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The Invalid Narrator and Women in *John Halifax, Gentleman*

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1．Introduction

John Halifax, Gentleman (1856) is the most successful novel of Dinah Maria Mulock Craik (1826-1887).[1] Although her name is remembered only as the author of this novel and her other novels have almost been forgotten, Craik was, to borrow Monica Correa Fryckstedt's phrase, one of "the most popular 'queens'" (10) during the 1850s, and *John Halifax, Gentleman* became "a minor classic" (19).[2] John Halifax, who was a poor orphan, determined to make his way in the world through hard work, achieves success in business and becomes a man of distinction in the fictional community of Norton Bury in Gloucestershire. The story is narrated by Phineas Fletcher, who is the best friend of the hero. Although Phineas describes the appearance of his friend with great admiration, he rarely tells about his own, mainly because he is an invalid. The reader never knows precisely what his physical condition is, but, through certain references, we can infer that he is a seriously disabled person. At the beginning of the story, Phineas appears in his hand-carriage, saying that "it was always a trouble to me to move or walk" (Craik, *John*, Dodo 1).[3] Later, the reader learns that he uses a crutch when he walks. On seeing John in the street, Phineas is irresistibly attracted to his sturdiness.

> As I have stated, in person the lad [John] was tall and strongly-built; and I, poor puny wretch! so reverenced physical strength. Everything in him seemed to indicate that which I had not: his muscular limbs, his square, broad shoulders, his healthy cheek, though it was sharp and thin—even to his crisp curls of bright thick hair. (2)

Phineas refers to his physical condition by contrasting with John's healthy appearance. By emphasizing what John has and Phineas does not, the latter shows his own weakness. The first meeting with this lad gives a vivid and lasting impression of "principal figure in a picture which is even yet as clear to me as yesterday" (2) to Phineas, and this determines his own later life. In this paper, I intend to examine the portrayal of this invalid narrator and his role in the novel by comparing him with Ursula and Muriel, John's future wife and first-born daughter.

2．Helplessness and Uselessness

When Phineas first meets John, Phineas is sixteen years old. Although John is two years younger than Phineas, the former soon becomes the object of adoration to the latter. Phineas remarks that his sudden liking for John "spring[s] more from instinct than

reason" (12), and soon this new friendship becomes indispensable for him. When John intends to leave, Phineas describes himself, in a supplicatory tone, as "his sickly boy" (14), as if he were in acute fear of being abandoned. Although the words "his sickly boy" have a ring of self-deprecation, they also imply Phineas has already tied himself with John inseparably. Wishing to detain John as long as possible, Phineas shows his garden to him. The scene of the garden is filled with figurative images. That John carries his frail friend on his back like a "meal-sack" (16) to the garden symbolizes their future relationship: John struggles to take his own way, and Phineas, like his shadow, follows under his guidance. Surrounded by the thick yew hedges, the garden offers a private relaxing space to Phineas, but it also represents the small and confined world he lives in. It is clear that hedges, like walls, can be the shield to separate him from the Norton Bury community. John tries several ways to go through the hedges, which indicates his quest for broadening his world and way of struggling with difficulties in his later years; his attempt to get past a barrier is also to bring about the enlarging of Phineas's closed society.

The isolation of Phineas is emphasized in various ways. Because of his physical limitations, Phineas, especially in his boyhood, is forced to be confined in bed. However, this is not the only reason he has been friendless. We are told that when he and his father, Abel, go to the tan-yard, few people, even their own neighbors, greet them, since Abel is a Quaker.[4] Alice Barber Stephens drew the illustration of this scene. In her drawing, Phineas, in a wheel chair with his father in the foreground, is stared at from a distance, which indicates their heterogeneity in the local community, and their solitary state is further emphasized by the total lack of eye contact with other villagers (Figure 1).[5]

As Phineas comes to know John's personality, his friendship becomes increasingly precious and valuable. However, we cannot say they cultivate their friendship smoothly. Phineas is too weak to go outside by himself and has to wait for John to visit. Even when John was forbidden to enter his house by Abel, Phineas never manages to see his friend by himself. One reason he makes no effort to keep in touch with his only friend is that he knows quite well that John would never exhibit sneaky behavior to pull the wool over Abel's eyes, but the main reason is that he never has energy to do anything. Even when his condition is rather good, Phineas has "the strongest disinclination to stir" (111) from his quiet home. He thus adopts a passive attitude.

