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**FIGHTING SPIRIT:
VICTORIAN WOMEN'S GHOST STORIES**

**THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW
FOR THE DEGREE OF PhD**

ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the supernatural stories of five Victorian women: Margaret Oliphant, Elizabeth Gaskell, Rhoda Broughton, Lanoe Falconer, and Vernon Lee. Their contributions to the genre negate any assumptions of the ghost story as mere entertainment; they are instead consistently concerned with gender-based power relations. What emerges is a literary form that allows for disruption and dislocation of 'normality'.

Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897) has suffered much criticism for her supposedly narrow-minded, anti-feminist views, but her ghost stories reveal a complex woman, very much engaged with the position of her contemporaries. The supernatural is frequently a positive force that empowers her female characters. It also provides a means of dealing with bereavement, loss, and loneliness, issues that are reflected in her own life.

Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) exemplifies the recurring tensions often experienced by Victorian women drawn by both the domestic role they had been prepared for, and the attractions of a career. Her ghost stories illustrate the kinds of splits resulting from conflict between self and self-abnegation. Elements of Gothic and melodrama feature, allowing Gaskell to address some unexpected taboo subjects.

Rhoda Broughton (1840-1920) uses her supernatural fiction to explore the powers of the mind and the unconscious, particularly through dreams and premonitions. This allows a consideration of issues of power and powerlessness within the roles of her male and female protagonists.

Lanoe Falconer (1848-1908) enjoyed a period of great success following the publication of her first novel, and her ghost novella, Cecilia de Noël (1891). The latter addresses in a strikingly original manner many anxieties of the Victorians, such as the struggle between science and religion. Due to her writing career being cut short by illness, Falconer has been relegated to obscurity for most of the twentieth century.

Vernon Lee (1856-1935) displayed a precocious talent from early life, and her Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy (1880), published at the age of only twenty-four brought her critical acclaim. Her supernatural fiction bears testament to her knowledge of this country, as well as other areas of expertise, such as music, psychology, and aesthetics. It depicts a past which can intrude on the Victorian present, insinuating itself into the consciousness of increasingly unstable victims through the effects of music and art.

The current neglect of these writers has its roots in their original reception, and this is among subjects considered in the more general chapter on Victorian publishing.

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INTRODUCTION

Because a woman has *mind*, she is supposed to have no *heart*.¹

Such a prospect supports the Victorian ideal of the purely passive wife, invalid, or mother, quite innocent (and glad to be) of all worldly matters, existing only as someone relative to her husband or father. It was the standard propounded by the proliferation of conduct books, such as those by the popular Sarah Stickney Ellis in her Women of England Series.² Intellectual pursuits, including writing, were held to be incompatible with domestic happiness.³ As a society which placed great emphasis on regulations and etiquette, it cannot be denied that a male-imposed definition of 'normal' female behaviour was in place, but it would be a mistake to accept that this was adhered to unquestioningly by all Victorian women, as will be illustrated in the course of this thesis.⁴ On the other hand, society's rules were difficult to overturn, particularly as no one coherent feminism emerged in the developing interest of women in their circumstances and rights. What becomes clear, and what will be expanded on below, is that an enormous amount of tension existed around women's attitudes to traditional duties and expressions of independence, individuality and creativity. Specifically, this struggle is reflected in women's reading and writing, a situation that has bearing on the popularity amongst women readers and writers of the ghost story genre. In this introduction, the social context within which this hugely successful, but frequently trivialized, form was produced, will be considered.

What exactly *was* expected as normal, natural behaviour for a middle or upper-class Victorian woman, and what were the deviations? To be respectable was everything. As Lynda Nead points out: 'The notion of respectability was defined for women in terms of dependency, delicacy and fragility; independence was unnatural, it signified boldness and sexual deviancy'.⁵ Richard le Gallienne, writer and contemporary advocate of

women's rights, goes further, and sums up satirically the expected role of Victorian women:

To be truly womanly you must be shrinking and clinging in manner and trivial in conversation; you must have no ideas, and rejoice that you wish for none; you must thank Heaven that you have never ridden a bicycle or smoked a cigarette; and you must be prepared to do a thousand other absurd and ridiculous things.⁶

Women are to be relegated to the 'separate sphere'⁷ of domesticity, and, more specifically, to marriage and motherhood: 'In her most perfect form, the lady combined total sexual innocence, conspicuous consumption and the worship of the family hearth'.⁸ Accordingly, girls were educated with the particular aim in mind of creating a 'lady', with many believing that 'the inculcation of moral and religious feelings, followed by "Domestic duties", "General knowledge" and "Accomplishments" ' was sufficient, and even desirable, for a woman's mind.⁹ Yet both enlightened women *and* men raised objections to this state of affairs. Florence Nightingale, who, after a great deal of frustration, did herself struggle free, from suffocating family duty to the freedom of positive action in nursing, rages in Cassandra (1928): 'Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity - these three - and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised?'.¹⁰ Supporting the argument that women can also possess the supposedly male characteristics of passion, intellect and moral activity, was John Stuart Mill, who met with huge opposition and much ridicule for his views on The Subjection of Women (1869): 'What is now called the nature of woman is an eminently artificial thing - the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation of others'.¹¹ With such all-pervasive beliefs, debates and arguments ongoing, it is hardly surprising that their influence was felt in the literature of the time. First, however, there is the question of what women could, should, and did read.

The reading habits of the Victorian lady were shaped largely by the way in which she herself was defined and categorized by men. W.M. Thackeray, in his position as editor of the Cornhill Magazine, assured his readers that: ‘At our social table, we shall suppose the ladies and children always present’.¹² This forms the root of the problem; in polite, respectable Victorian society, women were grouped, not with men as equal adults, but with the children. As such, they were deemed unfit to judge for themselves what was suitable reading material, or to deal with any subject less than completely innocent. This is the legacy of Thomas Bowdler, who, early in the century, had devoted himself to reprinting Shakespeare so that, ‘those words are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family’.¹³ Why such worry on the part of male editors and the *paterfamilias*? A clue lies in the flurry caused by the rise of the naturalistic novel, with its frank depiction of all aspects of the human condition. Tennyson illustrates a general male fear when he writes of literature which would ‘“set the maiden fancies” otherwise pure and virginal, wallowing in images at once shamefully animalistic and morally degrading’.¹⁴ The issue at the heart of the matter is *control*: the need to have, as the nucleus and linchpin of a comfortable, domestic, *respectable* society, the pure, passionless, docile woman. Thus the belief, subconscious or otherwise, that if women were allowed to come in contact with only the ‘right’ sort of literature, and kept in ignorance of everything else, their characters could be moulded accordingly.

The next step from bowdlerising literature as a means of control was the emergence of the powerful circulating libraries, the chief of these being Mudie’s Select Library and W.H. Smith’s. Their success was based on the prevalence of the three-volume novel, which was too expensive for most people to actually buy for themselves. Karl Beckson explains how their influence then grew:

In wishing to protect their readers from what they regarded as corrupting influences, thus establishing a reputation from which profits accrued, the libraries assumed unofficial positions as censors and arbiters of literary taste. Hence, they selected inoffensive works deemed suitable for middle-class subscribers, principally women with the leisure to read lengthy fiction.¹⁵

The result increasingly infuriated writers, and George Moore, whose work did not always fit with the libraries' standards, became one of the foremost voices of dissent: 'nothing beyond the value of a sentimental tale is to be found in the circulating libraries'.¹⁶ His angry attacks, in the form of an article and pamphlet, 'A New Censorship of Literature' (1884), and Literature at Nurse; or, Circulating Morals (1885), did not bring about the downfall of these powerful and established institutions, but they did perhaps signal the beginning of the end, as the one-volume novel and inexpensive editions gradually took hold.¹⁷

The easing of restrictions maintained by the lending libraries may have allowed women a greater freedom in their reading, but there are examples of how, into this century, women's access to literature and therefore knowledge, was blocked. In A Room of One's Own (1929), Virginia Woolf gives a famous example of how, whilst visiting Cambridge University, she encountered male restrictions:

instantly, there issued, like a guardian angel barring the way with a flutter of black gown instead of white wings, a deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman, who regretted in a low voice as he waved me back that ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction.¹⁸

Woolf is understandably angry at this treatment, and the fact that her language emphasizes the librarian's low-key approach serves to heighten the sense of injustice and stupidity of the situation. Woolf's book forms a discussion of women as writers; if women faced such disadvantages as imposed behavioural standards, lack of formal

education, and restricted access to literature and knowledge, how did they face and/or surmount such difficulties?

‘ “I wonder, for my part, that she did not make me literary; but fortunately I escaped that.”

“Heaven be praised!” said Mr Cavendish’.¹⁹

This comic exchange takes place between two of Margaret Oliphant’s characters, Miss Marjoribanks, the novel’s eponymous and formidable heroine (1866), and her potential suitor. However, it is a good indicator of the prevailing attitude towards women who wrote. Writing, quite simply, impinged on the male preserves of business and knowledge, and threatened the all-important duties of the middle/upper-class woman: ‘Because so much importance was attached to the roles of wifhood and motherhood, marriage was deemed the apotheosis of womanly fulfilment, alternatives to which were regarded as pitiable or unnatural’.²⁰ Women who wanted to write, or turned to it as a means of support, were therefore faced with the hugely problematic tensions arising from the pull of both instilled beliefs and their own individuality and creativity, what Shirley Foster views as ‘a desire to challenge and change current attitudes and a reluctance to disturb the status quo’.²¹ In Virginia Woolf’s opinion, a choice, however difficult, had to be made: ‘Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer’.²² Herself writing in the twentieth century, but by birth a Victorian, she describes the life-and-death struggle that takes place in order to write freely and honestly:

I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me [...] whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her.²³

She obviously feels that whether or not they were physically restricted, women's creative processes were marred or blocked by the presence of male-imposed ideals that functioned only for the benefit of men themselves. Woolf's own choices were no less problematic, and not always made without the influence of others. Though she married a man who ostensibly understood and encouraged her career, concern regarding the effects of writing on her physical and mental health meant that Leonard Woolf, and also her sister Vanessa, sometimes enforced the traditional Victorian 'rest-cure' which forbade any activity, particularly of a creative kind. This same concern also affected the couple's decision not to have children, a resolution Virginia was by no means sure of. Her allowing Leonard to convince her led to lingering regrets.²⁴ Notably, she is not the only celebrated woman writer for whom, for whatever reason, domesticity and literature were incompatible: Jane Austen, the Brontës and George Eliot all spring to mind. Out of the five writers examined in this thesis, only two married – Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant – and the latter spent the greater part of her life a self-supporting widow. Of course, in a growing number of cases, marriage - held out as the perfect role - was not an option anyway, due to the fact that the numbers of women greatly outnumbered men.²⁵ However, for some women, it proved impossible to break out of the stifling stereotypes, as Victoria Glendinning relates: 'Girls of high intelligence and an enquiring mind were the ones who suffered most. They seem like lonely bonfires, burning away their frustration and emptiness into their diaries and private letters'.²⁶ Thus the copious diaries and letters of the time become the only legitimate outlet of expression for so many wasted women.

Not every woman writer made a definite choice between her art and domesticity. One woman who clearly experienced the difficulties of conflicting roles, yet who seemed, to a large extent, to reconcile them, was Elizabeth Gaskell, who will be considered in

detail in a later chapter. She put the doctrine of separate spheres to her own use by building up a network of female friends - including Harriet Martineau and Barbara Bodichon, who were involved in women's rights - which in turn aided the development of her confidence, in writing and as a woman.²⁷ Gaskell managed to achieve a balance between the professional and the domestic that she could live with; if that meant maintaining, for the most part, a traditionally acceptable public image in order for her to write and publish, then so be it.

In contrast, Margaret Oliphant is a writer who is usually associated with definite anti-feminist views. This verdict, however, is over-simplistic and unfair, as a later chapter will demonstrate. She was certainly fortunate to begin with; the career that was to become so prolific started almost accidentally,²⁸ partly because she was encouraged by a cousin, George Wilson, who believed in education for women, and recognized her talents.²⁹ Significantly, as will be shown, her female characters are by no means passive. She in fact did, as well as supporting two sickly, indolent sons, bring up children of relatives as well, and it is probable that these experiences of being the only one able to cope are what led her, by the 1880s, to her belief that, 'I think it is highly absurd that I should not have a vote if I want one'.³⁰ Oliphant cannot be dismissed unquestioningly as an anti-feminist, as her writing, and specifically her ghost stories bear out. Once again, the relationship between the artistic and the personal life proves problematic.

As the debate over the issue of women's rights grew, so more women themselves became openly involved. According to John Stuart Mill, 'Literary women are becoming more freespoken, and more willing to express their real sentiments'.³¹ However, in fiction and journalism alike, getting into print as a woman writer - with

whatever agenda - was less than simple. Elaine Showalter finds that the greater bulk of rejected manuscripts came from women,³² and she blames this largely on the fact that only 20% of women writers had a formal education behind them, a factor which proved influential in determining whether women took up the pen at all.³³ This disadvantage showed itself in prejudice: 'Women writers, who were almost all self-taught, were expected to meet male standards of scholarship if they ventured to use their knowledge'.³⁴ It was an effective means of shaming or squeezing women out of what was regarded as male territory. In the newspapers too, women wanting to openly push for greater equality found it difficult to have their voices heard: 'Feminists did not fare well in the mainstream Victorian press. Routinely ridiculed, frequently attacked, silenced or given only minimal coverage, Victorian feminists did not find it a simple matter to speak out about women's place in Victorian culture'.³⁵ However, it is arguable that perhaps this was ultimately beneficial, as the feminist Josephine Butler pointed out: 'The conspiracy of silence of the press has done us this service ... it has forced us to create a literature of our own',³⁶ thus effectively giving women an identity and independence lacking before. A brief survey of a few of the journals established by women gives some idea of the determination and intent of those behind the scenes: English Women's Journal (1858), Englishwoman's Review (1865), Woman's Gazette (1875), Women and Work (1874), Shield (1870).³⁷ These conditions helped to encourage a new breed of professional women who, although not willing to give up the idea of some form of family life, also demanded a career that was taken seriously.

Dinah Mulock, or Dinah Craik, as she became, was one such woman. Arriving in London at a young age, she left behind an alcoholic father, and brought with her an ill mother and a young, idle brother to support. Far from being daunted by the prospect, she launched herself not only on a literary career, but also on the male-oriented world of

business and publishing, not worrying that she upset certain strongholds with her determination and ‘“unfeminine” businesslike energy’.³⁸ As Foster explains:

Craik’s experiences also taught her to look to herself for emotional support. The myth of masculine superiority had early been shattered for her, as it had been for Elizabeth Sewell, though since in her case she was not squashed by overbearing male arrogance she was encouraged to take a more scornful attitude towards the opposite sex.³⁹

Yet she had no wish to sacrifice other areas of her life, and ‘also craved for emotional fulfilment, and clung to an idealistically romantic creed’.⁴⁰ This may seem to contradict her feminist beliefs, considering the domestic demands which usually came with marriage, but when marriage - a happy one by all accounts - eventually came about, ‘it clearly provided Craik with the emotional fulfilment she desired, but she continued to run her life in the way she wanted’.⁴¹ She accordingly ignored objections from her husband’s family that she was too old and he too young, and refused to contemplate giving up her art (and independence). Thus Dinah Craik seems to have appropriated both the possible states for a Victorian woman - married or self-supporting - and manipulated both to her own positive advantage. She put to good use the years of being single, gaining maturity and confidence before going open-eyed into a marriage of equality. She was one woman at least who resolved the tensions.

In what ways then, did these social and literary conditions affecting women of the time, have specific bearing on the popularity of the ghost story genre? Most successful women writers of the time have at least one, and sometimes many, stories of the supernatural, to their name. To begin with, it is significant that spiritualism, and the role that women played within the movement, was so popular in the Victorian era. Many mediums were women, and Alex Owen argues that their ‘involvement with spiritualism was at one level all about gender expectations, sexual politics, and the

subversion of existing power relations between men and women'.⁴² Arguably, their role is based on limiting definitions of feminine qualities; it was widely believed that their 'innate' passivity made them ideal 'vessels' for spirit communications.⁴³ However, like the writers mentioned earlier, who did not want to ostracize themselves from the rest of society, at the same time as wanting greater control of their own destinies, female mediums seem to have generally appropriated patriarchal values and manipulated them for their own ends: 'The medium attained power because of qualities which were associated with powerlessness, but such power allowed her to move beyond the confines of the ordained female role and into new or forbidden territory'.⁴⁴ In this particular context, 'forbidden territory' could mean speaking publicly at meetings, having private sittings with male audiences, or taking on the not-necessarily lady-like personality of a visiting spirit, to give a few instances: seemingly minor incidences, but potentially extremely liberating for someone previously trapped in the obedient-housewife mould. The benefit was that, throughout, the medium could remain acceptable, and even respected, even though, technically, it was *influence* - due to her supposed womanly moral and spiritual superiority - rather than power that she had gained.⁴⁵

In this case, literature certainly seems to reflect life; taking into account the recurring pattern of tension between complying with patriarchal tradition and breaking with it, the ghost story offered numerous attractions similar to those connected with spiritualism. Diana Basham argues that, 'both ghosts and women were subject to the same kind of criticism and liable to be met with the same dismissive hostility in their attempts to gain recognition',⁴⁶ so perhaps an instinctive or conscious awareness of bonds drew them to the genre; Jenny Uglow regards the ghost story as a means of exorcising 'unnamed tensions within'.⁴⁷ Again, Basham makes an important point: 'Victorian women, even

as late as the 1890s, tended not to use the ghost story form for overtly feminist purposes. Instead, their attraction to the form seems to have been directed by its potential for covert meanings and excluded presences'.⁴⁸ Women in journalism may have been happy to write more openly about their situation, but in supernatural fiction they seem to have appreciated the subversive possibilities. Basham identifies this specifically as 'the narrative of female absence', and in particular cites Amelia B. Edwards and Margaret Oliphant as practitioners of this technique.⁴⁹ Significantly, these two women differed widely in their overt political sentiments; the former openly acknowledged her feminism, whilst Oliphant avoided any such disclosure. It is Oliphant, however, who is selected by Basham to illustrate this point, using her story, 'The Open Door' (1882): 'In all its aspects, the story itself is an open door, a two-way mirror, and as such it brilliantly realises the feminist potential of the ghost story mysteriously to reflect the exclusion of women and their inadequate representation'.⁵⁰ By this interpretation, the story comes from the pen of the writer who has all along had the reputation of being an anti-feminist, but who nonetheless did not see why she could not have a vote if she so wished. In other words, perhaps Oliphant, though feeling inadequate to - or objecting to - challenging the entire machinery of patriarchy openly, did subvert the system covertly through her supernatural fiction.

If it is true that women writers of supernatural fiction wanted to subvert gendered norms, what was it about the genre which allowed them to immediately throw a critical male readership off its guard? One possible answer is that, with its roots deep in the past, the ghost story was very much an oral tradition. Perhaps men, jealous of their profession as a serious one, would instinctively feel less threatened by the image of women - metaphorically speaking - sitting round a fire, telling each other spooky stories. This is borne out by the Victorian tradition of the ghost story being a part of the

Christmas annual, to be read to the whole family, once again round the fire. In the stories themselves however, the oral tradition rapidly emerges as a specifically female one, with the authoritative voice being that of a matriarchal figure. Anna Maria Hall's 'La Femme Noir'⁵¹ illustrates a chain of female narrative voices; Gaskell's 'The Old Nurse's Story' and Craik's 'The Last House in C- Street'⁵² are similar examples.

Within these female narratives, as Basham argues, 'the challenge of the supernatural is made directly to notions of masculinity itself'.⁵³ This can take differing forms: a male character being worsted or humbled by a supernatural force more powerful than himself is one, and appears in numerous stories, such as Margaret Oliphant's 'The Open Door', and Rhoda Broughton's 'The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth'.⁵⁴ It could involve depictions of communities of women - spanning the living and the dead - such as Elizabeth Gaskell's 'The Old Nurse's Story';⁵⁵ or, as in one of Gaskell's more unusual stories, 'The Grey Woman',⁵⁶ boundaries between gender and sexuality could be completely blurred. We must again think of the minister's wife, mother of four children, and anxious to remain a dutiful member of both her family and society, when we consider a remarkable tale that involves bigamy, cross-dressing, and a possible lesbian relationship. Would Elizabeth Gaskell have felt able to write such a narrative except under the guise of a 'harmless' ghost story? In other words, not only did the genre allow for the expression of subversively feminist ideas, but it also made possible the exploration of dangerous territory that would have been closed off completely in any other context.

For the purpose of this thesis, therefore, I have chosen to examine the genre of the ghost story through the work of five women writers: Margaret Oliphant, Elizabeth Gaskell, Rhoda Broughton, Lanoe Falconer, and Vernon Lee. All illustrate the hypothesis that

Victorian women's supernatural fiction was multi-layered, and that beneath the acceptability of a traditional form of entertainment lay the distinct purpose of voicing assertive beliefs and views which frequently challenged patriarchal ideology. The above writers spanned the second half of the nineteenth century; in some instances their work overlapped, and there is evidence to suggest that they were aware of each other's work, as with Oliphant's reviews of Gaskell, an issue which will be addressed in the chapter on publishing. In many ways their work exhibits similar concerns about women's lives, and allows them, in common, to depict strong, capable, determined, and independent notions of womanhood normally denied them. On the other hand, the timespan is a large one, and numerous historical changes have to be taken into account. Oliphant's opinions regarding women's position in society can be seen to alter during her long career; this is apparent in her non-fiction, but also emerges in her characters and plots. Gaskell clearly manifests, and is aware of, a troubling pull between traditional and more progressive attitudes with regard to a woman's role. Broughton's reputation, her reception at the hands of critics and a reading public, and her delineation of female behaviour, shifts dramatically over the years. Falconer's focus on the most agitating of contemporary issues contrasts with Lee's concentration on the powerful force exerted by the past.

Over the period studied, the style of the ghost story shows a move away from the more narrative-based tales of Oliphant and Gaskell towards Lee's psychological hauntings. A change in emphasis had already been witnessed from the gothic stories of the early part of the nineteenth century and end of the eighteenth, in that ultimate responsibility for events was placed, not on unstoppable fate, but on the human characters and their choice of actions. Neither were the supernatural circumstances negated by physical explanations at the end. This lack of answers could perhaps be viewed as surprising

given the technological and scientific advances of the period, but writers such as those who feature in this study seem to suggest that increased knowledge serves only to generate more questions. To some extent, all the writers examined here retain elements of the traditional ghost story, ensuring its recognition as such by readers, and demonstrating a constancy in human anxieties surrounding the vexed issues of death, bereavement and a possible afterlife. Yet at the same time they manipulate and extend the boundaries of what may be expected within a ghost story. There may be the traditional apparition, although this in itself can be subject to experimentation, as when in Oliphant's 'Old Lady Mary' the perspective is partly that of the ghost. There may not even be a ghost, as in Gaskell's 'The Grey Woman', the title signifying instead the death-in-life of the eponymous heroine. Owing to the emphasis on the haunted rather than the haunters, doubt is frequently cast over whether the ghost is a product of a character's imagination or 'real'. In addition, most of the writers feature other supernatural phenomena, such as witchcraft, curses, premonitions and dreams. The thesis accordingly includes this extended definition of the ghost story in its analysis.

I would argue that the supernatural fiction of Victorian women is distinct from that of their male counterparts. One logical reason for this is that, as there was not the same policing of men's opinions, there was no need to express them subversively. Although there were, as will be discussed in the publishing chapter, limits and definitions placed on what any author could expect to have allowed into print, such rules were constructed by men, who were also responsible for deciding what was appropriate in respect of women readers and writers. Male writers, then, were more inclined to utilize the genre (and they expected women to do likewise) as entertainment, and thus concentrated more exclusively on the element of fear as the ultimate point of the tale. Examples of this would be Lord Lytton's 'The Haunted and the Haunters, or, The House and the Brain'

(1859),⁵⁷ Bram Stoker's 'The Judge's House' (1891),⁵⁸ W.W. Jacob's 'The Monkey's Paw' (1902),⁵⁹ and Algernon Blackwood's 'The Kit-Bag' (1908).⁶⁰ In all of these stories there is a steady accent towards a horrifying climax. The first also illustrates the theme of a struggle between supernatural forces and a masculine assumption of dominance. Such a tendency would be frequently challenged and examined in women's stories, such as Oliphant's 'The Open Door'. One could also offer one of the most famous ghost story writers, M.R. James, and the closed, masculine world of academics he delineates, which almost completely excludes women, as another example of how men and women's ghost stories differ.

Perhaps the closest affiliation between men and women's ghost stories may be observed in Henry James's The Turn of the Screw (1898).⁶¹ James uses a similar psychological approach to that of Vernon Lee - whom he knew - and adopts a female protagonist and narrator. Yet there are still differences, primarily in that James's assumption of a female voice could be regarded as a means to an end. Punter reads this tale as one of 'psychological doubt' in which the author illustrates the difficulties of accessing the past, and where James's themes symbolize 'the locked room of the unconscious'.⁶² Thus, his governess and her gender are picked for the vulnerability they immediately infer. That she is a woman in her particular circumstances allows James to develop the characteristics of guilt, sexual anxiety, repression and religious mania which could believably be construed to have arisen from her gender and resultant upbringing. Ultimately it will allow for an examination into an unbalanced state of mind. In other words, a male author, in this instance, is using a female protagonist for literary purposes, whereas for a woman writer, her female character would often have been the point of the story, representing all of her social concerns.

The Victorian ghost story, therefore, gains particular significance when applied to the general sociology of women's reading and writing of the time. Within the mainstream patriarchal society, the ideal held out to women was to become perfect wives and mothers, and nothing else. Writing, especially as a profession, and especially as an outlet for feminist feelings and beliefs, did not fit into this ideal. This created tension for women who wanted to write, for whatever reasons, between their traditional domestic duties and their individual wish to assert their independence and creativity. Many writers rejected open radicalism for two reasons, the first being that they felt a genuine pull towards the duties they had been brought up to, and the second being that radicalism would have been noticed and objected to. The ghost story proved an ideal discourse for hidden agendas and deeper textual levels, as well as representing, on the wider level, women's own marginalization, like the supernatural, to the realms of the irrational/Other. The more the subject is examined, the more it seems that Victorian society, women's reading and writing, and the ghost story are irrevocably intertwined.

- ¹ Grace Aguilar, 'The Authoress', Victorian Love Stories: An Oxford Anthology, ed. by Kate Flint (Oxford, 1997), pp.1-17, p.6.
- ² Cf., for example, Sarah Stickney Ellis, The Wives of England: Their relative duties, Domestic Influence, and Social Obligations (London, 1843).
- ³ Cf. 'A literary woman is the very antipodes to domestic happiness', Aguilar, p.2.
- ⁴ For a comprehensive discussion of the position of women in this period, cf. Martha Vicinus, ed., Suffer and be Still: Women in the Victorian Age (Bloomington, 1972).
- ⁵ Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain (Oxford, 1988), p.28.
- ⁶ Karl Beckson, London in the 1890s: A Cultural History (New York, 1992), p.144.
- ⁷ Nead, p.33.
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- ⁹ Barbara Rees, The Victorian Lady (London, 1977), p.21.
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- ¹⁴ Beckson, p.292-3. The ageing speaker in Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall Sixty Years After' (1886) suggests contemporary literature would 'Set the maiden fancies wallowing in the troughs of Zolaism'.
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- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.297.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.* pp.297-8. Cf. George Moore, Literature at Nurse, or, Circulating Morals: A Polemic on Victorian Censorship (Hassocks, 1976).
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- ²⁸ Merryn Williams, Margaret Oliphant: A Critical Biography (London, 1986), pp.7-8.
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⁵⁶ Ibid. pp.187-248.

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⁶⁰ Algernon Blackwood, 'The Kit-Bag', Victorian Ghost Stories: An Oxford Anthology, ed. by Michael Cox & R.A. Gilbert (Oxford, 1992), pp.480-9.

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**A NEW PAGE:
PUBLISHING THE GHOST STORY**

MAGAZINE DAY

Serial publication, literally, had its day in the nineteenth century. Such was the excitement generated by its blend of fiction and fact, with the latest works by favourite authors, that the first of the month, when the latest issues became available, became known as ‘Magazine Day’.¹ The first edition of the Cornhill Magazine, for example, in 1859/60, with W.M. Thackeray as editor, was wildly popular, selling 100,000 copies.² With its heyday in the 1860s and ’70s, the publication aimed to provide quality and variety at the affordable price of a shilling, therefore pitching to a different market to the more expensive likes of Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine.³ The public, however, were far from restricted in their choice, be it in price or content. Fierce rivalry for their attention flourished, and it has been suggested that the result was ‘a Darwinian model of literary development, in which literary forms compete with one another for readers because of economic pressure on literary production to appeal to the common denominator of aggregate demand.’⁴ Readers could pick quarterlies (normally aimed at a well-educated, middle/upper-class male readership), monthlies, or weeklies. Of the first, the four most important were the Quarterly Review, the Edinburgh Review, the Westminster Review, and the North British Review. All of these were literary and general, but were especially strong in the areas of novel criticism and reviews. A selection of monthlies could include Bentley’s Miscellany, Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, the Cornhill Magazine – regarded as one of the most brilliant and popular – Macmillan’s Magazine, Fraser’s Magazine – these last two being among the most important – the St James’s Magazine, and the Victoria Magazine. The Athenaeum was regarded as the most prestigious weekly journal, with a reputation for fair reviewing, whilst the Saturday Review led the way in literary reviews, albeit famed for their venom

as much as their intellectualism and influence. Other weeklies included All the Year Round, Chamber's Journal, the London Journal, the London Review, and the Spectator.⁵ As Thomson has capably argued:

Victorian periodicals, taking it upon themselves to satisfy the needs of the 'multitude' for entertainment and education, became by the mid-nineteenth century one of the most influential and culturally significant forms of popular entertainment and instruction.⁶

Sutherland has estimated that around 50,000 novels were published over the Victorian period,⁷ and many of these began life in serial form. The format was also ideal for the genre of the ghost story, which soon became a feature anticipated with relish, particularly, as we have seen, at the time of the Christmas annuals. The periodicals' omnipresence assured their domination, and this allowed for a particular shaping of their audience:

By the 1850s, critics and the reading public had developed critical standards and vocabulary for discussing the novel, and a coherent discourse had emerged. The literary review and literary article became important mediators between literature and the reading public.⁸

A relationship had been established between those who were effectively the educators, and those eager to be educated, and for the first time literature became a widespread feature of everyday life, encompassing all classes. It was through this medium, as it were, that the majority of Victorian women's ghost stories made themselves visible to a large number of keen but discerning spectators. This same group, if not gratified, now had the power to return them ignominiously to the grave.

The triumph of the periodical form in the nineteenth century is closely linked to the qualities of an era which 'subscribed to a notion of personal development running from infancy through maturity and ending in old age'.⁹ The rise of the middle-classes and a

belief in progress, which required ‘the perseverance and delay of gratification necessary for middle-class economic success’ mirrored the very nature of a serial; here too postponement of knowledge of the outcome was a crucial ingredient.¹⁰ A serial story could take around two years to complete, but the interim provided ‘cheap luxury’, whilst ultimately, ‘the richness of detail and expansion of the text over time suggested a world of plenitude’.¹¹ As opposed to the political upheavals gripping much of Europe at the time, Britain had adopted the methods of steady development and rejected violent revolution, and again this is reflected in the public’s chosen literary channel.¹² Surely this provides an intriguing situation for the women’s ghost story, which, with its plots of dislocation and disruption, highlighting the unexpected and the uncontrolled, could well explode into this dangerously complacent ideology.

Curiously, the periodical had rather a different impact on the writers responsible for its circulation. Whilst readers’ interests were projected, the popularity of the system meant that authors were tempted ‘to write for the immediate moment instead of futurity and for the many instead of the few’.¹³ However, concerns for posterity were pushed aside in favour of the benefits:

The ease of publication, the high rate of payment, the favourable notice to be gained from being known to write for a particular periodical, and, at the same time, the convenient shelter of anonymity which made it the author’s choice to reveal whether or not his was the hand that had written a particular article – all this made the periodical format attractive to writers.¹⁴

All of the women writers who will be studied in this thesis were influenced to some degree by at least one of these concerns. For retiring writers like Lanoë Falconer, the first and the last were most appealing. Living in Italy for the greater part of the year, Vernon Lee certainly appreciated the periodical’s convenience, whilst neither Margaret Oliphant, Elizabeth Gaskell, nor Rhoda Broughton ever denied the importance of

pecuniary matters in their motivation to publish. One of Oliphant's diary entries, written on Christmas night, is particularly revealing in this respect: 'I want work. Work that will pay. enough to keep this house going which here is no one to provide for but me. I don't know how to stop. to change to make another way of living'.¹⁵ Yet as women, there was another, powerful movement of which they were part: 'it was during the nineteenth century that the female voice gained authority and dissemination, more than in any previous century'.¹⁶ As we have witnessed earlier in the chapter, 'there are strongly differentiated gender and class determinants of literary opportunity and literary access'.¹⁷ Periodicals created a significant opening:

Women's writing filled an occupational vacancy created by the unprecedented number of journals and serials, with many authors producing as many as a dozen novels a year to earn a living. Women's writing also met a perceived need for moral instruction, similar in nature and function to that provided by and expected of vast numbers of women educators. Like education, writing that did not qualify as 'fine' literature came to be undervalued as women's domain.¹⁸

Perhaps it was these complacent expectations of instruction, within the limits of Charles Mudie's 'young girl standard',¹⁹ discussed in the introduction, which allowed women the freedom to quietly introduce their more subversive themes unnoticed into their supernatural fiction, or perhaps, subconsciously or otherwise, their contemporaries welcomed a disguised deviation from the didactic and moral. Whichever, it has been asserted that the periodical form suited a women's lifestyle, particularly if she had family ties, as the arrangement allowed more scope for domestic duties and interruptions.²⁰ Furthermore, even when adhering to all the rules, if she were publishing a longer work as opposed to a short story, 'The inherent periodicity and silent spaces between parts that characterized serial fiction could have enabled women writers and readers to indicate and recognize female bodily experiences that were not permitted direct articulation', as with Molly Gibson in Gaskell's Wives and Daughters (1866), who undergoes puberty in-between the first and second part.²¹

The popularity and wide readership of the periodical press, and this new, hungry market was identified by early women writers to be an ideal channel, but it was by no means straightforward:

Progressive writers recognized it as a potentially empowering medium, but the ways in which they were presented to their desired readers often undermined their efforts because their texts were sensationalized [...] Women writers and late Victorian women's issues were exploited as cultural commodities to help boost circulation rates, and it was clear to feminists, at least, that this was not a reliable medium.²²

They were conspired against by ideologically opposed groups. Feltes cites 'the coming of the Net Book Agreement and the death of the three-volume novel' as the beginning of publishing as 'a patriarchal/capitalist mode of production'.²³ From 1895 they had to combat the 'newly legitimated traditionalism and reactionary rhetoric'²⁴ of the Salisbury government, but simultaneously they were attacked by the aesthetes, 'promoting either traditional or counterrevolutionary models of womanhood'.²⁵ It was towards the end of the century then that what Tuchman designates the 'edging out' of women occurred,²⁶ 'when men began to regain the literary marketplace after a brief field victory by their female rivals'.²⁷ Up to this point, however, and despite the ongoing battle to be taken seriously on a level with male contributors, the periodical press presented a rich field of opportunity for women writers, and a perfect arena for the ghost story.

BALANCING ACTS

The masculine history of the text asks us to read what it mentions casually; the feminine story asks us to read what it studiously avoids.²⁸

Several successful periodicals existed during the Victorian period which were aimed specifically at women, notably The Lady's Magazine, Eliza Cook's Journal, the New Monthly Belle Assemblée, the Lady's Newspaper and Pictorial Times, and the Englishwomen's Domestic Magazine. However, as their less-than snappy titles suggest, their intentions were gender-specific, and 'tended to perpetuate the Victorian ideal of domestic femininity [...] material that was to any degree intellectual was often thought to be inappropriate for women'.²⁹ For any women writer or reader who did not feel particularly in need of pictures to aid her understanding, or those who did not wish to participate in the trend to group women and children as a single audience,³⁰ women's periodicals proved inadequate. A desire to break away, however, could be problematic: 'At its bluntest, one may say that men tended to have lived, loved and worked before writing fiction, women often the other way round'.³¹ It is what Thomson recognizes as the 'double bind' of women writers: 'a truly pure woman is too ignorant to be a good novelist, and conversely, any insightful female novelist is morally suspect'.³² The writers in this study trod a fine line between acceptability and outrage, sometimes lapsing into the latter, but there is no doubt that the seemingly harmless yet subversive discourse of the ghost story – and authorship in general – helped them to achieve a balance. In their lives, it would be difficult to pretend that the mature women would have been as innocent as the patriarchy would have liked to assume. One only has to imagine Gaskell in her work amongst the slums of Manchester to realize that her eyes would have been perfectly opened to the seamier side of life. It was often fiction, however, which provided the only outlet:

most Victorian women writers were divided personalities. They were aware that to write at all was considered unwomanly, and to earn a living by it was certainly unladylike, so, in public, they either expressed no views on controversial topics or very conventional ones. What they really thought can be defined more clearly from a study of their writings. Here the true hidden self could safely be displayed.³³

The way in which it was impossible to disentangle life and art, whatever those in favour of the pedestal approach to women would have liked to believe, has been noted:

Gaskell and Oliphant, in different ways and to different degrees, did more than use life-experience as the raw material for fiction. They had lives of their own which were, as they lived them, narrative-led: the chaotic jumble of events called 'life' compulsively shaped into story as part of the assimilation process, two self creating authors. This need to make sense of oneself, translated into neat closures, the satisfaction of the fictional form, is perhaps of all others the most gripped form of narration there can be.³⁴

Neither woman could afford to indulge in theory or the luxury of an artist's lifestyle; both had substantial domestic commitments to attend to. Gaskell, in addition to coping with the demands of four daughters, had the duties that came with the position of minister's wife. Oliphant was a widow with two sons to bring up; she also inherited numerous relatives to support single-handedly. The miracle was that they found the time to write at all: 'For Gaskell and Oliphant the world of imaginary (and thus limitless) experience is checked, rather than stopped, by the restraints of their various and compulsory social functions of motherhood, free-lance professional writing, and marriage'.³⁵ Oliphant especially has the reputation (justly deserved) of producing a huge volume of work. For both women, their experiences, positive and negative, of family and domesticity, became a crucial foundation for their writing, so that they used their respective situations, even at the same time as being controlled by them.

At a time when it was considered the duty of the husband to provide financial stability for the whole family, Gaskell and Oliphant broke with tradition:

Each woman wrote with a sharp sense of shared financial responsibility for her family's wellbeing. Mr Gaskell's salary as a Unitarian minister was not grand, and Mrs Gaskell's earnings were an important resource for providing educational opportunities for their children, for allowing Mr Gaskell to take an occasional break from the pastoral demands of Manchester, and even, as the well-known story goes, for permitting Mrs Gaskell to make the secret and hopeful purchase of a house for the family outside the smoke of Manchester.³⁶

In its extreme form, this could extend to a form of guilt, again derived from the fact that writing, for women, was suspect. Oliphant, for example, always found it impossible to admit she wrote for pleasure as well as out of necessity:

Margaret Oliphant, throughout her life, appears to have felt quite unable to defend her clear need to write on any grounds other than those of having to feed her children. It was, in that respect at least, convenient that she was a widow, and she certainly made the most of it as a stance – for instance as a bargaining point in professional correspondence [...] Instinctively, she finds both reading and writing a nourishment as necessary to the mind as physical food to the body; but this is not a position she can argue. The imaginary must always serve the real.³⁷

This in turn affected her reception in the literary world, leading her to 'seriously undermine her position as a serious novelist by implying that when writing is a service one provides for others, there can be no romanticizing it as art'.³⁸ Gaskell differed somewhat, and whilst 'conceding it to be something she cannot help doing, more or less explicitly defines storytelling as an activity with a useful social function'.³⁹ She managed to combine altruism with personal ambition:

Gaskell was intensely interested in publication and in acquiring a public voice, and [...] her attempt to write the fiction of those denied a voice within Victorian society led her to an awareness of her own silencing, a sense of the ways literary and cultural plots shape our understanding of the world and limit our ability to describe it.⁴⁰

Much more will be said about this silencing in the chapter on Gaskell, but it is clear that she achieved at least some degree of equilibrium in the issues of public and private demands, individuality and social considerations. It is also apparent that, despite quite

possibly having to adopt various kinds of narrative subterfuge, and being compelled to project an acceptable public façade, it was vastly more empowering for a woman to attempt publication in a general periodical, rather than those aimed specifically at women. An issue of the Cornhill Magazine may have only carried approximately two women writers to six or eight men, but that still ensured that in the period between 1860 and 1900, over 175 women writers reached a mixed audience, which would have otherwise been closed to them.⁴¹ It did not follow, of course, that the critical evaluation their work received was comparable to that of their male counterparts, and this will be discussed later in this chapter. The balancing act, however, was definitely worthwhile.

DISGUISES

When Dickens called himself Boz and Thackeray called himself Titmarsh, they were subscribing to a convention of literary entertainment in which penmanship was equated with gamesmanship: the gentlemen players were the gentlemen posing as players. The adoption of pseudonyms by women writers was part of a different development, associated with anonymity and gender.⁴²

As Swindells notes, the Brontës, Eliot, and Gaskell all used pen names at some stage.⁴³

Gaskell's correspondence shows her considering this matter, when she suggests 'Stephen Berwick' as a pseudonym for the publication of Mary Barton (1848).⁴⁴

Catherine Judd has listed the main reasons for women traditionally adopting the disguise of a pseudonym: as a necessary mask to protect from gender bias in the marketplace; to guard the family honour and shield the writer from family disapproval; the need to feel masculine to write (this last a twentieth-century interpretation).⁴⁵

However, whilst she is not attempting to deny that prejudice existed, she does suggest that, over time, a 'cluster of mythic images'⁴⁶ has grown up, initially promulgated by the writers themselves, and accepted by critics. She refers to Tuchman's study of the Macmillan's archives, which concluded, contrary to established wisdom, that:

Women writers were no more inclined to use pseudonyms than their male counterparts, and that both male and female authors were far more likely to adopt a pseudonym from their own gender than to cross over. Surprisingly, of the writers who published under *noms de plume*, men apparently were more likely to use a cross-gendered pseudonym.⁴⁷

Sutherland also notes this trend to use sexually neutral or transsexual pseudonyms.⁴⁸

One such example is Lanoë Falconer. The first part was a traditional family name; it was her father's, but her sister also had it as her middle name. The second part is a synonym of her real surname, Hawker. Falconer was of an extremely publicity-shy nature, so it would seem that the pen name did offer, in her case, protection, and the

freedom to express herself in fiction without the attendant personal intrusions. Gaskell, as we have seen, did not maintain use of a pseudonym; once she was sure of her reception she seemed rather to relish her status as a writer. Vernon Lee was perhaps the most unusual, in that, not only did she adopt a pseudonym for professional purposes, but she carried it over to her private life, with most of her friends and family referring to her by her invented title. One can only speculate as to what levels of self-denial or self-invention this may imply.

WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

In reminiscing about her first contribution to Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine – Katie Stewart (1852) – Margaret Oliphant described how she was 'scarcely expecting to be admitted to the honours of the Magazine'.⁴⁹ This speaks of both the trepidation of a young woman embarking on a career in a traditionally male domain, and also of the lofty reputation which contributors and readers alike perceived this publication as possessing. As Haythornthwaite has noted, 'The House of Blackwood had a good name for standards of book production, for selecting and keeping some of the finest writers of the period and for fair dealing in all matters relating to business'.⁵⁰ After this nervous start, Oliphant was to become one of the periodical's most stalwart writers, in the capacity of fictionist, essayist, and reviewer. As John Blackwood's daughter reported after her death: 'there is not a year, hardly a month, from the date of her earliest contribution down to her last, in which she is not represented in the archives of the Magazine'.⁵¹ The most significant reason for this is the personal relationship she established with the family-run publishing house. Whilst a contributor, she experienced the editorship of three generations: the originator of the Magazine, William Blackwood, known as 'The Major' due to his military background; John Blackwood, with whom her relationship was strongest, and who was involved in the editorship from 1845 until 1879; and William Blackwood the third, with whom her dealings were 'more formal and less harmonious'.⁵² The change to greater formality came about as publishing became increasingly business-like;⁵³ the latter William was a businessman, whilst his predecessors had been lovers of literature. They were also ready to take an individual interest in the contributors' welfare; after her husband's death, the Blackwoods did their best to use Oliphant's material, even when of questionable quality, in order to help:

‘these kind-hearted men not willing to reject what they knew to be so important to me’.⁵⁴ She describes the Major as ‘mild and courteous’, with ‘the consideration and gentleness which comes in fine natures with the power of command and the habit of dealing with men rather than things’.⁵⁵ His successor, John, ‘was cheerful, energetic and sociable. He had considerable business sense and an infallible instinct for making good contracts’.⁵⁶ The successful relationship, therefore, between Margaret Oliphant and Blackwood’s, was based on the house’s combination of business acumen with human concern:

Margaret Oliphant benefited from the personal kindness and generosity of John Blackwood and the Major, from the warm family friendship that developed and from the encouragement, praise, criticism, and sound literary and business sense which John Blackwood brought to the role of the editor.⁵⁷

It certainly seems that the latter’s forbearance extended beyond the duties of business, as even when writing for a different publication, she would turn to him for advice, ‘sure that she would not ask in vain for a sound and helpful criticism, and sure, too, that he would not grudge the trouble, even to the extent of sitting up at night “to gallop through it”’.⁵⁸ In matters concerning his own publication, John Blackwood’s influence was subtle but present nonetheless, as a letter from Oliphant, in Paris writing Miss Marjoribanks (1866), graciously acknowledges: ‘I have made the little addition you suggest – thank you for this [*that?*] suggestion – you know how much dependence [?] I put on your judgement’.⁵⁹

When John Blackwood died, Oliphant recalled him as her ‘kind captain and critic, friend and brother’, adding that, ‘I scarcely remember any moment of special darkness in which I missed the kind grasp of his hand held out to me, the ready help, the cheerful encouragement’.⁶⁰ Her tribute was summed up as ‘Support is the word that occurs to me most readily’.⁶¹

Not that the entire relationship was trouble-free, of course. Tuchman has issued the timely reminder that Oliphant's volumes on Blackwood's were commissioned biographies, which would naturally depict the firm in the most favourable possible light.⁶² There *were* disagreements, particularly following the later William's assumption of the editorship. These mainly focused on money; in 1866 she felt comfortable in writing to John Blackwood with forthright assurance: 'Would you have the goodness to pay into my bankers the remainder of the money for Miss M. [Marjoribanks] which comes to two hundred and sixty something pounds? – If it suits you I should like it this week'.⁶³ At the same time, such was her relationship with her editor, that she was 'quite content to leave everything in your hands about money'.⁶⁴ William, on the other hand, was less approachable, and less disposed to generous payments and advances than his kind-hearted predecessor.⁶⁵ However, there were issues of contention with John Blackwood as well; in this case it was more often the portrayal of women:⁶⁶ 'his conventional and conservative views sometimes made him unsympathetic towards Mrs Oliphant's strong and managing heroines'.⁶⁷ He was a definite supporter of the status quo:

He had a courtly old-world view of women. He preferred them to be unworldly and charming, and believed it was the duty of men to shield them from the grosser realities of the world. Only thus, he believed, could their innocence and purity be retained and the sanctity of family life secured.⁶⁸

Oliphant, however, despite her creation of formidable heroines, had no wish to disrupt the institution of the family, and so they perhaps managed to compromise on the subject. It doubtless ended in typical lively debate: 'The critic/publisher relationship was evidently a pleasurable and entertaining one, for an animated discussion of books and writers permeates the correspondence'.⁶⁹ It could be argued that this approach would have suited a woman writer – particularly a widow with no other financial or

moral support – and better facilitated her entry into a competitive world. Certainly, Gaskell gained her encouragement mainly at home. Although her relationship with Dickens, her most famous editor, was marked by much flattery on his side, there does not seem to have existed the same level of dependence, and thus the relationship between writer and editor was much more business-like, and subsequently at times much more fraught.

