it be for him if I lived with you. I will let him die first!’ (p. 248)

Beer identifies this refusal as significant within the context of Gaskell’s attempt to create an alternative framework by which to judge illegitimacy:

Ruth is allowed to come within striking distance of marriage ... Ruth’s refusal is important, in that she is seen to realise that environment – in this case close daily contact with a bad man – could be worse for a child than the slur of illegitimacy.<sup>18</sup>

Earlier seduction narratives make it clear that ‘fallen women must not get married’.<sup>19</sup> To have Ruth reject the chance to be rehabilitated within conventional society, not simply to conform to the orthodoxy outlined by Beer but also to imply the limitations of marriage for children as well as women, challenges fundamental attitudes towards marriage as the bedrock of a stable society. Gaskell suggests that Ruth will be a better mother alone than she would be when having to counter the negative impact of her potential husband. Identifying motherhood as a powerful source of redemptive self-respect and happiness,

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia Beer, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

regardless of the mother's uncertain social status, marks Gaskell's version of the seduction narrative as compellingly revisionary.

### Patriarchal Responses to Illegitimacy

Bradshaw's outraged response to the revelation that Leonard is illegitimate makes emphatic use of conventional rhetoric, and displays an outward confidence in such rhetoric:

"That very child and heir of shame to associate with my own innocent children! I trust they are not contaminated ... Do you suppose your child is to be exempt from the penalties of his birth? Do you suppose that he alone is to be saved from the upbraiding scoff? Do you suppose that he is ever to rank with other boys, who are not stained and marked with sin from their birth?" (p. 279)

Bradshaw asserts the traditional notion that illegitimacy is a visible form of moral corruption ('innocent', 'contaminated', 'penalties', 'stain', 'marked') and expresses further, conventional fear that Leonard, through having been allowed free access to his own children, may himself have actually corrupted them. Bradshaw's anger is given credibility by a sense of betrayal, that people he trusted have deceived him. His indictment of Leonard, however, complicates any feelings of sympathy the reader might have for him.

Michie suggests that Bradshaw's horror deliberately articulates an abhorrence analogous to that felt by Gaskell's contemporary male writers at the thought that the supposedly invulnerable boundaries that protected the sanctity of the home from so-called polluting forces could be penetrated:

By depicting Ruth becoming a member of the family circle of a dissenting minister as well as a wealthy manufacturer, Gaskell transgressed the boundary that writers such as Dickens, Acton and Greg worked to maintain. The idea of the prostitute crossing over the threshold of the home was abhorrent to these writers.<sup>20</sup>

According to Michie, it is the success of Ruth's deception that represents the climax of Gaskell's interrogation of the standard seduction narrative and, by extension, her challenge to established social order. There are two problems with her analysis, however. The first is that, while Michie concentrates on Ruth as the source of disorder, for Bradshaw it is Leonard as much as Ruth who represents a corrupting influence on his family. In concentrating on Ruth, Michie is guilty of a critical oversight that fails to acknowledge Bradshaw's focus on Ruth and Leonard and, similarly, Gaskell's own intention to shift the narrative focus from the mother to the mother and child. The second problem is that Ruth is not actually a prostitute. Beer comments:

Unlike many Victorians, she [Gaskell] distinguishes carefully between different types of fallen woman, between those who have been seduced and those who have turned to prostitution a way of life ... and does not lump together all those who have intercourse with men to whom they are not married under the general title of fornicators. The characters in her books, reflecting the contemporary outlook, often do.<sup>21</sup>

Michie has misread Ruth and attempted to make her fit into the same set of conventional and mistaken assumptions as Bradshaw does. In fact, their error highlights the fact that Gaskell's Ruth manages to escape the fate traditionally associated with the mothers of illegitimate children. In two earlier stories by Gaskell that deal with illegitimacy, both mothers become prostitutes in order to support themselves and their family, particularly

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<sup>20</sup> Michie, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Beer, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

when they find it impossible to re-enter domesticity. Esther in Mary Barton, for example, finds it almost impossible to re-enter her childhood home:

She set off towards the court where Mary lived, to pick up what she could there of information. But she was ashamed to enter in where once she had been innocent, and hung about the neighbouring streets. (p. 278)

Gaskell represents the collective need permanently to exclude Esther and women like her from domesticity as a physical as well as mental aversion on the part of Esther who effectively polices her own shame. In the short story Lizzie Leigh, Lizzie has turned to prostitution after being seduced. The physical scars of her lifestyle are evident:

She went straight to the bed, and withdrawing the curtain, saw Lizzie, - but not the former Lizzie, bright, gay, buoyant, and undimmed. This Lizzie was old before her time; her beauty was gone; deep lines of care, and alas! of want (or thus the mother imagined) were printed on the cheek, so round, and fair, and smooth, when last she gladdened her mother's eyes. Even in her sleep she bore the look of woe and despair which was the prevalent expression of her face by day; even in her sleep she had forgotten how to smile. (p. 27)

These are the physical identifiers of sexual fall that Bradshaw invokes when he talks about stains and marks and which he expects to see on a woman such as Ruth and on her child. Illegitimacy is treated as social exclusion: both in the situation of the prostitutes and in Bradshaw's desire to exclude Leonard from the society of other 'innocent' children. Michie suggests that: 'Gaskell's novel was so disturbing to Victorian readers because it represented the transgression of a boundary that seemed as if it should be absolute' (p. 106). Bradshaw's reaction, then, could be said to reflect what Gaskell considered would be the conventional response to her novel, simultaneously as she highlights the limitations of such a response.

Having identified that the urge to condemn Ruth and, by extension, Leonard is more complex than a straightforward moral repugnance, Gaskell complicates each response further. There is a certain reassurance to be gained from Bradshaw's belief in the necessary visibility of moral awkwardness in the sense that it is easy to identify and to avoid. His confidence relies on expressions such as 'stained and marked' emphasising visibility when the reality Leonard exposes is the invisibility of illegitimacy. While words like 'stained' dominate, words like 'contaminate' (connected with the powerful Victorian themes of civic cleanliness as the shield against medical epidemics) suggest something far more invidious and infectious. The boy is not just excluded from society but is seen as a potentially injurious invasion of evil within it. Bradshaw's confidence in such illusory visibility - the illegitimate is 'marked' and stained - is fundamentally compromised by the recognition, in Gaskell's narrative, that Leonard has avoided identification for so long.

It is interesting that Bradshaw does not, maybe cannot, refer to Leonard by name, but only as the child of Ruth. Bradshaw is confident only in describing Leonard as a product of primary, safe, maternal sin with which he feels conventional disgust. Whilst his horror is directed at the existence of Leonard, Leonard himself remains a symbolic presence. That Bradshaw cannot resolve his rhetoric to fit the reality of Leonard suggests the intolerable pressure involved in maintaining the stereotype of the child automatically corrupted by the sin of the mother. Bradshaw's attitude to Leonard exposes an interesting social paradox. As Leonard has concealed his beginnings, so Bradshaw, the novel has shown us, has erased his own humble origin by creating an illusion of stability through economic power. Although Bradshaw is a self-made man himself and has had to exploit

certain relaxations in rigid class laws in order to rise to his present position of apparent security, he himself becomes a fearful upholder of rigid social distinctions that demand clarity of origin and a rejection of the possibility of social mobility. The outsider, once inside, rigorously practises social exclusion.

Bradshaw's fundamental feelings of insecurity concerning his own social status are revealed in his relationship with Bellingham, a member of the aristocracy:

The first day at dessert, some remark (some opportune remark, as Mr Bradshaw in his innocence had thought) was made regarding the price of pine-apples, which was rather exorbitant that year, and Mr Donne asked Mr Bradshaw, with quiet surprise, if they had no pinery, as if to be without a pinery were indeed a depth of pitiable destitution. (p. 218)

Leonard's situation becomes analogous to Bradshaw's, as both experience a profound sense of uncertainty about where they fit in to an apparently rigid social order. Legitimacy is, of course, a state entirely constructed by law and culture. Illegitimacy, or more specifically, Leonard, represents a force, which challenges the apparent surface calm of society and forces all those who are 'contaminated' by his presence to question the basis of their own security. What appears a conventional condemnation of illegitimacy becomes far more interesting and complicated once illegitimacy shifts from an abstract, secretive concept to a real child, Leonard, who forces the adults around him to negotiate a new relationship with social problems they had previously considered themselves uncontaminated by.

This process of forcing individuals to apply their untested rhetoric to real, emotionally demanding situations is pushed to the limit when the two principles of

Victorian life that Bradshaw defends so violently - domestic and economic security - are fundamentally challenged by the behaviour of Richard Bradshaw, his son, who is eventually found guilty of embezzling the family firm. Gaskell introduces another narrative of a 'tainted' son, though here not the taint of illegitimate birth. Prior to his son's crime, Bradshaw is unequivocal in his belief in simple cause and effect:

If another's son turned out wild or bad, Mr Bradshaw had little sympathy; it might have been prevented by a stricter rule, or more religious life at home...All children were obedient if their parents were decided and authoritative; and everyone would turn out well, if properly managed.  
(p. 209)

Having established a position, which allows for no compromise, Gaskell now exposes the essential weakness in such untried absolutes, which come apart at the seams once specific pressure is applied. The compromises and contradictions already exposed in Bradshaw's muddle of thought when dealing with Leonard are pushed to the limit when his rhetoric proves unable to cope with the altogether more substantial emotional demands of his son. Both Leonard and Richard are judged by the wider community as products of their parents. Bradshaw becomes a victim of his own self-confident bombast when Thurstan, among others, perceives how Bradshaw's very strictness has led to weakness in his son:

"But remember," said Mr Benson, "how strict Mr Bradshaw has always been with his children. It is no wonder if poor Richard was a coward in those days." (p. 153)

By expressing sympathy for Richard, Thurstan appears to be consolidating his liberal credentials but again, in reality, things are not this neat or simple. His desire to blame the parent for any shortcomings in the child closely resembles Bradshaw's conservative view that Leonard will carry his mother's sin perpetually and highlights, perhaps, a shared weakness in the two to seek reductionist principles rather than to accept the muddle of



human emotion. Faith goes on to express an attitude far closer to Gaskell's own belief; that a child is not simply a victim or appendage of the parent but an individual with free will: "And Mr Bradshaw was just as strict with Jemima, and she's no coward" (p. 153). Thus, the comparison between Richard and Leonard highlights both the comforting fiction of cause and effect that over-simplifies the parent-child relationship and the uncomfortable, uncontrollable reality that children are individuals capable of independent thought. But, ultimately, the reader is not forced to decide whether Thurstan or Faith is right. Gaskell allows these contradictions to exist simultaneously to show the grey areas of life, to deny the reader the comforting fiction of certainty. By showing that Bradshaw both can and cannot be held responsible for Richard's crime, Gaskell makes the reader reflect that to hold Leonard responsible for his mother's weakness is a moral over-simplification but not necessarily wrong. While revealing the muddle that lies behind social convention, Gaskell is careful not to replace one set of morally comforting yet ultimately flawed certainties with another set of her own devising.

In The History Of Sexuality: 1, Michel Foucault comments on the evolution of Victorian sexual relationships:

The couple imposed itself as a model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy. A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom.<sup>22</sup>

Ruth's behaviour presents an explicit challenge to this model: a model, moreover, that Foucault connects to increasing success in making the Victorian city more clean and

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<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, The History Of Sexuality:1, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 3.

disease-free. She exists as physical opposition to the notion of the couple as the definitive model of sexual relations, and, perhaps more critically, she represents an undermining of 'the principle of secrecy'. In relation to this, the existence of Leonard is crucial because he becomes a focus for bringing sex out into the open - he is no longer protected by the closed parental door.

### Conclusion

In Ruth, Gaskell focuses on illegitimacy as a powerful disruptive force for a number of reasons. Its existence makes explicit female sexual desire and, further, it highlights the inability of marriage to resolve female desire. The alternative, that is remaining single, is also fraught with denial, as illegitimacy represents a disturbing force to be resisted. While the sublimation of self within marriage creates all sorts of strains and pressures, motherhood paradoxically provides an opportunity for self-sublimation that can be combined with self-empowerment and growth. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Gaskell does not limit her observations simply to the impact of illegitimacy to the women who have to bear the shame of their supposed profligacy: she allows Leonard to live. Leonard is vital because while he is a product of defiant female disorder he must adapt to a rigid patriarchal order and ultimately become a representative of it. He becomes a visible site of contestation. In this way, Gaskell shows that illegitimacy is not simply an isolated female issue centred around disobedience and irrationality but challenges fundamental male assumptions of the basis of power, consequently sending disruptive ripples throughout society, disruptions that are not necessarily malevolent but have the power to effect fundamental change. Ruth's

conventional death at the end of the novel represents an acknowledgement by Gaskell: that the conflicting ideas contained within the body of the fallen woman and within the text cannot be resolved.

## II

### Alternative Versions of the Seduction Narrative: Adam Bede and Jessie Phillips

Although George Eliot herself was reticent about acknowledging her debt to other literary works when describing the genesis of Adam Bede (1859), preferring instead to describe it as: ‘the suggestions of experience wrought up into new combinations’,<sup>23</sup> critics have regularly cited Ruth as one of the sources for Adam Bede, noting in particular the shared focus of both novels on rewriting the ‘seduced maiden’ narrative.<sup>24</sup> Gillian Beer goes further by suggesting that, in fact, Ruth provided a negative counterpoint for Eliot, highlighting those aspects of the conventionalized narrative that she wished to challenge:

[Eliot’s] criticism of Ruth’s sharp contrasts and of its idealization served as a model, which could be implicitly corrected.<sup>25</sup>

Beer’s reading seems right. Nevertheless, that is not to say that Eliot rejects the key features of the seduction narrative out of hand. What I shall examine first in this chapter is how, just like Gaskell, she is sensitive to the sympathetic potential of various conventions, sympathy that, however, unlike Gaskell, she is keen to interrogate and subvert.

The first issue to address is that of class. Both Ruth Hilton and Hetty Sorrel, the seduced maiden in Adam Bede, are orphans, framed as economically vulnerable. It could

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<sup>23</sup> The George Eliot Letters, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), vol. II, p. 503.

<sup>24</sup> See Alicia Carroll, ‘Tried by Earthly Fires: Hetty Wesley, Hetty Sorrel, and Adam Bede’ Nineteenth-Century Literature 44, (Sept., 1989), p. 219, and Miriam Jones ‘“The Usual Sad Catastrophe”: From the street to the parlor in Adam Bede’, Victorian Literature and Culture, (2004), 305-326 (p. 307).

<sup>25</sup> Gillian Beer, George Eliot (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986), p. 71.

be argued, however, that Eliot drains potential sympathy from Hetty through her presentation of her background. While Ruth becomes utterly alone and has to earn a meagre living as a seamstress from a former situation of greater economic and social security, Hetty seems more privileged: she lives with her uncle and aunt Poyser on their farm. Into this apparently respectable situation, however, Eliot introduces a shadow of unreliability into Hetty's ancestry. Her grandfather regards her with hostility as the product of a marriage that should, in his opinion, never have taken place. Eliot writes:

A long unextinguished resentment, which always made (him) more indifferent to Hetty than to his son's children. Her mother's fortune had been spent by that good-for-nought Sorrel, and Hetty had Sorrel's blood in her.<sup>26</sup>

Grandfather Poyser is the voice here, which effectively foreshadows the sustained hostility Hetty will be subjected to by Eliot at many points in the text. Hetty is defined specifically by the 'blood' of her father, who was financially profligate. He brought disgrace on the Poyser's daughter; Hetty will bring disgrace on them. Thus the suspicion is raised already that Hetty too will turn out to be an economic liability. Furthermore, the views that Eliot attributes to old Martin here also highlight the significance of family name in conferring legitimacy: Hetty is, after all, a Sorrel, not a Poyser. Hetty's deficient relationship to her surrogate parents is highlighted when the question of her marriage arises. Her aunt considers:

Though she and her husband might have viewed the subject differently if Hetty had been a daughter of their own, it was clear that they would have welcomed the match with Adam for a penniless niece. For what could Hetty have been but a servant elsewhere, if her uncle had not taken her in?  
(p. 99)

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<sup>26</sup> George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Stephen Gill (Penguin: London, 1980), p. 338. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

Themes of lineage, marriage, and a social position dependent on ancestry are all being signalled as major themes even before the literal illegitimacy. Hetty is thrust to the periphery of the family by Eliot's wording, distanced from the close personal relationships she might have shared had she been an authentic daughter. That she is not loved like a biological child is emphasised by the expression 'a daughter of their own' placed in opposition to the objectifying expression 'a penniless niece' which denies any sense of personal connection. Eliot uses characters' speech and free indirect discourse to voice an increasingly damning view of Hetty and a foreshadowing of her doom. She appears here not to have, as it were, proper parents, just as she will herself, become less than a legitimate mother to her own child. Moreover, Hetty is described as an economic drain, 'penniless' and consequently a potential threat to the Poysers' security.

Eliot thus subverts the 'vulnerable orphan' convention as it is applied to the 'seduced maiden' narrative. She endows Hetty both with a comfortable socio-economic background and, within that, a less respectable and less secure, situation. Her respectability has already been subtly but effectively compromised. Hetty's position, both inside and outside the family, in fact, calls to mind the conventional position of the illegitimate in Victorian society, physically within the community but pushed to its borders as deficient in necessary family relations and threatening to the economic stability of the whole. The pattern of Victorian illegitimacy that casts the illegitimate as social outsider is already in place before the actual illegitimate birth.

Just like Gaskell's figuring of Ruth, Eliot's presentation of Hetty draws heavily on the conventional Victorian stereotype of female attractiveness. Eliot's descriptions of Hetty consistently draw attention to childish qualities:

Beauty like that of kittens, or very small ducks ... or babies just beginning to toddle and to engage in conscious mischief - a beauty with which you can never be angry, but that you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which it throws you. (p. 84)

At first, in this extraordinarily disparate passage, Eliot exploits the conventional association of the beauty of small animals and children with Hetty, the association reinforcing cuteness, vulnerability and lack of individual consciousness; this 'beginning to toddle ... conscious mischief' is in direct contrast with the full knowingness of adults. The intimation that Hetty's beauty finds its equivalent in barely sentient creatures is refined to incorporate the notion of 'conscious mischief', ambiguously poised between its toddler context and its sudden intimation of a will towards evil by a fully conscious being. The implications of responsibility implied by the word 'conscious' are immediately undermined by the playfulness of 'mischief', which has the effect of making safe whatever act it refers to. Eliot continues to play with contradictions and the association of Hetty with babies has the effect of suggesting that, just like them, she cannot be held responsible for her actions; the murder of her own baby is an example, perhaps, of such barely 'conscious mischief'. While in Ruth, however, Ruth's simplicity and childishness are exploited by Gaskell to emphasise her fundamental innocence in the face of sexual fall and to diminish any threat to conservative moral values she might represent, in Adam Bede, Hetty's beauty is conflated not only with babies and moral innocence but with violence: 'a beauty ... that you feel ready to crush'. Eliot's curiously ambiguous wording here, that seems to articulate a desire to attack Hetty and women like

her for the emotional and physical confusion their beauty causes is odd, not least because the hostility is now being expressed through the authorial voice. The implication is that, on some level, beautiful women like Hetty invite the violence that later defines them. While Eliot maintains the connection between female beauty and infantile consciousness, this connection in the passage here assumes a much more sinister consequence. The violence that is here imagined by the narrative voice foreshadows the later, real violence that emphatically marks the book as a challenge to more conventional seduction narratives.

Class plays a crucial role in both authors shaping of the seduction itself. Both Ruth and Hetty fall in love with men who are socially superior to them and who subsequently abandon them. Research by Gillis and myself, among others, highlights the fact that in Victorian reality, such socially unequal matches were highly irregular and they form the source statistically of a relatively small proportion of illegitimate births recorded.<sup>27</sup> This then appears to represent a conscious rejection of social realism in favour of a popular literary fantasy of upper-class seduction and seems to suggest that Eliot was keen to exploit this one aspect of the conventional seduction narrative, with its

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<sup>27</sup> John R. Gillis, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-173. In his study of records at the Coram Foundling Hospital, he found social inequality in less than a quarter of the relationships documented.



use of the superior coercive power and glamour of the higher-class seducer, which invokes uncomplicated sympathy for the female 'victim'. However, again, here as with other patterns of the seduction narrative, Eliot recalls this convention only to subvert it.

The relationship upon which Ruth embarks with Bellingham is typified by detailed descriptions by Gaskell of the self-sacrificing love of Ruth, compared favourably to Bellingham's indolence:

"Really, Ruth," said he, that evening, "you must not encourage yourself in this habit of falling into melancholy reveries without any cause. You have been sighing twenty times during the last half hour. Do be a little cheerful. Remember, I have no companion but you in this out-of-the-way place."

"I am very sorry, sir," said Ruth, her eyes filling with tears; and then she remembered that it was very dull for him to be alone with her, heavy-hearted as she had been all day. (p. 65)

Gaskell makes clear that Ruth seems to be unaware of the possible social advantages that might be gained by a relationship with Bellingham and simply loves him. Although Ruth is not morally irreproachable, Patricia Beer argues that for Gaskell, at least, the manner in which the relationship was conducted is significant:

But though love cannot justify, it is relevant, and an illicit union, entered on with love, is morally better than cold-bloodedly selling oneself, concludes Mrs Gaskell.<sup>28</sup>

Eliot seems to concur explicitly with Gaskell's conclusion in her characterisation of Hetty, who represents the morally dubious counterpoint to Ruth's slightly strained innocence. Eliot's words convey the impression that she first has her vanity flattered by Arthur Donnithorne, 'the vainest woman is never thoroughly conscious of her own beauty till she is loved by the man who sets her own passion vibrating in return' (p. 149).

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<sup>28</sup> Patricia Beer, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

Eliot then shows her seeing an opportunity for social advancement through an advantageous marriage with him:

Captain Donnithorne couldn't like her to go on doing work: he would like to see her in nice clothes, and thin shoes and white stockings, perhaps with silk clocks to them; for he must love her very much – no one else had ever put his arms round her and kissed her in that way. He would want to marry her, and make a lady of her. (p. 150)

Here, free indirect discourse makes Hetty the voice of her own condemnation: work-shy, materialistic, vain and frivolous. Marriage is syntactically linked to social success, 'make a lady of her', and it is his love, not hers which is foregrounded.

However, such awareness of social opportunity is not always interpreted by modern critics in such negative terms. Nancy Anne Marck comments:

Thinking of Arthur Donnithorne's attentions in the light of other admirers, Hetty analyses her potential suitors, revealing a strong sense of material realities, as she evaluates each admirer's ability to provide the status and luxuries she desires. It is the narrator's part, however, to persuade the reader that these luxuries are evil in and of themselves. In a Jane Austen novel, the reader might reasonably expect a young unmarried girl to consider the facts of inheritance and income openly, but in this pastoral novel, social ambition like Hetty's threatens the stability of the community. The narrator correlates Hetty's heartlessness with her desire for upward mobility, but this materialism is only crass when Hetty applies it.<sup>29</sup>

Marck's point is, of course, just. However, Eliot's handling of the material advantages open to an attractive woman seems particularly damning as a result of the multiplicity of charges the novel makes against Hetty: not just upwardly-mobile and materialistic, and vulgar (which Marck's 'crass' implies), but insensitive and untender. When compared to Austen's positive treatment of social ambition among young women, which is, after all, focused on respectable marriage, Eliot's harsh treatment of Hetty could be said to

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<sup>29</sup> Nancy Anne Marck, 'Narrative Transference and female narcissism: The social message of *Adam Bede*', *Studies in the Novel* 35:4 (2003: Winter), 447-70 (p. 453).

represent a much more conservative position as far as the opportunities provided by social mobility are concerned. Although Eliot's presentation of Hetty appears to conform to conventional treatments of the maiden seduced by the upper-class villain, Hetty's ambition highlights the limitations of the stereotype and serves to fatally undermine any sympathy she might have garnered as such a man's lower-class victim. In fact, her resemblance to a trope designed specifically to negate those threatening aspects of sexually active single women and which is assumed to conceal her dangerous social ambitions makes her in Eliot's hands seem all the more dangerous when her private aspirations are revealed.

#### Alternative Versions of the Seduced Maiden: Jessie Phillips

If Ruth as idealised innocent and Hetty as manipulative minx could be said to represent divergent perceptions of single, sexually active women, Frances Trollope's Jessie Phillips (1843), contains an eponymous heroine who seems to variously embody both these apparently exclusive roles, depending not on anything intrinsic to her character or her genetic ancestry but on how she is perceived by various members of her community. Jessie Phillips is both literally and figuratively trapped in the middle of an ideological debate about the consequences of the 1834 Poor Law, which removed the right from unmarried mothers to name the father of their illegitimate child and to apply to them for financial support. The only means of support for destitute unmarried mothers became the workhouse, a proposition so unpleasant it was thought to represent a highly effective disincentive to illegitimate births. More than Eliot or Gaskell, Trollope

explicitly links unrealistic and polarised attitudes to women, men and illegitimacy to the law. She consistently highlights the essentially misogynistic principles that lie behind the Poor Law, as Jessie is consistently misinterpreted and misrepresented even by those sympathetic to her, who cannot help but define her within the stereotypes set up by the law.

Jessie works as a seamstress in Deepbrook. She is a favourite of Ellen Dalton, the daughter of the local squire and it is during one of her regular visits to the family that she catches the eye of Frederic Dalton, Ellen's brother. Jessie becomes pregnant by Frederic but she is confident that he will honour his promise to marry her. As in Adam Bede and Ruth, this confidence is fatally misplaced. When Jessie arranges a meeting with Ellen to reveal her relationship with Ellen's brother and to confront Frederic, her intentions are misunderstood by Ellen and undermined by Frederic, who refuses to admit that a relationship exists between them. Ellen's thoughts on this confusing and unsuccessful meeting are the most illuminating, since they reveal that her own ability accurately to interpret Jessie's behaviour is fundamentally circumscribed by the limitations of her own personal experience and the polarised stereotypes available to her:

But how was Ellen to account for the young woman's having addressed him as Frederic, dear Frederic? A single word, the utterance of a name, seemed but slight authority upon which to withdraw from her the respect and esteem which years of good conduct had produced ... she felt justified in withdrawing herself from the attempt she had meditated for the protection of her former favourite, by deciding that she was either too innocent to want her assistance, or too guilty to benefit from it.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Frances Trollope, Jessie Phillips (Stroud: Nonsuch, 2006), p. 221. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

However, while Ruth could be said to represent the 'too innocent' and Hetty the 'too guilty' form of lower-class and sexually vulnerable young woman, Trollope here draws the reader's attention to the inadequacy of these stereotypes through dramatic irony; by making Ellen's incomprehension of the more complicated truth of Jessie's position an explicit failure of compassion on her part. The dichotomy, upon which Ellen's flawed decision rests, between 'too innocent' and 'too guilty', is one that prevents Jessie from being correctly understood and, further, one that is metonymic of the limitations of the literary representation of fallen women. Trollope's technique of presenting the socially limited parameters of the middle-class girl's thoughts on this matter leaves the reader able to think beyond such stereotypes.

When Jessie's mother dies and her requests for financial help are dismissed by Frederic, she enters the workhouse. While there she is encouraged by a female friend to seek the advice of a lawyer, Mr Lewis. She asks: "If there is any help for me ... I come to know if the truth told plainly and boldly before all the world may not make a rich man take care of his own child when the mother is dead?" (p. 396). Lewis greets her question with overt suspicion and hostility, having been warned earlier by Frederic that Jessie might try to make what he describes as a malicious claim against him:

"That's no business of yours, young woman. If you can't maintain yourself, it will be born in the workhouse; and if you can't maintain your child, why then it will be bred in the workhouse. Let the father be a king or a cobbler it will not make the slightest difference, so you need not trouble yourself to say anything about that. The law has taken care of them, and such as you too, in that respect, at any rate, for it won't let you tell lies, you see, however much you may desire it." (p. 397)

Again, it is through dramatic irony that Trollope makes her point. Lewis believes that he is protecting an innocent man from the manipulations of a desperate and immoral woman; the reader, however, knows that his suspicion is entirely misplaced. Jessie does not conform to the stereotypical fallen woman of Poor Law rhetoric and Frederic is far from the helpless male in need of protection. In this way, then, Trollope rejects both Lewis's misguided reading of the situation and, by extension, the law that he represents and so vigorously applies. In fact, Lewis's moral blindness is foreshadowed by his literal failure to recognise Jessie: 'Mr. Lewis, like every body else in the village, knew Jessie Phillips perfectly well by sight; but when she now dragged her aching limbs into his presence, he had not the slightest notion that it was the much admired beauty who stood before him' (p. 395). While Ruth and even Hetty have powerful advocates who insist on seeing beyond the convention and responding to the individual, even those like Ellen Dalton and Martha Maxwell who are basically sympathetic to Jessie are unable through most of the novel to interpret her actions other than through the filter of 'Otherness': 'Miss Maxwell became convinced ... that Jessie Phillips had murdered her infant, she felt persuaded that every statement which the young monster had made to her was as false as was the seeming tender softness of her character' (p. 455). This failure, or perhaps refusal of Jessie's former friends and acquaintances to recognise her is a recurring image and suggests that a shift has taken place in the way that Jessie is 'read' by those around her. She loses her individuality and is subsumed into a dehumanising stereotype. Trollope is articulate about revealing this process of collective cultural and social estrangement that is necessary to transform the transgressive woman into 'Other'.

### III

#### Anti-Social Motherhood

Both Ruth and Adam Bede introduce the major Victorian theme of the redemptive power of motherhood. This is associated both with Ruth's pregnancy and Adam's early fantasy of Hetty as mother. Hetty's childishness is viewed, rather erroneously as it turns out, by Adam as somehow indicative of her natural fitness for motherhood:

How she will dote on her children! She is almost a child herself, and the little pink round things will hang about her like florets round the central flower. (p. 152)

Yet Eliot's use of the word 'almost' here is ominous. Hetty's resemblance to children does not indicate any concomitant sympathy for infants. Nor, indeed, does being a quasi-child automatically make a woman sensitive to other children. In fact, in another abruptly damning passage Eliot depicts Hetty as displaying a rather disturbing lack of those 'natural' feelings Adam assumes follow from her own characteristics:

Hetty would have been glad to hear that she should never see a child again; they were worse than the nasty little lambs that the shepherd was always bringing in to be taken special care of in lambing time; for the lambs *were* got rid of sooner or later. (p. 154)

Once again, the character is made to be the voice of the shocking attitude. Free Indirect Discourse is a device that falls between authorial statement and character. By attributing these strikingly ruthless views to Hetty, Eliot not only points up a contrast between Adam's fantasy of her childishness and her maternal instincts, but prefigures her murder of her own child. This profoundly unfeminine lack of maternal feelings, at odds with Victorian assumptions, in her comparison of children to lambs and finding them 'worse'

because 'lambs *were* got rid of sooner or later', suggests that Hetty entertains murderous thoughts towards children long before she actually rejects the redemptive opportunity provided by literary motherhood, even illegitimate motherhood as successfully exploited by Gaskell, in favour of infanticide, an act that forces a profound refiguring of those aspects of the conventional seduction narrative that had seemed habitually reassuring.