Phineas's helplessness is also shown in his repulsion toward his father's business. Abel expects his son to succeed him in his tan-yard business, but Phineas never accepts the idea: "Mentally and physically I alike revolted from my father's trade" (31). After Abel's death, Phineas briefly thinks of working for his living, but he soon gives up the

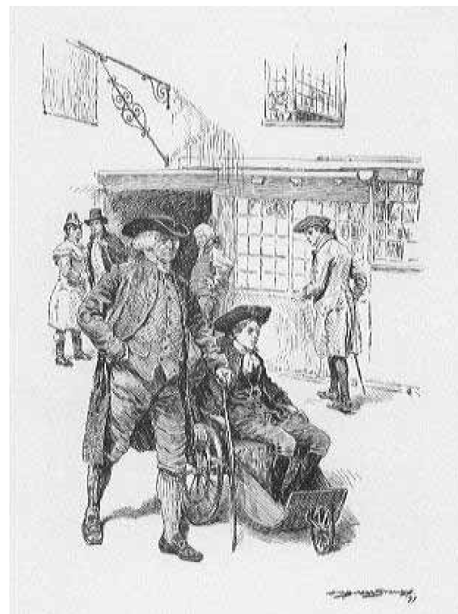

Figure 1 : Alice Barber Stephens, "Many a Person Looked at Us As We Passed."

idea and moves to John's house. We can make an interesting comparison between his lassitude and the attitude to life of Craik's another invalid protagonist, Olive Rothesay. In *Olive* (1850), Craik's earlier novel, the eponymous heroine has a spine disorder. Olive decides to be a woman artist and struggles to do so. Through her portrayal, Craik emphasizes the importance of economic independence of women, especially of the women who have little hope for getting married. Given the "almost masculine power of mind" (Craik, *Olive* 127) and "almost masculine genius" (Craik, *Olive* 145), Olive achieves her goal of becoming a professional artist. However, the narrator carefully comments that Olive's aim to be a woman artist "was from no yearning after fame, no genius-led ambition, but from the mere desire of earning money, that Olive Rothesay first conceived the thought of becoming an artist" (Craik, *Olive* 119). This is quite a contrast to Michael Vanbrugh, Olive's painting master, who openly claims the great and noble principle of art and declares his ambition for fame. In addition, Olive is represented as a dutiful daughter and womanly woman who patiently endures unrequited love for Harold Gwynne.

While Craik packed both masculine and feminine qualities into Olive, she deprives Phineas of manliness, all of which she invests in John instead. Compared to Olive, Phineas has neither the will to work nor a sense of independence. His remissness is obvious in his total indifference to money. We are told that Phineas has "little use for money" (76) and rarely carries any, so when John loses all of his money at the theater of Coltham, most probably at the hands of a pickpocket, they have no choice but to walk ten miles at midnight to go home. Olive Rothesay is the first character in a series of invalids in Craik's novels. Elaine Showalter argues that in Craik's fiction, "unmarried women and their struggles are represented by afflicted characters of both sexes" ("Dinah" 12). In her *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter also suggests that "[i]t is a commonplace in feminine fiction for the sensitive man to be represented as maimed" (127), which means that those men are a type of stand-in for frustrated women. If so, Phineas Fletcher is a typical feminized man who represents women's limited and straitjacketed social situation.

We should notice that the physical condition of Phineas is not uniform throughout the novel. He seems to become better as he grows. It is as if his health were improving because of John:

> But sickness did not now take that heavy, overpowering grip of me, mind and body, that it once used to do. It never did when John was by. He gave me strength, mentally and physically. He was life and health to me, with his brave cheerfulness—his way of turning all minor troubles into pleasantries, till they seemed to break and vanish away, sparkling, like the foam on the top of the wave. (110)

The first thing we should note is that Phineas intimates that inner security supported by strong friendship can exert a great influence on one's physical condition.[6] Phineas sets such a high value on friendship with John that he admires and loves John like a lover. As Sally Mitchell observes, Phineas "has a feminine viewpoint yet he can share a man's life and thoughts" (49). Thus, Phineas plays an androgynous role, connecting men's sphere to that of women's.

