GOOD GIRLS DIE; BAD GIRLS DON'T: THE USES OF THE DYING VIRGIN IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FICTION

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he limited narrative possibilities available to a young middle-class woman in nineteenth-century fiction have frequently been mapped. She can marry; she can fall; she can die, or she can indulge in some combination of the three. Along with the dying fallen woman, the dying virgin provides one site among many for the working out of middle-class female subjectivity. The dying virgin offers the illusion of a doubly fixed subject—fixed by death and suspended in the closed system of virginity. She offers a place where identity may be momentarily claimed, and, in her positioning at the end of many narratives (and *as* the end of many narratives), she offers a moment of recuperation—where her own transgressive and shifting behaviours and subjectivities or those of other female characters may be temporarily reclaimed for a conventional unthreatening ideal.

I want to explore this here by comparing Australian women's fiction to other popular nineteenth-century women's fiction. By doing so I am asserting some commonality in the socially-constructed gendering and understandings of middle-class Anglophone women in different geographical situations—as a basis to argue for different uses of the dying virgin in different sites against a background of *overlapping* (not identical) understandings of class and gender.[1] In addition, I am claiming for (white, middle-class, female, English language) writers a particular position in relation to the production of the text and the issue of middle-class female subjectivity; one based not on biology but on an intensified investment produced by the culturally and socially determined relation of women writers to any engagement with the female subject.

Elizabeth Langland claims, in relation to nineteenth-century England, that "domestic" fiction played an important role in the production (and exposure) of contemporary ideology and the regulation of class management. She sees the ostensibly leisured middle-class female as hard at work in the onerous job of producing, sustaining and differentiating class positions and "ensuring middle-class hegemony" (as well as being produced by it) (291). Langland argues that middle-class wives and daughters are vital to these processes, through their central role in

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[1] I use that term "middle class white woman" to stand in for the negotiated, constantly in process discourses around that figure, the always in process and therefore always contested set of formulations described by Mary Poovey in her discussion of "middle class" (3).

the complexities of household management and therefore the management and positioning of "lower-class" servants, and the lower-class objects of middle-class philanthropy. Like Nancy Armstrong and Mary Poovey, she sees such regulation conducted discursively, through the management of elaborate systems of signs.

For Langland, domestic narratives partially defuse the female power and implication in class and domestic management by naturalising it, and making it part of women's nature, concealing the skill and work involved. Similarly, Armstrong sees "a class sexuality that valued people according to intrinsic personal qualities" (74). In both arguments the domestic woman, while doing an extraordinary amount of ideological and physical labour, is depicted as "apparently having nothing to do" (Armstrong 79), and therefore in both domestic and class virtues must be located in the personal qualities or "mental features" of the domestic woman, rather than in physical display or actual signs of the labour undertaken (80).

I want to offer some preliminary arguments about what happens to this figure of the ideal woman in the context of Anglo colonies influenced by this middle-class hegemony in various ways, but not necessarily able to reproduce the conditions of its production—the minute practices of etiquette and behaviour which consolidated middle-class status (298). Langland and Armstrong read the mystified model of idle angel as primarily negative in its denial of female agency, and in its identification of women's "social effectiveness as a symptom of domestic rather than managerial talents, of intrinsic feminine charm rather than practical, applied intelligence" (Langland 298). However the same figure, brought into rather distorted action in colonial contexts, might enable unexpected ideological processes and female subjectivities.

Illness, especially fatal illness, is one way of defusing or muting female power, both social and physical, particularly in situations where involvement in physical labour is not always concealed as it is in British Fiction. This, I would argue, is the case in American and Canadian but especially in Australian fiction.[2] However, as with other ways of concealing female power, invalidism is also a cause of anxiety and discomfort within the discursive, focusing on the body as it denies it, confusing the language of the "pure and innocent" feminine with notions of corruption, contagion and disease, the virgin as sealed vessel (Warner 263) with the abject, and the so-called public with the private.

