

WOMEN, ILLNESS AND SEXUALITY IN THE FICTION OF MARY BRADDON

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n nineteenth-century fiction it seems that being female meant being ill. From Elizabeth Gaskell's Mrs Hale (*North and South*) and Charlotte Bronte's Caroline Helstone (*Shirley*) and Lucy Snow (*Villette*) to Lady Glyde in Collins's *The Woman in White*, Victorian women in fiction crumpled, collapsed and took to their beds as an escape from the restrictions and powerlessness of their lives. Braddon's fiction also contains women such as Pamela Tempest (*Vixen*), who react to the realisation of their powerlessness by illness. But the characters for whom illness is directly related to sexuality are more pertinent to this study, for although adhering to fictional conventions of elision and allusion in dealing with sexual matters, Braddon nonetheless treats sexual attraction, frustration and violation more explicitly than many of her contemporaries.

Nineteenth-century middle-class society was predicated on domestic ideology and the concomitant separation of spheres. The importance of the family gave prominence to the ideal of romantic love and the companionate marriage. Aristocratic marriages had been alliances of blood and wealth; the middle class espoused an ideal of alliances of love and choice. However, while as Gay notes, "middle-class marriage and the family it begat ostensibly had no rules other than the dictates of the heart" (106), Braddon was fully aware that "beyond doubt what passes for love in the decades of Victoria concealed ingredients of power protected by defensive, usually self-deceptive stratagems" (Gay 106). For Braddon, the middle-class ideal of romantic love and the companionate marriage are dangerous and unrealisable given the gross power imbalances between men and women.

In *Taken at the Flood* (1874), Braddon encapsulates the plight of economically dependent women, who are precluded by notions of gentility from any career other than that of wife and mother:

Mrs Standen . . . had sacrificed the tenderest hopes of a girl's heart upon the altar of family convenience. Should there not be a small stone altar in the hall of every house, as a symbol of that invisible shrine on which so many tender feelings are constantly being offered up before the implacable household Nemesis, Necessity? (50)

This essay will explore Braddon's depiction of the physical, psychic and social effects of female sexual frustration and sexual violation within the sanctity of marriage, through characters in three novels: Lady Cecil in *The Lady's Mile* (1866), Barbara Trevornock in *The Story of Barbara* (1880) and Ellen Carley in *Fenton's Quest* (1871).

The subject matter of *The Lady's Mile*—the narrowness of the options available to women and the restrictive limitations of female lives—is heralded in the first pages by the introduction of the central metaphor of the novel: the daily London social ritual of the drive to and fro along the Lady's Mile. "The lives of the women . . . are like this drive which they call the Lady's Mile. They go as far as they can, and then go back again. See how mechanically the horses wheel when they reach the prescribed turning-point" (6). More significantly, the passage depicts the woman as object of the male gaze, for the ritual of the Lady's Mile has one aim: the exhibition of society women to the gaze of other women and, importantly, to the gaze of men. In *Romanticism and Gender*, Mellor notes that "the cultural production of a woman . . . defines her subjectivity solely in relation to a man" (109), or, as Braddon writes: "The women are what the men make them. You must have *Lui* before you can have *Elle*. Aspasia is impossible without Pericles. You could never have had a Cleopatra unless you had first your Caesar; or your Marian de Lorme without Cinq Mars" (6).

It is not accidental that the speaker is male, that the description of the Lady's Mile comes to the reader filtered through male eyes, nor that the examples Braddon chooses to illustrate the woman as object to the male subject are women of dubious purity who have exploited their sexuality. For Braddon, the feminine ideal of ornamental uselessness and utter innocence (which we can read as ignorance) demanded by bourgeois domestic ideology ensured that, far from being the angel of Patmore's house, women were forced into the situation described by Engels:

The marriage of convenience turns often enough into the crassest prostitution—sometimes of both partners, but far more commonly of the woman, who only differs from the ordinary courtesan in that she does not let out her body on piecework as a wage worker, but sells it once and for all into slavery. (102)

Braddon extends the metaphor of the Lady's Mile; the passage modulates from the social surface of conformity and ritual to the sexual basis of the male gaze, leading on to the fate of women who "fall" from the unrealistic and absolute ideal of purity and chastity demanded by domestic ideology in the interests of patrilineality:

If [the horses] went any farther, I suppose they would be lost in some impenetrable forest depth in Kensington Gardens. In the drive the rule has no exception; because . . . the barrier that

divides the park from the gardens is a palpable iron railing. . . . But on the highway of life the boundary line is not so clearly defined. There are women who lose themselves in some unknown region beyond the Lady's Mile and whom we never hear of more. . . . On this side, the barrier they pass seems so slight a one—a hedge of thorns that are half hidden by the gaudy tropical flowers that hang about them—a few scratches, and the boundary is passed; but when the desperate wanderer pauses for a moment on the other side to look backward, behold! the thorny hedgerow is transformed into a wall of brass that rises to the very skies, and shuts out earth and heaven. (6)