Gaskell's work appeared on numerous occasions in both of Dickens's journals, Household Words and All the Year Round; she contributed twenty-eight pieces to the former, including three of her ghost stories.⁷⁰ A feature of these publications was that they included 'a curious blend of debunking articles on ghosts and witches which assume an enlightened modern reader and stories which demand, at the least, the willing suspension of disbelief'.⁷¹ This mutual interest in the supernatural may have benefited both parties, but their relationship was lacking in the honesty and openness which characterized that between Oliphant and Blackwood: 'His approaches to Gaskell suggest a mixture of deference, innuendo, and power that is somewhat disturbing'.⁷² Frequently, there are examples of Dickens making a flattering comment to his contributor's face, whilst giving a much less complimentary version to his co-editors.⁷³ It would seem that manipulation was considered acceptable by Dickens, because ultimately, his 'first concern was the well being of the journal he was editing';⁷⁴ unlike the Major, his talents lay rather with 'things' than people. Disagreements often stemmed from overrunning deadlines, word limits, and endings. Again, he was guilty of telling Gaskell one thing, whilst expecting another. This was particularly true of North and South (1855). The potential for conflict existed from the beginning: 'Dickens wanted each part to be self-contained – with a clear climax and resolution – Gaskell wanted a more leisurely pace for the development of plot and the entanglement

of her audience'.⁷⁵ However, he is recorded as reassuring Gaskell: 'Don't put yourself out at all as to the division of the story into parts; I think you had better write it in your own way'.⁷⁶ They often clashed about Dickens's belief in the necessity for happy endings in periodicals; he also wanted to change the ending of 'The Old Nurse's Story' (1852), but Gaskell, in this case, was adamant, and won out.⁷⁷ One incident where he got his way was in Cranford (1853), when he insisted that a reference to him be changed to Thomas Hood, even though his name appeared on every page of Household Words. Gaskell herself initiated the problems, when still inexperienced as a writer, having allowed Dickens 'to have his way early on; then she developed a strong sense of artistic integrity toward her work and refused permission for what she saw as editorial pampering'.⁷⁸ Vann believes that much of the problem lies with the fact of Gaskell being female. In his article, he cites the example of the differences that existed in the treatment of Gaskell and a contemporary, Charles Lever. Though both experienced problems, which eventually caused a rift in Gaskell and Dickens's relationship, the editor was nothing but solicitous towards Lever, whose serialization, six years after North and South, of A Day's Ride, actually lost money (not the case with Gaskell).⁷⁹ After the passing of several years, it would seem 'that he understands the need to explain his principles to contributors. Had he given such a detailed explanation to Mrs Gaskell, she might not have been alienated from Dickens's editorship'.⁸⁰ Unfortunately, by then it was too late for Gaskell. She was always more financially and domestically stable than Oliphant, and her career flourished regardless of editorial annoyances, cut short only by her early death. One cannot help wondering, however, whether Oliphant, had the situations been reversed, could ever have maintained her status and prolific output without the mutually cooperative relationship which existed between herself and Blackwood's. In the harsh world of Victorian publishing, the working relationship was one for the woman writer to maintain if she wanted success.

MEN AND WOMEN IN THE WORLD OF REVIEWING AND READING

The review, as a genre, has to place the literary work in a certain framework in order to come to terms with it; it has to label, name, and put the work in context before it can proceed to analyze and evaluate it. One of the ways in which this framing takes place is through definition of the 'type' of work it is; another way is through comparison or the juxtaposition of the reviewed work with others works.⁸¹

Reviewing was a flourishing business in the Victorian literary sphere; periodicals renowned for their reviews, such as the Saturday Review and the Athenaeum, were mentioned earlier in this chapter, but the practice extended across the board of highbrow or middle-class, and across the spectrum of periodicals and newspapers. The Sunday Times, the Guardian, the Weekly Times, and the News of the World all carried reviews.⁸² Up until 1860 reviews were anonymous; this and the fact that the first person plural, 'we' was used, resulted in 'oracular voices which seemed to speak with the authority of Culture behind them'.⁸³ It was a powerful position, and, as Thomson asserts, 'It is not difficult to see how readers' expectations and judgements about fiction might be shaped by the reviewers' promotion of gendered hierarchies of authorship and of male/female distinctions'.⁸⁴ After this time, those responsible for the criticism began to take on higher profiles, and included women: Elizabeth Gaskell and Christina Rossetti both reviewed for the Athenaeum, for instance.⁸⁵ This could have both advantages and disadvantages; Margaret Oliphant, as a young woman, had appreciated the veil drawn between her and the public, in order that she might be accepted as the male reviewers were: 'She wrote her first review when only twenty-six, and therefore especially valued the tradition of anonymous reviewing, since she believed that, had her age and sex been known, her reviews would have lacked authority'.⁸⁶ On the other hand, with open reviewing came recognition, although this did not always mean that it was progressive ideas on female careers and lifestyle that were reaching readers. The

most famous woman reviewer was Geraldine Jewsbury, who for thirty years from 1849, reviewed for the Athenaeum and was a reader for Bentley and Sons. The publication of Zoe in 1845 had earned her a reputation as rather a scandalous writer, but with her gradual assimilation into the world of paid employment, she increasingly 'adopted conventional Victorian moral standards'.⁸⁷ Thomson asserts that Jewsbury, along with other writers such as Oliphant and Eliot, were often harsher towards women writers who deviated from gender stereotypes than many of the male reviewers.⁸⁸ As an example she cites George Eliot's 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', which appeared in the Westminster Review in 1856, in which Eliot attacked women writers for lack of education.⁸⁹ Thomson argues that their motivation may have stemmed from a desire to merge their voices with that of the patriarchy, in an effort to be taken seriously.⁹⁰ Thus, women's writing could be denigrated two-fold. Firstly, for the subject matter, which was considered less important than that which occupied the minds of male writers and readers: 'Victorian attitudes about genre shaped and continue to shape the canon today. One obvious result, of course, was to exclude authors like M.E. Braddon or Rhoda Broughton from consideration as canonical, thus allowing them to go out of print and be forgotten'.⁹¹ Critics worked 'on the assumption that, having discovered any writer to be a woman, we may expect to find a profound exploration of feeling but a singular lack of coherence on the level of ideas'.⁹² Secondly, there was the question of whether the woman writer remained within the accepted ideology: 'literary reputations were formed less by the author's sexual identity than by the way their works conformed to or transgressed from the gendered framework of reviewers' expectations'.⁹³ Favourable reviews were easier to come by if the stereotype was adhered to: 'For the most part, literary critics admired and endorsed writing by women that formed an extension of their domestic role'.⁹⁴ The result of both was that women writers were relegated to 'second rank'.⁹⁵ Thus progressive views were usually marginalized: 'Feminists were

granted only secondary status as authors and as cultural commentators, both by the publishing world and the social agents defining literary aesthetics'.⁹⁶ In this way, 'what is virtue in a man is weakness in a woman', and Tuchman offers the double standard of 'philosophic complexity' in a male work being dubbed 'pretentiousness' if attempted by a woman.⁹⁷ Ultimately, such was the significance of masculine/feminine identity, that, 'Gender was not only an analytical category used by Victorian reviewers to conceptualize, interpret, and evaluate novels, but in some cases the primary category'.⁹⁸

The writers studied here were aware of this complex situation: 'Gaskell's nervousness about writing, about publication and about critical reception, is characteristic of an existence on the periphery of the production process'.⁹⁹ She worried about:

the prejudices of the critics who mediate, through the gentleman's club, responses of readers to writers. The same critics are not gender-free in their literary judgements, but have precise ideas (prejudices) about what constitutes unfeminine writing and are not commonly capable of 'true praise'.¹⁰⁰

In other words, she feared that she would not find approval in what she was trying to convey, but only when her writing met the established criteria. Her fears proved eerily intuitive; as the twentieth century got underway, an erosion of her reputation started, which erased her skills as social commentator, skillful narrator, and talented spinner of supernatural tales. Walters is particularly tough on Lord David Cecil's influential Early Victorian Novelists (1934), for just this reason. She credits this work with establishing the condescending and erroneous view of Gaskell as merely charming, first and foremost a wife and mother. Highlighting the process, she argues that:

First the critic forms a concept of the woman writer as she is *not*, and having established this to his satisfaction, he makes a selection from her writings which fits his expectations of what such a woman might write. Thus whole areas of experience which do not fit are either summarily dismissed or dealt with as unhappy instances of the writer attempting what is for her impossible.¹⁰¹

It is for this reason that Walters asserts that, 'Whatever genre we may care to select we find that in spite of great popularity, even universal acclaim, at the time of their publication, the works of women writers tend to lack a survival kit'.¹⁰² This, unfortunately, is exactly the process that doomed Lanoë Falconer to modern obscurity after instant celebration.

Oliphant, it has been noted, underwent a perceptible change during her long career: 'It appears that in the early years Margaret Oliphant attempted to convey the impression that she was male'.¹⁰³ Certainly, as we have witnessed, she valued the anonymity that hid the fact of her being female. However, as her age and status increased, 'her persona was very definitely female and matriarchal, the literary equivalent of Queen Victoria. She had established herself as the representative of the cultivated, well-read middle class: the informed, but conventional'.¹⁰⁴ She had found her market, and would obviously have been unwilling to damage a lucrative situation by alienating it:

Mrs Oliphant's own moral sense of what novels should provide for young girls was offended by narratives which seriously proffered sensation *per se*, whatever its realist accoutrements. Novels, she argued, should not raise impossible expectations in young women readers; and especially not expectations involving men, which were almost certain to be disappointed.¹⁰⁵

Her concern reflects not only her own experience of the danger of depending on men, but also on her belief that sense should prevail. It did not mean, as writer or reviewer, that she relished insipid characterization, as her disputes with John Blackwood have illustrated: 'Oliphant always kept a watchful eye on presentations of women and is quick to pounce on a depiction that degrades, insults, or deals in stereotypes'.¹⁰⁶ Whilst she maintained a careful foothold within the realms of the socially acceptable, she could still create and appreciate original and capable women.

It would seem that women, as reviewers, writers and readers, were responding to the attitudes of male critics in a complex way that was both defiant and defensive. They felt bound to judge their own sex more strictly, in order to compete; and when in the marketplace, they had to satisfy both their own artistic beliefs and those of a potentially defensive readership. Tuchman has suggested that, 'Most library readers were probably women. Most publishers' readers were men'.¹⁰⁷ We have seen how vital the question of gender was to the nature of writing and reviewing. What role did it play, however, in the area of reader response? Margaret Oliphant believed that 'The novelist's true audience is the common people – the people of ordinary comprehension and everyday sympathies, whatever their rank may be'.¹⁰⁸ However, the actualities are more complicated to gauge, as 'few Victorian readers have put their reactions to the books they read on record'.¹⁰⁹ When asserting the importance of poetry over prose, in 'The Tyranny of the Novel', in the National Review for April 1892, Edmund Gosse gave the fact of the latter's largely female audience as one of his supporting arguments.¹¹⁰ Reading was equally as gendered an issue as writing or reviewing. Not always, however, could reader response be made to fit the stereotypes. In 1888 a survey was carried out by Edward Salmon to assess the reading preferences of young people. Some 790 boys and over a thousand girls responded to questions regarding their favourite authors and books, ranging from children of thirteen to young men and women of nineteen. It could perhaps be argued that at this age their reading habits would not have become totally fixed in socially acceptable patterns. The results were fairly unexpected. Fewer than 30% of female votes were for female authors and not quite half of the girls mentioned favourite books by women. Twenty years later, when the survey was repeated, the results had hardly changed, even though this time the questionnaires were anonymous. The highest scoring boys' authors were Dickens, W.H.S. Kingston, and Walter Scott, whilst their favourite books were Robinson Crusoe, Swiss Family

Robinson, and The Pickwick Papers. The girls listed Dickens, Walter Scott, and Charles Kingsley as their top authors, and cited Westward Ho!, Wide Wide World, and the Bible as their preferred choice of books. It has been suggested that the overwhelming inclusion of male authors could have been because their work was more readily available, or because their names were more recognizable than authors of generic girls' fiction. When questioned about the number of female admirers of adventure writers, traditionally for boys, such as Verne, Marryat and Defoe, the response centered on the fact that their target audience often found books written specifically for girls to be 'insipid'. The exceptions were American writers, such as Alcott, with their tougher heroines and 'true to nature' plots and behaviour.¹¹¹ Could the inclusion of the Bible, on the other hand, suggest that the girls were affected from an early age by a sense of duty or conscience that would be particularly strong if accompanied by the knowledge that the results, identified as yours, would be read by teachers and/or parents? It could surely also be inbred enough to operate even under assurances that one's opinions would be unseen by adults.

It could be argued, therefore, that, whilst the power of the reviewers was undoubtedly strong, it was not always having the intended effect. So effective was their praise of male authors, that they were attracting an intrigued female audience as well. At the same time, the women authors who obeyed the dictates of those 'oracular voices' by confining themselves to stereotypical and traditional female behaviour found themselves left on the shelves by the very people they were aiming at. Women writers who were read extensively were the ones who provided different, exciting, and robust heroines. Perhaps then, the conservative majority of critics were not enough to stem the growing appeal of progressive writers not prepared to supply silly heroines for little girls.

STIRRING THE WATERS

Thus was described the impact of Rhoda Broughton's first novel, Cometh Up as a Flower (1867), when 'the novel-reading public was startled and swept away by the freshness, the naturalness, and the audacity mixed with simplicity'.¹¹² It could equally be applied to the process of women's writing as a whole during the passage of the century, as they forced the reading public and the critics to reassess the nature of their art. Broughton was also representative of the other women studied here as well as women writers generally in that she was one of those who 'lacked a survival kit'. It is possible to trace the change in attitudes towards her which affected Oliphant, Gaskell, Falconer and Lee, and which ultimately kept their work from remaining known throughout the twentieth century. It is also the aim of this section to provide an overview of the kind of reviews that their general work – as opposed to their supernatural fiction alone – was attracting.

In Broughton's case, notoriety, rather than fame, gained her notice in the early days of her career. Although she spent many years living in Oxford, her initial move there roused nothing but hostility from the academic coterie, which took a long time to subside. Lewis Carroll was the first to administer a rebuff when he refused an invitation to dinner from one of Broughton's friends, on the grounds that, 'I cannot bring myself to meet Miss Rhoda Broughton, of whose novels I greatly disapprove'.¹¹³ It was considered that, 'in minor descriptions, such as of persons, she also exceeded in her earlier works the boundaries of judgement and even good taste',¹¹⁴ owing to the physical nature permitted to her heroines and their actions. 'Miss Broughton's heroines have always been a little ahead of their time',¹¹⁵ as one reviewer commented, adding

that 'It is left to a man in this story to hide a shudder over suggestions wanting in delicacy, and to wince at words that should have been left unsaid'.¹¹⁶ Carroll's response, she recalled, 'hurt like a blow in the face'.¹¹⁷ She experienced the dichotomy of critics versus public, whatever the latter thought, it was the reviewers who dictated what was worthy of lasting attention: 'Criticism did not deal kindly with Miss Broughton in her day. Her early novels were accused of immorality and her later novels drew very little serious criticism. Nevertheless, the public relished her work'.¹¹⁸ She did, however, accomplish a fairly lengthy period when she managed to attain a certain measure of consensus, when she was credited by critics as possessing 'unmistakable individuality',¹¹⁹ talent for 'bright and sparkling talk',¹²⁰ the 'power of indication, avoiding elaboration',¹²¹ and the inability to write 'a "stale" chapter, or even a "stale" line'.¹²² The judgements of the critics did tend ultimately towards left-handed compliments: 'She is neither a great artist nor a profound philosopher; but she is a good story-teller, a brave lover, a true woman and a smart writer; and, being all of these, she can well afford to dispense with the rest'.¹²³ This summation suggests that Broughton's qualities are rather superficial, at the same time as being aligned with her womanhood, which in turns prevents her attaining the status of true artist. As the twentieth century gained pace, the tide of opinion began to turn against her, as one very brief and dismissive 1908 review shows: ' "MAMMA" herself is a good character-study of a lazy, self-indulgent old lady. This is the best we can say of Miss Broughton's book'.¹²⁴ As Q.D. Leavis concluded, 'she lived to see herself become a merely historical figure, and when she died in 1920 she was not even that'.¹²⁵ Broughton is assigned to the past, the victim of initiating a new phase, which can only be overtaken by even newer fashions: 'her manner had been formed in the ample three-decker days, and the charm of her work [...] lay in precisely that rambling shapelessness to which only the three-decker lent itself'.¹²⁶ The response is typical of the anti-Victorian criticism that

surfaced about this time, but some estimation of Broughton lingered on, albeit rooted in nostalgia, as an excerpt from a comic poem in Punch illustrates:

Yet, though it may prove most
unchancy
To flout Mrs LEAVIS, I own,
To a permanent fondness for Nancy,
Belinda, and Joan.¹²⁷

Rhoda Broughton's chances of posterity were dashed by her 'stirring of the waters'; over the years, as her subject matter and handling became less scandalous, she began to seem outmoded to the critics who had dubbed her outrageous in the first place. The high opinion of the public, in the end, did not count.

A.W. Kinglake, a historian of the Crimean War, and involved with Blackwood's from 1862, commented of Margaret Oliphant: 'To me she is charming. To read her is like being with a delightful woman – a woman of powerful intellect', adding that 'he wished he could do something towards making her works more widely known'.¹²⁸ His compliment may strike today's reader for its somewhat surprised juxtaposition of 'woman' and 'intellect', but at least it allows that she does have intellect. Henry James, on the other hand, took a rather more acerbic view: 'I should almost suppose in fact that no women had ever, for half a century, had her personal "say" so publicly and irresponsibly'.¹²⁹ Part of the annoyance seems to rest on the idea of a woman having a public voice. Haythornthwaite refutes this verdict, arguing that, despite her wide range and prolific output, 'most of her reviews were perceptive and appreciative of talent, and only a minority included the sharp and cutting comments that caused offence'.¹³⁰ Also that she relished 'truthful delineation of character, but was especially scathing when faced with sentimentality, mawkishness, and manifest improbabilities of plot or character'.¹³¹ Both during her lifetime and since her death, Oliphant has been judged as

much for her reviews and opinions as for her original material: the reviewer herself was reviewed. It has certainly been admitted that James's complaints are not without grounds:

She further believed that the novelist should uphold the claims of the ideal, the sanctity of marriage and the gentlemanly virtues. These beliefs sometimes led her to judge works on moral and social grounds rather than on aesthetic ones, a tendency which increased with the passage of years.¹³²

Her adopted stance of using her sex, widowhood, and parenthood to market herself, meant that she left herself open to such comments. Her idealism did, however, also allow her to be fair: 'She believed that the "true critic" should see more than the book before her. She should see the mind that produced it'; she therefore could still express admiration for Browning, for example, even when she found his work too convoluted.¹³³

Equally, she could retain appreciation of Elizabeth Gaskell, even whilst disapproving of some of her themes and subjects, admitting that, 'Ruth, though a great blunder in art, does not seem to have lessened the estimation in which her audience hold her'.¹³⁴ She discussed at some length the reasons for her view:

the mistake lies in choosing such a heroine at all. Every pure feminine mind, we suppose, holds the faith of Desdemona – 'I do not believe there is any such woman;' and the strong revulsion of dismay and horror with which they find themselves compelled to admit, in some individual case, that their rule is not infallible, produces at once the intense resentment with which every other woman regards the one who has stained her name and fame; and that pitying, wondering fascination which so often seems to impel female writers to dwell upon these wretched stories, by way of finding out what strange chain of causes there was, and what excuse there might be.¹³⁵

Gaskell, as the chapter about her will illustrate, believed strongly in the value of rational discussion about such issues, rather than hiding them and pretending they did not happen; she would also have disagreed with the idea that women's ears were too

sensitive to hear such things, her Unitarian reasonableness asserting women's capacity for common sense as equal to their male counterparts. Moreover, she went some way in her exposure of the sexual double standard which was at work to ensure that the man escaped censure whilst the woman was defiled as impure and ruined. Oliphant, however, had assumed the persona of moral guide, and this is what she had to project to the reading public, whether or not she actually believed in the woman-as-shrinking-violet motif. She also exhibited rather a nostalgic attitude towards the depiction of love and romance, objecting about North and South (1855) that 'here is again the desperate, bitter quarrel out of which love is to come; here is love itself, always in a fury, often looking exceedingly like hatred, and by no means distinguished for its good manners, or its graces of speech'.¹³⁶ She questioned: 'Shall we have nothing but encounters of arms between the knight and the lady – bitter personal altercations, and mutual defiance?'.¹³⁷ Her very metaphors reveal the kind of courtly love she claims should reign, but one only has to take her own Miss Marjoribanks to see that Oliphant did not always stick to her own rules; perhaps she felt the difference lay in the distinctions of social realism and comedy. There were other reasons why her contemporary's work attracted her criticism: 'Mrs Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857) shocked her because she believed that Branwell's problems should not have been made public'.¹³⁸ However, as Williams points out, 'Throughout her long career she turned to fiction to discuss painful and complicated events and emotions, which she believed it would be wrong to speak of in relation to herself', and her own alcoholic brother found his way into her writing.¹³⁹ Oliphant, therefore, was contradictory in her approach to the writing of other women, because of the way she chose to depict herself. She illustrates well the criticism that Gaskell frequently drew, in her frank and sympathetic discussion of taboo subjects.

Vernon Lee and Lanoe Falconer share the distinction of both having begun their careers with favourable responses from the critics. The former's Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy (1887), 'at once established Miss Paget's position in the front rank of English essayists'.¹⁴⁰ Falconer's Mademoiselle Ixe (1890) gained the best possible commendation:

Mr Gladstone was among the first to recognize its merits, and his appreciation, expressed in print, called immediate attention to it. Everyone was reading it, asking for it at the libraries, buying it, waiting impatiently while fresh impressions were being printed.¹⁴¹

Her friend, Lady Camilla Gurdon, wrote that, 'It is so pleasant to think of your book being snatched up and read by everyone as it ought to be'.¹⁴² The Athenaeum regarded it as 'an advance from the shapelessness of much Victorian fiction'.¹⁴³ The novel centres on the title character, a Russian spy, and although she had never been to Russia, Falconer gained evidence of her realism; her story was censored in the country it discussed: 'page after page was blacked out'.¹⁴⁴ Of her final book, Old Hampshire Vignettes (1907), it was said that, 'These portraits are the slightest of thumbnail sketches, but daintily executed, and touched with life and reality'.¹⁴⁵ 'The Violin Obligato' was asserted by some to have been the best thing she wrote, though 'its merits were of the delicate, elusive kind',¹⁴⁶ whilst 'seldom has the gospel of self-renunciation been preached with such dignified wisdom than in her "thought-notes"'.¹⁴⁷ In addition to the writers' general reception, however, there is the distinct reception of their ghost stories to consider.

WEIRD FASCINATION

It seems that reviewers did not quite know what to make of Victorian women's ghost stories. Normally confident in discussing the authors' more mainstream work, they struggled to impose reason and meaning on this particular genre, not even quite sure if it met with their approbation or not. Even today, the genre is frequently dismissed as less important than other facets of a writer's work. It has been declared, for example, of a reprint of a collection of Gaskell's supernatural fiction that, 'Excepting "The Old Nurse's Story" and "Lois the Witch," none of these tales is likely to enhance Mrs Gaskell's literary standing'.¹⁴⁸ The critic does admit of the former that 'the constituents are subtly blended by means of the old narrator's keen gauge of her listeners' emotional receptivity. The impressive tale, after all these years, continues to grip readers',¹⁴⁹ and his criticism is as much about the editor's arrangement as the tales themselves. However, the fact remains that the criticism avoids discussing the collection in terms of the significance of their supernatural content. When the body of supernatural fiction is considered for its own sake, the contributions of women writers to the genre is now at least being recognized, with writers such as Vernon Lee belonging 'to a ghostly sisterhood which, from the 1880s onwards, was to be responsible for much of the most interesting terror fiction'.¹⁵⁰ It has been argued recently that one aspect of the ghost story that makes it attractive is that 'the past will often be seen as superior to the present, with its dreary rationalism and materialism'.¹⁵¹ It could be viewed as escapist, therefore, but could also be regarded as taking a more serious aim: 'Some have chosen the supernatural tale as a vehicle for conveying their beliefs about the natural and the spiritual worlds and their inter-relations'.¹⁵² The effect that the writers aimed for will be

examined in the following individual chapters, but this section is concerned with their critical reception.

One memorial of Margaret Oliphant concentrated exclusively on her work in the supernatural field, as an extract shows:

SEER, who beyond the untrodden bourne
 Where meet the Viewless and the Seen,
 In dreams that voyage and return
 With doubtful news, hast pilgrim been;
 Romancer of the lands that lie
 More unexplored than faëry.¹⁵³

Considering the range of her work, this is significant, and demonstrates the kind of impact that the genre could have. One of her obituaries praised her ghost stories for their ‘well-selected detail’,¹⁵⁴ and another rated ‘A Beleaguered City’ with the supernatural tales of Scott and Lord Lytton.¹⁵⁵ Possibly they could strike a chord, and arouse universal emotions and questions. A contemporary reviewer felt that, ‘Mrs Oliphant’s work approached greatness when she was inspired to write as a mother who had lost children’ because of the added depth, believing the stories of the Unseen to be her best work.¹⁵⁶ Thus the main concern is not the element of fear, but their profundity.

In Vernon Lee's case, her exploration of the supernatural genre continued, on the whole, to elicit the appreciation with which she began her career. Of *Hauntings* (1890), one verdict was that, ‘These four curiously interesting stories have a weird fascination quite unlike any other of their order’.¹⁵⁷ Again, a certain perplexity can be seen in that ‘curiously’, and the idea of unexplained fascination. The general consensus towards her ghostly fiction was, rightly, that ‘it may not be Vernon Lee’s real business to freeze the blood’,¹⁵⁸ and, doubtless due to her other lines of interest, the reviewers chose to concentrate on the aesthetics of her work. Judged at ‘the centre of her magic: a poetry

of impressions that is also a kind of poetry of time',¹⁵⁹ and 'the treatment has always poetic grace and romantic flavor'.¹⁶⁰ Apart from their content, it was enough that, 'for those who care more for exquisite form than solid substance these airy creations of a rich and lively imagination are excellent reading'.¹⁶¹ The Times Literary Supplement lighted on the theme of the past which will be examined in much greater detail in the chapter on Lee: 'As though by instinct she interweaves the past and present, so that old things come to life at a personal touch and a new scene, with all its bloom of freshness, is mellowed by some associated light of memory'.¹⁶² Another aspect to be later discussed was highlighted: 'the attraction of the artist to perfect beauty is shown with terrible force'.¹⁶³ Again there is the contrast between modern living and the sense of escape offered by such stories: 'Vernon Lee has a dream-world of her own; it is a tragic world, but we may envy her ability to live apart from the sordid and unromantic world of today'.¹⁶⁴ Evocations of the past are always viewed romantically, and here is no exception; Vernon Lee's ghost stories are valued for their beauty and complexity rather than for any fear they inspire, and in this appraisal a modern-day interpretation would doubtless concur.

Falconer's Cecilia de Noël was dubbed by the New Review, with a seemingly unintentional pun, as 'welling over with the best spirit of the age',¹⁶⁵ and the Catholic World, in a substantial review, felt it 'revives and intensifies the impression of original power and something uncommonly like genius which was produced by Mademoiselle Ixe. Both the plan and the treatment of the new tale are strikingly clever'.¹⁶⁶ The Times asserted that 'The author of Mademoiselle Ixe must always write brilliantly', and that she 'has never written anything more powerful than when she makes Cecilia describe what passed in the haunted room in the silent watches of that terrible night'.¹⁶⁷ Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch concluded that, 'Here [...] we have a new writer filled with love

of her fellow-beings'.¹⁶⁸ The issue of the story's supposed moral purpose triggered a great deal of debate; Falconer herself commented that it contained her own gospel, and the message she had to give to the world.¹⁶⁹ It was even appropriated by the clergy: 'Principal Tulloch wrote to tell her that he had embodied her beautiful story in a sermon which he preached to a large congregation in Glasgow'.¹⁷⁰ The very fact that it was reviewed in the Catholic World is suggestive; its approach, unsurprisingly, concentrated almost exclusively on the religious aspect, rather than the supernatural, and concluded that 'Cecilia's gospel is a very beautiful one. It is good to have it preached in a form so attractive as is here given it'.¹⁷¹ Falconer regarded it as 'an attempt to express my conviction that in the goodness of human beings, especially of some exquisite characters, we possess a revelation which scientific criticism cannot account for or explain away'.¹⁷² Some did adopt it on this very personal level, one friend writing to say, 'it is quite impossible to read such a book as Cecilia de Noël without thanking you for it from my heart ... a veritable oasis in the desert, a fountain of refreshment and healing'.¹⁷³ Falconer's non-dogmatic approach to Christianity also raised criticism. Charlotte Yonge acidly remarked that it was 'a pity that so fine a book as Cecilia de Noël should be injured by the entire absence of Christianity', and though she later asked Falconer to contribute a story to the Monthly Packet, she added a footnote on publication disclaiming responsibility for any of the opinions.¹⁷⁴ One Canon Alfred Ainger also expressed anxiety about what he saw as her willingness to replace Christianity with individuals like Cecilia, reading in it a 'vein of cynicism that seems to me to endanger the good you might otherwise do'.¹⁷⁵ Whilst he was quick to flatter that, 'I so truly admire your books for the fine and rare quality they show – their humour (as delicate as it is rare), their style and their character-drawing', he perhaps took secret affront at the portrayal of Canon Vernade, worrying about her preaching 'that we are all bad together', which 'leaves a certain bad taste in the mouth'.¹⁷⁶ The

Spectator provided ‘a review which gratified Marie extremely’, but it believed she ‘does not sufficiently realize that the highest and purest kind of love is potent to repel as well as to attract, and that those whom it repels may harden themselves, till the attitude of defiance constitutes an impassable gulf’.¹⁷⁷ It was the religious aspects that preoccupied the reviewer of the Times also, who thought that it bordered on ‘a many-sided speculative discussion over a treatise on theology’ and a ‘somewhat sombre and abstruse narrative’.¹⁷⁸ Cecilia they found ‘an angel far too good for this earth and quite unfitted to inhabit it’.¹⁷⁹ Andrew Lang agreed that ‘I read Cecilia with much interest, but I am not sure she was not better before she got lost in theological discussion’.¹⁸⁰ (In a footnote, March-Phillipps adds that it was Lang who, as a reader for Arrowsmith, refused Mademoiselle Ixe because she was ‘too violent a lady’.¹⁸¹) These seem odd criticisms to make, given the strong sense of humour – compared to that of Austen¹⁸² - which pervades the story, in spite of the narrator’s melancholy. There seems to be a resistance to the threatened crossover between religion and the ghost story, as if the latter is expected to be for entertainment only. Anything of a weighty nature is criticized, whereas, for example, the ‘two most delightful children’ are spoken of highly.¹⁸³ Modern readers, if finding anything objectionable, would probably point to the children, which provide the only instances of Falconer verging on Victorian sentimentality. There is also a letter from a friend who found ‘much of the talk very clever and good except perhaps the servants’, as she believed there not to be much difference of pronunciation between the latter’s talk and that of their masters in reality, which led to her preferring Mademoiselle Ixe.¹⁸⁴ Thus the general tone of the reviews is mixed. There are many definite admirers of Falconer, and a welcome for her work, but unlike her first, less problematic, spy novel, there is an apparent discomfort with the subject matter of Cecilia. Much debate is concentrated around the religious implications, with vague accusations that the author (especially as a woman?) is

impertinently entering realms which she is not qualified to comment on. Once again there is the uncertainty surrounding the woman's ghost story and how to interpret it, whether to look to it for instruction or entertainment, and indecision as to which is preferable.

A collection that well illustrates this dilemma is Louisa Molesworth's Four Ghost Stories (1888), several of the reviews for which survive. They depict the now-familiar confusion as to meaning and aim, whether favourable or not. Molesworth was held in high esteem as a children's writer; Edward Salmon [*author of the reader-response survey*], writing in the Nineteenth Century in October, 1887, declared, 'I have left till the last any mention of the lady who, by right of merit, should stand first', adding that, 'Mrs Molesworth's charm is her realism'.¹⁸⁵ It was perhaps this quality which perplexed the critics of her supernatural stories, as this was what they were continually searching for. One reviewer mentioned 'true', 'fact', and 'reality/realism' eight times in twenty-seven lines, and whilst affirming that 'the art and mastery with which they are told is remarkable', they concluded, 'that we part from them with a puzzled and unsatisfied mind – as to their reality, in the first place, and, as might be expected, as to the import and meaning, if they are matter of fact'.¹⁸⁶ Although the overall tone is positive, there is a keen sense of frustration that the mysteries of the afterlife and the purpose of humanity have not been solved neatly and conclusively. Another review concentrated on their power to convince, which it rated highly, owing to the plainness of the narrative. This time there is a firm emphasis on the need for ghost stories to have a purpose, namely that of responsibility for providing answers and 'proof'.¹⁸⁷ The Academy judged that:

Everything that Mrs Molesworth writes is worth reading; but it might be almost a question whether she was altogether well advised in her latest attempt. It is superfluous to say that these ghost stories are well told; but, unless we are to

understand that the author vouches for the actual truth of them, it seems almost a pity to make a little child, as in 'Unexplained,' the ghost-seer, the poor thing would be so frightened.¹⁸⁸

Given her position as writer of children's stories, this was rather a pointed remark, and it also underlines attitudes towards the issue of fear. The London Quarterly Review decided, 'They will not terrify their readers, though they are weird'¹⁸⁹, although this trait was not judged negatively. The Literary World, however, was of a different opinion: 'Our own taste, we confess, is for apparitions of a more practically terrifying kind'¹⁹⁰, and therefore conflated contemptuously her supernatural fiction with that meant for children. This was one review that was generally negative:

Mrs Molesworth's ghosts are of an unremarkable sort. They do nothing, say nothing, prove nothing; they simply appear and disappear, leaving a disagreeable impression on the minds of the observers, but in no wise serving to clear perplexities from the paths of the living or in any way to instruct them.¹⁹¹

This approach demands a combination of the didactic and the diverting; whilst wanting to be pleurably thrilled, they too want their ghost stories to 'instruct'.

The complexity of the reader response engendered like confusion in the authors. Tuchman notes that 'Aspiring women novelists wrote to the society [*of authors*] to learn where to place "ghost stories" '.¹⁹² She argues that by the time Molesworth published her collection, such stories had lost much of their appeal, despite still managing favourable reviews: 'Women who wrote 1860s-style ghost stories in the 1890s were out of tune with the times'.¹⁹³

Yet tales of the supernatural have always retained their 'weird fascination', never wholly going out of fashion, and frequently enjoying renewed periods of intense popularity. Their appeal is complex, and even more so when penned by Victorian

women writers, for whom authorship was complicated enough in any genre. These women gained a freedom in both this particular form, and the prolific periodical press and growing publication opportunities which made their work more accessible to ever greater numbers. For women writers, supernatural tales enabled exploration of dangerous subjects and an entrance into the kind of theological arenas normally only accessible to men. Readers, although not necessarily able to identify or vocalize this specifically as a problem, were aware that there were differences between supernatural fiction and more mainstream literature that they struggled to contend with. It is this attempt to label, to recognize the cause of a vague feeling of discomfiture, to deal with the unfamiliar, which is often at the root of any unfavourable reviews. Alternatively, the very fact that ghost stories cannot be tidily compartmentalized and dismissed could well form part of their enduring attraction. Whilst there are those who express dissatisfaction that they fail to provide conclusive answers, most of their appeal would instantly vanish if it were otherwise. Victorian women's ghost stories may have been regarded at times by their contemporaries as being variously mystifying, complicated, frustrating and infuriating, but it is for all these reasons that they hold such magnetism for a modern reader. Their hidden agendas and multifarious layers ensure that they will enjoy life eternal.

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**MARGARET OLIPHANT:
SEARCHING FOR STRENGTH**

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

Neglected, and all-too frequently dismissed, Margaret Oliphant's work has only, in the last few decades, begun to receive the attention and re-examination that it deserves. Virginia Woolf, in Three Guineas (1938), was neither the first, nor the last, to accuse Oliphant of becoming little more than a hack: 'Mrs Oliphant sold her brain, her very admirable brain, prostituted her culture and enslaved her intellectual liberty in order that she might earn her living and educate her children'.¹ This reputation grew, becoming entwined with the assumptions placing her as a shrill anti-feminist, an old-fashioned, embittered old prude, or simply as a second-class talent.

Over recent years, however, the balance has started to be redressed. It is not to say that the criticisms mentioned have no foundation in truth; as to her hack status, she herself felt that her phenomenal output, and what drove her to it, may well have lessened its impact, and reflected on what might have been if her personal circumstances had been different. However, whilst assenting to the premise that it would be unusual to produce works of art constantly for several decades, I should like to suggest that Oliphant's accusers have been one-sided in their judgements, and that she has left some fine literature, notable for its subtle and subversive nature.

Her supernatural fiction constitutes a body of work among the most worthy of proper recognition. In this genre, it has been judged, 'she comes near poetry'.² These stories illustrate in a manner largely free of sentiment, the subject of death and what lies beyond. Particularly relevant for this study is Oliphant's exploration of gender roles. It is 'in the liminal spaces between here and the hereafter, in the uncharted regions of the

hereafter itself, that Mrs Oliphant discovered a place to ponder further upon irresolvable paradoxes and gender-related confusion'.³ Anyone closely considering her treatment of this subject could not possibly dismiss her out of hand as an anti-feminist, but instead should discover a thoughtful, concerned writer, fully aware of the complexity of human nature and the societies it creates.

'Stories of this description are not like any others. I can produce them only when they come to me'.⁴ So wrote Oliphant to her publisher Mr Blackwood, about her ghost story, 'The Open Door' (1882), one of the most powerful of her supernatural tales. There is a possibility then that her stories of the supernatural were less motivated by financial necessity than her novels or journalism. As the title suggests, the issues it explores are ones frequently discovered in Oliphant's fiction: bereavement and its threat; and concern, in consequence, with the barriers which separate the worlds of the dead and living, the relative roles played in all this by men and women, and the impact this has on their wider social relations. One contemporary of Oliphant's recorded that:

Those early years were marked by sorrows which for long left their trace on Mrs Oliphant's naturally cheerful and happy temperament. How bravely she struggled on in her sadness and bereavement is evinced by the mass of work she accomplished at that time, finding, perhaps, her only relief in the toil which one of less courageous, less disciplined mind would have felt to be impossible.⁵

She could also wrestle with problems of faith: 'after the death of her beloved daughter in 1864 she found it very hard to accept the goodness, if not the existence, of God. She was haunted by the problem of why so many people died before their time, especially children'.⁶ She was haunted by what she called 'the shadow of death',⁷ although she did her best to ignore its presence, as with her son Cecco: 'all through he was getting weaker; and I knew it, and tried not to know'.⁸ One review of A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen (1882), concluded that, 'Altogether this is one of the books that make it more

than ever true that "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted" '.⁹ It could be then that her supernatural fiction was part of a cathartic process for the author, allowing her simultaneously to escape from, and address issues of loss and loneliness.

'The Open Door' is set firmly within a masculine framework and viewed significantly from a male perspective; it is narrated by Colonel Mortimer, and tells the story of his family's experiences of the supernatural at their rented estate outside Edinburgh (the location being based on the Blackwood estate which Oliphant had visited).¹⁰ Returning through the park on dark winter nights, the young son begins to hear unexplained moans and cries; anxiety for the owner of the voice and fear of its origins makes him ill, and only his father, he is convinced, will be able to clarify and resolve the situation. Mortimer, who is on business in London when he is informed of his child's worrying state, rushes home in fear of losing his only son.

From the beginning then, there is the shadow of mortality: the ghostly voice in the grounds, and Mortimer's own child, and all this symbolized by the open doorway:

No offices remained to be entered - pantry and kitchen had all been swept out of being; but there stood the doorway open and vacant, free to all the winds, to the rabbits and every wild creature. It struck my eye, the first time I went to Brentwood, like a melancholy comment upon a life that was over. A door that led to nothing - closed once, perhaps, with anxious care, bolted and guarded, now void of any meaning¹¹.

As Mortimer is to discover, the mysterious open doorway is far from being void of meaning, and indeed is the focus for what is to happen. It has been noted that, 'Margaret Oliphant's ghost stories are full of images like gates, doors, windows - barriers through which people can almost meet and touch, but not quite'.¹² For Oliphant, this image of the everyday door, or window, is a frequent symbol of the flexible nature of the thresholds that separate the human world from that of the spirits.

They may be closed, or opened, depending on circumstances, or individuals. Of course, it is also an apt metaphor for the attitude of the human mind towards the supernatural.¹³ Perhaps Mortimer unconsciously registers this image because of the delicate nature (or so he and his wife suppose) of their son, Roland, and therefore is threatened by the fear that he may cross over the boundaries. The family already has experience of this sort to refer to: 'The lad was doubly precious to us, being the only one left us of many',¹⁴ and throughout the story it is this ever-present dread of losing his son which drives him on despite his own fear of the supernatural events unfolding before him: 'God! If I could not find any help - and what help could I find? - Roland would die'.¹⁵

The significance of bereavement is also apparent in 'A Beleaguered City' (1880). Clarke regards this as 'one of the most sophisticated of Victorian ghost stories',¹⁶ and its author held it in high regard among her work: 'It is a story which I like - a thing which does not always happen with my own productions - and I should like to republish it'.¹⁷ Multiple narrators tell how the residents of Semur, the 'city' of the title, have let materialism and petty politics get in the way of humanity and genuine religion. As punishment, the ghosts of former residents seize the town, forcing the bewildered living outside the walls to live a refugee existence. Only once they have atoned for their sins are they allowed to take possession of their homes again. However, for some of the residents, fear is not the main ingredient of their emotions. The solitary mystic, Paul Lecamus, one of the story's narrators, longs for his dead wife, and experiences true happiness when she returns: 'Her presence wrapped me round and round. It was beyond speech. Neither did I need to see her face, nor touch her hand. She was more near to me, more near, than when I held her in my arms'.¹⁸ Unlike most of the other residents, he thinks deeply on the mysteries of the unseen:

Why should it be a matter of wonder that the dead should come back? the wonder is that they do not. Ah! that is the wonder. How one can go away who loves you, and never return nor speak, nor send any message – that is the miracle: not that the heavens should bend down and the gates of Paradise roll back and those who have left us return. All my life it has been a marvel to me how they could be kept away.¹⁹

The author can also draw on personal experience; it has been suggested that the tale 'reflects Mrs Oliphant's deep religious faith, and also her longing to be united with her own dead (her mother, her husband, her daughter)'.²⁰ Agnès Dupin, wife of the main narrator, the mayor of Semur, is grieving for the loss of her little girl, as Oliphant was for her own young daughter, Maggie, who died at the age of ten in 1864. In 1894, Oliphant admitted that 'Up to five years ago I could not say her dear name without the old pang coming back',²¹ only the new grief of the loss of her sons making it seem less sharply painful. It is quite possible then, that Oliphant's own longing informs Madame Dupin's attitude:

But suddenly as we went out of the door, her face lighted up, her eyes were suffused with tears – with light – how can I tell what it was? - they became like the eyes of angels. A little cry came from her parted lips – she lingered a moment, stooping down as if talking to someone less tall than herself, then came after us, with that light still in her face.²²

Thus the power of the haunting is generated mainly through the fact that the ghosts are loved ones, whose severance the living have been unable to accept.

'Old Lady Mary' (1884) differs from 'The Open Door' in that, as opposed to taking as its focus male reactions to the supernatural to highlight gender relations, it examines the roles of two women within the society that moulds them. It is unusual in that it considers the supernatural from the point of view of both the living and the ghost itself. Once more Oliphant takes as her starting point the subject of death and bereavement, using them to highlight in particular the frequently useless and helpless role which

women were brought up to in a patriarchal society. She illustrates how women often became complicit in this process, but then continues the story with an awakening to self-awareness, and a rebellion against the stifling situation.

She chronicles the events concerning two Marys: one the Old Lady Mary of the title, and the other her godchild, known as 'little Mary', a young women of about eighteen, who has been brought up under her protection, having no background or fortune of her own. Her godmother, though never a bad women, has been led into complacency through the flattery of others, regarding her as 'a model of old age',²³ and her attitude is summed up by one who has had the chance to observe her: "She was one of them, and I've known a many, as could not abide to see a gloomy face," said the housekeeper. "She kept us all comfortable for the sake of being comfortable herself, but no more"'.²⁴ As a consequence, her vanity does not allow her to consider the inevitability of her own death, despite her age, and she cannot be persuaded to make a will, in order to provide for her otherwise destitute godchild. The opening words of the story are, 'She was very old, and therefore it was very hard for her to make up her mind to die',²⁵ and later she reflects: 'For why should she die? There seemed no reason or need for it'.²⁶ Finally, she does write a will, but it is to play a game with her solicitor; she draws it up herself one night and then hides it in the secret drawer of her cabinet. Her death takes place soon after, but because she has never revealed her secret, the young Mary is still left penniless.

It is then that the real story begins. Old Lady Mary's consciousness does not end with her life on earth; at first she is not even aware she has died, so like simply waking and passing into another room is the process of passing over. She finds herself surrounded by long-dead friends and lovers, and is ultimately brought before the judge of all

(Oliphant refrains from any directly religious references to God, perhaps because of the difficulty that would have been encountered in attempting a description). She emerges from the interview (which the reader is not a party to) having been brought to the full realization of her thoughtlessness and frivolity, and is horrified at what she has done to her cherished godchild. The only option is to return to the place where she has spent her life, though she is warned against this, for reasons she can guess:

There passed through her mind a hundred stories of those who had *gone back*. But not one that spoke of them as welcome, as received with joy, as comforting those they loved. Ah no! was it not rather a curse upon the house to which they came? The rooms were shut up, the houses abandoned, where they were supposed to appear. Those whom they had loved best feared and fled them. They were a vulgar wonder, - a thing that the poorest laughed at, yet feared. Poor banished souls! It was because no one would listen to them that they had to linger and wait, and come and go. ²⁷

It is this image, which concentrates on the horror-value of an apparition, and demands only the motive of, for example, buried money, or family revenge, which Victorian women so frequently wrote against. Writers such as Oliphant, though they made use of these devices, went deeper, to consider the nature of the haunting and what it could reveal. Lady Mary believes though that she can overcome this ingrained behaviour, and is therefore filled with despair when she discovers that 'the place that had been hers knew her no more'.²⁸ She is unable to open the secret drawer, though she can feel the wood of its surface, and only children and animals show any awareness of her presence. Though she has bridged the barrier between life and death, it is not within any human power to control these boundaries. In this tale, the ghost, as much as the living characters, feels a sense of bereavement. The younger Mary realizes this just as well when she cries out, 'Unseen! Unseen! Whatever we may do [...] all unseen, unseen, concealed as much by the blue skies as by the dull blank of that roof'.²⁹ Much as she desperately tries, Lady Mary cannot make herself known to her godchild, and as

exaggerated and crass rumours of Lady Mary's ghost circulate, stemming from the fact that the little girl Connie is able to see her, the young Mary feels this badly.

This desperate desire to break the silence imposed by death was generated by the author's own too-frequent experiences of losing loved ones. Her life became a pattern of watching cherished relatives and friends whom she had often supported, die before her. Margaret Oliphant was born Margaret Wilson on the 4 April 1828.³⁰ By the time she died on the 25 June 1897, she had published nearly a hundred novels, a huge number of articles, and a substantial body of supernatural fiction that earned her a separate reputation as an expert in this genre. Her beginnings were ordinary, but from the first, shaping influences can be traced. She was closest to her mother, who encouraged her to read; she seems to have had no formal education, but did have a precocious attitude to learning. The impression of her father, on the other hand, is of a withdrawn and bad-tempered man, with whom Margaret had no special relationship. Her two brothers were older, but from early on, the pattern of Margaret in the supporting, strong role was set, and one which was reflected in her fiction: 'her strong female characters are all burdened women; carriers, like herself, of other people's rejected obligations'.³¹ Her brother Willie began to display signs of the alcoholism that was to end his career in the church at a young age, and for a time Margaret left the family home to act as a kind of chaperone to her student brother; whilst he was at home she allowed him to finish some of her writing under his own name. This writing also started early; encouraged by an older cousin, George Wilson, who believed in education for women and recognized Margaret's talents, she published her first novel, Margaret Maitland (1849), at the age of twenty-one, to considerable critical approval. On the 4 May 1852, she married her cousin, Frank Oliphant, who after nearly seven years of marriage died of tuberculosis in Rome, where the family was staying for his health. By

this time Margaret already had two young children, and was seven months pregnant with her third. It is difficult to gauge whether or not the marriage was a happy one, as virtually no mention is made of it in the autobiography, perhaps because it occupied so little time out of her long life and career.