3. Ursula and Phineas

Before John's marriage, it is as if Phineas were John's wife: he stays home and waits for his friend to return. However, Phineas tends to depict women in the novel as being strong and powerful. Jael, for example, is described as the person who gives "no indication of her sex in its softness and tenderness" (11), and even Abel, her master, "was sometimes rather afraid of Jael" (54). Lady Caroline has another powerful personality. She has her own charm, and by throwing "her shining arts abroad," she can be "the magic centre of any society" (206). Lady Caroline openly counters her husband's argument, and later betrays him by having an extramarital affair. Her decadent beauty, loveless home life, and degenerating morals show not only the sharp contrast to Ursula March but also the corrupt and declining upper class. Mrs. Jessop, Ursula's former governess, and Mrs. Tod, the landlady of Rose Cottage, also have a more established presence in the novel than their husbands.

When Phineas first sees Ursula at Mrs. Tod's kitchen, he describes his impression of her as a young woman who has a unique charm:

> A girl, in early but not precocious maturity, rather tall, of a figure built more for activity and energy than the mere fragility of sylph-like grace: dark-complexioned, dark-eyed, dark-haired—the whole colouring being of that soft darkness of tone which gives a sense of something at once warm and tender, strong and womanly. Thorough woman she seemed—not a bit of the angel about her. Scarcely beautiful; and "pretty" would have been the very last word to have applied to her; but there was around her an atmosphere of freshness, health, and youth, pleasant as a breeze in spring. (126)

Avoiding excessive glamorization of Ursula, Craik seems to present her not as an angel but as a person with flesh and blood. With regard to "the mere fragility of sylph-like grace," Craik bestows it on Muriel, as we see later. Seen through the eyes of frail Phineas, Ursula's liveliness and strength may be emphasized in the narrative. Furthermore, she is full of vigor and even has an air of dignity.

> [S]he was not one of those gentle creatures whom, married or single, one calls instinctively by their Christian names. Her manner in girlhood was not exactly either "meek" or "gentle"; except towards him [John], the only one who ever ruled her, and to whom she was, through life, the meekest and tenderest of women. To every one else she comported herself, at least in youth, with a dignity and decision—a certain stand-offishness—so that, as I said, it was not quite easy to speak to or think of her as "Ursula." (257)

Indeed, Abel refers to Ursula as a child who had violent passions: she tried to give a big loaf to John in spite of a strong remonstrance and injured herself with a knife. As a young woman, she carries out her strong intention to marry John instead of the fact that he is a social inferior. She does not care about the threat to freeze her inheritance by her cousin Richard Brithwood. Nevertheless, it seems that Ursula gradually relinquishes her individuality and strength after her marriage. Especially after childbirth, she shrinks into nothing but the role of a mother. Shown in the quotation above, Ursula becomes "the meekest and tenderest of women" in front of John, which means she is satisfied to be an

adjunct to her husband. Ursula retreats from tangible presence of a strong-minded single woman to a mere ideal image of a wife and mother.

Although John's marriage evokes diverse emotions in Phineas, such as happiness, loneliness, jealousy, and resignation, we should not overlook that it is he who has given them a helping hand to encourage their marriage: he visited Ursula to ask her to see John, who had suffered a serious illness due to his desperate and hopeless love for her. We can say that this is virtually the only positive action Phineas takes in the novel, which becomes a watershed in Phineas's narrative. It is obvious that the references to his physical affliction drastically decrease after their marriage.

June Sturrock suggests that Craik's concern in her novels is to represent women as workers (94). Ursula is no exception, and she is often depicted performing household chores. She has to manage them by herself, though she has been brought up as a lady.