Jones asserts:

Narratives of actual infanticide are practically non-existent in the canonical novel in English, though narratives of illegitimacy and the "fallen woman" abound...[Eliot was] breaking new ground in England by treating infanticide.<sup>31</sup>

Jones, however, rather overstates Eliot's originality here. While it is true that novels dealing with illegitimacy can seem ubiquitous both before and during the period that Eliot was writing, this is not to say that Eliot had no literary antecedents to look to in her treatment of infanticide. Josephine McDonagh argues convincingly that Eliot was writing within 'a cultural environment saturated by tales of child-murder',<sup>32</sup> and she provides examples of a variety of prose and poetry texts that support this view. Perhaps the most significant text to be mentioned is The Heart of Midlothian (1818) by Walter Scott, which has as a key theme infanticide. The narrative concerns the fate of Effie Deans, a woman seduced by a nobleman called Staunton, charged with the murder of her illegitimate child, and whose sister, Jeanie walks to London to obtain a pardon for her sister. In McDonagh's view, The Heart of Midlothian is 'a work whose central interest in

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<sup>31</sup> Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

<sup>32</sup> Josephine McDonagh, 'Child Murder Narratives in George Eliot's Adam Bede: Embedded Histories and Fictional Representation', Nineteenth-Century Literature (56: 2) 228-259 (p. 229).



terms of plot and character in many ways prefigures Adam Bede'.<sup>33</sup> Scott's sympathetic presentation of Effie, however, provides an interesting counterpoint to Eliot's of Hetty. When Effie's acquaintances are discussing her possible crime, they are quick not to jump to conclusions and Scott describes them as invoking all kinds of mitigating possibilities, such as temporary insanity – a common plea of infanticidal mothers and, interestingly, one not suggested in Hetty's trial. Of Effie, Mrs Saddletree comments:

“Ay, ay, that's just puir Effie ... How she was abandoned to hersell, or whether she was sackless o' the sinfu' deed, God in Heaven knows; but if she's been guilty, she's been sair tempted, and I wad amaist take my Bible-aith she hasna been hersell at the time.”<sup>34</sup>

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word 'sackless' in its Scottish dialect form as meaning: 'Innocent of wrong intent, guileless, simple; also, of a thing, harmless'.<sup>35</sup> Unlike Hetty, Effie is innocent of infanticide; in fact, her child is not dead, but it could be argued that Hetty too is 'innocent of wrong intent': it is simply that no-one but Dinah gives Hetty the benefit of the doubt or, indeed, troubles to find out the truth before coming to hasty judgement. What all these texts share is an assumption that illegitimacy and concealment of pregnancy is a necessary corollary to infanticide and, implicitly, that illegitimacy can be the impetus to infanticide.

The practical advantages of this correlation had been outlined very persuasively by Henry Fielding in Tom Jones. When Mr Allworthy finds the foundling, Tom, in his room, his servant, Mrs Deborah Wilkins, recommends the following course of action:

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>34</sup> Sir Walter Scott, The Heart of Midlothian, ed. Claire Lamont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 52. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>35</sup> www.oed.com

“If I might be so bold as to give my advice, I would have it put in a basket, and sent out and laid at the church-warden’s door. It is a good night, only a little rainy and windy; and if it was well wrapt up, and put in a warm basket, it is two to one but it lives till it is found in the morning. But if it should not, we have discharged our duty in taking proper care of it; and it is, perhaps, better for such creatures to die in a state of innocence, than to grow up and imitate their mothers; for nothing better can be expected of them.” (p. 29)

Although Allworthy fails to take Wilkins’ advice and the novel avoids an incident of child murder, Fielding allows space for a moment where the possibility of infanticide is openly discussed as a perfectly acceptable resolution to the existence of an unwanted child. Further, the whole scene is framed within the domestic, which serves to normalise what Wilkins is contemplating. Rather than as a criminal act, infanticide is viewed here almost as a piece of efficient household management. There is dark humour too, in the way that Wilkins neatly summarises and dismisses the overwhelming moral and social anxieties that characterise later treatments of infanticide. I would argue, then, that far from breaking new ground, Eliot departs from the comforting conventions of the seduction narrative by introducing infanticide to the plot, only to replace one set of conventions with an alternative set. Although infanticide seems to demand a shocking revision of expectations, in fact, Eliot fits into a tradition that exploits and is even comfortable with those links between illegitimacy and infanticide.

### Illegitimacy and Infanticide

By grafting infanticide on to a more familiar narrative of female sexual fall and illegitimacy, Eliot assumes a link between illegitimacy and infanticide. In this she was reflecting a view, widespread at the time, that: “those who have erred are almost

necessarily driven by the pressure of want to rid themselves of children they cannot feed.”<sup>36</sup> Governments were so concerned about the link between illegitimacy and infanticide that in 1871 a select committee was set up to enquire into statistics.

Higginbotham comments:

These perceptions of the acute danger facing illegitimates were supported by the knowledge that illegitimate infants had a crude death rate at least twice that of legitimate children. In 1871, the Select Committee on Infant Life Protection speculated that as few as 10 percent of illegitimates survived to adulthood. Such findings helped not only to expose the dangers facing infants but also to buttress a widely held view that infanticide was one of the strategies by which unmarried mothers rid themselves of the burden of unwanted babies.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, the correlation between illegitimacy and infanticide that characterizes Victorian rhetoric had been enshrined in the Act that in 1800 Hetty is tried against: the 1624 Act to Prevent the Destroying and Murthering of Bastard Children. Court transcripts from the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century period, moreover, consider the likelihood of a link between illegitimacy and infanticide sufficiently relevant to the trial evidence to record the birth status of the victims of infanticide in the indictment. The following example is representative of the majority of indictments for infanticide, which include reference to the birth status of the child:

Sarah Panton was indicted for that she, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January, at St John, at Hampstead, was big with a certain female child, and that afterwards on the same day, by the Providence of God, the same child secretly from her body did deliver alive, and that child, by the laws of this realm, was a bastard, and that she did afterwards feloniously, wilfully, and of her malice aforethought, kill and murder the said bastard child.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Committee for Amending the Law in Points Wherein It Is Injurious to Women, *Infant Mortality: Its Causes and Remedies* (Manchester: A. Ireland, 1871), p. 14, cited in: Anne Higginbotham, ‘Sins of the Age: Infanticide and Illegitimacy in Victorian London’, *Victorian Studies* (1989: Spring), 319-337 (p. 321).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

<sup>38</sup> *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), 17 June 2003), February 14th, 1816, trial of Sarah Panton (t18160214-47).

While the link may have become strong in popular social perception, Higginbotham argues persuasively, that there are problems in assuming the existence of an automatic link in real life cases between illegitimacy and infanticide. She argues that:

An exaggerated emphasis on murder as an important cause of infant mortality may have distorted the connection between illegitimacy and mortality. Between the 1860s and '90s, fewer than two hundred murders of children under age seven were reported each year in England and Wales. While these represented a high proportion of all murders, they could not account for a significant proportion of the 30,000-40,000 illegitimate infants born each year during this period.<sup>39</sup>

Further, she identifies that the circumstances consistent with the majority of infanticide cases predominately concerned women who were isolated from their usual network of friends and family and gave birth in private. In fact, those cases of infanticide that reached the criminal courts nearly always involved female servants who were particularly vulnerable because pregnancy outside marriage would lead not only to immediate dismissal but loss of shelter and destitution. Higginbotham asserts: "Infanticide was not an automatic reflex of mothers who gave birth to illegitimate children. Indeed, many of these crimes resulted from uncommon circumstances".<sup>40</sup> It is important to establish here, then, that the infanticidal mother described by Eliot appears to owe more to popular assumptions about women, especially fallen women, than to a desire to reflect contemporary reality. Infanticide is a significant issue to consider within the dominant theme of the thesis, illegitimacy, not necessarily because the two were synonymous, but because that was the fear and the perception throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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<sup>39</sup> Higginbotham, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

Published in 1859, Adam Bede, was a politically timely novel, but, as I argue later, conservative in scope. As previously discussed, infanticide was an act that was perceived and conceived by Eliot's contemporaries both as escalating to epidemic proportions in contemporaneous England and increasingly, as the locus of social anxiety about a range of other, correlated issues. Several critics are agreed that Adam Bede captured the cultural and social zeitgeist with its presentation of a mother accused of child-murder. Rosemary Gould writes that, 'Infanticide was fast becoming a media crisis, with journalists and letter writers suggesting that it was an epidemic that shamed the nation.'<sup>41</sup> Josephine McDonagh comments:

For social historians the year of the novel's publication, 1859, is in fact, particularly significant because it stands near the beginning of a period of intense public interest in infanticide: a rush of press reports of incidents of child-murder cases, coupled with extensive debates among medical professionals, led contemporary commentators to claim that Britain was at this time experiencing something like an "epidemic" of child murder.<sup>42</sup>

Newspaper reports recording incidents of the discovery of dead babies, such as the following example from the Morning Chronicle, emphasise the routine nature of infanticide. The subheading, 'ANOTHER CHILD MURDER', as well as the stress placed on the efficiency of various official agencies, including the police and the medical profession when dealing with the discovery of a dead baby, serve to highlight a message that the discovery of a dead baby is a regular and well-regulated occurrence:

ANOTHER CHILD MURDER. – Yesterday morning, about six o'clock, as a journeyman bricklayer, named Charles Bartlett, was proceeding to his work through Soho-square he saw a bundle lying on the ground. On picking it up he found it to contain the body of a newly-born female,

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<sup>41</sup> Rosemary Gould, 'The History of an Unnatural Act: Infanticide and Adam Bede', Victorian Literature and Culture (1997), 263-277 (p. 263).

<sup>42</sup> McDonagh, op. cit., p. 232.

wrapped in a piece of dirty calico. He at once handed the body over to (Constable) Boot, 151C, and it was taken to the Marlborough-mews station. Dr. Rogers, the parish surgeon, examined the body, at the request of the inspector (Rogers), and stated his opinion that death had been caused by suffocation. Information has been forwarded to the coroner.<sup>43</sup>

An article in The Times on 24<sup>th</sup> January, 1863, is scarcely less dramatic when it highlights: ‘the number of dead children found in the squares, on the doorsteps, and down the areas of this vast town’.<sup>44</sup> Concern about infanticide was not limited to London. Mark Jackson quotes from the Exeter and Plymouth Gazette: ‘Shocked commentators also deplored the extent to which infanticide, often referred to as, “the great crime of the age” had become “nearly as common as measles”’.<sup>45</sup> Even George Eliot’s publisher, John Blackwood comments in a letter dated 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1858, that, having read the first two hundred and nineteen pages of the Adam Bede manuscript, he hopes that ‘things will not come to the usual sad catastrophe!’<sup>46</sup> Adam Bede then, could be read as a literary response to a very real social problem.

Infanticide and infanticidal women, in particular, were issues that captured attention for a variety of reasons. Jones highlights how the trope of the ‘innocent’ fallen woman was important in securing sympathy for the mother, another example of how conventions surrounding illegitimacy were exploited to provide a defence for infanticide.<sup>47</sup> That Eliot was exploiting this popular archetype of female vulnerability is

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<sup>43</sup> Morning Chronicle, 18th November 1861, cited in Miriam Jones, “‘Too Common and Most Unnatural’”: Rewriting the “infanticidal woman” in Britain, 1764 –1859”, unpublished doctoral thesis, June 1999, (Ontario: York University), p. 36.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>45</sup> Mark Jackson, The trial of Harriet Vooght: continuity and change in the history of infanticide, in Mark Jackson, Infanticide: Historical Perspectives on Child Murder (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2002), p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> Gordon S. Haight, The George Eliot Letters, Vol II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 446.

<sup>47</sup> See Jones, “The Usual Sad Catastrophe”, p. 310.

demonstrated not only in the dynamic of the relationship she creates between Hetty and her seducer, Arthur Donnithorne, but also in the way that she adapted the original, popular source for Hetty Sorrel. In a journal entry dated November 1858, George Eliot writes: 'The germ of Adam Bede was an anecdote told me by my Methodist Aunt Samuel ... an anecdote from her own experience'. Samuel 'had visited a condemned criminal, a very ignorant girl who had murdered her child and refused to confess'.<sup>48</sup> The woman Samuel visited was called Mary Voce, but far from being the 'ignorant girl' described by Eliot, she was described by a contemporary Nottingham broadside thus:

She has had four children, one of which only is living, a Boy about five years of age; Her Husband is a Pensioner , and is obliged to go to Chatham once in three years on account of his Pension; during the time he was absent on one of these Journeys ... She had entertained another Man in her house, and cohabited with him, refusing to admit her legal husband.<sup>49</sup>

Mary Voce's sexual history, at odds with conservative expectations of female purity is positioned here as integral to her guilt. She is characterised as a sexually dangerous woman who has destroyed her marriage by engaging in a series of extra-marital relationships and who commits infanticide in order to satisfy her sexual desires unencumbered by a child. Jones comments that Mary Voce challenges conventional presentations of the infanticidal woman:

Not nearly as prototypical of the "infanticidal woman" described by social historians as is Hetty, for she was married, took more than one lover, had previously been found guilty of various petty crimes, and had been pregnant five times with one son living.<sup>50</sup>

Voce's case certainly seems to exemplify Higginbotham's premise that the assumed link between illegitimacy and infanticide concealed a more complex reality. Voce it seems

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<sup>48</sup> 'History of Adam Bede,' in The Journals of George Eliot, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 296. Cited in McDonagh, p. 228.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in George Eliot, Adam Bede, ed. Mary Waldron (Ontario: Broadview, 2005), p. 609.

<sup>50</sup> Jones, "The Usual Sad Catastrophe", p. 309.

committed infanticide as a matter of convenience, rather than as a response to the shame of illegitimacy – her children would have been legitimate. In fact, as I shall show, Mary Voce’s failure to conform to the cultural stereotypes prescribed for her has much more in common with Hetty’s representation than might at first appear.

Jones explains this transformation by Eliot from the real Mary Voce to the imagined Hetty Sorrel as arising from the specific pressure placed on novelists to conform to certain middle-class cultural expectations:

As a seduced virgin Hetty was certainly more palatable to the genteel reader, and as the heroine of a novel from a respectable press she was more acceptable to that same reader than the protagonist of a penny broadside.<sup>51</sup>

Eliot certainly appears to continue to recognise the particular demands of the liberal media in her representation of Arthur Donnithorne as the stereotypical seducer. Adam’s outburst against Arthur, his former friend, makes it clear that in Adam’s mind at least. Arthur is at least equally responsible for the death of his child:

“It’s *his* doing,” he said; “if there’s been any crime, it’s at his door, not at hers. *He* taught her to deceive – *he* deceived me first. Let ‘em put him on his trial – let *him* stand in court beside her, and I’ll tell ‘em how he got hold of her heart, and ‘ticed her t’ evil, and then lied to me. Is *he* to go free, while they lay all the punishment on her ... so weak and young?” (pp. 410-11)

Eliot creates a space thus for a legitimate defence of Hetty that does not seek to minimise the serious nature of the crime, rather to emphasise the vulnerability of women at the hands of predatory men. Adam is keen to increase sympathy for Hetty, by shifting blame

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 308.



on to the absent father, a process that is occasionally reflected in the attitudes of contemporary media:

How would it do if, whenever a crime of this kind is discovered, the seducer were to be placed beside his victim in the dock, and held up to public infamy for his cowardly desertion of her? It is a hard case, and this consideration always weighs strongly with a jury, that all the misery, all the shame and the guilt should be visited on the victim, while the gay Lothario goes free.<sup>52</sup>

This repositioning of the father as a significant contributory factor to the crime of infanticide is successful in reinforcing the stereotype of the seduced maiden as victim. Yet, Eliot, I would argue, neither continues with this potential line of exoneration nor with the approach that Jones sees as conforming to liberal views of the period. Furthermore, it could be argued that her presentation of Adam here has more to do with wanting to establish his sympathetic credentials rather than to provide a convincing defence of Hetty's crime. The problem is, that having described Hetty in a manner consistent with a desire to secure her some sympathy within the conventions of a liberal narrative, in the face of a crime as serious and un-feminine as infanticide, Eliot fails to capitalise on this. Hetty shifts in her hands from victim to antagonist.<sup>53</sup> The word that is so important here is 'victim'. While Hetty's motivation to commit infanticide might seem fundamentally different from that of Mary Voce, both share a failure to maintain the sympathy of their audience/reader, by stepping outside the roles that culture has defined for them. Both as a consequence are punished.

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<sup>52</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, 7 Sep, 1861, cited in Jones, "Too Common and Most Unnatural", p. 82.

<sup>53</sup> See, on this point, Jones: 'In the broadsides and newspaper articles the young woman, seduced and abandoned, is positioned as an object of pity, even of charity, as long as she remains the victim. Eliot does not allow Hetty this luxury; with her disdainful descriptions she attacks the cliché of the helpless woman and firmly directs her readers away from the paternalistic, infantilizing sympathy provoked by stock representations.' "The Usual Sad Catastrophe", p. 310.

## Fatherhood and Infanticide

Jessie Phillips subverts what might be described as the traditional infanticide plot in as much as the seducer's role in the infanticide is not simply an interesting philosophical idea. In this way Trollope's novel provides an interesting counterpoint to Adam Bede. Although it is Jessie who is assumed to have killed her child, reprising her presentation as the victim of misplaced literary and social expectation, it is, in fact, Frederic Dalton who discovers the baby crying in the barn where Jessie gave birth to it. He wrongly assumes that Jessie has abandoned the baby and left it to die and directs his anger at what he perceives as her incompetence at the baby and stamps on it: 'Again it uttered a sharp piercing cry. He raised his booted foot, and made a movement as in sudden rage, and the piercing cry was heard no more' (p. 434). Trollope further explores the potentially damaging consequences of the Poor Law Amendment by suggesting, somewhat ironically, that it is the inexplicability of Frederic's act, given that the current law protects him from any paternity claim that protects him from suspicion. When Martha goes to Mr. Rimmington with her suspicion that Frederic murdered the baby, Rimmington counters her accusation with the rationale that:

It is impossible to find the shadow of a motive for Dalton's committing the act. Assuming, even, that he was the father, of which, as the girl's oath on the subject cannot be taken, he well knows there can be no legal evidence whatever ...For HIS child, you will observe, in the eye of the law, it could never be; and he could therefore have no motive of any kind to spur him to so horrible an act. (p. 477)

Both novels provide a space for the idea that the father of the child should be held to account, but while Adam's defence of Hetty and indictment of Arthur is circumscribed by the fact that Hetty did actually kill her child and represents an analysis of blame along

ultimately safe philosophical lines, Trollope raises the stakes. The ideological debate that Eliot appears to invoke in Adam Bede assumes a disturbing and radical reality in Jessie Phillips since Frederic is literally guilty of child murder, guilt that forces a judgment of the efficacy of the law that Eliot herself by contrast seems reluctant to pursue.

Hetty and Jessie both stand trial accused of infanticide. In the sense that Hetty is found guilty and Jessie not guilty, the ultimate authority of the court to come to either decision is not challenged by either Eliot or Trollope. Given that the evidence produced at Jessie's trial is easily as damning as that produced at Hetty's, this represents a more significant defence of the court system by Trollope, who asks the reader to believe in the court's omniscient ability to come to the right decision in spite of rather than because of the evidence. Having been so consistent in her criticism of the Poor Law Amendment, this represents something of a conciliatory move by Trollope. For Hetty and Jessie, the radically different verdicts they receive have no influence on their shared punishment in the fictional plot, which is death. Hetty dies on her return from a period of transportation and Jessie dies as the verdict is disclosed. The death of both women represents an ostensibly secular retreat to convention but while for Eliot Hetty's death provides the opportunity to make safe what remains a potentially disruptive element of the plot, for Trollope Jessie's death marks a more subversive political challenge. Her unequivocal status as victim has been dramatically asserted in the face of an unjust and punitive law and the profound unfairness of her treatment exploits the conventional mythology of the unmarried mother whose death assumes a sort of sacrificial resonance. This comparison

between Eliot and Trollope brings the conservatism of Eliot into sharp focus, a conservatism that is particularly apparent in the characterization of the male protagonists.

Both writers arguably exploit the potential of the male seducers, as representatives of a patriarchal legal system, to offer a critique of the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary legal process and, by extension, of a society governed and shaped by such processes. In this way, then, the different roles of Arthur Donnithorne and Frederic Dalton could be said to be metonymic for the authors' own differing attitudes towards patriarchal authority advanced throughout the two novels. Eliot's Arthur Donnithorne symbolises a benign form of masculine authority, one in which the processes of self-regulation are seen to operate successfully for the good of the community – that is, a conservative vision. He takes moral responsibility for Hetty's crime, even if the law does not require him to do so, to the extent that it is he who seeks to have Hetty's execution revoked:

It was a shout of sudden excitement at the appearance of a horseman cleaving the crowd at full gallop ... The rider looks as if his eyes were glazed by madness, and he saw nothing but was unseen by others. See, he has something in his hand – he is holding it up as if it were a signal. The Sheriff knows him: it is Arthur Donnithorne, carrying in his hand the hard-won release from death. (p. 462-3)

Further, Arthur undergoes a self-imposed banishment, an act that again, Eliot frames as undertaken for the good of the community as a whole: “One of my reasons for going away is, that no one else may leave Hayslope – may leave their home on my account” (p. 467). There is an implication here that Arthur has genuinely learnt his lesson and is keen to atone for his guilt, conscious that his moral lapse has had unforeseen consequences on the whole community, not just Hetty.

The contrast with Frederic's self-serving behaviour is startling. Even though he knows that Jessie will be executed if found guilty of infanticide, he does nothing to secure her release and actually sees himself as something of an injured party for having to maintain the deceit:

“A horrible story, Dalton, is it not, this about Jessie Phillips and her murdered child?”

“Horrible indeed!” replied young Dalton, who had heard it too frequently reverted to any longer shrink from the subject. He had, indeed, suffered no slight martyrdom while schooling himself into this apparent calmness, but he had done it; and now added, without any quiver of the lip or even dropping of the eyelids, “The whole history from beginning to end is one of unparalleled atrocity.” (pp. 457-8)

Trollope emphasises his callousness. Frederic too is forced into banishment, but it is not on his terms, rather those of his sister, Ellen, who has discovered the truth. She offers him an ultimatum – either he leaves the country or she will publicly accuse him. Although he accepts that he has no choice but to flee, he maintains his egocentricity by considering the ways in which his banishment can punish rather than heal the family and community he has left:

“But they shall hear of me ... they shall hear that the moment they cease to pay the tax I mean to levy on the family coffers for my existence in a distant land and under a borrowed name, - that moment shall be the last of their tranquillity.” (p. 530)

There is none of Arthur's sense of a necessity for reparation here, only an opportunism that is alert to the exploitative potential of any situation. In the absence of legal penalty against fathers, both writers then invoke retribution that takes into account the moral reparation the two men have undertaken. Just as with their allegedly criminal female victims, death is rehearsed as the inevitable punishment for both men. Arthur's death

remains symbolic, however, as Adam articulates a sense that the 'old' Arthur has gone forever: 'It was affection for the dead: *that* Arthur existed no longer' (p. 466). Eliot allows Arthur to live because the text promotes the view that he is trusted to have undertaken a process of penance that makes a more radical form of punishment unnecessary. This invokes the Christian concept of penance: a punishment that is simultaneously a gain. Unlike Arthur, Frederic does not assume any personal responsibility for his actions, actions that include infanticide, a crime that it is important to remember Arthur is effectively innocent of. Frederic is unable to evade a form of natural justice and drowns. Although both men are beyond the law, Eliot and Trollope try to compensate for the absence of any formal punishment, as experienced by the women, by choosing forms of retribution that roughly correspond to the relative guilt of the two men. For Eliot, Arthur becomes the physical embodiment of a benevolent legal process: she defends a system that maintains traditional social hierarchy at considerable individual cost by representing it as successful in its self-regulation. Trollope is, however, alert to the risks of a prejudiced legal system, and she exposes these risks through Frederic, who vividly highlights how a system comfortably predicated on the moral transparency of those who police it can be exploited with ease. The conservatism that informs Eliot's position is brought into sharp perspective by Trollope's more subversive view, which grafts onto a conventional narrative of seduction and infanticide, a subversive revision of conventional literary tactics to make profound legal discrimination more palatable.

Some critics have detected the conformist move in Eliot's narrative and account for it in different ways. Jones argues that it reflects the increasingly disciplinary attitude of middle-class employers towards their employees:

Adam Bede marks a shift ... towards a more anxious, regulatory attitude by rhetorically reproducing the particular types of moral and professional scrutiny to which working class people, particularly female servants, were subjected at mid-century.<sup>54</sup>

Jones conflates Eliot's authorial position with that of middle-class employers who police their workforce of female servants and punish those who fail to conform to a rigid set of moral values. Ironically, it was precisely this sort of scrutiny that led to female servants, in particular, concealing pregnancies and then falling under suspicion of infanticide. This irony highlights the co-dependency of two apparently conflicting positions. Although Jones' critical argument is attractive, it is too simple. Jones sees Eliot simply reproducing a rhetorical version of middle-class scrutiny of the working class. In fact, this apparently neat dynamic is much more complicated.

### Adam Bede and Street Literature

The argument that Eliot was influenced by contemporary street literature is much more persuasive. Critics including Higginbotham note Eliot's debt to popular street literature of the time:

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

Although Adam Bede was set in the late eighteenth century, Eliot might have taken the details of Hetty Sorrel's crime and even the testimony at her trial from contemporary newspaper accounts of child murder cases.<sup>55</sup>

Jones too acknowledges that Adam Bede derives from a culturally diverse range of sources and influences, although she fails to demonstrate convincingly the influence they had on the narrative:

By its simultaneous translation, for a middle-class readership, of both the professional discourses of science law and medicine, and the popular discourses of the newspapers, broadsides and street ballads which chronicled trials and executions, the text participates in the redefinition of infanticide as a middle-class issue.<sup>56</sup>

The punitive tone of Adam Bede is an aspect of the text that has perplexed many critics. The evidence of broadsides is illuminating on this problem, since Adam Bede fits comfortably alongside their strongly disciplinary aspects in the portrayal of the guilty infanticidal woman. Such broadsides, moreover, looked in their turn to information sourced from trials. Looking at contemporary court reports of infanticide trials can prove the largely overlooked influence of popular literature on the genesis of Adam Bede.

I intend to compare the circumstances and outcome of Hetty's crime with two trials that took place at The Old Bailey in the early nineteenth century. Of the forty-two cases of infanticide that went to trial at The Old Bailey between 1800 and 1834, only two women, Sarah Panton and Catherine Welch tried to dispose of the bodies of their babies in a natural, outdoors and undomestic environment. In the majority of other cases, babies were hidden either in boxes kept in bedrooms or in privies. Further, while Sarah Panton

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<sup>55</sup> Higginbotham, op. cit., p. 322. See also Jay Clayton, 'The Alphabet of Suffering: Effie Deans, Tess Durbeyfield, Martha Ray and Hetty Sorrel.' Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History, ed. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 37-60.

<sup>56</sup> Jones, "The Usual Sad Catastrophe", p. 306.



was found not guilty, Catherine Welch received a guilty verdict and was hanged. Comparing the contrasting demeanour of the two women during their trial raises interesting issues about the significance of conforming to well-established stereotypes of femininity, issues that are relevant to Eliot's presentation of Hetty as witness.

A note on dates: both Panton and Welch were tried under the revised 1803 Offences Against the Person Act, which came into effect three years after Hetty's trial. The 1624 statute had held that concealment was proof of murderous intent; in other words, if a mother had concealed her pregnancy she would be found guilty of murder if her baby died. The problem for juries was that a guilty verdict automatically received the death penalty, even if no proof of a live birth had been produced. The law became effectively unworkable since juries were not prepared to condemn a woman to death for concealment. The 1803 statute separated the murder of a child from concealment. Infanticide remained punishable by death but juries could now find women guilty of a lesser charge of concealment with a maximum sentence of two years' imprisonment. Old Bailey cases would seem to support this view. From 1800-1804 nine women were accused of infanticide and all were found not guilty, even in cases where the evidence seemed pretty damning. Elizabeth Jarvis's baby, for example, was found to have a large wound on its tongue that probably led to its death, yet even having listened to the testimony of various witnesses as to the impossibility of this wound having been administered accidentally, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty. In the following six cases heard between 4<sup>th</sup> July 1804 and the 10<sup>th</sup> September 1809, all the women accused were found guilty of concealment and received prison sentences. These dates are, I

suggest, significant to understanding Eliot's disciplinary strategy in Adam Bede. By positioning Hetty's trial in 1800, fifty-nine years earlier than the novel's publication date, Eliot chooses to deny Hetty the opportunity of being convicted of the lesser charge of concealment by having her tried under the 1624 statute, even though a precedent does exist for a woman to be convicted of infanticide under the new legislation. Further, Eliot chooses to ignore the historical reality, which makes clear that such a draconian law dramatically reduced the likelihood of a guilty verdict. She does so, it appears, in order to facilitate a punitive impulse to see Hetty punished by death. The result of this examination seems to make clear Eliot's disciplinary objective.

The basis of the trials of Panton and Welch is reliance on information reconstructed from witness statements rather than on statements produced by the witnesses themselves. The transcript of Panton's trial makes no mention of any statement made to the court by the prisoner herself, although statements were heard from no less than eight other witnesses, including two surgeons and a police officer. Jones remarks:

Once the criminal justice system is evoked – once, in other words, a woman is charged with a crime - her voice is silenced, she is framed as the 'suspect' or the 'accused,' and the broadside narrative unfolds around a textual absence almost as profound as that in the texts which only report a crime and have no suspect.<sup>57</sup>

This 'textual absence', identified by Jones as operating in contemporary broadsides, is reproduced in Adam Bede. At the conclusion of the hearing:

Adam felt a shuddering horror that would not let him look at Hetty, but she had long relapsed into her blank hard indifference. All eyes were strained to look at her, but she stood like a statue of dull despair. (p. 437)

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<sup>57</sup> Jones, "'Too Common and Most Unnatural'", p. 204.

Eliot compares Hetty here to a statue, a blank - unreadable and unknowable by the trial's spectators. Jones argues that the effect is to render the human being behind the 'accused' as absent. This literary reproduction of the process of silencing found also in trials aligns Eliot's rhetorical intentions with the disciplinary function exemplified by the legal process. There is a further aptness to the image and it applies to Eliot's own treatment of Hetty, which is punitive, emotionally ambivalent and rejects opportunities supplied by both literary convention and liberal opinion to treat the accused sympathetically.