After the birth of her third child, Margaret returned with her family to Britain, where she settled for a time in Edinburgh, continuing her already established working relationship with Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, and deepening what became a personal friendship over the years with the Blackwood family. Providing her family with a good education and opportunities became a priority, and was the driving force behind much of her hard work, which became almost an obsession. Her two sons, Cyril and Francis (known as Cecco), were sent to Eton, and eventually to Oxford. She had been thrown into total despair and depression in 1864 when her daughter Maggie had died unexpectedly at the age of ten - again in Rome - of gastric fever, and her family was always her primary concern and object of her love. These family commitments had deepened by 1870, when she took in her widowed and deeply depressed brother Frank and his two small daughters and son. Following his early death she raised Madge, Denny and young Frank as her own, once more paying for their costly education in order to enable them to have careers. With tragic irony, Frank, who as a young man looked as if he was on the brink of a successful career in India - as opposed to her own sons' ineffectualness - died of fever there. Throughout her life she helped out other dependants, such as the Mrs Harry Coghill who edited the autobiography; she became Margaret's secretary.

Despite her striving, her sons did not live up to the effort which went into their having every opportunity to make a success out of their lives. Both were bright as children, but

neither fulfilled his potential as an adult. A combination of laziness and ill health ensured that both took poor degrees, and despite their mother's constant efforts to look out for good positions, neither held down a job for any length of time. Their situations were the despair of their mother who fretted about what would become of them. These two sons doubtless confirmed her views on men which were endorsed by other male dependents, and were already being dryly expressed in an 1866 article:

By degrees, it occurred to us to be anything but envious of men – to find that most of them, in reality, instead of being the free, bright, brave creatures we had dreamed, required a vast deal of propping up and stimulating, to keep them with their front to the world.³²

Her letters and diaries reveal the depth of her concern, with recurrent comments: 'Oh that the lord will take away my reproach and establish my boys! If that was but so what could I desire more - nothing. Nothing. Any struggle would be welcome!'.³³ Yet despite the disappointment, and often impatience, she felt with her sons, a great many letters to them still survive, particularly to Cecco, who lived the longest, and though she does not hesitate to speak her mind, her thoughts are always for his welfare, and pleased to receive tidings of him: 'My dearest Cecco, It was the greatest comfort in the world to get your letter this morning',³⁴ one begins. Her worrying about what would become of them after her death was, in the event, of little use; she outlived them both, as they died young, Cyril in 1890 and Cecco in 1894, of tuberculosis. Margaret was devastated, and began to lose ground herself at this point. She died in 1897 from a disease of the colon, whilst the celebrations for Queen Victoria's jubilee were going on around her. Her death certificate does not mention any profession, listing her only as 'Widow of Francis Oliphant an Artist (Painter)'.³⁵ Officially, her monumental achievements were denied.

ONE HUMAN HEART TO ANOTHER

The kind of convictions illustrated in 'The Open Door' are symptomatic of the markedly distinct attitude Mortimer bears towards his son, separate from all other familial connections. Roland is 'the light of his eyes',³⁶ whilst his two sisters are referred to merely as 'dear girls'.³⁷ The reason has a great deal to do with a sense of responsibility Mortimer carries, as a man, to bring up Roland to fulfil the ideal role of masculine virtue and strength. Whilst recognizing Roland as a child still, he yet instructs him to 'tell it all out like a man',³⁸ and the narrative surrounding their discussions about the ghostly incidents are full of references to the qualities which Mortimer deems necessary for manliness, such as bravery, rationality, moral strength, and leadership. At the beginning of the story, before Mortimer himself has experienced the supernatural force, the idea of seeing a ghost seems rooted in mere superstition, and is the antithesis of everything masculine. Little wonder then, that his first reaction to Roland's revelations is one of horror for entirely human reasons: 'My blood got a sort of chill in my veins at the idea that Roland should be a ghost-seer; for that generally means a hysterical temperament and weak health, and all that men most hate and fear for their children'.³⁹ The reality, or not, of the ghost, takes second place to the awful thought that his son may not turn out to be a man, but a weakling instead. In a moment which is almost pantomime-like in its failure to hit on the correct cause, Mortimer searches in vain for any reason but that of a ghost for his child's illness: 'Was it a hallucination? Was it the fever of the brain? Was it the disordered fancy caused by great bodily weakness?'.⁴⁰ Despite the threat of death, he can cope more easily with the straightforward fact of Roland's physical illness, because it is within the range of his masculine rationality. At the end of this first meeting with his son after his return from

London, he is actually relieved to find only an illness, the cure of which he assumes will be simply to find and put a stop to the (presumably human) source of the crying in the grounds.

Part of the process of preserving this masculine regime of order and benevolent control is the exclusion of women from any active role in what takes place. As Diana Basham points out, the story 'brilliantly realizes the feminist potential of the ghost story mysteriously to reflect the exclusion of women and their inadequate representation'.⁴¹ Throughout 'The Open Door', women are deliberately kept on the fringe of events, relegated to roles of nursing, and keeping a cheerful home going for the men to return to. At no point does Mortimer discuss the idea of a ghost with his wife, or suggest to her that Roland's illness is anything more than a fever brought on by the over-taxing of his sensitive nature through his experience of a fellow-human in trouble. Despite his comments during the story of how dear his wife is to him, his silence - which extends to his two daughters - surrounding the idea of a ghost is never broken, or questioned by himself. Is it the belief in women's irrationality, and assumed acceptance of the ghost, which causes this behaviour? Would his male rationality be threatened? Already, at his young age, Roland has been assimilated into this culture, and himself excludes his mother and sisters from his experiences: ' "I made up my mind," cried the little fellow, "that I would stand it till you came home. I said to myself, I won't frighten mother and the girls" '.⁴² Only once his father has returned from his trip will he tell of what is making him ill:

He got hold of my hand in a cold and tremulous clutch, and waved to everybody to go away. 'Go away - even mother,' he said - 'go away.' This went to her heart, for she did not like that even I should have more of the boy's confidence than herself; but my wife has never been a woman to think of herself, and she left us alone⁴³.

In a reversal of the expected, a child gives orders to the parent; Mortimer is complicit in this; he does not suggest that the mother should hear what Roland has to say, but instead watches her leave, knowing she will be suffering, but content in the knowledge that she adheres to her prescribed role, no matter how painful. After the tale has been told, the mother is recalled, to fulfil another aspect of this role, shown in contrast to the father's: 'Father will know: and mother [...] can come and take care of me'.⁴⁴ Mortimer's role is one of knowledge, which allows him to deal with any incident which may arise - in his son's eyes at least - whilst his wife's is one of caring and nursing. As the tale progresses, it becomes clear that this places a burden on the colonel; whilst any crises faced in his capacity as an officer in India seem to have been dealt with without lasting trauma, the onslaught of supernatural elements are beyond his control, and the only means of dealing with them is through someone else's more qualified help. Even then though, he does not consider consulting with his wife. It is the wife of Jarvis, the coachman, less segregated by the roles imposed by gentility, who reveals the ghost story to Mortimer:

"Tell the Cornel straight out, or see, I'll do it. I dinna hold wi' your secrets: and a secret that the haill toun kens!" She snapped her fingers with an air of large disdain. As for Jarvis, ruddy and big as he was, he shrank to nothing before this decided woman.⁴⁵

It is a pointed role reversal, continued when the burly coachman turns into a trembling idiot at the Colonel's demand that he accompany him to the site of the unexplained noises, unquestioningly accepted as those of a ghost by the estate workers and the rest of the village.

In this way, through the intensity of unexpected pressure, Oliphant accents the required standards of Victorian masculinity, whilst at the same time subversively questioning them. Her narrator, Mortimer, telling the story from hindsight, has had his beliefs about

the supernatural radically altered, and in consequence, his personal bounds of rationality extended. His own views on the masculine role may not have undergone complete transformation, but:

the enigma is provided, not so much by the surface plot of ghostly visitation, but by the reader's disconcerting suspicion that the real centre of interest lies elsewhere [...] It is the Colonel, rather than his son, who is most enduringly affected by this encounter with the unseen.⁴⁶

Oliphant makes the implications of the situation available to the reader. She places before us, as her prime character, a conventional, and, superficially at least (particularly to Victorian readers presumably), wholly admirable man; he is ex-army, a family man, loving husband and father, courageous, just, the perfect 'head of the household'. This is how he sees himself, and perhaps nothing has happened in the past that has ever challenged that assumption. Certainly he views it as a God-given role, and one which the rest of the family never for a moment question: 'They had a feeling that all would go right now. God is very good to you when your children look to you like that'.⁴⁷ What is it, ultimately that is more terrifying: the ghost itself, or what it may signify? That Mortimer may lose everything he thinks he stands for, as well as his son to inherit this masculine legacy? In the threat of being unable to solve the problem of the unquiet spirit in the grounds, lies the threat of invading chaos, and a situation where he is exposed as a fake before those who have so far never questioned his role as husband, father, lawgiver. It is this that brings him to his 'wits end'.⁴⁸ It is this that drives him to go out nightly to the ruins, in an attempt to make sense of the cries he hears. For the same reason he ensures that he takes a witness, in order to testify to his own sanity. In this role, he tries first to deny his fear, which begins, despite his protested disbelief in the supernatural, as soon as he goes out to investigate:

I felt the most unaccountable reluctance to pass those ruins on the way home. My curiosity was intense; and yet it was all my mind could do to pull my body

along. I daresay the scientific people would describe it the other way, and attribute my cowardice to the state of my stomach. I went on; but if I had followed my impulse I should not have gone on, I should have turned and bolted.⁴⁹

Of course, as a colonel, he can hardly turn tail and run, if he wishes to maintain his reputation. How easy it would have been for him if he could indeed have put his feelings down to a straightforward stomach complaint. He admits, as the situation becomes more difficult, that before moving to Brentwood, rumours of a ghost would have done little to scare them off:

If we had heard of it to start with, it is possible that all the family would have considered the possession of a ghost a distinct advantage. It is the fashion of the times. We never think what a risk it is to play with young imaginations, but cry out, in the fashionable jargon, "A ghost! - nothing else was wanted to make it perfect." I should not have been above this myself. I should have smiled, of course, at the idea of the ghost at all, but then to feel that it was mine would have pleased my vanity. Oh yes, I claim no exemption. The girls would have been delighted. I could fancy their eagerness, their interest, and excitement.⁵⁰

He has come a long way to so analyze his actions, and the statement has much of Oliphant's own sentiment in it. Though she believed herself in an afterlife, she abhorred what she saw as the common vulgarization that took place during the Victorian era, in the phenomena of spiritualism, occultism, and so on.

Circumstances take an even more urgent turn when the Colonel has personal contact with the spirit haunting the old ruined house in the grounds of his estate: 'I got home I don't quite know how; but in my mind there was no longer any indifference to the thing, whatever it was, that haunted these ruins. My scepticism disappeared like a mist'.⁵¹ Now the presence cannot simply be dismissed, and there is the threat to his own position as the indomitable role model. To counter this he involves other men, like him performing roles of solid masculinity: his butler, Bagley, who served under him in India, and is supposedly fearless; the local doctor, Simson, a determined rationalist and

as determinedly sceptical of the supernatural; and the minister, Dr Moncrieff, a learned scholar as well as a kind and open-minded old man. The first to be taken out to the ruins is the intrepid Bagley, who, within minutes of hearing the cries of the ghost (though nothing is to be seen), is reduced to an unconscious heap, and who is ultimately forced to leave the Colonel's employ, a nervous shadow of his former self. As to the sceptical doctor, to the end he will not admit to supernatural agency, claiming instead the work of some mischievous tramp, though he cannot hide the fact that he has been shaken:

He took - though he was a very temperate man - not the claret I was going to offer him, but some brandy from the tray, and swallowed it almost undiluted. "Mind you, I don't believe a word of it," he said, when he had lighted his candle; "but I can't tell what to think of it," he turned round to add, when he was half-way upstairs.⁵²

Almost in despair that time is running out for his son, Mortimer enlists the help of the minister, who proves to have the solution to the mystery, his humble belief being that 'maybe at the moment the Lord will put it into our heads what to do'.⁵³ Though Mortimer does not set any great store by this hope, he and Simson, who has again joined him, are amazed and petrified when Dr Moncrieff recognizes the now familiar cries of 'Oh, mother, let me in!'. The ghost which has brought so much terror to all those who hear it emerges as the spirit of a young man, by the name of Willie, who the minister actually knew, and remembers, 'a prodigal - weak, foolish, easily imposed upon, and "led away" '.⁵⁴ When the young man had finally returned home, it was to discover he was too late, and that his mother had died some days before; on hearing the news he had collapsed at the door, calling for her, unable to take it in. Oliphant, in this story, depicts the constructs of masculinity, how they can fail, and the debilitating fear of such failure.

The problem for the two women in 'Old Lady Mary' begins long before Lady Mary's death and subsequent return as a ghost. As opposed to the masculine codes of behaviour illustrated in 'The Open Door', it lies rather in the nature of women's upbringing in Victorian society. This is an area that has brought Oliphant a great deal of criticism, but as many of her comments have been taken out of context, much is undeserved. Williams points out the absurdity of Oliphant being 'a woman who wrote marvellous fiction about the war between the sexes remembered as an outraged Victorian Matron'.⁵⁵ She was not afraid of a forceful aphorism, for instance: 'Marrying is like dying – as distinct, as irrevocable, as complete'.⁵⁶ Taken as part of the article in which this statement appeared, it becomes clear that she is not motivated by any vindictive desire to keep women in unhappy marriages, but primarily by a concern for any children. She was convinced, furthermore, 'that if marriage were to be downgraded, it would be women who would suffer'.⁵⁷ She did believe in the doctrine of 'separate spheres', but did not agree it followed that women were inferior to men: 'if anyone will tell us that the nursery is less important than the Exchange, or that it is a more dignified business to vote for a county member than to regulate a Christian household, we will grant that the woman has an inferior range of duty'.⁵⁸ She was very clear on this position, and when J.S. Mill appealed for her support in extending the suffrage to women, she responded to what she felt to be his patronizing attitude to women with: 'We are not men spoiled in the making, but women',⁵⁹ valuing what she perceived as their differences, and according importance to the female role. What should prevent disagreement, she felt, was that mutual humanity should ultimately prove greater than gender distinctions: 'This idea, that the two portions of humankind are natural antagonists to each other, is, to our thinking, at the very outset, a monstrous and unnatural idea'.⁶⁰ Instead, she argued, 'above and beyond and beneath all their differences, He has made them primarily human creatures', communing 'from one

human heart to another'.⁶¹ Therefore, she felt that proposed changes in the laws concerning, for example, divorce or the extension of the franchise would be not so much objectionable as inadequate in accounting for individual women's circumstances. She felt perfectly secure in her belief in female competence, and indeed could be scathing, as quotations elsewhere show, as to whether men measured up. When it occurs, Jay considers that 'Her contempt for men is tempered always by her sense of them as the necessary raw material upon which women practise the daily self-denial which will sharpen their moral faculties'.⁶² Though Oliphant came to think that there was no reason why independent women should not have the vote, she did not feel it necessary to establish women's status. Clarke has argued that, 'her views were changing from year to year and she came to share most of the less extreme views of nineteenth-century feminists'.⁶³ It is perfectly possible, as modern readers, to disagree with parts of her ideology as outdated, but not to dismiss her as an anti-feminist, or to accuse her of not thinking through her arguments; her complexity goes beyond that.

Oliphant, from the beginning of 'Old Lady Mary', offers an analysis of how Lady Mary has become the character that the reader encounters: 'She had been beautiful in her youth, and had enjoyed all the triumphs of beauty; had been intoxicated with flattery, and triumphant in conquest, and mad with jealousy and the bitterness of defeat when it became evident that her day was over'.⁶⁴ When we meet her, however, all that has passed, and 'her life whole life went on velvet, rolling smoothly along, without jar or interruption'.⁶⁵ It is mainly thanks to those around her, in particular, her doctor, her solicitor and the minister: 'It was a duty much enforced upon her by all around her, that she should do nothing that should exhaust or fatigue. "I don't want you to think," even the doctor would say'.⁶⁶ Yet, because of the issue of the will, the same people hold a surprising view of her in private: 'These gentlemen all consulted together in despair,

and asked each other what should be done. They thought her an egotist - a cold-hearted old woman, holding at arm's length any idea of the inevitable'.⁶⁷ It is surprising because it is their treatment of her that is causing her reaction that so annoys them. They do not wish her to think, and she is doing exactly that, playing along with their games of flattery and smooth-talk.

At the beginning of the story, 'little Mary' is being brought up in a very similar fashion:

She was one of the pleasantest things to look at of all the pretty things in Lady Mary's rooms, and she had the most sheltered, peaceful, and pleasant life that could be conceived [...] There was something much more serious in her life, had she known, which was that she had nothing, and no power of doing anything for herself; that she had all her life been accustomed to a modest luxury which would make poverty very hard to her.⁶⁸

She has been bred as an object to look attractive - certainly not to think - and she is completely unaware of the disservice that has been done to her. Never has she been encouraged to question on what her lifestyle is based, or what will happen to her when her godmother passes away. When this event actually takes place, her naiveté is painful, as it takes her some time to work out why the vicar and his wife have taken her in, simply expecting 'that the vicar would speak to her, or Mr Furnival send for her, and tell her what she was to do'.⁶⁹ This is all she is capable of, with her complete lack of worldly experience; she waits patiently for a man to tell her what to do. As Jay asserts:

The numerical disproportion that had left half a million single women as a surplus on the marriage market bolstered a man's sense of his strength as a purchaser at the same time as it rendered a woman most sensitive to the 'immoral randomness' of the process which could so transform her life.⁷⁰

It is some measure of her helplessness that the doctor's mother is seriously bothered that this character so perfectly bred by the patriarchal system will prove too appealing to one

of its proponents, and that the doctor will succumb to the temptation of taking as a wife the innocent - and importantly for the mother - penniless - waif.

As Jay observes of 'A Beleaguered City', 'At every point of the tale the women are marginalized'.⁷¹ Even the mayor, Dupin, whose account is 'self-congratulatory' and full of 'fussy pomposities',⁷² perceives their unenviable position, as he watches his wife:

Agnès with the other women sitting apart on one side and waiting. I recognized even in the excitement of such a time that theirs was no easy part. To sit there silent, to wait till we had spoken, to be bound by what we decided, and to have no voice – yes, that was hard.⁷³

Agnès herself is perfectly aware of her status, but is resigned: 'Perhaps it was better that the messenger should not be a woman; they might have said it was a delusion, an attack of the nerves. We are not trusted in these respects, though I find it hard to tell why'.⁷⁴ She knows 'that they would not accept, as most of us were willing to accept, the interpretation of the mystery'.⁷⁵ Jay's explanation is that the men's dismissal of the women's beliefs as 'prejudices', 'is designed to neutralize their disruptive potential'.⁷⁶ Oliphant would have felt the masculine attitude to be unfair: 'Women have a better understanding of "the true meaning of life" than men (the author believed) because they are more in touch with the great realities of birth and death'.⁷⁷ Speaking of the death of her own daughter, Maggie, Oliphant mused: 'I feared from the first moment her illness began, and yet I had a kind of underlying conviction that God would not take my ewe-lamb, my *woman-child* [*my italics*], from me'.⁷⁸ What is the significance of the addition of adult identity? It could be that Oliphant, like Agnès Dupin, recognized a collective ideology amongst women, and had visualized how this could have grown with her daughter, imagining what her daughter, as a woman, could have brought to the world, had she lived. Her answer is to give Agnès Dupin, and through her all other women, a

voice and status in the form of her own narrative, wherein she is left free to express her beliefs. Part of Oliphant's realistic acceptance of human nature, however, means that miracles, in Semur, do not last, as Monsieur Dupin accedes: 'The wonderful manifestation which interrupted our existence has passed absolutely as if it had never been. We had not been twelve hours in our houses ere we had forgotten, or practically forgotten, our expulsion from them'.⁷⁹ Whilst the women will always have, as they had before, their acceptance of the supernatural to remind them of the existence of more powerful agents than themselves, in the everyday patriarchal world, an insistence on rationalism and capitalism will always triumph.

One of Oliphant's last pieces of work, 'The Library Window' (1896), is a complex tale which combines the issue of expected female behaviour with the sense of loss and loneliness which the author addresses in her tales dealing with bereavement. The story was published in the same issue of Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine that carried her article, 'The Anti-Marriage League', in which she attacked Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure (1895).⁸⁰ Much of her - undeserved - reputation as a confirmed anti-feminist, so damaging to her reputation as a writer, sprang from this article, and Hardy's response following her death a year later. She vehemently objected to the fashion for sex being the only focus of the latest novels. One of her obituaries stated that:

For her, the sex-problem as we find it to-day, irresistible in its fascinations for lady novelists, had no existence, and in the entire range of her works, nearly eighty in number, the too frequent element of doubtful taste and of morality about which there can be no question is delightfully and conspicuously absent.⁸¹

Of even greater concern for her was the separation of sex from children and responsibility, and taken together, her views led to her being labelled, first by Hardy, as a hysterical prude.⁸² She was not a prude, and this is borne out by the fact that 'The

Library Window' explores awakening sexuality, but in ways more subtle than the approach adopted by Thomas Hardy.⁸³

Once again, Oliphant chooses an opening - this time a window rather than a door - to represent the barrier between the worlds of the spiritual and the temporal. The plot itself is easily told; a young girl on the verge of womanhood goes to stay with her elderly aunt in St Rule's (based, it has been suggested, on St Andrews),⁸⁴ and becomes obsessed with the window opposite that at which she sits. Whilst it is acknowledged that it is a part of the college library, there is great debate amongst her aunt's old friends as to whether it is real, or only a fake from the days of the window tax. The narrator (who tells the story from some years distant) becomes increasingly impatient with them all, as she is able to make out more evening by evening of the room behind the window, which finally reveals a man studiously writing. The sight of this scholar every evening when the light begins to fade becomes the essence of her existence, and it begins to worry her aunt. It never occurs to the narrator that she could be observing a ghost, which is indeed the case. Thus, in a striking image, life and death are mirrored in the windows facing each other across the street.

The narrator, who never identifies herself, and at the time of the story is hovering between childhood and womanhood, reflecting in hindsight, gives many significant indications as to her character, for example: 'Everybody had said, since ever I learned to speak, that I was fantastic and fanciful and dreamy, and all the other words with which a girl who may happen to like poetry, and to be fond of thinking, is so often made uncomfortable'.⁸⁵ She is perhaps not growing up to be the version of womanhood required and expected; 'bookishness' in young women is equated with an unhealthy state of mind in one who should be out enjoying a social whirl and trying to catch

herself a husband. What she tells us is that her seriousness is deliberately confused with a fanciful nature which gives rise to some dismay in her mother, who keeps her running about with errands and practical work in order that she should not give way to this disturbing behaviour. In her studious father, whom she obviously resembles, and whose scholarly nature has given him a career and made him famous, such behaviour is entirely acceptable. In these circumstances, her aunt's home, where she is sent for the healthy air of the town to do her good, is a real retreat; she is allowed to do as she pleases, which usually entails day-dreaming in a certain corner: 'At the time of which I speak the deep recess of the drawing-room window was a great comfort to me'.⁸⁶ It provides a curtained-off, womb-like safety, from which she can observe life without taking part. Importantly, as it becomes intimately connected with the window, she reveals that she possessed another interesting characteristic: 'I had a sort of second-sight, and was conscious of things to which I paid no attention',⁸⁷ which is later confirmed as a more definite family trait in 'women of our blood',⁸⁸ and extends further than simply an alert consciousness, into an awareness of the supernatural.

In her sensitive state, a struggle is about to take place, and the first real sign of this is her attitude to Lady Carnbee, one of the group who passes time with her aunt. There is the 'heavy black Spanish lace with large flowers', which is the trim for everything she wears; it becomes a potent and threatening image for the narrator, and seems like a sinister inversion of the bridal image of flowery lace.⁸⁹ More powerful still is the description of Lady Carnbee's hand and ring, which is worth quoting at length:

She had long fingers, very taper, which had been much admired in her youth; and her hand was very white, or rather more than white, pale, bleached, and bloodless, with large blue veins standing up upon the back; and she wore some fine rings, among others a big diamond in an ugly old claw setting. They were too big for her, and were wound round and round with yellow silk to make them keep on: and this little cushion of silk, turned brown with long wearing, had twisted round so that it was more conspicuous than the jewels; while the big

diamond blazed underneath in the hollow of her hand, like some dangerous thing hiding and sending out darts of light. The hand, which seemed to come almost to a point, with its strange ornament underneath, clutched at my half-terrified imagination. It seemed to mean far more than was said. I felt as if it might clutch me with sharp claws, and the lurking, dazzling creature bite - with a sting that would go to the heart.⁹⁰

This is a highly charged image, menacing in the extreme. The hand, with its long tapering fingers and enlarged veins, seems tainted with decay and rottenness. The diamond too is highly symbolic; it becomes an animal that may bite or sting. To the narrator, who is tormented by Lady Carnbee's hints and jokes about imagined lovers, it seems to represent encroaching sexuality; it is dangerous and horrible, something she wants to escape and hide from. Yet this hand and its diamond become increasingly prominent in the story, eventually becoming surrounded by near-hysteria. Lady Carnbee is transformed into a witch, with control over her fearsome weapon, and the power to cast spells.⁹¹ She is loathsome to the narrator: 'Her old fingers had a strange touch, cold like something not living, and I felt that dreadful diamond sting me on the cheek'.⁹² Lady Carnbee and the sexuality she comes to symbolize are infectious, and the narrator reacts violently when the old woman teases her that her day-dreams are about a man: "I am thinking of no man!" I said, half crying. "It is very unkind and dreadful of you to say so, Lady Carnbee. I never thought of - any man, in all my life!" I cried in a passion of indignation'.⁹³ This is not strictly true of course; both the narrator and the reader know that the mysterious scholar already fascinates her. Her anger is more likely generated by the fear of the kind of insidious sexual thoughts that Lady Carnbee represents to the narrator, and which she rejects with such shock.

As a counter to this sexuality which the narrator feels to be threatening her, she retreats more and more to the safety of the window, and what she sees from it. As the story has been progressing, she has begun to notice increasingly the window opposite, which has

gradually cleared a little further every evening, until she makes out the room behind it, and eventually, a man, sitting at a desk writing intently. Immediately noticeable is that she associates the room with her father's study; in fact, by this point, she is making constant reference to her father and his habits. It is filled with solid furniture, and the reassuring clutter of books and papers, comforting in a masculine, yet non-threatening, asexual way. When the scholar appears, she has difficulty in making out what he looks like; he too is mainly a solid outline so there is no source provided for physical attraction.⁹⁴ Though he begins to take up most of her waking thoughts, what the narrator entertains for him is a romantic longing which stops short of the little-understood and frightening aspect of sex, but instead forms a type of hero-worship, such as a young girl might feel for her father. Admiration for a male figure occurs infrequently in Oliphant's fiction, as in her own life, so 'The Library Window' is somewhat original in this respect. When she thinks she may meet her scholar, she shyly dresses up for him, in virginal white, with pearls.⁹⁵ There *is* something almost voyeuristic in her activity: 'I used to hurry through the day till the evening came, when I could watch my neighbour through the window opposite',⁹⁶ but again, ensconced in her window recess, she does not have to take an active part in anything, so is safe. She senses a bond between them: 'I don't know who you are, or what you are: but you're lonely and so am I'.⁹⁷ Notably, the other male character is also non-threatening:

As for Mr Pitmilly, he had a beautiful fine French frill to his shirt, plaited in the most minute plaits, and with a diamond pin in it which sparkled as much as Lady Carnbee's ring; but this was a kind frank friendly stone, that looked you straight in the face and sparkled, with the light dancing in it as if it were pleased to see you.⁹⁸

Once again a diamond is the symbol, but this time for the good.

What is happening then, is a struggle inside the narrator, as she makes the difficult transition from childhood to womanhood, the focus for this in the story being the comforting version of masculinity symbolized by the scholar (another lover of books like herself), and the frightening and repulsive new sexuality represented by Lady Carnbee. Why is it not the other way around? Is Lady Carnbee the threatening one because she is the same sex as the narrator, and therefore represents her own potentially destructive power as a woman? Certainly, it transpires that Lady Carnbee and her charms as a young woman have proved treacherous. The full story rapidly unfolds, when, after attending a party at the college library, the narrator is forced to realize that the window is in fact a fake one, and the man she has been observing a ghost. The revelation almost proves too much for her sanity to bear, and only her aunt's reluctant telling of the tale can calm her. The scholar was bewitched and lured away from his books by a woman - it is strongly implied that it was Lady Carnbee - 'and yon ring was the token';⁹⁹ he was killed by the woman's enraged brothers, and from then has been seen by various members of the narrator's family who have the mysterious gift of second sight. The strictly defined codes of behaviour imposed on both women and men can therefore be seen to have potentially traumatic effects, which Oliphant illustrates through her supernatural fiction.

DESPERATE TEMERITY

When we happen to be compelled, by force of circumstances, to do things that are generally reserved for men, we have, in most cases, found that we were able to do them, heaven be praised! If the poor souls were to try ours, the result might be different indeed.¹⁰⁰

Such was Oliphant's half-humorous, half-contemptuous judgement of the respective abilities of the sexes. In her own life, circumstances almost *always* compelled her to adopt both roles; in her ghost stories she depicts powerful allegiances formed between women and supernatural forces, and men who achieve solutions through an acceptance of the female perspective. In reality and in fiction, 'Oliphant admired indomitable women, capable of dealing with particular injustices – her female ideal was inviolable'.¹⁰¹ The minister in 'The Open Door' is able to lay to rest the troubled spirit of Willie, through inclusion of the mother, in contrast to Mortimer's earlier exclusion of his womenfolk. Moncrieff instructs him that, 'She's no here. You'll find her with the Lord. Go there and seek her, not here'.¹⁰² With that one simple gesture of sympathy and understanding, which has nothing to do with bravado or 'manliness', the situation is resolved. It is difficult not to draw parallels between the story of the young man with that of Oliphant's own sons, who were proving weak and ineffective themselves.¹⁰³ Willie was furthermore the name of her alcoholic brother, forced to leave the church because of his problem, after which he lived out the rest of his days in Rome, supported financially by his sister. It is doubly significant therefore, that it is a woman, and a mother, who provides the ultimate rest and solution. In the process of this, Mortimer comes to a new position: 'I had ceased even to be alarmed, for my part. My heart was rent with pity and trouble - pity for the poor suffering human creature that moaned and pleaded so, and trouble for myself and my boy.'¹⁰⁴ The narrative focus merges with the

authorial one, to become one of pity and sympathy. Mortimer comes to regard the ghost a fellow human in pain, and associates him with his own son. In effect, he attains the maternal viewpoint, rather than the one-sided, strictly masculine attitude he had previously maintained within his family. What seems, on first reading, to be a simple tale of male adventure, takes on greater significance on deeper consideration. Subtly, and with great narrative ease, Oliphant questions important aspects of gendered behaviour within a framework that all readers can relate to: that of death and bereavement. In this respect, the supernatural becomes, not a weapon, but a constructive assistant in Oliphant's skilful manipulation of sub-text.

It is Lady Mary's death and return as a ghost, in 'Old Lady Mary', which proves the catalyst for both the women's rebellion against the passive and useless role that they have been eased into without them ever having proper consciousness of it. The author stated that 'Women, as popular opinion goes, are more patient by nature, more capable of quiet endurance and passive fortitude, than men. It may be so; but women are not patient of injustice'.¹⁰⁵ When Lady Mary realizes the fact of her own death, the situation she has left behind her, and the dreadful nature of the task she is thinking of performing in returning, a new mood takes hold of her: 'Then all the strength of her nature rose in her'.¹⁰⁶ This indicates that strength has always been in her, but has just been smothered by the imposed role of thoughtlessness. Now she has been freed from the guardians of this role, she is able to tackle the problems that have previously been carefully hidden from her. She sums up her intentions with the decisive words: 'I will try'.¹⁰⁷ This, the narrative voice makes clear throughout the remainder of the story, is the most important thing, whether or not the outcome is totally successful; it is the act of effort which matters. This is reflective of Oliphant's pondering of 'how does it happen that the cowardice of womankind is a fact so clearly established, and that so little notice

is ever taken of the desperate temerity of this half of the creation?'.¹⁰⁸ The young Mary experiences the same unexpected surge of self-confidence, significantly, at the moment when Lady Mary makes her first visit to the girl's presence (though all Mary is aware of is a faint noise). Even the mildness of temper that she has been brought up to exhibit cannot withstand the idea of being nothing more than a charity case. She is appalled by the disdainful remarks concerning her godmother, whom she defends, distressed that anyone should think she should love her less because she has not left her money. Her attachment to her godmother is real, and she wishes to make contact as desperately as Lady Mary, in order to assure her she does not blame her as others do, just as her godmother is desperate to make her understand how sorry she is, and to make amends. Such feelings have a positive effect: 'Mary felt herself stung by such unendurable suggestions into an energy - a determination - of which her soft young life had known nothing'.¹⁰⁹ She shocks her friends by throwing off the mantle of helpless young girl: "Wretched!" cried Mary, springing up. "I am not wretched." And she turned with a countenance glowing and full of courage to the door'.¹¹⁰ This sudden activity becomes positive excitement: 'She did not feel at all disposed to cry or "give way". It went to her head with a thrill of pain, which was excitement as well, like a strong stimulant suddenly applied; and she added, "I should like to go out a little" '.¹¹¹ She expresses her own wish, and carries it out, slowly gaining faith in her own power. It is a contrast to her previous life when she never went out, 'but lived constantly at home'.¹¹² She takes a job as governess to the little girl, Connie, the daughter of the family who are renting Lady Mary's old house; they are *nouveaux riches*, and as such are rather dismissed by Mary's old friends, who are positively scandalized to find Mary has taken a situation with them. However, with her new-found determination, she refuses to let them take her away. It is through Connie, who frequently reports sightings of an old lady on the stairs, whose description fits Lady Mary's, that Mary becomes convinced that her

godmother is haunting her former abode, and must be unhappy. The tension grows as Lady Mary continues to appear; but young Mary is still unable to see her, though believing she feels a presence, and the situation gradually wears down her health. Finally, as Mary is approaching illness, there is a dramatic moment of communication between the two, after which Mary is struck down with a dangerous fever, and Lady Mary returns to the land of spirits, having achieved all she can.

It may seem a strange ending; the will, eventually, is found quite by accident, without Lady Mary, and we are not given much hint as to what young Mary's life holds for her following her contact with the supernatural. Noticeably, there is no happy marriage to round off the plot – a popular device in Victorian fiction - anyone expecting that the earl coming to take possession of his old relative's house will sweep Mary off to happy-ever-after is to be sadly disappointed. Rather pointedly, it seems, Mary is left making an independent way through life, for once not relying on men to dictate to her. She is one of Oliphant's 'young women who make the bitter journey from innocence to experience, who grow sadder and wiser as experience proves to them that life (or men) cannot fulfil their idealistic expectations'.¹¹³ In old Lady Mary, a great change has taken place: 'Her face, which had been so easy, was worn with trouble; her eyes were deep with things unspeakable. Pity and knowledge were in the lines that time had not made'.¹¹⁴ She is now only thankful to return to the place that is now her home. Her experience, and her efforts, have made her stronger, and instead of simply letting life's comforts roll over her, she has created her own happiness, on which note the story ends:

She had come to herself by this time, and the dark lines were melting from her face. 'I am forgiven,' she said, with a low cry of happiness. 'She whom I wronged loves me and blessed me; and we saw each other face to face. I know nothing more.'

'There is no more,' said all together. For everything is included in pardon and love.¹¹⁵

Ultimately, Lady Mary is doing her goddaughter a service when she unintentionally leaves her penniless. Though not of the same flippant character as Lady Mary, the young Mary is set to lead a passive, stifling life until the sudden change in her circumstances alters everything. Both women are jolted into activity by the passing over of Lady Mary; ironically, the latter is more alive after her death than during her life. Both women are driven on in demanding situations by their concern and love for each other, which reaps its rewards. It would be a mistake to assert that Oliphant wrote with any intention to show her male characters as acting out of malice or cruelty; as with all of her supernatural fiction, 'Old Lady Mary' illustrates men continuing an unfair system into which they themselves have been indoctrinated. Women may suffer because of it, but at the same time they are depicted as being frequently complicit in the patriarchy which works against their interests. Through contact with the supernatural, women discover concern for each other and an avenue through which to break this cycle positively.

The ending of 'The Library Window', as with so much of Oliphant's supernatural fiction, is ambiguous and quirky; she seems determined to avoid the neat or obvious. Whilst the narrator cannot escape completely from the negative events of the past, the supernatural influence helps to provide the strength and courage needed to encounter these as well as the challenges of the present and future. The narrator's mother is called and comes to take her away; the family leaves for abroad, and her contact with the scholar at the window is over as suddenly as it began. There is, however, a postscript, in which she brings us up to date. She never returned to St Rule's, but she has not left the legacy of her time there behind. Lady Carnbee leaves her the ring which she so hated and still fears in her will; she keeps it locked up in a house she never lives in, and would gladly have it stolen. What does it say about its power over her that she cannot

simply give it away, or even throw it away? Moreover, she sees the ghostly scholar again. The last time she had seen him, he had actually acknowledged her, with a friendly wave, as if there was indeed a connection between them. Later in her life, when she returns from India a widow, with only her children for comfort (reminiscent of Oliphant's own return, in similar circumstances, from Italy), she sees him again, waving, at the dockside. At another lonely period of her life he appears to give her cheer and strength. She does not claim to make any sense of the whole chain of events, and we leave her still questioning the meaning of her experiences; Oliphant seems deliberately to leave it open to interpretation. The fact that the postscript is told in adult life - when she again sees the ghost of the scholar - is surely significant. One would expect the connection to have been broken with the end of childhood, and presumably the lessening of the fears that were troubling her, but not only does she see the scholar again, but she is still 'under the spell' of Lady Carnbee's 'evil' ring. Addressing the question of the ghostly scholar's previous function in the narrator's life, it would seem that it was to provide balance and reassurance at a time of threatening emotional upheaval. It is this same role he plays at a time when risking her feelings in adult love - the dangerous side of which is still symbolized by the ring - has left her a lonely widow with young children to support. These are circumstances which Oliphant could identify with, but in her own case she had always found that men fell short of the patriarchal ideal of safeguarding their womenfolk, so there is perhaps an element of wish fulfilment at work. Once again she is emotionally vulnerable, and the supernatural provides valuable support. It takes the form that is at the time most comforting, whether it is as a father-figure, or to give a sense of family, which is what she needs when she steps back alone onto her home soil. When human solace may be unavailable, or out of the question - as a Victorian girl it would no doubt have been very difficult to ask about sex and the unexpected feelings it inspires, for example - the ghost fulfils her needs

instead.¹¹⁶ By the end then, the nature of the supernatural comfort has become broader, but one thing is certain, however; this supernatural presence has once again had a very positive effect on a woman's life in times of otherwise unavoidable loneliness.

Given Margaret Oliphant's life of constant hard work and effort, supporting single-handedly both her own and an extended family, dealing with great personal loss, financial matters, and the running of a household, it is not surprising that she reflected these in her writing. Margaret Gray points out that her fiction excels in 'a preponderance of male characters who disappoint or fail their women, and in the alcoholics, moral degenerates, or physically ill characters who hold back the women or drag them down'.¹¹⁷ Margarete Rubik discusses how Margaret redresses this balance:

Oliphant consistently describes women as the stronger, cleverer, and more active sex, whereas men are painted as incompetent weaklings - an inversion of conventional assumptions that has generally been attributed to her personal experience with the men of her family.¹¹⁸

This chapter has aimed to show this to be particularly true of her supernatural fiction, which, as a genre, was eminently suitable for the insertion of sub-texts and covert meanings. Critics have also argued that her ghost stories arose partly out of her own personal need: 'In several of these works she attempted to formulate a theology which would not only prove consolatory for her personal unhappiness, but would also serve as a bulwark against the increasing materialism and scepticism of her age'.¹¹⁹ However, she knew where to draw the line in this matter: 'she did not, like some of the bereaved, try to find comfort in spiritualism [...] But although she did not claim to have had any personal contact with the dead, she clung to the hope that it was not impossible'.¹²⁰

The subversive content of so much of her material for a long time was, deliberately or otherwise, passed over, and in recent decades, when feminist critics were re-evaluating

the work of many women writers, Oliphant earned herself the infamous reputation as an anti-feminist, and was promptly all-but dismissed. Only recently has this verdict been challenged, based as it was on statements taken out of context. It would be too simplistic to label Oliphant, on the other hand, a feminist, but her work shows a constant concern for women and their position in life, and outside of her writing this concern did not waver. Though early in life she dismissed the campaign for women's rights as vulgar, by her later years she was stating that there was no reason why, as a tax-paying householder, living without a man at the head of the family, she should not have vote.¹²¹ Her views had undoubtedly changed with the times and with personal experience. As mentioned earlier, the furore surrounding her comments about modern literature have often been misleadingly quoted, twisting her argument to make her sound like a repressed, bitter old prude; for years this has served to give a false impression of a woman who was much more open-minded than she has been given credit for. Elisabeth Jay, in her new and complete edition of the autobiography, has described the process by which, after her death, her cousin Mrs Harry Coghill, and her niece Denny put together a highly subjective choice of material from her letters and scraps of autobiography, cutting out parts which reflected a more radical side, such as when she expresses doubts about her faith following her children's deaths, or when she speaks positively about women's suffrage, and including parts which suggested greater conventionality when viewed on their own.¹²² Thus a persona which was by no means the real Margaret Oliphant emerged. Merryn Williams prefers to regard her as an 'Old Feminist', placing her within her own time, which supports Oliphant's methods of subversion, rather than open feminism.¹²³ In this she was not so very different to many other women writing at the time, who had a point to make, but were conscious of the prejudice views on women's role in society could face. With Oliphant, it is necessary to

dig a little deeper, past the layers of years of misinterpretation, to the woman's surprising and fascinating work.

- ¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own, and, Three Guineas* (London, 1993), p.217.
- ² Marion Lochhead, 'Margaret Oliphant: A Half-Forgotten Victorian', *Quarterly Review*, vol.299:629, July (1961), pp.300-10, p.310.
- ³ Elisabeth Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: 'A Fiction to Herself': A Literary Life* (Oxford, 1995), p.157.
- ⁴ Margaret Oliphant, *The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs M.O.W. Oliphant*, ed. by Mrs Harry Coghill (Edinburgh, 1899), p.321.
- ⁵ Mrs Gerald Porter, *Annals of a Publishing House: John Blackwood*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1898) iii, p.336.
- ⁶ Merryn Williams, 'Margaret Oliphant', *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, ed. by Douglas Gifford & Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh, 1997), pp.274-90, p.287.
- ⁷ Margaret Oliphant, *The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs M.O.W. Oliphant*, ed. by Mrs Harry Coghill, 3rd edn, (Edinburgh, 1899), p.88.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* p.138.
- ⁹ Review [anon.], 'A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen, by Mrs Oliphant', *Literary World*, 18 Nov. 1882, p.391.
- ¹⁰ A postcard held in the National Library of Scotland shows a pen and ink sketch of 'Ruins of Old Castle, Colinton House'. The illustration is of a ruined tower surrounded by trees. In old handwriting (whose is unknown) beside the picture is 'The scene of Mrs Oliphant's "The Open Door"'. Fol.55, MS 23211, NLS.
- ¹¹ Margaret Oliphant, *A Beleaguered City, and Other Stories*, ed. by Merryn Williams (Oxford, 1988), pp. 119-20.
- ¹² Merryn Williams, 'Introduction', Margaret Oliphant, *A Beleaguered City*, p.xii.
- ¹³ For a discussion of Brontë's use of doors/thresholds, cf. Valentine Cunningham, *In the Reading Gaol: Postmodernity, Texts, and History* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 345-7.
- ¹⁴ Oliphant, *A Beleaguered City*, p.117.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.152.
- ¹⁶ John Stock Clarke, *Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897): A Bibliography* (Queensland, 1986), p.12.
- ¹⁷ Oliphant, *The Autobiography*, ed. by Coghill, p.286.
- ¹⁸ Oliphant, *A Beleaguered City*, p.59.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.* pp.57-8.
- ²⁰ Clarke, p.12.
- ²¹ Oliphant, *The Autobiography*, ed by Coghill, 3rd edn, p.90.
- ²² Oliphant, *A Beleaguered City*, p.30.
- ²³ *Ibid.* p.165.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.* p.195.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.* p.163.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* p.166.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.* p.185.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.* p.198.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.* p.227.
- ³⁰ Biographical information is taken from the following sources: Margaret K. Gray, 'Introduction', in Margaret Oliphant, *Selected Short Stories of the Supernatural*, ed. by Margaret K. Gray (Edinburgh, 1985); Elisabeth Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: 'A Fiction to Herself': A Literary Life* (Oxford, 1995); Merryn Williams, 'A Chronology of Margaret Oliphant', in Margaret Oliphant, *A Beleaguered City, and Other Stories*, ed. by Merryn Williams (Oxford, 1988); Merryn Williams, *Margaret Oliphant: A Critical Biography* (London, 1986).
- ³¹ Diana Basham, *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (London, 1992), pp.164-5.
- ³² Margaret Oliphant, 'The Great Unrepresented', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol.100, Sept. (1866), pp.367-79, p.372.
- ³³ Margaret Oliphant, diary for 1887, MS 23214, NLS, p.11.
- ³⁴ Margaret Oliphant, letter 86, fol.226, MS 23209, NLS.
- ³⁵ Margaret Oliphant, death certificate, fol.49, MS 23211, NLS.
- ³⁶ Oliphant, *A Beleaguered City*, p.121.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.* p.121.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.* p.125.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.* p.127.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p.126.
- ⁴¹ Basham, p.171.
- ⁴² Oliphant, *A Beleaguered City*, p.124.

- ⁴³ Ibid. p.124.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid. p.128.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid. p.130.
- ⁴⁶ Jay, p.167.
- ⁴⁷ Oliphant, A Beleaguered City, p.128.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid. p.126.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid. p.135.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid. pp.132-3.
- ⁵¹ Ibid. p.136.
- ⁵² Ibid. p.146.
- ⁵³ Ibid. p.149.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid. p.157.
- ⁵⁵ Williams, 'Margaret Oliphant', p.276.
- ⁵⁶ Margaret Oliphant, 'The Laws Concerning Women', Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, vol.79, April (1856), pp.379-87, p.380.
- ⁵⁷ Merryn Williams, 'Feminist or Antifeminist? Oliphant and the Woman Question', Margaret Oliphant: Critical Essays on a Gentle Subversive, ed by D.J. Trela (London, 1995), pp.165-81, p.178.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid. p.381.
- ⁵⁹ Oliphant, 'The Great Unrepresented', p.376.
- ⁶⁰ Oliphant, 'The Laws Concerning Women', p.379.
- ⁶¹ Margaret Oliphant, 'The Condition of Women', Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, vol.83, Feb. (1858), pp.139-54, p.145.
- ⁶² Jay, p.73.
- ⁶³ Clarke, p.6.
- ⁶⁴ Oliphant, A Beleaguered City, p.163.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid. p.165.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid. p.168.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid. p.167.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid. p.166.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid. p.188.
- ⁷⁰ Jay, p.89.
- ⁷¹ Ibid. p.163.
- ⁷² Ibid. p.161.
- ⁷³ Oliphant, A Beleaguered City, p.49.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid. p.81.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid. p.82.
- ⁷⁶ Jay, p.162.
- ⁷⁷ Williams, 'Introduction', p.xii.
- ⁷⁸ Oliphant, The Autobiography, ed. by Coghill, 3rd edn, p.88.
- ⁷⁹ Oliphant, A Beleaguered City, p.109.
- ⁸⁰ Cf. Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure: An Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Sources Criticism, ed. by Norman Page (London, 1978), which contains Oliphant's 'The Anti-Marriage League', pp.381-5, in the context of other reviews and criticism, contemporary and modern.
- ⁸¹ Obituary, Margaret Oliphant, Daily Graphic, 28 June 1897, fol.80, MS 23211, NLS.
- ⁸² For a discussion of 'The Anti-Marriage League', Oliphant's concerns, Hardy's response, and the effects on Oliphant's reputation, cf. Elisabeth Jay, Mrs Oliphant: 'A Fiction to Herself', p.116, and Williams, A Critical Biography, pp.178-9.
- ⁸³ Cf. The introduction to Norman Page's edition of Jude the Obscure, which relates how Hardy's original intentions for a novel solely about the quest for education gradually changed as the plot became more concerned with questions regarding the status of sex and marriage within British society at that time, p.x.
- ⁸⁴ Oliphant, A Beleaguered City, p. 337n.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid. p.290.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid. p.289.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid. p.291.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid. p.298.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid. p.293.
- ⁹⁰ Ibid. p.293.
- ⁹¹ Ibid. p.294.
- ⁹² Ibid. p.307.
- ⁹³ Ibid. p.308.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid. p.311.