To go one further—to the *dying* female—is to solve some of the problems raised by the invalid female while exacerbating others. The figure of the dying *virgin* is particularly potent. The virgin is a recognisable figure, a subject position which can be placed. Though defined in terms of negatives, lack and fragility it holds intimations of power, autonomy and control. The female virgin is a production which reifies masculinist rights in the Victorian era and works toward

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[2] See D.P. Herndl's persuasive argument for the importance of the figure of the invalid in nineteenth-century American understandings of female identity and behaviour.

subjection, though it may, as Lloyd Davis argues, also provide a position which resists and questions its own cultural values and uses (10).

One way of controlling and fixing the power and ambiguity of that virgin body is through death. The dead body, Foucault implies, provides for the post-eighteenth century the illusion of a fixed identity, an ultimate knowableness (Chapter 8). The dead virgin promises the ideal, if unreal, fixed subject—the knowable unknown body and mind, a body which may be explored without violation, a pure female figure defined by and yet transcending her biology. To the extent that the state of virginity can be taken as a state of innocence, including innocence of the knowledge of one's own subjectivity—"one can only know it by being not it" (Munich 144)—any use of this figure in an exploration of subjectivity can be seen as subversive.

The two halves of the figure are mutually incompatible. Death removes the virgin body from the sexual economy which defines it. Such a removal can be seen as escape from enforced patriarchal definition, *or* perfection in its terms—since the only sure virgin is a dead virgin (Munich 144). Death or dying negates, as it stands in for, the dangerous sexuality of the female. Elisabeth Bronfen argues that femininity and death are inevitably linked in Western cultures. Both, she claims, are irruptions of the repressed other of these cultures, and images joining the two are part of what she calls a "dominant cultural image repertoire" (xiii). In her argument, the dual threats of death and femininity are defused by representation—and such representation invokes the fantasy of a regained order after the threat (xii).

The narrative moment of death, while it frequently gestures toward the erasure of subjectivity, and indeed toward the impossibility of language and artistic practice (Stewart 44-45), is also a moment which affirms or instates the subjectivity of the witnesses within the text, and by extension of the reader-as-witness or spectator (45).[3] Virginity, likewise, can represent this absence—a space defined by masculine desire (Munich 150). In the popular fictions under discussion, while the subject thus doubly erased is always female, the implied reader is also often female, so that even when the dying virgin loses or is denied subjectivity, her loss can be the gain of the female witness/reader. In colonial fictions, where the textual subject is particularly vexing or dangerous, the process may work to apparently neutralise a dangerous model of female subjectivity to the advantage and affirmation of only slightly less threatening models.

Many fictional dying virgins are young women on the brink of sexual maturity. The acknowledgment of the difficulty of narrating an adulthood for the transgressive female child can also be read as the freeing of this threatening subject from repressive models of nineteenth-century female maturity, the sexual economy

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[3] The spectatorial, or scopophilic nature of the Victorian death scene is described by Charles Dickens in a description of a Paris crowd watching the removal of a corpse in "Some Recollections of Mortality" in *The Uncommerical Traveller*: they were "looking at something that could not return a look" (qtd Stewart 55).

and gender boundaries which burden the adult female. The figure of the dying virgin, then, is a site of intersecting anxieties about female bodies, power, and weakness, ideal femininity and female sexuality. The deathbed scene, according to Margarete Holubetz, and Garrett Stewart, offers a particular, familiar Victorian narrative program within or against which such anxieties may be played out.[4]

A great many of the best remembered dying virgins in the nineteenth century are in fiction by men.[5] In women's fiction, the ranks of the virgin dead include Frankenstein's bride Elizabeth in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Gaskell's Bessy Higgins in *North and South*, Brontë's Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre*, Maggie in Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, Little Eva in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Beth in Alcott's *Little Women*. The cultural uses of the figure are liable to vary according to the gender of the writer and her distance from the supposed centres of British middle-class culture.