If we turn our attention to Welch's trial, it is possible to identify several key differences in the way that she presents herself in the trial compared to Panton, differences that given the similarity of evidence against the two women, would seem to have been critical in determining her guilty verdict. Her actions are again reconstructed through the testimony of eight different witnesses, several of who remember having seen Welch. Just like Hetty, she is eventually identified because she returns to the scene of the crime:

'I saw her walking by the side of the ditch from which the little child had been taken, and nearly at the spot from where I had taken it, she appeared to be looking very minutely into the water; after she had been looking into the water, she came on towards the King's road - I then went up to her and asked if she had lost anything, that she was so minutely examining the ditch, she said No; I said I had found something, and I had every reason to believe it belonged to her; she asked what had I found - I said I had found a child, and asked what she had done with the child that she had been seen with last evening; she said "Me a child, I had no child;'"<sup>58</sup>

Her critical error is to deny the crime, as here, when she refuses to acknowledge being seen with a child. She compounds this error by providing a defence of herself at the end

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<sup>58</sup> [Old Bailey Proceedings Online](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org) (www.oldbaileyonline.org, 17 June 2003), 10th April 1828, trial of Catherine Welch, (t18280410-17).

of the evidence, maintaining that she gave birth to a baby who died shortly after his birth, weeks before the alleged incident:

“My child was buried in High-street, Mary-le-bone, in the old burying ground... I am as innocent as a baby unborn, and leave it to the gentleman of the Court to look into my case, for I have not a person in the world to do anything for me”.<sup>59</sup>

While her final line acknowledges the need to play for sympathy, her preceding speech is fragmented and confused. Breaking with the convention of contrite passivity condemned Welch to death. A contention made by Higginbotham that: ‘the more unconventional the woman’s behaviour and background, the more likely she was to lose the sympathy of the court’,<sup>60</sup> appears to be realised in the execution of Welch. It appears too that Eliot’s depiction of Hetty enthusiastically endorses this conservative notion, that a guilty verdict follows not so much from the evidence as on the female accused failing to conform to the role of victim. Bartle Massey voices the notion that this is a common attitude in trials, when Eliot has him say to Adam:

“But she’s gone on denying she’s had a child from first to last: these poor silly women-things – they’ve not got sense to know it’s no use denying what’s proved. It’ll make against her with the jury, I doubt, her being so obstinate: they may be less for recommending her to mercy, if the verdict’s against her”. (p. 430)

Eliot is here commenting on her own decision to render Hetty as manifestly obstinate. Even silence, which works to Panton’s favour in securing her a verdict of not guilty, is turned against Hetty.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Higginbotham, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

The details of the case against Panton bear an eerie resemblance to the actions that condemn Hetty:

Having been delivered of the child, put and placed it under a certain hedge, and down to and upon the ground in a certain open place, and that then she did desert, leave, and abandon it, unprotected and exposed to the cold and inclemency of the weather, without any covering or clothing, and without food, sustenance, or nourishment; by means of which it became mortally weak and sick, of which mortal weakness and sickness it miserably perished and died; and that she, in manner and form last mentioned, the said female bastard child, feloniously, wilfully, and of her malice aforethought, did kill and murder.<sup>61</sup>

Although this description makes no mention of Panton having used actual violence against the child, the act of abandoning the child admits of no ambivalence in the stern eyes of the law, as far as the mother's motives are concerned. Hetty's own complicated impulses are similarly silenced during the trial by the moral certainties that the law represents. In a move that seems to challenge the authority of legal narrative, however, Eliot creates a space for Hetty to break the silence proscribed for her at the trial, through her last minute confession to Dinah:

"I saw a hole under the nut-tree, like a little grave ... I'd lay the baby there, and cover it with the grass and the chips. I couldn't kill it any other way. And I'd done it in a minute; and, O, it cried so, Dinah – I *couldn't* cover it quite up – I thought perhaps somebody 'ud come and take care of it, and then it wouldn't die." (p. 454)

Eliot permits a glimpse of a softer motivation, in this private scene, than she allows in the public court. Spectacularly here, the language gives Hetty feelings that challenge the depiction of her as 'blank, hard, indifferent'. Hetty's confession expresses conflicting impulses – on the one hand, she makes her intent to kill the baby clear, but on the other, she expresses a wish that someone might find and rescue it. Hetty's confusion introduces

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<sup>61</sup> Old Bailey Proceedings Online ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org), 17 June 2003), February 14th, 1816, trial of Sarah Panton (t18160214-47).

a persuasive sense of ambiguity to evidence that in the trial had seemed pretty convincing.

Further, the pastoral setting of Hetty's crime, at odds with urban settings conventionally associated with child-murder, seems to deliberately recall an earlier poem, William Wordsworth's The Thorn (1798). Having been jilted by her partner on her wedding day, Martha Ray is suspected of having buried her baby under a thorn bush, in a spot that resembles a grave:

This heap of earth o'ergrown with moss,  
Which close beside the Thorn you see,  
So fresh in all its beauteous dyes,  
Is like an infant's grave in size.<sup>62</sup>

This description foreshadows the description Eliot allows Hetty of the location she chooses for the burial of her child. Further, Eliot's fruitful 'nut tree' seems to introduce a sympathetic mood similar in tone to the collusive moss that covers the baby's grave in Wordsworth's poem. Although some members of Martha's community want to bring Martha to justice, their attempts are thwarted by nature itself:

'And some had sworn an oath that she  
Should be to public justice brought;  
And for the little infant's bones  
With spades they would have sought.  
But instantly the hill of moss  
Before their eyes began to stir!  
And for full fifty yards around,  
The grass – it shook upon the ground! (p. 159)

The clear implication here is that the law can never make sense of infanticide and would do best to leave well alone. Martha's punishment is self-inflicted; a compulsive vigil at

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<sup>62</sup> William Wordsworth, Poetical Works, ed. Thomas Hutchinson and Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 157. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

the thorn. The Thorn epitomizes an endorsement of the view that private remorse is the only appropriate form of retribution. Christine L. Krueger suggests that: 'the pastoralization of infanticide aimed at placing women who killed their infants in a virtually supernatural space, outside the state's jurisdiction.'<sup>63</sup> She sees The Thorn in this context as representing an 'effort to protect women from the state by elaborating a representation of infanticide that insisted on its private character'.<sup>64</sup> This view is substantiated by the later action of the poem. Eliot undoubtedly knew The Thorn,<sup>65</sup> she too pastoralizes the infanticide. Unfortunately for Hetty, Eliot recalls this liberal literary position as represented by The Thorn only emphatically to reject it. Eliot introduces - not for the first time - a sense of ambiguity to her portrayal of Hetty. There is sharp ambivalence in her representation of the legitimacy of the legal process through conventional liberal literary tropes such as the confession (or good-night as it would have been known when it appeared on a broadside), and the pastoral setting. She does so maybe partly in recognition of the expectations of her audience, as suggested by Jones earlier but also, I suggest, to signal even more clearly her rejection of liberal convention surrounding the representation of women accused of infanticide, a rejection exemplified by the guilty verdict Hetty receives. Eliot's handling seems ambiguous both in its multiple affiliations: now leaning towards liberal literary opinion, now towards broadside sensationalism and also in its indications of barely suppressed ambivalent reactions toward the fate of the beautiful girl.

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<sup>63</sup> Christine L. Krueger, 'Literary Defenses and Medical Prosecutions: Representing Infanticide in Nineteenth-Century Britain', Victorian Studies (Winter 1997), 271-290 (p. 271).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>65</sup> McDonagh, *op. cit.*, p. 229-30, see McDonagh's discussion there.

Eliot's disciplinary revision of the sympathetic infanticidal mother figure, in Jones' view, represents:

A shift towards a more anxious regulatory attitude by rhetorically reproducing the particular types of moral and professional scrutiny to which working class people, particularly female servants, were subjected at mid-century.<sup>66</sup>

Jones' analysis, that Eliot's treatment of Hetty can be ascribed to developments in middle-class Victorian society, does not adequately account for the deep ambiguities in Adam Bede. That Eliot did not write simply in order to examine contemporary attitudes is highlighted by the fact that she chose to locate the action of the novel between 1799 and 1800, sixty years before its publication in 1859. The attitudes revealed in the novel do not represent only those current while she was writing, but a conflation of the previous sixty years' debate on the subject. This chapter argues that Eliot's interrogation of conventional sources of sympathy for the infanticidal mother is curiously inconsistent. There seem many currents at work in Eliot's portrayal of Hetty and the verdict upon her. The novel is punitive yet allows, on its margins, that punitive dynamic to be complicated by such disparate elements as Hetty's confession and Adam's indictment of Donnithorne.

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<sup>66</sup> Jones, "The Usual Sad Catastrophe", p. 306.



## IV

### Infanticide as Conformity

In fact, Eliot's problems reconciling liberal literary conventions within a more punitive framework could be seen as a faithful manifestation of the conflicting social impulses embodied by the complex and disturbing relationship between the infanticidal mother and society. In Adam Bede, Eliot is almost successful in promoting the view that infanticide is a social and moral crime quite reasonably punishable by death. Hetty is castigated as dangerously subversive and anti-social. The novel does, however, communicate a certain anxiety with this view, expressed through the subversive and disruptive elements that exist on its margins. Infanticide presented a complicated set of conflicting values to the Victorian middle classes. In 1714 Bernard Mandeville summarised the paradoxical relationship between morality and infanticide in The Fable of the Bees:

The fear of shame attacks her so lively, that every Thought distracts her. All the family she lives in have a great opinion of her Virtue, and her last Mistress took her for a Saint. How will her enemies, that envied her Character, rejoice! How will her Relations detest her! The more modest she is now, and the more violently the dread of coming to Shame hurries her away, the more Wicked and more Cruel her Resolutions will be, either against her self or what she bears.<sup>67</sup>

The infanticidal mother becomes, then, a problematic figure because while the act itself is morally repellent, it can be viewed as providing a useful service to society:

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<sup>67</sup> Bernard Mandeville, The Fable of the Bees; or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits, (Oxford: 1924), vol. I, Remark C, p. 75. Quoted in Mark Jackson, New-born child murder: women, illegitimacy and the courts in eighteenth-century England, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 113.

The image of the miserable, lower-class infanticidal mother provided a villain/victim upon which middle-class society could project its collective desire that these children should die. This character also provided an outlet for anxiety about the competition between rich and poor, a person upon whom benevolence could be exercised and for whom an imaginary solution of infanticide could be created.<sup>68</sup>

Hetty is provided with a motivation for killing her child that emphasises the extent to which infanticide can be viewed as an act of zealous social conformity, rather than as an anti-social tendency:

She thought of a young woman who had been found against the church wall as Hayslope one Sunday, nearly dead with cold and hunger - a tiny infant in her arms: the woman was rescued and taken to the parish. 'The parish!' You can perhaps hardly understand the effect of that word on a mind like Hetty's, brought up among people who were somewhat hard in their feelings even towards poverty. (p. 380)

Furthermore, Eliot draws conscious parallels between Hetty's infanticidal impulse and Martin Poyser's repudiation of his niece:

"I'm willing to pay any money as is wanted towards trying to bring her off," said Martin the younger when Mr Irwine was gone, while the old grandfather was crying in the opposite chair, "but I'll not go nigh her, nor ever see her again, by my own will. She's made our bread bitter to us for all our lives to come, an' we shall ne'er hold up our heads i' this parish nor i' any other." (p. 415)

That Mr Poyser desires the death of Hetty, at least in symbolic terms, is vividly demonstrated by his outburst: "I'll not go nigh her, nor ever see her again, by my own will." For Poyser, Hetty is the source of social humiliation and he wants to put as much distance as possible between himself and the source of his disgrace, just as Hetty wanted to do with her own baby. Acting under the same sense of shame as her uncle, Hetty responds to her perceived disgrace as the mother of a bastard by trying to destroy the visible evidence of her shame, the baby. Rather than simply wishing for its death,

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<sup>68</sup> Gould, op. cit., p. 269.

however, she responds in a more explicitly violent manner by being instrumental in the death of her baby. Mason Harris comments that:

The parallel Eliot suggests between Mr Poyser's rejection of his niece and Hetty's child murder indicates the need for a more conscious morality than that of tradition-bound Hayslope ... Mr Poyser's attitude here is more excusable than Hetty's crime, but both repudiate a child because they equate disgrace with death ... the analogy between her abandonment of her child and her uncle's attitude towards her implies a repudiation of the human on both sides.<sup>69</sup>

It is ironic to say the least that Hetty proves herself to be most legitimately one of the Poyseres - in the sense of having a highly developed and defining sense of social disgrace - by committing an act that finally severs all ties between her and her adoptive family. Eliot is not oblivious to this irony and having given it space within the text, the acknowledgement that infanticide could, in fact, represent a more unequivocal assertion of anti-liberal values that Eliot herself was capable of, highlights the dilemma that Eliot and society in general failed to resolve.

Other Victorian texts develop this idea of infanticide as a sacrificial and socially conformist act. The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point (1848) by Elizabeth Barrett Browning defines infanticide as a sacrificial act and in doing so advances a message that combines anti-slavery and feminist ideology. The infanticidal mother is a female slave raped by her master, a dynamic that invokes the traditionally uneven balance of power in conventional seduced maiden narratives, but, because of Victorian abhorrence of slavery, makes the upper-class seducer unequivocally unjust. In this sense, Barrett Browning could be said to reveal the male-female dynamic that implicitly underpins the seduction

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<sup>69</sup> Mason Harris, 'Infanticide and Respectability: Hetty Sorrel as Abandoned Child in Adam Bede', English Studies in Canada, IX (June, 1983), 177-196 (pp. 186-187).

narrative by transposing it onto an extreme example of male exploitation. Barrett Browning uses the form of dramatic monologue as the mother explains that she suffocated her baby in order to save it from her 'curse':

Why, in that single glance I had  
Of my child's face, . . . I tell you all,  
I saw a look that made me mad . . .  
The master's look, that used to fall  
On my soul like his lash . . . or worse!  
And so, to save it from my curse,  
I twisted it round in my shawl.<sup>70</sup>

The identification of the child in traditional narratives such as Christina Rossetti's Cousin Kate (1862) as a paradoxical physical symbol for the mother of 'my shame, my pride'<sup>71</sup> undergoes a subtle but significant change here. The racial element sharpens another aspect of the mother's anguished, divided reaction. The baby looks like his father and this invokes in the mother simultaneously feelings of hatred and a powerful protective impulse. The slave's infanticidal act is entered into deliberately and is framed as an act of love; she kills her child 'to save it from my curse'. Just as in poems like The Thorn, a pastoral setting is used to suggest nature's complicity with the mother and, by extension, the correctness of the act in terms of 'natural' law:

Yet when it was all done aright, . . .  
Earth, 'twixt me and my baby, strewed,  
All, changed to black earth, . . . nothing white, . . .  
A dark child in the dark,--ensued  
Some comfort, and my heart grew young:  
I sate down smiling there and sung  
The song I learnt in my maidenhood. (p. 372)

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<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Aurora Leigh and Other Poems, ed. John Robert Glorney Bolton and Julia Bolton Holloway (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 370. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>71</sup> Christina Rossetti, Selected Poems, ed. C. H. Sisson (Manchester: Carcanet, 1984), p. 104.

She has felt alienated from the child, whose white skin is a permanent reminder of his father, but she can now be reconciled with her baby whose skin is black in the darkness. The slave's innocence is emphasized by the use of words like 'maidenhood' and the 'comfort' she receives from having protected her child is fully supported by the poet. What becomes clear when we examine together a number of narratives that ostensibly use a similar narrative pattern about seduction, illegitimacy, motherhood and infanticide, is how individual writers also shape these themes towards specific, often social and political issues.

Two narratives that reject the pastoral association with child murder in favour of a more realistic link between urban poverty and infanticide are The Chimes (1844) by Charles Dickens and A Manchester Shirtmaker (1890) by Margaret Harkness. Both these texts paradoxically frame infanticide as a profound expression of maternal devotion and challenge the link between illegitimacy and infanticide – Meg in The Chimes and Mary Dillon in A Manchester Shirtmaker are widows who are unable to find enough work to feed themselves and their children. Dickens and Harkness are keen to undermine the view that infanticide is a shame response in favour of one that takes into account economic pressures. The Chimes is one of Dickens' Christmas Books and a ghost story, which exploits contemporary media hysteria about rates of infanticide. Meg's father, Toby Veck has a dream where an alternative vision of the future of his daughter is presented to him. The purpose of this dream is to teach him the shortcomings of his harsh and unsympathetic views exposed in relation to a case of infanticide reported in the paper: "Unnatural and cruel!" Toby cried. "Unnatural and cruel! None but people who were

bad at heart, born bad, who had no business on the earth, could do such deeds.”<sup>72</sup> His dream ends with Meg, despite loving her child, unable to face the thought of her starving and in pain, about to jump into the Thames with her. Dickens makes the patriarchal father the converted proponent of a more liberal attitude. Toby begs for mercy on her behalf:

“Have mercy on her!” he exclaimed, “as one in whom this dreadful crime has sprung from Love perverted; from the strongest, deepest Love we fallen creatures know! Think what her misery must have been, when such seed bears such fruit! Heaven meant her to be good. There is no loving mother on the earth who might not come to this, if such a life had gone before.”  
(p. 151)

Toby revises his view of human nature and rather than comfortably dismissing such crimes as a consequence of individuals being ‘born bad’, he is depicted as now able to comprehend the significance of environmental factors in influencing behaviour. Meg’s characterization as a good mother emphasizes the sacrificial nature of her act:

He heard it moan and cry; he saw it harass her. And tire her out, and when she slumbered in exhaustion, drag her back to consciousness, and hold her with its little hands upon the rack; but she was constant to it, gentle with it, patient with it. Patient! Was its loving mother in her inmost heart and soul and had its Being knitted up with hers as when she carried it unborn.  
(p. 146)

That such a devoted mother should be driven to kill her child and herself, indicates Dickens’ desire to refigure the stereotype of the infanticidal mother in order to challenge the conservative attitudes Toby articulates at the beginning of the story and which Dickens might have presumed to be shared by his readers.

A Manchester Shirtmaker shares a similar agenda to The Chimes, although the novel itself is more explicitly political in its ambition. As Catherine R. Hancock puts it:

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<sup>72</sup> Charles Dickens, The Christmas Books (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 117. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

Harkness uses sympathetic infanticide for a specific purpose: to expose the dehumanizing elements of ruthless capitalism, the exploitation of sweated labour, and that most dreaded of Victorian “benevolent” institutions, the workhouse.<sup>73</sup>

Mary Dillon is widowed with a small baby to support. Her desperation to find work as a seamstress in inner-city Manchester is frustrated by high levels of unemployment and sweatshops. She is forced to sell her only means of income, her sewing machine, when a sweatshop owner, Cohen demands a deposit for the shirts he gives her and when she returns he refuses both to pay for her work and to return her deposit. Destitution comes quickly as Mary refuses to turn to prostitution or the workhouse, expressing sentiments that echo Hetty’s own horror of being dependent on charity: “My baby must be – shall be happy,” she murmured. “It shall not be a workhouse brat! A pauper servant!”<sup>74</sup> She cannot feed her baby and is tortured by the sight of her slowly starving to death:

‘It was so dark, that she could hardly see the child’s face, but she could feel its little limbs, which were getting thinner each day, she could hear its cries, that were shrill and peevish. And, indeed, had there been light, she could not have borne to look at it; for she fancied that its eyes said, “Why do you starve me like this?”’ (p. 48)

Poverty and the inadequacy of contemporary social provision for the poor becomes an agent for the child murder here. She steals a lethal dose of opium and poisons her baby, an unconventional form of literary infanticide. Hancock comments:

In her mind, the lethal dose of opium that she steals from a chemist’s shop is not poison but a gift that enables her to take care of her baby, to end the agony of a prolonged starvation, and, most significantly, to make sure that Daisy is never subjected to the degradation of the workhouse.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Catherine R. Hancock, ‘“It was bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh, and she had killed it”’: Three versions of destructive maternity in Victorian fiction’ *Literature Interpretation Theory* (15: 2004), 229-320 (p. 312).

<sup>74</sup> Margaret Harkness, *A Manchester Shirtmaker* (Brighouse: Northern Herald Books, 2002), p. 43.

<sup>75</sup> Hancock, op. cit., p. 314. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

Soporific drips were commonly given to babies and in this way, Harkness unites the themes of soothing distress and murder. Mary's bond with and concern for her child makes her a very different kind of infanticidal mother to Hetty, yet both share a dread of being institutionalized, which represents an awareness on the part of Harkness and to a lesser extent, Eliot, of the failure of Victorian social strategies for dealing with the poor. Both Dickens and Harkness sabotage the comfortable literary stereotype that infanticidal mothers are never married by having the main protagonists guilty of no lapse in morality, thus making them more deserving of society's sympathy and less easy to condemn. Further, both subvert the ubiquitous myth of the redemptive power of motherhood. Where Eliot interprets the crime of infanticide rather conventionally to challenge the assumption that all mothers love their children, Dickens and Harkness refigure infanticide somewhat paradoxically and more interestingly as an act of sacrifice and the fullest possible expression of maternal love. They demonstrate that infanticide was subject to a diverse range of readings and highlight, perhaps, just like Jessie Phillips earlier, the essentially conservative perspective of Adam Bede.

### The Power of the Illegitimate Child

These conflicting almost paradoxical values applied to the victims as much as to the perpetrators of infanticide. The child victims of infanticide were assumed to be illegitimate and, therefore, economic liabilities:

The writings of Malthus and the Utilitarians suggested that illegitimate children threatened the economic stability of the state. This threat altered



the value of such children, marking them as superfluous and consequently changing the representation of their lives in fiction.<sup>76</sup>

As economic liabilities, a certain amount of ambivalence existed as to the value to society of such children in the first place. From a liberal perspective it was critical to minimise the emotive impact of the victim in order to maintain sympathy for the mother and from a conservative standpoint, the life of an illegitimate was at best worthless and at worst represented an economic drain. Interestingly, then, both liberal literary culture and its more conservative counterpart, the broadside, had a common interest in emasculating the impact of the baby on the narrative and both developed a similar strategy for maintaining textual coherence at the expense of the child. It seems at first that Eliot conforms to this strategy: the baby remains an anonymous blank in the text, to the extent that its gender is never even revealed. Gould also offers this analysis. She argues that the baby is marginal, incidental even to the main focus of the text:

Although no one in the novel questions the idea that Hetty has committed a crime and most feel she should be punished, no one considers the child a person whose life would have been worth living. Because it was illegitimate, it should never have been conceived in the first place, as if God had not meant any such creature to exist. In effect the child is not a character in the novel. It exists only to facilitate the action, that action which encourages the reader to desire the child not to exist.<sup>77</sup>

However, Gould's theory is too sweeping. Counter to both liberal and conservative convention, Eliot makes the baby count - at the expense of narrative consistency. The child does exist. And, moreover, does not exist simply so that Hetty can kill it, in order that the reader might feel sorry for her when she might be executed for her crime. While the death penalty certainly does create pity for Hetty, it does not figure as a moment in

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<sup>76</sup> Gould, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

the text free from moral ambiguity. In conscious defiance of contemporary legal practice<sup>78</sup> which appeared to act in the belief that ‘God had not meant an such creature to exist’, Eliot steps away from the comforting conventions of literary tradition and uncovers the complicated and difficult emotions the existence of the baby demands.

Gillian Beer describes Adam Bede as:

George Eliot’s first major exploration of kinship, the tangle of unchosen relationships which entrap and sustain the individual ... The knitting of willed and unwilled in family ties, and in procreation, enmeshes the characters in the action.<sup>79</sup>

These connections are revealed at Hetty’s trial, when it is revealed that two key witnesses felt a sufficient sense of responsibility towards the baby, however tiny and unwanted, to try to protect it. Gould asserts that ‘no one considers the child a person whose life would have been worth living’, but nor does anyone articulate the apparently widespread belief that the child is better off dead. This is curious, given that even an overtly liberal text such as Ruth allows space for several characters to articulate this view. In fact, Gould’s statement is in direct opposition to the references to the time, effort and trouble taken by a number of individuals to locate and identify both mother and child. At the trial, various representatives of the community relate their efforts to look after the mother and child. Sarah Stone gave lodging to Hetty. She did not turn Hetty out when the baby was born but, rather, gave her the baby clothes she had kept from her own children:

“Those are the clothes. I made them myself, and had kept them by me ever since my last child was born. I took a deal of trouble both for the child and the mother. I couldn’t help taking to the little thing and being anxious about it.” (p. 434)

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<sup>78</sup> No woman was executed for the murder of a newborn between 1849 and 1903.

<sup>79</sup> Gillian Beer, op. cit. pp. 62 -63.

This represents a very real and practical kind of social acceptance of the baby. As a representative of the community, Sarah passes on these clothes in a symbolic as well as practical gesture, suggesting acceptance and inclusion of the baby into traditional patterns of social and maternal behaviour. Eliot presents this welcoming of the baby also as a hope of influencing the defective mother.

However, against the wishes of Sarah, Hetty leaves and partially buries her baby in a pile of wood chippings in a coppice. The death of this child who, according to Gould: 'no one considers ... a person whose life would have been worth living', initiates a determined search for the mother: 'then we went looking after the young woman till dark at night, and we went and gave information at Stoniton, as they might stop her' (p. 436). Among the villagers, there is no visible ambivalence about the status of Hetty as a criminal. Far from viewing infanticide as an act of convenience, therefore, removing a potentially economically draining infant from society, individuals of the very class most likely to suffer the burden of paying for such parish babies assert, through their varied individual efforts, that the baby counts. Eliot here gives space to two contrasting cultural perspectives, both of which challenge the contemporary Malthusian-influenced political view that such children represent an economic threat. While the trial could be said to represent dominant culture and expresses a formal, abstract belief in the child as part of society, the evidence from the two villagers represents the voice of the marginalised; those on the periphery of conventional middle-class literary culture, and expresses a more informal, practical judgement on the interconnectedness of all individuals in society. Eliot wants to show that her narrative authentically reflects an inclusive view of

infanticide that scrutinizes the ambivalence of a culture that effectively turns a blind eye to infanticide.

As we have seen, the Poyser take her crime extremely seriously: 'The sense of family dishonour was too keen, even in the kind-hearted Martin Poyser the younger, to leave room for any compassion towards Hetty' (p. 415). While their shame is essentially a rather conventional response, and invokes the sort of clichéd language typical in cases of illegitimacy, Eliot makes it clear that it is not the element of sexual transgression in Hetty's crime that most disturbs them, but the murder of a baby:

"An' you t' ha' to go into court and own you're akin t'her," said the old man. "Why, they'll cast it up to the little un, as isn't four 'ear old, some day - they'll cast it up t' her as she'd a cousin tried at the 'sizes for murder."  
(p. 416)

Mrs Poyser's response is framed by a kind of instinctive ambiguity about 'th' innocent child'; not only does it refer explicitly to her child, Tottie, the prospective victim of bullying at school, but implicitly to the dead baby, who died without the care of a proper mother:

"It'll be their own wickedness, then," said Mrs Poyser, with a sob in her voice. "But there's one above 'ull take care o' th' innicent child, else it's but little truth they tell as at church. It'll be harder nor ever to die an' leave the little uns, an' nobody to be a mother to 'm." (p. 416)

Her response is framed by a sympathetic, primarily imaginative connection made between her children and Hetty's baby as victims of an absence of maternal love, potential or real. Hetty's actions have the effect not only of making Mrs Poyser aware of the vulnerability of all children but further, of her own vulnerability; that is to say, of the

temporary nature and the limitations of maternal love. Again, Hetty's baby looms large over the lives of those associated with her.

It is not, therefore, simply Hetty who occupies this 'central, if difficult, role'.<sup>80</sup> Crucially, what makes Hetty difficult for the reader is Hetty in relation to her child. Or, more precisely, not in relation to her child, a fact acknowledged by Hetty herself at the time of her confession: "I seemed to hate the baby - it was like a heavy weight hanging round my neck" (p. 454). The effect of including Hetty's confession within a wider range of sympathetic responses to the baby is to shift the narrative focus away from Hetty Sorrel in isolation, as Gould would have it, and to see that Hetty functions with her child. Gould claims that 'part of the bond that Eliot creates after Hetty becomes pregnant rises out of the reader's shared wish that the child should not exist'.<sup>81</sup> This is far too easy. While the reader may, at times, see through the eyes of Hetty, who certainly does not want the baby to exist, this is to forget that throughout the novel it is her selfishness that has been the dominant force in her life. The moments where the reader might consider that life would have been better for all concerned if the baby had never existed are not condoned or validated by Eliot. At times, Eliot encourages readers to feel sympathy for Hetty, but this sympathy is often abruptly withdrawn or revoked and certainly does not compromise sympathy for the child. The two figures are linked and this link is not, as liberal literary convention would suggest by its emphasis on sympathy for the mother, competitive in nature. On the contrary, it is defined by the fact that both mother and child embody the contradictions inherent to Victorian social responses to the family.

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<sup>80</sup> Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>81</sup> Gould, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

On the surface, Adam Bede appears to be a retelling of the infanticide narrative that seeks to assert a conservative perspective on a set of liberal conventions that had evolved as a way of dealing compassionately with infanticide. Eliot rejects conventional forms of sympathy, which focus on the mother and instead, establishes a potentially conflicting source of emotive authority in the baby. In doing so, she sets up an explicit challenge to the view that it is better that such illegitimate babies never existed, a view that seems to be tacitly accepted by both liberal and conservative commentators as expedient in promoting quite different aims. Eliot asserts that these illegitimate babies do matter and highlights through the imagined trial in her novel that by taking place at all, real trials implicitly accept the value of an illegitimate baby's life, even if that value is simultaneously compromised by a low rate of convictions. Although Adam Bede and Ruth seem to be radically different novels in their treatment of illegitimacy, what they both share is an acknowledgement that while illegitimate children are awkward and difficult, they represent a critical locus for cultural anxiety.

## Chapter Four: Foundlings and Fathers

### I

#### The Seducer as Father

When William King wrote the ballad The Beggar Woman, published in 1709, he could not have imagined how prescient his satirical vision of gender role-reversal was to become in an often-overlooked aspect of nineteenth-century literary versions of illegitimacy. The poem opens with what appear to be the familiar signifiers of the classic seduction plot, the exploitation of a maiden by an aristocratic seducer:

A Gentleman in Hunting rode astray,  
More out of choice, then that he lost his way,  
He let his Company the Hare pursue,  
For he himself had other Game in view.  
A Beggar by her Trade; yet not so mean,  
But that her Cheeks were fresh and Linen clean.<sup>1</sup>

The difference in their social status is emphasised by words like 'gentleman' contrasting with 'beggar', although her personal attractiveness is stressed with words like 'fresh' and 'clean', suggesting innocence. This impression is somewhat compromised when she quickly agrees to accompany the gentleman into the wood:

Mistress, quoth he, and what if we two shou'd  
Retire a little way into the Wood.  
She needed not much Courtship to be kind,  
He ambles on before, she trots behind;

That she is no stranger to illicit sexual relationships is implied by the lack of small talk she requires before acceding to his wishes but also by her eagerness to keep up with him. King's allusion to a baby 'to her Shoulders bound' confirms this impression. When,

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<sup>1</sup> William King, 'The Beggar Woman', in Miscellanies (Printed for Bernard Lintott, 1709). Available at [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res\\_ver=0.2&res\\_id=xri:lion&rft\\_id=xri:lion:ft:po:Z300410619:3](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&xri:pqil:res_ver=0.2&res_id=xri:lion&rft_id=xri:lion:ft:po:Z300410619:3)

guided by her, they find 'an unfrequented place', the Squire's absolute confidence is described, 'Then thinks the Squire I have the matter sure', a statement that in retrospect is heavy with dramatic irony. The lady complains, however, that 'Sitting, says she's not usual in my Trade', and further, explains that:

'Should you be rude, and then should throw me down,  
I might perhaps break more Backs than my own.'

Reminded of the child, the Squire suggests that 'if you mean the Child's we'll lay it by'. She rejects this suggestion by arguing that the baby will cry and arouse attention, so he, eager to satisfy his sordid desires and, simultaneously, to do so while maintaining the fiction of his status as honourable gentleman, asks:

"I shou'd be loth  
To come so far and disoblige ye both:  
Were the Child ty'd to me d'ye think 'twou'd do?"

His self-assurance in the role of gentleman seducer that convention has defined for him is so complete that he does not see that he is being cleverly manipulated:

With Speed incredible to work she goes,  
And from her Shoulders soon the Burthen throws.  
Then mounts the Infant with a gentle Toss  
Upon her generous Friend, and like a Cross,  
The Sheet she with a dextrous Motion winds,  
Till a firm Knot the wand'ring Fabrick binds.  
The Gentleman had scarce got time to know  
What she was doing; she about to go,  
Cries, Sir, good buy ben't angry that we part,  
I trust the Child to ye with all my Heart,  
But e'er you get another 'ti'n't amiss  
To try a Year or two how you'll keep this.