- ⁹⁵ Ibid. p.317.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid. p.312.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid. p.322.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid. p.317.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid. p.328.
- ¹⁰⁰ Oliphant, 'The Great Unrepresented', pp.367-79, p.379.
- ¹⁰¹ Ralph Jessop, 'Viragos of the Periodical Press: Constance Gordon-Cumming, Charlotte Dempster, Margaret Oliphant, Christian Isobel Johnstone', A History of Scottish Women's Writing, ed. by Gifford, pp.216-31, p.223.
- ¹⁰² Oliphant, A Beleaguered City, p.154.
- ¹⁰³ For a consideration of the characters of Oliphant's sons, cf. 'Prodigal Sons' Williams, Margaret Oliphant: A Critical Biography, pp.113-25.
- ¹⁰⁴ Oliphant, A Beleaguered City, p.152.
- ¹⁰⁵ Oliphant, 'The Laws Concerning Women', p.383.
- ¹⁰⁶ Oliphant, A Beleaguered City, p.185.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p.186.
- ¹⁰⁸ Margaret Oliphant, 'Modern Novelists – Great and Small', Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, vol.77, May (1855), pp.554-68, pp.554-5.
- ¹⁰⁹ Oliphant, A Beleaguered City, p.200.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid. p.191.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid. pp.191-2.
- ¹¹² Ibid. p.166.
- ¹¹³ Clarke, p.14.
- ¹¹⁴ Oliphant, A Beleaguered City, p.228.
- ¹¹⁵ Ibid. p.229.
- ¹¹⁶ Cf. Barbara Rees, The Victorian Lady (London, 1977), for an exploration of what was considered proper behaviour for young ladies, including the stony silence surrounding the subject of sex, such as the following: 'In the 1870s one mother, perhaps more bold than most of her contemporaries, asked a doctor what she should tell her daughter, then on the point of marriage. The reply was, "Tell her nothing, my dear madam, for if they knew they would not marry"', pp.36-7.
- ¹¹⁷ Margaret K. Gray, 'Introduction', Margaret Oliphant, Selected Short Stories, ed. by Margaret K. Gray, p.viii.
- ¹¹⁸ Margarete Rubik, 'The Subversion of clichés in Oliphant's fiction', A Gentle Subversive, ed. by D.J. Trela, p.51.
- ¹¹⁹ Gray, p.ix.
- ¹²⁰ Williams, Margaret Oliphant: A Critical Biography, p.126.
- ¹²¹ Williams, 'Feminist or Antifeminist?', p.172.
- ¹²² Margaret Oliphant, The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant: The Complete Text, ed. by Elisabeth Jay (Oxford, 1990).
- ¹²³ Williams, 'Feminist or Antifeminist?', p.179.

**ELIZABETH GASKELL:
STRUGGLES FOR SELF**

DIVISIONS

to spend so much ourselves on *so* purely selfish a thing as a house [*that at Plymouth Grove*] is, while so many are wanting – that's the haunting thought to me; at least to one of my 'Mes,' for I have a great number, and that's the plague. One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian – (only people call her socialist and communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother, and highly delighted at the delight of everyone else in the house, Meta and William most especially who are in full extasy. Now that's my 'social' self I suppose. Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience whh is pleased on its own account. How am I to reconcile all these warring members? I try to drown myself (my *first* self,) by saying it's Wm who is to decide on all these things, and his feeling it right ought to be my rule, And so it is – only that does not quite do.¹

The tensions resulting from difficulties posed by nineteenth-century society's rigid demands on a capable, intelligent woman can be clearly seen in this first-hand account.

The self-destructive metaphor of suicide shows the extent to which the promotion of self was discouraged, yet the half-wistful, half-sly addendum testifies to the writer's refusal to accept blindly that her position could only be relative to her husband. It is a topic to which the writer, Elizabeth Gaskell, returns again and again, in her letters and diary, with varying summations of her role. Yet this is a woman dismissed for the greater part of our century as *Mrs Gaskell*, the 'charming' author of Cranford (1853), and perhaps, if she was lucky, associated with the writing of worthy social novels. They are, as critics are increasingly recognizing, doing her a disservice, for her range was much wider, and infinitely more fascinating.

The idea of divisions within the female nature and sphere of experience is the most prominent strand to emerge in Elizabeth Gaskell's supernatural short stories. Reflected constantly in her fiction, it is also strongly apparent in documentation by and about her: 'She, herself, felt split, and not simply into two but into a multiplicity of selves whose

warring allegiances were hard to disentangle'.² These selves were generated by the opposing versions of womanhood demanded by both the individual and the Victorian patriarchal system. She existed 'in a society that elevated the feminine role almost to the obliteration of any other'.³ To some extent her life fell acceptably within these confines. She married, and had four children – all girls – who survived into adulthood, as well as a first daughter who was stillborn, and a son who died in infancy. (It was as an escape from her grief at this event that she began writing her first novel, Mary Barton (1848).) She was, however, aware of conflicting pressures, but felt unable to achieve an unequivocal solution. As a young mother in 1835, for instance, desperate to do everything right, she kept a diary of her daughter Marianne's development, from the age of six months to four years. She muses, 'How all a woman's life, at least so it seems to me now, ought to have a reference to the period when she will be fulfilling one of her greatest & highest duties, those of a mother'.⁴ Certainly, throughout her life and career, she never argued against the position that a woman's duties at home should, ultimately, come first; Patsy Stoneman asserts that she can never therefore be regarded as a feminist in the modern sense of the word.⁵ However, as she also points out, 'Behind many of Elizabeth Gaskell's ideas on the education and social role of women lies the tradition of rational feminism as expressed by Mary Wollstonecraft'.⁶ In contrast, however, during the same period, she defiantly asserts what could have been regarded as a flippant and unworthy ideal: 'I confess I think beauty a desirable thing. True like most other gifts it has its temptations, but still it is a high gift in the influence it irresistibly gives its possessors over others – an influence which may be used for such noble purposes'.⁷ Not always, however, does she think of putting duty first, and her instincts and irrepressible love of life take over. As a young woman she longs for freedom and lack of home complications: 'but as I happen to be a woman instead of a bird, as I have ties at home [...] and as, moreover, I have no wings like a dove to fly away [...] why I must

stay at home'.⁸ She never did fully rid herself of the need to escape, whether it be from home pressures, or those of parish life, or from the ugliness and squalor of industrial Manchester to the rural peace of her childhood home. She often took holidays without her husband (and vice versa). Later in her life, however, she did modify these extremes, although without having totally solved the conundrum: 'home duties and individual life' remain 'just my puzzle', leaving the seemingly unavoidable fact that, 'One thing is pretty clear, *Women*, must give up living an artist's life, if home duties are to be paramount'.⁹ She then adds a typical qualifier: 'I am sure it is healthy for them to have the refuge of the hidden world of Art to shelter themselves in when too much pressed upon by small Lilliputian arrows of peddling cares'.¹⁰ Her conclusion, in as much as it can be said that she reached one, managed a certain compromise: 'If Self is to be the end of exertions, those exertions are unholy, there is no doubt of *that* – and that is part of the danger of cultivating the Individual Life; but I do believe we all have some appointed work to do, whh no one else can do so well'.¹¹ Thus, whilst claiming, 'I do not think I ever cared for literary fame; nor do I think it *is* a thing that ought to be cared for',¹² she was able to pursue a successful literary career at the same time as bringing up a family, usually regarded as a woman's only fit vocation. She was also one of those who signed the first petition that led to the Married Women's Property Acts.¹³ Her personal struggles with such dilemmas meant that there was 'no avoiding the serious tension faced by a Victorian woman who tried to be more than a relative creature'.¹⁴ Much to her own shame, the effort involved occasionally seemed too much - 'I am sometimes coward enough to wish that we were back in the darkness where obedience was the only seen duty of women'¹⁵ - though this was only momentary. Throughout her career, Gaskell suffered from heart problems (which eventually killed her in 1865 at the age of only fifty-five), exhaustion and the frequent headaches (often bad enough to be incapacitating) which Gilbert and Gubar regard as symptoms of 'the anxiety of female

authorship'. The headaches she shared with other notable women writers, such as George Eliot, Olive Schreiner, Geraldine Jewsbury and Maria Edgeworth.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, these stresses involved in Gaskell's writing all translate into a rich source of inspiration for her professional life:

The theme of conflicting senses of identity is prominent in her fiction. So, too, is her manipulation of the tension which arises when individuals are subjected to rival demands, whether these demands come from the claims others make on them, or from inner debates produced by moral dilemmas.¹⁷

In this way we have the sexually powerful demonic version of Lucy in 'The Poor Clare' (1856); a wife escapes from a repressive and dangerous marriage with another woman in 'The Grey Woman' (1861); an innocent woman defends her identity to the cost of her life in 'Lois the Witch' (1859), to give but a few examples.

Within this sense of division, Elizabeth Gaskell's religion played a fundamental and ever-present role.¹⁸ She was born into a Unitarian family in 1810, and in 1838 married William Gaskell, a Unitarian minister in Manchester: 'religion is a constant factor in the life of the household, even when not brought into play. Unmentioned it may be, but never forgotten. Elizabeth Gaskell was a Unitarian'.¹⁹ As such, she was part of a Dissenting tradition, which gradually, during the course of the century, faced lessened prejudice and became a powerful social group. It differed from the Church of England in that it denied the Trinity and the divinity of Christ: 'The absence of this body of belief meant that Unitarianism was a peculiarly open church in the nineteenth century'.²⁰ The bedrock of this faith was reason, above all else. It 'held that the truths of religion were to be sought through reason rather than scriptural authority, and stressed the importance of Christian charity, tolerance for all shades of belief, and concern for social welfare'.²¹ Elizabeth's sense of a divided self may well have been worse had she been brought up within a narrower doctrine. With her strong element of

common sense, its doctrine of good works suited her perfectly, and allowed for a certain stability: 'in the mid-century crisis of faith she repudiated neither science nor belief and combined, as a minister's wife working among the poor in Manchester, a practical concern for the present with a strong belief in an afterlife'.²² At least, as a Unitarian, with the background of asserting individuality, she had the freedom and the right to question and debate, even as a woman. Her denomination supported women's education,²³ and this, combined with her family background was a significant factor in her personality: 'It is important that her father and husband were Unitarians, whose "theology was an optimistic affirmation of man as a rational being who could ultimately attain a perfect state in this world"'.²⁴ Because of this, the normal strictures applied to a Victorian woman did not bind Elizabeth quite so tightly: 'To the Gaskells, who saw reason and love as equally necessary for humanity, the doctrine of "separate spheres", which assigned reason to men and love to women, was a denial of full humanity to both'.²⁵ It is a significant fact that her husband actively encouraged Elizabeth to write, and indeed collaborated with her on her first publication, 'Sketches Among the Poor' (Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, January 1837).²⁶ Her religious views permeate her writing, however subtly. In 'An Accursed Race' (1855) she begins by speaking of Britain's bigoted past: 'We have tortured Jews; we have burnt Catholics and Protestants, to say nothing of a few witches and wizards. We have satirized Puritans, and we have dressed up Guys'.²⁷ 'Lois the Witch' takes as its theme the terrifying madness that can result from religious extremism. Disagreeing as she did with the tenets of the Roman Catholic church, its significance nonetheless surfaces more than once in her tales, as in 'The Poor Clare', with its connections between the figure of the nun and the ideal Victorian woman: 'a life of service, self-abnegation and chastity'.²⁸ Reddy suggests that Gaskell takes a subversive dig at the interwoven structures of power, which at a profound level involve women themselves in the process of their own subservience:

The Catholic Church, which looms large in both 'The Poor Clare' and Villette, is a patriarchal system that demands the sole right of defining women to act as enforcers of its rules. Gaskell seems to be suggesting that even the rabidly anti-Catholic British social system is identical in its patriarchal organization to the Catholic Church.²⁹

For Gaskell, then, religion could prove both another source of division and pressure for women, or, on a more personal level, act as a logic from which to gain some individuality and stability.

SHAPING REALITY

Elizabeth Gaskell's natural aptitude for narrative is mentioned by Angus Easson,³⁰ but it has been noted that it was exactly this quality which has been responsible for her enduring label of 'second class'. She has been regarded:

as a home-maker and an amateur, rather than as a serious professional writer. And no quality has been held against the author more than her natural gift of storytelling. Her love of plot-making, her appreciation of the good anecdote, story, or melodrama has been cited against her, as if her very charm and natural ability as a spinner of tales were evidence of an absence of art and purpose in her works.³¹

Now, however, thanks to Jenny Uglow's widely praised biography, with its subtitle 'A Habit of Stories', and its positive, consistent emphasis on Gaskell's ability, the balance has been redressed. Finally it is accepted that 'The mere act of female storytelling [...] becomes a means, not unlike the writing of novels, by which the female characters may name and give shape to the reality of their lives in a patriarchal society'.³²

Possibly for just this reason, Gaskell's narrative frameworks almost always allow for the development of a female chain of experience. The story of 'The Grey Woman', whose main plot takes place in eighteenth century Germany, finds continued life because it is written down by a mother for her daughter as a warning. It can then become part of a wider oral tradition as it intrigues the Victorian tourist who becomes in turn the external narrator. The setting for her collection Round the Sofa (1859), is a circle of friends who gather in the manner suggested by the title. The possessor of the article of furniture is an invalid lady of Edinburgh, who distinct from the pale and swooning type common to Victorian romantic fiction, is the lynch-pin and focus of a narrative bond that gives speech and confidence to an otherwise inconsequential group.

In a reversal of the notion of separate spheres, which gave men the gift of articulation, 'Gaskell makes her own point by creating a small society in which the men are awkward and hesitant, while the women are natural storytellers (as Gaskell was herself)'.³³ They take it in turns to tell their tales, of varying types and styles. It is a revelation to the young and timid female narrator, cowed by poverty and a premature weariness of life. In this use of powerful female narrative within narrative, Gaskell enhances the effect of women using storytelling to build a female tradition of experience and wisdom. She also appropriates typically masculine beginnings, as in one of the two fragments of ghost stories, found undated among her papers after her death. Her female narrator asserts:

I have no objection to tell you to what I alluded the other night, as I am too rational, I trust, to believe in ghosts; at the same time, I own it has ever remained an unexplained circumstance; and the impression it left on my own mind was so vivid and so painful that for years I could not bear to think at all upon the subject.³⁴

It is more usually a male narrator who insists on his disbelief of the supernatural. The difference is that whereas the masculine counterpart would leave it at strict denials, despite relating whatever strange circumstances, the woman admits to its continued effect on her life, and is open to repeating her story. Male narrators also feature, however. 'The Crooked Branch' (1859) (also known as 'The Ghost in the Garden Room', a title given to it by Dickens, as editor of All the Year Round³⁵) bears the unusual distinction of being initially narrated by a ghost (of a man) to the subsequent male narrator. This takes place in a prologue which was omitted in later editions, but it demonstrates that the oral tradition of ghost stories was, first and foremost, cross-gendered, but was appropriated at various stages by women, for their own purposes.

The oral tradition was a vital part of Gaskell's work, in which she was able to involve her own experience. It has been recorded that she 'was particularly intrigued by the remoteness of northern England', as well as Wales, both places where she spent a great deal of time, and gained personal insight for her stories.³⁶ Place was important, and she laughingly acknowledged her debt to her own ancestry: 'being half-Scotch I have a right to be very superstitious; I have my lucky & unlucky days, & lucky & unlucky people'.³⁷ She also displays a wide knowledge of northern customs and folklore, and of old tumbledown country houses, with their family histories and unhappy ghosts. These she gained from her enjoyment of continued contact with the older people in the places of her youth, which she in turn passed on to others of her acquaintance, as well as utilizing them in her fiction.³⁸ Her experience links here to her fiction, in that 'the processes of oral narration, particularly when they involve a second, and receding narrator, establish contact with the immediate, but irrevocably receding past'.³⁹ She enjoyed adding to her repertory, at one point reporting gleefully 'I SAW a ghost! Yes I did'.⁴⁰ This was a story later reported by the travel writer Augustus J.C. Hare, who became friends with Gaskell after meeting her in Oxford in 1860. (His opinion was that 'Everybody liked Mrs Gaskell'.⁴¹) The sighting took place whilst staying with friends. On an impromptu visit to a carter, who claimed to have been made ill because the ghost of his wife sat beside him in the night moaning and crying, so that he could not sleep, Gaskell found the man away from home. She saw, however, as did her companion, a woman in a lilac print gown watching from a window. On giving this description, a neighbour informed them that they had seen the ghost.⁴² Many of these experiences proved first and foremost an immense source of fun for Gaskell, such as being gathered round the fire with her friends the Howitts at Heidelberg, scaring each other with 'the most frightening & wild stories we had ever heard, - some *such* fearful ones - all true'.⁴³

The 'Christian/socialist' Gaskell, however, ensured that fun was not the only aim of her tales:

Her longer ghost tales, 'The Old Nurse's Story' and 'The Poor Clare', demonstrate not only her skill as a raconteur, but also her concern with social issues. Like many other Victorians, she saw fiction as a way of leading people to unpalatable truths, of extending their awareness and understanding of those around them.⁴⁴

In the former, her humble narrator, Hester, the nurse, is given the ability to open the debate on secret marriage and women's roles; the latter is dealt with too in 'The Poor Clare', as are the difficult issues of sexual responsibility and power. She was also concerned that they reach a suitable audience: 'one or two of the HW. [*Household Words*] stories might not so well do for young people. One is an unexplained ghost story for instance'.⁴⁵

Perhaps Gaskell's concern also stems from her unashamed love of the Gothic, elements of which continually surface in her plot devices. Michael Ashley sees her as taking her initial inspiration from the Gothic novels of the beginning of the century and earlier, as well as providing ideas for many women writers who followed.⁴⁶ Gaskell used the sensationalist element with relish. Curses feature as a catalyst for tragic events in 'The Poor Clare', 'The Doom of the Griffiths' (1858), and 'Lois the Witch', and obliquely in 'An Accursed Race'. Witchcraft is an issue in 'The Poor Clare' as well as 'Lois the Witch'. Gaskell, however, in a progression from the early Gothic novels, places careful emphasis on the culpability of the human, man or woman, who recklessly put in place these curses, rather than leaving it to mysterious fate. In this way she shows how precious lives can be wrecked, often, as in 'The Poor Clare', with great irony. In this case an irresponsible father unwittingly condemns his beloved daughter to years of horror, as he goads Bridget Fitzgerald into cursing him; likewise the old woman does

not realize it is the life of her own granddaughter she will blight. In 'The Doom of the Griffiths' a betrayal is the reason for the curse. In 'Lois the Witch', the madness and cruelty of people who could drown an old woman for witchcraft causes a prediction of the doom which will envelop the innocent Lois, caught up as a spectator:

her eyes met mine as they were glaring with fury – poor helpless baited creature! - and she caught the sight of me, and cried out, 'Parson's wench, parson's wench, yonder, in thy nurse's arms, thy dad hath never tried for to save me, and none shall save thee when thou art brought up for a witch.'⁴⁷

Such was the attraction of the excitement generated by supernatural events, that Gaskell could not resist using them even in her non-supernatural work. In a chapter of Cranford entitled 'The Panic', the ladies of the village are scared off taking their usual (and easiest) route home along 'Darkness Lane' after a servant's tale of a headless lady in white which haunts it. Mrs Forrester begins the discussion by admitting that ghosts are what she is most frightened of.⁴⁸ In Sylvia's Lovers (1863), the sailor, Charlie Kinraid (another lover of stories), relates the history of his father's uncle (again, there is a chain of narrative), whose brother returns from the dead to prevent him being robbed and murdered. Without explanation, the latter appears on the seat of the cart his brother is driving home from market along a lonely road at night, loaded with money he has made at market. Two men who emerge from the shadows are dissuaded from their obvious evil intentions by the fact that there are two men instead of one on the gig. As soon as the danger is past, the apparition silently disappears. Stories, then, play a crucial role in Gaskell's approach, in her reasons for telling them, and the way they are told.

WILD WOMEN

Just at that instant, standing as I was opposite to her in the full and perfect morning light, I saw behind her another figure – a ghastly resemblance, complete in likeness, so far as form and feature and minutest touch of dress could go, but with a loathsome demon soul looking out of the grey eyes, that were in turns mocking and voluptuous. My heart stood still within me; every hair rose up erect; my flesh crept with horror. I could not see the grave and tender Lucy – my eyes were fascinated by the creature beyond. I know not why, but I put out my hand to clutch it; I grasped nothing but empty air, and my whole blood curdled to ice. For a moment I could not see; then my sight came back, and I saw Lucy standing before me, alone, deathly pale, and, I could have fancied, almost, shrunk in size.⁴⁹

This chilling excerpt from Elizabeth Gaskell's 'The Poor Clare' illustrates the results of a curse levelled at the innocent Lucy, as punishment for the sexual misdemeanors of her father ('You shall live to see the creature you love best, and who alone loves you ... become a terror and a loathing to all'⁵⁰). Perhaps what is most interesting is the narrator's (Lucy's fiancé) reaction; he evinces as much attraction as repulsion. Gaskell herself reacts in much the same way. As Maureen Reddy points out:

The only interesting thing about Lucy for a modern reader and, I think, for Gaskell herself, is the demonic double. This may be why Lucy disappears from the story when the double is destroyed. Even the most cursory acquaintance with her fiction shows that Gaskell was uninterested in the wholly angelic order of women. Her most attractive and fully realized heroines, like Margaret Hale of North and South, are neither angel nor demon, but fully human beings, which certainly includes having a sexual nature.⁵¹

The motif prefigures Bram Stoker's Dracula (1897) and other icons of the *fin de siècle* in its depiction of alluring yet deadly females. 'Fascinated' by the sexy double, he loses sight of its pure counterpart. Calling it 'creature', his instincts are animalistic; his attempts to 'clutch' it reveal his desire for possession. Engulfed by the moment, he experiences what could be described as a sexual swoon, from which he emerges to find the real Lucy, pale and virginal, reduced in his eyes. She has become Gaskell's

representation of the classic binary opposition: saint/devil, or, virgin/whore.⁵² The doppelgänger delights in creating havoc; one of the first incidents which causes the father to retreat from his daughter in disgust is sexual. The double is seen engaging with 'undue familiarity – all unbecoming in a gentlewoman – with his grooms'.⁵³ Gaskell may well be making the point that he himself has been sexually profligate, and yet he cannot bear the idea of Lucy acting likewise. Unpunished as he would be by his fellow men, for what would be regarded as, at worst, excusable male behaviour, Gaskell punishes him with Bridget's curse. In tandem she illustrates how Lucy, as a woman, in addition for paying for the sins of the father, is ostracized by her own kind: 'all shrink from her, sooner or later, as from one possessed – accursed'.⁵⁴

Throughout this long story, Gaskell deliberately acknowledges the existence of female sexuality, and explores the effects both of its repression and its expression. Lucy is an example of the former; living up to inhibiting social codes, sexuality may only be expressed in demonic form: 'Lucy's demonic double acts out Lucy's repressed sexuality along with her repressed rage'.⁵⁵ The two other main female characters are Bridget and Mary Fitzgerald. Mother and daughter, attendants to the Catholic Starkey family of Lancashire, their relationship, essentially fiercely loving, is turbulent. Both women are described by their creator as 'wild', an adjective which, as has been identified, is often, in Gaskell's short fiction, a euphemism for 'sexual or passionate'.⁵⁶ In the case of Bridget, as with Lucy's double, this must be expressed through reckless and 'unwomanly' behaviour. She lives independently, and, incidentally, is of masculine stature. Taciturn and needing the help of no one, this gains her the reputation of witch in the eyes of the other villagers. Ultimately, in a reflection of Lucy's fiendish double, Bridget's buried nature surfaces in behaviour which justifies their suspicions: 'In this story, female sexuality is completely demonic; Lucy's sexual self comes to life because

her grandmother calls up demons in a curse. And witchcraft, at least in this story, is a compact with the devil'.⁵⁷ In the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy, Bridget's pent-up power explodes into a curse. She pays dear for it. Bridget is a woman from whom everything she cares about – and that is not much – is taken away from her. Alan Shelston regards her as 'a woman with far more potential – and with a far greater capacity for suffering – than her situation can allow her to express'.⁵⁸ Strong-willed as well as attractive, Mary is lured away by the opportunities offered by the continent, and Bridget loses touch with her, left only with her little dog, Mignon, on whom she lavishes her displaced affection. Her association with the Starkey family severed through death, Bridget begins a weary and unsuccessful journey on foot to try and recover her lost child. On her return, her last reminder of Mary, the dog, Mignon, is shot by one Squire Gisborne, and in revenge, Bridget curses him:

You shall live to see the creature you love best, and who alone loves you – ay, a human creature, but as innocent and fond as my poor dead darling – you shall see this creature, for whom death would be too happy, become a terror and a loathing to all, for this blood's sake.⁵⁹

It is at this point that the narrator actively enters the scene. Called upon in his capacity as a lawyer to find Bridget to tell her of an inheritance, he discovers that the girl he falls in love with is the old woman's granddaughter. Mary has been seduced by Gisborne whilst abroad, and on discovering his faithlessness, drowns herself. The defiantly spirited Mary chooses to profess her sexuality, but the laws of society are stronger than she is. Like the heroine of *Ruth* (1853), Gaskell bows to convention in punishing errant women with death, wherever her sympathies may lie. In his remorse for causing her death, Gisborne comes to dote on the daughter, but weak man that he is, abandons Lucy in revulsion when it is she who becomes the object of the curse. It is another woman who stands by her, the 'dear and faithful Mistress Clarke',⁶⁰ who acts as the mother she never knew, and bears with her the effects of the curse. Because of the wanton

behaviour of the double, they live in self-enforced isolation, until the narrator determines to join the complicated strands of the mystery in order to free the woman he wishes to marry. Bridget is made aware of the results of her rash actions; she has offended both God and humanity, and she must atone to both. For the former she becomes a nun, and for the latter she chooses the order of The Poor Clares, noted for the severity of their self-abnegation. Devoting herself to the care of others, she finally removes the curse by sacrificing her own life to save that of Gisborne himself. Whilst criticizing the diffuseness of the plot, Maureen Reddy asserts that the story:

works as a myth of female power and powerlessness. It is a frightening depiction of the consequences of expressing female sexuality in a culture that insists that all good women are sexless angels and that therefore requires women to repress their sexuality, under threat of ostracism or death. Further it is a psychologically perceptive portrayal of the results of repression.⁶¹

In a similar vein, the women of 'The Old Nurse's Story' (1852) are also victims of repressed sexuality, foisted on them by men. Miss Maude and Miss Grace Furnivall are the daughters of the proud and haughty Lord Furnivall, who refuses to let them marry: 'no one was good enough to wed them'.⁶² They are instead driven to subterfuge; they both fall in love with the one man they are allowed contact with, their father's handsome foreign music teacher. This turns them against each other, where previously they were each other's support, and when Maude secretly marries the musician and has his child, her sister betrays this knowledge to their cruel father. He turns them out onto the Cumberland Fells on a snowbound winter night, where they freeze to death. It is Miss Grace who pays the penalty rather than her father; for the rest of her long and lonely life, she is haunted by scenes of the past: her father's wild organ music and her sister's child, begging to be let in. The narrator of the story, the nurse Hester, recognizes that, though Grace is much to blame, she is victim as much as perpetrator, and has been solely punished; 'even in my fear, I had a kind of pity for Miss Furnivall,

at least. Those gone down to the pit can hardly have a more hopeless look than that which was ever on her face'.⁶³ As in 'The Poor Clare', repressed female sexuality severs the bond between women and kin, forcing them into cruel and reckless behaviour. It also contributes to their own disempowerment at the hands of the patriarchy, confirming the latter's suspicions of female sexuality in a vicious circle.

STORMY SILENCES

Gaskell constantly addresses the theme of women who are powerless and who have been silenced. This, she demonstrates, can only have terrible consequences, whether for themselves or for those around them. The social mores surrounding sexuality are dictated by the greater body of the patriarchy, but Gaskell also examines the smaller detail of individual, controlling male figures. Their influence can begin early in a woman's life. In the fragment of a ghost story, the same opposing forces that Gaskell experienced are drawn upon. In line with Unitarian progressiveness, the narrator, as a young girl, has been sent away to gain an education. Her father, the benign face of masculinity, who would normally be her chaperone, has been called away on business – part of the male experience – and she must travel alone. The family friends she stays with en route are Quakers; Gaskell had relatives of this denomination. Whilst both are designated 'good' people, the narrator is careful to distinguish between the silent, intimidating husband who fulfils his 'duty' and no more, and his talkative, kindly wife, to whom the narrator warms at once. Her hostess gains a scolding simply for allowing the cat onto her knee to endanger her dress.⁶⁴ Significantly, this does not prevent her maternal behaviour towards the narrator, but she must alter her manner to avoid her husband's attention. Both the wife and the young guest are deflated and subdued by, not a violent abuser, but a supposed pillar of the community.

Gaskell, however, does not shirk the subjects of violence and abuse. In 'The Grey Woman', the title is misleading. Whilst suggestive of a stereotypical supernatural framework, the heroine actually becomes a *living* ghost, a grey shadow of her former beauty. She is pursued to this horrific limbo of life in death by her own husband. When

the young Anna Scher naively enters into a marriage with the elegantly sadistic Monsieur de la Tourelle, she is under the impression that he is charming, attentive and urbane. She has, in fact, trapped herself into a liaison with a controlling, heartless, aristocratic criminal and murderer. Given her preparation, it is not too surprising:

Raised with the expectation that marriage would be their vocation, few girls were actually educated for that vocation. They went into marriage 'blind', so to speak, and learned with a jolt that courtship, for which they were prepared, and marriage, for which they were not, were entirely different things.⁶⁵

In the best Gothic tradition, Monsieur de la Tourelle locks her into his castle, to remain a prisoner of his whims, useful only to produce an heir. He is a secret member of the hated and feared Chauffeurs gang, which terrorises the countryside, and has no qualms as to what will happen to his wife should she interfere with his activities: 'if I suspected my wife of knowing more than I chose of my affairs, she would not outlive the day'.⁶⁶ Thus, 'The "grey" woman literally embodies female suppression and entrapment – in her own numb, dreamlike state, in her marriage and even in her flight'.⁶⁷

Less Gothic, but similar in character is Benjamin, of 'The Crooked Branch': 'a bad, hard, flippant young man, with yet enough of specious manners and handsome countenance to make his appearance striking at first to those to whom the aspect of a London fast young man of the lowest order is strange and new'.⁶⁸ It transpires that Benjamin is willing to kill his parents, an honest, hard-working farming couple, for their little and carefully saved nest-egg. The shock of discovering this plot literally silences his loving mother; she is struck dumb with paralysis at his trial when called to give evidence, and dies shortly after. Whatever his conduct, a woman cannot speak out against a man, and it is the woman too who pays the price for a man's sins.

In 'The Doom of the Griffiths', possessive male love ends in tragedy not only for women. Trouble stems from a father's love of his son that is restrictive and selfish, and which is then removed totally when the father remarries. For most of his life, Owen has been indulged by a father whose main concern is himself. The young man is so desperate at heart for genuine, family love that a chain of tragic events is set in motion which leads to the deaths of Owen, his father, the adoring wife that Owen has secretly married and who gives him an all too brief taste of happiness, and their baby son.

'Lois the Witch' is again an example of the damage done by possessive love, and has its origins in a true example of male subjection of women. In – unbelievably – the 1850s, whilst in Essex, Gaskell witnessed the shocking sight of a woman narrowly being saved from a conviction for witchcraft.⁶⁹ Building upon this foundation, she read widely on the subject, and built up a wealth of detailed knowledge about the madness that engulfed Salem, Massachusetts in 1692.⁷⁰ It was in this small town that nineteen people were hanged as witches, eight condemned, and a further fifty pardoned after 'confessing'.⁷¹ Young Lois Barclay is uprooted by the death of her parents from the southern, rural England that she knows and loves, and transplanted to Salem, where lives another branch of the family. Gaskell makes much of the sharp contrast between Lois's home, and the American outpost, determinedly clawing a living out of the wilderness, and overrun by a dangerous blend of religious fervour and superstition. Disaster is inevitable: 'panic, once started, cannot be halted until it has worked out its fury in destruction, leaving the community aghast, like those self-betrayed, at the evidence of their own turbid passions.'⁷² The totally innocent Lois falls victim to just such an unstoppable chain of events, which Gaskell depicts, in addition to her examination of mass behaviour, in terms of male possessive love. Her cousin Manasseh suffers from what is recognisable to a modern reader as probable manic depression, and

what is ultimately admitted even by his proud mother as insanity. Solitary, depressive, having already attempted suicide, he lights on his cheerful and lovely young relative as a form of salvation. Until then all he has known is an austere home overseen by a narrowly religious mother who, though she cares for him, does not display affection or understanding. In his growing obsession, Lois becomes the object of his marriage plans and of his disturbing delusions:

I saw in my soul, between sleeping and waking, the spirit come and offer thee two lots, and the colour of the one was white, like a bride's, and the other was black and red, which is, being interpreted, a violent death. And when thou didst choose the latter the spirit said unto me, 'Come!' and I came, and did as I was bidden. I put it on thee with my own hands, as it is preordained, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice and be my wife. And when the black and red dress fell to the ground, thou wert even as a corpse three days old.⁷³

When matters erupt, and Lois is one of those accused of witchcraft, Manasseh's behaviour seals her fate. Before an entire congregation, he attempts, incoherently, to justify Lois, not denying the charge, but insisting that she cannot help herself, and so should not be punished. This, of course, only goads his listeners further, making Lois a scapegoat for both the entire community, and for Manasseh's mother, desperate to find an explanation for her son's condition:

With wilful, dishonest blindness, she would not see – not even in her secret heart would she acknowledge, that Manasseh had been strange, and moody, long before the English girl had reached Salem. She even found some specious reason for his attempt at suicide long ago. He was recovering from a fever – and though tolerably well in health, the delirium had not finally left him. But since Lois came, how headstrong he had been at times! how unreasonable! how moody! What a strange delusion was that which he was under, of being bidden by some voice to marry her! How he followed her about, and clung to her, as under some compulsion of affection! And over all reigned the idea that, if he were indeed suffering from being bewitched, he was not mad, and might again assume the honourable position he had held in the congregation and in the town, when the spell by which he was held was destroyed.⁷⁴

An innocent woman is sacrificed because it is impossible that a man should be found wanting, or to be at fault. So it is that 'Men's obliteration of women, to the point of

silence, torture and death, runs through Gaskell's stories'.⁷⁵ Such is the tradition of the male at the head of the household, that anarchy threatens when that position is upset. In this way, 'Lois' bears strong resemblance to 'The Poor Clare', in that, 'The witch and the demon are in fact the same being; like the female demon, the witch is a persistent literary image that is rooted in male fears of women'.⁷⁶ Negative images of women and the need to control are disastrously interwoven, and it is difficult to tell which comes first.

The combination of enforced sexual repression, and a controlling, possessive patriarchal system is sufficient to turn the women in Gaskell's supernatural stories, in many cases, into their own worst enemies. Just as 'conflicts and passions' run through her letters, 'these tales show women of strong will and individual action, but they also delineate the ways in which women's power can be frustrated, turned even to a destructiveness which rebounds on the women themselves'.⁷⁷ Gaskell's novel Ruth, and 'The Old Nurse's Story' may both tackle the difficult issues of bearing children outwith the only conventional and acceptable manner, but, unlike the former, her short story, 'makes no play with "innocence", but exposes stormy passions in lonely women'.⁷⁸ Herself freed by the genre from the restrictions faced by a novelist of the time, Gaskell could depict what can happen to women who are *not* free. The two Furnivall sisters become eaten up with pride and jealousy, turning on each other, breaking the bond of sisterhood, and causing their own destruction. Gaskell, with her usual self-examination, was perhaps reflecting worries regarding her own character, as she muses in her diary: 'William told me the other day I was not of a jealous disposition; I do not think he knows me'.⁷⁹ If jealousy is one result, then another is bitterness. This is what happens to Bridget Fitzgerald, who, apart from the narrator, whose primary interest is her granddaughter, hardly has a single ally in the story. A series of suppressive acts – her daughter's

seduction, accusations of witchcraft, the killing of her companion – drive her to frustrated and destructive action. Ultimately, the curse she aims at Gisborne rebounds upon herself; it hurts the one *she* would love the most, the child of her beloved daughter. Grace Hickson, of ‘Lois the Witch’ has become similarly embittered by a repressive patriarchal religion, which Gaskell recognises as damaging to women. She is motivated by ‘duty’,⁸⁰ rather than love, and ‘had a kind of jealous dislike to her husband’s English relations, which had increased since of late years his weakened mind yearned after them’.⁸¹ As happens to her son, the lack of any affection eventually takes its toll on her. Because of her strength, this simply embitters her, whilst in her weaker son it causes mental imbalance. She plays her part in the farcical condemnation of the obviously innocent Lois, because of this well of jealousy, bitterness, and the drive to protect her male child. Women, then, become complicit in their own suppression and suffering, as well as helping to cause it in others.

STEPPING OUT FROM THE SHADOW

Gaskell does not make excuses for the damaging actions of her female characters, but she traces clearly the reasons for them, and allows the reader to realise how they have been driven to them. Just as she herself never achieved a full solution to the female divided self, so her ghost stories reflect that there is no easy answer to the complex mixture of emotions and demands which she perceived as facing Victorian women. Her plots, therefore, are themselves split, as she offers two visions of human empowerment, both of which she experienced herself, to a certain extent. In some instances, her heroines and their actions actively break the boundaries set in place for them by the patriarchy. At other times, resolution involves working within existing spheres, and remains closer to the realism of her novels. Both, however, are built upon a sense of female community, and the ability that this confers to turn their enforced silence into a vocalising of their experience. Again, the origins of this can be traced to the writer's life. One biographer sees Gaskell as having a 'network' of female friends, which proved vital in her development as a self-confident woman and author. These friends, such as Barbara Bodichon and Harriet Martineau were often involved in the issues of women's rights.⁸² Likewise, Mary Howitt, who figures frequently in the correspondence, was a feminist and a translator of several languages – she also shared with Gaskell her love of Gothic.⁸³ In this way, 'Gaskell confronted the difficulties involved in imagining and enacting female power in texts'.⁸⁴

On occasions, Gaskell envisages situations where women successfully operate independently of their menfolk. She describes, 'women who find that in the end they must rely on their own strength, not the illusory strength of father or husband. They

have to learn to step out from the shadow and speak and act for themselves, according to their conscience'.⁸⁵ Thus in 'Right at Last' (1860) (which is a mystery, rather than a ghost story), the central character, Margaret Brown, is a strong and determined woman who bears up under trial much better than her husband. She is herself aware of this, and acknowledges it calmly and without emotion: 'if she were to judge of her husband from this morning only, she must learn to rely on herself alone in all cases of emergency'.⁸⁶ Her husband too, Dr James Brown, accepts the reversal of roles and his own shortcomings: 'I am not so brave, so good, so strong as you, my Margaret'.⁸⁷ In 'Six Weeks at Heppenheim' (1862) (again, not a supernatural story), the narrator summarises the failed relationship of the heroine and her betrothed: 'She was the strong, good, helpful character, he the weak and vain'.⁸⁸ Strong (both mentally and physically), capable Thekla, who is the humble housemaid at the narrator's hotel, and the recipient of the outpourings of another of Gaskell's frustrated females, the hotel's mistress, nurses the latter through a dangerous illness and saves the life of her master's little son. Her creator is happy to show women of all stations as equally courageous, although she remains within tradition in making the patient Thekla's eventual reward marriage to her master.

On reading Gaskell's short fiction, it is difficult not to agree that, 'What emerges from her work as a whole is that, at subsistence level, gender divisions are blurred'.⁸⁹ No story better illustrates this than 'The Grey Woman'. Despite the mental torture dispensed by her husband, the timid (and pregnant) Anna would doubtless have been unable, on her own, to summon up the courage to break the psychological hold which he exercises. That she escapes is down to her courageous and inventive maid, Amante, who is a similar figure to that of Mrs Clarke in 'The Poor Clare', in her staunch championing of her young mistress. Their creator 'believed that much of the harshness

of society could be overcome if men would only free the feminine side of their nature'.⁹⁰ As a woman, however, Gaskell had more control over, and knowledge of, her female characters, so she often created instead women with masculine traits. Bridget Fitzgerald is one, and Amante is another. Like the former, she is 'tall and handsome',⁹¹ and 'feared no one'.⁹² When her mistress is reduced through fear to a state of collapse, Anna reports that 'she took me up in her vigorous arms, and bore me to my room'.⁹³ In a subversion of the mistress/servant relationship, as well as that of gender, Amante is in control for much of the story. It is she who plans the escape: 'She gave me directions – short condensed directions, without reasons – just as you do to a child; and like a child I obeyed her'.⁹⁴ She and her mistress flee the castle disguised as husband and wife, with Amante, of course, in the male role. She deliberately enhances her masculine qualities:

finding in one box an old suit of man's clothes [...] she put them on to see if they would fit her; and, when she found that they did, she cut her own hair to the shortness of a man's, made me clip her black eyebrows as close as though they had been shaved, and by cutting up old corks into pieces such as would go into her cheeks, she altered both the shape of her face and her voice to a degree which I should not have believed possible.⁹⁵

As modern readers, we may not be aware of the added significance such a situation would have held for Gaskell's contemporaries: 'The idea of a woman in masculine garb was both shocking and titillating for many Victorians'.⁹⁶ That Gaskell, not only a Victorian, but the wife of a minister, could then incorporate such a device, when copies of *Ruth* had been burnt by some of her husband's congregation, is a measure of the freedom conferred by the supernatural genre.

Anna effectively turns against a tyrannical, threatening, repressive, but acceptable relationship, in favour of one which is close and inter-dependent – with a woman – and based on genuine love, trust, and camaraderie. Accepted standards of female attractiveness are also transgressed, as independence becomes more important. In order

to evade the pursuing Monsieur de la Tourelle, Anna destroys her own beauty, aided by Amante: 'I let her dye my fair hair and complexion with the decaying shells of the stored-up walnuts, I let her blacken my teeth, and even voluntarily broke a front tooth the better to effect my disguise'.⁹⁷ This added sense of freedom, both literally, and from convention, gives Anna a strength she has not experienced before. Such is the horror of Monsieur de la Tourelle's activities, that on hearing them related, even Amante quails: 'Her eyes grew large and wild, her cheeks blanched, and for once she sought by her looks help from me. The new call upon me roused me'.⁹⁸ Anna assumes, for that moment at least, control over the situation: the child has grown up.

She is now ready to become a mother herself: 'At length my child was born – my poor worse than fatherless child. It was a girl, as I had prayed for. I had feared lest a boy might have something of the tiger nature of its father, but a girl seemed all my own'.⁹⁹

Anna is seeking to maintain that female tradition which is ingrained within the tale:

Read from a feminist point of view, this story is a terrifying fable about female sexuality, marriage, and society. The submerged meanings in 'The Grey Woman' are all connected to central female experiences, and may only be apprehended by readers consciously approaching the story from a female perspective, the one from which it certainly was written.¹⁰⁰

As well as the cross-dressing and gender swapping, bigamy may be added to the story's list of boundaries broken. After the faithful Amante is tracked down and killed by the Chauffeurs, Anna chooses to deliberately transgress the rules of state and church, by marrying the doctor who attends her, whilst her husband still lives. He is the antithesis of Monsieur de la Tourelle: 'very gentle and thoughtful'.¹⁰¹ In order to provide her daughter with a safe and happy home environment and a good father, Anna is prepared to maintain the levels of courage and defiance that her relationship with another woman uncovered within her. She makes no apologies: 'that dear husband and father – for such

I will call him ever',¹⁰² for she has fought hard for her independence and for the happiness of her daughter.

Though incorporating fewer sensational elements than 'The Grey Woman', 'The Old Nurse's Story', generally regarded as Gaskell's most accomplished ghost story,¹⁰³ is a paradox of female relationships. Once again, Gaskell depicts division in women's attitudes towards their own sex. As discussed earlier, there is a strong current of jealousy and cruelty in the tale, directed by women, at women, albeit because of enforced circumstances. However, what emerges triumphant, is the sense of female community, which finally breaks the evil spell which has tormented Furnivall Manor and its inhabitants since the death of Miss Maude Furnivall and her secret child. The lynchpin is Hester, another strong woman, at the time of narration, the 'Old Nurse' of the title, but a young woman when the events of the story take place. She is a fine example of the female tradition, and how it is maintained; she tells the story to the third generation of children of the same family, and is proud of her loyalty: 'My mistress had asked me, on her death-bed, never to leave Miss Rosamond; but if she had never spoken a word, I would have gone with the little child to the end of the world.'¹⁰⁴ Almost instantly, the story is grounded in the world of women, the current Lord Furnivall appearing in the narrative just long enough to throw his weight around: 'I was bidden by my lord to have Miss Rosamond's things ready by a certain day. He was a stern, proud man, as they say all the Lords Furnivall were; and he never spoke a word more than was necessary'.¹⁰⁵ Rosamond, with Hester in attendance, is sent, on being made an orphan, to live at Furnivall Manor, which is inhabited mainly by ghosts and barely-alive old women. As well as Miss Furnivall there is her maid and companion, Mrs Stark (aptly named), who, 'looked so cold, and grey, and stony, as if she had never loved or cared for anyone; and I don't suppose she did care for anyone, except her mistress'.¹⁰⁶ Even

amongst embittered and lonely women considered to have no value in the outside world that has abandoned them, there is a sense of allegiance. Offering more comfort is Dorothy, the old housekeeper, who helps the new young nurse to keep her sense throughout the ghostly disturbances: 'she asked me would I leave the child I was so fond of just for sounds and sights that could do me no harm; and that they had all had to get used to in their turns?'.¹⁰⁷ In actual fact, her information is slightly disingenuous, as the ghost of the child *is* quite capable of doing harm, albeit it is Rosamond, and not Hester, who interests it. In the manner of Cathy, of the recently published Wuthering Heights (1847), she appears crying at the windows, trying to lure Rosamond out to her death on the freezing fells. The mesmerised Rosamond would obey if it were not for her courageous nurse who is willing to resist ghosts, en masse, who appear to play out once again the fateful night when the mother and child were abandoned to the elements: 'I held her tight with all my strength; with a set will, I held her. If I had died, my hands would have grasped her still, I was so resolved in my mind'.¹⁰⁸ As with Bridget Fitzgerald, Gaskell is unwilling to allow a character to get away with past rash actions, simply because she is a woman. Like Bridget, Miss Furnivall pays with her life, in two senses. During her lifetime remorse and constant repetitions of her actions plague her, and her death is finally brought about by the shock of going through it yet again. Before she dies, however, she in some way atones, crying, 'Oh father! father! spare the innocent little child!',¹⁰⁹ in contrast to her original intentions as a jealous sister. The innocent new generation is saved, however, because of her nurse's heroic actions. Female community has won out.

Gaskell's tales are not straightforward. They have been perceived as problematic, partly because they cannot be fitted neatly into feminist readings, pure and simple. The ending of 'The Grey Woman' is an example of this; it has been posited that it is,

'extremely pessimistic, as it suggests that women cannot hope to escape the limited place assigned them by their society; the most they can hope for is a benevolent master'.¹¹⁰ It is true that, following Amante's death, Anna feels the need to remarry, committing bigamy in the process, albeit for her daughter's sake, rather than her own. Also true is the fact that she never really escapes from her original husband and his repressive presence, even once she knows of his death: 'Dr Voss tried to persuade me to return to a more natural mode of life, and to go out more. But although I sometimes complied with his wish, yet the old terror was ever strong upon me, and he, seeing what an effort it was, gave up urging me at last'.¹¹¹ Anna has been sacrificed to male violence, but it is possible to argue for a more positive interpretation of the outcome. All her energies, and her newly discovered courage are poured into ensuring that her daughter does not repeat her mistakes. Set in front of her are positive images of both men and women for her to imitate. Thus female tradition is able to ameliorate gender relations in the course of passing generations.