For instance, Langland's argument about the discursive mystification of women's involvement in labour in nineteenth-century British fiction can be seen to work in different ways for the fiction produced in the colonies, particularly British ruled Anglo-dominated colonies like Australia. In real terms it is likely, because of the shortage and expense of servants, that many middle-class women in Australia were engaged in forms of manual labour that their British equivalents were not. But the "real" does not rule fiction, and there are other ideological projects at stake in the fact that nineteenth-century Australian fiction by women depicts middle-class heroines engaged routinely in tasks which would have been coded working class in most British fiction. The work of maintaining and defining class boundaries undertaken in such texts, then, becomes proportionately more complicated. Likewise, the need to invest class characteristics in a mystified ideal lady, if the benefits of middle-class status are to be produced and enjoyed in the Australian context, are all the more imperative where heroines are making their own clothes (O'Neill *Faithful Unto Death*, Lloyd-Tayler *By Still Harder Fate*, Gaunt *Kirkham's Find*, Praed *Outlaw and Lawmaker*), blacking their own boots (*Outlaw*), baking bread (Chads, "Plentiful as Blackberries"), washing their own dishes, personally supervising wash day, and even herding sheep (Liston "How a Woman Kept her Promise") and running tea rooms (Cambridge *A Humble Enterprise*).

The dying virgin in Australian women's fiction is often a figure who has transgressed British-defined boundaries, but can be used to justify transgressive behaviour and even appropriate it to the subjectivity of the ideal colonial lady, by,

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[4] See Holubetz (15). There is some scope for arguing that the deathbed scene invokes a set of melodramatic generic paradigms of its own even within the ostensibly realist text. See also Garrett Stewart's argument in *Death Sentences* that "death in fiction is the fullest instance of form indexing content, is indeed the moment when content, comprising the imponderables of negation and vacancy, can be found dissolving to pure form" (3).

[5] For example Dickens's Little Nell, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Bram Stoker's Lucy Westenra in *Dracula*, the ostensibly dead Woman in White (Wilkie Collins), Henry James's Daisy Miller, Edgar Alan Poe's extensive collection of dead virgins (though the latter have a nasty tendency to reanimate). Many of these, as Bronfen argues, are indebted to Richardson's *Clarissa*.

literally, dying for it. A death scene which transforms the dubious colonial girl into the angel of the house and whitewashes either her own former actions, or those of figures paralleled with her, works to the reification of a model of middle-class female subjectivity similar to that posited by Langland. Inevitably, it is a model supported by structures even more fragile, fractured and transparent than those described by Langland.

At around the same time as the publication of *Little Women* in North America, Maude Jeanne Franc (Matilda Jane Evans) published *Minnie's Mission*. Ostensibly, Franc's fictions were conservative and harmless. A number of them were concerned, as *Minnie's Mission* is, with Temperance. Minnie Rayton sails from Britain to live with her uncle and aunt on their rural property in Australia. Frustrated with the scope of her domestic and decorative role in life, she takes on the cause of temperance. Her rather unconventional pursuit of this mission involves learning to ride and to saddle her own horse so that she can independently gallivant around the countryside converting shepherds and the nearby townspeople to her cause, with the help of her trusty pledge book. In pursuit of temperance she has a number of dubious *tête à têtes* with single young men of the area, including the local doctor, and a neighbour who is positioned as the love interest of the narrative.

She wreaks havoc in her own new home by converting her uncle to teetotalism. Toward the end of the novel she becomes concerned about the imminent return of her unconverted cousin Harry, so she decides it is her "duty" to empty the contents of the wine cellar at 2 o'clock in the morning. This expedition, and the descriptions of the locked cellar, to which only Minnie holds the keys, which must not be entered by Harry, and which holds such dangerous and pungent liquid, is implicitly sexual. Imprudently Minnie gets wet feet, and when she is startled by her cousin's arrival she falls down the stairs and breaks her ankle (279). The sexual ambiguity of Minnie's actions in the rest of the novel reach their climax in the description of her "fall" and rescue. The cause of temperance is used in this, as in other nineteenth-century women's fictions, to justify and sanitise behaviour which, if pursued for selfish reasons, would impugn the reputation and class status of the female. In *Minnie's Mission*, death is also useful in reasserting class status as it legislates unprecedented freedoms of behaviour.

During the "fall" scene, the repentant cousin Harry discovers Minnie unconscious at the foot of the cellar stairs, and awakens the female servants, shouting, "this is no time for fooling. Miss Minnie is out here—met with an accident—look sharp and dress, and come out, will you?" (281) They twice answer that they saw Miss Minnie "go to her own room for the night" (281-82), but finally one of them goes to check Minnie's room. The trespass involved here is explicitly physical, and specifically sexual and moral. The place for a good genteel young woman at night is in her room, particularly if her debauched cousin, who may or may not have had "time for fooling" with the maids in the past, is lurking

around. The maids check not the present, unconscious figure at the bottom of the cellar stairs, but the domestic space which should be occupied.