The space conventionally allowed for an earnest philosophical debate about the moral and legal responsibility of the father, as seen in novels such as Adam Bede and Jessie Phillips is brilliantly circumvented here as the mother takes matters into her own hands



and teaches the squire a valuable lesson in the consequences of seduction. The tables have been turned and the squire is left, quite literally, holding the baby.

Although this poem seems at first to have little to do with nineteenth-century illegitimacy narratives, the focus there invariably being on the mother, it flags up an interesting alternative perspective. A surprising number of Victorian novels include relationships between illegitimate children and surrogate fathers, who may or may not be biologically related. Take, for example, the relationship between Rochester and Adele Varens in Jane Eyre (1848), Earnshaw and Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights (1847), and even Michael Henchard and Elizabeth-Jane in The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886). Common narrative patterns embrace two dominant strategies for dealing with the messy consequences of illegitimate birth: either the death of the sexually transgressive mother along with her baby, or the death of the mother but the survival of the baby, to be brought up by a sexually irreproachable father-figure.

Biological fathers are rarely called upon in fiction to undertake their paternal duties, although not always presented as reluctant to do so. Of the seducers discussed in the previous chapter, only Frederic Dalton in Jessie Phillips unequivocally rejects fatherhood and is defined simultaneously as unredeemed and unredeemable. More often, writers adopt more subtle strategies that provide a space for the idea that if those prospective fathers were given the chance, they might be good fathers, carefully negotiating a rehabilitation of their image in the process. Sometimes, potential fathers are ignorant of the pregnancy, as is the case with Arthur Donnithorne. Hetty certainly thinks

that he will look after her and the child: she is on her way to seek his protection when she gives birth. Certainly his later behaviour, such as seeking a pardon for Hetty, suggests that readiness to take responsibility for the consequences of his behaviour, responsibility, it is suggested, that might have extended to raising his illegitimate child. Eliot performs a neat sleight of hand here in order to allow Arthur the possibility of re-integration into the old community at the end of the text. That Arthur never gets the chance either to save or reject his child protects him and by extension, Hayslope, from the awkward social and moral consequences of either option.

Ruth, published in 1853, six years before Adam Bede, appears at first to trace in its presentation of the father a design similar to Adam Bede. The seducer, Bellingham, initially knows nothing of the fact that he is a father. Here the similarities end. The child, Leonard, is allowed to live with his mother, and, further, his father accidentally learns of his existence when he meets Ruth years later. Gaskell takes a greater risk in terms of moral and narrative disruption than Eliot. Bellingham is shocked to discover that he is a father and is keen to assume a parental role, arguing that he is in love with Ruth. Ruth herself acknowledges that she is still in love with Bellingham: ““Oh, my God! I do believe Leonard’s father is a bad man, and yet, oh! pitiful God, I love him; I cannot forget – I cannot!”” (p. 225). With its contradiction and repetition, this sentence effectively communicates the paradoxical emotions this chance meeting with Leonard’s father has aroused. Ruth’s personal struggle assumes a philosophical significance as she grapples with the appropriate ethical response to a man whom, on the one hand she believes to be genuinely wicked but on the other, offers Leonard the opportunity to escape his

illegitimacy. It is this struggle that Eliot neatly sidesteps six years later and its absence in Adam Bede highlights the seismic shift that has taken place in the presentation of the seduced maiden. While Ruth is allowed to retain sufficient moral purity that her struggle conveys an authentic sense of the ambiguity both personal and social surrounding her relationship to her child's father, Eliot refuses to allow Hetty to complicate the narrative by offering her the opportunity to redeem herself through the repudiation of her lover. Adam Bede thus represents a hardening of literary attitudes specifically to the mothers of illegitimate children. Ironically, it is Ruth's relationship to her child which provides her both with the strength to see the right thing to do, at least within the moral landscape of the novel, and which gives Bellingham the opportunity to manipulate her against her will since legally he could claim the child if he chose. Nevertheless, she decides to reject Bellingham on the basis that he rejected their child:

"I am so torn and perplexed! You, who are the father of my child!"

But that very circumstance, full of such tender meaning in many cases, threw a new light into her mind. It changed her from the woman into the mother – the stern guardian of her child ...

"He left me. He might have been hurried off, but he might have inquired – he might have learnt and explained. He left me to bear the burden and the shame; and never cared to learn, as he might have done, of Leonard's birth. He has no love for his child, and I will have no love for him."

(p. 225)

This indictment of Bellingham, whose abandonment of Ruth is seen as correspondingly a repudiation of their child, applies just as accurately to Donnithorne. Yet Eliot never allows Hetty to articulate these sentiments, because she remains emotionally flawed: unable to imagine herself as a mother, 'the stern guardian of her child', and to gain moral authority from this role. Neither Hetty nor the presence of a child disrupt Eliot's design of representing Donnithorne as reformed and representative of most of what is good about a

patriarchal social hierarchy at the conclusion of the novel. As a woman, Ruth cannot resist Bellingham; as a mother, she can.

In this way, Gaskell is unequivocal in her support of the redemptive power of motherhood since it is in her maternal role that Ruth is able to resist falling into another ill-advised union with her seducer, even when he offers to marry her: “I will save Leonard from evil. Evil would it be for him if I lived with you. I will let him die first!” (p. 248). Eliot’s materialistic Hetty would doubtless have jumped at the chance of marrying her seducer and the potential for social legitimacy and wealth this would confer, but Ruth cannot love the man who abandoned her and will not enter into marriage without love. Bellingham offers to be a father to their child and yet Ruth turns him down, implying that to be illegitimate is to be better than to be raised by a man driven by a corrupt sense of morality. She makes explicit what most other nineteenth-century writers are more comfortable leaving implicit: that, just like mothers, the fathers of illegitimate children have transgressed, if not sexually then in their abandonment of the mother. Gaskell establishes here that there are circumstances where a non-biological father or even no father at all can be vastly preferable to a biological one, an attitude that seems surprisingly modern, yet one implicit in many nineteenth-century illegitimacy narratives where fathers and surrogate fathers are often chosen on the basis of their emotional rather than biological compatibility. Unlike many of her contemporaries, however, who sidestep the issue by marginalizing the biological father, Gaskell examines the complex dynamics of such a choice by making Bellingham physically present and willing to be a father: a profoundly subversive twist in what appears to be a deeply conventional narrative.

## II

### Charles Dickens: Bleak House and the Surrogate Father

While the fictional mothers of illegitimate children continue to die, thus taking the shame of their transgression to the grave rather than inflicting it on their child, the products of illicit sexual relationships, the children, are ubiquitous in Victorian novels and narratives develop increasingly sophisticated ways of representing them and their relationship to society. Fathers, sometimes biological but more often surrogate, are increasingly foregrounded in nineteenth-century texts. In Bleak House (1853), Charles Dickens appears to revert to an eighteenth-century technique for making the illegitimate child's relationship to society safe through redefining the relationship between child and father. The history of Esther Summerson conforms to recognizable elements of the foundling narrative. The eighteenth-century narrative has been defined thus by Lisa Zunshine:

A typical "foundling" would be raised by strangers, leave her adopted family upon reaching marriageable age, go through numerous ordeals (during which she acquired an eligible suitor while retaining her chastity), and finally discover her true kin, reassert her legitimate status, and reestablish herself as part of her biological family. Though structurally similar to the real-life bastard as an outsider forcefully inserting herself into the family and social order, the fictional foundling differed in important ways from her money- and status-hungry illegitimate counterpart. Her quest was for moral excellence and true identity.<sup>2</sup>

Based upon Zunshine's research into earlier foundling prototypes, I would contend that Esther's gender is key to her identification with earlier paradigmatic foundling texts.

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<sup>2</sup> Zunshine, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

The correspondences between Esther and earlier foundling heroines, such as appear in Belinda (1801) by Maria Edgeworth, however, extend the association far beyond one based simply on gender. Esther is 'raised by strangers', in her case, a woman whom she calls 'godmother' but who is later revealed to be her aunt:

I was brought up, from my earliest remembrance – like some of the princesses in the fairy stories, only I was not charming – by my godmother. At least, I knew her as such.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to Eliot's presentation of Hetty, which exploits the use of Free Indirect Discourse to condemn Hetty, Bleak House has large sections of text narrated by Esther herself, conveying the impression that she has authorial control over her narrative. She is shown as, herself, alert to the multiple resonances of literary archetypes, in this case, fairy tales. Esther explicitly highlights this distance between appearance and reality when she somewhat self-consciously distances herself from 'princesses'. The transformative power of the fairy tale is embedded in status and wealth. By self-deprecatingly rejecting even the fantasy status of princess, Esther asserts her difference from 'money- and status-hungry ... counterparts'. Dickens makes explicit Esther's narrative as literary construct, drawing on historical myths of illegitimacy and transformation, myths that I would contend, include the foundling narrative, whose transformative power lies less in status and wealth but in conferring identity.

Dickens' conception of an 'eligible suitor' for Esther foregrounds the centrality of family in the search for identity, locating the suitor within the quasi-family unit. Aged

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Dickens, Bleak House, ed. Nicola Bradbury (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 28. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

fourteen, Esther's 'godmother' dies and she becomes a companion to Ada Clare, going to live with a relative of Ada's, John Jarndyce. Esther's relationship with Jarndyce treads a difficult line between paternal and romantic love. He asks that she calls him 'Guardian': "I think you had better call me Guardian, my dear" (p. 120), although their exact relationship remains undefined until he surprises her with a proposal of marriage. Dickens attempts to smooth over the dichotomy between (quasi-) father and lover by insisting on a unifying concept of 'protection'. Jarndyce seems motivated principally by a strong sense of responsibility – the letter describes his possible new role as 'protector' rather than husband. He wants to challenge the marginalized role that society seems to have marked out for Esther from the moment of her birth:

He had considered this step anew ... and had decided on taking it; if it only served to show me, through one poor instance, that the whole world would readily unite to falsify the stern prediction of my childhood.  
(p. 691)

The uneasy dynamic of this relationship is foreshadowed by other foundling narratives, where father figures can also assume romantic roles. The most pertinent example is the ambiguous relationship between Clarence Hervey and Virginia St Pierre in Belinda (1801), a relationship so ambiguous, in fact, that Belinda's acquaintances believe Virginia to be Clarence's kept mistress. Like Jarndyce, Clarence adopts Virginia when her grandmother dies, although they have no biological connection, and, influenced by the work of Rousseau, who brought up a young woman, Sophie, to be the perfect wife, 'he formed the romantic project of educating a wife for himself'.<sup>4</sup> Dickens veils the 'child-bride' element and the sexual element through writing like this explanation by Jarndyce

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<sup>4</sup> Maria Edgeworth, Belinda, ed. Kathryn Kirkpatrick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 362. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

of his motives:

“I hear of a good little orphan girl without a protector, and I take it into my head to be that protector. She grows up, and more than justifies my good opinion, and I remain her guardian and friend. What is there in all this?”  
(p. 117)

Dickens formulates the distinctly disturbing aspect of this relationship as a question, suggestive of a certain moral ambivalence, ambivalence that the text itself fails to resolve. Both Jarndyce and Clarence are given moral stature in the eyes of the reader by assuming the role of protector to an orphaned female child. Clarence finds it difficult to find the right raw materials, and the description of what he was looking for is illuminating, not least because it describes not only Virginia but also Esther precisely:

It was easy to meet with beauty in distress, and ignorance in poverty; but it was difficult to find simplicity without vulgarity, ingenuity without cunning, or even ignorance without prejudice; it was difficult to meet with ...a heart wholly unpractised, yet full of sensibility, capable of all the enthusiasm of passion, the delicacy of sentiment, and the firmness of rational constancy. (p. 362)

Like Jarndyce, who trains Esther to be the perfect housekeeper, with a view to her keeping house for him forever, Clarence sets about transforming Virginia into the perfect wife. Both women's transformation is sealed by a new name chosen by their protector that marks their new if contrasting expectations. Rachel becomes Virginia, a name, taken from Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788), which itself tells of a peasant-girl, Margaret, abandoned by a gentleman seducer when pregnant, and depicts the girl Virginie growing up in a sort of social experiment, in household far from civilization in natural tropical paradise, as perfect in beauty, virtue and sensibility (a literary allusion that suggests the Romanticism underpinning Clarence's project). In contrast, Esther becomes: ““Old woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs Shipton, and Mother Hubbard and



Dame Durden, and so many names of that sort, that my own name soon became quite lost among them” (p. 121). These names, some from traditional English folktales, confuse the issue and conceal her status: she is named no longer as a child but a woman, and they confer on her age beyond her years, while they refute the sexual aspect of being a homemaker for a man. Not only is Dickens’ foundling Esther redefined as a prosaic home-maker in a way that appears defiantly to reject the sensual and romantic image, implicit in Clarence’s choice of name for Rachel; she recognizes that her own identity, including her own desire, is buried and ‘lost’ as she is moulded by her ‘father’.

The amorous ambitions revealed in Belinda to lie behind masculine protection appear safely sublimated within domesticity in the language of Bleak House. Yet, this veil of domesticity is not enough to make Jarndyce’s proposal to Esther seem entirely appropriate. Esther herself is depicted as conscious that the love Jarndyce offers represents a strange hybrid of parental duty, where sexual desire is noticeable by its almost defiant absence. She describes the letter that contains his proposal as: ‘not a love letter, though it expressed so much love’ (p. 690). Further, Esther interprets his proposal as an act of generosity rather than desire on Jarndyce’s part:

But he did not hint to me, that when I had been better-looking, he had had this same proceeding in his thoughts, and had refrained from it. That when my old face was gone from me, and I had no attractions, he could love me just as well as in my fairer days. That the discovery of my birth gave him no shock. That his generosity rose above my disfigurement, and my inheritance of shame. That the more I stood in need of such fidelity, the more firmly I might trust in him to the last. (p. 692)

That Esther is conscious of a fundamental and disturbing conflict existing between the roles of father and husband is made clear by her earnest desire to frame Jarndyce’s offer

as a supreme act of pity and selflessness. Yet, her repeated stress on her lack of physical attractiveness after smallpox, suggests her own anxiety to overwrite Jarndyce's motives as entirely devoid of sexual desire, rather as an almost natural extension of his paternal duty. The inevitable fault lines around such an enterprise are revealed, however, by the fact that however Esther might try to rationalize this proposal, her emotional reaction is to cry:

Still I cried very much; not only in the fullness of my heart after reading the letter, not only in the strangeness of the prospect – for it was strange though I had expected the contents – but as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me. I was very happy, very thankful, very hopeful; but I cried very much. (p. 692)

On the one hand, her tears signal a proper sense of maidenly anxiety, but repeated use of words such as 'strange' highlight the fact that her tears represent more than this. Esther is uneasy in her new relationship with Jarndyce and, further, she senses that duty and gratitude are not entirely satisfactory as the basis for a marriage. The 'something' that is indistinct and that she feels lost to her by agreeing to marry Jarndyce is real romantic love. Esther's later sense of confusion is foreshadowed by Virginia's reaction to the knowledge that Clarence wants to marry her:

Mrs Ormond was so delighted to see Virginia smile, that she could not forbear adding, "The strange man was not wrong in every thing he said; you *will*, one of these days, be Mr Hervey's wife."  
"That I am sure," said Virginia, bursting again into tears, "that I am sure I do not wish, unless *he* does." (p. 386)

That Virginia and Esther are depicted as prepared to marry their guardians out of a sense of honour rather than love, allows Edgeworth and Dickens to emphasise the selfless nature of these foundlings, whose gratitude outweighs any personal desire. It also marks

them as significantly different from their mothers, who are defined by their inability to put duty before desire.

### Foundlings and Surrogate Fathers

The consequences for the surrogate fathers are equally interesting. Both men also seem to offer marriage to their wards out of a sense of duty. Clarence Harvey falls in love with Belinda and only continues to maintain his promise to Virginia when it becomes clear that her honour has been profoundly damaged by her association with him – it is widely believed that she is his mistress. That nobody within Dickens' novel questions the innocence of the relationship between Jarndyce and Esther highlights a fundamental shift in the presentation of virtuous masculinity. While Clarence's success with the ladies and his virility are seen generally as positive points in his favour, Dickens emphatically rejects these attributes in favour of representing Jarndyce as asexual – there is never even the suggestion that he has had earlier relationships with women. Edgeworth is essentially playful in describing Clarence as both a father figure and a sexually confident man. Jarndyce, on the other hand, as an essentially sexless version of Clarence's romantic father / hero, characterizes an anxiety on the part of Dickens about the sexualisation of the role of parent absent in Edgeworth's earlier work, anxiety that is representative of a society more zealous in the enforcement of rigid boundaries of acceptable sexual behaviour.

Further, while Clarence's avowal that he is prepared: "to sacrifice my own happiness to a sense of duty" (p. 471), could apply equally to Jarndyce, the nature of the sacrifice required of each man is significantly different. For Clarence, the sacrifice involves marrying the foundling he feels obliged to and giving up the woman he loves; for Jarndyce it means giving up his foundling, the object of his love. Both men then, are faced with the prospect of giving up the woman they love in order to comply with their sense of moral duty, although only Jarndyce is compelled to go through with this sacrifice. While both writers back away from the moral dubiousness of a father-figure who becomes a husband, Clarence is permitted to retain his sexual vigour and is rewarded by a happy marriage to Belinda. Jarndyce's sacrifice, on the other hand, is altogether more selfless: there is no alternative partner for him. Between these differing representations is also a fundamental shift in the role of father. For Edgeworth, masculine desire is seen to compete with the moral demands of fatherhood, while for Dickens, fatherhood becomes an almost sanctified role, as he perceives that fathers become increasingly important as protectors of the family in the face of maternal sexual disobedience. Jarndyce has to be pure to counteract the corrupting influence of the fallen mother and, as we shall see, where Esther's relationship with her mother is described as 'an inheritance of shame', her relationship with her surrogate father has the power to assert her right to legitimacy.

When both men eventually relinquish their sexual claims on their wards, the way in which this situation occurs differs profoundly. Where Clarence and Virginia have an open discussion about their feelings for one another, Jarndyce breaks off their

engagement, having intuited that Esther is in love with Allan Woodcourt. Virginia is given space to express her feelings. There is space in the text for her desires and she herself defines her love for Clarence as analogous to that felt by a child for a parent:

“I do love you, better than any one living, except my father, and with the same sort of affection that I feel for him ... I knew it would be the height of ingratitude to refuse you.” (p. 470)

Esther, on the other hand, is presented by Dickens as a passive witness to Jarndyce’s revelation that he has engineered an engagement between Woodcourt and Esther, without Esther knowing. Jarndyce is never more a father than a lover than when he gives up his claim on Esther, instructing her that he has been looking after her best interests all along, ensuring even that Woodcourt’s mother recognizes the goodness in Esther and accepts her, somewhat paradoxically through revealing Esther’s profound sense of duty to Jarndyce despite her love for Woodcourt:

“Now, madam ... Come you and see my child from hour to hour; set what you see, against her pedigree, which is this, and this” – for I scorned to mince it – “and tell me what is the true legitimacy, when you shall have quite made up your mind on that subject.” Why, honour to her old Welsh blood, my dear!’ cried my guardian, with enthusiasm, ‘I believe the heart it animates beats no less warmly, no less admiringly, no less lovingly, towards Dame Durden, than my own!’ (p. 964)

Jarndyce’s meeting with Mrs Woodcourt, ostensibly arranged to smooth an engagement between Esther and Woodcourt, becomes a conversation about ancestry and illegitimacy. Dickens sets forth a belief tested in other novels, that legitimacy is an unstable state that can be earned, as is the case here, and revoked depending on the moral character of the individual in question.

The narrative unsuccessfully strains now to regularize Esther's former prospective marriage to Jarndyce by trying to remove any suggestion of desire from that relationship and replacing desire with duty. The unspoken physical dynamic the earlier proposition introduces into their relationship remains an uncomfortable issue for the characters and reader. Esther is able to achieve personal happiness without having to compromise those very qualities of selflessness and gratitude that make an assertion of personal desire, as expressed by Virginia, impossible, impossible because Esther, unlike her earlier foundling forbears, does not uncover her true legitimacy in the course of the narrative. Although (in the terms of Zunshine's earlier definition) she does 'discover her true kin', she is unable to 'reassert her legitimate status, and reestablish herself as part of her biological family', because her parents were not married, because her mother, Lady Dedlock, will not publicly acknowledge her as her daughter, and her father, Captain Hawdon ('Nemo'), is dead. Esther has to be even more self-effacing and less egocentric than other earlier foundlings in order to *earn* her legitimacy rather than have it simply discovered by the plot. This represents a critical subversion of the conventional foundling narrative, and, correspondingly, a significant shift in social attitudes to illegitimacy, reflected in Dickens' literary efforts to realign traditional narratives with contemporary attitudes. When Jarndyce challenges Mrs Woodcourt and the reader to "Tell me what is the true legitimacy" (p. 964), he is, in effect, subjecting her and his wider audience to a more dangerous kind of interrogation than is embarked on in earlier texts, and one that Dickens himself attempts to engage society in, through his readers. While the conventional view states that it is mothers who determine the status of their children, Dickens, along with some other Victorian writers, as we shall see, foregrounds the (surrogate) father as having

or acquiring sufficient moral authority to overwrite the degrading inheritance of the mother. The positive relationship between the abandoned child and father effectively cleanses the child of its former associations and restores legitimacy, while reasserting traditional patriarchal values in the face of the consequences of so-called female disobedience.

### III

#### George Eliot: Silas Marner and the Foundling Narrative Revisited

The legitimate foundling is less common after the early nineteenth century; the bastard more common (Zunshine attributes this to declining anxiety about inheritance).<sup>5</sup> Certainly, with a heroine who the novelist defiantly leaves illegitimate to the end of the narrative, Bleak House fits into this change. Yet Silas Marner (1861) sees George Eliot reprise the classic foundling narrative: the revelation of Eppie's parentage confirms her legitimate status. When Molly Farren, the wife of Godfrey Cass dies on the way to force Cass to own her as his wife, Eppie, her daughter finds refuge in the cottage of Silas Marner. The following passage significantly plays with the themes of parent-child recognition and bonding:

The wide-open blue eyes looked up at Godfrey's without any uneasiness or sign of recognition: the child could make no visible audible claim on its father; and the father felt a strange mixture of feelings, a conflict of regret and joy, that the pulse of that little heart had no response for the half-jealous yearning in his own, when the blue eyes turned away from him slowly, and fixed themselves on the weaver's queer face, which was bent low down to look at them, while the small hand began to pull Marner's withered cheek with loving disfiguration.<sup>6</sup>

Just as legitimacy is revealed by Dickens to be primarily a social construct that may be earned and revoked, fatherhood is defined by Eliot as less to do with genetics and more to do with social and emotional fitness. With Eppie's mother an opium addict whose relationship to Eppie is defined by a lack of care, Eliot here introduces the father's

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<sup>5</sup> Zunshine, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

<sup>6</sup> George Eliot, Silas Marner, ed. David Carroll (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 118. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.



instinctive love for the child, even one he is about to renounce. Moreover, contrary to expectations, it is not a woman who brings up Eppie but Silas, a surrogate father. Eliot is eloquent when describing the redemptive power of father-love:

Silas's face showed that sort of transfiguration, as he sat in his arm-chair and looked at Eppie. She had drawn her own chair towards his knees, and leaned forward, holding both his hands, while she looked up at him.  
(p. 165)

The double looking expresses, again, the father-child affinity, an affinity that is here fully reciprocated. Other women voice the idea that fathers can be good carers and do not express serious concern at Eppie being brought up by a lone father. Eliot expresses the idea that 'the men' can have natural instincts towards fatherhood, hampered by macho social conditioning that leaves them socially unskillful and prone to drink. Dolly Winthrop concedes that: "'I've seen men as are wonderful handy wi' children. The men are awk'ard and contrairy mostly, God help 'em—but when the drink's out of 'em, they aren't unsensible'" (p. 122). Eliot uses Nancy Lammeter to give space to an even more unconventional thought, that a man might be more damaged by the failure to produce a child than a woman:

Perhaps it was this very severity towards any indulgence of what she held to be sinful regret in herself, that made her shrink from applying her own standard to her husband. "It is very different—it is much worse for a man to be disappointed in that way: a woman can always be satisfied with devoting herself to her husband, but a man wants something that will make him look forward more—and sitting by the fire is so much duller to him than to a woman." (p. 155)

Nancy's reference to the future, to the need of a man 'to look forward', Nancy alludes to the fact that a father's relationship to his child is necessarily framed by inheritance, a sense of security in the knowledge that dynastic life, with all its possible material advantages will continue uninterrupted through the child.

Godfrey is tormented by what he now perceives as an unnecessary lack of children – his and Nancy’s only child dies – and reveals to Nancy that Eppie is his legitimate child. When he claims Eppie as his own, Eppie’s rejection of him and the material wealth he offers, in favour of the relative poverty of her surrogate father represents an assertion of the emotional claim of the surrogate father. In fact, she is repelled by Godfrey and what he offers:

It would be difficult to say whether it were Silas or Eppie that was more deeply stirred by this last speech of Godfrey's. Thought had been very busy in Eppie as she listened to the contest between her old long-loved father and this new unfamiliar father who had suddenly come to fill the place of that black featureless shadow which had held the ring and placed it on her mother's finger. Her imagination had darted backward in conjectures, and forward in previsions, of what this revealed fatherhood implied; and there were words in Godfrey's last speech, which helped to make the previsions especially definite. Not that these thoughts, either of past or future, determined her resolution - that was determined by the feelings which vibrated to every word Silas had uttered; but they raised, even apart from these feelings, a repulsion towards the offered lot and the newly-revealed father. (pp. 171-2)

Restored legitimacy in this text does not bring wealth. It is at this final point that correlation between the foundling plot of Silas Marner and those of the eighteenth-century break down. In the older narrative pattern, the female foundling is transformed into a legitimate daughter only after she has received a dazzling marriage proposal that ensures her financial security. Zunshine relates this to economic anxieties:

I propose that the particular sequencing of events in the eighteenth-century foundling narrative – *first* the intimation that the heroine is about to marry very much above her station, and *then* the discovery of her own affluence – could be explained, at least in part, by the writer's tendency to downplay the connection between real-life bastards and fictional foundlings. Because the presence of illegitimate children threatened the uninterrupted transfer of property down the legal line, their fictional counterparts had to be portrayed as not even needing the property they

would ultimately inherit: greedy mercenary bastards had nothing in common with the idealistic and, as far as marriages go, lucky foundlings.<sup>7</sup>

Eppie discovers the apparent good fortune of her legitimate birthright *after* she has accepted a marriage proposal from Aaron, with precisely the sort of future prospects that Godfrey is keen to protect her from:

“She looks blooming and healthy, but not fit for any hardships: she doesn't look like a strapping girl come of working parents. You'd like to see her taken care of by those who can leave her well off, and make a lady of her; she's more fit for it than for a rough life, such as she might come to have in a few years' time.” (pp. 167-168)

Eppie, then, is in more financial need than her foundling predecessors and in this way, by subverting the expectation that Eppie should not need her inheritance, Eliot seems to exacerbate the anxiety surrounding the potential of illegitimacy to disrupt legal inheritance. Yet, again unlike her predecessors, Eppie rejects the fortune offered her, despite lacking the financial security that would make such a rejection irrelevant. Eppie represents even less of a threat to the established social order than her foundling predecessors who benefited from their paternal inheritance.

### Felix Holt: The Radical

Eliot extends her interrogation of the unstable dynamic of raising and sublimating anxiety about illegitimacy, through the transformative nature of the foundling narrative, in Felix Holt: The Radical (1866). Just as in the case of Eppie, the discovery of Esther Lyon's legitimate birthright is accompanied by the revelation of her entitlement to a fortune. In her case, however, both the economic temptation offered and the subsequent

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<sup>7</sup> Zunshine, op. cit., p. 34.

renunciation required assume much greater significance. Esther grows up with Rufus Lyon, a dissenting minister, who married her mother, Annette Ledrus having rescued her from destitution. As in Silas Marner, Rufus's fitness as a parent is remarked upon by Annette on watching him with Esther as a baby:

Mr Lyon, though he had been working extra hours and was much in need of repose, took the child from its mother immediately on entering the house and walked about with it, patting and talking soothingly to it ... Baby went to sleep on his shoulder. But fearful lest any movement should disturb it, he sat down, and endured the bondage of holding it against his shoulder.

"You do nurse baby well," said Annette, approvingly. "Yet you never nursed before I came?"<sup>8</sup>

While the Victorian period is conventionally seen as a time where the sanctity of motherhood takes centre stage, I would contend that in passages such as this, writers such as Eliot and Dickens in the earlier section, are making a powerful claim for the recognition of the transfiguring potential of fatherhood. Esther believes Rufus is her father but, in fact, she is the biological daughter of Bycliffe. Just as is the case with classic foundlings, there is a moment when proof is required for Esther's claim to legitimacy and this comes in the figure of Christian:

"Was the marriage all right then?"

"O, all on the square – civil marriage, church – everything. Bycliffe was a fool – a good-natured, proud, headstrong fellow." (p. 216)

With the evidence of her legitimacy beyond doubt, Esther discovers that not only is Rufus Lyon not her biological father, but that her legitimate relationship to her biological father entitles her to lay claim to the Transome estates. Just as in Silas Marner, Eliot appears to exaggerate the threat posed by Esther to the established order, subverting those very literary processes established to negate the threat represented by the foundling girl. As the

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<sup>8</sup> George Eliot, Felix Holt: The Radical, ed. Lynda Mugglestone (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 87. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

poor daughter of a minister, and one, moreover, who is noted for her expensive tastes, the temptation of great wealth is not modified by the existence of a proposal from a rich man. In fact, if anything, Eliot exaggerates Esther's materialism by revealing her fantasies of inheriting great wealth and living like a lady:

The glimpses she had had in her brief life as a family governess, supplied her ready faculty with details enough of delightful still life to furnish her day-dreams; and no-one who has not, like Esther, a strong natural prompting and susceptibility towards such things, and has at the same time suffered from the presence of opposite conditions, can understand how powerfully those minor accidents of rank which please the fastidious sense can preoccupy the imagination.