The thread of the novel which I wish to examine in some detail is the story of Lady Cecil Chudleigh, who embodies the dangers of female economic marginalisation. Left destitute by the extravagance of her father and brother, Lady Cecil becomes companion/housekeeper to her aunt, Mrs MacClaverhouse. She feels herself to be "an unnecessary creature . . . a mere waif and stray . . . a lady's-maid without a lady's-maid's wages; a slave without a slave's apathy" (125). She is persistently courted by the successful barrister Laurence O'Boyneville who is very aware that "a man may marry the woman he wishes to marry: a woman can only marry the man who wishes to marry her" (103). Faced with the prospect of poverty and dependence, Cecil agrees to marry O'Boyneville and finds herself plunged into isolated boredom and frustration:

[For O'Boyneville] loved his wife honestly and truly . . . but he knew about as much of a woman's tastes and prejudices as he knew of the habitudes and requirements of a white elephant; and he took Lady Cecil calmly home to the dreary, scantily-furnished Bloomsbury mansion, and left her to be happy after her own fashion in the spacious empty rooms while he went back to his work. While he went back to his work! In those few words might have been told the dismal history of two lives. The husband went to his work, and gave his heart and soul to breaches of contract and actions for damages . . . and the wife saw him go out and come in, heard his tired sigh, as he sank half-exhausted into his easy chair, but remained utterly ignorant and unsympathising. (163-64)

In view of what Braddon clearly implies is Cecil's sexual frustration, O'Boyneville's obsession with breaches of contract and actions for damages carries ironic overtones. The subtext of the Cecil/O'Boyneville marriage is, like that of Dorothea and Casaubon, one of sexual frustration. Braddon's description of a typical day in the O'Boyneville household makes Cecil's lack of sexual fulfilment clear:

At breakfast, at dinner, when his young wife was talking to him in her brightest and most animated manner, she would stop suddenly, chilled and discouraged by the discovery that the great barrister had not heard a word of her discourse. . . . After breakfast Mr O'Boyneville kissed his wife, and hurried out of the house. At half-past six he came home . . . and sat down to dinner. Sometimes he talked a little to his wife during dinner. . . . After dinner he read his papers for a quarter of an hour, and then laid himself down upon a gigantic . . . sofa . . . and slept peacefully until nine, when . . . the advent of his clerk . . . brought the evening's batch of letters and papers. Then the popular barrister arose like a giant refreshed, took a cup of tea from Cecil's attentive hands, and sipped the revivifying beverage in a dreamy manner, staring thoughtfully at his wife without seeing her. . . . After tea he went to his study, which darksome sanctorum he rarely left until the smallest of the small hours. (164-65)

Not surprisingly, Cecil wonders why O'Boyneville married her. "Was he *her* husband? Was he not rather wedded to that inexorable tyrant he called his profession?" (167-68). Indeed, Cecil's sexual frustration is quite explicitly stated in the narrator's comment that "Laurence O'Boyneville made no change in his bachelor-habits . . . he devoted his nights to study and his evenings to sleep" (198). Cecil's lack of sexual fulfilment is contrasted with her recollections of her honeymoon, when O'Boyneville "had been the most devoted and submissive of husbands, the tenderest of friends, the most sympathetic of companions" (170).

O'Boyneville has the interest, stimulation and excitement of his daily court battles, while Cecil is left, companionless, within a large and dreary house which, significantly, she is unable to make home-like. If, as Madoff claims, the Gothic castle functions symbolically as a metaphor for the heroine's psychological state (49-61), O'Boyneville's Bloomsbury house functions universally as a metaphor for the female struggle for selfhood within the confines of patriarchy, and as an exteriorisation of Cecil's marriage of isolated boredom and sexual frustration. In an interesting Gothic inversion, the fear of sexual violation of the Gothic heroine has become lack of sexual fulfilment:

Cecil arranged her favourite books in a little old-fashioned bookcase . . . she decorated the two gaunt rooms with birds and flowers, and scattered pretty inexpensive nicknacks on the ponderous rosewood tables. Whatever elegance can be imparted to two great dreary apartments, furnished by general order on an upholsterer . . . Lady Cecil imparted to the Bloomsbury drawing-rooms. But when all was done they were too large for her

loneliness, and the days and nights seemed very long in them.
(169-70)

Despite her efforts, the Bloomsbury mansion, her husband's house, remains unfeminised, the domestic sphere stays under male control.