Gaskell herself did not dismiss the doctrine of separate spheres:

Active and strenuous as her life as a writer and minister's wife was, it seems to have convinced her that the feminine sphere of interest was not only different from that of men – it required a different literary perspective, an act of feminine fiction-making, to give reality and shape to it.¹¹²

She may have been unwilling to reject this Victorian bastion, but through her wide range of strong, capable, intelligent and heroic female characters, Gaskell develops her philosophy that this difference is every bit as important and meaningful as the male sphere. It was not, she felt, a mere shadow of the male life:

As a woman, Elizabeth Gaskell was not an obvious innovator, but her life shows how, in favourable circumstances, the doctrine of "separate spheres" did allow "a specifically female world" to develop, which offered scope for energetic self-determination and female bonding.¹¹³

Moreover, in her stories she was able to push the boundaries further than she may have felt comfortable with in her own life. Neither can the women of her fiction be summed up as the same, nor their experiences even be relegated to the restrictive label of a single sphere. As in 'The Old Nurse's Story', which saw ordinary women gaining strength merely from the company of other women, 'The female author writing about female experience is claiming a cultural place for that experience and, by extension, is seizing power and authority from the patriarchal order'.¹¹⁴ That order itself was altering under Gaskell's eyes: 'The degree of public esteem she gained was thanks to aspects of nineteenth-century social change that allowed a woman to speak as a representative of the dominant culture'.¹¹⁵ To possibly a greater extent than the other writers considered in this thesis, Gaskell achieved a balance between her profession and the rest of her life: 'The increasing skill and confidence evident in her mature writing suggest that she had found a way of resolving the dilemma of combining the roles of woman and artist'.¹¹⁶ To suggest that it was easy, however, would be untrue: 'Years of hard work and the emotional strain of publishing had taken their toll of Gaskell. It had taken dexterous juggling to be wife, mother, household manager, part of a lively social circle, and writer; her success was hard won'.¹¹⁷ When given the attention she deserves, Gaskell proves anything but the conventional Victorian writer. Instead she offers an absorbing and complex range of subjects and issues which defy expectations and assumptions. Always surprising, always intriguing, Elizabeth Gaskell's supernatural stories are the brilliant result of a divided self.

- ¹ Eliza Gaskell, The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, ed. by J.A.V. Chapple & Arthur Pollard (Manchester, 1997), April 1850, to Eliza Fox, L.69, p.108.
- ² Jane Spencer, Elizabeth Gaskell (London, 1993), pp.1-2.
- ³ Carol A. Martin, 'Gaskell's Ghosts: Truths in Disguise', Studies in the Novel, vol.21:1 (1989), pp.27-40, p.38.
- ⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell, Private Voices: The Diaries of Elizabeth Gaskell and Sophia Holland, ed. by J.A.V. Chapple & Anita Wilson (Keele, 1996), p.53.
- ⁵ Patsy Stoneman, Elizabeth Gaskell (Hassocks, 1987), p.28.
- ⁶ *Ibid.* p.43.
- ⁷ Gaskell, Private Voices, ed. by Chapple & Wilson, p.59.
- ⁸ Gaskell, Letters, ed. by Chapple & Pollard, May 1838, to William & Mary Howitt, L.8, p.14.
- ⁹ *Ibid.* Feb. 1850, to Eliza Fox, L.68. p.106.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* Feb. 1850, to Eliza Fox, L.69, p.107.
- ¹² *Ibid.* Sept. [1862?], to an unknown woman, L.515, p.694.
- ¹³ Martin, p.38.
- ¹⁴ Stoneman, p.33.
- ¹⁵ Gaskell, Letters, ed. by Chapple & Pollard, April 1850, to Eliza Fox, L.69, p.109.
- ¹⁶ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven, 1984), p.151.
- ¹⁷ Kate Flint, Elizabeth Gaskell (Plymouth, 1995), pp.1-2.
- ¹⁸ For a fuller discussion of the significance of Gaskell's Unitarianism, cf. Valentine Cunningham, 'Mrs Gaskell', in Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel (Oxford, 1975), pp.127-42.
- ¹⁹ Angus Easson, Elizabeth Gaskell (London, 1979), p.4.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.* p.5.
- ²¹ Spencer, p.7.
- ²² Martin, p.27.
- ²³ Jenny Uglow, Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories (London, 1994), p.35.
- ²⁴ Stoneman, p.24.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.* p.64.
- ²⁶ Elizabeth Gaskell, Mrs Gaskell's Tales of Mystery and Horror, ed. by Michael Ashley, p.13.
- ²⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell, My Lady Ludlow, and Other Tales (London, 1906), p.218.
- ²⁸ Maureen T. Reddy, 'Female Sexuality in "The Poor Clare": The Demon in the House' Studies in Short Fiction, vol.21:3 (1984), pp.259-65, p.264.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.* p.264.
- ³⁰ Elizabeth Gaskell, Cousin Phillis, and Other Tales, ed. by Angus Easson (Oxford, 1981), p.vii.
- ³¹ Barbara Weiss, 'Elizabeth Gaskell: The Telling of Feminine Tales', Studies in the Novel, vol.16:3, fall (1984), pp.274-87, p.274.
- ³² *Ibid.* p.280.
- ³³ J.R. Watson, ' "Round the Sofa": Elizabeth Gaskell Tells Stories', The Yearbook of English Studies, vol.26 (1996), pp.89-99, p.90.
- ³⁴ Elizabeth Gaskell, fragment, Cousin Phillis, and Other Tales (London, 1925), p.721.
- ³⁵ For his 1859 Christmas issue Dickens planned a story cycle based on 'The Haunted House'. Each room was to be haunted by a ghost which related a story. The prologue was added so Gaskell's tale would fit the framework, and Dickens re-titled it "The Ghost in the Garden Room", cf. Gaskell, Tales of Mystery, ed. by Ashley, p.95.
- ³⁶ Alan Shelston, 'The Supernatural in the Stories of Elizabeth Gaskell', Exhibited by Candlelight: Sources and Developments in the Gothic Tradition, D.Q.R. Studies in Literature, ed. by Valeria Tinkler-Vilani, 23 vols (Amsterdam, 1995), xvi, pp.137-46, p.140.
- ³⁷ Gaskell, Letters, ed. by Chapple & Pollard, Oct. 1859, to George Smith, L.442, p.576.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.* Aug. 1838, to Mary Howitt, L.12, pp.28-33.
- ³⁹ Shelston, p.140.
- ⁴⁰ Gaskell, Letters, ed. by Chapple & Pollard, May 1849, to Eliza Fox, L.48, p.81.
- ⁴¹ Barbara Brill, 'An Oxford Ghost', in The Gaskell Society Newsletter, vol.13, March (1992), pp.13-15, p.13.
- ⁴² *Ibid.* pp.13-14.
- ⁴³ Gaskell, Letters, ed. by Chapple & Pollard, 1841, to Elizabeth Holland, L.15, p.44.
- ⁴⁴ Martin, p.32.
- ⁴⁵ Gaskell, Letters, ed. by Chapple & Pollard, July 1855, to [unknown], L.260, p.365.
- ⁴⁶ Ashley, p.11.
- ⁴⁷ Elizabeth Gaskell, Curious, If True (London, 1995), pp.100-1.
- ⁴⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, Cranford, and Sylvia's Lovers (London, no date), pp.122-4.
- ⁴⁹ Gaskell, Curious, If True, p.59.

- ⁵⁰ Ibid. p.38.
- ⁵¹ Reddy, 'Female Sexuality', p.263.
- ⁵² For a discussion of binary oppositions, cf. Toril Moi, 'The Deconstruction of Binary Oppositions', in 'Feminist Literary Criticism', Modern Literary Theory, ed. by Ann Jefferson & David Robey, 2nd edn, (London, 1986), pp.204-21, pp.210-12.
- ⁵³ Gaskell, Curious, If True, p.58.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid. p.63.
- ⁵⁵ Reddy, p.263.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid. p.260.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid. p.262.
- ⁵⁸ Shelston, p.143.
- ⁵⁹ Gaskell, Curious, If True, p.38.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid. p.56.
- ⁶¹ Reddy, p.261.
- ⁶² Gaskell, Curious, If True, p.18.
- ⁶³ Ibid. pp.21-2.
- ⁶⁴ Gaskell, fragment, Cousin Phillis (1925), p.722.
- ⁶⁵ Maureen T. Reddy, 'Gaskell's "The Grey Woman": A Feminist Palimpsest', Journal of Narrative Technique, vol.15:2 (1985), pp.183-93, pp.187-8.
- ⁶⁶ Gaskell, Curious, If True, p.217.
- ⁶⁷ Uglow, p.473.
- ⁶⁸ Gaskell, Cousin Phillis, ed. by Easson, p.206.
- ⁶⁹ Gaskell, Tales of Mystery, ed. by Ashley, p.136.
- ⁷⁰ Ashley gives her main sources as Cotton Mather, Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcraft and Possessions (1685); and Wonders of the Invisible World (1693); and Increase Mather, Causes of Conscience Concerning Witchcraft (1693). Early in her career, Gaskell had used the pen name of Cotton Mather Mills, cf. Gaskell, Tales of Mystery, ed. by Ashley, p.136.
- ⁷¹ Ibid. p.136.
- ⁷² Gaskell, Cousin Phillis, ed. by Easson, pp.xi-xii.
- ⁷³ Gaskell, Curious, If True, p.133.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid. p.168.
- ⁷⁵ Uglow, p.473.
- ⁷⁶ Reddy, 'Female Sexuality', p.265.
- ⁷⁷ Martin, p.33.
- ⁷⁸ Uglow, p.307.
- ⁷⁹ Gaskell, Private Voices, ed. by Chapple & Wilson, p.56.
- ⁸⁰ Gaskell, Curious, If True, p.110.
- ⁸¹ Ibid. p.107.
- ⁸² Stoneman, p.26.
- ⁸³ Uglow, pp.142-3.
- ⁸⁴ Christine L. Krueger, 'The "Female Paternalist" as Historian: Elizabeth Gaskell's My Lady Ludlow', Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History, and the Politics of Gender, ed. by Linda M. Shires (New York, 1992), pp.166-83., p.169.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid. pp.25-6.
- ⁸⁶ Gaskell, Cousin Phillis (1925), p.290.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid. p.296.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid. p.377.
- ⁸⁹ Stoneman, p.45.
- ⁹⁰ Uglow, p.123.
- ⁹¹ Gaskell, Curious, If True, p.205.
- ⁹² Ibid. p.206.
- ⁹³ Ibid. p.220.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid. p.221.
- ⁹⁵ Ibid. pp.228-9.
- ⁹⁶ Reddy, 'Gaskell's "The Grey Woman"', p.190.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid. p.229.
- ⁹⁸ Gaskell, Curious, If True, p.234.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid. p.242.
- ¹⁰⁰ Reddy, 'Gaskell's "The Grey Woman"', p.185.
- ¹⁰¹ Gaskell, Curious, If True, p.243.
- ¹⁰² Ibid. p.248.
- ¹⁰³ Cf. Uglow, p.307; Gaskell, Tales of Mystery, ed. by Ashley, p.19; & Peter Haining, ed., The Gentlewomen of Evil: An Anthology of Rare Supernatural Stories from the Pens of Victorian Ladies (New York, 1967), p.100.

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- ¹⁰⁴ Gaskell, Curious, If True, p.2.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p.3.
¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p.5.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p.17.
¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p.23.
¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p.24.
¹¹⁰ Reddy, Gaskell's "The Grey Woman" ', p.191.
¹¹¹ Gaskell, Curious, If True, p.248.
¹¹² Weiss, p.278.
¹¹³ Stoneman, p.33.
¹¹⁴ Reddy, Gaskell' "The Grey Woman" ', p.188.
¹¹⁵ Spencer, p.18.
¹¹⁶ Ibid. p.17.
¹¹⁷ Ibid. p.17.

**RHODA BROUGHTON:
DANGEROUS DREAMS**

DREAMS

Whilst largely ignored today, one hundred years ago Rhoda Broughton was one of the best known and most prolific writers of her time. Famous firstly for her novels, such as Cometh Up as a Flower (1867)¹ and Not Wisely but Too Well (1867),² Broughton, like many of her female contemporaries, also wrote ghost stories, producing some excellent specimens of the genre. Weathering accusations of indecency, of catering more for popular rather than intelligent taste, and of never truly fulfilling her true potential, it was yet generally acknowledged that her talent for plot and pace was always evident, and she was renowned throughout her long career and beyond.³ Happily, interest in the writer and her work is beginning to re-emerge, as a recent critical biography and a new collection of her ghost stories has proved.⁴ One of the foremost criticisms often levelled at her was that her novels were too long. In fact this was imposed on the author by the ubiquitous three-volume novel, a trend which the author detested but was forced to adhere to for many years. In contrast, the short story was ideally suited to her sharp wit and naturally succinct style, and it was a huge relief to her not to have to pad out her plot unnecessarily.

As is the case with the other women I have chosen to discuss for their contributions to the supernatural genre, this fiction is never the straightforward affair that one might expect. Its beauty and fascination lie primarily in the way it unravels to reveal so many layers and depths. Some of Broughton's ghost stories were first published separately in magazines and periodicals; some appeared as a collection in 1879, initially with the title Tales for Christmas Eve, and later as Twilight Stories. One of the first things to become apparent under scrutiny is Broughton's conception of the relationship between humanity

and the supernatural. The latter exists in her fiction to reveal aspects of the human character that would otherwise remain hidden; this could be the hypocrisy and faults of a class at large - for example that of the upper class she most commonly represented - or the more secret world of the individual's most repressed feelings and emotions. This relationship is most completely explored through Broughton's almost obsessive interest in dreams, particularly premonitions. Her compulsion permeates every aspect of her supernatural fiction, even gaining small mention when it is not the main focus, as in 'The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth' (1868): 'Suddenly a sort of shiver passed over me; and feeling frightened - I did not know why - I looked up quickly'.⁵ This is the premonition of danger - in this case immediately followed by a terrifying supernatural attack on a maid-servant - which confronts so many of her characters. That most of her characters narrating and/or playing an active role are female increases the problematic nature of the dream device. As the narrator in 'Mrs Smith of Longmains' (1889) concludes emphatically: 'All dreams are absurd!';⁶ she then goes on to consider:

Perhaps I had had enough of having my own will now! After all, I had better henceforth submit tamely to Alice's rule. I was clearly not fit to rule myself. Into what a stupid quandary I had brought myself, guided only by the Will-o'-the-Wisp of a senseless dream.⁷

The narrator fears being trapped by two controlling agents: that of her well-meaning but domineering and patronizing daughters, and the premonitory dreams which she believes can only be symptomatic of mental weakness; each serves to reinforce the other. The dream, in which she witnesses the murder of her neighbour, Mrs Smith, by her butler, leaves her feeling impelled to somehow warn the victim and prevent the tragedy, despite the late hour and dreadful weather. She ultimately rebels against her daughters and obeys the dream and her instincts, which turn out to be well founded. Nonetheless, she is plagued for the greater part of the tale by her fearful agreement of their conclusion

(not to mention Mrs Smith's) that she is a woman whose sense has deserted her. As a woman, she is *expected* to be irrational, and as such any experiences beyond what is viewed by the majority as rational or 'normal' are dismissed as female silliness.

As early as 1848, Catherine Crowe, in her investigative work, The Night Side of Nature, was chronicling associations being made between premonitory experience and 'nervous or hysterical females';⁸ such people, she explains, have often been involved when certain phenomena are discovered to have natural causes after all. She adds that it is the opinion of the time that 'somnambulists and clairvoyantes are chiefly to be found among sickly women'.⁹ Crowe's main objective, on the other hand, was to establish enquiry into the supernatural as a rational part of science, rather than relegating it to the realm of hysterical women and their over-stimulated imaginations. Had she been born later in the century, she would doubtless have been an enthusiastic advocate for the infant Society for Psychical Research. As it was she battled gamely against a great deal of ridicule and repudiation, as she bitterly expressed:

There is in this country, and I believe in France also, though with more exceptions, such an extreme aversion to admit the possibility of anything like what is called supernatural agency, that the mere avowal of such a persuasion is enough to discredit one's understanding with a considerable part of the world; not excepting those who profess to believe in the Scriptures.¹⁰

She uses all the ammunition she can, often bringing in biblical support, but to be fair to her detractors, Crowe does not offer much in the way of solid scientific argument or evidence:

Degraded in his nature, and distracted by the multiplicity of the objects and interests that surround him, man has lost his faculty of spiritual seeing; but in sleep, when the body is in a state of passivity, and external objects are excluded from us by the shutting up of the senses through which we perceive them, the spirit, to a certain degree freed from its impediments, may enjoy somewhat of its original privilege.¹¹

She also suggests that: 'there exists an indisputable sympathy betwixt certain organisms, especially where connected by relationship, or by affection, which may be sufficient to account for the supervention of simultaneous thoughts, dreams, or presentiments'.¹² Nor did she enhance her reputation by the periodic bouts of insanity from which she suffered, and which led to public displays of erratic behaviour. However, loose and speculative as her arguments may appear, two things must be remembered. Firstly that Crowe's aim was to open debate and investigation - to widen the bounds of possibility - rather than to offer proof; and secondly, that even today the language and substance of argument surrounding this subject is still unable to approach anything which constitutes 'proof'.

Jung, in the chapter of his memoirs entitled 'On Life After Death', in which he evaluates 'synchronistic phenomena, premonitions, and dreams that come true',¹³ offers his own personal experiences, including foreseeing an accident to a family member, and attempts to suggest a balanced view, rather than answers:

When one has such experiences - and I will tell of others like them - one acquires a certain respect for the potentialities and arts of the unconscious. Only, one must remain critical and be aware that such communications may have a subjective meaning as well.¹⁴

J.A. Hadfield does offer some evidence, recording that some cases of premonitions of danger have been proved to be the natural result of 'acute sensibility of one or another of our senses'.¹⁵ However, he freely admits that not all cases of telepathic dream can be explained in this manner, for example, the communication of the death of someone close, or two people having the same dream, when such circumstances have been related to others at a time or in a way which denies the existence of fraud.¹⁶ From the subject of premonitory dreams he raises fundamental questions: 'What attitude should we adopt towards such dreams? The acceptance of precognition implies first, that the

future, or parts of the future, are foreordained; and secondly, that we are capable of foreseeing them'.¹⁷ He goes on to give instances of premonitory dreams which have not been explained, and offers some theories, though not, as he is careful to stress, proof:

Precognition sounds incredible because we think of time in terms of such artificial measurement of time. But if we think of time as an *experience* - 'the experience of the succession of events', there appears to be no reason why some people should not experience the same events at different times, and therefore some people experience events before other people [...] A more comprehensible theory is the supposition that the subconscious mind has a wider field of vision than the conscious mind [...] when the conscious mind is in a state of relaxation [...] or asleep, the subconscious mind may be able to convey to it the things it has sensed. This is what constitutes our intuition.¹⁸

More recently, in Apparitions, Green and McCreery have preferred to remain with the theory of the subconscious, rather than that of time:

it is frequently suggested that apparitions seen in such circumstances [premonitory] are a method by which the subconscious mind is able to convey a certain piece of information to the conscious mind of the subject, in spite of the latter's emotional resistance.¹⁹

They go on to consider:

It is often suggested that such warnings [premonitions/warnings of danger] are provided by the subject's subconscious for his protection, on the basis of information which it has obtained by inference or by extra-sensory perception. If this is so, however, the method of communication does not seem to be entirely perfect.²⁰

In explanation they cite instances where warnings have been partially or completely ignored by recipients (often for reasons of incredulity, as experienced by the narrator of 'Mrs Smith of Longmains'), but add that in such cases alertness may have been sufficiently raised to avert any potential misfortune.

To return briefly to Crowe, of the prophetic dreams she discusses certainly most are concerned with the death of a relative or friend. In keeping with Crowe's anecdotal

style she claims that, 'The frequency of such phenomena may be imagined, when I mention that the instances I shall give, with few exceptions, have been collected with little trouble, and without seeking, beyond my own small circle of acquaintance'.²¹ The dreams described by Broughton in her stories exhibit all these preoccupations, reflecting, no doubt, both her own and her audience's fascination with death and the human mind. Indisputably, much may be learned through the supernatural, by her characters and by her readers, of the complex nature of humans.

Among Broughton's supernatural stories which deal with dreams and premonitions, one of the most striking is 'The Man With the Nose' (1872); the curious title may well be one expression of Broughton's tendency to mix humour and fear. Here the emphasis definitely rests on what the supernatural surprisingly reveals about one of the characters. Though, as is typical of Broughton's fiction, it is written in the present tense, a habit which frequently irritated her critics, the final two lines show that the contained events actually took place twenty years previously, when the now broken-spirited narrator was a young man, happy and in love with the young woman who becomes his wife in the process of the tale. The crux of the story is the abduction of the bride by the mysterious 'Man With the Nose', after which she is never heard from again. The reader is taken through the heady days before the wedding, whilst they are planning the destination for their honeymoon, followed by the trip itself. All, however, is not sweetness and light for the two lovers. Elizabeth, the innocent young bride, finds herself subject to recurrent and terrifying (waking?) nightmares, when a sinister man, exerting a powerful control, appears in her room and summons her to come to him, a command which, despite her struggles, she finds almost impossible to resist. After the first sighting, when Elizabeth wakes her new husband in terror and attempts to describe the hypnotic

presence, his distinguishing feature causes the narrator as much merriment as concern, as Broughton dares the reader to push the boundaries between humour and horror:

‘he had a *nose!*’

‘My dear soul,’ cry I, bursting out into a loud laugh in the silence of the night, ‘do not most people have noses? Would not he have been much more dreadful if he had had *none?*’

‘It was very prominent,’ she answers, in a sort of awe-struck half-whisper, ‘and very sharply chiselled; the nostrils very much cut out.’ A little pause. ‘His eyebrows were one straight line across his face, and under them his eyes burnt like dull coals of fire, that shone and yet did not shine; they looked like dead eyes sunken, half extinguished, and yet sinister’.²²

The description adds to the dichotomy in Elizabeth’s character that begins to emerge early in the story. Though initially introduced as a pretty little innocent, in diminutive terms - relating her playfulness of nature, dancing blue eyes, ‘her little brown head and her small happy white face’²³ - Elizabeth keeps a secret which causes her shame, and which she reveals to her fiancé just before their wedding. When the narrator’s suggestion that they honeymoon in the Lake District is greeted with horror, he discovers that the area holds terrible associations for her. Whilst there on holiday several years previously she had allowed herself to be hypnotized as part of an entertainment. The silly antics and resultant embarrassment left a more serious scar, however, and the inexplicably troubled Elizabeth falls into a life-threatening fever, which she blushes and trembles to speak of: ‘I lay in bed for five whole weeks, and - and was off my head, and said odd and wicked things that you would not have expected me to say - that dreadful bed! Shall I ever forget it?’²⁴ In this tantalizing confidence, what hidden side of her nature was revealed, unsuitable for this supposedly innocent Victorian heroine? In addition there is the pointed reference to the sexually charged symbol of the bed, all the more significant when we view Elizabeth in her transitional stage of girl/virgin to married/sexual woman.

Whether deliberately or not, this aspect of the story bears fascinating resemblance to 'Shalken the Painter' (1839), a ghost/horror story by Broughton's uncle, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu.²⁵ Influential as he was in her early career, she had probably read this work. It shares the same themes of control and abduction of a young girl by a grotesque and macabre stranger. There is also the weird and compelling juxtaposition of bed and tomb. In a vision sequence, Shalken is guided by the apparition of his vanished love, Rose, to a vault containing what seems to be a large four-poster bed, holding the ghastly Vanderhausen. This turns out, in what is surely a pointed connection, to be the tomb of Vanderhausen, and the ghostly Rose is dressed in a shroud, having become the victim of a predatory corpse. Le Fanu clearly depicts male sexuality in this instance as equaling violence and rape, and in this context it is destructive and even fatal for women. Elizabeth, in 'The Man With the Nose', suggests that the mesmerist and her abductor are two different people, but if so the connections between them are strong. Of the former she declares:

I try to think about it as little as possible; but some times, in the dead black of night, when God seems a long way off, and the devil near, it comes back to me so strongly - I feel, do not you know, as if he were *there* somewhere in the room, and I *must* get up and follow him.²⁶

Both exert a pull; in the same way her physical body will later be possessed by her kidnapper, so her mind is violated, and Elizabeth's control of it usurped.

The jarring and unsettling combination of love/sex with death continues as the honeymoon couple, eventually having settled on the Rhine for their getaway, pay a strange visit whilst in Belgium. Bizarrely, the narrator takes his three-day bride to see the paintings of Antoine Joseph Wiertz, notorious for his morbidity, at the museum created from the painter's studio. Wiertz, who had a great (and as his many critics would have it, misguided) faith in his own genius, was born in 1806, and during his

career was accused of sensationalism and voyeurism, because of the often juxtaposed gruesome and sexual content of his art. It is said that he gained triumphant pleasure when children fled screaming from his paintings. It was he who bequeathed his studio as the Musée Wiertz on his death in 1865, and presumably, as Broughton wrote her story only a few years after, the novelty value was still strong, especially given the Victorians' penchant for the grotesque and fantastic spectacle.²⁷

The narrator in Broughton's story offers a vivid description of one particular exhibit:

We have been peering through the appointed peep-hole at the horrible cholera picture - the man buried alive by mistake, pushing up the lid of his coffin, and stretching a ghastly face and livid hands out of his winding sheet towards you, while awful grey-blue coffins are piled around, and noisome toads and giant spiders crawl damply about. On first seeing it, I have reproached myself for bringing one of so nervous a temperament as Elizabeth to see so haunting and hideous a spectacle.²⁸

The painting is probably 'The Premature Burial' (1854).²⁹ Most readers would probably join with the narrator in questioning his wisdom, as well as his ideas on honeymoon itineraries, yet Elizabeth's response is unexpected and disquieting: 'When you bury me, dear, fasten me down very slightly, in case there may be some mistake'.³⁰ Does she have some inkling of the death-in-life she is soon to become prisoner of? The weirdness of this incident is heightened by immediately being contrasted with Elizabeth's persuading her husband to buy her a coquettish little bonnet, which delights him as 'a delicious picture of a child playing at being grown up'.³¹ What emerges are the two sides of a young woman who is sexually aware enough to flirt with its danger and the illusion of power it gives, but at the same time is ashamed and confused by such feelings, and the conflicting female roles she perceives. Ultimately she is overwhelmed and destroyed by the man who asserts confident control and power, because he has harnessed the power of the human mind. Elizabeth is also betrayed by her husband,

who, regarding her as the silly little woman - however adored - will not take her further sightings of the threatening stranger seriously, and promptly abandons her for twelve days whilst he returns to England (ironically for a funeral), thus giving the hypnotic abductor plenty of time to spirit his wife out of existence. Whether the kidnapper is of human or supernatural agency is never proved, but the narrator does not see Elizabeth again, and only has one depressing but telling sighting to report:

In a village a few miles from Lucerne the peasants, on the day in question, saw a carriage driving rapidly through their little street. It was closed, but through the windows they could see the occupants - a dark gentleman, with the peculiar physiognomy which has been so often described, and on the opposite seat a lady lying apparently in a state of utter insensibility.³²

It provides a reasonable hint as to her fate.

Although Broughton wrote most of her material before the advent of Freud and his theories of psychoanalysis, the latter's exposition of dreams as wish fulfilment could be applied here. As he sees it:

The dream process is allowed to begin as a fulfilment of an unconscious wish; but if this attempted wish-fulfilment jars upon the preconscious so violently that it is unable to continue sleeping, then the dream has made a breach in the compromise and has failed to carry out the second half of its task. In that case the dream is immediately broken off and replaced by a state of complete waking.³³

This is extremely reminiscent of Elizabeth's experience, and especially helpful when we consider the almost seamless transition the controlling figure makes from dream to reality/unconscious to conscious. Elizabeth's mental state also ties in: 'There is no longer anything contradictory to us in the notion that a psychical process which develops anxiety can nevertheless be the fulfilment of a wish'.³⁴ Under this interpretation her contradictory and confusing feelings about sex are understandable.

Specifically discussing nightmares, J.A. Hadfield considers their impact: 'People may ignore their dreams, they cannot ignore their nightmares. For nightmares can be most distressing, casting their shadows throughout the following day'.³⁵ He chronicles: 'The distinctive feature of a nightmare in the more restricted sense of the term is that of a monster, whether animal or sub-human, which visits us during sleep and produces a sense of dread', as was the case with Elizabeth.³⁶ He asserts that 'Both dreams and nightmares are reproductions of unsolved problems',³⁷ and whilst he denies that it is the whole explanation, allows that one interpretation of the nightmare is as 'an expression of intense mental conflict centring about some form of "repressed" sexual desire'.³⁸ He goes on to discuss 'Nightmares resulting from objective experiences',³⁹ and considers that a traumatic experience, whether in childhood or adult life is 'repressed and dislocated'⁴⁰ because the person cannot cope: 'But the mind [...] cannot leave such objective problems unsolved, and they persist in coming up when at night our inhibiting forces are in abeyance [...] The mere glimpse of it is enough; we shut out the rest and wake up in horror'.⁴¹ This frequently interconnects with 'Nightmares resulting from fear of our own impulses',⁴² when 'The dread of impending disaster which appears in so many nightmares is usually the result of some unrecognised moral conflict'.⁴³ All of this could be applied to Elizabeth's experiences: the objective stimulant of the trip to the mesmerist and the moral conflict caused by her newly awakened and shamefully pleasurable sexual self (as well as fear of the actual experience of the marriage bed) is in direct conflict with the strictly enforced Victorian moral code of conduct for women. All this Broughton skilfully reveals through her interweaving of the supernatural element.

Another of Broughton's stories which may be interpreted through Freud's theory of wish-fulfilment, but with the somewhat different motivation of jealousy, is 'Behold It

Was a Dream' (1872). Again the emphasis is placed on a warning dream, which is the central event. It also incorporates another of Broughton's favourite devices: the epistolary form. It is partial in this case and reinforces the present-tense narrative; the effect is to heighten the immediacy of the horror, which is strong and graphic in this tale.

The unmarried, intelligent and witty female narrator, Dinah Bellairs, visits an old friend who has unexpectedly married late in life (by Victorian standards), and settled happily into 'an exclusively bucolic, cow-milking, pig-fattening, roast-mutton-eating, and to-bed-at-ten-o'clock-going life'.⁴⁴ However, Dinah cuts her visit short, risking offending her friends, on the strength of a terrible nightmare she has on the first night. It reveals the couple murdered in their beds, swimming in a sea of blood, their throats cut with a reaping hook, whilst the murderer steals all the jewellery he can lay his hands on. Dinah sees his face clearly. Convinced that her experiences are a premonition of tragedy, yet believing it with difficulty, she struggles to decide whether to tell: 'I cannot believe that any vision so consistent - so tangibly real and utterly free from the jumbled incongruities and unlikenesses of other dreams - could have meant nothing',⁴⁵ and yet she has 'a thorough faith that I have been a superstitious hysterical fool',⁴⁶ the typical worry of so many women. In the end, after much agonizing, she decides that the truth is best, but it turns out that her worries were not unfounded; she has to endure the expected humiliating response from the husband, Robin, who gives 'a covert smile of benevolent contempt for my superstitiousness'.⁴⁷ To humour this hysterical female, the newly-weds take her round the fields of their farm - the man in her dream being dressed as a labourer - but the plan backfires when she recognizes the killer. She insists on following through her plan of leaving, though she is heartened when the man is dismissed, Robin having the excuse that he is a lazy worker anyway. Dinah is at least

able to believe that any disaster has been averted. However, Broughton here offers a wonderfully ironic twist. It is Dinah's *telling* that puts the horror in motion; it is in revenge for his dismissal that the enraged thug carries out his murder and theft. Left to his own devices he would have remained merely a shady character dodging hard work.

The significant issue is the fact that firstly she *has* such a dream, compounded by her choosing to *vocalize* it, thus giving it life and enabling it to move from her subconscious mind to reality. In discussing 'Dreams of the Death of Persons of Whom the Dreamer is Fond', Freud states his belief that the roots of what may appear to be a very disturbing dream lie deep in the complex subconscious, often repressed from earlier life: 'The meaning of such dreams, as their content indicates, is a wish that the person in question may die ... They may also be the wishes of the past which have been abandoned, overlaid and repressed'.⁴⁸ He qualifies what could be regarded as a startling assertion by relating it to childhood jealousy, frequently still present, unbeknownst to the adult subject. Though referring specifically to relatives, his arguments could well be applied to Dinah and her friend Jane, who grew up together, sharing many similarities in circumstances and family life. As Freud suggests, siblings are supposed by the adults around them to simply love each other.⁴⁹ It is not, however, always so straightforward, and though there may indeed be love, there is often also envy. In the case of 'Behold It Was a Dream', it could be argued that the narrator and, up until recently, her friend Jane, have effectively remained children, because they are unmarried, still living at home, dependent on and under the rule of parents, one of several siblings with whom they must compete for the attentions of potential husbands (in this way also becoming rivals themselves) if they are ever to escape. These impulses, however, would have been repressed, and Dinah and Jane are friends. Both women have younger, prettier sisters to overshadow them, as Dinah considers about her friend:

Two years ago Jane was thirty-five, the elderly eldest daughter of a large family, hustled into obscurity, justled, shelved, by half-a-dozen younger, fresher sisters; an elderly girl, addicted to lachrymose verse about the gone, and the dead, and the for-ever-lost.⁵⁰

Unlike the narrator, however, Jane's vitality and wasted promise have been given back to her in the only way possible for so many Victorian women; she has married, but it is a marriage based on genuine, mutual love: 'The peaky, sour virgin is transformed into a gracious matron, with a kindly, comely face, pleasure making and pleasure feeling'.⁵¹ She is lonely and ignored no longer, and Dinah is sharply aware of their relative situations as she ruminates on Jane's 'little house ... for which she has so happily exchanged her tenth part of the loud and noisy paternal mansion',⁵² and which to Dinah 'seems like heaven'.⁵³ The implication of jealousy increases when one of Dinah's sisters comments disparagingly about Robin: ' "He is nothing of the kind," reply I, in some heat, recalling the libelled Robin's clean, fresh-coloured *human* face. "You will be very lucky if you ever secure anyone half so kind, pleasant and gentleman-like" '.⁵⁴ It does not seem too far-fetched, then, to assume that tragedy arises from jealousy, of the kind of '*human*' bond which Jane now has, so that the dream may be viewed as wish-fulfilment. As Freud states, this does not imply wickedness: 'Many people, therefore, who love their brothers and sisters and would feel bereaved if they were to die, harbour evil wishes against them in the unconscious, dating from earlier times; and these are capable of being realized in dreams'.⁵⁵ He concludes that 'In the dreams we have been discussing, a repressed wish has found the means of evading censorship - and the distortion which censorship involves'.⁵⁶ Thus Dinah's role as instigator and catalyst in these events can be quite unconsciously displaced.

The supernatural element is retained in the fact of her dream actually being a premonition; the man she sees in her mind actually exists and is the eventual culprit.

There can be no definite explanation for this, as the first section demonstrated, but it does illustrate the recurring point that the supernatural cannot coexist, in many cases, with family life, and in fact often actively disrupts it. This is symbolically exemplified in 'His Serene Highness' (1893), where the malevolent evil present in a house built on the site of an old churchyard claims an annual victim. They are identified as 'the throttled man, burnt woman, and mangled child';⁵⁷ although prey to separate incidents, they make up the basic family unit. It could be interpreted as both a rebellion against the set Victorian family values, or, as in 'Behold It Was a Dream', as jealousy of what one does not possess. What is importantly revealed in Broughton's ghost stories is the powerfully destructive combination of the complex human mind with the inexplicable supernatural. As with Elizabeth in 'The Man With the Nose', and in 'Behold It Was a Dream', the supernatural unearths a side of the human character which Victorian society would have preferred to keep hidden.

Supernatural dreams do not only exist to foresee tragedy and misery. Broughton also writes about dreams that provide reassurance and comfort, even if it is only within the context of insulating a human character against bad news. This is the case with 'Poor Pretty Bobby' (1872) - the author's most traditional ghost story - set as it is in a time frame of commonplace death and loss. Though narrated by Phoebe at the end of the nineteenth century, her story relates to her girlhood, in the year 1802:

In these days of stagnant quiet it appears as if people's kith and kin always lived out their full time and died in their beds. *Then* there was hardly a house where there was not one dead, either in battle, or of his wounds after battle, or of some dysentery or ugly parching fever.⁵⁸

Despite such exposure to the harsh realities of warfare, Phoebe is in the vulnerable position of experiencing her first love, and with someone involved in the conflict. Bobby Gerard is a young sailor on her captain father's ship, and in her subjective state

she would be little able to cope with the shock of loss. When one night Phoebe has a dream which she fully believes to be reality until it is disproved the following morning, in which Bobby arrives home pale, wet and silent, Phoebe is attuned to its meaning: 'Mother, I know well that Bobby is dead, and that I shall never see him any more. I feel assured that he died last night, and that he came himself to tell me of his going'.⁵⁹ Several weeks later the young man's death is confirmed - he is shot and thrown overboard whilst defending the ship from the French - and although distraught, the ghostly occurrence gives Phoebe the opportunity and ability to accept and come to terms with the death of her lover.

More than anything, it is the knowledge that death is conquered by love which sustains Phoebe - that Bobby loved her to such an extent - and it is again this reassurance of comfort and love which is the motivation for the mysterious dream events experienced by the narrator of 'What It Meant' (1881). The news of an adored brother's death takes weeks to reach his family from where he is working in India. However, the discovery is preceded by supernatural signs to the narrator, one of his sisters, so that though the news of his death still comes as a terrible shock, the now-understood clues at least provide the comfort of knowing how close the loving bond was. Unlike 'Poor Pretty Bobby', where there is a direct appearance from which Phoebe immediately draws the correct conclusion, the dream occurrences in 'What It Meant' are symbolic, and puzzle the sister. An unidentified voice on several occasions cries 'Your brother! - your brother! - your brother!',⁶⁰ of which the narrator can only ponder: 'It was a voice, that was all. It was neither loud nor low, it was neither soft nor harsh. It was a voice and it was sorrowful. That was all you could certainly say of it'.⁶¹ In addition to the voice the narrator is bidden to discover a mysterious flower and a ribbon - both yellow and brown - which in the morning no longer exist. Soon after comes the news that her brother has

been killed by a tiger. The sister is perhaps singled out because it is her that the brother speaks to last before he leaves for his final trip, exclaiming 'God bless you!' as his carriage pulls away.⁶² Despite the separation of death the familial bond is confirmed.

Broughton, therefore, in her continual use of dreams in her ghostly fiction, may be seen to explore various facets of both the human and the otherworldly. She probes the darker side of human nature, as well as the loving, and illustrates her belief in a similar diversity in the supernatural. When this is brought together the result is intriguingly revelatory.

COURAGE AND CHARACTER

It seems appropriate to begin a section on Broughton's female characters with an appraisal of the writer herself, who had much in common with the independent characters she created. One of her contemporaries, Marie Belloc Lowndes, a writer herself, and friend of many of London's turn-of-the-century literary circle, devoted an extensive passage to Broughton in her memoirs, in which she declares:

Of the many remarkable women I have known, Rhoda Broughton stands out as having been the most remarkable. When I first knew her she was about seventy, but she showed no sign of age, apart from the fact that her hair was grey. She had a fine mind, an acute type of intellect, and a most generous nature. Under a somewhat tart manner she had a sensitive heart, and possessed an exceptionally loyal nature.⁶³

These are sentiments echoed by her modern biographer, who chronicles 'a sharp eye and an equally sharp tongue, softened at times by a compassionate spirit; humour, albeit cynical, and a fine ear for realistic dialogue'.⁶⁴ Whilst Belloc Lowndes reminisced mainly about friends, so that the portrait was naturally complimentary, this was not always the case, and she was careful to give a balanced and truthful view; she includes the writer's tendency to tartness which some found off-putting. Ethel Arnold (daughter of Matthew) supplements this with the information that Broughton was 'temperamentally extremely reserved, in regard both to those people and those events who and which had touched her most nearly, affected her most deeply'.⁶⁵ In spite of this Mrs Lowndes obviously felt deep admiration for her friend, and was quick to point out her unique qualities: 'When I first knew her, she suffered from some form of arthritis, and during the early years of our friendship I never saw her stand. She always sat bolt upright, and never alluded to either her health or to her novels'.⁶⁶ Her dignity and particularly her modesty are characteristics mentioned by more than one friend and

acquaintance: 'No solitary copy can be seen, in the well-filled book-cases, of the author's works. She says that she sells them out and out at once, and then has "done with them"'.⁶⁷ This comment comes from the testimony of Helen C. Black, author of the somewhat sycophantic Notable Women Authors of the Day (1893). The title proved unwittingly prophetic; most of the twenty-six writers are long-since forgotten, but others clinging on tenaciously with Broughton are names such as Eliza Lynn Linton and Charlotte Riddell. Black is nonetheless fascinating to today's reader for her depth of detail:

Ushered upstairs into the drawing room, where the author receives you with much cordiality, the first thing which strikes you is the sweet rich voice in which her welcome is uttered. Standing facing the setting sun, with its golden light reflected on her, you observe that she is above the middle height, and graceful in figure; the hair, rolled back from the low broad strong-looking forehead, is becomingly tinged with grey over the right temple, harmonizing well with the darker shades on the neat, well-shaped head. The mouth and chin indicate firmness and resolution. In repose, the expression might almost be called sad, but as she speaks, the frankness in the grey eyes, set well apart, at once dispels the idea, and the pleasant musical laugh betrays the vein of fun and wit - entirely of an original kind - which runs through her books. She is dressed in some fabric of dark green, with velvet sleeves and bodice; the latter relieved at the upper part with a paler shade of embroidered vest.⁶⁸

As well as her capture of Rhoda Broughton's liking for elegant clothes, Black goes into some detail over room interiors, revealing an astute eye for any valuable antiques or fine china. As Ethel Arnold divulges:

Rhoda Broughton wrote her novels, or "Works," as she preferred to call them, with that twinkle in her eye, that twist to her humourous mouth, her friends knew so well, because she discovered early in life that she had a gift for storytelling, and because, to put it frankly, as she always put it herself, she also discovered that her stories were eminently marketable commodities.⁶⁹

Black also describes 'a business-like work-bag, filled to overflowing, which gives a home-like look to the room and indicates that it is useful as well as ornamental',⁷⁰ as if, in common with the other writers she met, she is anxious to imbue these literary women

with domestic inclinations, in order to meet with her audience's approval. She goes on to record the compliments of others, including Mary Braddon's that 'Rhoda Broughton is a genius and a prose poet',⁷¹ and that of a ship's captain whose officers named a remote Arctic mountain 'Mount Rhoda' in honour of the woman whose novels had entertained them on the long and lonely voyage.⁷²

The recipient of these tributes was born on the 29 November 1840, in North Wales. Her father, the younger son of a baronet, was a clergyman, and was given the living of Broughton, near Eccleshall, and one of the family seats, Broughton Hall. Built in 1637, it was perhaps the source of later inspiration as it came equipped with its own ghost, that of a Royalist predecessor shot by the Roundheads, and known as 'Redsocks' owing to the apparel which characterized him.⁷³ She gained a thorough education from her scholarly father, particularly in English Literature, Greek, Latin, French, German and Italian. On her father's death in 1863 (her mother died earlier) she went to live with her elder sister, this arrangement continuing until the latter's death: her sister was widowed early and Broughton never married. During her lifetime she lived in Oxford, London, Richmond and Chelsea, where she made a decided mark:

In London and Oxford literary circles Rhoda Broughton had soon gained a reputation as a witty conversationalist; she had even proved more than a match for Oscar Wilde who, not relishing the idea of having a rival who might out-talk and out-epigram him, declined to send her any more invitations to his own parties.⁷⁴

Certainly she was a formidable presence, although this largely served to increase her charm. One letter from Matthew Arnold records his keenness to call on her;⁷⁵ his daughter was to write a moving tribute to Broughton, a close friend, on her death. Henry James joked that she made him tremble.⁷⁶ James and Broughton enjoyed a long and comfortable friendship, and a lengthy correspondence. In an early letter he

addresses her banteringly as 'My Dear Distinguished One',⁷⁷ and later as 'My dear Old Friend'.⁷⁸ In that same letter he speaks of her 'magnificent courage and character',⁷⁹ an accolade which so aptly describes many of her heroines. Frequently he refers to his enjoyment of their strolls in Richmond Park; these only ceased with their increasing age and ill health. During one such indisposition, James writes wistfully of 'Your friendly little Chelsea fireside'.⁸⁰ Their attachment lasted their lifetimes. James died in the spring of 1916; Broughton died on the 5 June 1920.

Her writing career began in a hurry; she wrote the draft of her first novel in six weeks. Not Wisely but Too Well and Cometh Up as a Flower were initially serialized in the Dublin University Magazine, aided by her uncle, J.S. Le Fanu (who distanced himself when her work was accused of 'coarseness and boldness'⁸¹), and published in novel form by Richard Bentley & Son, with whom she had a long-term association. A letter from George Bentley, in which he discusses terms for a new novel, states it is 'the truth that I would rather issue your book without any profit than see it emanate from any other house than mine'.⁸² These were swiftly followed by Red as a Rose is She (1870); Punch was soon gleefully caricaturing her stories with such titles as 'Cometh Down Like a Shower' and 'Red in the Nose is She'.⁸³ Over the years, her initial reputation for raciness and the way this altered over time caused Broughton some amusement, as she related to E.F. Benson:

for nearly fifty years she had been busily writing the same kind of novel. When she began writing, her books were deemed to be very risky, she was thought to be of the breed of Zola, and no well brought-up girl was allowed to read them. But now, though her novels were just the same as they had always been, she was considered of the breed of Miss Yonge, and well brought-up girls were strongly urged to read them by their mammas, because they were so thoroughly nice. But the girls thought so too, and could not get far in them.⁸⁴

This humour and acceptance of the changing tastes of the reading public during her long career again reflects the self-effacement that she was known for. Twilight Stories, the collection of some of her ghost stories, published in 1879, met with a warm reception. Such was the enthusiasm, that one contemporary, then an Oxford undergraduate, remembered that, 'I had the hardihood to ask her for a ghost story to succeed one already published. She good-naturedly complied with a fearsome tale of poltergeist activity, whose authenticity she could vouch for'.⁸⁵ The biographer Walter Sichel spoke of her 'wistful apprehension of the world spiritual',⁸⁶ and Marilyn Wood has recently addressed the significance of the tales in terms of Broughton's writing generally:

This volume is important in that, coming at this point in her writing career, it is an early indication of the terse, trenchant style that is to be found in her later novels but which, for the time being, was overwhelmed by the external demand for length, however detrimental to form. When these stories were reprinted in 1947, the editor, H. Van Thal, remarked in his preface 'The reader of these tales will find an admirable crisp style and the point and denouement is quickly arrived at in each case', and in content and delivery he saw Rhoda Broughton, in the field of mystery stories, as a forerunner of M. R. James.⁸⁷

All in all, Broughton pursued an independent and determined path through a lengthy stretch of the rapidly changing late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like Vernon Lee, she was a writer who spanned two centuries. This is tantalizingly symbolized by correspondence from 'Curtis Brown Ltd.', thanking Broughton for allowing them to handle the film rights of her books.⁸⁸ Presumably her death put an end to a venture which may have made Broughton accessible to a wider, twentieth-century audience. In the extensive 1938 bibliography of Edith Batho and Bonamy Dobrée, she is placed outside the circle of premier writers (which included her friend Henry James), but they state unequivocally that 'she never wrote anything unworthy'.⁸⁹

One of the reasons that Broughton emerges as distinct from the multitude of contemporaries - one of the 'notable women authors' who, in some measure at least,

outlived her day - was her creation of such distinct female characters. Like the writer herself they pursue their own course, and power the plot. Temple Bar considered that:

People may like, or dislike, the wilful, perverse though by no means shrewish, mettlesome, wayward, warm, sensuous creature, that walks, lolls, looks beautiful, flirts, is epigrammatic, and makes love half-way through her pages; but there is no contesting the fact that the creature lives and breathes.⁹⁰

As Marilyn Wood points out: 'In most of the stories there is a recognisable strong Broughton female figure, capable of independent thought and action, given also to wry observations',⁹¹ a device heightened by the shadowy nature, in contrast, with most of the men who appear, in whatever capacity:

One of the most obvious 'merits' is Rhoda Broughton's comprehensive knowledge of the female character - its strengths, its weaknesses, its timidity, its bravura, its deception, its integrity - and her ability to convey all the nuances with a sure hand [...] Within the context of the fictional world she created her women are real, they live and breathe, but it is their reality and vitality that make the young men appear such dull, stiff, stereotyped figures.⁹²

As with Mary Braddon's infamous Lady Audley, Broughton's heroines are complex, 'like the Victorian age itself [...] apparently the epitome of purity and rectitude, while, in reality, hiding dark secrets',⁹³ and the fact that they 'had more independence of thought than most of their living counterparts, and were not afraid to speak their minds',⁹⁴ is perhaps what set literature's moral guardians on the war path. Another of our authors, Margaret Oliphant, criticized Broughton for belonging to the 'Sensation School',⁹⁵ what Elaine Showalter describes as her 'fleshly inclinations'.⁹⁶ Temple Bar reported that:

It is an age of women's rights and the emancipation of a sex supposed to have been long-enthralled; and freedom in one direction, entailing freedom in another, is pretty certain to encourage it most of all in the direction most desired and most easily taken. We mean, of course, the direction of love and sentiment. If women are to do pretty much as men do, it follows that they are to do pretty much what they please.⁹⁷

This formed another link between Broughton and Mary Braddon, whose friendship developed from the latter's regard for Broughton as a worthy rival.⁹⁸ More surprising, as Showalter points out, was the condemnation of Geraldine Jewsbury, who appeared to have done an about-turn, given the subject matter of *Zoe* (1845). Broughton herself is no easy figure to pin down to a particular system of beliefs; like the mixture in her heroines she is a blend of independence and self confidence with a conventionality of moral outlook, based on an awareness of her position in society and a constant emphasis on dignity and good breeding. Her 'heroines were bold and bad (within limits)'.⁹⁹

Wood sees this reflected in her characters:

Although none of Rhoda Broughton's heroines can really be termed feminists they possess many of the 'New Woman' qualities that imbued the suffragists [...] They are modern enough to demand equality, if not supremacy, in some areas of life and a right to their own opinions, but they are still conventional enough to expect love and marriage as the natural order in a woman's life.¹⁰⁰

The same may be said of the author; she embodies the 'New Woman' rather than feminism, and the suffragists as opposed to the suffragettes.