While eighteenth-century foundlings enjoy a luxurious, if unpredictable standard of living, which makes it easy for them to appear unsusceptible to the temptation of wealth, Eliot makes it clear that it is Esther's relative poverty that makes her ambitions all the more manifestly dangerous. Further, in order to claim her inheritance, Esther must displace the present noble occupiers of Transome Court. Far from confirming her status as legitimate, Esther's inheritance from her biological father seems to ally her much more closely with her 'money- and status-hungry illegitimate counterpart'.<sup>9</sup>

But, this exaggerated threat is revealed to be illusory, as Eliot, having provoked reader anxiety, goes on to represent Esther as even more ascetic than her safe foundling stereotypes. Although Esther has 'a strong natural prompting and susceptibility' towards rank and wealth, she turns away from the temptation that is offered, this rejection made all the more impressive by the very fact that unlike the traditional foundling she is characterized as materialistic. Eliot forces Esther to confront the reality of inheritance in a

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<sup>9</sup> Zunshine, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

particularly visceral way, showing that the girlish fairy tale of inheritance without victims is a fantasy:

To her inexperience this strange story of an alienated inheritance ... of the dispossession hanging over those who actually held, and had expected always to hold, the wealth and position which were suddenly announced to be rightfully hers – all these things made a picture, not for her own tastes and fancies to float in with Elysian indulgence, but in which she was compelled to gaze on the degrading hard experience of other human beings, and on an humiliating loss which was the obverse of her own proud gain. (p. 361)

Esther's renunciation is made all the more powerful by the fact that the family who presently inhabit Transome Court, and for whom she feels so much empathy, are not, in fact, part of the legitimate family line but the benefactors of a long-contested aspect of the law of entail. Just as Bleak House is described by Hilary Schor as the novel which, 'constitutes the English Literature's most extended attack on the legal system that determines the inheritance of property', Felix Holt: The Radical also exploits the anxieties raised by the presence of the potentially disinherited to offer a critique of the profound irrationality of the legal system of inheritance.<sup>10</sup> Since the present Transomes are not really Transomes at all, but members of the Durfey family whose ancestor acquired their estates through the dubious purchase of the inheritance from a Transome reprobate, Eliot strongly implies that they and families like them represent a very real and illegitimate threat to the established line of inheritance. In showing that apparently respectable and legitimate families like the Transomes are not what they appear, Eliot ensures that Esther's ultimate rejection of material ambition is thrown into sharp relief. Rather than containing anxiety about illegitimacy and inherited wealth within the well-established and safe foundling trope, the presence of a foundling becomes a powerful

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<sup>10</sup> Hilary M. Schor, Dickens and the Daughter of the House (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 101.

stimulus to more generalised and, therefore, more disturbing revelations about the unstable nature of inheritance.

Esther does receive an offer of marriage from a rich admirer, which has the potential to remove the necessity of a personal fortune, but it occurs after the revelation of her inheritance and fundamentally reverses the romantic context of earlier founding marriages by replacing romance with pecuniary considerations. Harold Transome, the heir disinherited by Esther, quickly recognizes that marriage to Esther will resolve the problems raised by her claim on what he views as his property:

He saw a mode of reconciling all difficulties, which looked pleasanter to him the longer he looked at Esther. When she had been hardly a week in the house, he had made up his mind to marry her; and it had never entered into that mind that the decision did not rest entirely with his inclination.  
(p. 383)

That he is a man who is familiar with conflating commerce and sexual desire has been established by the dynamic of his earlier marriage: Harold's first wife was a slave. Further, this travesty of the romantic ideals underpinning traditional marriage suggests that Harold is comfortable with subverting the moral integrity of established legal forms. Yet, there is an almost imperceptible shift of power underpinning the surface forms of their relationship. Although it is Harold's arrogant perception of his control over events that appears to be privileged, in fact, it is Harold who is selling himself to Esther. Whether or not she marries Harold, the Transome estates belong to her. This already fraught situation is further complicated by the revelation that Harold is illegitimate – his mother admits that she committed adultery and that Jermyn, the lawyer, is his biological father. At the moment where it appears that all of Harold's theoretical rights to the

disputed property seem to have been dealt a terminal blow, Eliot invokes tradition as it applies to illegitimate boys: Harold's status as bastard has no impact on his rights to inheritance. Harold himself exhibits a refreshingly robust attitude to the revelation of his illegitimacy:

But, with a proud insurrection against the hardship of an ignominy which was not of his own making, he inwardly said, that if the circumstances of his birth were such as to warrant any man in regarding his character of gentleman with ready suspicion, that character should be the more strongly asserted in his conduct. No one should be able to allege with any show of proof that he had inherited meanness. (p. 457)

In fact, in a neatly ironic twist, it is the fact of Harold's illegitimacy that finally convinces Esther, his foundling counterpart, to renounce her claim on the Transome fortune and exceed the altruistic stereotype set out for her:

With a terrible prescience ... she saw herself in a silken bondage that attested all motive, and was nothing better than a well cushioned despair... And Harold Transome's love, no longer a hovering fancy with which she played, but become a serious fact, seemed to threaten her with stifling oppression... Yet what had happened that evening had strengthened her liking for Harold, and her care for all that regarded him: it had increased her repugnance to turning him out of anything he had expected to be his, or to snatching anything from him on the ground of an arbitrary claim. (p. 465)

Although a more subversive narrative would have had Esther take possession of Transome Court, the unconventional challenge to authority that Esther represents through her apparent ultra-conservatism should not be underestimated. Through Esther, Eliot articulates the startling view that all inheritance is arbitrary, this arbitrariness being most effectively expressed through the fact that Esther gets to choose, and that her choice matters. As in Silas Marner, she sets up an alternative value system, which rejects legal



legitimacy in favour of moral legitimacy and the sanctity of personal relationships, even if those relationships are defined by a rejection of traditional values.

Both Eppie and Esther reject glittering financial rewards and, implicitly, their biological fathers. In doing so, they support an alternative value system represented by their surrogate fathers. These fathers, and their daughters exemplify the subversive concept that legitimacy is something that can be chosen. While it is the relationship between mothers and their children that has often preoccupied critics, I think the relationship between fathers and their children becomes increasingly significant throughout the nineteenth century, not least because it is fathers who control inheritance and, by extension, the power to confer legitimacy. The surrogate father creates a space within the whole tortured legitimacy debate, where normal rules are suspended: it doesn't actually matter what the biological connection is. Interestingly, this suspension of the normal obsession with birthright sits quite comfortably alongside more conventional narratives, even within more conventional narratives. Further, by making moral choices that privilege the influence of men who were not directly involved with the fall of their mothers, these children are able to give a voice to the silent opprobrium of men who fail to behave as gentlemen. Although they might escape legal punishment for their moral crimes, they lose the right to be called father. Far from marking a reduction in anxiety over the safe transfer of wealth from one generation to the next, the foregrounding of fathers in these new versions of the foundling narrative flags up an increasingly important relationship between illegitimacy and economic concerns, in terms of exploring wider social anxiety.

#### IV

##### Illegitimate Sons and their Fathers

Harold Transome could be said to be representative of the eighteenth-century literary tolerance of male bastards such as Tom Jones, in the sense that unlike his female counterpart, he does not have to be legitimized by a curious twist of fate before he can inherit property due to him. Issues of inheritance become increasingly serious when boys are concerned and, just as with foundling girls, the relationship between the (surrogate) father and child becomes increasingly important. Oliver Twist (1838) by Charles Dickens reprises a key dynamic within Felix Holt: The Radical, in the sense that the novel contrasts the experiences of a foundling girl with a bastard boy. Oliver Twist appears to echo the effect in Bleak House of using a standard illegitimacy narrative to explore the constraints of the Victorian value system. Oliver Twist is born into the workhouse, the child of an unmarried mother. While his past is a mystery, his future seems one of certain degradation and poverty, both economically and emotionally. This is a fact determined by his illegitimacy. Oliver's early working life is characterised by a series of incidents where his innocence is ignored or even denied by those who seek to use him as a scapegoat for their own guilt. A comment made by Bradshaw in Ruth could equally well be applied to Oliver:

“That very child and heir of shame to associate with my own innocent children! I trust they are not contaminated ... Do you suppose your child is to be exempt from the penalties of his birth? Do you suppose that he alone is to be saved from the upbraiding scoff? Do you suppose that he is ever to

rank with other boys, who are not stained and marked with sin from their birth?"<sup>11</sup>

Yet, just as Leonard's redemption lies in being adopted by the benevolent middle classes, Oliver too is rescued from a life of crime and corruption by the middle-class figure of Brownlow. The life that Oliver's origins, and the attendant social prejudice, had appeared to condemn him to is avoided. It is, moreover, eventually revealed that Oliver's parents were members of the middle classes, and that his father's will recognises him as a legitimate heir.

### Sons and Daughters

The story of Rose Maylie runs alongside that of Oliver and reprises the conventional foundling narrative (further refuting Zunshine's assertion that the foundling narrative became redundant in the nineteenth century). She is deeply in love with Harry Maylie. Just like her eighteenth-century predecessors she receives a highly advantageous marriage proposal. In a break from that pattern, however, she feels obliged to reject Harry's offer of marriage because she believes that she is illegitimate. Such a stain would irrevocably damage Harry's chances as a prospective Member of Parliament:

"The prospect before you," answered Rose, firmly, "is a brilliant one. All the honours to which great talents and powerful connexions can help men in public life, are in store for you. But those connexions are proud; and I will neither mingle with such as may hold in scorn the mother who gave me life; nor bring disgrace or failure on the son of her who has so well supplied the mother's place. In a word," said the young lady, turning away, as her temporary firmness forsook her, "there is a stain upon my name,

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<sup>11</sup> Gaskell, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

which the world visits on innocent heads. I will carry it into no blood but my own; and the reproach shall rest alone on me.”<sup>12</sup>

Rose uses emphatic terms such as ‘stain’ that represent an increasingly uncompromising, we might say Victorian, perception of illegitimacy absent from the eighteenth-century narratives her story resembles and which, it could be argued, reflects a society increasingly anxious about the moral impact of illegitimacy. Her pride and moral strength gently challenge the notion that the children of illicit relationships are somehow tainted by moral turpitude. The shift between a conventional acceptance of a marriage proposal, despite the apparent illegitimacy of the potential bride and Rose’s refusal highlights the increasing necessity of illegitimates to prove themselves worthy. Dickens shows here that marriage no longer offers a simple and acceptable resolution to the potential economic threat the foundling represents.

As with Esther in Bleak House, it is Rose’s acceptance of the role of passive victim, to the point of accepting death, which paradoxically provides the means for her to be legitimized. Her worthiness to the point of self-effacement permits her to transcend her origins. Dickens provides the reader with a third, fantasy resolution denied Esther but in keeping with archetypal foundling narratives: the denouement finds Rose legitimate after all. This, indeed, is the resolution that actually solves Rose’s dilemma, the revelation that, having ‘earned’ her legitimacy, she can be granted actual legitimacy. For Dickens, however, money remains a more powerful obstacle to marriage even when Rose is legitimate. It is not only her illegitimacy but also the difference in economic status

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist, ed. Peter Fairclough (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 316-7. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

between Rose and Harry that has to be dissolved. When Rose discovers that she is not illegitimate, her response is muted:

“The disclosure of tonight,” replied Rose softly, “leaves me in the same position, with reference to you, as that in which I stood before.” (p. 464)

It is only when Harry makes his own revelation - that he has renounced the rights of his birth - that a happy ending seems possible:

“When I left you last, I left you with a firm determination to level all fancied barriers between yourself and me; resolved that if my world could not be yours, I would make yours mine; that no pride of birth should curl the lip at you, for I would turn from it. This I have done. Those who have shrunk from you, and proved you so far right. Such power and patronage: such relatives of influence and rank: as smiled upon me then, look coldly now.” (p. 465)

Harry’s rejection of his wealth represents an acceptance of its significance as an impediment to his relationship with Rose. Just as Esther in Felix Holt gives up her wealth in order to pursue love, so too does Harry but where Esther gives up her entitlement in favour of an (illegitimate) male heir, Harry gives his up for a (legitimate) woman, arguably a move that represents a far more significant and sustained challenge to patriarchal dominance. Where financial inequality in eighteenth-century texts was part of the fairy-tale and easily resolved through the poor foundling becoming the beneficiary of a fortune, Dickens stresses the financial concerns that underpin anxiety about illegitimacy by choosing an alternative that, by inverting the expectation, is altogether more disturbing. This being a romantic narrative, the destructive potential of Harry’s grand gesture is only later suggested in the cold looks he receives from former friends and colleagues. Dickens, then, does not see illegitimacy as simply a moral problem; he looks behind the myth of morality and recognises the hard economic reality that supports it.

## Alternative Constructions of Legitimacy

The significance of psychological legitimacy as defined by a kind of moral integrity is made explicit by the conditions of Oliver's father's will. The truth of Oliver's biological illegitimacy is not mentioned. Moreover, this simple truth is replaced by a far more complex definition of legitimacy:

If it were a girl, it was to inherit the money unconditionally; but if a boy, only on the stipulation that in his minority he should never have stained his name with any public act of dishonour, meanness, cowardice, or wrong. He did this, he said, to mark his confidence in the mother, and his conviction - only strengthened by approaching death - that the child would share her gentle heart, and noble nature. (p. 458)

Interestingly, this 'new' definition of illegitimacy relies on the scaffolding of its original. Firstly, the possible stain of illegitimacy is carried and passed down exclusively by the female line, although in this case the influence of the mother is made safe: 'the child would share her gentle heart and noble nature'; second, as with biological illegitimacy which is an invisible mark until it is made visible by social recognition, so too is this hybrid. It is the public nature of Oliver's 'act of dishonour' that is so crucial. Presumably if he had kept any potential inner corruption private Oliver would still have been able to inherit his father's fortune. There is, however, a significant shift in terms of individual responsibility. Illegitimacy by birth is immutable; the child can do nothing to remove the stigma of his origins. Dickens' version of illegitimacy introduces the important notion of individual responsibility or self-determination. In Oliver Twist, the reader is provided with several alternatives that allow for legitimacy to be manufactured by the child stigmatised as such. These alternatives include the inheritance of money and the social recognition of moral and psychological purity. From a starting point on the margins of

society, there is one further way in which it is possible to become a member of the conventional middle classes. This involves bringing unconventional, sometimes disenfranchised individuals together in order to assimilate them into the ideal domestic body.

### The Safe Father

It is not simply children who are worried about their marginal identity within a wider social hegemony. Dickens' novel appears both to reveal and at the same time criticise a society that defines itself exclusively in terms of absolute conformity to a domestic ideal, an ideal that requires children. There is a proliferation of single adults in Oliver Twist who want to legitimise themselves with a child. Moreover, those who are childless are all men seeking a son or sons. It is, paradoxically, the marginalised, illegitimate child who becomes essential to this process of assimilation into conformity. Dickens explores a range of needs that demand a child to be satisfied. These needs are significant in the sense that for each legitimate, visible motivation there is an illegitimate, shadowy desire. First, Dickens' own need to define and promote an idealised vision of social benevolence obscures an altogether more selfish desire to conform. Furthermore, the apparently altruistic wish to have an heir in order to pass on wealth is taken apart. Dickens demonstrates that all is not as it seems. The desire to consolidate wealth, to keep it intact suggests at once an insecurity about the future, an awareness of the insubstantiality of life and a yearning to be significant in both an economic and an egotistical sense. Moreover, the promise of inherited wealth carries with it the

understanding that the child will, in return, become a kind of insurance policy against a lonely old age.

In Dickens' narrative, it is Brownlow who might seem to represent the ideal in terms of the charitable impulse. His is not the charity on the large social scale that the hideous bureaucracy and cruelty of the workhouse represents but a domestic, individual benevolence. Having defended Oliver against a charge of theft, Brownlow does not deposit Oliver back on to the street but takes him back to his home. The possible risk to his own security that this incurs is expressed by his friend, Grimwig: 'he demanded, with a sneer, whether the housekeeper was in the habit of counting the plate at night' (p. 149). So far it would appear that Brownlow has acted with only Oliver's best interests at heart. Dickens, however, reveals that, in spite of Brownlow's ideal qualities, motivation to do good acts is rarely straightforward. Brownlow's feelings for Oliver rapidly shift from detached duty to a need that cannot be contained or explained away as altruism:

Oliver looked very worn and shadowy from sickness, and made an ineffectual attempt to stand up, out of respect to his benefactor, which terminated in his sinking back into the chair again; and the fact is, if the truth must be told, that Mr Brownlow's heart, being large enough for any six ordinary old gentlemen of humane disposition, forced a supply of tears into his eyes, by some hydraulic process which we are not sufficiently philosophical to be in a condition to explain.

"Poor boy, poor boy!" said Mr Brownlow, clearing his throat. "I'm rather hoarse this morning, Mrs Bedwin. I'm afraid I have caught cold."  
(pp. 129-30)

Brownlow feels an emotional attachment that goes beyond any feelings of benevolence. Essentially, the presence of Oliver enables Brownlow to feel love for a fellow human being again, a need that he readily admits to:



“I am more interested in your behalf than I can well account for, even to myself. The persons on whom I have bestowed my dearest love, lie deep in their graves; but, although the happiness and delight of my life lie buried there too, I have not made a coffin of my heart, and sealed it up, for ever, on my best affections.” (p. 146)

Within this context of death, Oliver becomes symbolic of new life. Brownlow, therefore, needs Oliver as much as Oliver needs Brownlow. It is adults, specifically unrealised fathers, who can ‘make’ new families from a muddle. Children are too passive to satisfy their own fantasies about belonging within domestic conformity. It is precisely this passivity, however, that enables adults to work them into their own domestic fantasies.

But there is even more than this involved in Brownlow’s motivations. There is an implicit economic dimension in his relationship with Oliver, which adds another layer of complication. The middle class, of which Brownlow is a member, adopts directly from the upper classes an authenticating process that demands that any accumulated wealth be passed to a single heir. In both symbolic and real ways this creates a reassuring sense of continuity. In this way, Brownlow is not simply looking back, feeling alone and isolated but looking forwards, needing to create a sense of permanence, of legitimacy about his own life. Oliver becomes an emotional insurance policy against old age:

How Mr Brownlow went on, from day to day, filling the mind of his adopted child with stores of knowledge, and becoming attached to him, more and more, as his nature developed itself, and showed the thriving seeds of all he wished him to become - how he traced in him new traits of his early friend, that awakened in his own bosom old remembrances, melancholy and yet sweet and soothing - how the two orphans, tried by adversity, remembered its lessons in mercy to others, and mutual love, and fervent thanks to Him who had protected and preserved them - these are all matters which need not to be told. (p. 479)

The bequest that Brownlow passes onto Oliver is symbolic here: it is defined by a passing on of 'stores of knowledge'. The word 'stores' is significant in this context. It suggests that Oliver must keep this knowledge intact, ready perhaps to be passed onto the next generation. Dickens emphasises the mutual need that exists between Oliver and Brownlow by describing them as 'the two orphans'. One contemporary critic commented that Dickens, 'Typifies and represents, in our literary history, the middle-class ascendancy prepared for by the Reform Bill'.<sup>13</sup> This mutually needy relationship powerfully defines the authenticating processes of a newly emergent middle class.

Oliver does not, however, experience simply the apparently straightforward care of the middle classes. While Oliver's needs remain constant regardless of whether Brownlow or Fagin is looking after him, it is clear that Dickens uses Oliver's needs to provide exactly that constant demanded in order to highlight the fact that what Fagin represents is a direct parody of the authentic care offered by Brownlow. For instance, when Oliver is rescued by Brownlow, he is given 'a basin of beautiful strong broth' (p. 130), in order to aid his recovery. In his first evening resident at Fagin's, he is given 'gin and water' (p. 106), a substance that parodies the authentic nourishing properties of broth by simply sending Oliver to sleep without providing any genuine sustenance. Indeed, Charley Bates appears to be conscious of the parodic nature of his experience when he swaps Oliver's clothes:

Master Bates, apparently much delighted with his commission, took the cleft stick: and led Oliver into an adjacent kitchen, where there were two or three of the beds on which he had slept before; and here, with many uncontrollable bursts of laughter, he produced the identical old suit of

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<sup>13</sup> Reprinted in P.A.W. Collins (ed.), *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 476.

clothes which Oliver had so much congratulated himself upon leaving off at Mr Brownlow's; and the accidental display of which, to Fagin, by the Jew who purchased them, had been the very first clue received, of his whereabouts. (p. 168)

While the smart set of clothes from Brownlow's identified Oliver as an authentic member of the middle classes, the 'old suit of clothes' seems to mock Oliver's aspirations, a fact that Fagin's boys are clearly not unaware of. In this way, then, Dickens highlights the differences between the middle and criminal classes by observing, paradoxically, the superficial likeness between the two. Crucially, however, this likeness is perceived through the filter of satire.

### The Dangerous Father

It is not simply through the external needs of life that Dickens explores the similarities and differences between the criminal and middle class: Fagin and Brownlow both sharing the role of surrogate father to Oliver represent, in addition, the symbolic potential of representatives of the criminal and middle class. Fagin's relationship to Oliver complicates the relationship Oliver has with Brownlow. First of all, the fact that significant elements of Fagin's relationship with Oliver satirise the authentic care Brownlow offers has the effect of emphasising the superiority of Brownlow's authentic emotional bond with Oliver. While Brownlow passes down education of an improving nature to his adoptive son, Fagin's wisdom comprises of teaching Oliver how to pickpocket effectively:

"You're a clever boy, my dear," said the playful old gentleman, patting Oliver on the head approvingly. "I never saw a sharper lad. Here's a shilling

for you. If you go on, in this way, you'll be the greatest man of the time."  
(pp. 111-112)

There is a clear inversion here from Brownlow's ethical bequest, where the emphasis is on a spiritual or moral inheritance to an explicit recognition by Fagin of the child, not simply as someone to inherit the name and business interests of the parent but as an economic asset. It is this difference that reveals the substance of Fagin's role as dark shadow to Brownlow's transparency.

The satiric role of Fagin does not, however, merely reveal the transparency of Brownlow's motives. Parody is only effective if a shared set of assumptions exists in the first place. The simple fact that Dickens is able to use Fagin so accurately as a model of parody against the earnest values of Brownlow suggests that the two are not as different as they or, indeed, the middle-class reader might like to think. Both Fagin and Brownlow have the same ambition for Oliver. In the words of Fagin, they want him to be 'the greatest man of the time' (p. 112). In this way, the vanity of their own accomplishments is perpetuated and their place in society is secure. Furthermore, Fagin's explicit recognition of Oliver as an economic asset, in the sense that he may provide for Fagin when he is old, forces the reader to look more cynically at the motives of Brownlow. While Brownlow does not need Oliver to support him in an explicitly economic sense, Oliver represents a valuable emotional currency that offers comfort to Brownlow in his old age: "I have not made a coffin of my heart, and sealed it up, for ever, on my best affections" (p. 146). Both are motivated fundamentally by a sense of self-interest; it is simply that Fagin is more straightforward about recognising Oliver as an asset. Although Dickens appears to endorse the values of the middle classes, the presence of Fagin does

not provide the simple contrast that first appears to be the case. Both Fagin and Brownlow are united by their need, as single men, for sons in order to legitimise themselves in the eyes of society.

In addition, Dickens does not simply employ a tone of parody when assessing Fagin's role in Oliver's life; he adds an additional level of complication. Both Brownlow and Fagin offer Oliver superficially similar versions of the domestic ideal. While the reader may be instantly aware of the class difference that separates the homes of Brownlow and his nefarious counterpart, Dickens deliberately draws parallels between the two. In addition to the cynical view of the narrator, he offers the reader an alternative view of what each has to offer through the eyes of a child, Oliver. Innocent of any class prejudice, Oliver is able to provide the reader with a fresh view of both the criminal and the middle class, exposing both the differences and, more significantly, the similarities between the two. Like Brownlow, Fagin provides Oliver with food, clothing and lodging without, at first, asking for any financial recompense:

Oliver ate his share, and the Jew then mixed him a glass of hot gin and water: telling him he must drink it off directly, because another gentleman wanted the tumbler. Oliver did as he was desired. Immediately afterwards he felt himself gently lifted on to one of the sacks; and then he sank into a deep sleep. (p. 106)

The words 'gently lifted' imply some tenderness in the treatment of Oliver, which seems at odds with the brutal world he has stumbled upon and which the more cosmopolitan reader would expect. Yet Dickens is intending to challenge the expectations of his readers with these awkward moments that do not quite fit. He establishes a sophisticated and apparently contradictory set of intentions here. While he represents the criminal classes

as surprisingly humane in the eyes of Oliver, a fact that suggests parallels between the middle and criminal classes as both try to adapt to a society in flux, he wishes ultimately to assert the moral superiority of the middle classes.

### Unstable Legitimacy

It is, perhaps, in the character of Monks that fear of the arbitrariness of social distinctions and values is most effectively realised. Dickens shows Esther Summerson and Oliver transformed from biological illegitimacy to social legitimacy partly through their acute conformity to social convention. Monks, however, dramatically inverts this pattern and in doing so exposes its destabilising potential, potential so carefully obscured by the natural goodness of Oliver and Rose. The presence of Monks does not simply maintain the fear that Oliver initially realizes; it cultivates it. While Henry playfully rehearses the possibility of the legitimate son being disinherited, it is Monks, originally legitimate and middle class by virtue of his legal birth, who becomes illegitimised by Oliver, who eventually takes the most powerful signifier of his legitimacy: his money. Monks' ultimately self-destructive impulse to degrade Oliver so that he cannot benefit from their father's will is fuelled by an 'unquenchable and deadly hatred' (p. 459), passed down to him by his mother in a dark parody of the 'gentle heart and noble nature', that Oliver's mother passes on to him:

I swore to her, if ever it crossed my path, to hunt it down; never to let it rest; to pursue it with the bitterest and most unrelenting animosity; to vent upon it the hatred that I deeply felt, and to spit upon the empty vaunt of that insulting will by dragging it, if I could, to the very gallows foot ... the

villain folded his arms tight together, and muttered curses on himself in the impotence of baffled malice. (p. 459)

Dickens makes explicit here the idea of a corrupting potential of maternal influence, which contrasts with the paternal care Oliver has received. Dickens also forces the reader to look behind the artifice of so-called polite society and recognise the arbitrariness of such terms as legitimate and illegitimate. Furthermore, he makes the life of the illegitimate Oliver consistently more attractive than that of the legitimate Monks. When the choice is hypothetical - that is, given a 'safe' imaginative context - the reader would rather be good and illegitimate than bad and legitimate.

In Oliver Twist, there exists the potential for legitimacy to be conferred as the mystery of birth and background is revealed. This is not the abstract, symbolic legitimacy that may be achieved by obedience to social laws but real legitimacy. For Rose Maylie this represents good news: her legitimacy revealed, marriage to the man she loves is possible. Little Dorrit, published twenty years after Oliver Twist, shows Dickens' preoccupation with the issue of unstable legitimacy. He revisits the consequences of a reverse in legitimacy but, for Arthur Clennam, a character who occupies the unsettling ground between Rose and Monks, the consequences are far more depressing. When Clennam returns home from an extended period of work abroad, he feels estranged from his home and, more significantly, his mother:

"Is it possible, mother," her son leaned forward to be the nearer to her while he whispered it, and laid his hand nervously upon her desk, "is it possible, mother, that he had unhappily wronged anyone, and made no reparation?"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Dickens, Little Dorrit, ed. John Holloway (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 87. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

Clennam is right to sense that a secret is being kept from him. When Clennam employs terms such as 'reparations' he assumes that his father's wrong is of a financial nature. In fact, the wrong his father committed was moral rather than economic in nature: he deserted Clennam's biological mother, an act of cowardice for which Clennam must now pay. Interestingly, the guilt of illegitimacy is here transferred via the father rather than the mother. Where Oliver Twist conformed to what might be described as a conventional moral code, in the sense that the good characters, like Rose Maylie are rewarded and the bad characters, like Monks are punished, Little Dorrit describes a society where such moral reassurance does not exist. Clennam is a good man but he loses his legitimacy nonetheless, as reparation for his own father's guilt. This shift in perspective could suggest that Dickens was reflecting a society increasingly anxious about its relationship to illegitimacy.

### Illegitimate Inheritance

When Esther gives up her inheritance in favour of the male bastard, Harold Transome in Felix Holt, Eliot is careful to put in place a series of conditions that make safe the inheritance of an illegitimate. That Harold's maleness somehow regularizes his illegitimacy represents an emphatic assertion of patriarchal authority in the face of awkward and uncomfortable issues raised by illegitimacy. Just like Tom Jones, Harold's inheritance is framed as inevitable and, therefore, acceptable because there is no legitimate male heir to establish a counter-claim. Dickens takes this pattern of illegitimate inheritance further. The legitimate male heir is disinherited and he deserves it. Through



Monks and Oliver, and Fagin and Brownlow, Dickens is able to explore both the dominant culture and that which both validates and undermines it. By the end of Oliver Twist, Dickens has presented the reader with a set of normalities, normalities he exposes as fundamentally illusory. Not only can the illegitimate turn out to be more legitimate than the legitimate but also it is parents, more specifically fathers, not children, who are most concerned with legitimising themselves in the eyes of society through the production of a son.

#### Daniel Deronda – Foundling Boy

Two narratives, both of which share an uncertainty about identity, dominate Daniel Deronda (1876). The first is, of course, that of the eponymous hero, which follows the eighteenth-century foundling story with one crucial twist – Deronda is a boy. Daniel Deronda believes himself to be the illegitimate son of his ‘uncle’, Sir Hugo Mallinger, a position that, while it fills Deronda with a profound unease about his identity, actually confers greater status on him through his association with wealth and social position than does the eventual revelation that he is, in fact, the legitimate son of a Jew. In this way, Eliot considers what can be worse than being illegitimate and raises issues of racial identity. The movement of Gwendolen Harleth’s narrative echoes that of Daniel Deronda. Although both are legitimate, additional passive biological factors, in Gwendolen’s case, her gender and in Deronda’s case, his racial background, appear to exclude them from a sense of true legitimacy, at least in the eyes of society. While Deronda’s tale moves towards a more coherent sense of his personal identity at the expense of his social

standing, Gwendolen becomes increasingly preoccupied with a sense of her own 'caught' illegitimacy, as the wife of a man whose long-term mistress ought to occupy that socially condoned position. While Deronda is able to construct a sense of strong personal identity in defiance of social expectations, Gwendolen conforms to social laws that prove to be at odds with what she feels is morally right, this conformity leading ultimately to an increasing sense of dislocation.

In a pattern observed in the texts discussed in this chapter, Eliot foregrounds the (surrogate) father-son relationship. Deronda is bought up by his 'uncle' and is first made aware of the possible ambiguities surrounding his relationship to Sir Hugo Mallinger when his tutor reveals that the illegitimate children of Catholic popes and cardinals would refer to their fathers as 'uncle'. This is shocking in itself given that Deronda is a young man rather than a small child when he is made aware of his supposed illegitimacy. Furthermore, it is not as a consequence of any social slight that he recognises his difference but through a connection with historical abstracts:

Daniel felt the presence of a new guest who seemed to come with an enigmatic veiled face, and to carry dimly-conjectured, dreaded revelations ... The uncle whom he loved very dearly took the aspect of a father who held secrets about him – who had done him a wrong – yes, a wrong: and what had become of his mother, from whom he must have been taken away? – Secrets about which he, Daniel, could never inquire; for to speak or be spoken to about these new thoughts seemed like falling flakes of fire to his imagination.<sup>15</sup>

Daniel experiences here a conventional shock response to the realisation that his relationship to his 'uncle' might resemble that between Catholic cardinals and their children. But this conventional response overlays rather more unsettling perceptions. This

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<sup>15</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Terence Cave (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 167. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

implicitly suggests how much it is a legal and cultural construct. Most significant is the presentation of illegitimacy as something unfixed and uncertain. Far from being a clear mark of shame, visible from infancy onwards, it can exist as a secret, unrecognised not only by society but also by the individual himself. In this way, illegitimacy becomes a threat both to the individual and to the safety of the family unit given that it can reside in even the most supposedly innocent of family relations such as that between uncle and nephew. The sense of illegitimacy here as an active, transforming and protean state is used by Eliot to reveal the shifting half-truths that inform and define the moral absolutes of her society.