The effect of lack of sexual fulfilment on Cecil is psychic rather than physical. Although she languishes and looks "pale and ill," for a society for which the wife was moral guardian it is most significantly her "moral constitution" that is undermined (200): "She abandoned herself entirely to the unbroken monotony of her life. . . . A profound weariness of spirit took possession of [her] in the bright June weather. . . . The disease that was undermining Lady Cecil's moral constitution was not sorrow; it was only the absence of joy" (198-200). Lonely, isolated and frustrated in her husband's large dreary house, Cecil is left vulnerable to the seductions of Hector Gordon, her first love. Relentlessly pursued by Gordon, she feels there is no one to whom she can appeal for help. She considers that her husband has left her to her fate, to take her own course "without help or care from him. She doubts if he remembers her existence, except when she is with him: "For the first time in her life, Cecil, felt a sense of resentment as she thought of her husband's indifference. . . . To-day for the first time she was angry with [O'Boyneville] for not loving her better; for to-day she felt herself in supreme need of his love" (295). Cecil is isolated by what she sees as O'Boyneville's indifference, but Braddon consistently attacks the demand for absolute female purity and reticence. In a society in which, as Ellis rightly noted, "woman, if she would preserve her peace, her safe footing in society, her influence, and her unblemished purity, must avoid remark" (172), Braddon exposes the impossibility of women withstanding determined male pursuit.

The very demands of purity and self-effacement preclude effective female resistance. As Braddon explicitly states in *Beyond These Voices* (1910):

Then began the struggle that most women make . . . when they feel the downward path sloping under their feet, and know that the pit of shame lies at the bottom of it . . . the impotent struggle in which all the odds are against them, their environment, every circumstance of their lives, their friends, the nearest and dearest even, to whom they cannot cry aloud and say, "Don't you see that I am fighting the tempter, don't you see that I am half way down the hill and am trying to make a stand, that I am over the edge of the cliff and am hanging to the bushes with bleeding, lacerated hands in the desperate endeavour to keep myself from falling?" (123-24)

Cecil compares the scant time and attention her husband gives her with the ardent pursuit of Gordon: "My husband will not waste an hour from his profession for my

sake," she thought; "and this man, who was once so true and honourable, is ready to sacrifice truth and honour for love of me" (297). Loneliness and sexual frustration almost lead to the destruction of the O'Boyneville marriage, and Cecil almost becomes one of the lost women of the novel's opening metaphor.

If the subtext of Cecil's story is sexual frustration, that of *The Story of Barbara* is sexual violation. In a society based on the ideal of domestic harmony with the family as the moral and civilising cornerstone, Braddon exposes the taint of what could be called "family commerce" within all her families, even those which seem to represent the domestic ideal of happy and mutually supportive groups.

In Gothic fiction it is usually the heroine's socially sanctioned protectors who are her most aggressive persecutors. In Braddon's novels, and in those of other nineteenth-century writers, family members are often persecutors, not in the physical sense found in Gothic, but in terms of economic exploitation. Physical imprisonment is translated into economic imprisonment and is thus both more insidious and more oppressive. Heroines can and do escape from convents and castles, but the only means of escape from economic imprisonment is a financially advantageous marriage—a life sentence of close relationship, often to a physically inimical husband, with the consequent implication of sexual violation. Despite her superficial observance of the socially sanctioned proprieties, Braddon exposes such marriages as legalised prostitution.

The opening chapters of *The Story of Barbara* paint an almost Utopian domestic picture of Barbara and her mother and sister. The "mother and daughters were so fond of each other, and so fond of their home, that the whole of life was sweetened by this overflowing fountain of love" (6). Despite the loving relationship, however, Mrs Trevornock procures Barbara for the wealthy Vyvyan Penruth as surely as the Parisian mother procures her daughter for Conway Field in Braddon's final novel, *Mary* (1916). Mrs Trevornock loves "her daughter with a passionate love, capable of self-sacrifice in the highest degree." Yet she feels only self-congratulation at the fulfilment of her dreams of a financially advantageous marriage for Barbara:

She had no misgivings as to [Barbara's] happiness. . . . No doubt poor Barbara had been very deeply in love with Captain Leland; but she must have almost forgotten him by this time, and would, as in duty bound, become attached to Mr Penruth, whose generous devotion was calculated to inspire grateful affection.
(108)

The juxtaposition of "generous devotion" and "calculated" is part of the mercantile basis of this relationship in Mrs Trevornock's mind. She assumes that the possessions and lifestyle Penruth's money can procure for Barbara will bring her to

love her husband and forget her love for Leland. Even after Barbara's honeymoon illness,

it never entered into [Mrs Trevornock's] thoughts that she had done wrong in promoting her daughter's marriage with Vyvyan Penruth. She was not the kind of woman who would have deliberately sold her child into bondage. Yet she had been made somewhat uneasy now and then by the tone of her darling's letters. (141-42)

Mrs Trevornock is persistently and wilfully blind to Barbara's obvious abhorrence towards any thought of marriage with Penruth.