> Often she would sit chatting with me, having on her lap a coarse brown pan, shelling peas, slicing beans, picking gooseberries; her fingers—Miss March's fair fingers—looking fairer for the contrast with their unaccustomed work. Or else, in the summer evenings, she would be at the window sewing — always sewing — but so placed that with one glance she could see down the street where John was coming. Far, far off she always saw him; and at the sight her whole face would change and brighten, like a meadow when the sun comes out. (258)

We can plainly see Craik's praise of working in Phineas's praise of Ursula's rough fingers as "fairer." However, there is a suggestion here that her essential "work" as a housewife is to wait for her husband's getting home as well as establishing a comfortable domestic environment for him. Unlike Olive Rothesay, it is clear that Ursula's "work" is not a measure for economic independence. The image of Ursula may overlap the dutiful wife painted in Joseph Clark's *The Labourer's Welcome* (Figure 2). The highlight in this picture is the face of the wife which lights up on seeing her husband. Stephen Kern observes that the focus of this picture is "the wife's wide-open eyes and her vision of the environment of the home that she has prepared" for her husband (218). The husband who returns exhausted from hard work can find a haven in his sweet home. Among many other examples, this painting can be regarded as furthering gender roles in Victorian society. Craik also contributes to reinforcing gender stereotypes through depicting John and Ursula as an idealized couple.

Now that Ursula is John's wife and she assumes Phineas's role of waiting for him by the window, the focus of Phineas's narrative

Figure 2 : Joseph Clark, *The Labourer's Welcome*, undated, Museums Sheffield, Sheffield.

changes from the relationship between himself and John to that shared by John with his own family. As John's family members increase, Phineas seldom talks about himself. Stephen's illustration (Figure 3) adeptly reflects this turning point of the novel. In this picture, while Ursula, holding her first-born baby in her arms, occupies the centerpiece with her husband, Phineas is shoved to the right side; in fact, his body is severed by the frame border.

Phineas and Ursula seem to create a mutually complementary relationship. When the former was frail and had to stay in the house, just waiting for John's visit and taking his care, the latter was represented as an active and strong-willed woman; but once Ursula settled down in the household, succeeding to the role of waiting for John, then Phineas becomes more healthier and active than before. He sometimes goes out with John and records what John does away from home. However, places he can go are so limited that, as Mitchell points out, Craik declines to give readers the details about John's business or his inventions (50). By putting control of the story into the hands of invalid Phineas, Craik could cover her own meager knowledge about the public sphere. It may be more appropriate to say that the narrator's infirmity exposes the fields of women's impossibility to participate in public activities and Craik's need to limit the novel's world to domesticity.

Figure 3 : Alice Barber Stephens, "Mrs Halifax Entered, Holding in Her Arms Her Little Winter-Flower, Her Baby Daughter."

4. Muriel as an Angel

Phineas is not the only person who suffers impairment. Muriel, the eldest daughter of John and Ursula, is congenitally blind, which gives great shock to the parents. Throughout the novel, Muriel is described as something angelic and ethereal: "none of us ever seemed to think of Muriel as a woman" (325). She is so often likened to an angel that readers can easily conjecture that Muriel cannot live long. Phineas notices her blindness earlier than even her parents, perhaps, because of his own infirmness. However, Craik seems to lay more emphasis on the immeasurable depth of parental love than on the narrator's keen observation. Phineas repeatedly records scenes in which parental affections make John and Ursula fail to notice that their daughter is getting weaker by the day. With phrases such as "how blind love was" (357) and "an especial mercy of heaven which put that unaccountable blindness before her [Ursula's] eyes" (371), Craik tries to associate physical blindness with figurative blindness, to admire both affectionate parents and their daughter, a girl with an extremely pure heart. In addition, whenever the narrator refers to Muriel, he tries to incorporate pathos into his narrative. Craik's sentimental description of this blind girl was mocked by many contemporary male readers. For example, Showalter cites a lampoon by Edward Burne-Jones and William de

Morgan in her paper ("Dinah" 11). It is interesting to note, however, that Craik's depiction of Muriel shares the same sentiment as *The Blind Girl*, the oil painting by John Everett Millais (Figure 4).