Further to the sense that conventional responses to illegitimacy are inadequate to its complexities is the fact that Deronda's frame of reference is a purely literary one:

Having read Shakespeare as well as a great deal of history, he could have talked with the wisdom of a bookish child about men who were born out of wedlock and were held unfortunate in consequence, being under disadvantages which required them to be a sort of heroes if they were to work themselves up to an equal standing with their legally born brothers. But he had never brought such knowledge into any association with his own lot, which had been too easy for him ever to think about it – until this moment when there had darted into his mind with the magic of quick comparison, the possibility that here was the secret of his own birth, and that the man whom he called uncle was really his father. (p. 167)

The kind of literature familiar to Deronda is one that promotes the idea of illegitimacy as a state of extremes, whether these are negative, as in the case of shame, or positive, as heroic difference. It is this rather romantic view of illegitimacy, defined by extremes, which Eliot refutes. Literature and Deronda define illegitimacy in an imaginative mode that bears little relationship to reality. Eliot shows that far from being extraordinary,

illegitimacy is a rather ubiquitous presence within, rather than outside of, normal family relations.

Indeed, the fact that Gwendolen Harleth can ask the question: “‘Mamma, have men generally children before they are married?’” (p. 333), highlights, in the use of the word ‘generally’ the normalcy with which illegitimacy is regarded in her society. The question itself suggests how far illegitimacy is from being a clear-cut state. Her mother goes on to elucidate why Deronda, in particular, appears to suffer no obvious hostility as a consequence of his presumed illegitimacy:

“And people think no worse of him?”

“Well of course he is under some social disadvantage: it is not as if he were Lady Mallinger’s son. He does not inherit the property, and he is not of any consequence in the world. But people are not obliged to know anything about his birth: you see, he is very well received.” (p. 334)

While for Deronda the suggestion that he might be illegitimate feels like ‘the presence of a new guest who seemed to come with an enigmatic veiled face, and to carry dimly-conjectured, dreaded revelations’ (p. 167), for Mrs Harleth, Deronda’s social ambiguity is framed in no such melodramatic terms. While she is conscious of convention, it is with a rather dismissive expression – “‘of course’” - that highlights the tiredness of such conventions, that she educates her child in the more complex ways of the world. Her acceptance of Deronda represents the kind of pragmatic response that rarely reveals itself in literary texts, which prefer the melodrama that Deronda models his own responses upon. Eliot herself used the threat of illegitimacy as melodrama in Adam Bede and the revelation of Harold Transome’s illegitimacy in Felix Holt certainly conforms to the rules of melodramatic revelation. The issue of secrecy is significant here. Deronda employs

negative, rather melodramatic language to describe the secrecy surrounding his birth: 'Secrets about which he, Daniel, could never inquire'. It is language that reinforces the sense of illegitimacy as a state of absolutes: 'never'. The assumption that illegitimacy demands an unequivocal shame response is what, to Deronda, necessitates secrecy. This rather conventional response is challenged by Mrs Harleth who suggests a far more pragmatic reason for silence: "People are not obliged to know anything about his birth; you see, he is very well received" (p. 334). In other words, because his 'uncle' has a title, people choose to ignore his possible illegitimacy, not as a sinister conspiracy of silence but out of polite disinterest, social etiquette far outweighing any sense of moral disquiet.

### The Economic Context

It is in this way that, as well as undermining the ubiquitous literary trope of the illegitimate as 'Other', socially excluded, Eliot makes explicit the alternative, far more powerful value system that is conveniently obscured by a superimposed set of arbitrary moral values:

"Well, of course he is under some disadvantage: it is not as if he were Lady Mallinger's son. He does not inherit the property, and he is not of any consequence in the world." (p. 334)

It is hard economics; more precisely, Deronda's limited economic status, as a consequence of his ambiguous domestic relationships, is the real signifier of his standing in the world at large. Mrs Harleth exemplifies what Milton has identified as:

Eliot's concern with the way a will confers identity on the heir through the transfer of wealth and property rights.<sup>16</sup>

In *Deronda*'s case he is caught in a rather cruel double bind. He will always perceive himself to be under some disadvantage in society as a consequence of his relationship with 'uncle' Hugo, but not for the reason he imagines. While social morality permits the overlooking of illegitimacy in the face of a title - *Deronda* being received in society with the appearance of a secure identity - his failure to inherit Sir Hugo's fortune actually denies him the legitimacy of which social acceptability can merely provide a counterfeit. That *Deronda* represents a testing of primogeniture is one way in which Eliot tries to reconfigure the social institutions that rely on smooth inheritance for their continued success. Daniel *Deronda* is a sympathetic character, and the manifest unfairness of his situation is continually drawn attention to by other characters, even by those who stand to gain by *Deronda*'s loss, such as the new Mrs Grandcourt, Gwendolen:

But whatever he might say, it must be a secret hardship to him that any circumstances of his birth had shut him out from the inheritance of his father's position; and if he supposed that she exulted in her husband's taking it, what could he feel for her but scornful pity? (p. 422)

The fact that *Deronda* is not bitter about losing his childhood home to a man manifestly his social and emotional inferior, who has no moral claim on the property, who is demonstrably mercenary in his human relations again draws attention to the obvious wrongs of such a system.

As Milton explains, other writers had considered the conflicting claims of morality and legality in relation to inheritance: he instances the example of Anthony

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Milton, 'Inheritance as the key to all mythologies: George Eliot and legal practice', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, 28:1 (March, 1995), 49-68. Available at <http://www.lion.chadwyck.co.uk>

Trollope's Ralph the Heir (1870), where, as in Daniel Deronda, the illegitimate son is a thoroughly decent chap while the legitimate son is a bit of a bounder who attempts to sell his birthright to his brother. Ultimately though, although Trollope appears to create space for a certain ambivalence about inheritance to be articulated, he comes down unequivocally on the side of legitimate primogeniture: the novel's conclusion, where the legitimate son inherits in spite of his behaviour, asserts profound support for primogeniture, in spite of its weaknesses, as the only system to guarantee security and continuity. Daniel Deronda appears to represent a reactionary reversal of the subversive possibility of the illegitimate son inheriting explored by Eliot in Felix Holt. After all, although Mrs Harleth and her daughter, now Mrs Grandcourt, express reservations about Deronda's situation, neither seriously considers the possibility that he could inherit his surrogate father's fortune. As Daniel Deronda progresses, however, any sense of reassuring continuity to be conferred through inheritance is dispelled. Furthermore, inheritance becomes a force for change rather than stagnation and becomes the means by which society can be changed and reconfigured.

#### Mrs Glasher: The Power of the Fallen Woman

It is Gwendolen's experience that introduces rather more subversive elements to the traditional illegitimacy narrative set up by Deronda. Gwendolen's narrative seems at first to extend a pattern tentatively established in Adam Bede. Just like Hetty, Gwendolen is legitimate, but family connections, through marriage in her case, transform her into someone uncertain about her place in society; indeed, even someone as uncomfortable

with her identity as Deronda himself. A significant aspect of Gwendolen's character is her surface conventionality. Not only does this link her to Deronda but also allows Eliot to show that even the most conservative of individuals may be susceptible to subversive influences. One example of Gwendolen's conventional thought processes occurs after her meeting with Mrs Glasher, the long-term mistress of her rich suitor, Grandcourt, who, coincidentally, is the heir of Sir Hugo Mallinger.<sup>17</sup> Mrs Glasher makes her ongoing relationship to Grandcourt clear and demands that Gwendolen give up any marital designs on him:

"My name is Lydia Glasher. Mr Grandcourt ought not to marry any one but me. I left my husband and child for him nine years ago. Those two children are his, and we have two others – girls – who are older. My husband is dead now, and Mr Grandcourt ought to marry me. He ought to make that boy his heir." (p. 152)

This speech makes clear the financial rather than moral incentive for marriage. Mrs Glasher repeats the word 'ought' to suggest a kind of moral imperative to her demands, but this is at odds with her concluding statement, which suggests her real concern is with money, and the legitimacy it can buy. Marriage, it would seem, is simply a necessary step along the way to achieving an inheritance for her son. Furthermore, the girls she has had with Grandcourt seem to be almost an afterthought, because, although they are older, they are excluded from inheritance on the basis of their gender. Gwendolen at first considers what Mrs Glasher has told her with a kind of comfortable detachment:

"I wonder what anybody would say; or what they would say to Mr Grandcourt's marrying some one else and having other children!" To consider what 'anybody' would say, was to be released from the difficulty of judging where everything was obscure to her when feeling had ceased to be decisive. She had only to collect her memories, which proved to her that 'anybody' regarded illegitimate children as more rightfully to be looked shy

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<sup>17</sup> See Josephine McDonagh, 'Child Murder', pp. 167-169, for a discussion of Mrs Glasher and Gwendolen in relation to the myth of Medea.



on and deprived of social advantages than illegitimate fathers. The verdict of 'anybody' seemed to be that she had no reason to concern herself greatly on behalf of Mrs Glasher and her children. (p. 298)

Gwendolen's memories here function very much like Deronda's literary archetypes. They provide a consistent framework upon which it is easy to graft a conventional response to illegitimacy. Gwendolen's memories operate as a kind of intellectual shorthand obviating the need for an authentic response to the challenge Mrs Glasher and her children represent. In this way, Eliot implies that social morality operates as a kind of lazy thinking for us all, a release, 'from the difficulty of judging ... when feeling had ceased to be decisive'.

While Gwendolen appears not to engage intellectually with the problem of illegitimacy raised by both Mrs Glasher's son and, to a lesser extent, Deronda, preferring instead to take refuge behind comfortable generalities, her emotions betray her and gradually undermine her complacency. While she is able to dismiss Mrs Glasher's demands while under the influence of her public, social self, privately she is disturbed by the sense of wrong she feels, in spite of herself:

On that day and after it, she had not reasoned and balanced: she had acted with a force of impulse against which all questioning was no more than a voice against a torrent. The impulse had come – not only from her maidenly pride and jealousy, not only from the shock of another woman's calamity thrust close on her vision, but from her dread of wrong-doing, which was vague, it is true, and aloof from the daily details of her life, but not the less strong. Whatever was accepted as consistent with being a lady she had no scruple about; but from the dim region of what was called disgraceful, wrong, guilty, she shrank with mingled pride and terror; and even apart from shame, her feeling would have made her place any deliberate injury of another in the region of guilt. (p. 297)

Again, a line is drawn between a social morality, defined here as actions 'consistent with being a lady' and a private moral sense: 'her feeling would have made her place any deliberate injury of another in the region of guilt'. Gwendolen's thoughts rely on a conventional lexis of shame when expressing her relationship to Mrs Glasher: 'but from the dim region of what was called disgraceful, wrong, guilty, she shrank with mingled pride and terror'. Superficially, this suggests a conservative fear of shame by association, but this feeling sparks the growth of a rather more subversive consciousness. Gwendolen, though perfectly entitled, in the eyes of society, to marry Grandcourt, recognises Mrs Glasher's alternative, moral claim as somehow overriding the social rules she has grown up with. Gwendolen's sense of shame is activated not by a superficial sense of propriety but by a fundamental, interior sense of right and wrong that transcends surface social concerns. Through Gwendolen, Eliot could be said to explore the consequences of the apparently more socially acceptable choice that Esther Lyon did not make in Felix Holt, that is, to claim an inheritance and deny the illegitimate son. In taking another woman's entitlement, Gwendolen steps into a morally illegitimate role. Despite being married, she begins to feel as if she is the 'other woman'; her experience now takes place 'in the region of guilt'. Further, just as in Felix Holt, Eliot sets up a situation where a legitimate woman is set against an illegitimate male. Although Gwendolen and Esther make choices that are radically different, the consequences of those choices assert the same view; that to be female is to be less than illegitimate. Eliot creates a situation where an individual who is traditional by nature tests conventions and finds them to be wanting. The gaps left by custom must be filled by a new kind of instinctive feeling, feeling that runs absolutely counter to the forces of social orthodoxy.

Mrs Glasher's final assertion of moral superiority takes place when she returns

Grandcourt's diamonds to Gwendolen:

These diamonds, which were once given with ardent love to Lydia Glasher, she passes on to you. You have broken your word to her, that you might possess what was hers. Perhaps you think of being happy, as she once was, and of having beautiful children such as hers, who will thrust hers aside. God is too just for that. The man you have married has a withered heart. His best young love was mine; you could not take that from me when you took the rest. It is dead; but I am the grave in which your chance of happiness is buried as well as mine. You had your warning. You have chosen to injure me and my children. He had meant to marry me at last, if you had not broken your word. You will have your punishment. I desire it with all my soul.

Will you give him this letter to set him against me and ruin us more – me and my children? Shall you like to stand before your husband with these diamonds on you, and these words of mine in his thoughts and yours? Will he think you have any right to complain when he has made you miserable? You took him with your eyes open. The willing wrong you have done me will be your curse. (p. 359)

Mrs Glasher assumes here the role of betrayed wife, casting Gwendolen as the other woman, a role that, increasingly, she comes to identify with. While Mrs Glasher alludes to the traditional fate of the 'other woman' - 'I am the grave in which your chance of happiness is buried as well as mine' - her death is metaphorical, the letter itself representing a robust challenge to such literary victims as Mrs Gaskell's Ruth and even Eliot's Hetty. Furthermore, she is determined to take Gwendolen with her. It is not only the defiance of Mrs Glasher that challenges preconceived ideas about inheritance and the fitness of those outside established family units to inherit. It is no accident that Mrs Glasher's final outburst should be framed by a dispute about a revoked inheritance. The diamonds belonged to Grandcourt's mother and Mrs Glasher's temporary ownership of them represents recognition of her status as Grandcourt's wife in all but name. This

valuable symbol of both wealth and social status is metonymic for the power of inherited wealth to confer legitimacy, and also to take it away again. In this way, Eliot introduces the notion of the essentially protean nature of inheritance; that it is, in fact, far more unstable than might at first appear.

The power of inheritance to effect dramatic social change in defiance of apparently sacrosanct moral codes reaches its defiant climax with the revelation that Grandcourt's will favours his illegitimate child at the expense of his legitimate wife:

"Gad! If there is no prospect of a legitimate heir, he has left everything to a boy he had by a Mrs Glasher; you know nothing about the affair, I suppose, but she was a sort of wife to him for a good many years, and there are three older children – girls. The boy is to take his father's name; he is Henleigh already, and he is to be Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt. The Mallinger will be of no use to him, I am happy to say; but the young dog will have more than enough with his fourteen years' minority – no need to have had holes filled up with my fifty thousand for Diplow that he had no right to; and meanwhile my beauty, the young widow, is to put up with a poor two thousand a year and the house at Gadsmere – a nice kind of banishment for her if she chose to shut herself up there, which I don't think she will. The boy's mother has been living there of late years. I'm perfectly disgusted with Grandcourt. I don't know that I'm obliged to think the better of him because he's drowned, though, so far as my affairs are concerned, nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it."

"In my opinion he did wrong when he married this wife – not in leaving his estates to the son," said Deronda, rather dryly. (p. 716)

While in Adam Bede the concept is established that the impact of a child - even a dead one - cannot be ignored, Daniel Deronda goes one step further: the male child becomes the key to relegitimising an illegitimate family. Deronda's comment, which concludes the passage above, represents a radical revision of convention. In accepting an illegitimate child's right to his father's property and applying censure to the father as bearing the shame of an immoral marriage, Deronda raises the point that it is parents, more

specifically fathers, rather than children who ought to be penalised for unsanctioned sexual relationships. This represents a significant shift away from the idea that the shame for unorthodox relationships should rest solely with the mother. While Deronda's views could be dismissed as being coloured by self interest, they are given authority by Sir Hugo who is not unduly disturbed by the idea that illegitimate children should be included in inheritance: "I say nothing against his leaving the land to the lad". There is no fear here that the fabric of society is threatened by this radical change of status for the boy. Furthermore, Eliot here makes much more explicit than in Felix Holt the competition for limited resources that underpins the divide between legitimate and illegitimate. As money is transferred to young Henleigh, he acquires both name and status at the expense of Gwendolen, who loses her economic privilege and, consequently, her social position. She will, as Sir Hugo points out, live "a nice kind of banishment". Esther Lyon, on the other hand, actively chooses to live a sort of banishment with Felix Holt, her choice sweetened by love. The house at Gadsmere, Gwendolen's inheritance, is a symbolic as well as real sign of the reversal of her fortunes. As the former home of Mrs Glasher, it emphasises Gwendolen's new status as a kind of illegitimate in the eyes of a society obsessed with material wealth, and, simultaneously, the fundamentally ephemeral nature of social identity. The power of inheritance to effect dramatic change in the lives of individuals demonstrates the fundamentally unpredictable and unstable nature of individual experience in a society governed not by abstract moral absolutes but by the vicissitudes of personal wealth. This in turn highlights the fact that far from being stable and unchanging, society is in a permanent state of flux, reflecting as it does the collective experience of unpredictable individuals.

## Unorthodox Legitimacy

To return to Deronda himself, the resolution of his narrative highlights wider social anomalies than those concerned simply with domestic relationships. Deronda discovers that he is the legitimate son of Jewish parents. His mother, a celebrated opera singer, Alcharisi, asked Sir Hugo Mallinger to bring him up as his own son in part in order that he might avoid the prejudice associated with his Jewish heritage. Deronda's mother's motives are complicated by self-interest: a child would have got in the way of her successful career. Deronda's fate as a baby has distinct parallels with the dead baby in Adam Bede. Deronda's mother certainly experiences the same sense of entrapment that Hetty felt when she discovered that she was pregnant. Both women identify motherhood with social estrangement and wish to escape this fate. The authentic act of infanticide that takes place in Adam Bede is transformed into a symbolic, rather more worldly act in Daniel Deronda. In both novels, however, Eliot advances a similar message about monstrous motherhood. Deronda has his life, but he is effectively estranged from his home and his cultural and economic inheritance. The princess makes a considered choice between two kinds of otherness: biological illegitimacy or illegitimacy on the basis of racial difference. She determines that biological illegitimacy is the lesser of two evils. The novel broadly supports the princess's recognition that society is kinder to rich illegitimates than to rich Jews while presenting her as an unattractive, morally corrupt character. Although he is legitimate in the traditional sense, as a Jew, albeit a wealthy one, it is clear that Deronda will experience a very different kind of life to the one he

enjoyed under the protection of Sir Hugo. In this way, not only wealth but also racial origin is shown to be a key indicator of social legitimacy. There is an irony to the fact that while Deronda is barred from inheriting from his father, it is from his mother that he inherits his racial identity, an inheritance that estranges him from his past life. This adds an additional layer of confusion to a society apparently at ease with its moral judgements, threatening again the status of legitimacy as the unique indicator of social acceptability.

In Daniel Deronda, Eliot asserts the interconnectedness of society at the expense of an orthodox presentation of illegitimacy. Illegitimacy takes on a much more complex aspect, overwhelming trite moral absolutes. Eliot shows how categories of otherness, constructed in order to reinforce convention, are not passive but have taken on a life of their own, making everyone vulnerable to becoming 'Other', even illegitimate, in various senses. While all this is deeply subversive, convention is also recognised in Daniel Deronda as a powerful social reality. For instance, Deronda's self-imposed exile at the end of the novel appears to justify Alcharisi's fears for her son. Furthermore, while Eliot reveals the contradictions and moral sleights of hand inherent in Victorian culture, she is constrained by those very same conventions. The most glaring example of this is the reliance on traditional gender stereotypes. Just as in Felix Holt, while women can be disinherited, they cannot move the other way – it must be an illegitimate male who is able to cross into legitimacy and inherit. In this way then, Daniel Deronda is a radical novel that retains deeply conventional elements; in this respect it is much like the society that both Eliot and Dickens endeavour to question.

## Chapter Five: Novelists on the Margins

### I

#### Wilkie Collins: The Sensation Novel as Illegitimate Text

This thesis has been largely concerned with identifying certain patterns that emerge when researching the themes of illegitimacy and infanticide in Victorian fiction. Some Victorian writers, however, radically challenge the literary hegemony that these recurrent patterns seem to create and the carefully constructed narrative strategies for containing the unsettling potential of illegitimacy that they represent. Ironically, perhaps, the most subversive of Victorian narratives position illegitimacy and infanticide *within* comfortable middle-class domesticity, rather than on the borders of bourgeois society. Whereas many Victorian writers deal with what Peck and Coyle succinctly call ‘a sense of disturbing and irrational forces that lie just below the surface of family life’,<sup>1</sup> and could arguably be seen thereby as seeking ultimately to protect an ideal of the period, family life, from such destructive forces, Wilkie Collins, Thomas Hardy and Henry James place them provocatively into the heart of domesticity. A phrase James himself uses, in a review of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s writing, comments that her versions of sensation fiction are concerned with:

Those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries that are at our own doors ... Instead of the terrors of *Udolpho*, we were treated to the terrors

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<sup>1</sup> John Peck and Martin Coyle, *A Brief History of English Literature* (London: Palgrave, 2002), p. 216.



of the cheerful country house, or the London lodgings. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely the more terrible.<sup>2</sup>

This recognition, that the truly terrifying narrative is not displaced onto a distant, exotic location but unravels in the centre of a recognizable domestic environment, is understood and exploited by James in The Other House (1896), Wilkie Collins, the founder of sensation fiction, in No Name (1862), and Thomas Hardy in Far From The Madding Crowd (1874), and provides at least one point of similarity between these three apparently disparate authors. By exploring ‘the mysteries that are at our own doors’, they aim to expose the anti-social desires that disrupt the benign surface patterns of comfortable middle-class domesticity. This represents a challenge to one of the patterns identified in this thesis, that is, the exile of the fallen woman, either by hiding her away in a country retreat or abroad, or representing her as fleeing from her community, or as relocated on the margins (social or geographic).

The novels examined in this chapter expose also the problematic, unstable nature of the authoritative social structures which construct illegitimacy and infanticide. Illegitimacy is constructed by the legal institutions and definitions of marriage and inheritance; infanticide, as child-murder, is also constructed legally. Yet both are conceptualized as offences not only against the law but also against sanctions which attained particular moral power during the nineteenth century: the idealisation of marriage, the sanctity of the family, and the myth of innate maternal protective love. These moral structures mean that illegitimacy is accompanied by a taint of shame, often conceived as inherited shame, weighing most heavily on women and daughters, and

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<sup>2</sup> Henry James, ‘Miss Braddon’, The Nation (November 9, 1865), cited in Henry James: Literary Criticism (New York: The Library of America, 1865), pp. 745-46.

infanticide seems a violation of sacred motherhood. Yet infanticide is represented in novels examined so far often as motivated by that sense of shame: the threat to a woman of a loss of identity and reputation leads to a literal death. Collins, Hardy and James use the themes of illegitimacy and infanticide to question authoritative structures, revealing these as inconsistent, illogical, even against morality. They go further and show women escaping from the guilty identity attendant on illegitimacy, and even on infanticide. These plights, normally treated as the demise of respectable social identity for women are shown here, sensationally, to provide the opportunities for new identities and new social consequence.

#### Wilkie Collins and the Sensation novel

Sensation novelists, already in a position that challenges the authority of realist texts, could be seen to go further and challenge authorial and textual authority within their sensation novels. Indeed, sensation fiction, occupying an uncertain position on the boundaries of legitimate fiction, finds itself in a position broadly comparable with that of the illegitimate child in relation to bourgeois society. It is not surprising, then, to find that many sensation plots are dominated by the theme of illegitimacy. No Name, indeed, opens with a revelation of illegitimacy, and one that proves to be fundamental, not simply to the progress of the plot but to the philosophical preoccupations of the text.

When the parents of Norah and Magdalen Vanstone die in quick succession, the unconventional circumstances of their relationship are exposed. Mr and Mrs Vanstone

were, in fact, Mr Vanstone and Miss Blake until several months prior to their deaths. The death of Mr Vanstone's wife in America clears the way for them to marry and they travel to London for precisely this purpose. Collins' treatment of the resultant problem for their offspring foregrounds the inadequacy of the authoritative structures, legal and moral, that themselves construct the concept of illegitimacy. Unfortunately for Norah and Magdalen, they legitimise their relationship in the eyes of a society oblivious to the real state of their affair, without taking legal advice. The will, drawn up when Mr Vanstone was not legally married to the girls' mother, is made void by his subsequent marriage to her. In a speech that widens up the issue philosophically, from one of individual misfortunes to an attack on the structure and morality of the law, as demonstrated in this case, Mr Pendril, the family lawyer, angrily remarks:

I am far from defending the law of England, as it affects illegitimate offspring. On the contrary, I think it a disgrace to the nation. It visits the sins of the parents on the children; it encourages vice by depriving fathers and mothers of the strongest of all motives for making the atonement of marriage; and it claims to produce these two abominable results in the names of morality and religion.<sup>3</sup>

The ironies and paradoxes displayed in this speech are more than merely rhetorical ironies. No Name is framed by an irony that reveals the illogicality of the law and which also highlights the contradictory moral demands of individual desire and social conformity. It is significant that a lawyer voices this summary of the false position of the law regarding illegitimacy. In comparison with many illegitimacy narratives, Collins' scene here conducts the discussion of the issues explicitly in terms of legal and social structures. Mr Pendril is a respected member of a profession whose role it is to defend the laws upon which the stability of society is supposedly based. Indeed, his whole career is

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<sup>3</sup> Wilkie Collins, No Name, ed. Mark Ford (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 110. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

founded on an implicit acceptance of the validity of such laws. While the handling of a similar situation in Daniel Deronda gives space for individuals to commiserate with the victims of arcane legitimacy legislation, this sympathy remains on the level of subjective concern and draws back from explicitly exposing the weakness of the law and of large scale social structures.

The passage containing the comments of Mr Pendril serves also to highlight the fact that the law is not only illogical but morally inadequate: the law is presented as confused and inconsistent as to the strict moral definition of illegitimacy. The language of Pendril's speech above conveys this inconsistency: the law 'encourages vice'; it is 'a disgrace'; it produces 'abominable results'. Just as the sensation mode reveals that shocking chasms can open up in respectable lives, and are not separated into appropriately marginal social areas, so Collins shows that illegitimacy itself is a far from clear-cut state. Analysis of the law opens up chasms, equally shocking, if not more, which threaten order and morality. Far from enshrining illegitimacy as an absolute moral and legal condition, Collins shows the legal basis for the concept of illegitimacy to be infirm, incoherent: the law, in this case, emphasises the mutability of the legitimate state. The law, which appears to be fixed and immutable, is, in reality, as 'irrational and disturbing', to use Peck and Coyle's phrase about the secrets hidden in Victorian narratives, as the lawless, morally unregulated state of legitimacy it is supposed to demarcate and control. Pendril's speech, like many other aspects of Collins' novel, demonstrates that society is underpinned by a set of rules that far from protecting the

majority from disorder actually embody the moral and logical ambiguities they are supposed to circumscribe.

### The Illegitimate Mother who Survives

The opening of Collins' novel does not only expose the structure of the law as fundamentally flawed: that other great cornerstone of Victorian bourgeois morality, the middle-class family, is shown to inhabit a space that bears little relationship to its ideal. The outwardly ordered and moral household is revealed as outside the law. The source of Magdalen and Norah's illegitimacy, Mrs Vanstone, is not set apart from traditional bourgeois family structures. Just like her children, 'Mrs' Vanstone appears to hold a legitimate position within her community but in reality is – according to law - an impostor, a fraudulent wife, an illegitimate mother. Magdalen and Norah's mother is not, however, a forsaken woman inhabiting the boundaries of society and family, as is the case of many of the texts considered previously. Far from representing a salutary reminder of the inevitable consequences of transgressing the values that maintain the integrity of the family, she demonstrates that the tragic fate of the fallen woman is by no means inevitable. Collins' fallen mother is also not represented as dying. Rather than either living in exile or dying when her daughters are born, thus conveniently removing the awkward challenge she represents to family structures, she lives in comfort at the very heart of what appears to be a normal, ordered and loving family, and apparently unburdened by guilt. In fact, it is the appearance of absolute conventionality rather than of 'anarchic lawlessness' that represents the most disturbing challenge to the escapist

fantasy of family life as security against the polluting influences of life outside the domestic sphere.<sup>4</sup>

### The Foundling Narrative Revisited

In an equally radical departure from the cultural and narrative patterns that so strongly associate illegitimacy for a woman with guilt, Magdalen's career, after the knowledge of her illegitimacy, clearly recognises the possibilities open to her now that she does not have to play by the rules. It seems relevant here to introduce a comment Johanna Geyer -Kordesch has made about the erotic elements in eighteenth-century crime literature:

If the erotic plot were to impart a positive impulse it would be by embracing the power of the outlaw. By accepting the power of illegitimacy (of the illicit), of women being sexually able and willing, the suicidal heroine and her unrequited passion would be dethroned.<sup>5</sup>

Magdalen embodies the kind of heroine that Geyer -Kordesch imagines. Like her mother before her, she defies the conventional route of female 'Other', the real or metaphorical cultural exile into marginality. She does not die of shame or grief, in that common pattern of death for mother and child we have seen in illegitimacy novels, but turns the unique insight being 'Other' gives her to her advantage.

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<sup>4</sup> U.C. Knoepfelmacher discusses this aspect of Collins' work in 'The Counterworld of Victorian Fiction and The Woman in White', in Lyn Pykett (ed.), Wilkie Collins (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 58-69 (p. 61).

<sup>5</sup> Johanna Geyer -Kordesch, 'Infanticide and the erotic plot: a feminist reading of eighteenth-century crime', in Mark Jackson (ed.), Infanticide (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 93-127 (p. 108).

Her career follows the template of the classic foundling heroine, discussed earlier in this thesis. However, in the case of Magdalen, Collins once again breaks with paradigmatic expectations. Collins' novel explores the consequences of reversing the traditional narrative pattern of the progress of the foundling, from unacknowledged parentage to financially advantageous legitimacy. Magdalen falls from acknowledged parentage and middle-class security and expectations to financial insecurity and loss of social identity.

Foundling stories foreground the issue of identity, especially social identity. Just as in classic foundling narratives, a new identity is created, but additionally, and - we might say - philosophically, the subjective nature of identity is explored, as Collins traces Magdalen's career. The character of Magdalen presents the phenomenon of an identity imposed by society becoming, in some way, a positive subjective position, offering choices. It is an irony that Magdalen comes to appreciate that the space between appearance and reality, as far as social regulation is concerned, provides not only the means for her fall but the key to her redemption. Bourne Taylor has suggested that 'No Name reveals above all ... the impossibility of representing a coherent female subjectivity, a "true nature"'.<sup>6</sup> But, to challenge Bourne Taylor, it can be argued that this blank or absence is not viewed by Collins as simply a negative loss. He handles it, rather, as an opportunity to manipulate a series of expedient identities that exploit the concealed weaknesses of bourgeois security. The identities that Magdalen is shown choosing to

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<sup>6</sup> Jenny Bourne Taylor, In The Secret Theatre of Home (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 134.

adopt become, then, further challenges to the idea of a fixed and authoritative social structure that can impose immutable social identities and moral states

For Magdalen, 'embracing the power of the outlaw', (to use Geyer-Kordesch's phrase) takes the form of apparent conformity to social expectation, including the pursuit of what seems to be conventional marriage. This 'outlaw' boldness is depicted as an alternative to the exile, into ignominious marginality, so often the lot of the guilty woman in illegitimacy narratives. The roles Magdalen adopts in pursuit of her fortune are, it is true, circumscribed by the limitations traditionally placed on careers open to women. As a counter-example to what Collins depicts Magdalen achieving, Norah represents the conventional route of middle-class girl fallen on hard times and becomes an authentic ill-paid and socially-despised governess, Magdalen's career takes an altogether more dramatic trajectory. What is dramatic is the element of exaggeration and even theatricality in her life choices, compared to those of her sister. She adopts the roles of governess, middle-class girl available for purchase on the marriage market, and maidservant: three roles that ostensibly follow conventional paths for young women without financial security, and which yet, together, prove capable of permitting considerable agency and self-assertion. Collins' Magdalen, in these roles, is able to transcend and, ultimately, question supposedly rigid class and economic boundaries.