Barbara embodies female helplessness and lack of self-determination. In a world based on commerce, Barbara's alternate morality of love and self-respect has no place. When Barbara tells her mother that she considers her fate "a hard one," her mother's response is that "it is a fate that ninety-nine women out of a hundred would envy" (110). Braddon makes it clear that Barbara finds Penruth sexually repugnant. When Penruth proposes, Barbara's response is that to marry him would make her hate herself: "life would be a burden" to her (105). After she accepts his proposal "for [her] mother's sake" (106), Penruth "took her in his arms and kissed her, having the right to do so now, as he thought; and she submitted as helplessly and as hopelessly as she would have done had she fallen into the sea, and felt the arms of some hideous sea-monster winding round her and strangling her" (106). Not surprisingly, Barbara soon falls "dangerously ill":

After her wedding-day, when all was over, the knot tied, the vow vowed, the life-long sacrifice consummated, her fortitude had suddenly given way . . . and before the first ten days of her honeymoon were over she was lying prostrate in the strange room at Maurice's hotel in a high fever. (126)

In an interesting comment, Braddon notes that when the bride and groom return to the Penruth home in Cornwall, Barbara was "still weak and fragile—a poor, pale, fainting creature for a man to be proud of, and the consciousness of this vexed Vyvyan Penruth sorely" (127).

Lest her readers think of commercial marriages solely in terms of the middle class, Braddon had prefigured Barbara's fate in the forced marriage of Ellen Carley, a bailiff's daughter, to the farmer Stephen Whitelaw in *Fenton's Quest*. Ellen Carley sells herself to keep her father out of prison for embezzlement. Ellen's first reaction to her father's insistence on her marriage is incredulity: "You'd sell me to [Whitelaw] for two hundred pounds, father?" (243). When she realises that is precisely his intention, "a deadly whiteness and despair [came] over the bright soubrette beauty, and even William Carley's hard nature was moved a little by the altered expression of his daughter's countenance" (245). Braddon's exposure of

the trade in female virtue and maidenly charms is both overt and explicit in the relationship between Ellen and Whitelaw:

To Ellen there was something hideous in the sound of her own name spoken by those hateful lips; but he had a sovereign right so to address her, now and for evermore. Was she not his goods, his chattels, bought with a price, as much as a horse at a fair?

That nothing might be wanting to remind her of the sordid bargain, Mr Whitelaw drew a small canvas bag from his pocket presently . . . and handed it across to William Carley. . . . "I'll take your IOU for it presently . . . to be given back to you upon my wedding-day." (259-60)

Barbara also thinks of her marriage as a commercial transaction. When Penruth gives her one hundred pounds for necessities before her marriage, Barbara "took the money without compunction. She had sold herself for a price, and she felt no shame in accepting any portion of that price. The shame was in the bargain itself—a deeper shame for her plighted husband than for herself, she thought" (108).

The similarity between Ellen's emotions during her engagement and those of Barbara dispel any comforting middle-class idea that what applies to the Ellen Carleys of the world has little to do with the middle-class world of drawing-room and servants. Barbara "had a vague fancy that the sacrifice [of her marriage] would be prevented somehow. The stroke of doom would not descend" (*Story* 114). Ellen "told herself that something *must* happen to prevent the carrying out of this abhorrent bargain" (*Fenton's* 277). Barbara's engagement period is far too short for her; "these early spring days . . . seemed to hurry by with inexorable speed, drifting her towards her doom" (*Story* 109). For Ellen, "time lost its familiar sluggishness; the long industrious days, that had been so slow of old, flew by the bailiff's daughter like the shadows from a magic-lantern" (*Fenton's* 277). All Braddon's heroines coerced into loveless marriages can be read in the description of Ellen's married life. Ellen feels "a dull despair, a settled conviction that for her life could never have again a single charm, that her days must go on in their slow progress to the grave unlightened by one ray of sunshine, her burden carried to the end of the dreary journey unrelieved by one hour of respite" (*Fenton's* 285).

For Braddon, romantic love and the companionate marriage are unrealisable ideals. In a society based on the ideal of the stable family unit whose moral centre was the pure wife and mother, Braddon exposes the dangers inherent in female powerlessness and economic marginalisation. Her commercial marriages call into question the whole basis of bourgeois domestic ideology and the separation of spheres, and it is significant that Barbara, and we can guess Braddon too, sees the bargain as shameful with "a deeper shame" for the man, the holder of power, than for the woman. For a society which considered the wife and mother as custodian

of the moral health of society, the physical and psychic effects on women of lack of control over their lives and bodies augured ill.

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