Maids and family come to what might seem the least likely conclusion when faced with the evidence of a barefoot girl unconscious in the cellar, reeking of alcohol, dressed in a wine-soaked nightgown and clutching the cellar keys—they assume she has been sleep-walking. However her subsequent death is sufficient to obscure any threat to her status. Minnie fades away, confident in her heavenly destination, but still anxious about cousin Harry. This is part of the prolonged death scene:

> Minnie's mission was nearly accomplished, but it seemed as if the spirit lingered yet, to put the last touch to its work. . . . "Dear Minnie, you asked for me," [Harry] faltered. . . . What did she want with him? . . . She feebly clasped his hand; but even as she did so, the gentle eyes closed. . . . Harry, with one hand still in that gentle clasp, stood still with his face shielded by the other, while more than one tear escaped his eyes. Helen . . . softly laid her hand upon his arm. They were standing so when Minnie, with a faint sigh, once more re-opened her eyes. They rested anxiously upon them. "Harry, is it yes or no?" she whispered faintly, for life's currents ran very low and tremulously. "Yes; God helping me!" he exclaimed in earnest tones. "Dear Minnie, I will do what you wish." A smile of joy came over the dying face like a passing sunbeam. Her eyes looked anxiously round towards the writing-case on the drawers. "The book," said Jessie, sobbing; "The pledge-book, she wants that, Here it is, I will bring case and all to the bed." She spread it open before Harry. Minnie glanced lovingly up at him again. "Sign," she said, "read and sign." He read it through blinding tears, and the name that followed, tremulously as it was written down, was written in prayer. The smile that came again to the pale lips was beautiful to behold. "Mission is ended," she whispered. "Bless God for it! . . . Helen, you will be Harry's bride now? you will watch over and help him now?" [sic] . . . "It is nearly over; I am nearly home. How sweet is rest!" and the dark eyes gently closed again. . . . There she lay, passing away to her rest in the full glory of womanhood. But there was yet something to be done—a farewell to be taken of each. . . . How tenderly those adieus were spoken one by one! . . . She turned at last to Dr Leigh. He was standing watching her by the side of Edwin and his wife. The anxious look came back into her face. "Dear Edwin—doctor—will you not grant a last wish—for Minnie's sake—sign." The words came with evident difficulty; but they

> were words that must be said. It had flashed to her mind that her work was not yet done, that more remained behind: it was this; oh, could they deny her? They could not. Edwin bent down and whispered, "Darling Minnie, I will"; and firmly in sight of the fading eyes he dashed his pledge. The pen was taken up by the doctor. Slowly and deliberately he wrote, as though weighing the value of every letter. "Thank you, dear Minnie, for remembering me," he bitterly exclaimed, as he threw it down again, and turned away. "Thank you, doctor. My mission is fully ended God help you all to follow me, Jesus only—can—help—you—save you! Good-bye!" . . . Minnie's mission on earth was over; she had gone to the place where the mansions prepared were awaiting her, where the triumphant songs and the crown and the palm-branch were to be her portion . . . there she would await the arrival of those who were to be the stars in her crown—jewels to shine resplendent to all eternity! (289-92)

A scene such as this operates to neutralise narrative anxiety raised by the over-active and over-assertive Minnie in the rest of the novel. Her previous nightgown scene was one in which, wild-eyed and dishevelled, she confronted her drunken, violent uncle and commanded him to cease drinking and abusing her aunt. Trespasses, literal and metaphorical, are erased by an ending which affirms Minnie's class and feminine status by asserting her sure entry into the celestial hierarchy. Displays of power unsuitable to a middle-class girl, and acts of class coercion, are defused by a scene in which Minnie is displayed as apparently completely powerless. Unable to walk, barely able to speak, flowerlike, delicate, dying, virginal and prostrate, she becomes the ideal passive domesticated woman. Her fate is both payment for and palliation of her sins.