Jane Winstanley, the main character of 'Rent Day' (1893) (which is more accurately described as a mystery/thriller than a ghost story), however, most definitely does not make any concessions to femininity: 'I always told her that she was much more like a man than a woman, and she took it as a compliment, and dressed to the part'.¹⁰¹ She has already fulfilled her prescribed roles of wife and mother; now she skilfully manages her own estates, collects her own rents, and is calmly prepared to use the loaded revolver she keeps by the bed in case of burglars.

In 'Mrs Smith of Longmains' we are shown an example of what Marysa De Moor describes as the paradox of 'those culturally imposed rules, that definition of "woman" '

which 'was often passed on from mother to daughter and dispersed in print by other women, the unwilling but unwitting servants of the Other (i.e. white, heterosexual male)'.¹⁰² 'Mrs Smith' is certainly a story of women; all the men are conspicuous by their absence on trips. However, the narrator's daughters do a good (if ultimately unsuccessful) stand-in job of policing their mother, convinced of her weakness (mental and physical) and inability to take care of herself. Despite being semi-convinced, the narrator manages to stand up for herself, reasserts her independence with a long and dangerous ride through a blizzard, and thus saves the life of another woman.

In 'Across the Threshold, a Spirit Story' (date unknown), the two Miss Bells are certainly in the mould of 'New Women'. Described as 'lively athletic girls',¹⁰³ and, in a rather less complimentary way, by their friend as 'hard as nails',¹⁰⁴ they nonetheless exhibit the weaknesses mentioned earlier. On a visit to this friend, the two girls are forced to stay the night by bad weather. The friend's father is a famous doctor in charge of a lunatic asylum, which is attached to the family's quarters. When the visitors discover that a patient has escaped, cracks begin to appear in the bravura:

I am not afraid of anything I can knock down, but one could not knock down a lunatic. They are so frightfully strong. Well, there, I can't help it, and it is no use arguing about it, but I am inexpressibly afraid of anyone who has lost his wits.¹⁰⁵

Her fear seems to be aligned with that of the supernatural. Like this, mental illness cannot be contained within the bounds of conventional rationality and reason. Physical strength is immaterial, and it is impossible to take the measure of one's adversary. In such a way, Broughton always maintains the human element of her characters, whatever their principles.

In the supernatural stories of Broughton, the independence shown by some of her female characters is sometimes transmuted into a situation where this is involuntary; they are independent of society because that society perceives them as 'different' and will not allow them to integrate fully. As Marysa De Moor expresses it: 'these authors projected this inner life onto one "indomitable" (because not adapted to society) character who in the last instance either had to adapt to a merciless society or succumbed, literally, by dying at the end of the story'.¹⁰⁶ Betty, in 'Betty's Visions' (1886) is one such character, fragile, yet forced into self-sufficiency by what the people around her - even her family - regard as her oddities. From a child she is seen as 'unnatural',¹⁰⁷ simply because she is quiet, does not cry and is well behaved, in contrast to her beautiful cousin Rachel, who is held up as a paragon of childhood/young womanhood, from which Betty's mother, at first, defends her: 'If, as I incline to think, since Rachel's arrival, to be like other children means to be voracious, idle, and uncivil, I am not sorry she is unlike other children'.¹⁰⁸ However, even her mother is unsettled into preferring Rachel - though ostensibly Betty is never abandoned - when Betty's visions begin: no one feels at ease with proximity to the supernatural. Without her control she is given access to knowledge of death as it takes place; even when the person in question is physically distant, she sees them pass and they touch her. Though in a somnambulistic state, and forgetful of the details when her normal self, she is able to break the news before anything has been confirmed. The visions become increasingly personal, beginning with her uncle when she is a child, progressing to her immediate family, and, as a wife and mother, ending with herself.

In the meantime she makes her mother 'nervous',¹⁰⁹ 'displeased and frightened'.¹¹⁰ Something in her manner is 'ghostly',¹¹¹ and it is this association with something those around her cannot understand which leads them to ostracize her, however much they

wish to be kind, and despite her character as a loving and patient daughter and wife. Ironically, her mother's self-imposed role of invalid and hypochondriac is considered 'normal' by her Victorian counterparts. Accordingly attempts are made to so align Betty: 'The girl is of an exceptionally nervous organization. She has been upset by this sudden change from the long gloom of her past life; it is a form of hysteria'.¹¹² However, Betty does not conform to this convenient female complaint; this is part of her problem: her *difference*. What makes people uncomfortable is that this pretty young girl is inexplicably a harbinger of death. Even her father, who comes to love her more, does not know how to treat her: 'Sometimes [...] a poignant desire assails him to question her as to those strange and supernatural intimations [...] But always a sort of reluctant awe restrains him'.¹¹³ Betty, unsurprisingly, does not want to be different, though she is accepting of her association with the supernatural. She is at her happiest when, in a vision-free period, she makes a loving marriage and becomes a mother, which, as has been suggested, remains the goal of even Broughton's most free-spirited heroines. Ironically this is what kills her: giving birth to her second child. As the reader never really finds out anything about the visions, the emphasis is placed on Betty, and the effect on her. What emerges is Broughton's use of the supernatural to illustrate the loneliness a Victorian women could face if, even involuntarily, she appeared outside the rigid conventions and roles made available to her by society.

As De Moor earlier argued, women are often complicit in the suppression of others of their sex. Broughton's 'Was She Mad?' (date unknown), in the manner of George Gissing's The Odd Women (1893), depicts the cruelty directed at unmarried women, and the frequent enforced sterility of their lives. Illustrated in connection is the viciousness of 'civilized' society - for example, Broughton's world of the country house

- directed, as in Betty's case, at anyone even slightly at odds with the majority. Set within this largely domestic sphere, the cruelty often emanates from a group of women.

The supernatural plot is the familiar one of premonitions. The inaptly named spinster, Hannah Younghusband, is an unwelcome guest of the caustic - and also unmarried - Miss Monroe. Her only crime is her single status; her hostess constantly bemoans the fact that women far outnumber single young man at her luncheon parties. It is during one such party that Miss Younghusband experiences a vision that foretells the death of Miss Monroe's niece, Sally, and her shy lover, Mr Ayrton. Whilst she keeps this to herself at the time, in sure knowledge of the ridicule she would face if it were otherwise, she writes the names of the doomed sweethearts in a sealed envelope, with instructions to Miss Monroe to open it only under her instructions; this is to be after the event, in order to confirm her sanity (which she herself does not doubt, as this is not an isolated incident). She is unable, however, to fully conceal her distress, and her odd behaviour causes gossip and unkind remarks.

As to Miss Monroe herself, her lament, when her seating arrangements are ruined is 'Why are there so many women in the world?',¹¹⁴ although *she* is 'one of the great and apparently indefinitely multiplying number of the unpaired'.¹¹⁵ Broughton refers scathingly to her ignorance, whilst at the same time implying that ultimately it is not her fault: 'Her mind was but indifferently furnished, she having come into the world too early to have caught the fever of the higher culture [...] poor Miss Monroe, old, plain, never having learned much and having long ago forgotten that little'.¹¹⁶ Badly educated, chronically bored, with only the trivialities of lunch parties to look forward to, the author's main barb is aimed at the system that determines that women should stultify in this manner, any potential wasted. Thus Miss Monroe, despite their similar

situations, judges Hannah Younghusband with the rest of society, that is, initially on physical appearance, unkindly detailing her shortcomings, dismissing her as 'odds and ends',¹¹⁷ unmarriageable, and therefore of no interest. Secondly, her lack of social graces and unconventional behaviour lead Miss Monro to conclude that 'She is evidently let out of Bedlam for the day!',¹¹⁸ bandying about the all-too common accusation of madness at any unconventional woman.

Sally is also judged dismissively as 'a rather ugly young women with a soft voice',¹¹⁹ who does as she is told; reflecting on the seating arrangements her aunt regrets that the two men she is between 'should have been wasted on Sally'.¹²⁰ Her lover, a poor tutor, is also shrugged off by his employers as 'a duffer all round',¹²¹ because he is a scholar rather than an athlete, and they lack the intelligence and sensitivity to appreciate the merits of anyone cast in a different mould to themselves. They display only arrogant superiority and callousness towards him: 'he must have seen us laughing at him times out of mind; but yet he never bears malice; he is ready to do anything, tiresome or disagreeable, for any of us the moment after'.¹²² His patience earns him only wondering mockery, even (or especially) as a man. The spiteful women - one of whom speaks above - are all-too observant of his poorly-cut clothes. This, of course, only increases 'his misery, his dumbness, his hideous consciousness of having more arms and legs than ever man wore before',¹²³ but for all that he and Sally embark on a tentative, innocent relationship: 'Perhaps no one else was particularly eager to engross either of them; perhaps people saw their natural suitability and helped them. Perhaps it was only that both being dependent, kind, and not very happy, they gravitated inevitably to one another'.¹²⁴ Happiness, however, is not to be theirs: 'It was a passion that was death-marked from its birth; but for that one evening it set them, heavily handicapped by fate as they were, on a level with the gods. They came down from that level fast enough'.¹²⁵

Ayrton is killed in a fire, rescuing one of his boorish pupils, and Sally dies shortly after of scarlet fever, fulfilling Hannah Younghusband's premonition. Once again the supernatural has proved incompatible with family life or love, but it also illustrates that the potential cruelty of humanity is equally capable of preventing happiness without intervention.

KNIGHTLY AND NOBLE?

Less finely drawn than her female characters they may be, but Broughton's men are by no means redundant; they too interact with forces from another world. There is no better example of the way in which the author uses the supernatural as a means to expose a masculine need for control than the character of Ralph Gordon in 'The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth'. Established from the start as the ideal specimen of indomitable British manhood, he is a soldier, handsome, brave, with a hearty laugh and a habit of striding up stairs three at a time. Certainly the kind of man who would find it impossible to resist debunking the ridiculous proposition that a house could be haunted. The prospect becomes even more attractive when there are ladies - and one in particular - to impress: 'With the gas lit and a poker, I'll engage to exorcise every demon that shows his ugly nose [...] it would take more than a whole squadron of departed ones, with the old gentleman at their head, to send me crazy'.¹²⁶ Not surprisingly, for those versed in the genre, this impudent challenge is accepted with willing ferocity; it is his life, rather than his wits, which he loses. The mysterious and terrifying evil that has left one housemaid the permanent inmate of a lunatic asylum has proved more than a match for one young man's ego.

The aura of bravery that surrounds the notion of soldierly life would seem to be for Broughton the ideal situation for upsetting accepted patriarchal beliefs through the supernatural. In the few instances where male characters play more than a minor role, it is usually with the intention of having them suffer horrible fates at the whim of a power that completely outweighs any of their much-vaunted masculine strengths. The German soldier-prince Waldemar in 'His Serene Highness' escapes relatively lightly with his

life, but the finale of the episode leaves him far from serene. Described glowingly at the beginning of the tale by the young female narrator (who meets him a while after the event when he has recovered his composure) he has 'beautiful teeth',¹²⁷ is 'robust and muscular',¹²⁸ and though he is naturally now 'rather credulous about the supernatural',¹²⁹ this is deemed allowable, by his exacting female audience, in a foreigner. The ghostly events centre on the gloomy, uninhabited house he was once billeted in whilst on a campaign, where an unspecified malignant force holds sway over the site of its violated resting place: 'It appeared to me as if a breath from the grave met me on the threshold'.¹³⁰ The price's potential victim status is marked early; as might be expected in a Broughton story his sleep is disturbed; he resorts to bromide to overcome the sense of menace and ensure the rest he is desperate for. However, he rapidly becomes a wreck of his former manly self; he is 'ashamed of the completeness with which his supernatural fears had got the better of him over night',¹³¹ the implication being that he is succumbing to the supposedly female malady of hysteria. In the event, he narrowly escapes the near-certainty of ending as the annual sacrifice to the resident evil, that calamity falling instead on the unlucky brother of his equerry, who stays overnight in the most haunted room and has his throat cut by the glass door he mysteriously falls through. As with the graphic descriptions of 'Behold It Was a Dream', Broughton, more than our other authors, delights in the inclusion of a little gore.

Definitions of masculinity lie at the heart of 'Poor Pretty Bobby'. Phoebe, in describing the Captain, concedes that 'much as I loved my father, it was more as my personification of all knightly and noble qualities than from much personal acquaintance with him'.¹³² It is women's absorption into the patriarchal system of beliefs which proves disastrous to the young lovers' relationship; Bobby is aware, at

some level, of female complicity when he uses it as a lever: 'My mother was the last person in the world to wish him to take care of my body at the expense of my honour'.¹³³ His shame is that he is protected by Phoebe's father from dangerous ventures, because of a promise to look after him made to his dying mother. This leads to accusations of cowardice from the rest of the crew - the sharpest spur to risk-taking - and fear for his reputation: ' "Your father always takes a great deal too much care of me," he says, with a slight frown and darkening of his whole bright face'.¹³⁴ He persuades Phoebe to commit herself to this masculine notion of glory over life, and she convinces her father to let Bobby take part in the most dangerous operations, where, predictably, he is killed. 'Honour' proves small consolation for Phoebe, who lives to a very old age, and despite marrying someone else, having children, and being 'happy in the main, as happiness goes',¹³⁵ she is unable to forget Bobby, and her words leave a sense of incompleteness and lasting loss.

It is this issue of male control that makes the hypnotism discussed earlier in the chapter, in relation to 'The Man With the Nose', so dangerous. From its very conception, at the hands of Franz Anton Mesmer, at the end of the eighteenth century, the practice of hypnotism raised concerns. Abuses were feared; doctors worried about the potential for taking advantage of unsuspecting women: 'By a single wave of the hand, we deprive the female of all sense'.¹³⁶ There would seem to be some degree of contention regarding the facts of this; although Harper's Encyclopaedia states that it is a widely accepted fallacy that hypnosis can be used to force a person into doing something against their will,¹³⁷ Theodore Barber, in his chapter on 'Suggested, Dangerous, Harmful, or Criminal Acts' argues otherwise.¹³⁸ He asserts that, whilst susceptibility can vary, there is the possibility, as proved by laboratory tests, that subjects will perform (or believe they are performing) the kind of behaviour outlined by the chapter title. He goes on to

provide two incidents where hypnosis was offered at trial as a reason for criminal behaviour.¹³⁹ Janet Oppenheim conceives of another problem for the Victorians: that mesmerism could be regarded as 'anti-Christian', in that 'it could easily be perceived as replacing that independent, animating principle - spirit or soul - that was central to religious faith'.¹⁴⁰ Clearly this could be a problem for Elizabeth in 'The Man With the Nose', as she battles with her guilty conscience for having let herself be mesmerized in the first place, and the feelings it arouses.

For Broughton, hypnotism is another means for men to exert control over women, and as such, is as dangerous and threatening as the supernatural forces which also play a part in mocking Victorian notions of masculinity.

WORLDS APART

Rhoda Broughton was born into the landed, titled upper classes - although her father was a younger son and not particularly wealthy - and within that class she was happy to remain. She owed her lifestyle to her writing in more ways than one; not only did she write partly to enable her to maintain the standards to which she was accustomed, but also her inspiration and material for her novels and stories came from the world she knew. The country-house setting is common, and at the very least her characters are upper class and well-to-do.

Her supernatural stories are no exception. 'The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth' is carried on in the author's favourite epistolary form. Not only does this heighten the sense of immediacy and therefore fear, it further serves to establish the characters of the two correspondents as women of the leisured class, with the time to write frequent, fashionable and gossipy letters. This was also an encouraged feminine accomplishment and time-filler. Details can be included which would be irrelevant in straightforward prose: 'Do you recollect Florence Watson? What a wealth of red hair she had last year! Well, that same wealth is black as the raven's wing this year!'¹⁴¹ and 'Dresses are gored to as *indecent* an extent ever; short skirts are rampant'.¹⁴² Until the advent of the haunting, such trivialities, and the women's pleasure in them, fill up their days.

There are instances where Broughton depicts togetherness between women, across the boundaries of class, as happens in 'The Truth' with Mrs Montresor and her maid. It is the latter who first informs her mistress of the house's bad reputation, and she is

automatically believed. It is together that they share the first terrifying confrontation with the supernatural evil: 'Benson came running in, and between us we managed to lift her on to the bed [...] And all the while we kept glancing over our shoulders, in a vague cold terror of seeing some awful, shapeless apparition'.¹⁴³ For men, however, class is an unbridgeable distance, and Mrs Montresor's husband views things in an entirely different light. When he discovers that his wife's informant is her maid, who found out from the cook, who was told by the grocer, his contempt for this lower-class chain of knowledge is unqualified, as his wife reports:

The moment Henry came in, I ran to him, and told him; but he pooh-poohed the whole story, laughed at me, and asked whether we should turn out of the prettiest house in London, at the very height of the season, because a grocer said it had a bad name.¹⁴⁴

It is this upper-class male refusal to consider anything possible which lies outside their scientific education which makes them the targets of supernatural vengeance. Servants and women, on the other hand, are often saved by the united willingness to retain an open mind.

Women too, however, are quite capable of making negative judgements on the basis of class. In 'The Truth', when first attempting to guess why the rent for the house is so low, Mrs De Wynt, the correspondent of Mrs Montresor, jokes: 'You will next suggest - remembering the rose-coloured curtains - that its last occupant was a member of the demi-monde'.¹⁴⁵ Even in jest there is an acute awareness of a person's exact situation in society, and a weeding out of anyone whose breeding does not bear scrutiny. Broughton's own class is evident throughout; she has a tendency to draw her villains from the lower classes, something she was not alone in at that time. In 'Mrs Smith of Longmains', for example, the murderer who victimizes solitary old ladies with large fortunes is a butler, in debt and with a shadowy past.

Broughton in fact often makes lower-class breeding a reason for dastardly behaviour. On top of this she adds some references to race, which would have been widely acceptable at the time, but which would doubtless be very unpopular amongst modern readers. When Dinah, in 'Behold It Was a Dream' describes the murderer in her premonition, the whole passage hinges on class and race:

'The first moment that I caught sight of him', continue I, speaking quickly, 'I felt certain that he was Irish; to no other nationality could such a type of face have belonged. His wild rough hair fell down over his forehead, reaching his shagged and overhanging brows. He had the wide grinning slit of a mouth - the long nose, the cunningly twinkling eyes - that one so often sees, in combination with a shambling gait and ragged tailcoat, at the railway stations or in the harvest fields at this time of year'.¹⁴⁶

Being Irish is here equated with a natural propensity to criminality, borne out in physical appearance. The description is rather one of an animal/monster than a human. In contrast, we have the 'honest bovine English faces'¹⁴⁷ of his fellow labourers. Once again, with its animal analogy this is hardly complimentary, but at least the cow, as a useful, placid, animal is an improvement on the mindless predator which describes the Irish nature.¹⁴⁸

This is perhaps one of the more unpalatable aspects of Broughton's writing, but it must be remembered that she was working within her time. It is perhaps best to read it in a historical context, and view the whole issue of class within her work, all part of what makes Broughton's supernatural stories so fascinating. In her exploration of the genre, she attained a peak in her writing career; instead of struggling with the unnatural lengths of the three-volume novel, she was able to turn to her ideal form of short and sharp stories. This was certainly a case of 'less is more'; she packed in layer upon layer of social comment, and through her preoccupation with dreams, an extraordinary

examination of the human unconscious. The relationship between humanity and the supernatural is scrutinized in compelling depth, and at the hands of Rhoda Broughton, the stuff of nightmares becomes remarkable literature.

- ¹ Cf. the Book of Job, The Good News Bible: Today's English Version (Swindon, 1976), 14.10.
- ² Cf. William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of Othello the Moor of Venice, ed. by Alvin Kernan (London, 1992), p.279, V. 2. 340.
- ³ These accusations are discussed more fully in the chapter on publishing.
- ⁴ Rhoda Broughton, Rhoda Broughton's Ghost Stories and Other Tales of Mystery and Suspense (Lincolnshire, 1995); & Marilyn Wood, Rhoda Broughton (1840-1920): Profile of a Novelist (Lincolnshire, 1993).
- ⁵ Broughton, Ghost Stories, p.13.
- ⁶ Ibid. pp.98-9.
- ⁷ Ibid. p.106.
- ⁸ Catherine Crowe, The Night Side of Nature, or, Ghosts and Ghost Seers (London, 1852), p.115.
- ⁹ Ibid. p.123.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p.69.
- ¹¹ Ibid. p.47.
- ¹² Ibid. p.103.
- ¹³ C.G. Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections (London, 1993), p.333.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. p.335.
- ¹⁵ J.A. Hadfield, Dreams and Nightmares (London, 1954), p.219.
- ¹⁶ Ibid. pp.221-4.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. pp.226-7.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. pp.232-3.
- ¹⁹ Celia Green & Charles McCreery, Apparitions (London, 1975), p.76.
- ²⁰ Ibid. p.79.
- ²¹ Crowe, p.59.
- ²² Broughton, Ghost Stories, p.22.
- ²³ Ibid. p.17.
- ²⁴ Ibid. pp.18-19.
- ²⁵ Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, 'Schalken the Painter', The Mammoth Book of Victorian and Edwardian Ghost Stories, ed. by Richard Dalby (London, 1995), pp.5-27.
- ²⁶ Broughton, Ghost Stories, p.19.
- ²⁷ Dominique Vautier, 'Antoine Wiertz', The Dictionary of Art, ed. by Jane Turner (London, 1996), vol.33, pp.170-1. For more information on Antoine Joseph Wiertz, cf. A. Moerman & F.C. Legrand, Antoine Wiertz, 1806-1865 (Paris, 1974).
- ²⁸ Broughton, Ghost Stories, p.20.
- ²⁹ Cf. appendix A.
- ³⁰ Broughton, Ghost Stories, p.20.
- ³¹ Ibid. p.20.
- ³² Ibid. p.30.
- ³³ Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, ed. by James Strachey, 15 vols (London, 1991), iv, p.736.
- ³⁴ Ibid. p.737.
- ³⁵ Hadfield, p.175.
- ³⁶ Ibid. p.176.
- ³⁷ Ibid. p.178.
- ³⁸ Ibid. p.176.
- ³⁹ Ibid. pp.180-5.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid. p.180.
- ⁴¹ Ibid. p.180.
- ⁴² Ibid. p.185.
- ⁴³ Ibid. p.186.
- ⁴⁴ Broughton, Ghost Stories, p.31.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid. p.35.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid. p.43.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid. p.39.
- ⁴⁸ Freud, p.348.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid. pp.349-56.
- ⁵⁰ Broughton, Ghost Stories, p.32.
- ⁵¹ Ibid. p.32.
- ⁵² Ibid. p.33.

- ⁵³ Ibid. p.33.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid. p.42.
- ⁵⁵ Freud, pp.350-1.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid. p.369.
- ⁵⁷ Broughton, Ghost Stories, p.172.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid. p.46.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid. p.58.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid. p.122.
- ⁶¹ Ibid. p.124.
- ⁶² Ibid. p.119.
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- ⁶⁴ Wood, p.14.
- ⁶⁵ Ethel M. Arnold, 'Rhoda Broughton as I Knew Her', Fortnightly Review, July/Dec. (1920), pp.262-78, p.263.
- ⁶⁶ Belloc Lowndes, p.189.
- ⁶⁷ Helen C. Black, Notable Women Authors of the Day (Glasgow, 1893), p.44.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid. p.38.
- ⁶⁹ Arnold, p.262.
- ⁷⁰ Black, pp.39-40.
- ⁷¹ Ibid. p.44.
- ⁷² Ibid. p.42.
- ⁷³ Wood, p.7.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid. p.54.
- ⁷⁵ Rhoda Broughton's correspondence, Delves Broughton Collection, letter from Matthew Arnold to Broughton, DDB M/A/I/1-4, Cheshire Record Office.
- ⁷⁶ Wood, p.96.
- ⁷⁷ 7 Dec. 1876, letter from Henry James to Broughton, DDB M/J/1/1-66, CRO.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid. 8 May 1913.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid. 8 May 1913.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid. 4 Jan. 1912.
- ⁸¹ Wood, p.12.
- ⁸² 11 Feb. 1895, letter from George Bentley to Broughton, DDB M/B/2/1, CRO.
- ⁸³ Wood, p.45.
- ⁸⁴ E. F. Benson, As We Were: A Victorian Peep Show (London, 1930), p.269.
- ⁸⁵ D.S. MacColl, 'Rhoda Broughton and Emilia Pattison', Nineteenth Century, vol.137, Jan./June (1945), pp.28-33, p.29.
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- ⁸⁷ Ibid. p.36.
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- ⁸⁹ Edith C. Batho & Bonamy Dobrée, The Victorians and After, 1830-1914 (London, 1938), iv, p.294.
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- ⁹¹ Broughton, Ghost Stories, p.5.
- ⁹² Wood, p.125.
- ⁹³ Ibid. p.84.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid. p.16.
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- ⁹⁹ Pamela K. Gilbert, Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels (Cambridge, 1997), p.10.
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- ¹⁰¹ Broughton, Ghost Stories, p.134.
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- ¹⁰³ Broughton, Ghost Stories, p.151.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p.150.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p.154.
- ¹⁰⁶ De Moor, p.62.
- ¹⁰⁷ Broughton, Ghost Stories, p.71.

- ¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p.71.
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- ¹¹⁰ Ibid. p.74.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid. p.73.
- ¹¹² Ibid. p.85.
- ¹¹³ Ibid. p.80.
- ¹¹⁴ Ibid. p.176.
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- ¹¹⁶ Ibid. p.177.
- ¹¹⁷ Ibid. p.177.
- ¹¹⁸ Ibid. p.180.
- ¹¹⁹ Ibid. p.176.
- ¹²⁰ Ibid. p.179.
- ¹²¹ Ibid. p.189.
- ¹²² Ibid. p.189.
- ¹²³ Ibid. p.180.
- ¹²⁴ Ibid. p.188.
- ¹²⁵ Ibid. p.190.
- ¹²⁶ Ibid. p.15.
- ¹²⁷ Ibid. p.163.
- ¹²⁸ Ibid. p.167.
- ¹²⁹ Ibid. p.163.
- ¹³⁰ Ibid. p.166.
- ¹³¹ Ibid. p.172.
- ¹³² Ibid. p.49.
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- ¹³⁴ Ibid. p.51.
- ¹³⁵ Ibid. p.61.
- ¹³⁶ Logie Barrow, Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebians, 1850-1910 (London, 1986), p.86.
- ¹³⁷ Rosemary Ellen Guiley, Harper's Encyclopaedia of Mystical and Paranormal Experience (London, 1991), p.275.
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- ¹⁴⁰ Janet Oppenheim, The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914 (Cambridge, 1985), p.213.
- ¹⁴¹ Broughton, Ghost Stories, pp.10-11.
- ¹⁴² Ibid. p.11.
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- ¹⁴⁵ Ibid. p.10.
- ¹⁴⁶ Ibid. p.38.
- ¹⁴⁷ Ibid. p.40.
- ¹⁴⁸ For a fuller discussion of Victorian Anglo-Irish relations, cf. Patrick O'Farrell, England and Ireland Since 1800 (Oxford, 1975); and Nicholas Mansergh, The Irish Question, 1840-1921: A Commentary on Anglo-Irish Relations and on Social and Political Forces in Ireland in the Age of Reform and Revolution (London, 1965).

**LANOE FALCONER:
A VICTORIAN GOSPEL**

DESPAIR

In 1891, Lanoe Falconer wrote a ghost story that captured the dilemmas of an age. More accurately termed a novella due to its original publication in book form, Cecilia de Noël¹ seethes with the conflict of both society and individuals in a bewildering transition from the innocence of familiar traditions to what new and uncompromising experience teaches them. The plot itself centres on the experiences of a group of guests staying at Weald Manor, the haunted country home of Lord and Lady Atherley. The appearance of this ghost to most of them, as well as its previous appearance to others, shakes the foundations of their own personal creeds, and in different ways makes them reassess their life-views. That these creeds are strongly held is emphasized by each guest being designated a chapter called a 'gospel'; this also functions in an ironic way, as most of the guests' opinions are shown by Falconer to be dogmatic, silly, or harsh. Throughout the traumatic experiences of the tale, the eponymous Cecilia de Noël, though absent until the final chapter, is mentioned constantly, not as some brilliant intellectual who would be able to provide all the answers, but as someone who, in some inexplicable way, might be able to ease their personal situations. Falconer keeps her chief character as mysterious near-legend for the greater part of the plot, the build-up making the revelation of the real woman all the more surprising. As such, the narrator and main character, Lyndsay, forms an intense interest in her by the time she makes her appearance, because of his own desperate need.

His is an intensely personal struggle against a despair that threatens to engulf him. At the point where the reader meets him, he is on the very brink of the conclusion that life has no point whatsoever; although suicide is never overtly discussed, it is mentioned.

Atherley is obviously worried, saying, 'I don't want you to rave or commit suicide in some untidy fashion, as the hero of a French novel does'.² Lyndsay himself touches on the subject obliquely, in conversation with a visiting doctor (about the latter's world-view): 'Surely, under these circumstances, the best thing would be to commit suicide?'.³ One has the definite impression that Lyndsay's existence is inexorably narrowing towards this awful point, but it is against his will; he does not *want* death; he wants someone or something to reconfirm the point of living. This is no straightforward depression that he gives into; Lyndsay *wants* more than anything to be able to value life and to feel that his life has some value. He struggles against the overwhelming feelings that everything is pointless. The reasons for such feelings become clear during the early part of the story. Ten years before he suffered a terrible hunting accident that almost killed him and which has left him a cripple. Though he still walks, it is in a way which necessitates dragging his leg after him, a means of which he is acutely self conscious, and which is so physically draining that minimal effort exhausts him. It becomes apparent that Lyndsay's despair stems from the realization that he no longer fits into his world. In a society that draws such definite lines between the sexes and their spheres, Lyndsay can no longer fulfil his role of patriarchal masculinity. He has been feminized, as his friend and host Lord Atherley reminds him: 'Remember, if you do come a cropper, it will go hard with you, old man: you can't shoot or hunt or fish off the blues, like other men'.⁴ Instead he is relegated to the drawing room and the world of women, where he has to endure their pity: ' "Don't keep Mr. Lyndsay up late, George," said my kind hostess; "he looks so tired" '.⁵ Whether rightly or wrongly, he no longer considers himself a true man, a conviction that is furthered by the breaking of his engagement: 'You were always hard upon her, George. She jilted a cripple for a very fine specimen of the race. Some of your favourite physiologists would say she was quite right'.⁶ There is evidence to suggest that George Atherley is indeed judging her harshly;

unbeknownst to him it would seem that Lyndsay has been self-sabotaging his relationship. He decides to cut his links with the past and his relationship by burning the remaining letters from his ex-fiancée, and in doing so their contents are revealed to the reader. Initially there is a short note: ‘ “Dear Mr. Lyndsay,” ran the first, “why did you not come over to-day? I was expecting you to appear all the afternoon. - Yours sincerely, G.E.L.” ’.⁷ The second bears even greater significance for Lyndsay’s actions:

You silly boy! I forbid you to ever to write or talk of yourself in such a way again. You are not a cripple; and if you had ever had a mother or a sister, you would know how little women think of these things. How many more assurances do you expect from me? Do you wish me to propose to you again? No, if you won’t have me, go. - Yours in spite of yourself, GLADYS.⁸

It would seem that the problem lies more with how Lyndsay perceives others’ altered view of him, rather than with how other people actually see him. The notes would suggest that his engagement would have continued but that he could not accept that a woman could possibly love him in his present physical state. He is being damaged, not only by his injuries, but also by the cynicism which has set in and is progressively eating at his sense of identity, self-worth, and will to live. In his view, whether they are being kind or cruel, others no longer see him as a man, but as a useless off-cut of humanity, with no manliness to be admired, capable of being neither husband nor father to the next generation. Any innocence or joy in life has been eroded by the results of his misfortune; it has tragically altered the way he views himself, and the way in which he observes others’ opinions.

Both for Lyndsay and for the reader, his insecurities are pictured in a starker light thanks to the contrast offered by his friend, George, Lord Atherley. He has provided unswerving support, both immediately after Lyndsay’s accident, and throughout the following ten years, but his physical person provides a cruel irony, this man:

whose wide-browed head a no less admirable frame supported. Even the stiff evening uniform of his class could not conceal the grace of form which health and activity had moulded, working through highly favoured generations. There was latent force implied in every line of it, and, in the steady poise of look and mien, that perfect nervous balance which is the crown of strength.⁹

Such a prepossessing beginning is borne out by the other aspects of his life. He has intelligence, wit, self-confidence, kindness, and in addition, social status, lands and wealth - topped off with good looks and athleticism. In short, he is the perfect specimen of the Victorian male. Blessed with such good fortune, he keeps himself busy with estate affairs and with his own interests in the subjects of the day, and has never known the meaning of the despair that has seized Lindsay. His is an open-hearted approach to life, as his advice to Lyndsay illustrates: 'I think it would go better with you, old chap, if you did not hold yourself in quite so tight'.¹⁰ As Lyndsay points out in response, his being 'as well-behaved as a woman'¹¹ is not a matter of his own choosing, but Atherley, in the simple acceptance of his own unchallenged masculinity, is unable to grasp the full extent of his friend's emotions.

Throughout Cecilia de Noël, and also in her other work, Lanoe Falconer constantly considers and re-evaluates the qualities of innocence and cynicism, and how the two can clash, or merge within the same person. The character of Lyndsay is the most obviously cynical, in a way that stems from bitter personal experience which has made him question the world, his place in it, and its reactions to himself. Atherley has no such personal cynicism; he exhibits the innocence of one whose life has been free of serious hardship or life-altering circumstances. On the other hand, he is a man of the world, with definite views on that world. He possesses much cynicism on the subject of religion, which will be dealt with fully later in this chapter, but in this case cynicism is equated with the experience which is built up by any educated, free-thinking person in

relation to matters which strike them as ridiculous or humorous. As for innocence, Falconer is careful to make the distinction between that which allows for a sense of joy in life and an ability to love one's fellow creatures, and that which is actually thinly veiled stupidity or naïveté. Of the former, the clearest example provided is that of the two children in the house, Harold and Denis. It would be all too easy to depict children in a mawkish and sentimental light, but Falconer largely manages to avoid the trap. Theirs is an uninhibited gusto for life, with all the attendant scrapes and mischief making, which, though it cannot cure, alleviates Lyndsay's internal suffering. Unlike in the world of adults, there is for him the relief of a lack of embarrassment about his injuries:

'I s'pose you are tired because you always have to pull your leg after you,' said Denis, turning upon me two large topaz-coloured eyes. 'Does it hurt you Mr. Lyndsay?'

'Mother told you not to talk about Mr. Lyndsay's leg,' observed Harold sharply. 'No, she didn't; she said I was not to talk about the funny way he walked.'¹²

It is harder for Lyndsay to bear the pointed skirting around the subject of Lady Atherley than the artless curiosity of the children. In their family life, Lyndsay is able to experience some of the love and kindness that he feels can never be his directly, and he chronicles this in his descriptions of their actions:

Atherley's little sons, Harold and Denis, were playing with a very unlovely but much-beloved mongrel called Tip. They had bought him with their own pocket-money from a tinker who was ill-using him, and then claimed for him the hospitality of their parents; so, though Atherley often spoke of the dog as a disgrace to the household, he remained a member thereof, and received from a family incapable of being uncivil, far less unkind, to an animal, as much attention as if he had been high-bred and beautiful - which indeed he plainly supposed himself to be.¹³

It is this kind of innocence, which later achieves its pinnacle in the person of Cecilia, which Falconer values so highly, and which, with its contrasts, she explores frequently in her other novels and stories. In 'The Hôtel d'Angleterre' (1891),¹⁴ the two sisters are

complete opposites; Belinda represents worldly, showy experience, and Joan, shy innocence. It is the latter which is depicted as the more attractive, not only to the reader, but to men. Despite Belinda's 'splendid poise and self possession',¹⁵ she is shown as bossy and overbearing, with a habit of marshalling the other guests at the hotel into a series of picnics and expeditions, which those who prefer not to have to think for themselves rather like. Though not deliberately cruel, she is dismissive of the quiet younger sister she has always overshadowed: 'Joan, who, with her wretched looks and manners, could hardly be expected to have ever got an offer at all'.¹⁶ When the young and handsome Sir Walter Montford arrives at the hotel, everyone assumes it will be Belinda he is attracted to: 'Everybody, high and low, prepared to watch the development of a love-affair. The servants were divided in opinion as to whether the hero and heroine were already betrothed or no'.¹⁷ However, Sir Walter is thoughtful and sensitive; he is repelled by such cynicism, and able to see beyond splendid poise. It is Joan he is drawn to, appreciating her good points: 'the fine lines of her brows and contour and the violet darkness of her beseeching eyes'¹⁸ sounds rather different to Belinda's perspective.

In 'The Violin Obbligato' (1891), however, Falconer illustrates that innocence can expose one to vulnerability and hurt. The young Sylvia, not yet 'out' and passing the summer in solitude with her violin, is drawn into the love affair of two friends, Paul and Jessica, whose duet at a local charity concert she is accompanying. The song's refrain is:

For we shall breast the storm of time
 unshaken
 And love tomorrow as we love today.¹⁹

The shy young girl experiences their relationship vicariously as a wonderful and dramatic romance, the more so when the pair are separated by Jessica's disapproving parents. Risking damage to her own reputation, Sylvia becomes the intermediary for their letters, with a touching belief in the song's message. However, worldly concerns intrude, and before a few months have elapsed, both have found new lovers, in Jessica's case one whom she cannot love or respect, but who brings wealth and social status to herself and her smug family. The mother's final words: 'There was nothing to grieve for, everybody was satisfied; all had ended well'²⁰ pass the understanding of the bewildered Sylvia, whose soul is unmoved by worldly considerations, and whose heart is broken by the cynicism of attitudes to 'love' and marriage.

In Cecilia de Noël's *Lady Atherley* we have the fullest picture of what the Victorians would have been pleased to term a suitable womanly innocence, but what was really a pitiable ignorance. Falconer, though using her for humorous situations, is yet not cruel, because she realizes it is the system, and not Lady Atherley, which has created this woman. She is a bundle of lace and conventions, whose function is to produce heirs and raise them suitably to take their positions within the upper classes, and Lyndsay ruminates on her type:

That a ghost should venture into Atherley's neighbourhood was less amazing than that it should continue to exist in his wife's presence, so much more fatal than his eloquence to all but the tangible and the solid. Her orthodoxy is above suspicion, but after some hours of her society I am unable to contemplate any aspects of life save the comfortable and the uncomfortable: while the Universe itself appears to me only a gigantic apparatus especially designed to provide Lady Atherley and their class with cans of hot water at stated intervals, costly repasts elaborately served, and all other requisites of irreproachable civilisation.²¹

She and her husband, though they seem to get along in relative harmony, have obviously married for social reasons, and are intellectually mismatched, as Atherley is aware:

‘You were in love once - twice,’ I added hastily, in deference to Lady Atherley.
‘Only once,’ said Atherley calmly.²²

Lady Atherley’s horror of the unconventional is a characteristic shared by Mrs Merrington, the lady of the house in Falconer’s first published novel, Mademoiselle Ixe (1890).²³ On meeting her she is discussing the problems associated with governesses: ‘Miss Olivier was everything one could wish as far as teaching went, and Evelyn improved under her very much, but she had very peculiar views, and indeed went as far as ladies’ rights; so of course I was not sorry when she left’.²⁴ The stress on convention rather than knowledge and education is abhorred by Falconer. In ‘A Piece of Old China’ (1889), a young woman retorts impetuously to her father’s views on a woman’s role, but can only act on her beliefs when compelled by financial misfortune:

‘Marian does not care for china as I could wish. She prefers expensive lessons in music and languages. It is a great mistake, as I tell her. In England blue-stockings never go down. In society there she would find a little knowledge of china much more useful.. Her piano strumming and her Italian will never help her to get married.’

‘They will help me to get my living,’ retorted Marian with flaming cheeks.
‘What nonsense you talk!’ cried her father.²⁵

As Marian’s life descends into near-poverty when she has to provide for herself, so Falconer condemns the slavery to which women were often reduced because of their forced dependence on, and subservience to, men. This is one of her themes in ‘An Idealist’ (1893), in which she exposes the too-frequent discrepancies between words and actions:

You see, it is part of the whole hideous injustice – overtime and underpay! They are always shouting against it for themselves – the men – and look at the poor

drudges in their homes behind them! 'A man's work is from sun to sun, but a women's work is never done.' And not work merely, however hard. Ill-health, torture, and risk of life – year after year, perhaps – all thrown into the bargain and paid with the same wages – which are barely thanks. That's the worst part of it – this cool acceptance of the whole thing as a matter of course.²⁶

She makes clear that ignorance is not something to be coveted, that it can only lead to weakness and oppression; and in the character of Cecilia de Noël, who will be discussed later, she gives us a woman who is neither a simple shrinking violet, nor silly society belle, but whose innocence of heart provides the balm for the many troubled minds in the story.

BREAD AND MANNA

The prevailing reason that Lyndsay is unable to overcome his depression and face the future is the immense and, to a great extent, never previously experienced, uncertainty about what that future contained. A revolution had been taking place: 'on 1 July 1858 Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace made the first public statement of their Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection before the Linnean Society of London, and their papers were published on 20 August of the same year'.²⁷ Though Finucane asserts that already, 'By the beginning of the nineteenth century, "science" was a fully-fledged member of the English intellectual Establishment',²⁸ and that all branches were advancing, this was the beginning of the furious and controversial debate most frequently associated with Darwin's The Origin of Species.²⁹ This undermined the biblical view of the world's beginnings, as told in the Book of Genesis: 'many Victorians feared that the walls of religion were crumbling before the onslaught of science'.³⁰ Mass doubt in matters of religion assailed the Victorians as a product of these huge leaps forward in science and technology, and for the first time society as a whole had to face questions about the validity of their beliefs surrounding God, life, and death. Atheism was becoming an increasingly common phenomenon, and whilst for some it was a clear-cut path, for many the pull between long-held religious traditions and what scientific experience was teaching proved a terrible struggle. Reactions varied, with atheism at one extreme, to fundamentalism at the other, and with many undecided and maintaining their church going out of habit or social pressure.³¹

Lord Atherley is one of those whose vision of life is straightforward, and who is perfectly comfortable and self-assured about the fact. It is he who begins the story with

the bald aphorism that 'There is no revelation but that of science',³² and later declares to Mrs Molyneux: 'Show me a religion which cultivates common sense, and I will embrace it at once'.³³ He is happy to state openly his atheism, glad to hold forth in his witty way on his reasoning, and enjoys not a little his power to shock the conventional, including his wife. He views the scientific as 'a healthy appetite for bread' which 'completely satisfies all reasonable desires',³⁴ and the attachment to religion 'a sickly craving for manna'.³⁵ He would have been in strong agreement with the argument that the Victorian period:

was a time when science was most forcefully extending its authority in the realm of knowledge and even beyond, into religion and morals, and when it really did seem for a while that apparently insoluble problems could be solved, that the limits imposed on human society by material conditions could be broken, and that knowledge was an aspect of morality, so that the highest Victorian virtue was 'Truth'.³⁶

As to his thoughts on the reality of their visitor from the other side, he is typically definite; it is a 'bogie', or, in other words, 'a real thing belonging to the external world'.³⁷ The reasons for it 'appearing' are anything but supernatural:

Sometimes it is not heard of for years; then all at once it reappears, generally, I may observe, when some imaginative female in the house is in love, or out of spirits, or bored in any other way. She sees it, and then of course - the complaint being highly infectious - so do a lot more.³⁸

One who would concur with his opinion, though in slightly different terms, would be the visiting doctor who plays the chief role in 'The Stranger's Gospel', who believes that 'No event which has actually taken place can actually be supernatural',³⁹ and treats 'seeing a ghost' as one of his patient's physical symptoms of whatever their malady may be. This well educated and highly strung young man falls into the same category as those who seek to reduce 'religious experience to mental disorder, the advocates of scientific naturalism sought to replace the existing clerical and literary intellectual elite.

A culture based on science must replace one founded on religion'.⁴⁰ He argues that 'Nothing is sadder in the whole tragedy, or comedy, than these pitiable efforts to hide the truth, to gloss it over with fables which nobody in his heart of hearts believes'.⁴¹ In this he is like Darwin, who began as a Christian, but gradually lost his belief,⁴² stating that: 'disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete. The rate was so slow that I felt no distress, and have never since doubted even for a single second that my conclusion was correct'.⁴³ That this was a relatively trouble-free process for Darwin is evident in the fact that though his wife remained a staunch believer, they lived together happily, she taking great pride in his achievements. Of the publication of The Descent of Man⁴⁴ she observed: 'I think it will be very interesting, but that I shall dislike it very much as again putting God further off'.⁴⁵

For Lyndsay, however, the fact that his life, in terms of bare facts, has become so unbearable, means that, though sceptical, he wants and needs to believe in something beyond the world he can see: 'If there was nothing behind and beyond all this, what an empty freak of destiny my life would have been - full, not even of sound and fury, but of dull commonplace suffering: a tale told by an idiot with a spice of malice in him'.⁴⁶

As Turner observes, 'Men were still led to tackle questions which science did not respond to adequately'.⁴⁷ His desperation lives with him during his days, and haunts his nights:

To my heart, if not to my lips, sprang the old old cry for help which anguish has wrung from generation after generation. The agony of mine, I felt wildly, must pierce through sense, time, space, everything - even to the Living Heart of all and bring thence some token of pity! For one instant my passion seemed to beat against the silent heavens, then to fall back bruised and bleeding.⁴⁸

His reference to 'the Living Heart' suggests a deep-rooted belief, though it may be under assault because he sees no evidence in his own circumstances. Cecilia de Noël is

is typical in that, 'these stories provide a kind of momentary reassurance to readers, regardless of their daily "rational" beliefs. Most ghost stories, although not necessarily anti-scientific, imply that science cannot "explain it all"'.⁴⁹

Whilst Lyndsay is searching for some sign of a power beyond human life to give validity to his existence, and regards the possibility of a ghost as a potential answer, another of Weald Manor's guests, Mrs Lucinda Molyneux, is also seeking, though she is not fully aware, until she sees the ghost, of what for. As Finucane points out, 'In a Christian society assailed by doubts and science, but influenced too by romantic hopes and visions, Victorian apparitions satisfied the thirst for immortality'.⁵⁰ A new organization, the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), was launched in 1882, to investigate the truth behind paranormal activity. A brilliant and fashionable socialite, Mrs Molyneux espouses with comical rapidity each new pseudo-religion proffered by the latest con man or woman. Having exhausted the field of Spiritualism, she amuses Atherley, and shocks his wife into dropping the stitches of her knitting, by declaring that her latest faith 'has nothing to do with God at all'.⁵¹ Tempting fate, her last speech before bed on the first evening of her stay is, 'Oh, how I pray that I may see the ghost!'.⁵² Her wish, of course, is granted, but does not fall in with the silly excitements of her séances and table liftings, instead violently exposing the fallacy her life is built on:

I used to be so contented with it all - its pleasures, its little triumphs, even its gossip; and what I called my aspirations I satisfied with what was nothing more than phrases. And now I have found my real self, now I am awake, I want much more, and there is nothing - only a great silence, a great loneliness.⁵³

The ghost, for her, has only created more questions, and as such, for Lyndsay who does not see the ghost, also. It will take Cecilia, at the end of the novella, to interpret the apparition.