There are two beggar girls who are probably sisters in the foreground of the painting. The elder blind girl has her concertina on her lap, which seems to be the only means to earn their livelihood. We can tell it has just stopped raining because there is a double rainbow in the sky, and the color of the sky is still dark. The girls' clothes are dirty and shabby, and it is clear that the little girl has nothing to keep off the rain except her blind sister's shawl. The message of the painting, however, is not to appeal to their wretched situation as a social problem. Despite the dark sky in the background, the general tone of the painting is rather bright and vivid, and the pastoral scenery behind the girls is peaceful. A butterfly perching on the right shoulder of the elder girl emphasizes the calmness and peacefulness of the scene. The mild and gentle expression of the blind girl also contributes to the tranquil mood of the picture. As Whitney May puts it, it is empathy that permeates in the painting.

Figure 4 : John Everett Millais, *The Blind Girl*, 1856, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, Birmingham.

Just as *The Blind Girl*, Phineas attempts to elicit the emotional sympathy of the reader in his description of Muriel. However, while Millais succeeds to convey his theme to the viewer, Craik represents Muriel in a manner too tear-jerking to be persuasive. Muriel is set up as an overly idealized protagonist: she is spotless, quiet, and peaceful, always bringing harmony to the family. She is Phineas's favorite child and the apple of John's eye.

> In her spirit, as in her outward life, so innocent and harmless, she knew no dark. No cold looks — no sorrowful sights — no winter — no age. The hand laid upon her clear eyes pressed eternal peace down on her soul. I believe she was, if ever human being was, purely and entirely happy. It was always sweet for us to know this — it is very sweet still, Muriel, our beloved! (331)

Based on the overly exaggerated tone of Phineas, it seems as if Muriel could easily transcend her disability and even time. By giving Muriel moral advantage that instills harmony and peacefulness into the family, Craik, in contrast to her description of Ursula, tries to create an ideal image of young women in Victorian society. However, whether by the author's design or not, Muriel reveals that a protagonist like her cannot help being unrealistic.

5. Conclusion

It must be admitted that Phineas as a narrator with his androgynous character is depicted with opportunistic behavior by the

author. Physical disabilities of Phineas and Muriel are treated so sentimentally in the novel that it cannot be denied that sometimes they even sound ridiculous. Craik intends to arouse in the reader great admiration for John and share sympathy for invalid people through Phineas's character, but she seems to neither have the intention of raising awareness of the situation surrounding disabled people nor appeal to social reformation. However, by making the narrator invalid, Craik demonstrates a close affinity between men who are forced to limit their range of activities and women. In *John Halifax, Gentleman*, Craik creates Ursula and Muriel as representations of two types of idealized women: the former is an ideal image of the mother who completely devotes her own family; the latter is the perfect embodiment of the impeccable girl in Victorian society who never complains and accepts her own fate calmly. She is so pure and angelic that everyone around her cannot but love her. However, as Showalter observes that "men condemned to lifelong feminine roles display the personality trails of frustrated women" (*Literature* 127), Craik tries to show the fact that every woman cannot be like Ursula or Muriel through the life of Phineas. Making Phineas vulnerable and feminized, she represents another type of woman who is never allowed to take initiatives and cannot carve a life by herself.

Notes

1 Craik herself thought that her best work was not *John Halifax, Gentleman*, but *A Life for a Life*. (Mitchell 58).

2 In addition to Craik, Fryckstedt names Margaret Oliphant and Anne Manning as three of the most popular "queens" of the circulating libraries during the 1850s (10).

3 All subsequent references of *John Halifax, Gentleman* are cited from the Dodo Press edition and shown parenthetically in the text.

4 Phineas himself is not a Quaker. He refers to the fact that his father has never brought him into the Society of Friends, following his deceased wife's will.

5 Figure 1 and 3 are illustrations from the 1897 edition of *John Halifax, Gentleman*. For other illustrations by Stephens, see Craik, *John, Celebration*.

6 The close connection between mind and body is repeated in other characters: John suffers from serious illness when he carries a torch for Ursula; later, strain of worry about her favorite son Guy forces Ursula to take to her bed.

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