In context, the death scene can and does work this way, but there are also counter narratives in operation. As in a number of fictional Victorian death scenes, there is a potential sexual charge in the gathering at the female's bedside of a collection of spectating male relatives. The specular objectification of the dying virgin here is deflected by the narrative control that virgin exercises. Instead of fading gently away, and leaving, as the narrative states several times, "the rest of her mission to God," Minnie repeatedly revives sufficiently to issue orders which, because of her privileged position as the dying subject—the subject about to abdicate subjectivity—it is barely possible to refuse. Thus, in her near death state, she achieves those things which she failed to achieve in life, despite all her energetic horse-riding. She extracts signatures for her pledge book from her two cousins *and* the doctor; and coerces her best friend into marrying her now pledged cousin. In Britain in the late 1860s "dying declarations" held at least a quasi-legal

status (Barnard 173). Potentially, Minnie's requests are further empowered by a form or moment of female speech which commands patriarchal recognition.[6]

The narrative nature of the pressure to temperance is stressed here in the final persuasions of a temperance novel, by the call to "read and sign." In that they are affirming and signing Minnie's text here, they are affirming not just Minnie's mission, but Minnie herself, forcing the witnesses of her death scene to witness not just her erasure, but her affirmation through a text (the pledge book), which it is stated will live on after her death. There is an evident equation between the novelistic text and the internal text of the pledge book. Minnie's mission as textual construct is to continue to revive at the point of death and closure and demand that those who read will "sign."

Minnie's virgin death also frees her from the alternate plot set up for her. The matrimonial narrative, which sometimes has a similar function of palliating female class and gender transgressions, is displaced by the death narrative, which in this case provides the heroine with an uncompromised glorious and powerful future. Thus virgin Minnie dies out of the narrative, into apparent ultimate closure. I am tempted to suggest that in a text like this, which removes its protagonist not so much into the oblivion of unknowable death as into the assured hearts, flowers and crowns of an elect heaven, which is yet beyond the temporal and discursive, there is some faint suggestion of the sort of haunting of/beyond the text described by Spivak in relation to Margaret Saville, the fictional "recipient" of the text of *Frankenstein*.

I do not wish to draw any huge national conclusions from the contrast between *Minnie's Mission* and its American contemporary, Louisa M. Alcott's *Little Women*, but rather to make some transnational claims for the anxieties exposed. The death of Beth in *Little Women* is one of the better known virgin deaths of popular women's fiction. The novel is frequently read as providing options for middle-class white female subjectivity, in that it maps four diverse female trajectories toward adulthood in the four March daughters (Murphy 565). Depending on your reading of these four, the dying virgin Beth provides a saving example which enables the somewhat more transgressive pathway of the creative, angry sister Jo, who is explicitly paired with her; or Beth provides an illustration of the literally fatal consequences of becoming the ideal domestic woman of the period—literally in-valid, self-abnegating to the point of annihilation. The most useful readings, I would argue, see the dying Beth as part of a continually unravelling text in which Beth is offered up, *both* sincerely and insincerely, as an example of what Ann B. Murphy calls "terminal goodness," so that Jo's resistance to Beth's erasure, as well as her adoption of Beth as role model, work constantly against each other in a narrative friction which makes the text, and the death, enduringly compelling.

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[6] See also Bronfen's reading of Benjamin, *Clarissa*, Rousseau and the privileged dying voice, Chapter 5.

If Beth embodies one aspect of nineteenth-century female subjectivity, then Minnie carries several contradictory aspects and, it might be argued, is a character who has to die because of the impossibility of their coexistence in the one body. In *Little Women*, the death of the ideal domesticated woman enables the tracing of an alternate female subject through Jo. In later Australian women's novels, such as Augusta O'Neill's *Faithful Unto Death*, the dying virgin is used more explicitly to enable the career and affirm the subjectivity of her more transgressive female counterpart. At the same time, the body of the dying virgin is fetishised by a still contradictory narrative which privileges the attractions of the perfected dead female body, while simultaneously arguing for the rights of the imperfect desiring woman.