Mrs Molyneux, however, is not alone in her embrace of 'supernatural' phenomenon, as a way to answer the increasingly complicated questions surrounding life and death. Henry Sidgwick, Cambridge philosopher and mentor of the young Darwin, also turned to alternatives to traditional religion:

Sidgwick thought certain contemporary psychical phenomena, if discovered to be valid, might provide sufficient empirical evidence for belief in the survival of the human personality after death. These phenomena included hypnotism, mesmerism, mental telepathy, apparitions, and spiritualistic communications'.⁵⁴

Educated people at the forefront of debate, as well as bored socialites, were groping in shady arenas for a modicum of certainty. Even the co-discoverer of natural selection, the scientist Alfred Russel Wallace, defended Spiritualism,⁵⁵ presumably in an effort to replace the still-needed idea of God he had shattered. It was not only God that some feared losing. The man of letters, Frederic W.H. Myers, who felt that 'psychical research constituted an endeavour to provide the foundation for a new religion',⁵⁶ worried about what man would sacrifice to science:

He expected psychical research to furnish data that would lead to 'the discovery by scientific methods of a spiritual world' and eventually to a religion according to which neither the life nor the love of human beings could ever become extinct.⁵⁷

There is a fear that the coldness of science will destroy the most noble human characteristics and emotions, and that the resultant technology, in a Wellsian vision of the future, could ultimately threaten the continuation of humanity. Myers attempts to fuse the science he cannot deny and the spirituality he cannot abandon to achieve a positive, harmonious result. All of the people above are striving to forge a middle route between science and religion, feeling that neither one on its own could answer life's

questions and problems. It was an approach that stood against the totalitarianism - but not everything - of Darwin's creed.

However, there were those who had no interest in compromise, and stood by their religious principles. In some cases this had less to do with Christian love than with determination, and even narrow mindedness. Falconer represents several different aspects of this through her characters Mrs Mostyn, Canon Vernade, and the young curate, Austyn. Of the first, her uncompromising attitude is all the more frightening because of the contrast with her veneer of sweetness: 'a white-haired old lady long past seventy, with the bloom of youth on her cheek, its vivacity in her step, and its sparkle in her eyes'.⁵⁸ She has seen the ghost in her youth, and her belief that it is a lost soul began her conversion from materialistic, flippant young girl to the old woman whose underlying hardness is revealed in her mechanically uttered mantra: ' "Many are called," she repeated, "but few are chosen; and those who are not chosen shall be cast into everlasting fire" '.⁵⁹ It is enough to make her unusual youthfulness seem almost vampiric, as if her conviction that she is one of the Elect and thus certain of eternal salvation is fed by her equal determination that others are only fit for perpetual suffering and death. For Lyndsay, searching in her story for comfort through the ghost, and expecting it from this supposedly sweet old lady, her gospel is terrifying:

I [...] beheld, entire, distinct, the spectre that drives men to madness or despair - illimitable omnipotent Malice. In its shadow the colour of the flowers was quenched, and the music of the birds rang false. Yet it wore the consecration of time and authority! What if it were true?⁶⁰

Only the touch of the child Denis is able to wake him from the evil spell Mrs Mostyn casts around him, and allows him to feel that her gospel is a lie.

Canon Vernade is a pompous hypocrite, esteemed by people such as his niece, Lady Atherley, for his dignified position within the Church of England, and forgetful of the genuine reasons for being there. Having preached a stirring sermon on the worthlessness of material riches compared to a heavenly reward, he discusses with exasperation an old school-fellow, still in the ranks of ordinary clergy, who has turned down a wealthy living the Canon arranged, on a matter of conscience. Falconer also attacks hypocrisy in 'An Idealist', in which the idealist of the title, Stephen Hope (a significant surname), is abruptly dissuaded from joining the 'New Brotherhood' when he discovers that its charismatic leader, far from practising the practical humanism which he preaches, is a bully who badly treats his downtrodden wife.⁶¹

Canon Vernade's thoughts on the subject of the supernatural, at least, if not his reasoning, would meet with the Atherley's approval: ' "Preposterous! Perfectly preposterous!" cried the Canon. "The Education Act in operation for all these years, and our lower orders still believe in bogies and hobgoblins!" '.⁶² He is comfortable that he has the world worked out: 'realise that we are not moving on the stage of a Christmas pantomime, but in a universe governed by fixed laws, in which the miraculous performances you describe to me never can, and never could, have taken place'.⁶³ In his self-satisfaction he is oblivious to the irony of his denying the validity of miracles. When he sees the ghost, his confusion is perhaps more complete than anyone's, possibly because his certitude is based on such superficial foundations. His cry to Lyndsay is 'What if it were all a delusion, and there be no Father, no Saviour?'.⁶⁴ One feels that his terror is possibly good for him rather than otherwise, because it causes him to think about fundamentals, slicing through his worldly concerns.

The despair which he feels is comparable to what was felt in reality by many of Darwin's contemporaries, such as his old tutor, Professor Sidgwick; he accused his former pupil of trying to: 'sink the human race into a lower grade of degradation than any into which it has fallen since its written records tell us of its history'.⁶⁵ He was unable to abandon the ingrained religious dogma and adopt the new purely rational approach, nor was he able to reconcile the two as others managed. Like others, he was also appalled at the biological fact of being descended from apes.⁶⁶ However, the most detailed -and arguably the most moving - description of the turmoil caused by the battle of science and religion takes place in Edmund Gosse's Father and Son (1907),⁶⁷ during what he calls 'that year of scientific crisis'.⁶⁸

Edmund Gosse was born in 1849; his father, Philip, was a zoologist and writer of books on natural history. His mother also wrote - mainly religious tracts - in her early years. Both were zealous members of the Plymouth Brethren; his mother, the more gentle, affectionate, and balanced of Gosse's parents, died when he was seven. Initially, the scientist in Philip Gosse was uppermost: 'every instinct in his intelligence went out at first to greet the new light. It had hardly done so, when a recollection of the opening chapter of "Genesis" checked it at the outset'.⁶⁹ Gosse describes his father's struggle, writing from his own viewpoint of scientific atheism:

It was not, really, a paradox, it was a fallacy, if he could only have known it, but he allowed the turbid volume of superstition to drown the delicate stream of reason. He took one step in the service of truth, and then he drew back in an agony, and accepted the servitude of error.⁷⁰

More specifically, 'Geology certainly *seemed* to be true, but the Bible, which was God's word, *was* true'.⁷¹ In a desperate attempt to create a sense of unity for himself out of this seeming contradiction, he published in 1857 Omphalos: An Attempt to Untie the Geological Knot, its aim being to unite science and scripture. Its basic premise was that

the world was formed as a mature planet; it was caricatured as the theory 'that God hid the fossils in the rocks in order to tempt geologists into infidelity'.⁷² The response was blunt and traumatic: 'atheists and Christians alike looked at it, and laughed, and threw it away'.⁷³ Philip Gosse was crushed by the ridicule of those with whom he was used to associating. He moved out of London, to Devon, taking the young Edmund with him, where he suffered from 'a dislocation of his intellectual system':⁷⁴ a depression so severe that it sounds like what today would be described as a nervous breakdown. This, naturally, was extremely disturbing for the young son to witness. His father became increasingly paranoid about committing sin,⁷⁵ but at the same time, Gosse felt, 'he began, in his depression, to be angry with God'⁷⁶ for so rewarding his devotion. He never really recovered from this blow, nor reconciled the ideas of science and religion.

One who has no such doubts, but is nearer to Mrs Mostyn in the harshness of his religious certitude, is the curate Austyn, who practices his doctrine with the almost masochistic self-persecution of a Jesuit. He fasts constantly and lives in a bare room completely bereft of any worldly comfort. Lyndsay ponders, 'why he repelled as well as attracted me; what it was behind the almost awe-inspiring purity and earnestness I felt in him that left me with a chill sense of disappointment?'.⁷⁷ However, as the curate begins to express the tenets of his beliefs, the answer to that becomes clearer. Austyn holds that the 'first manifestation of God is always of "one that is angry with us and threatens evil" ';⁷⁸ that God should be linked with evil perhaps strikes Lyndsay as bizarre, but the young ascetic's final summation of God as 'Sovereign, Lawgiver, Judge'⁷⁹ is what finally clinches Lyndsay's disgust, when he states, 'I was hungering for bread; I was given a stone'.⁸⁰ In all his conversations with those who have seen the ghost, he has yet found no satisfactory answers to his questions, nor comfort in his despair.

THE GHOST

Not everyone in the story finds the ghost harrowing. Lady Atherley never sees it, doubtless because she lacks the imagination, which is also why the idea does not disturb her on a deeper level. She is, as usual, however, concerned with the material problems which arise as a consequence of living in a haunted house:

Directly I heard of it I knew we should have trouble with the servants [...] And then it is so awkward about visitors. What are we to do when the fishing season begins? I cannot get George to understand that some people have a great objection to anything of the kind, and are quite angry if you put them into a haunted room.⁸¹

Her husband, who is not treated to a glimpse of the apparition either, regards the subject with his typical scepticism, discussing it in terms of fashion:

If you study the reports of societies that hunt the supernatural, you will find that the latest thing in ghosts is very quiet and commonplace. Rattling chains and blue lights, and even fancy dress, have quite gone out. And the people who see the ghosts are not even startled at first sight; they think it is a visitor, or a man come to wind the clocks. In fact, the chic thing for a ghost in these days is to be mistaken for a living person.⁸²

Falconer takes a sly dig at the way her contemporaries assimilated the supernatural into the round of society entertainments, but also provides some irony. For all Lord Atherley's self-assured wit and scepticism, the ghost which inhabits Weald Manor is far more than a manifestation, via the imaginations of his guests, of the latest vogue in spectres. He does not see it, perhaps, because his self-confidence is not mixed with conceit; his assurance does not involve condemnatory dogma, and under his habit of poking fun lies kindness rather than cruelty.

Others, however, have a lesson to learn. In common with many contemporary women's ghost stories, 'the interest does not lie in the ghost, but in the effect it produces in one after another of the people it visits'.⁸³ Unfortunately, what emerges is the human ability to miss the point. Though the ghost may shake the foundations of the beliefs of those to whom it appears, they prioritize their own fear (although Falconer never attempts to suggest this is not natural), and assume from the outset that the ghost means them harm. Mrs Mostyn and Austyn both surmise that it is without doubt a lost soul, the latter prefacing his conclusion with, 'Its face, as I tell you, was a revelation of evil - evil and its punishment',⁸⁴ adding that once lost, to continue in its suffering, even if it repents, must be part of that punishment.⁸⁵ It could be argued that Canon Vernade and Mrs Molyneux leave Weald Manor wiser and better people, such is the realization about their own lives that follows the shock. Mrs Mostyn and Austyn are only hardened in their uncompromising view of life and what comes after, as is the stranger doctor, though he is responding to a second-hand account. For all, however, though they may have failed in their interpretation of the apparition, their experience shakes, if only temporarily, their sense of human complacency.

When Mrs Molyneux discusses the ghost with Lyndsay, she says: 'Yes, it was in hell, because hell is not a great gulf, like Dante described, and I used to think; it is no place at all - it is something we make ourselves'.⁸⁶ In that evaluation she speaks of both the ghost and those who witness its appearance. The 'lost soul' is a manifestation of the wrong deeds it has committed whilst in human form, and Mrs Molyneux becomes conscious of herself reflected in this human form. In the same way the similarities between the ghost and Lyndsay become increasingly apparent. Both are helpless to alter their circumstances; both are condemned to indefinite suffering; both are seeking escape. They represent the extreme in the story of what is demonstrated by so many of

the characters: a lack of *something* in their lives - for example the emptiness which Mrs Molyneux comes to recognize which can no longer be filled by society pleasures - whether they realize it or not, many are seeking certainty, reassurance, and/or a balance. The other need they share is for help to interpret this distress; this help arrives in the shape of one extraordinary human being: the long-awaited Cecilia de Noël.

CECILIA DE NOËL

Until the final chapter, Lanoe Falconer deliberately builds up Cecilia de Noël as the person least likely to provide a solution to the supernatural problem of the Atherley's family home. The stranger doctor groups her as one of the 'unknown, unremarkable people - whom the world never heard of, nor is likely to hear of, living uneventful obscure lives in out-of-the-way corners'.⁸⁷ Yet, as with the ghost, Falconer gives the impression that the family and friends who surround Cecilia and supposedly know her best, miss her point. In choosing to have Lady Atherley provide a description in answer to Lyndsay's questioning, Falconer is able to illustrate how Cecilia appears judged purely on a shallow society level:

'She is tall and rather fair, with brown hair. Not exactly pretty, but very ladylike-looking. I think she would be very good-looking if she thought more about her dress.'

'Is she clever?'

'No, not at all; and that is very strange, for the Atherleys are such a clever family, and she has quite the ways of a clever person, too; so odd, and so stupid about little things that anyone can remember. I don't believe she could tell you, if you asked her, what relation her husband was to Lord Stowell'.⁸⁸

In other words, the implication is that Cecilia is indeed intelligent, but is considered not to be so by a society, as represented by Lady Atherley, who cannot fit her within their narrow definitions of 'clever'. There is no showiness to her, and she is unlike the rest of her family; she has no desire to propound her views, as Lord Atherley so willingly does. Neither can she be assessed by Lady Atherley's normal scale of womanly attributes; she is concerned with more important things than finery and genealogy, so making her 'odd'.

She could certainly not be considered as a straightforward feminist heroine. She concurs happily, 'in her slow gentle way'⁸⁹ with her family's view of her, and possesses the feminine virtue of modesty in abundance, referring to herself as 'stupid'⁹⁰ when attempting to express herself on serious subjects, in deference to her male audience, who she refers to as 'clever'.⁹¹ She willingly joins in the jokes about her oddities and absent-mindedness, as when Atherley teases her about having married the only man who would put up with her: 'I said: "I hope, for one thing, you can live on air, old chap, for you will get nothing more for dinner if you trust to Cissy to order it"'.⁹² Cecilia provides a solution, but, as in her other work, she does so with qualities which actually transcend gender definitions; after all, the other women characters are usually so caught up with the superficial veneer of society that any 'feminine virtues' they possess are depicted as artificial and pointless, Lady Atherley being the prime case. She may display characteristics such as gentleness and modesty, which in today's analysis, when taken in connection with Victorian women, are usually translated as feebleness, but Falconer is at pains to show that hers are qualities which are sadly lacking in upper-class circles, and which her other characters would do well to adopt, be they male or female. This is a constant theme which reoccurs in her other work. In 'The Violin Obligato' Sylvia Llanover is valued for her 'simplicity of manner',⁹³ and in 'A Rainy Day' (1891) the heroine Lydia is favourably compared for her depth of feeling with her irrepressible sister Madge: 'she said nothing, as was her fashion when she felt much'.⁹⁴

In her first novel, Mademoiselle Ixe, published the year before Cecilia de Noël, Falconer depicts woman as avenging angel, on a mission to kill a male oppressor. In her second tale, the central woman is instead a female saviour, and religious imagery in connection with Cecilia is plentiful. Firstly, of course, there is her surname, with its allusions to the birth of Christ, and entrance into the world of a deliverer. When

Lyndsay first catches sight of her, he likens her to 'a new Madonna',⁹⁵ and Mrs Molyneux compares her to 'a picture of the Magdalene, kissing the bleeding feet upon the cross'.⁹⁶ The reason for this, and the reason for her being able to minister to both human and supernatural need, is her pity: the kind which has its origins in love rather than condescension:

No suffering could ever be disgusting or shocking to Cecilia, nor ridiculous, nor grotesque. The more humiliating it was, the more pitiful it would be to her. Anything that suffers is sacred to Cecilia. She would comfort, as if she went on her knees to one.⁹⁷

Lyndsay himself discovers the truth of this description of Mrs Molyneux's, when Cecilia realizes his injuries: 'her eyes grew softer with such tender pity as not yet had shone for me - motherless, sisterless - on any women's face'.⁹⁸ She is able, too, to understand despair, as her baby has died. In addition, she is shown, Christ-like, as possessing the gift of healing. When the dog, Tip, is ill, the children ask that he be allowed to lie on Cecilia's dress, with a conviction that this will help him, much as the sick would touch the hem of Jesus's robe as he passed, and be cured.

Because of this it is Cecilia, alone out of all the other characters, who has the strength to consider the ghost before herself: 'the more I thought, the more sad and strange it seemed that not one of those who saw it, not even Aunt Eleanour [*Mrs Mostyn*], who is so kind and thoughtful, had had one pitying thought for it'.⁹⁹ Her response is typical: 'So when I said my prayers, I asked especially that if it should appear to me, I might have strength to forget all selfish fear and try only to know what it wanted'.¹⁰⁰ This is exactly what happens, though Falconer is careful to depict her as retaining human weakness, rather than as a superwoman:

I was afraid - so much afraid, I only wanted to get out of sight of it. And I think I would have gone, but it stretched out its hands to me as if it were asking for

something, and then, of course, I could not go. So, though I was trembling a little, I went nearer and looked into its face. And after that, I was not afraid any more, I was too sorry for it; its poor poor eyes were so full of anguish.¹⁰¹

She is the only one who can bring herself to look into its face, and so she discovers the dreadfulness of the ghost's situation: 'I learnt that in another world there may be worse for us to bear than even here - sorrow more hopeless, more lonely'.¹⁰² Thus far, this would seem to support Mrs Mostyn and Austyn's views of eternal damnation; the spirit has indeed caused its own suffering through evil actions whilst alive. However, the similarities end here because of the human response:

I held out my arms to this poor lonely thing, but it shrank back, crying:
'Speak to me, but do not touch me, brave human creature. I am all death, and if you come too near me the Death in me may kill the life in you.'

But I said: 'No Death can kill the life in me, even though it kill my body. Dear fellow-spirit, I cannot tell you what I know; but let me take you in my arms; rest for an instant on my heart, and perhaps I may make you feel what I feel all around us.'

And as I spoke I threw my arms around the shadowy form and strained it to my breast. And I felt as if I were pressing to me only air, but air colder than any ice, so that my heart seemed to stop beating, and I could hardly breathe. But I still clasped it closer and closer, and as I grew colder it seemed to grow less chill.

And at last it spoke, and the whisper was not far away, but near. It said:

'It is enough; now I know what God is!'

After that I remember nothing more, till I woke up and found myself lying on the floor beside my bed. It was morning, and the spirit was not there; but I have a strong feeling that I have been able to help it, and that it will trouble you no more.¹⁰³

Maintaining the depiction of Cecilia as a female saviour, this could well be read as religious allegory, with Cecilia as Jesus Christ. She is willing to sacrifice herself to save an otherwise doomed being, and is confident of transcending physical death. In her actions as intermediary she conveys a sense of God the Father to the one she saves.

In saving the ghost, she also saves Lyndsay, although it is her response, rather than the ghost, which provides his solution. He describes it as 'the light which had risen upon my darkness - the light that never was on land or sea, but shines reflected on the human

face'.¹⁰⁴ In answer to Atherley's argument that Cecilia had dreamt the whole episode, he offers an ecstatic reply:

'And let it be a dream,' I said. 'It is of no consequence, for the dreamer remains, breathing and walking on this solid earth. I have touched her hand, I have looked into her face. Thank God! She is no vision, the woman who could dream this dream! George, how do you explain the miracle of her existence?'
But Atherley was silent.¹⁰⁵

Cecilia reconciles the supernatural and the human, and in doing so reconciles Lyndsay to life. Atherley's silence, which ends the story, is in stark contrast to the volubility with which he began it, and thus the impact of Cecilia is doubly effective. Atherley can offer no rational or slick cynicism to play down the force of his cousin's actions. What Cecilia offers is in contrast to everything that has gone before in the story. She has innocence, but it is not the type to be confused with naïveté or the silliness of Lady Atherley. It is completely at odds with Atherley's scientific, rational approach to life, but as his silence shows, Falconer gives Cecilia the ability to address the issues which science cannot answer. Her solution is not of the arid intellectual type demonstrated by the stranger doctor or Austyn. Most fundamentally, she brings balance to the question of religion, offering a belief that is founded on love rather than doctrine. In this way she avoids the crisis which plagues many of the other characters, distilling her thoughts into one simple statement to Lyndsay:

is it not strange? So many people from the great world come and ask me if there is any God. Really good people, you know, so honourable, so generous, so self-sacrificing. It is just the same to me as if they should ask me whether the sun was shining, when all the time I saw the sunshine on their faces.¹⁰⁶

Unlike Austyn's God, which threatens evil, Cecilia's brings only joy, and illumination rather than doubt. For her there are no complicated questions of denominations and doctrinal differences; she incurs the disapproval of Canon Vernade for lending a field for a Methodist meeting, but this is typical of her concern with God as opposed to the

petty attempts to turn Him into a political, dogmatic, or social issue by the men who claim to serve him. Lanoe Falconer, in her creation of Cecilia de Noël, brings us a truly remarkable female saviour.

IN THE DARK

Lanoe Falconer's close friend, Lady Camilla Gurdon, recorded that the author felt that Cecilia de Noël contained *her* gospel.¹⁰⁷ Falconer herself expounds on this when, just prior to publication in 1891, she wrote to her cousin, Henry Houndle, to express her ideas on her novel, saying it 'is an attempt to express my conviction that in the goodness of human beings, especially of some exquisite characters, we possess a revelation which scientific criticism cannot account for or explain away'.¹⁰⁸ In a second letter she continued to emphasize her point: 'its chief import is this - that the only revelation which science cannot explain away is the revelation of goodness in the human character'.¹⁰⁹ It might be said that Cecilia is a female saviour in that she is able to reveal the true saviour to these humans who are too far, in every sense, from Him to hear the message for themselves; the author regarded the story as an allegory.¹¹⁰ Falconer compounds her 'gospel' in her inscription at the front of the book:

Through such souls alone,
 GOD, stooping, shows sufficient of His Light
 For us i' the dark to rise by.¹¹¹

Cecilia therefore, as well as female saviour, is ultimately an instrument of God; she passes on the revelation of his presence - always apparent to her - to others who would otherwise be blind. They are too caught up with human concerns and experience to accept God in himself, but they are able to be touched by his human representative. In Lyndsay's case this is necessary because he can not have one without the other; he needs a human to prove the existence and saving nature of God, and God to reconcile him to life. In discussing the significance of the spectre itself, Falconer expressed her carefully worded opinion that, 'The ghost which represents the sinner *may* have no

existence save in the imagination of those who saw it'.¹¹² The important issue is its effects, one of which is to sweep away dogma and theory: 'No need of Councils or Synods – the human heart often mistakes the letter but secures the spirit'.¹¹³

Though Falconer said that Cecilia was not, directly, based on anyone from life, she did, in part, represent certain aspects of people the author knew, among them Eveline, Lady Portsmouth, of Hurstbourne Park.¹¹⁴ Lanoe Falconer spent a great deal of time here, and noted Lady Portsmouth's unceasing kindness to the younger girls. Falconer became extremely close to her second daughter, Camilla, who became Lady Camilla Gurdon..¹¹⁵

We have it from Falconer herself, however, that the character of Mrs Mallet was based on a real person; she was taken from one of their own much-loved family servants; the author, in her book of reminiscences, muses on the fact that the formidable cook was the only character to receive criticism:

One approaches with some diffidence the subject of Mrs. Mallet, whose first appearance on the printed page was hardly what had been expected by her admirers. The one study from life in a group of imaginary characters, she was denounced as unnatural, impossible and overdrawn. So far, indeed, this confirmed the fidelity of the copy, since the original herself was undoubtedly overdrawn, and, as her portrait was said to do, verged on caricature.¹¹⁶

Certainly, the real Mrs Mallet evidenced the strongest links with the world of the supernatural, as is recorded humorously by Falconer: 'As to spirits, they did not merely come when she did call them, they flocked to her uninvited, even in the least propitious circumstances'.¹¹⁷ Like Cecilia de Noël's Mrs Mallet, the inference is that the person who shouts loudest about her spirit encounters is, in fact, the one who has convinced herself of her seeing a ghost, and/or has almost certainly encountered one of Atherley's 'bogies' rather than the genuine article. Her comic pronouncements in Cecilia de Noël are often taken directly from life, as when Lady Atherley demands to know how Mrs Mallet can tell that the latter's own face is white, and the cook replies, 'with great

dignity': 'Which I looked down my nose and it were like a corpse's'.¹¹⁸ As Richard Faber indicates, 'upper servants (butlers, housekeepers and ladies' maids) enjoyed lower middle-class status and might become impressively genteel'.¹¹⁹ The 'self-conscious and self-satisfied simper'¹²⁰ which Mrs Mallet cultivates further supports this argument. Also true is the somewhat curious comforter which persuades Mrs Mallet to remain in a haunted house: 'I had a dream that night and a spirit seemed to whisper in my ear: "Don't be afraid, it is only a token of death" '.¹²¹ The incident where Mrs Mallet's sleep is disturbed, which in Cecilia de Noël has the suspected culprit as Lady Atherley, took place in reality, but with Falconer's sister, Julia, as the initial accused: ' "I can only compare it," she said of one experience that had disturbed her slumbers, "to the dragging of 'eavy furniture, which I really thought, Miss, it were you a-coming up to waken me" '.¹²²

As Bruce Robbins points out: 'nothing is more faithful to comic tradition than a sudden involuntary stumble from the heights of praise into a pointed disservice',¹²³ which is exactly what Mrs Mallet achieves in slipping from her usual somewhat self-satisfied deference. He also argues that, 'given the conventions of realism, it is even more evident in the novel that the moral and intellectual qualities to be inferred from the servant's part in these dialogues do not compose a flattering portrait of the class'.¹²⁴ The critics of Cecilia de Noël's Mrs Mallet would doubtless agree with this judgement. However, as with all Falconer's characters, though she may poke fun at them, it is always with a degree of affection, rather than cruelty, and this is never more evident than with Mrs Mallet, whom Falconer knew and loved personally. Furthermore, throughout her work, Falconer consistently identifies qualities, rather than class. These can be positive or negative, as when discussing a penchant for ghost-seeing: 'But persons of this type, whether in drawing rooms or kitchens, are not dependent for

excitement upon material terrors, being alive to manifestations that are commonly and quaintly called "spiritual" '.¹²⁵ Both the high-society belle, Mrs Molyneux, and Mrs Mallet can be accused of happily accepting/manufacturing paranormal experiences to brighten up an otherwise dull existence. There is also the difference in the way which Lady Atherley and Cecilia treat servants. The latter, when Mrs Molyneux is explaining the principles of her latest religious craze, hastily interrupts with, 'perhaps it would be as well just to wait for a little, you know - just till the servants are out of the room? They might perhaps think it a little odd'.¹²⁶ Her character, whom Falconer uses to highlight faults of the upper classes, has been brought up to the view that servants need to be treated much as children, and are incapable of thinking for themselves, or sorting out good and bad influences. Cecilia, however, takes a very different approach, as Atherley demonstrates in one of his humorous addresses:

My dear Jane, I must say that in taking a servant on Cissy's recommendation you did not display your usual sound common sense. I should have soon as thought of asking her to buy me a gun, knowing that she would carefully pick out the one least likely to shoot anything. Cissy is accustomed to look upon a servant as something to be waited on and taken care of. Her own household, as we all know, is composed chiefly of chronic invalids.¹²⁷

The character through which Falconer propounds her 'gospel' is one who regards servants as equal to her in their humanity, rather than automatons there merely to provide a service. Cecilia herself, with her typical mix of self-effacement and humour at her own expense, repeats the frustrations of her maid, Parkins: 'She said I was the most trying lady she had ever waited upon. She often says so. I am afraid it is true'.¹²⁸ That a servant should address her mistress in this way, and that the mistress should agree with her, is in distinct contrast to normal behaviour, especially in the rest of this novel. I cannot even agree that Falconer inadvertently does Mrs Mallet a disservice, as the emphasis is neither on moral or intellectual grounds. Ultimately, when Robbins suggests that 'servants fill the margins of texts devoted to their superiors',¹²⁹ it is

difficult not to conclude that few could have done this so admirably as the overdrawn, and completely delightful, Mrs Mallet.

The woman who wrote this extraordinary novella, so much more than simply a ghostly tale, was born Mary (or Marie) Elizabeth Hawker in 1848 in Aberdeenshire. She came from an old Hampshire family, already familiar with fame; her grandfather was Colonel Peter Hawker (1786-1853), whose Instructions to Young Sportsmen in All that Relates to Guns and Shooting (1814) and diaries are still being read today.¹³⁰ This illustrious heritage was continued through Falconer's nephew, Lanoe Hawker, (1890-1916), who was the first fighter pilot to be awarded the Victoria Cross, for his bravery during the First World War. Tragically, he was shot down by Manfred Von Richthofen, the 'Red Baron'. He is commemorated in a biography by his brother.¹³¹

Shortly after Marie's birth, when her father inherited the family estate, the family moved to Hampshire, where, apart from some time spent on the continent, she spent the rest of her life. She was educated privately at home, and sometimes by herself, possessing both intelligence and dedication. This latter she directed not only towards learning but also inwardly: 'She was by nature hasty, impetuous, and impatient, but so unflinchingly did she school herself, that those who knew her in later years could not believe that she had ever erred in these ways'.¹³² One friend described her appearance for Marie's biographer:

'You saw a woman with a plain face, but an attractive face, a slight, undeveloped figure, dressed in an old-maidish way, inappreciative of current fashion.' Her hair was soft and dark, her skin white, her eyes were great, short-sighted grey eyes, full of gleams of light. Her wonderful smile was a very striking trait. She had beautiful teeth, strong, white, and regular. They were her one small vanity, and the consciousness of their perfection seemed to give confidence to her laugh. Her hands, too, were beautiful, and she used them eloquently, when at her ease. That she was badly dressed was often due to the

fact that she was employing some failure as a dressmaker, to whom no one else would give work.¹³³

She came from a 'good' - if unpretentious - background, and her biographer reports that, 'Quietly as Marie lived, she saw English society at its best, and the shades of difference with which she draws the country lady, the vicar's wife, or the fashionable butterfly, are the fruits of experience imbibed at first hand'.¹³⁴ This, as we have seen, centred on the grand house of Hurstbourne Park, home of the Portsmouth family. The Hawker family was close; despite several offers of marriage, Marie remained single, becoming an enthusiastic aunt.¹³⁵ The writer and her mother were especially devoted to each other, and the latter's death in 1901 was a blow from which the daughter never recovered. Writing was always an important part of family life. Throughout her adolescence and young adulthood she contributed to the humorous periodicals produced by herself and her younger brother and sister, with contributions from sundry relations and friends. There was the Midge, which ran for about twelve years¹³⁶, and the Argus, to which she contributed, amongst other things, 'The Ghost Upon the Terrace', in 1873. It is an original premise; the apparition is that of a living woman, whose finest hour is spent at the place of the title, and whose shade vanishes when she dies. Evelyn March-Phillipps's verdict was that 'The writing already stands out fresh and vivid, and is marked by a clear-cut finish which sets it apart from the ordinary amateur standard'.¹³⁷

Certainly her attitude was professional, being:

a tale of steady development under a somewhat hard discipline. Close study pursued in spite of constant ill health and its interruptions, steady writing never relaxed under continued discouragement, ripened a nature too strong to sink easily, and too full of keen humors to be ever anything but the brightest and most amusing member of the home circle.¹³⁸

She approached her writing with method and determination, even before publication, regarding it as training: 'From very early days she studied her craft closely. She read

and wrote and pruned and polished. Volumes of MS. Books, filled with extracts and criticisms, bear witness to an industry that never flagged'.¹³⁹ Unfortunately, for the time being, at least, she can be the only judge, as her biography, written in 1915, seven years after the author's death, was based partly on speaking to family and friends (particularly her sister, Julia), and on her numerous diaries, notes and manuscripts, kept by Julia, and whose whereabouts are at present unknown.

When it came to seeking outside publication Mary Hawker decided to shade her identity with the pseudonym Lanoe Falconer. The first part is her father's name, the second a paraphrase of her family name. Her first novel, Mademoiselle Ixe (1890), was an instant success, but in fact Falconer had already written Cecilia de Noël, the novel which was to be published second, and had been trying to place it for some time, only to have it repeatedly rejected by firms who thought that a sensation-loving public may not have appreciated its finer talent.¹⁴⁰ However, she persevered with the book she felt to be 'her own child',¹⁴¹ and eventually Macmillan's accepted it, with the result of instantaneous and virtually universal praise. The editor of the New Review regarded it as 'an almost flawless gem',¹⁴² Gladstone was an admirer, 40,000 copies were sold initially in English, and it was translated into French, German, Dutch and Italian.¹⁴³ In a very short space of time, Falconer found herself in the somewhat uncomfortable position of having her work discussed throughout society, from dinner tables to church pulpits. The publisher, Mr Fisher Unwin, wrote to Falconer to give his impressions: 'To me your strong point is your vivid photographic pictures of society and characters'.¹⁴⁴

However, almost as rapidly as fame had overtaken Lanoe Falconer, it faded. Though Cecilia de Noël has been published by Virago as part of The Virago Book of Victorian Ghost Stories,¹⁴⁵ Falconer - and her other work - is largely unheard of today. Her

disappearance from the literary scene is due to the simple, but frustrating, reason of illness. From shortly after the publication of Cecilia de Noël, her greatest achievement, Falconer was plagued by ill-health, which led to her turning down most of the numerous requests, often from prestigious publishers, for more stories to be included in anthologies also carrying names such as Vernon Lee and Margaret Oliphant. Outwith her writing, this poor health was a great trial, leading her to question her worth:

I am rather uneasy as to the lack of work in my present life. I began wondering whether I should go and offer myself for work at the C.O.S., but a strong impulse seems to advise me not to do this, or to make any other engagement of the kind till I am at least well enough to dispense with medical treatment.¹⁴⁶

She is a contrast to Elizabeth Gaskell, who juggled a family, parish duties, and a writing career. Falconer desired work, and worried that her failure to undertake much, even of a charitable kind lessened the meaning of her life. Eventually, she became resigned to the situation: 'I accept without much disquiet the failure of all my intentions with regard to work'.¹⁴⁷

She did maintain a small output, contributing to the English Review and the Monthly Packet, maintaining her interest in the supernatural, for example, with 'Was it a Ghost?' (c.1893/4). In her essay, 'The Short Story', it is clear she continued her meticulous approach: 'Nowhere can signs of weariness, of haste or scamping, be so inexcusable as on the miniature ivory of the short story'.¹⁴⁸ Lanoe Falconer died of rapid consumption on the 15 June 1908, aged sixty, and was laid to rest near her sister's home in Herefordshire. If it were not for her ill-health, I believe that Lanoe Falconer would still enjoy the high reputation that she earned for herself during her lifetime, and in particular for her wonderful and original contribution to the supernatural genre. For anybody wishing to read an intelligent ghost story, and at the same time witness all the

major concerns of an entire age, they could do no better than to turn to the pages of Cecilia de Noël.

- ¹ Lanoe Falconer, Cecilia de Noël (London, 1891).
- ² Ibid. p.13.
- ³ Ibid. p.51.
- ⁴ Ibid. p.43.
- ⁵ Ibid. p.12.
- ⁶ Ibid. p.13. In view of my later discussion of Darwinism and Natural Selection, I would suggest that Lyndsay's remark carries implications of eugenics. For a fuller consideration of this subject, cf. Sir Ronald Aylmer Fisher, Natural Selection, Heredity, and Eugenics: Including Selected Correspondence of R.A. Fisher with Leonard Darwin and Others (Oxford, 1983); and Robert A. Peel, ed., Essays in the History of Eugenics: Proceedings of a Conference Organised by the Galton Institute, London, 1997 (London, 1998). especially Lesley A. Hall, 'Women, Feminism and Eugenics', pp.36-49.
- ⁷ Falconer, Cecilia de Noël, p.21.
- ⁸ Ibid. pp.21-2.
- ⁹ Ibid. pp.3-4.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p.12.
- ¹¹ Ibid. p.13.
- ¹² Ibid. p.41.
- ¹³ Ibid. pp.26-7.
- ¹⁴ Lanoe Falconer, 'The Hôtel d'Angleterre', The Hôtel d'Angleterre and Other Stories, 2nd edn (London, 1891), pp.7-61.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. p.10.
- ¹⁶ Ibid. pp.57-8.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. p.25.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. p.32.
- ¹⁹ Lanoe Falconer, 'The Violin Obligato', The Hôtel d'Angleterre, pp.62-119, p.64.
- ²⁰ Ibid. p.119.
- ²¹ Falconer, Cecilia de Noël, pp.11-12.
- ²² Ibid. p.112.
- ²³ Lanoe Falconer, Mademoiselle Ixe (London, 1890).
- ²⁴ Ibid. p.2.
- ²⁵ Lanoe Falconer, 'A Piece of Old China', Temple Bar, vol.87 (1889), pp.509-26, p.513.
- ²⁶ Lanoe Falconer, 'An Idealist', New Review, vol.9, Nov. (1893), pp.502-14, p.507.
- ²⁷ Charles Darwin, & Alfred Russel Wallace, Evolution by Natural Selection (Cambridge, 1958), p.1.
- ²⁸ R.C. Finucane, Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts (New York, 1984), p.173.
- ²⁹ Charles Robert Darwin, The Origin of Species (London, 1869).
- ³⁰ Finucane, p.175.
- ³¹ Ibid. p.175.
- ³² Falconer, Cecilia de Noël, p.1.
- ³³ Ibid. p.147.
- ³⁴ Ibid. p.1.
- ³⁵ Ibid. p.2.
- ³⁶ George Levine, Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Literature (Massachusetts, 1988), p.3.
- ³⁷ Falconer, Cecilia de Noël, p.16.
- ³⁸ Ibid. pp.14-15.
- ³⁹ Ibid. p.46.
- ⁴⁰ Frank Miller Turner, Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England (New Haven, 1974), pp.33-4.
- ⁴¹ Falconer, Cecilia de Noël, p.50.
- ⁴² Finucane, p.174.
- ⁴³ Gertrude Himmelfarb, Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution (London, 1959), p.315.
- ⁴⁴ Charles Darwin, The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex (London, 1871).
- ⁴⁵ Himmelfarb, p.316.
- ⁴⁶ Falconer, Cecilia de Noël, p.43.
- ⁴⁷ Turner, p.35.
- ⁴⁸ Falconer, Cecilia de Noël, p.25.
- ⁴⁹ Ruth Jeffries, 'The Victorian Short Story. The Marginalized Genre: Diversity in the Victorian Short Story', Gaslight: Mysterious Bytes, <http://www.webfic.comm/mb/mb1.htm> (1999), pp.2-10, p.7.
- ⁵⁰ Finucane, p.212.

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- ⁵¹ Falconer, Cecilia de Noël, p.145.
⁵² Ibid. p.153.
⁵³ Ibid. p.164.
⁵⁴ Turner, p.51.
⁵⁵ Ibid. p.87.
⁵⁶ Ibid. p.117.
⁵⁷ Ibid. p.117.
⁵⁸ Falconer, Cecilia de Noël, p.61.
⁵⁹ Ibid. p.80.
⁶⁰ Ibid. p.81.
⁶¹ Falconer, 'An Idealist', pp.502-14.
⁶² Falconer, Cecilia de Noël, p.101.
⁶³ Ibid. p.103.
⁶⁴ Ibid. p.108.
⁶⁵ Himmelfarb, p.222.
⁶⁶ Ibid. pp. 238-9.
⁶⁷ Edmund Gosse, Father and Son (Middlesex, 1983).
⁶⁸ Ibid. p.102.
⁶⁹ Ibid. p.103.
⁷⁰ Ibid. p.102.
⁷¹ Ibid. p.112.
⁷² Ibid. p.104.
⁷³ Ibid. p.105.
⁷⁴ Ibid. p.112.
⁷⁵ Ibid. p.107.
⁷⁶ Ibid. p.106.
⁷⁷ Falconer, Cecilia de Noël, p.127.
⁷⁸ Ibid. p.135.
⁷⁹ Ibid. p.137.
⁸⁰ Ibid. p.137.
⁸¹ Ibid. p.11.
⁸² Ibid. p.140.
⁸³ Evelyn March-Phillipps, 'Lanoe Falconer', Cornhill Magazine, vol.3:32 (1912), pp.231-44, p.235.
⁸⁴ Falconer, Cecilia de Noël, p.134.
⁸⁵ Ibid. p.135.
⁸⁶ Ibid. p.163.
⁸⁷ Ibid. p.52.
⁸⁸ Ibid. pp.121-2.
⁸⁹ Ibid. p.175.
⁹⁰ Ibid. p.188.
⁹¹ Ibid. p.188.
⁹² Ibid. pp.175-6.
⁹³ 'The Violin Obbligato', p.64.
⁹⁴ Lanoe Falconer, 'A Rainy Day', The Hôtel d'Angleterre, pp.120-50, pp.120-1.
⁹⁵ Falconer, Cecilia de Noël, p.169.
⁹⁶ Ibid. p.167.
⁹⁷ Ibid. pp.166-7.
⁹⁸ Ibid. p.174.
⁹⁹ Ibid. p.186.
¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p.187.
¹⁰¹ Ibid. p.189.
¹⁰² Ibid. p.190.
¹⁰³ Ibid. pp.193-4.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p.195.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid. pp.196-7.
¹⁰⁶ Ibid. pp.179-80.
¹⁰⁷ Evelyn March-Phillipps, Lanoe Falconer (London, 1915), p.136.
¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p.137.
¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p.138.
¹¹⁰ Ibid. p.137.

- ¹¹¹ Falconer, *Cecilia de Noël*, title page. Cf. Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, ed. by Stephan Hawlin & T.A.J. Burnett, 4 vols (Oxford, 1998), concluding lines of Book vii.
- ¹¹² March-Phillipps, *Lanoe Falconer*, p.138.
- ¹¹³ Evelyn March-Phillipps, 'Leaves From the Note-Books of Lanoe Falconer', *Cornhill Magazine*, vol.3:36, (1914), pp.480-9, p.486.
- ¹¹⁴ G.E.C., H.A. Doubleday, Geoffrey H. White & Lord Howard de Walden, ed., *The Complete Peerage, or, A History of the House of Lords & All its Members From the Earliest Times*, 14 vols (London, 1945), x, pp. 611-12. Eveline, Lady Portsmouth was the daughter of the 3rd Earl of Caernarfon. B. 1834 - d. 1906.
- ¹¹⁵ March-Phillipps, *Lanoe Falconer*, p.30.
- ¹¹⁶ Lanoe Falconer, *Old Hampshire Vignettes* (London, 1907), p.92.
- ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.101.
- ¹¹⁸ Falconer, *Old Hampshire Vignettes*, p.102; & *Cecilia de Noël*, p.35.
- ¹¹⁹ Richard Faber, *Proper Stations: Class in Victorian Fiction* (London, 1971), p.33.
- ¹²⁰ Falconer, *Cecilia de Noël*, p.31.
- ¹²¹ Falconer, *Old Hampshire Vignettes*, p.103; & *Cecilia de Noël*, p.183.
- ¹²² *Ibid.* p.101; & pp.32-3.
- ¹²³ Bruce Robbins, *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction From Below* (New York, 1986), p.66.
- ¹²⁴ *Ibid.* p.64.
- ¹²⁵ Falconer, *Old Hampshire Vignettes*, p.101.
- ¹²⁶ Falconer, *Cecilia de Noël*, p.146.
- ¹²⁷ *Ibid.* p.8.
- ¹²⁸ *Ibid.* p.177.
- ¹²⁹ Robbins, p.x.
- ¹³⁰ Cf. Peter Hawker, *Instructions to Young Sportsmen in All that Relates to Guns and Shooting* (London, 1824); and *The Diary of Colonel Peter Hawker, 1802-1853*, 2 vols (London, 1988) i & ii.
- ¹³¹ Tyrrel Mann Hawker, *Hawker V.C.: The Biography of the Late Major Lanoe George Hawker, V.C., D.S.O.* (London, 1965).
- ¹³² March-Phillipps, 'Leaves From the Note-Books of Lanoe Falconer', p.480.
- ¹³³ March-Phillipps, 'Lanoe Falconer', p.239.
- ¹³⁴ March-Phillipps, *Lanoe Falconer*, p.30.
- ¹³⁵ *Ibid.* pp.34-5 & 272.
- ¹³⁶ *Ibid.* p.41.
- ¹³⁷ *Ibid.* p.36.
- ¹³⁸ T.G.L. Hawker, 'Miss Mary E. Hawker', *The Writer*, vol.6:2, Feb. (1892), pp.25-6, p.25.
- ¹³⁹ March-Phillipps, 'Lanoe Falconer', p.232.
- ¹⁴⁰ March-Phillipps, *Lanoe Falconer*, p.128.
- ¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* p.128.
- ¹⁴² *Ibid.* p.136.
- ¹⁴³ 'Lanoe Falconer', *Dictionary of National Biography* [on CD-ROM].
- ¹⁴⁴ March-Phillipps, *Lanoe Falconer*, p.150.
- ¹⁴⁵ Richard Dalby, ed., *The Virago Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* (London, 1992).
- ¹⁴⁶ March-Phillipps, *Lanoe Falconer*, p.299.
- ¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p.304.
- ¹⁴⁸ Lanoe Falconer, 'The Short Story', *Atalanta*, vol.6, Oct.-Sept. (1892-1893), pp.457-9.

**VERNON LEE:
THE MUSIC OF THE PAST**

THE MUSIC OF THE PAST

When Vernon Lee gives one of her Italian Characters the motto '*Amour Dure: Dure Amour*',¹ or 'Love that Lasts: Cruel Love', she might have been offering a maxim for the bulk of her supernatural fiction. The themes of love, cruelty, and the continuity of the past haunt the pages of her tales as much as any ghost, providing the motivation, and all-too frequently the downfall, of most of the people she creates.

Her favoured device is a Victorian setting, characterized by the ordinary, everyday lives of the upper classes of that time; using this as her frame, she then creates within it a world of the past: a story within a story. This is sometimes medieval, frequently 17th or 18th century, and they usually rely greatly on the legends of the continent of the period. 'Amour Dure' (1890), for example, is related by Speridion Trepka, a Victorian Polish historian who has travelled to Italy to write a history of Urbania. His first words are, 'I had longed, these years and years, to be in Italy, to come face to face with the past'.² The irony of his longing becomes increasingly obvious, as, during the story, the past, in the form of the cruel and beautiful (and long-dead) Medea da Carpi gradually consumes his every waking and sleeping moment, and eventually leads to his death.

In the same vein, the very similar stories, 'Winthrop's Adventure' (1881)³ and 'A Wicked Voice' (1890)⁴ offer 18th century stories within 19th century narrative frameworks. Again the tales take place within Italy; whilst the Victorian narrators are nearly always English, or at the least, ex-patriot, the protagonists of the inner stories belong to the land of the setting, helping to provide a sense of jolting strangeness for the outsider.

Never, however, is it simply a case of telling a tale of times past. The strength of Lee's supernatural work lies in the fact that the past remains a live - and often malignant - entity. Reaching out to bridge the distance, trouble begins for the Victorian characters when they are unable to resist the other main feature of the past: its seductiveness. In this way, the past assumes human characteristics - malignancy/seductiveness - the force of which is indeed personified in the shape of a human, or, if you like, a ghost.

The ill-fated Speridion Trepka, of 'Amour Dure', is drawn into the inescapable web of Medea da Carpi, the ice-cold, heartless beauty of an aristocratic 16th century family. In her lifetime she has been responsible, both directly and indirectly, for the deaths of all the unfortunate males who have fallen for her charms: and a few besides. In innocently researching her history, Trepka unleashes the power which has not died with her body, and suffers the same fate as all those who had gone centuries before him, in the name of love.

In similar fashion, both 'Winthrop's Adventure' and 'A Wicked Voice' feature two Victorian men who are first captivated, and then swiftly brought to the edge of madness and destruction by singers who have been dead for a century. In the latter, the composer Magnus's own talents and inclinations are overwhelmed by the music of the deadly Zaffirino, which takes over his mind. He states, 'I am but half-bewitched, since I am conscious of the spell that binds me',⁵ and here lies his misery: he is aware of his loss of control, and of the supernatural nature of his malady, against which human force is nothing. He recognizes 'this corrupt and corrupting music of the Past',⁶ but is helpless against its pull.

In 'Winthrop's Adventure', a Victorian artist/gentleman of leisure becomes obsessed by the 18th century singer Rinaldi, whose music forces itself into his consciousness, and whose portrait mesmerizes him. His compulsions lead him to unearth the life and violent death of the singer, in the process becoming ensnared with the tragedy himself, which lives on out of the past, to the risk of his reason and his life.