## Legitimacy as Performance

Bourne Taylor comments that there are:

No stable signs or clues that can manifest feminine strength and this is reinforced by the fact that the roles she plays are exaggerated versions of established feminine ones.<sup>7</sup>

Bourne Taylor notes here the exaggeration in Magdalen's chosen roles but reads these as simply forms of conventional and limited female social identity. Collins, arguably, however, breaks out of these limitations and does so precisely by developing the idea of exaggeration and theatricality. For while he draws attention to the limitations placed on those who exist outside of masculine patronage, he simultaneously suggests, through Magdalen's exaggerated performance, the potential inherent in such a circumscribed role. Those who fall outside patriarchy are compelled, consciously or not, to play a part predetermined by social convention. Illegitimacy turns the individual inevitably into a performer. Magdalen consciously engages with these roles, and exaggerates the surface signifiers that define them; she consciously becomes a performer. This makes explicit the active subversive potential of what appear to be safe feminine clichés. Far from being a weakness, the lack of 'stable signs or clues that can manifest feminine strength' becomes, in the hands of Collins, a powerful ability to exploit the instability, in both gender roles and the laws that construct legitimacy, that is inherent in but concealed from dominant society.

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<sup>7</sup> Bourne Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

Collins shows Magdalen herself as conscious that she is turning convention to her own advantage, as triumphantly expressed in a letter to Miss Garth after her marriage:

I have done what I told you I would do – I have made the general sense of propriety my accomplice this time. Do you know who I am? I am a respectable married woman, accountable for my actions to nobody under Heaven but my husband. I have got a place in the world, and a name in the world, at last. Even the law, which is the friend of all you respectable people has recognized my existence, and has become *my* friend too!.. You forget what wonders my wickedness has done for me. It has made Nobody's Child, Somebody's Wife. (p. 484)

Collins emphasises in this passage the paradoxes and oxymorons inherent to Magdalen's position – 'propriety' as an 'accomplice', 'wickedness' as 'benefactor', 'Nobody's Child', who becomes 'Somebody's Wife'. The unstable elements in the law exposed by Mr Pendril's speech are here again exposed as creating an individual of completely contradictory definitions. The marriage ritual has indeed provided Magdalen with a legal means by which she can recover a social identity, purchased as 'Somebody's Wife'. The 'Somebody' is anonymous, in much the same way as 'Nobody's Child' was, because what matters is the sense of possession, which confers with it the economic power essential to the status Magdalen craves. The crucial acquisition, the acquisition that puts her back within the law's structure, is, one might say, embodied in the possessive case. Simultaneously, as she triumphs in her new public identity, she is conscious of the anti-social means by which it was achieved. Throughout this passage she employs language that casts her implicitly in the role of a kind of moral criminal, using 'the general sense of propriety' as her 'accomplice'. In this context, propriety itself becomes an ambivalent force. Moreover, it is not only propriety but also the law, which contains sufficient ambivalence to be turned against the 'respectable people' it is supposed to identify and protect.

Magdalen's ability to shift identity, apparently at will, poses a complex challenge not only to the formidable institutions of the law and domesticity but also exposes the fault lines inherent to social class. Loesberg, writing generally on the subject of sensation fiction, considers the significance of its challenge to existing class structures:

Sensation novels evoke their most typical moments of sensation response from images of a loss of class identity. And this common image links up with a fear of general loss of social identity as a result of the merging of the classes – a fear that was commonly expressed in the debate over social and parliamentary reform in the late 1850's and 1860's.<sup>8</sup>

This fear, that a merging of the classes would lead to a more general loss of social identity, lies behind the anxiety raised by the 'seduced maiden' narrative, characterised by the dramatically uneven social status of the upper-class seducer and lower-class seduced, as discussed earlier in the thesis.

The issue of class mobility is clearly a theme and fear that Collins is eager to explore. When Magdalen shifts from wife to penniless widow she asks her maid to become complicit in the shift from class to class by switching roles with her and playing a lady while teaching Magdalen how to be a domestic servant. This play-acting is a symbolic parallel to the equally baseless contrast that the law makes between an individual who is legitimate and one who is not. Being a bastard, as we have seen, is a role that a bastard is required to play. The maid's initial reluctance to participate in the subterfuge, is used by Collins to express the conventional view that class is fixed and, consequently, that she would be inevitably exposed as a fraud: "I should be found out,

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Loesberg, 'The Ideology of Narrative Form in Sensation Fiction', *Representations*, 13 (Winter, 1986), 115-138 p. 117.

ma'am," interposed Louisa, trembling at the prospect before her. "I am not a lady" (p. 503). Magdalen, on the other hand, representing a deeply seductive, dynamic counter-culture, liberates Louisa from her static sense of a class-bound identity and voices the argument that class, like legitimacy, is essentially a matter of appearances: "Shall I tell you what a lady is? A lady is a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance" (p. 503). The role-play is externalised, the costume, and also a performed identity.

In this conversation, then, Collins enacts a serious debate between the forces of conservatism and the forces of social change. The questioning of the assumptions that class is fixed and its demarcations clear-cut and real ("I am not a lady") corresponds to the assumptions about the law, in the case of illegitimacy, raised earlier in the novel. Who is a lady and who is not prove to be as illogical and subject to question as the question of who is illegitimate. Collins' plot acts as validation of the unconventional argument: that Magdalen articulates a view of society much closer to reality than the one expressed by the law is arguably justified by the success of her plan. The introduction of the theme of the lady, and the conversation about it cited above, also challenge assumptions central to the sensation novel, as it had developed, for example, in the hands of Braddon. Whereas the sensation novel often exposes a respectable lady as the possessor of a far-from-respectable secret identity (her allegedly true identity under a false outward disguise), here the idea of the 'lady', as an outward guise is broadened out into a new doctrine of class, social identity, itself as performance.

As if to emphasise further a view of society in flux, where social identities can shift, Louisa's reward for helping her mistress enables her to emigrate to Australia, a country that, in both a symbolic and a real sense, represents the potential to reinvent oneself in a society under construction. Furthermore, it is significant that Louisa's reward allows her to shed the social stigma of being herself a fallen woman with an illegitimate child. Australia thus provides, ostensibly, the opportunity to invoke the traditional pattern of the guilty woman being hidden away by flight to the margins, but, given the self-invention possible in a new society, Australia now also functions to provide a vision of a society where an illegitimate mother can reinvent herself within, and not merely on the margins of a respectable social structure. Although a relatively minor character, her narrative provides a parallel pattern, echoing that of 'Mrs' Vanstone: both are women who have successfully defied apparently insurmountable social regulation to enjoy loving relationships and children outside of wedlock. They have made a conscious decision to evade the traditional fate of women who transgress social and sexual codes by successfully reinventing themselves within those codes. Collins demonstrates that the confidence consolidated upon social institutions such as the law, marriage and wealth is ultimately the agent for the destruction of those same institutions it is supposed to protect. This second 'Mrs Vanstone', however, Louisa, succeeds in entering and occupying permanently a respectable social position, unthreatened by exposure.

Perhaps Magdalen's most shocking transformation is that which occurs at the conclusion of the novel. She conforms to the conventional requirement of the eighteenth-century founding romance, marries her true love, and has her fortune restored to her in

the process. It is this aspect of the novel that a fellow-novelist, Margaret Oliphant found most threatening:

Mr. Wilkie Collins ... has chosen, by way of making his heroine piquant and interesting ... to throw her into a career of vulgar and aimless trickery and wickedness, with which it is impossible to have a shadow of sympathy, but from all the pollutions of which he intends us to believe she emerges, at the cheap cost of a fever, as pure, as high-minded and as spotless as the most dazzling white of heroines.<sup>9</sup>

In Collins' world, if that is what Magdalen seems then that is what she must be. It is the shifting nature of identity, the sense in which seeming can be as authentic as actually being, that Oliphant finds so difficult. What Oliphant does is to transfer the social awkwardness of Magdalen's return to the safety of the bourgeois world into a question of narrative authenticity as opposed to individual authenticity. Rather than consider whether there is any legitimacy to Collins' vision, she simply claims that Magdalen's end is not believable; that the pollution she suffered must, somehow, be visible to those who live officially sanctioned lives within middle-class boundaries. Realist plausibility and social morality appear—correctly—both to have been disrupted by Collins' novel.

The general tendency of sensation novel to deal with outward masks and performed social identities has been noted by Bourne Taylor:

In sensation fiction masks are rarely stripped off to reveal an inner truth, for the mask is both the transformed expression of the 'true' self and the means of disclosing its incoherence. In the process identity itself emerges as a set of elements that are actively constructed within a dominant framework of social interests, perceptions and values. These novels thus focused on the ambiguity of social and psychological codes to insinuate that seeming, too, is not always what it seems.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Bourne Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-34.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

She does not, however, develop this perception to consider what were earlier defined as philosophical issues raised by this aspect of Collins' text: the fragile nature of legal structures and the social categories they define; the performative nature of class and social identity. In No Name, identity itself in any pure, intrinsic sense is shown to be illusory. Just as illicit and legitimate social identity, as defined and imposed by law, is shown to be illusory. Identity becomes the operation, the performance of certain roles imposed by social perceptions and values. Bourne Taylor again writes of identity as 'a set of elements that are actively constructed within a dominant framework', but Collins' novel displays that dominant framework as a construction that works to conceal the fundamental incoherence of that which it constructs.

Such a sense of the volatile nature of identity is, however, by no means unique to sensation fiction in general or to Collins in particular. In both Oliver Twist and Daniel Deronda Dickens and Eliot explore the unsettling possibility that individuals might shift between apparently rigid social boundaries. But, while Dickens and Eliot subvert authoritative fantasies of stable identity, legal and moral, they shy away from questioning or challenging the dominant frameworks within which these fantasies are constructed. Collins, on the other hand, questions the homogeneity of these dominant frameworks, primarily, those of the law and the family. Furthermore, he demonstrates that an unquestioning faith in established forms of authority can, paradoxically, promote the exploitation of weaknesses in those established forms of authority by those who question.

## Legitimacy as Weakness

Illegitimacy confers on the illegitimate a state of legal, economic and social weakness in the Victorian period. The unmarried mother, if a working woman, is liable to be turned out of service and to find herself without a reference to find further respectable work. It is one of the revisionary patterns in No Name that Collins' writing presents the legitimate at times as weaker than the illegitimate. He also presents legitimate men, in strong financial positions, as failing to conform to norms of masculinity, implicitly as illegitimately male.

In fact, to be legitimate in No Name, far from securing the family line and the security that symbolises, actually becomes representative of generational decline.

Collins' description of Frank Clare employs both feminine and degenerative terms:

His gentle, wandering brown eyes would have looked to better advantage in a woman's face – they wanted spirit and firmness to fit them for the face of a man. He was undeniably handsome, graceful, well-bred – but no close observer could look at him without suspecting that the stout old family stock had begun to wear out in the later generations, and that Mr Francis Clare had more in him of the shadow of his ancestors than of substance. (p. 30)

'Frank' means honest and also 'free-born'; 'clare' means light and bright, something easily seen through. These are virtues but they prove to have an ambiguous quality in this novel, whose heroine bears the name of a prostitute raised to respectability. Clare, with his ambiguously feminine surname, is also made to seem an illegitimate male in this passage. Further, the passage contrasts 'well-born' and 'old family stock', conventionally connoting both superior breed and social and economic superiority, with wanting 'spirit'



and lacking 'substance'. The description of Noel Vanstone is also framed by effeminate imagery: 'his complexion was as delicate as a young girl's, his eyes were the lightest blue' (p. 228). Again, Collins exploits the tension between appearance and reality and in language that relates this to an inheritance of a strong position, in terms of economic and social situation, and the stronger gender.

The narrative design too supports this undermining of the strength of the legitimate. Both Frank and Noel appear initially to be legitimate male heirs and suitors for the hand of Magdalen, but in the course of the novel they are made 'Other': both effeminate and illegitimate, in the sense that neither is viewed either as a legitimate heir to his family line or as a suitable partner for Magdalen. It is interesting to note that the very attributes normally necessary to inheritance - legitimacy and masculinity - are here converted into weaknesses, and that, in this context, inheritance becomes a poisoned chalice, a process circumscribed and ultimately destroyed by degeneration. It is Magdalen, both illegitimate and female, and, therefore, inconsequential to conventional forms of inheritance who represents a force for regeneration. Collins' plot seems to play with a contrast between biological inheritance - in Magdalen's strengths - and legal inheritance, the initial privilege of the male offspring.

One paragraph in its wording succinctly articulates Collins' exploration of this quasi-Darwinian paradox together with provocative allusions to ideas of 'Nature', 'science', and the assumption that these two powers will produce rationally coherent 'organisations':

By one of those caprices of Nature, which science still leaves unexplained, the youngest of Mr Vanstone's children presented no recognisable resemblance to either of her parents ... She bloomed in the full maturity of twenty years or more – bloomed naturally and irresistibly, in right of her matchless health and strength. Here, in truth, lay the mainspring of this strangely-constituted organisation. (p. 8)

It is easy to see the influence of Darwinian theory here (and Bourne Taylor has explored this thread in the writing) but the passage's deconstruction here of notions of nature and science as unassailably constructed and rational structures can also be related to the ways, already explored above, in which Collins' novel interrogates the apparently secure structures of the law in the issue of legitimacy. This passage adds the scientific parallel to social ideas of legitimacy - the notion of generational inheritance of physical features - to the themes of financial inheritance in the novel. Bourne Taylor uses the example of Darwinian theory to explain the source of Magdalen's superiority over legitimate others:

She draws on a set of references that correspond most closely of all to the Darwinian model of natural selection that makes anomalousness itself the central element of development.<sup>11</sup>

That is, Magdalen's bastardy is here allied to fundamental processes of evolution. One could say further, however, following from Bourne Taylor's observation, that Magdalen's illegitimacy can be seen as a kind of mutation and the advantage that it confers on her is her ability to step outside conventional processes of inheritance and consequently, gendered expectations. The connection made between No Name and Darwinian theory seems clear. but Collin's focus seems as much or more on different philosophical issues: on models of society and the structure of social morality than on theories of Nature alone. No Name, with its plot in which characters' status shifts so radically, presents a view of society in constant flux, flux that is necessary in order to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

avoid dangerous stagnation. Illegitimacy is transformed into a powerful, even essential force for introducing the means by which individuals can adapt and exploit a dynamic society. Illegitimates themselves become representative of flexibility and strength, able to adapt to new environmental demands and, even influence those changes themselves. That has Darwinian parallels and inspiration but also involves in this novel an exploration of social, economic and legal structures. Their legitimate counterparts, on the other hand, far from acting in a protective capacity, preserving society from destructive processes of change, are cast into the threatening anti-social role. This socially dangerous desire, to resist change, is seen by Collins to represent a profoundly self-destructive reflex. The legitimate are shown to enshrine regression rather than security, crucially they are unable to adapt to the demands of ever-changing social circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

### Issues of Structure

While No Name appears to conform to many of the narrative conventions that circumscribe sensation fiction, these fictional conventions too are subverted while being assimilated. Take, for example, the stock expectation of the sensation plot, 'the unmasking of extreme evil behind fair appearances'.<sup>13</sup> As Ford points out:

Whereas in most Collins novels the narrative is determined by the characters' attempts to follow a series of clues that lead them to the truth about some mysterious event in the past, in No Name, conversely, it is the

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<sup>12</sup> Ideas that bastards represented a stronger, potentially superior strain of family genes, are not restricted to post-Darwinian texts, but are explored in narratives such as King Lear in the speech of the bastard, Edmund (I ii) - though Shakespeare presents this as morally and socially dangerous. It is Darwinism that seems to give them a positive role in social and biological organisms.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, 'What is "Sensational" about the "Sensation novel"?', Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 37, reprinted in Pykett (ed.), Wilkie Collins (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 30-57 (p. 53).

disclosure of the book's single secret early on which initiates its main action.<sup>14</sup>

In No Name, however, far from creating suspense throughout the text, Collins frustrates reader expectations by positioning the key revelation of the novel, that Magdalen and Norah are illegitimate, in the opening chapters. Collins himself explains this deviation from what his readers had come to expect, in the Preface to No Name in which he states:

My one object in following a new course, is to enlarge the range of my studies in the art of writing fiction, and to vary the form in which I make my appeal to the reader, as attractively as I can.<sup>15</sup>

While it may be dangerous to conceive of the 'sensation novel' too rigidly as a fixed narrative form, it is clear that Collins himself saw his novel as breaking with narrative expectations.

It has been argued in this chapter that, far from making the climactic and disturbing revelation that of the illegitimacy of characters, disrupting apparently respectable domestic order and safety, Collins' structure, by beginning with this, allows the revelation that emerges subsequently from his text to be one about the insecurity and, in a sense, the illegitimacy, of social and legal constructions, including the construction of class and identity. The emergent strength of Magdalen seems, similarly, in the triumph of the weak, the illegitimate female, over the strong, the socially powerful males, to be a symbol of challenge to patriarchal order. Deirdre David views this desire by Collins as a novelist 'to enlarge the range of my studies in the art of writing fiction' as a radical impulse that she links specifically to issues of gender: she suggests that there exists, 'an

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<sup>14</sup> Ford, op. cit., p. viii.

<sup>15</sup> Collins, op. cit., p. xxii.

informing link between restlessness with dominant modes of literary form and fictional critique of dominant modes of gender politics'.<sup>16</sup> It was not, however, simply realist fiction that Collins expressed restlessness towards. It can be argued that he was nervous about being closely linked with what was seen to be the dominant form of literary subversion because, just like realist fiction, sensationalism formalised a mode of explaining society. It is how illegitimacy, a popular subject in the context of sensation fiction, allowing for criticism of strict gender and social regulation, provides Collins with the broader opportunity to express discontent with a range of literary conventions, even those associated with sensation fiction, that is significant here. This dissatisfaction with structural expectations can be viewed in relation to both social and, specifically, gender perspectives. David observes:

Even before it begins, No Name, a story about an unconventional female response to legal disinheritance, seeks to demystify the power of conventional, one might say, inherited, Victorian narrative discourse. Rather than demanding from the reader acquiescence in a controlled revelation of plot, the narrator collaboratively offers a chance to see how plot comes into being, an opportunity to experience plot-in-process, so to speak, rather than plot-as-product.<sup>17</sup>

David sees the novel, then, as rejecting its literary inheritance, as far as narrative design goes. One could go even further. The plot of No Name is pieced together through a variety of fiction and non-fiction texts: private letters, diary entries, fragments from newspapers and legal documents. The consistency of the official narrative with its appearance of omniscience is disrupted by a flurry of personal letters and these express confusion and emotional uncertainty. Far from being a disruption in the negative sense, a mere digression, Collins privileges awkward, inconsistent information unshaped by the

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<sup>16</sup> Deirdre David, 'Rewriting the Male Plot in Wilkie Collins's No Name', in Lyn Pykett (ed.), Wilkie Collins (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 136-148 (p. 136).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

demands of a polished narrative. We could read this manner of proceeding as analogous not just to an acknowledgement of the illegitimate but also to a privileging of the experience of the illegitimate. Collins gives space and significance to what is not normally included in novels, the illegitimate impulses and awkward feelings that are normally sacrificed to preserve the order of the single, dominant perspective.

Collins' handling of the narrator is relevant to this too. David Lodge comments:

The classic Victorian novel, perhaps most perfectly exemplified by George Eliot's Middlemarch, usually told its story from several points of view, which are often mediated through free indirect style, but compared and assessed by an authorial narrator. This was thoroughly consistent with the Victorian novelist's aim to present the individual in relation to society and social change. Individual fortunes in these novels illustrate broad social themes, developments, and conflicts in ways which only the narrator fully understands and can fully articulate. There is a kind of underlying confidence in this fiction that reality can be known, that the truth about human affairs can be told, and that such knowledge and truth can be shared collectively.<sup>18</sup>

Just as Collins' narrative dislodges confidence in many authoritative structures - from the law's power to define what is licit and illicit, through the principles believed to underlie class identities to the narrative pattern of the genre of sensation novel - so the confidence that tends to follow from an omniscient narrator is absent from No Name. Typically an omniscient narrative gives the impression of an authoritative source of knowledge and judgement in the text, which is ultimately in control of, and able to understand and interpret, individual values, motives and fortunes. It is this sense of monologic confidence, that there is one unifying truth to be discovered and told in each text and also in each individual, implicit in the reassuring presence of an omniscient narrator, that

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<sup>18</sup> David Lodge, Consciousness and the Novel (London: Secker & Warburg, 2002), p. 49.

distinguishes Collins from the work of many of his contemporaries exploring similar material: family dramas, mysteries, questions of conformity to social and moral norms. Collins' narrative raises doubts in the reader about how accurately illegitimacy can be defined, just as it raises doubts about whether a middle-class respectable woman can always be correctly distinguished from a servant, and the problematisation of illegitimacy gives rise to further questioning of conflicts between public and private, legal authority and personal identity.

## II

### Far From The Madding Crowd as Conventional Seduction Narrative

Far From The Madding Crowd (1874) by Thomas Hardy contains an illegitimacy plot that appears initially consistent with many of the conventions constructed around the illegitimacy narrative. Claire Tomalin considers Hardy's literary treatment of illegitimacy as being at odds with his own personal history, which she argues, reflects a more tolerant view than his literary treatment allows:

Being pregnant before marriage was usual enough among country people to be no great cause for shame if the man went reasonably willingly to the altar ...Jemima (Hardy's mother), her mother, her mother-in-law and her great-grandmother, all strong-minded and intelligent women, had all flouted the rules on sexual behaviour laid down by the Church and gentry.<sup>19</sup>

Her description of country attitudes to illegitimacy here certainly seems to be consistent with my analysis in chapter two. Tomalin offers an interesting hypothesis to explain the space between Hardy's personal experience and his literary representation of illegitimacy:

You have to wonder how much he brooded on the discovery that he had been an unwanted child who had prevented his mother from living the life she had hoped to set up for herself.<sup>20</sup>

While this interpretation seems superficially compelling, it relies on circumscribing Hardy's own multivalent background with somewhat conservative assumptions. Having

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<sup>19</sup> Claire Tomalin, Thomas Hardy: The Time Torn Man (Viking: London, 2006), p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.



asserted that Hardy was born into a culture that refuted conventional views on illegitimacy, Tomalin describes Hardy as ‘an unwanted child’; the only evidence she offers for this is the fact of his illegitimacy, a conjecture consistent with the most repressive Victorian orthodoxy. She accounts for the apparent conservatism of his literary representation of illegitimacy by reading his personal experience through the filter of a conventional literary shame response. In fact, as we shall see, Hardy invokes conventional patterns only to subvert them at critical points. The interrupted courtship of Sergeant Troy and Fanny Robin, a servant girl, certainly seems to follow the standard seduced maiden pattern: having seduced Fanny and made her pregnant, Troy abandons her in favour of Bathsheba Everdene, Fanny’s rich and beautiful former mistress. This abandonment quickly leads to destitution and Fanny is forced to enter the workhouse. Here, Hardy seems to conform to a familiar trope of humiliation and shame. Writers such as Eliot in Adam Bede and Trollope in Jessie Phillips invoke the spectre of the workhouse to highlight what seem like the dire and unavoidable consequences of sexual fall and pregnancy. The death of Fanny, along with her newborn baby, in the workhouse, appears to bring a conventional close to what seems like her peripheral influence on the narrative. Indeed, this is Tomalin’s interpretation:

When he wrote fictional accounts of country girls seduced and pregnant, he made Fanny Robin and Tess into romantic figures and victims, betrayed by men of higher social standing and driven to unhappiness and death. He sympathized with them and defended them, but he showed them punished with the severity his society regarded as appropriate. He made their babies die too.<sup>21</sup>

However, nothing is quite what it seems here. As we shall see later in James’ The Other House, the subtle shifts that Hardy and James introduce to the standard emotional

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

dynamic of the relationship between the seducer and seduced have profound narrative consequences.

### The Illegitimate Male

The most profound shift concerns the fact that the seducer, Troy is genuinely in love with the victim of seduction, Fanny. He is not simply a sexual adventurer like Frederic Dalton in Jessie Phillips or Bellingham in Ruth. While his behaviour at first exploited her vulnerability, he arranges a marriage with her, frustrated not by him, but by Fanny, who goes to the wrong church. The death of Fanny forces Troy to acknowledge the mercenary considerations that led him to marry Bathsheba, to Bathsheba herself:

“This woman is more to me, dead as she is, than ever you were, or are, or can be. If Satan had not tempted me with that face of yours, and those cursed coquetries, I should have married her. I never had another thought till you came in my way. Would to God that I had; but it is all too late! I deserve to live in torment for this ... You are nothing to me – nothing ... a ceremony before a priest doesn’t make a marriage. I am not morally yours.”<sup>22</sup>

As in No Name, this text questions the adequacy of legal institutions to define morality in sexual relationships. Here, Hardy allows the seducer, Troy, to assert his love for his dead mistress, in defiance of his marriage vows. Although Hardy’s presentation of his attraction to Bathsheba initially emphasises his masculine power, notably through his sword-play amongst the ferns, here, he is feminised. Like a seduced maiden, Troy is bewitched by appearance and the prospect of wealth and lives to lament, too late, his Fall. Although the feminist writers Penny Broumelha in Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Hardy, Far From The Madding Crowd, ed. Ronald Blythe (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 361. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

Ideology and Narrative Form (1982), and Rosemarie Morgan in Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy (1988), explore the idea that Hardy's novels provide a rich source of examples of gender confusion, they do not connect this specifically with the potent symbolism of illegitimacy. Bathsheba is superior in terms of wealth and status and his words to her, describing their courtship in terms that emphasise her role as seductress, 'coquetries', frame him as the wronged victim in their affair. The word 'affair' is used deliberately here because Hardy uses Troy's guilt to destabilise his relationship with Bathsheba and define it as an affair rather than a marriage. His statement, "I am not morally yours", invokes a kind of natural law at odds with patriarchy as well as the legal institution. In this way, then, as he stands over the body of Fanny Robin, Troy identifies with her emotionally, and levels at Bathsheba the accusations she might have aimed at him. Hardy does not have Troy identify simply with a woman, but with a poor, disenfranchised one. Troy's imaginative identification with Fanny is significant because it allows Hardy to reveal the roles that money and status play in determining legitimacy. Just as Collins returns to an old eighteenth-century pattern in his revised founding narrative, Hardy's presentation of Troy seems to deliberately recall an eighteenth century text. Troy's dangerous, almost feminine economic vulnerability is foreshadowed by Austen's characterisation of Willoughby in Sense and Sensibility, another seducer who, Austen implies, is ultimately made unhappy by his need to marry for money at the expense of love. This identification, with disenfranchised female characters, has the effect of at least partially rehabilitating Willoughby and Troy in the eyes of the reader.

## Female Solidarity as the Alternative Conclusion

Far From The Madding Crowd revisits another subversive challenge to masculine authority, already defiantly explored during the eighteenth-century, in the Memoirs of Emma Courtney (1759) by Mary Hays, which offers a nascent feminist resolution to the problem of illegitimacy, a resolution, moreover, that does not require the death of the seduced mother, but, rather, asserts the potential of female unity to subvert and overcome the dominance of male authority.<sup>23</sup> The suicide of Emma's husband, Montagu, exposes a sordid secret. Just as in Far From The Madding Crowd, the victim of his seduction is a servant in the home he shares with his wife. He has exploited his position as a doctor to kill the child shortly after its birth. Unlike Trollope's presentation of Frederic in Jessie Phillips as an infanticidal father motivated above all by selfishness, Hays shows Montagu's infanticidal intentions as deriving from a desire to protect the mother from further shame:

I foresaw that, with the loss of her character, this simple girl's misfortune and degradation would be irretrievable ... Bewildered, amidst contending principles – distracted by a variety of emotions – in seeking a remedy for one vice, I plunged ... into others of a more scarlet dye. (p. 191)

The reference to 'scarlet' marks Montagu here in the highly recognisable shade of the fallen, or 'scarlet' woman. His suicide note transfers the traditional masculine role of family protector on to his wife, whom he asks to look after Rachel, his seduced victim:

I need not say – protect, if she survive, the miserable mother! – To you, whose heavenly goodness I have so ill requited, it would be injurious as unnecessary. (p. 192)

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<sup>23</sup> See also Eliza Fenwick, Secresy, ed. Isobel Grundy (Ontario: Broadview, 1998), a novel that explores illegitimacy and the role of the male foundling through the friendship of two women; Caroline, the narrator and Sibella, the victim of male oppression.

Far from indulging in the sort of vengeful feelings the reader might expect from a wronged wife, Emma honours her husband's last wish and brings Rachel into her home, where they live, apparently contentedly: 'She has never since quitted me, and her faithful services, and humble, grateful attachment, have repaid my protection an hundred fold' (p. 192). Virtue is its own reward here, as Emma gains a loyal friend and servant. The betrayed woman is not exiled from the respectable affectionate and protective household; and is not the perpetrator of the infanticide. The solution to her Fall is not punishment and destruction for her but a denouement that centres on female sisterhood and benevolence. Hays' plot absolves the unmarried mother from both guilt and punishment.

The redemptive power of female solidarity to circumvent conventional patterns of domesticity and legal and moral judgements is also explored, to a lesser degree, by Elizabeth Gaskell in Ruth, where the support of Faith Benson makes it possible for the origins of Leonard's birth to be concealed. In Adam Bede, too, it is a woman, Dinah who provides the emotional support that results in Hetty's confession and partial rehabilitation. Interestingly, it is the intervention of these good women in the lives of their fallen peers, which creates a breathing space within the progress of the dominant narrative and suspends what can seem like an inevitable progress towards death. It is only the eighteenth-century novel, however, that is brave enough to reject premature death out of hand as the inevitable end of the fallen woman. To see this pattern reproduced in a Victorian text, albeit with one important caveat, one has to look to a poem, Aurora Leigh (1856) by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, which reproduces the pattern of the Memoirs of Emma Courtney. Aurora Leigh and Marian Erle, her social inferior,

are linked by their love for the same man. Aurora finds Marian, who has had an illegitimate son, and offers her a home. They live in domestic comfort together, with neither the death of the mother or the child a necessary conclusion to the text. Critically, though, Barrett Browning moves the action to Italy. While Hays could envision a kind of feminist domesticity in England, for Barrett Browning, this romantic idealism had to be geographically marginalised. That the Victorian texts discussed here fail to wholly resist the pressure to conform to certain narrative expectations, suggests that anxiety about the position of the fallen woman in society was increasing during this period.

The death of Fanny Robin and her baby in the workhouse seems to signal Hardy's concession to literary tradition, silencing the disruptive potential of the illegitimacy plot, in line with Gaskell and Eliot. In fact, as we shall see, Fanny's death initiates a radical assertion of the power of female solidarity in the face of male lawlessness. That Fanny's story can be subverted in this way, within what seems to be a thoroughly conservative narrative pattern, allows Hardy to reproduce structurally a version of contemporary social reality, where an apparently dominant morality failed to impose homogeneity of response. Although Fanny dies, it is, in fact, the posthumous nature of her relationship with Bathsheba that makes their allegiance all the more remarkable. Hardy takes what often remains safely as the symbolic power of the dead illegitimate mother and transforms it into something strange and real.