Probably the most famous dead virgin in Australian fiction of the late nineteenth century is Judy in *Seven Little Australians*, a character who parallels *Little Women*'s Jo in tomboyish disobedience, but is not provided with a useful double to die in her stead. She exhibits features of ungenteel vigour—she walks seventy-seven miles to escape her ladies' boarding school, scythes the grass single handed (a feat which has certain sexual connotations), constantly resists patriarchal authority, and engages in ambiguous class transgressions in her persistent adoption of an Irish accent, which aligns her with much-maligned working-class Irish servants, such as their own Bridget (98). She is briefly welcomed back into the domestic fold—so strictly policed by the excessive patriarch Captain Woolcot—during a bout of illness, which renders her, like Alcott's Beth and O'Neill's dying heroine Lily, temporarily possessed of a variety of ideal feminine features—passivity, obedience, frailty and silence. When she breaks out again, however, she is immediately squashed by a falling tree, and dies a poignant death.

It is possible to read this death as punishment for insufficiently concealing the construction and exercise of a subjectivity contrary to patriarchal interests. As with some other dying virgins, such as Minnie, it also saves and expunges Judy from a threatening sexuality, prefigured early in the novel in her real name, Helen, and her father's fear that "she would be shipwrecked on rocks the others would never come to, and [her "restless fire"] would flame up higher and higher and consume her" (22).

The alternate construction, or constrictions, self-imposed by her sister Meg, in the concealment of illicit tight-lacing, is interesting. Meg more appropriately attempts to adopt a form ostensibly disapproved, but in fact both approved and rewarded by the dominant discourses of gender in her society, and in the fictional narrative. Meg's stepmother, as well as the narration, approve of "Meg's now pretty, well-fitting dress body" [sic] (49). Her punishment is minimal by comparison to the external constriction of form bestowed upon Judy. The main results of Meg's misadventure are the shaming of her stepmother, some bed rest, and her father's recognition of her similarity to her dying mother (77-78)—an appropriate figure for her to be modelled on, as indeed she is more explicitly in the sequel *Little Mother Meg*. There is some ambiguity in the immediate cause of

Judy's death, which is a selfless attempt to save the baby of the family. On the one hand it is the result of her own recklessness and inattention, but it is also figured as a whole-hearted entry into the domestic and maternal world of the self-sacrificing woman, which turns out to be fatal, as it was for Lily and Beth.

In two lesser known Australian '90s novels by women, *Milliara* and *Myrtle*, somewhat more radical combinations of the transgressive active working female and the sickly good girl appear. The interesting point in both these novels is that the sickly virgin rallies rather dramatically and fights back. Though in both this works toward the accomplishment of a marriage plot, the configurations of the relationships are altered by the transformation of the dying virgin into the fighting virgin. However, in both novels the skill and success with which the "bad girls" masquerade as "ideal women," casts a dubious light on the authenticity of that figure, a pattern visible in popular women's English language novels from Britain and North America at the same time and even earlier.[7]

While the dying virgin was used in similar ways in English language fiction from Britain and elsewhere, the imperatives of increasingly powerful and persuasive middle-class ideologies, in conjunction with the various configurations of class, gender, sexuality and work in Australia, arguably made some particular uses of that potent figure more attractive. There is no thing which can be named "a middle class Nineteenth-Century Anglo-Australian Female Subject." I agree with Fiona Giles that that position was under imperative negotiation in the second half of the nineteenth century for the white population in colonies like Australia, but disagree that, for women at least, this was negotiated so directly through difference in relation to its English source, and opposition to the indigenous population. I would argue that these subjectivities were produced more through subtle manipulation of available models than through opposition, and relied more heavily on the stabilising possibilities of that mythical ideal woman.

The sanctity of English-defined virgin subjects could enable the legitimation of a variety of more colonial behaviours, and if necessary that figure could still be killed back into perfection at the last moment, having released in life possible subjectivities not entirely shut down with her death. By the end of the century, the use of the dying virgin to negotiate the status and identity of middle-class women in fiction was being replaced by more radical interrogations of the figure of the lady and her usefulness. Even where that figure was affirmed, there was a growing tendency to revive the sickly virgin to enjoy the more earthly rewards of her affirmed status.

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[7] For instance in Alcott's sensation novelette "Behind a Mask" (1866).

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