### Illegitimacy Within Marriage

Hardy shares more with Hays than with his contemporaries in the sense that he dares to position the revelation of seduction within marriage, thus calling into question the security of the bedrock of conventional domesticity still further. Both Bathsheba and Emma are held responsible by their husbands for the destructive consequences of the seduction. In Emma's case, Montagu claims that his jealousy of her former but not forgotten attachment drove him to seek comfort from another woman, while Troy blames Bathsheba for seducing him away from his true love, Fanny. In this way, then, both Hays and Hardy introduce uncertainty into the extent to which the law can confer legitimacy onto a marital relationship and, more significantly, onto a wife.

Emma and Bathsheba are increasingly identified as illegitimate wives and, moreover, identify themselves with their husbands' seduced victims:

The sadness of Fanny Robin's fate did not make Bathsheba's glorious, although she was the Esther to this poor Vashti, and their fates might be supposed to stand in some respects as contrasts to each other. (p. 354)

The reference here to the Old Testament story of Vashti and Esther, where the legitimate wife of King Ahasuerus, Vashti, is deposed and replaced by Esther, because she disobeys her husband and refuses to act in a manner she considers immoral, is significant in the context of a nineteenth-century novel concerned with (dis)obedience. Just as the moral status of Vashti and Esther is not fixed in the Book of Esther but depends on interpretation, so too Bathsheba and Fanny prove interchangeable in their roles as victim / legitimate and loyal wife. Indeed, by identifying Fanny as 'poor Vashti', the displaced

wife, Hardy seems to offer support for Troy's judgement that, "a ceremony before a priest doesn't make a marriage" (p. 361), and under cover of the allusion offers tacit recognition of Fanny's prior moral claim to be considered Troy's wife.

Hardy depicts Bathsheba as unable to feel hatred for Fanny:

"If she had only lived, I could have been angry and cruel towards her with some justification: but to be vindictive towards a dead woman recoils upon myself." (p. 358)

Here, Hardy has Bathsheba articulate the social anxiety that is both reassured and intensified by the almost sanctified space occupied by the sacrificial body of the illegitimate mother. Just as Emma recognises her husband's last wishes, and the moral obligation she has to the victim of his seduction, so too does Bathsheba, whose eventual obedience to Troy's unreasonable emotional outburst is expressed by her acknowledgment of Fanny's prior claim on Troy by burying her husband in the same grave as her rival. This allies her closely to the obedient biblical Esther.

Hardy seems to foreground here what could be described as a deeply conventional view of the necessity of wifely obedience. Yet this act, literally framed by the paired inscription and the shared tombstone, could be seen as much as an expression of female solidarity; an acknowledgement by Bathsheba of Fanny's prior and more legitimate claim on Troy, as an act of pious loyalty to Troy. It is also a move that blurs further the line between legitimate and illegitimate wife. Further, Hardy suggests that through Bathsheba's sacrifice, legitimacy of a kind has been restored to the child who is buried in consecrated ground alongside its mother and father.



Hardy explores the trope of female solidarity, represented as a challenge to conventional ideas of family and legitimacy. As in the Memoirs of Emma Courtney, it is the wronged wife rather than any man, who holds the power to confer retrospectively a kind of renewed moral legitimacy onto the mothers and even, in the case of Far From The Madding Crowd, the illegitimate child of the unsanctioned relationship and to remake the family in unconventional ways that challenge conventional definitions of the family unit. Under cover of what seem to be passive female friendships, then, writers were able to acknowledge what might be described as a more realistic view of illegitimacy, supported by social history, which suggests that historically it is often the mother of the unmarried woman and the community who would raise the child through communal supervision, existing alongside and counter to a more rigid and homogenous literary culture and the more punitive plots of Victorian fiction.

### III

#### The Other House and 'Natural' Motherhood

Just as in No Name, The Other House (1896) by Henry James, opens with an appreciation of the comfort and apparently timeless security that 'the cheerful country house' has come to represent:

When Jean Martle, arriving with her message, was ushered into the hall ... she perceived it to be showy and indeed rather splendid. Bright, large and high, richly decorated and freely used.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, potential disturbances to this domestic cheer present themselves rapidly, more swiftly, in fact, than in No Name. The 'other house' of the title is the one in which Jean Martle finds herself. Bounds belongs to Tony Bream whose wife dies of post-natal complications shortly after Jean's arrival, a significant choice of death and a foreshadowing of the main patterns in the subsequent plot, in that it highlights the risks inherent to desire even when it has been socially-sanctioned. Jean herself comes to represent another kind of threat to domestic tranquillity. Tony's neighbour and business partner, Mrs Beaver, intending that Jean should marry her son, Paul, has invited her to stay. Unfortunately, Jean falls in love with Tony. Her reciprocated but unspoken love frustrates not only Mrs Beaver but also Rose Armiger, the best friend of Tony's wife, who has developed a dangerous, self-destructive passion for Tony. The perils that are potentially present within desire, even of unmarried women for widowed men, are here

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<sup>24</sup> Henry James, The Other House, introd. Louis Begley (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 1999), p. 12. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

initially the awakening of a hidden, uncontrollable, passion of jealousy. The consequences of this frustrated desire, complicated by a pledge made by Tony to his wife that he will not remarry 'in the lifetime of her daughter', lead to the murder of Effie, Tony's daughter, four years after her birth and the original meeting of Tony and Jean.<sup>25</sup>

### The Other House and Adam Bede

The Other House shares many of the defining features that Adam Bede, as arguably the archetypal mid-century infanticide text, established as conventions by which infanticide may be understood and, to varying degrees, circumscribed and controlled by a society with a deep belief in the innate maternal virtue of females. In both novels it is women who are guilty of this deeply problematic act, women who are, moreover, mothers either real or virtual. In Adam Bede the biological mother, Hetty, smothers her child, while in The Other House the relationship between victim and aggressor simulates this convention. Rose, who eventually admits to having drowned Effie, claims for herself the role of surrogate mother through her strong emotional bond with Effie's biological mother:

"I want her for another reason," Rose declared. "I adored her poor mother – and she's hers ... It's as your dear dead mother's, my own, my sweet, that – if it's time – I shall carry you to bed!" (p. 235)

The grammatical expressions of possession in this speech create verbal confusion about whose the child is - 'her', 'hers', 'your', 'my own, my', most of all in the phrase 'my own' which, ambiguously is both an endearment and a statement of ownership. Both

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<sup>25</sup> I have used the word 'infanticide' when discussing the theme in relation to the archetype but 'child-murder' when discussing the murder of Effie specifically, since she is four years' old when she dies.

Eliot, in her negative portrayals of Hetty, and James are keen to exploit the challenge to sacrosanct moral and cultural values represented by mothers who kill their children. In the above speech, for example, Rose is not the natural mother; her love and ownership are not what they seem but destructive and threatening to the child. Correspondingly, her action, child-murder, is not that of loving, natural female behaviour, as conventionally constructed.

The secret, once again, at the heart of James' picture of an ordinary domesticity, 'the terrors of the cheerful country house', is that danger can issue from the heart of desire and love. What is revisionary about James' handling of illegitimacy and infanticide narrative patterns is that, besides confuting most of the established patterns, the conception that his novel challenges most is that of the nature of love and desire. It also conveys a rejection of social structures as morally authoritative and appears to replace these with a morality of individualism. This is also, like others considered in this chapter a novel, which presents a strong woman, though whom the plot places in the conventionally weak position of being the child-murderer. The novel takes further than No Name the concept of a ruthless woman prepared to defy moral and social sanctions for her own ends

To invoke the idealised, almost iconic state of motherhood as a defence of infanticide had been, as Krueger's research shows, a highly successful strategy in the real-life defence of women accused of infanticide and one which is exploited in fiction

too.<sup>26</sup> Even when, as in the cases of Hetty and Rose, it is clear that mothers are guilty, the need to believe in the sanctity of motherhood provides a formidable means of complicating what ought to be a straightforward acknowledgement of guilt. In a motif that has the effect of further confounding conventional literary associations and moral judgement, James, like Eliot locates the child-murder itself in a pastoral environment. Hetty smothers her child in an authentic rural location, while Effie is drowned in a river just beyond the reach of urban reproductions of rural Otherness, the gardens of Bounds and Eastmead. We could see these locations, just outside the inhabited territory of both novels, as symbols of the pattern we have noted recurring in illegitimacy narratives, that of the removal of the guilty, tainted, woman, from the community, either abroad or to a country retreat - a pattern found as early as Sense and Sensibility and Mansfield Park. It is relevant here to introduce Krueger's reading of the removal of the scene of infanticide outside community territory: she sees this as part of what we might call a narrative of mitigation, found in historical court-case narratives as well as sometimes in fiction. She says: 'The privatization and pastoralization of infanticide aimed at placing women who killed their infants in a virtually super-natural space, outside the state's jurisdiction'.<sup>27</sup> This strategy, in literary works and in court cases, proves successful in exploiting the potential of infanticide to confound conservative expectations about the crime of infanticide and, by extension, testing the boundaries of contemporary legal and social law.

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<sup>26</sup> As Christine Krueger points out: 'Beliefs about womanly nature and maternal instinct posed formidable obstacles to infanticide convictions' (Christine L. Krueger, 'Literary Defenses and Medical Prosecutions: Representing Infanticide in Nineteenth-Century Britain', Victorian Studies, 42 (Winter, 1997), 271-290 p. 278).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

Although infanticide is represented as an isolated and literally extra-ordinary act, one definitively outside the borders of what can be known and understood, Eliot and James exploit another, apparently contradictory convention that locates infanticide within comprehensible and all too familiar domestic trauma. Both Hetty and Rose could be said to fit the profile of, 'a seduced innocent as the representative unmarried mother, driven in desperation to kill her child'.<sup>28</sup> They are the victims of the breakdown of what they hoped, erroneously as it transpires, to be an absolute obligation implicit to sexual relationships. Their partners, Arthur Donnithorne and Tony Bream, take advantage of the possibility that the obligations traditionally incumbent upon sexual relationships might be evaded. The disappointment of female, trusting hopes in cases such as these was identified as a powerful motivation to infanticide, one almost conferring an element of innocence and naturalness on the women's later actions, but, critically, only when a child was the shameful evidence of a socially unsanctioned relationship. It did not give a green light to the random killing of any infants who happened to get in the way.

While Hetty fits the profile of both a seduced innocent and desperate unmarried mother, though Eliot also entertains the idea of her as wickedly prone to reject the claims of a tiny child, for Rose, only one element of this profile is experienced in an authentic way. While her romantic expectations have been disappointed and betrayed, she is not the legitimate mother of Effie and cannot claim to have her disappointed hopes compounded by shame. Furthermore, Rose herself seems to be aware of the cultural significance of such orthodoxies. She constructs herself in the image of Effie's mother in order to

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 274

capitalize on the mitigating potential of the stereotype she now resembles. As with the self-conscious references to the tradition of locating child-murder in pastoral environments and of confounding explanation by referring to the sanctity of the mother-child bond, Rose's superficial resemblance to another tradition of infanticide texts draws attention to the ways in which The Other House recognises and subverts the conventions that circumscribe the infanticide narrative. Like Hays' Memoirs of Emma Courtney, James' The Other House reaches a dénouement that avoids a punitive ending for the guilty woman. There a fallen woman finds protection from both a loving man and a benign woman. Here a fallen woman is protected by a man and (again) someone she has injured: not the wife of her lover but the father of the child she killed. In both, fathers take responsibility for events and do so in a radically unexpected twist in the plot.

### The Role of the Father

Both Eliot and James take advantage of the paradigmatic and multivalent qualities of infanticide to reflect on the wider social implications of such apparently aberrant behaviour. Perhaps most significant in this context is the response of the father of the child, not guilty directly of any crime against the child victim but nonetheless framed in both novels by guilt. James stresses the public context and significance of Tony's interventions in the tragedy. This guilt implies an awareness of complicity, complicity in the sense of failing to honour personal if not social contracts. Eliot presents Arthur as sympathetic to Hetty's plight to the extent that he publicly incriminates himself in order

to secure a pardon for her, asserting that the truth lies within the private significance of their relationship in defiance of the judgement of the law.<sup>29</sup> An apparent contradiction operates here. In order to stress that the private circumstances of infanticide are in effect unknowable in a court of law, a very public declaration by the man in each case is required, that transcends the legal meaning of guilt and innocence by referring to circumstances that remain private. Tony Bream's sense of complicity leads to a declaration that at first seems to leave Arthur's act of conscience firmly in the shade. He confesses to the killing of his daughter himself:

"Tony cries on the housetops that he did it!"

Dennis, blank and bewildered, sank once more on his sofa. "He cries -?"

"To cover Jean."

Dennis took it in. "But if she is covered?"

"Then to shield Miss Armiger." (p. 297)

James' language here conveys both the public natures of the man's actions ('cries', twice, 'from the roof tops') and the withdrawal of the woman into privacy and safety ('cover', 'she is covered', 'to shield'). 'Cover' suggests the clandestine hiding of a crime typical of the sensation novel and the further sense of a safety from prosecution or an alibi, as a defence from prosecution. But, James seems also to be bringing the ancient term, the legal concept of the 'feme covert' in here. Under the common laws of 'coverture', practised throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century in England, a married woman was not recognised as having legal rights separate from her husband.<sup>30</sup> What is significant

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<sup>29</sup> Krueger, p. 279, sees the tendency to stress the private character of infanticide as a move that protects women from full blame.

<sup>30</sup> See William Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England, (1765-9: 'By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing; and is therefore called in our law-french a feme-covert; is said to be covert-baron, or under the protection and influence of her husband, her baron, or lord; and her condition during her marriage is called her coverture.'



here is that the loaded use of this word suggests that Tony and Rose's friends recognise that Tony's responsibilities extend to those of a husband for a wife. The desire, 'to shield Miss Armiger', far from being a surprising and unconventional act, as suggested by Dennis's shock, is actually motivated by a profoundly conventional impulse - one that has run through the narrative of infanticide. The Doctor and Dennis are clear on Tony's motive. Just like Arthur, he attempts to protect Rose from the state by obfuscating the issue of guilt. That he 'cries on the housetops', seems to be at odds with the effort to emphasise the private, essentially unknowable, motivation to infanticide. In fact, it serves the same purpose as Arthur's public pardon in the sense that it undermines any confidence in the possibility of asserting objective truth in the matter.

### Individualism and Conformity

James skews and decentres conventional infanticide narrative patterns in this text and, as a result, introduces self-consciousness into a well-worn plot motif. Just as in No Name, there seems to be an awareness among the characters of the novel of playing a part within a choreographed drama. Similarly Rose is no ruined innocent but a consciously manipulative operator upon the emotions of other people, exploiting the innocent child for her own desires. James invokes some of the most powerful and emotive Victorian themes, where personal passion destroys public conformity to social rules, but in ways that ultimately, and startlingly, celebrate individualism. The slippage, from a narrative that appears to be consistent with the conventions that circumscribe literary treatments of infanticide to one that knowingly subverts these conventions, has the effect of privileging

individualism over conformity where conformity is increasingly associated with discredited social and moral certainties. Like Collins, James makes the guilty woman, in a drama of illegitimate love, the focus of an unconventional concept of individual identity. The management of Rose's public persona, like Magdalen's conscious adoption of her performed identity, includes assuming conventional traits if they offer useful potential for dissembling while following individual desires very much at odds with convention. This space between appearance and reality seems to reproduce on an individual level the duplicity that operates in the structure of the novel as a whole, where apparent conformity to established literary tradition conceals a far more radical narrative of desire, betrayal, and child-murder. The convention that allows James the greatest potential for subversion is the one associated with unmarried mothers driven to kill out of shame. Tony is the father of the victim, Effie, and he has rejected the infanticidal mother-substitute, Rose. Framing herself as a rejected mother, Rose pursues a strategy that traditionally offers considerable protection to women guilty of child-murder. But, critically, Rose is not the biological mother of the child. Furthermore, although Effie is the product of a single parent family and in that sense her background, resembling that of the archetypal vulnerable illegitimate child, can be exploited, she is not illegitimate. In this way, then, at the end of a century where many literary works struggled with the personal and cultural consequences of illegitimacy, James signals the redundancy of illegitimacy as a signifier of multiple Victorian anxieties. Josephine McDonagh has pointed to some Victorian instances of the figure of the woman with infanticidal impulses, such as Mrs Transome in Felix Holt, as representatives of ruthless, impersonal agents of a natural life force, acting in the interests of the survival of the fittest:

From the beginning of the novel we know of her (Mrs Transome's) 'desire that her first, rickety, ugly, imbecile child should die, and leave room for her darling, of whom she could be proud' ... Mrs Transome ... is a mistress of evolution, a Dame Nature figure, who attempts to control the future generations.<sup>31</sup>

James' ruthless child-killer here, however, seems to represent no impersonal force of nature but a force for privileging the individual over the law, a force the plot seems to validate.

This superficial resemblance in James' narrative to conventional narrative forms where the subversive challenge to social laws posed by infanticide is transformed into profound social conservatism conveys a message about the moral redundancy of the kind of orthodoxy developed to manage literary illegitimacy. James shows this by creating characters like Rose who are guilty of child-murder and who are able to evade social responsibility by demonstrating a self-confident control of literary convention. In fact, Rose does not kill out of a desperate desire for social acceptability or of fear arising from a socially-created sense of guilt but because she wants Tony or, at least, she does not want anyone else to have him. The betrayed woman is dominant over the shamed mother in this version of the child-murderer:

"I've failed, but I did what I could. It was all that I saw – it was all that was left me. It took hold of me, it possessed me: it was the last gleam of a chance."

Paul flushed like a sick man under a new wave of weakness. "Of a chance for what?"

"To make him hate her. You'll say my calculation was grotesque – my stupidity as ignoble as my crime. All I can answer is that I might none the less have succeeded. People have – in worse conditions." (p. 320)

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<sup>31</sup> McDonagh, *Child Murder*, op. cit., p. 167.

As suggested by the proliferation of the personal pronouns 'I' and 'me' in the passage quoted above, far from being a perverse act of conventionality, infanticide in this case becomes a profoundly self-seeking and self-conscious act. Like illicit sex, it is still impelled by desire, a departure from other infanticide narratives, where desire is notably absent – Hetty is presented by Eliot not as desiring Arthur for himself but simply for the money and status she will acquire through marriage to him. The far more shocking, radical selfishness that underpins Rose's actions represents a defiant challenge to the safe conventions identified by Krueger that had, up until now, controlled literary representations of infanticide. Like Collins, James disrupts the narrative conventions of the illegitimate-infant narratives and in so doing, he demonstrates that the pursuit of individual gratification can smash through the carefully constructed fictions that exist to explain and control subversive desires, and sanctions against heinous crimes like child-murder. In this sense, we might argue, James' departure from the patterns of the genre and the illegitimacy and infanticide narratives creates an illegitimate narrative, a mutant offspring.

## The Trial Scene

In Adam Bede the consequences of infanticide are largely controlled by a trial where the complex, private guilt of Hetty is brought into the public domain. The trial is a formal process that serves to make safe an act whose threat to society lies in its apparent defiance of conventional moral codes and of the family as social unit of social order, of legitimate financial inheritance. Furthermore, the trial favours collective legislative process over individual guilt. Hetty's unstable subjective response to the infanticide is now overlaid by a confident, monologic, apparently objective verdict of guilt. There is a tension here, between an ambivalent individuality and the certainty explicit in a process of law, a tension that remains unresolved in Adam Bede. A trial does, however, at least on the surface, provide a comforting resolution and a clearly demarcated statement of right and wrong. Even infanticide is demonstrated to be subject to the moral authority of a coherent and confident social order. In The Other House, however, the loss of faith in society to provide resolutions to the consequences of unsanctioned individual desire is represented most clearly by the formal process of the trial having been replaced by an open-ended and ambiguous cover-up.

A trial is a mechanism for assessing guilt. While the issue of premeditated guilt is fudged in Hetty's case, emphasising her rather ambiguous level of responsibility and thus retaining some sympathy in the reader, James leaves no doubt that Rose deliberately intends to kill Effie:

“She was immersed – she was held under water – she was made sure of. Oh, I grant you it took a hand – and it took a spirit! But they were

there. Then she was left. A pull of the chain brought back the boat; and the author of the crime walked away." (p. 295)

Once more James' style and grammar in a key statement of the guilty act convey his decentring of the conventional category of agency and guilt. The story here is narrated in a startling sequence of passive constructions. It may be, in content, a statement of absolute conviction of guilty agency, yet this is presented in passive, not active, forms. The clear assertion of the guilty agent is delayed until the end, with the words 'the author of the crime'. Up till, then the victim ('she') has repeatedly been the subject of the verbs. The subject position is not occupied by the guilty agent, Rose, but the defenceless victim, the child. James' choice of the word 'author' is significant here, when it comes. It projects a sense of omniscience onto the killer. In a novel dominated by equivocation, the act of child-murder represents a singular moment of absolute certitude. In this way, if in no other, infanticide retains its paradigmatic quality. Nor in James' mutant, illegitimate narrative is Tony – the seducer and the father - all that he seems. Or, rather, he is rather more than the stereotype he conforms to would lead us to believe.

Tony manages to transcend the role of seducer that tradition has prescribed for him. Not only is he sympathetic towards the potential defendant Rose, he is able to defy the forces of public morality and punitive social order. In a profound break with orthodoxy, the will of the individual is favoured over the requirements of social propriety, Tony determines that the crime will be concealed as an accident. That it is possible for Tony to overwrite the death of his daughter vividly demonstrates that just as in Collins' depiction of society, what matters now is the surface of actions and emotions

– the roles that are personal, whether guilty or innocent, legal or illegitimate, and beyond that, squaring them with what is socially acceptable rather than preserving the authenticity of the emotion or action. Unlike Collins, however, it is not only the social ‘Other’, inhabiting the space beyond social legitimacy, who manipulates the space between appearance and reality. Those who in Collins were unconscious victims of this sleight of hand, the socially legitimate, are now in James willingly complicit in their own manipulation.

Tony’s own personal sense of guilt and responsibility expresses what is left unsaid by Arthur Donnithorne and, by extension, Eliot herself, about the lover-father’s failures: “‘If she had not been mine she wouldn’t be lying there as I’ve seen her. Yet I’m glad she was mine! ... It was I who killed her’”(p. 308). Furthermore, he is able to intervene, again to an extent unthinkable in Adam Bede, in compliance with his own individual desires and in defiance of social law:

“‘She loves me!’” - Tony’s face reflected the mere monstrous fact. “It has made what it has made - her awful act and my silence. My silence is a part of the crime and the cruelty - I shall live to be a horror to myself. But I see it, none the less, as I see it, and I shall keep the word I gave her in the first madness of my fear. It comes to me – there it is.” (p. 303)

A hidden monstrosity within love is the hidden secret within this household and in the unseen heart of individuals. Tony will become, the language of this passage suggests, himself a house containing and concealing ‘horror’. What the infanticide narrative comes down to then, in James’ text is an overriding sense of individual responsibility replacing a reliance on public, social justice. Just as the motivation for the crime has shifted from fear of social estrangement to fear of loss of individual happiness so too has the form of

retribution shifted. Rose's punishment itself emphasises this pervasive subjectivity. She will have to live with her actions for the rest of her life:

“But I don't defend myself - I'm face to face with my mistake. I'm face to face with it for ever - and that's how I wish you to see me. Look at me well!” (p. 320)

Tony comprehends what kind of torture that involves: ‘Tony thought a moment. “Her doom will be to live”’(p. 310). Again, this internalised process of atonement serves to underline the new importance placed on individual integrity and represents a significant shift away from the kind of public repentance and ultimately the death sentence imposed on Hetty. Just as the horror is hidden under the surface, so is the sentence, the ‘doom’, but not imposed by a law court.



## IV

### Conclusion

The contribution of The Other House to a debate about the relationship of the individual to her society follows conventions most fully explored in the Victorian period, where the spectre of illegitimacy is exploited in order to engage in an exploration of identity that, were it not figured upon the 'Other', would be considered inadmissible. The trope of illegitimacy allows writers the freedom to explore the consequences of socially marginalised sexuality from a position of relative safety. Yet, simultaneously, as James acknowledges and even capitalizes upon conventions, evolving a position in the narrative where illegitimacy comes to be figured as the locus for manifold social anxieties, he questions and subverts those conventions. Paradoxically, those conventions could themselves be seen as the original archetypes of subversion. In this way, then James demonstrates the extent to which illegitimacy, as a plot motif in the nineteenth-century novel, once the embodiment of ambiguity, has by 1896 been assimilated into a known, knowable and thus reassuring trope of social dysfunction and 'otherness'.

When we consider his handling of the themes that have been the subject of investigation of this thesis, it is, in particular, in his representation of infanticide that James is most radical. It is the superficial similarity of the design of plot and characterisation in The Other House to the paradigmatic nineteenth-century infanticide narrative as exemplified by Adam Bede that makes the moments of dissonance that occur in The Other House all the more startling. In Adam Bede, infanticide is made safe by

being subjected to a legal process that in turn articulates a faith in the authority of a hegemonic social and moral constitution. Yet it is what, even in Adam Bede, evades the crushing reach of moral consensus and certitude - that is individual subjectivity - that James gives complete expression to. He conceives a society where ostensibly objective social absolutes, such as the necessity of legal process to define guilt and normalise any anti-social impulse, have been discarded as irrelevant. In their place is a wholly internalised awareness of guilt and responsibility, a sense of responsibility that does not extend beyond the individual sense of self.

And yet, as we have seen in James' novel, illegitimacy never wholly loses its power to unsettle, nor are the patterns rehearsed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century wholly discarded. Indeed, other late-Victorian writers who might be assumed to take a more politically radical stance than James, particularly on issues of female emancipation, still clearly find contemporary relevance in the patterns of illegitimacy stretching back to the eighteenth century this thesis has explored. Where James subverts these established patterns, New Woman writers such as Grant Allen in The Woman Who Did (1895) and Olive Schreiner in The Story of an African Farm (1883) reprise these patterns with the result that their narratives make the powerful point that little has changed over one hundred years in terms of the consequences of unsanctioned female sexuality.

In this context, the multiple points of comparison between The Woman Who Did and Adeline Mowbray (1805), which predates The Woman Who Did by ninety years, are

striking. The heroine of The Woman Who Did, Herminia Barton, falls in love with Alan Merrick, who proposes marriage. She rejects his proposal on philosophical grounds, her belief that marriage is a social institution that oppresses women, but she suggests an alternative, that they live together as husband and wife. Somewhat paradoxically, this offer at clear odds with prevailing morality, is represented by Allen as indicative of Herminia's fundamental moral purity:

“But Herminia, just as a matter of form – to prevent the world from saying the cruel things the world is sure to say – and as an act of justice to you and your children! A mere ceremony of marriage; what does it mean nowadays than that we two agree to live together on the ordinary terms of civilised society?”

Still Herminia shook her head. “No, no,” she cried vehemently. “I deny and decline those terms. They are part and parcel of a system of slavery. I have learnt that the righteous soul should avoid all appearance of evil. I will not palter and parley with the unholy thing ... marriage itself is still an assertion of man's supremacy over woman. It ties her to him for life; it ignores her individuality; it compels her to promise what no human heart can be sure of performing ... it is full of all evils, and I decline to consider it. If I love a man at all, I must love him on terms of perfect freedom.”<sup>32</sup>

Herminia's stance is framed here by Allen as an assault on worn-out moral codes, more specifically, those promulgated by the church. She claims for herself the moral high ground by offering a fresh reading of religious doctrine, “the righteous soul should avoid all appearance of evil”. By invoking biblical discourse to justify her own position, Herminia's essential purity is asserted. The intelligence and philosophical idealism of Herminia is foreshadowed by Adeline's own refusal to marry Glenmurray. While Adeline's views have been shaped by the writings of her lover rather than by independent thought, as is the case with Herminia, both women share a strength of purpose and idealism that presents them as more intellectually robust than their partners.

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<sup>32</sup> Grant Allen, The Woman Who Did, ed. Nicholas Ruddick (Ontario: Broadview, 2004), p. 74. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

Just as in Adeline Mowbray, where continental Europe represents a place of escape from the stifling moralism of England, Herminia and Merrick travel to Italy to escape the censure accompanying extra-marital pregnancy.<sup>33</sup> Both Opie and Allen provide a space where these relationships are allowed to be viewed as enriching. Opie describes the 'attachment' between Adeline and Glenmurray as 'cemented by one of the strongest of all ties – the consciousness of mutual benefit and assistance',<sup>34</sup> emphasising the element of equality that characterises their relationship. In both texts, however, there is an overwhelming sense of pessimism, that no relationship based on a rejection of society's conventions can escape punishment. As Allen says, 'All happy times must end, and the happier, the sooner' (p. 107). The deaths of Glenmurray and Merrick leave their partners without legal or, critically, financial security. Both women struggle to support their daughters but motherhood allows for the possibility of renewed social acceptance. It is in their deaths, framed by both authors as acts of willed self-sacrifice, that Adeline and Herminia are redeemed. They die so that their daughters can be returned to their grandparents, free from the taint of sexual subversion and illegitimacy passed on through the mother. This recognition on the part of both Adeline and Herminia, that their deaths are necessary to protect their daughters from shame represents a devastating acknowledgement on the parts of Opie and Allen of the power of social convention, specifically as it relates to illegitimacy.

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<sup>33</sup> See also earlier discussion of the pattern of exile as an accompaniment to sexual misconduct in Austen's *Mansfield Park*.

<sup>34</sup> Amelia Opie, Adeline Mowbray, ed. Shelley King and John B. Pierce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 66. All other references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

While the multiple points of similarity between both texts illustrate the continuing relevance of patterns of illegitimacy, it is in the points of divergence from the earlier, paradigmatic text, however, that ideological shifts over time are most salient. Allen's uncompromising representation of Herminia's death deliberately rejects the conciliatory model rehearsed by Opie. In Adeline Mowbray, Editha remains innocent of the potential shame attached to her birth. Adeline actively seeks a reconciliation with her mother and dies happy in the knowledge that her daughter will be brought up by Mrs Mowbray. By contrast, in a chilling subversion of this convention that seems suggestive of a hardening rather than a relaxation of attitudes to illegitimacy, not only is Dolores' illegitimacy revealed to her, but it is she who condemns Herminia, "You are not fit to receive a pure girl's kisses" (p. 159), betrays her mother by seeking protection from her paternal grandfather and finally wills her death:

"You're strong enough and wiry enough to outlive anything ... But I wrote to Walter from Sir Anthony's this morning, and told him I would wait for him if I waited for ever. For, of course, while *you* live, I couldn't think of marrying him. I couldn't think of burdening an honest man with such a mother-in-law as you are!" (p. 163)

The consequences of female sexual disobedience seem here to suggest a hardening of attitudes over the period considered in this thesis. Allen exploits the condemnation of the mother by the daughter here to articulate a less conciliatory, more openly radical political agenda than Opie. In this way, then, it could be argued that, although Allen presents a society apparently as rigid in its condemnation of illegitimacy as that of 1805, it is precisely the problematical conservatism of the conclusion of The Woman Who Did that involuntarily reveals an easing of attitudes; Allen, after all, does not have to provide a conciliatory ending to satisfy social convention but can shock with a deliberate suicide.

The Woman Who Did draws this survey of attitudes to illegitimacy and infanticide to a close. It demonstrates vividly how patterns of illegitimacy are rehearsed, revisited and subverted over time and how plotting the ways in which these patterns change can be illuminating in terms of charting shifts in social and ideological perspectives. That authors who include Margaret Atwood in Alias Grace (1997) revisit the theme of illegitimacy and infanticide in order to engage in contemporary feminist debates about representations of women and sexual ideologies shows how significant these patterns are to our collective literary culture.

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