Such intrusion of the past into the (Victorian) present has its roots in Vernon Lee's own obsessions. She first came to public notice, and critical acclaim, in 1880, when at the age of only twenty-four, she published the innovative Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy, which remained in print for many years.⁷ One contemporary reviewer declared, 'The great days of the Academy live again under this vivacious pen'.⁸ She was first inspired as an adolescent, when, with her lifelong friend, the painter John Singer Sargent, she would roam the remains of ancient buildings, and wander galleries and museums for hours at a time. Both were captivated by the portrait of the great Italian castrati Carlo Broschi (1705-82), known as Farinelli, the singer who was to resurface so significantly in her later work.⁹ It was an area that had received little previous attention, and the precocious and highly intelligent Lee (or Violet Paget, to use her real name) had been deep in research for the subject since her early teens. Critics were amazed by the young woman:

Who has made such good use of uncommon powers and opportunities that she has been able, at an age when most girls have barely realized their emancipation from the school-room, to shed light on the annals of a comparatively neglected period.¹⁰

She became completely immersed in the period, and in particular, its music, the influence of which is clearly apparent in her later supernatural fiction.¹¹

To go back still further, however, Lee's entire childhood and adolescence may be seen to have shaped the nature of her adult work. Born on the 14 October 1856, at Chateau Saint Léonard, just outside Boulogne, she was not given long to settle in France. Her parents moved frequently, travelling around the fashionable (and not-so fashionable, depending on finances) watering places of Europe, in the manner of comfortably off, but at times slightly impoverished gentility. After her birth in France, her first five years were spent in Germany. The family then settled more or less permanently in Italy, first in Rome, and then at the Villa Il Palmerino outside Florence, where Vernon Lee continued to live, with breaks for travel, for example, to the literary circle of London, and it is here she died on the 13 February 1935. Her greatest parental influence was her mother, who was temperamental and intellectual, and whom herself half belonged to the previous century, preserving 'thee' and 'thou' in her speech, for instance.¹²

In intelligence the young Violet Paget quickly outshone her elder brother - she began publishing articles in her teens - and as her biographer Peter Gunn describes her: 'She possessed an intelligence that would have been considered remarkable in any age'.¹³ Her knowledge was constantly added to: 'her impulse came from the study of facts, facts accepted and half-forgotten and fertilized with fresh facts until her mind was unable to generate a barren or a superficial thought or a thought not hung about and garlanded with associations'.¹⁴ Significantly, in view of her preoccupation with time and its passage, she herself was a woman of two centuries, writing in both the 19th and the 20th. According to Gunn: 'She said of herself that she had been born before her time, that she had spent her life struggling against Victorianism; but Victorian she was by birth and upbringing, cosmopolitan Victorian in her actions and reactions'.¹⁵ This speaks of her complex and personal involvement with the past, present, and future, and illustrates perhaps where her fictional concerns arose. The result was work of intriguing

originality and power; as her friend Maurice Baring wrote: 'Never [...] was culture so shot with imagination'.¹⁶ It was this same Maurice Baring to whom was dedicated another volume of supernatural stories: For Maurice: Five Unlikely Stories (1927).¹⁷ In Vernon Lee's own words: 'My ghosts are what you call spurious ghosts (according to me the only genuine ones), of whom I can confirm only one thing, that they haunted several brains, and have haunted among others, my own and my friends'.¹⁸ It is this immediacy and relevance which translates itself into her supernatural fiction, gaining power in its connection with Vernon Lee's understanding of, and preoccupation with, the idea of a living past.

ONE BORN OF OURSELVES

In describing 'Oke of Okehurst' (1890) (originally known as 'The Phantom Lover'), Peter Gunn considers that, 'it would perhaps be better described as a study of contrasts in hallucinations'.¹⁹ The valid point he makes here is that, for Lee, the supernatural is never as straightforward as a pale and moaning apparition. In the preface to Hauntings she makes exactly this assertion: 'The genuine ghost? And is this not he, or she, this one born of ourselves, of the weird places we have seen, the strange stories we have heard?'.²⁰ This statement reflects firstly how Lee created her stories; many were initially stories or half-forgotten legends told to her by her numerous Italian friends and she duly acknowledged this at the beginning of her tales.²¹ It also illustrates the emphasis she placed on the role of the human psyche in her construction of the Supernatural. (Significantly, she was an early proponent of psychoanalysis.) The state of a person's mind, their preoccupations, concerns and obsessions, all have their role to play. A character with nervous or compulsive tendencies is ripe for a brush with the supernatural.

In the story which Gunn refers to, Alice Oke, the main character, is introduced immediately as being of this type: ' "My wife," he added, after a minute, and in a very decided tone, "does not enjoy very good health - a nervous constitution" '.²² She harbours an unhealthy obsession with the past - specifically her predecessors - her namesake, a 17th century Alice Oke, her husband, and Alice's lover, the poet Christopher Lovelock. According to family legend, Alice Oke mysteriously turned on Lovelock, abetting her husband in his murder. The Victorian Alice increasingly, and deliberately, merges past with present, and the two personas of 'Alice', in the process

appropriating Lovelock as her own lover. These nervous preoccupations, until the events of the story, have been held at bay; when her psyche is given free rein and encouraged, tragedy results. Her husband, meanwhile (also her cousin, thus sharing his wife's ancestors), is drawn helplessly into the increasing madness of the situation, first by concern for the wife he loves, but who treats him with impatient contempt as a boring alternative to the romantic Lovelock, and then with gathering jealousy for the dead poet. Gunn's comment about contrasting hallucinations relates to this infectious madness and obsession with past people and events.

It is typical of Lee to ignore the conventions of the stereotypical ghost story. In keeping with her own intellectual turn of mind, she adopts the more complicated approach of doing away with the traditional ghost, opting instead for hauntings of a rather more psychological nature. She smoothly avoids asserting or denying the 'reality' of the supernatural, choosing to leave that question to the reader's interpretation. Instead of the usual apparition, she adopts the device of a physical link between the living past, discussed in the last section, and the 'haunted' character in the Victorian present.

In 'Oke of Okehurst', there is more than one article, in keeping with the nature of a family, and ancestral home; things have been kept, and stored, over the centuries. There is the portrait of the original Alice Oke, which bears an unusual degree of resemblance to the descendant. There are dresses, brought out of their musty wardrobes and worn by Alice Oke, heightening the similarities of, and the psychic connections between, the two women. There is the miniature and poetry of Christopher Lovelock, kept by the latter Alice in a virtual shrine in the room in which the 17th century pair used to meet. In this way, the Victorian Alice Oke, nervous and susceptible, consciously and unconsciously, heightens her receptivity to the influences of the events and people of the past.

The importance of art in Lee's scheme can be observed in 'Amour Dure'. The primary object which effects the connection between Speridion Trepka and Medea da Carpi, thus fatally ensnaring him, is a miniature of the beautiful yet evil woman. This 'exquisite work' makes it 'easy to reconstruct the beauty of this terrible being',²³ and illustrates the deadly duality of her nature:

Tight eyelids and tight lips give a strange refinement, and, at the same time, an air of mystery, a somewhat sinister seductiveness; they seem to take but not to give. The mouth with a kind of childish pout, looks as if it could bite or suck like a leech.²⁴

It is this visual effect which sinks with such detail into Trepka's brain and allows Medea da Carpi, with all the force of her corrupt nature, to reach out through the centuries, and, effectively, live. Later in the story, we are not clear whether Trepka actually sees the woman herself, his obsession having freed her to this extent, or whether this is simply a manifestation of his by now full-blown madness. What is of greatest significance is that it is the portrait which overrides time and effects such possibilities.

In 'Winthrop's Adventure', it is once again a portrait which provides the link between two centuries. The Winthrop of the title, an artist himself, although he pursues his career as a gentleman more vigorously than that as a painter, becomes mesmerized by the portrait of an 18th century singer, Rinaldi. The likeness has an extraordinary effect on Winthrop; rather than colours on a piece of canvas, it seems to represent a living soul, with 'wistful eyes' and a 'yearning' expression.²⁵ The connection which the figure in the portrait effects allows for a merging of past and present; the Victorian Winthrop is drawn into the life and violent death of Rinaldi, and events of the past are replayed in the 19th century. Driven unaccountably to the house where Rinaldi was murdered, Winthrop witnesses the scene, nearly losing his sanity in the process. Although, then,

he does 'see' something, it is the portrait which allows the events to unfold, and, as is typical, there is always the doubt that occurrences are again a manifestation of mania.

As Lee recorded, these plots centred on past singers are based partly on an incident in her own life. Whilst rambling in Padua with friends, she gained 'a glimpse, as it were, of a ghost'.²⁶ The group accidentally stumbled on the neglected house of Gasparo Pacchierotti (1740-1821), and was shown round by the gardener.²⁷ One room still contained his harpsichord, which, standing open, looked as if it were waiting to be played upon, but in reality would produce no note. A darkened lumber room held his dust-covered portrait: 'a mass of dark blurs, from out of which appeared scarcely more than the pale thin face – a face with deep dreamy eyes and tremulously tender lips, full of a vague, wistful, contemplative poetry'.²⁸ Her fictional portraits are instantly recognizable. In the stories, scenes from the past do not prove a straightforward culmination; Winthrop continues to be haunted by his experiences. It is his hearing a piece of music by Rinaldi, which is unrecorded by experts, which jolts past and present together once more and leads to his relating of the tale.

The most unusual of the physical objects which Lee uses to bring about such a clash of past and present is a life-size doll, in a story called 'The Doll'(1927).²⁹ There is no typical ghost in this tale at all, only a life-size cardboard doll, in the likeness of a young woman long dead, made on the orders of her husband following her death, in great detail, even being dressed in the original clothes. The narrator, a woman who spends her time collecting *bric-à-brac*, forms a strange connection with the figure: 'I somehow knew everything about her'.³⁰ Thus a young woman who has been silenced during her lifetime is able to finally to communicate with a fellow woman, making something positive out of the pathetic and grotesque image of her former self.

Lee's imaginative use of these physical devices - often some form of art - is what brings her concept of the past alive, and also what raises her supernatural fiction so much further than a mere ghost story.

CASTING SPELLS

In her history of the English ghost story, Julia Briggs asserts that: 'Running through Hauntings is the theme of the fascination that the dead exert over the living, the power that past beauty, whether of face or voice, can command, even after its own decay'.³¹

This theme of fascination is indeed a constant one in Lee's supernatural work, and, as Briggs says, the most noticeable aspects are in beauty, and that of the dead for the living. Lee's own fascination with the music of the 18th century, and especially in her choice of the human voice as an instrument of enchantment, is apparent here. She commented: 'the greatest, nay, merely the great, singers of the last century exercised a sort of magic which even the greatest performer on the most perfect of human-made instruments never possessed'.³² She wrote prolifically on the subject of Italian music in her younger years, and one of her greatest desires was to hear an 18th century-voice - one of the celebrated singers - engaged with one of the pieces that had fallen largely out of favour with the Victorian public, and which she could only pick over on the piano.³³

In Studies of the Eighteenth Century, she evoked a sense of what this meant to her:

In the pages of which the writers of the day speak of Pacchierotti there lies, as it were, a faded, crumbling flower of feeling, whose discoloured fragments still retain a perfume that goes strongly to the imagination; so that we almost fancy that we ourselves must once, vaguely and distinctly, have heard that weirdly sweet voice, those subtle, pathetic intonations. Some such occult charm, acting after a century, there must be.³⁴

In this way, it is to some extent a piece of personal wish-fulfilment which leads her, in 'Winthrop's Adventure', and 'A Wicked Voice', to have the spell cast by a singer of the 1700s, whose music can still be heard by the protagonist over the distance of a century.

In the former story, it is the effect of a piece of music which begins the chain of events - for the reader at least - for Winthrop it is a shocking confirmation that he has indeed been a victim of haunting, rather than, as he had come to conclude, merely a dream. One of his friends plays an air, dug up in a lumber-room, which has no copy in any of the archives, and is not recognized by any of the experts. Winthrop knows it because he has heard the original, sung by the original singer, whose death he has witnessed. He has already fallen victim to the face of Rinaldi himself, through his portrait:

for me it had a queer sort of interest, quite apart from that in the technical execution. There was something peculiar and unaccountable in the look of that face, a yearning, half-pained look, which I could not well define to myself. I became gradually aware that the portrait was, so to speak, haunting me.³⁵

There is the common awareness that *something* is happening to these characters, but also an inability to understand what, or to control it to any extent. The haunting has begun. A character, though frequently aware of it, is powerless to halt the invasive and disruptive force that enters his consciousness and urges him to unwelcome actions. Winthrop, despite his role as artist, rather than musician, is drawn again and again to the portrait, finding any pretext for his visits. Not, however, for the value of the artwork, which he confirms is worthless, but because of this fascination with the singer and his music.

In 'A Wicked Voice', a more malicious soul causes destruction with his singing, both when he is alive and after his death: 'The intoxicating music swallows the listening subject, and, as it closes the distance between itself and the listener, seems to stoke the dying embers of past experiences into a flaming presence'.³⁶ As happens so often in Lee's stories, beauty is coupled with evil, rather than innocence, and this is where the danger stems from. When alive, the celebrated Zaffirino had used his gift to bring about death, in what amounts to a ridiculously exaggerated proof of virility: 'his first song

could make any woman turn pale and lower her eyes, the second make her madly in love, while the third song could kill her off on the spot, kill her for love there under his very eyes, if he only felt inclined'.³⁷ This tale is related by a Count whose great aunt has apparently suffered this unfortunate fate, and the author, into whose tone may be read some amount of sarcasm, could perhaps be mocking damsels willing to be swept off their feet in such a way. As she herself recorded, however, such effects were not altogether far-fetched:

He [*the male singer*] was received with open arms in every house; all his impertinence and caprices were tolerated; when he sang people remained silent and breathless, and occasionally fainted and went into hysterics; when he ceased the applause was perfectly frantic.³⁸

There is no question that this is masculine, sexual power at its height, and it is hardly surprising that the owner of such a voice would be reluctant to relinquish such supremacy with his death. Accordingly, a young Victorian composer, in Venice to work on an opera, is ensnared as a means of continuing Zaffirino's reign; Magnus plays one of the antique tunes and from that moment his own work is forced out of his head by the wicked voice:

Meanwhile my work was becoming daily more difficult, and I soon passed from utter impotence to a state of inexplicable agitation. Every morning I arose with fine resolutions and grand projects of work; only to go to bed that night without having accomplished anything. I spent hours leaning on my balcony, or wandering through the network of lanes with their ribbon of blue sky, endeavouring vainly to expel the thought of that voice, or endeavouring in reality to reproduce it in my memory; for the more I tried to banish it from my thoughts, the more I grew to thirst for that extraordinary tone, for those mysteriously downy, veiled notes; and no sooner did I make an effort to work at my opera than my head was full of scraps of forgotten eighteenth-century airs, of frivolous or languishing little phrases, and I fell to longing with a bitter-sweet longing how those songs would have sounded if sung by that voice.³⁹

(Note again Lee's own fascination with hearing an 18th century voice.) This excerpt fully illustrates the double-sided nature of fascination. The helpless struggle against the

subjugation of Magnus's own nature, and at the same time the desire for what he knows is destroying him (expressed again in terms of sexual conquest, for example, 'impotence', 'languishing', 'longing'). As Caballero asserts, 'Like many ghosts, Zaffirino is invasive; he seems to invade his victim's body and infect his creative imagination'.⁴⁰ The imbalance of the fight between supernatural power and human weakness is obvious, and, as so frequently happens with Lee's characters, contact with the past is followed swiftly by mental breakdown. (It is interesting to note that Lee suffered for most of her life from neurasthenia, associated with traumatic incidents - often the breakdown of personal relationships - in her life.⁴¹) Nor does the end of the story provide an escape for the unlucky Magnus: 'And since I have satiated thy lust for revenge, since thou hast withered my life and withered my genius, is it not time for pity? May I not hear one note, only one note of thine, O singer, O wicked and contemptible wretch?'.⁴² His final words prove that the fascination continues, but now that Zaffirino has completed his possession of Magnus, he sadistically withholds what the composer has come to need. *Just how entire is Magnus's integration into the past is proved by his use of archaic speech; the story ends with his pitiful and unanswered pleas to this wicked voice.*

The fascination of the living for the dead is prevalent in 'Oke of Okehurst', and is again connected with the threat of madness. Alice Oke increasingly has no interest in any aspect of her life, save her obsession with her ancestress, the earlier Alice Oke, her lover, the poet Christopher Lovelock, and her need to 'become' the former, so she can possess/be possessed by the latter:

Very soon she got into the habit of never talking to me at all, save about Alice and Nicholas Oke and Christopher Lovelock; and then, when the fit seized her, she would go on by the hour, never asking herself whether I was or was not equally interested in the strange craze that fascinated her.⁴³

The words 'fit' and 'craze' aptly intensify the compulsive behaviour exhibited here, and Alice positively revels in the similarities between herself and her predecessor:

If I am like that Alice Oke, why I am; and am very pleased anyone should think so. She and her husband are about the only two members of our family - our most flat, stale, and unprofitable family - that ever were in the least interesting.⁴⁴

It would perhaps be fair to suggest that part of Alice Oke's obsession - different to the sexual motivations of the men of the previous stories - stems primarily from pathological boredom. She is described somewhat unkindly by the artist narrator as having 'all the extraordinary crazes of childless and idle women'.⁴⁵ Of course, many women, more so women reading today perhaps, would immediately refute the accusation that childlessness would necessarily lead to a lack of fulfilment. (Lee remained unmarried and childless, with no evidence of regrets.) However, the fact cannot be argued that Alice Oke was an upper-class woman with nothing to do (what can be argued is whose responsibility it is that this is the case). Indulged from childhood, wanting for nothing, married to an unimaginative man who bores her, romantic herself, with no inclination towards, for example, study to occupy her time, no friends in the neighbourhood, and no children either. It does not seem so surprising that such a woman in this kind of situation should develop compulsive tendencies towards one particular idea which takes root in her mind. It seems the one thing capable of giving meaning to her existence, and, in the process, validating her as significant and important. The only way it is possible to gain status is through someone else, and the past. The previous Alice Oke had assisted in the murder of her lover, dressed in men's clothing; she chose a path of positive, masculine action, as opposed to the feminine route of domesticity which is suffocating her descendent.

Further supporting this argument of female boredom and its results is the main female character in 'The Doll', who also leads a stultifying upper-class life of idleness, this time on the continent, collecting '*bric-à-brac*',⁴⁶ whilst her husband leads a busy public life. She comes to view her pastime as 'buying people's furniture out of dead people's houses to stick it in one's own'.⁴⁷ This then is the character and situation of the woman who becomes fascinated with the life-size cardboard doll she discovers in a house she has visited with the view of adding to her collections. The Doll proves to be the image of the first wife of the grandfather of the count whose house the narrator visits. Before long, the spell which readers of Vernon Lee's supernatural fiction should be familiar with is occurring:

I don't know what that Doll had done to me; but I found that I was thinking of her all day long. It was as if I had just made a new acquaintance of a painfully interesting kind, rushed into a sudden friendship with a woman whose secret I had surprised, as sometimes happens, by some mere accident. For I somehow knew everything about her, and the first items of information which I gained from Orestes - I ought to say that I was irresistibly impelled to talk about her with him - did not enlighten me in the least, but merely confirmed what I was aware of.⁴⁸

It is her fascination - beyond her control - and the communication that takes place, which leads the narrator on towards the later events of the story.

It would seem, therefore, that Lee approaches the theme of fascination variously, depending on whether the one being fascinated is a man or a woman. She of course, was writing as a woman, but in addition as a woman who was intelligent, educated (largely self-educated), with a successful, independent career as a respected writer. When writing about women who become obsessed with a person or an event, her message reveals boredom, and intense feelings of loneliness and uselessness. When, on the other hand, she describes similar situations in relation to male characters, the motivation is frequently more selfish. As we will see in greater detail in the following

section, Vernon Lee more readily attributes to men feelings of lust: both for a woman herself and for power, as, for example, is the case with 'Amour Dure' and 'Dionea' (1890).

Although the 1964 biography and letters from, to, and concerning Lee do not discuss the issue overtly, the writer's emotional leanings would seem to have been towards other women, and the tendency today is to regard her straightforwardly as a lesbian.⁴⁹ However, it is not necessarily that simple; I choose the word 'emotional' rather than 'sexual' because she seems to have been a remarkably non-physical person. She once said to Irene Cooper Willis, her literary executor: 'From my friends' matrimonial adventures I avert my eyes and say: "There goes something primeval"'.⁵⁰ One of her friends, the noted composer Dame Ethel Smythe, also commented on this:

Myself, I believe the tragedy of her life was that without knowing it she loved the *cultes* humanly and with passion; but being the stateliest, chastest of beings she refused to face the fact, or indulge in the most innocent demonstrations of affection, preferring to create a fiction that these friends were merely *intellectual* necessities [...] The thought, say, of a good bear-hug would have been, I fancy, as alien and would have seemed as vulgar to her as much mild slang as we all indulge in now and then. One day in an extra-expansive mood I gave her a parting hug myself, and though she bore it with kindness and courtesy, I felt I had committed a solecism.⁵¹

This perhaps sheds some light on the writer and her motives. Certainly, in continuing the theme of fascination, when she concentrates on male responses, she adopts a fairly condemnatory approach. The fascination of the dead for the living, and the power of past beauty, therefore, become gendered issues.

THE DRAWN CURTAIN

Lee, in her depiction of the fascination which the men in her supernatural stories experience, takes her theme even further, so that her tales verge on becoming demonstrations of male lust and greed, and a warning to this effect. She depicts fascination as being the initial step that breaks down the weak floodgates, leading the male characters into uncontrolled fantasy and obsession, victims of bestial natures.

The artist narrator of 'Oke of Okehurst' unwittingly gives a much fuller and more damning indication of his motives than he intends; authorial influence and intentions are obvious. It is on record, incidentally, that the artist's character was based on her good friend, John Singer Sargent.⁵² My rather negative reading is not necessarily belied by this seeming contradiction; Lee was somewhat notorious for using her friends quite unmercifully in her fiction. In 1893, another friend, Henry James, wrote to warn his brother after being caricatured in a later volume of short stories.⁵³ Caballero asserts that 'In her conversation and writing she did not mean to offend friends and fellow writers; her chronic indiscretion and even rudeness had their source rather in sheer intellectual self-absorption'.⁵⁴ He goes on to suggest that:

In her forceful temperament, a need for lavish nurturing was joined to something less kindhearted – a wish for her companions' continual intellectual submission. The sheer fatigue of such companionship drove many women away from Vernon Lee, and with each loss she cloistered herself more fiercely in the sanctuary of aesthetic experience, a haven from the disappointments and complexities of human relationships.⁵⁵

The artist in 'Oke of Okehurst' goes as a houseguest to the mansion of Okehurst, to paint companion portraits of the owners, William and Alice Oke. From the beginning,

however, it is the wife who fascinates him. She is described as the kind of woman who appears 'once in a thousand years',⁵⁶ and despite his assertions that she is not what would be termed conventionally beautiful, he ranges into the superlative in his attempts to portray her. She is 'The most marvellous creature, quite, that I have ever met: a wonderful elegance, exotic, far-fetched, poignant';⁵⁷ she is 'weird, exquisite'.⁵⁸ A reviewer declared, 'there is something of the sacred cat about her'.⁵⁹ Up until the arrival of the artist, her life has consisted of her dull marriage to William Oke (whose name could easily be read as 'Oak', typical descendant of a long line which has been strong, upright, ordinary⁶⁰). In many ways he is a forerunner of Waugh's Tony Last (another allegorical surname); nothing would make him happier in his role as simple and diligent country squire than having his wife as the Victorian lady of the manor, playing the hostess to her country neighbours and listening to his tales of hunting and fishing. The artist recognizes she is cast from a rarer mould, and it is his encouragement that brings what was previously kept at bay in the back of her mind bursting to the fore. She plunges into the restless brutality of the past, and an exciting life - that of Christopher Lovelock - which she both controls and is controlled by. The artist, therefore, is the one who triggers the events that lead to tragedy. As Robbins points out:

The symbolic woman depends rather more for her existence on the active reading of her meaning by the male artist and reader than on her intrinsic qualities: in this aesthetic, her creation is only completed by her passive cooperation with the male character.⁶¹

He himself is aware of his culpability, as proved by his frequent denials, and the lengths to which he goes to explain: 'I could not possibly do my subject justice so long as I was kept at a distance, prevented from studying the real character of the woman',⁶² and: 'So, if indeed I did at all conduce to mischief, I really cannot blame myself'.⁶³

Washing his hands of the outcome, he on the one hand claims: 'I studiously respected the prejudices of my host, and refrained from mentioning the matter, and tried to restrain Mrs Oke from doing so, in the presence of William Oke himself'.⁶⁴ His attempts at ingenuousness suggest he is merely an objective guest, there only in his capacity as an artist, and that Alice Oke's looks and personality have in no way captivated him, but he contradicts himself: 'From that moment I began to assume a certain interest in the eyes of Mrs Oke; or rather, I began to perceive that I had a means of securing her attention'.⁶⁵ What we witness is two obsessions, each feeding off the other.

Similar fantasies, although these are one-sided, develop in 'Amour Dure', 'Dionea' and 'The Doll'. Speridion Trepka, in the first, declares: 'Were it only possible to meet a woman of that extreme distinction of beauty, of that terribleness of nature, even if only potential, I do believe I could love her, even to the Day of Judgement'.⁶⁶ This vaguely blasphemous statement carries suggestions of masochism at the same time as his desire for possession, which rapidly increases. Initially he tells the plainly objective history of Medea da Carpi; if anything, the narrator is repulsed by her acts of cold-hearted cruelty and self-preservation. As he becomes ensnared, however (after he sees her portrait), he reinvents her story, excusing her actions - whilst patently glorying in them - as only natural for a woman such as she, blaming instead the men surrounding her. It is what Christensen calls 'a problematic projection of male desire'.⁶⁷ These, with an insane jealousy, he castigates for their lust and need to possess the woman who causes their destruction. It never occurs to him that he is in the same position, and is gaining gratification from Medea's antics.

The selfishness of fantasy is explored in 'The Doll', particularly in the description of when the original woman, later to be represented by the grotesque cardboard image, is still living:

The Doll - for I made no distinction between the portrait and the original - had been married straight out of the convent, and, during her brief wedded life, been kept secluded from the world by her husband's mad love for her, so that she had remained a mere shy, proud, inexperienced child. Had she loved him? She did not tell me that at once. But gradually I became aware that in a deep, inarticulate way she had really cared for him more than he cared for her. She did not know what answer to make to his easy, overflowing, garrulous, demonstrative affection; he could not be silent about his love for two minutes, and she could never find a word to express hers, painfully though she longed to do so. Not that he wanted it; he was a brilliant, will-less, lyrical sort of person, who knew nothing of the feelings of others and cared only to welter and dissolve in his own. In those two years of ecstatic, talkative, all-absorbing love for her he not only forswore all society and utterly neglected his affairs, but he never made an attempt to train this raw young creature into a companion, or showed any curiosity as to whether his idol might have a mind or a character of her own.⁶⁸

The painful irony here is that there was every opportunity for real, lasting love to develop; the wife had deep feelings, but the selfishness of the husband, whose love really amounted to little more than self-obsession, did not allow it to develop: that would have ruined his fantasy. Lee's concerns here are mirrored in her 1903 article, 'The Economic Dependence of Women',⁶⁹ in which she likens the relative positions of men and women to 'a human being playing with a doll'.⁷⁰ She expresses her belief that, 'The woman, save among the exceptionally wealthy, has always been a chief domestic servant',⁷¹ and that:

The present condition of women - their state of dependence, tutelage, and semi-idleness; their sequestration from the discipline of competition and social selection, in fact their economic parasitism - is in itself a most important factor in the wrongness of all our economic arrangements.⁷²

A typical male response, therefore, to obsession and fantasy, is the attempt to possess and to capture the object of desire. Occasionally this is even explored through black humour:

Fa Diesis [*F-sharp*] had rather a contempt for singers, regarding them as poor creatures, who were of no good, since they left nothing behind them that could be collected, except indeed in the case of Madame Banti, one of whose lungs he possessed in spirits of wine.⁷³

This particular incident in 'Winthrop's Adventure' cannot, of course, be taken as a serious example, but it does highlight the need on the part of many of Lee's male characters for acts of physical possession. Most often this is manifested through works of art, and the attempt to capture, or 'pin down' a woman through this medium. Many of Lee's male characters are artists of some description; this could in part be related to her attitude towards the Pre-Raphaelite school, whose depiction of women in particular disgusted her.⁷⁴ It is not only in her work, however, that such a device prevails. Perhaps the most famous example of a man's ruthless efforts to gain control over the woman he wishes to possess, via art, is Browning's 'My Last Duchess' (1842). The smoothly arrogant duke has his wife murdered for failing to devote her every smile, glance, or pleasure towards him. He is much happier with his current arrangement of keeping her portrait, of which he is in complete control: '(since none puts by/The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)'.⁷⁵ Significantly, in 'Amour Dure', Lee makes reference to Salome, another fatal woman, and icon of the decadent nineties. In the church where Trepka goes to attempt to meet Medea, the altar is decorated with pictures of Salome and the head of her victim, John the Baptist. Obvious similarities exist between the two stories. Salome, of course, was made most famous by the Wilde play of the same name, published the year after Hauntings, in 1891. Wilde and Vernon Lee met frequently within literary circles; the former, with The Picture of Dorian Gray

(1891), was causing a sensation through his depiction in this novel of the connections between art, beauty and corruption.

In 'Dionea', problems occur when the sculptor Waldemar is persuaded by his wife to fashion a female nude; previously his interest has been only with the male figure, as the elderly narrator, a doctor (who has taken an interest in Dionea since childhood), reflects: 'the female figure, he says [...] is almost inevitably inferior in strength and beauty; woman is not form, but expression, and therefore suits painting, but not sculpture'.⁷⁶ However, persuaded he is, using as a model the beautiful and mysterious Dionea, and rapidly a change comes over him:

What reassures me still more is the curious attitude of Waldemar towards the girl. I could never have believed that an artist could regard a woman so utterly as a mere inanimate thing, a form to copy, like a tree or flower. Truly he carries out his theory that sculpture knows only the body, and the body scarcely considered as human. The way he speaks to Dionea after hours of the most rapt contemplation of her is almost brutal in its coldness. And yet to hear him exclaim, 'How beautiful she is! Good God, how beautiful!'.⁷⁷

Within this naïve deliberation by the good doctor, meant to be reassuring, we can actually witness the change in Waldemar, from indifference to the beginnings of his fascination. Quickly this escalates into a reversal of his theory, and he strives endlessly and furiously so that his statue should capture the naked beauty of Dionea, to the despair of the wife who introduced them: 'she must loathe this unceasing talk of Dionea, of the superiority of the model over the statue'.⁷⁸ His obsession determines that he capture Dionea, and it kills the love for his wife.

We have seen the role of the artist in 'Oke of Okehurst' - 'Yes, there's nothing but her in the whole sketch-book'⁷⁹ - and how the artist's obsession is expressed via his

attempts to get Alice Oke onto canvas. Also, in 'The Doll', the count's behaviour develops in unsurprising fashion after his wife's death:

the husband had the Doll made, and dressed it in her clothes, and placed it in her boudoir, where not a thing was moved from how it had been at the moment of her death. He allowed no one to go in, and cleaned and dusted it all himself, and spent hours every day weeping and moaning before the Doll.⁸⁰

This fits nicely into his selfish version of love, which requires no other person; it would perhaps be more impressive if he had not eventually grown tired of it, and indulged in a liaison with a laundress. The use of art as a means of capture occurs again and again. In 'The Lady and Death', from Pope Jacynth (1904), the heroine is defined by her portrait and its inscription which praises her 'for piety and fortitude',⁸¹ and her actions are in keeping with this: 'She decided at once to give her useless woman's life for the life of the man who can comfort and save so many others'.⁸² Images and representations of capture in art also abound, for example, in 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' and 'A Wedding Chest', both from this later collection.

Almost without exception, the fruits of such obsession and the desire on the part of Lee's male characters to capture women in art, is tragedy. In 'Oke of Okehurst', the artist would have done well to take more notice of the 'maniac frown',⁸³ which singles out the otherwise inoffensive William Oke; he is driven mad, as, it could be argued, is his wife. The narrator, by intensifying and vocalizing Alice Oke's obsession in unheeding pursuit of his own, has allowed the ghost of Christopher Lovelock - previously only an interesting part of the family history - to acquire strength and a proper entry into the world of the living. (Whether it gains power physically, or, as Gunn has suggested, as a delusion of the Okes, is treated with ambiguity by the author.)

Convinced he sees Lovelock with his wife, Oke shoots Alice, killing her, and then bungles a similar attempt on his own life; he 'died a few days later, raving'.⁸⁴ Whilst proclaiming his innocence, the artist has in reality been the catalyst for wholesale death and destruction.

Waldemar too is driven to insanity by his futile attempts to capture the bewitching Dionea in clay. He throws himself off a cliff after sacrificing his wife at the altar in front of which Dionea has been posing, as well as burning down his studio. Speridion Trepka, in 'Amour Dure', falls foul of the edict, 'no man must survive long who conceives himself to have a right over her'.⁸⁵ After convincing himself that he is in communication with Medea da Carpi, and that he is being called upon to serve her in return for her love, he is discovered stabbed to death. He too could well be mad, and as is always the case with Lee's supernatural fiction, she leaves it open to interpretation whether the force behind the tale is that of the paranormal, or psychological trauma, or a mixture of both. Trepka believes that Medea's victims return to warn him, but he rebuffs them, persisting in his view of them as wrongdoers; this could be his crazed attempt to assert his own position; Lee leaves such questions tantalizingly unanswered.

On this level, therefore, it would be easy to read Lee as denigrating men in general. The fantasy and obsession with which many of her male characters objectify women is the cause of much of the tragedy in her fiction. The way that they use art to do so is an added factor, which may be related to, even today. It is not, however, so straightforward, and Lee does not simplistically idealize her own sex, as we shall see next.

MADONNAS AND GODDESSES

When Diana Basham suggests that, 'Vernon Lee was fascinated by the dangerous psychic over-charge attached to the concept of "Woman" ',⁸⁶ she offers a basis for much discussion of the writer's female characters. With her choice of the word 'fascinated', Basham further highlights Lee's own involvement with her subject matter, and goes on to introduce the importance, as we have already witnessed, of the human psyche in her version of the supernatural. Moreover, she raises the issue of how Lee approached woman as a 'concept' in her stories. The writer carefully avoided stereotypes of feminine qualities, offering instead thoughtful portraits of the complexities, and - often dramatically - of the extremes of female nature, stressing always the individuality. Her tales depict varying combinations of women as good and evil characters.

In 'Dionea', there occurs the classic binary opposition of witch/saint. This could also be broadened out to include a version of whore/mother. The title character has been found washed up on the Italian coast, although no shipwreck, and no other bodies, can be traced. Pinned to her clothes is her name, with its connections with Venus and Aphrodite. Given eventual events, the name is indeed apt. She is brought up by the nuns of the small village at which she lands, but from the first there are signs and suspicions that her origins are far from Christian; on her attempted baptism, 'she kicked and plunged and yelled like twenty little devils, and positively would not let the holy water touch her'.⁸⁷ During her time at the convent she drives the nuns to despair and little short of religious fear; if she is not a human incarnation of the devil himself, she is certainly depicted as a witch. In keeping, however, with her namesake, she is beautiful,

and from this fact the disasters ensue. It is not that she attracts lovers herself: '(they would be afraid of her eye), but wherever she goes the young people must needs fall in love with each other, and usually where it is far from desirable'.⁸⁸ This is somewhat of an understatement; her contact causes a great deal of personal disaster, and even death. Nuns abandon their faith to elope with lovers; priests commit suicide because of the overwhelming urges of the flesh. Dionea, as a personification of Venus/Aphrodite, creates a cult of erotic love, which, in turn, destroys all who fall victim.

Dionea herself is 'as cold as ice, as pure as snow',⁸⁹ completely unmoved by everyone's opinions of her as a witch. Nobody doubts her powers, and she neither affirms nor denies anything, maintaining her otherworldly self-sufficiency. On the death-by-lightning of a lecherous old man, her response is typical: ' "I told him," Dionea said very quietly, when she came to stay with me the next day [...] "that if he did not leave me alone Heaven would send him an accident" '.⁹⁰ Pagan force that she is, the reference to heaven appears incongruous, but, addressing the Christian narrator, she may well be simply adopting the acceptable terminology.

After this build up, the main victims are friends of the narrator: the sculptor, Waldemar, and his wife, Gertrude. As we have seen, the tragedy of the story ensues when Gertrude presses her reluctant husband into employing the fatal Dionea as a model. Gertrude strikes the reader as an utter contrast to Dionea, and constitutes the other half of the witch/saint binary opposition. She is described as 'a Memling Madonna, finished by some Tuscan sculptor, and her long, delicate white hands ever busy'.⁹¹ Her industry contrasts with Dionea's steadfast refusal to bow to the sewing and lace making which the nuns encourage, and the religious imagery is pointed. The comparison with the

Virgin Mary is heightened by her own maternal role; she cares tenderly for the children who surround her, and is pregnant during the story. Her 'thin white profile'⁹² inspires protection in her otherwise wild husband, and again opposes Dionea's robust constitution and brown complexion, not to mention her habit of frightening the village children.

In this clear binary opposition, what is most interesting is that the dark side triumphs. Gertrude, representing the light, is sacrificed on a pagan altar to the goddess of erotic love and beauty, whilst Dionea, her work of destruction seemingly complete, disappears victorious. Apparently she returns to the sea from which she was born; she becomes, fittingly, myth - as if her true personality as Venus/Aphrodite is revealed - being seen sometimes (so it is claimed) against the mast of a strange ship at full sail. Whilst Lee does not seem to endorse Dionea's character and actions exactly, she does give her power. In comparison with Gertrude, who can only watch in despair as events unfold, and gives up her life without a struggle, she is in complete control of the situation. Whilst her presence works its usual disastrous spell, causing Waldemar to ignore his virginal wife in favour of the charms which Dionea offers (but does not surrender), the man is by no means the victor. Far from his desires being satisfied, he ends with a violent death. It is impossible to know Lee's intentions definitely, but this could be a further manifestation of her abhorrence of the physical side of nature, in combination with a desire to empower her female characters. Whilst Gertrude is in bondage to the supposedly feminine traits so beloved of the Victorians - maternity, domesticity and meekness - Dionea is powerfully free of them, the nuns, as the chief proponents, having conspicuously failed in their attempts to instil them. Mariolatry is trampled underfoot by pagan abandonment. Neither woman is sensuous herself, but in Dionea this is fully realised by its conjunction with unfeminine power.

Again, Lee is unafraid of letting uncharacteristic (in fiction), wicked female behaviour go unpunished in 'Amour Dure'. The unashamedly evil Medea da Carpi makes a profession of luring men to their deaths, almost as if she is issuing retribution for their desires. The men themselves, in fact, usually think they are helping Medea, and that their reward will be her love (although she also makes short work of her male enemies). The reality is that their reward is death: 'her magic faculty is to enslave all the men who come across her path; all those who see her, love her, become her slaves; and it is the destiny of all her slaves to perish'.⁹³ She is purely self-serving, and uses the men who fall in love with her without remorse, whilst she, like Dionea, gains the label of 'witch'.⁹⁴ What emerges most strongly in the case of Speridion Trepka, innocent though he ostensibly is, is a humbling of masculine pride and the belief in the infallibility of his suit. Whilst declaring that everything he does, he does for Medea, it is clear that Trepka always believes totally that Medea will be his. What is obvious to the reader, from Medea's treatment of her former lovers, is that pride comes before a fall. In the end Medea outwits Trepka, as she did all the others, and he pays with his life. Lee would again seem to be asserting the empowering nature of chastity. Medea, like Dionea, remains a single, independent figure, and despite the fact that she does contract marriages, and has a son, these are very much strategic (and short-lived) moves and in no way part of her character. Such is the power this confers she is able to triumph over death, in so far as she can bewitch Trepka physically, several centuries after her actual death.

In complete contrast, Lee also offers a view of woman as victim in 'The Doll'. Notably, the woman in question - she whose image we see in the doll of the title - has come to

her state of powerlessness through marriage. As has been seen, the living doll is 'bought' directly out of the convent (nuns, no doubt, as in 'Dionea' being considered ideal to instil womanly and wifely duties). The attraction for the husband, whom Lee roundly despises, would seem to lie in gaining a 'blank page', whose nature can be moulded to suit himself. The wife is a virtual prisoner in the home, subject to her husband's whims, not allowed to develop as a person in her own right. Vernon Lee clearly views this as little more than a cattle market, or slavery, and clinches her point by having the wife die in childbirth, that is, fulfilling a wife's major role, producing sons and heirs.

Unable to fend for herself during life, the Doll is finally vindicated by the Victorian narrator who supposedly comes across her by chance. It seems, in fact, to be an act of fate, or destiny, as it proves a means of empowerment for the latter-day woman also. She is suffering under a different kind of bondage; such is its insidious nature, she does not even recognize how she is trapped until the Doll enlightens her. In this respect it is a mutual empowerment, allowing the Doll her first positive role. Whilst the narrator is supposedly a free woman - she travels about independently, buying for her collections - in hindsight she views it differently. The comparison of married roles makes it obvious: 'my husband is too busy for my *bric-à-brac* journeys'.⁹⁵ Whilst the husband is engaged with important business, she lives the life of a leisured, upper-class woman. It is one which Lee represents as being all-too often stale and meaningless, an endless cycle of killing time with visits, tea parties and hobbies, with no real opportunities to exercise talents or intelligence. The author is decided regarding the means of amelioration:

the one thing certain about the future of women is, surely, that they ought to be given a chance, by the removal of legal and professional disabilities, if not of

becoming different from what they have been, at all events of showing what they really are.⁹⁶

It is seeing and communicating with the Doll that opens the narrator's eyes to the similarities of their positions, and she is immediately determined to assert herself for both their sakes. To the old man who helps her she says, 'I want to tell you that I am an honest woman according to my lights, and I want you to trust me in this matter'.⁹⁷ In a dramatic finale, she burns the effigy ceremoniously, a purge which cleanses and frees them both. The old man acknowledges the importance and rightness of her gesture:

there remained in the embers something small and shiny. Orestes raked it out and handed it to me. It was a wedding ring of old-fashioned shape, which had been hidden under the silk mitten. 'Keep it, signora,' said Orestes; 'you have put an end to her sorrows'.⁹⁸

The fact that it is a wedding ring which she keeps could be conciliatory on the part of Lee, that is, there is no indication that this particular marriage of the narrator is unhappy, but rather the author condemns the tendency, or opportunity, within marriage towards oppressive gender roles. 'The Doll', therefore, ends positively, in that the women move forward out of victim roles, through active efforts on their own and each other's behalf.

The character of Alice Oke, in 'Oke of Okehurst', is more complex still, because she embraces both the role of victim and persecutor. As the narrator says, 'one couldn't feel sorry for her. I felt much sorrier for the wretched creature of a husband'.⁹⁹ The first part of that statement is biased; it comes from the man who is trying to extricate himself from blame in the affair. However, at the same time, it has some truth in it, which rests largely on the second part of the statement. Alice Oke, without a doubt, treats her

husband abominably. William Oke loves his wife - ineffectually though this may be - and she abuses that vulnerability:

Mr. Oke was standing before the door. On our approach I saw a look of relieved suspense, of keen pleasure come into his face.

He lifted his wife out of the cart in his strong arms with a kind of chivalrous tenderness.

'I am so glad to have you back, darling,' he exclaimed - 'so glad! I was delighted to hear you had gone out with the cart, but as you have not driven for so long, I was beginning to be frightfully anxious, dearest. Where have you been all this time?'

Mrs. Oke had quickly extricated herself from her husband, who had remained holding her, as one might hold a delicate child who has been causing anxiety. The gentleness and affection of the poor fellow had evidently not touched her - she seemed almost to recoil from it.¹⁰⁰

This exemplifies the vicious circle that is their marriage. Oke wants the ideal hostess wife, which Alice is not. She responds with psychosomatic illnesses that turn her into a semi-invalid. In turn the resultant belief in her 'nervous constitution' makes Oke even more suffocatingly protective. Alice fights against this with her aloofness and malicious taunting about Christopher Lovelock. No wonder Oke is bemused, believing himself cuckolded by a rival dead two centuries. In short, Alice behaves badly, but one can understand why, although one's sympathies are torn. 'Oke of Okehurst' has a far from positive ending, the result, primarily, of a fundamentally mismatched marriage and the demands of a patriarchal society.

What emerges, in general, is a picture of women both as exploited and exploiters. In the former role, they are usually victims of a traditional system, and in the latter, they are those who have, by supernatural agency, risen above it, and beaten it at its own game. Lee does not offer a happy or a comfortable alternative to the established *male/female* relationships that she regarded as frequently causing so much misery. She did not

pretend to, but she *did* explore the possibilities, as we have seen so far, and as we shall continue to consider in the final section.

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES

'The Doll' is interpreted by Jessica Amanda Salmonson as a purge of the often unhappy feelings Vernon Lee experienced towards women,¹⁰¹ and certainly this view could be supported by the other stories which have been discussed in this chapter. A pattern which seems to emerge for women writers of supernatural fiction is that the genre provides a suitably disguised outlet for tensions and emotions which would otherwise have to remain hidden, as Uglow has argued.¹⁰² For Lee then, it is possible that the supernatural provided a release for a very private person. As Dame Ethel Smythe earlier demonstrated, expressing herself on a physical level, or inter-personally, was virtually impossible for the writer, who could, however, put pen to paper naturally and easily.

Little scholarly attention has been directed towards Lee, partly because she willed her papers out of the public domain for the greater part of fifty years, as is explained in the Colby Library Quarterly.¹⁰³ This has ensured that she 'has dropped into a curious time-hole and has all but vanished'.¹⁰⁴ Even whilst alive, 'She lived on the margins of English literary society; marginalised both because of her geographic remoteness [...] and because of her formidable and scornful tongue and pen'.¹⁰⁵ Her biography was written in the early sixties, and the still early stages of modern feminism may go some way to explaining the lack of awareness and insensitive characterization of Lee offered by the male author:

She was a feminist, if by that we mean one who has continually before *him* [*my italics*] the understanding and recognition of the existence of a distinctly *feminine* [*my italics*] point of view; but she was critical of those women who saw the future for their sex in an aping of purely masculine behaviour.¹⁰⁶

The use of the masculine pronoun, and the loaded term 'feminine', illustrate clearly that Lee's writing, until the more recent work by feminist critics such as Salmonson, was being addressed blandly within a male framework/critique. Such treatment fails to recognize the latent sexual ambiguity within the supernatural fiction, and consequently the possibilities for a richer textual experience.

Lee's adoption of her pseudonym reflects her own awareness of gender-based judgements. As she explained in a letter to Henrietta Jenkin (an early mentor): 'I am sure no one reads a woman's writing on art, history, or aesthetics with anything but mitigated [*sic*] contempt'.¹⁰⁷ Her concern was justified; reviewers of Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy, once her true sex was known, made much of her being female. It was considered that 'the thing that this young woman has accomplished would have been creditable to a mature man who had spent his life in the same line of research'.¹⁰⁸ The perturbation caused by the fact that Lee was not a man is evident in the reviewer's patent relief that Lee's next volume, Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions (1881), 'is more youthful, and it is much more feminine, intensely subjective, and at the same time gloriously lawless'.¹⁰⁹ Supposed 'feminine' attributes – lack of objectivity and discipline - are happily seized upon as a means to reassure that Lee, after all, can be fitted within patriarchal critical expectations. Flaws in the text are put down to gender, rather than inexperience.

'The Doll', as we have seen, deals with a communion which springs up between two women, a relationship not possible within more traditional bonds: 'Do you suppose I could have ever told all this about the Doll to my husband? Yet I tell him everything about myself; and I know he would have been quite kind and respectful'.¹¹⁰ Despite the fact that she physically tells her husband everything, there is no real sense of *knowing*, of the effortless, barrierless communication that exists between herself and the Doll. Lurking behind her courteous references to him is always the implication that he is being 'kind' to someone who is slightly stupid, or pandering to the whims of a child. To a certain extent she has accepted this view; she uses the word 'silly' with reference to herself several times,¹¹¹ and debates the helplessness of 'we poor women'.¹¹² It is only in kinship with the Doll that she is filled with strength and moral courage, and driven to celebrate a release by fire. In this story, therefore, could be the purging of unhappiness in the relationships of reality, but also a celebration of the ideal, as she sees it. The only way this is possible is through the intervention of the supernatural, within whose bounds anything is possible.

Not only does Lee explore this territory of ambiguous sexuality through the depiction of female relationships, but also through male. The difference is that whilst the former takes literary shape as a relatively positive experience, the latter are more tortured and subject to great anxiety. Of course, the possibility remains that these are a metaphor for all same-sex relationships. On the other hand, it would also be possible to suggest that Lee regards women as being more at ease with the idea of homosexuality, and not victims of the immovable standards of Victorian masculinity.

Indeterminate sexuality is at its most problematic in 'A Wicked Voice', when the male narrator, the composer, Magnus, is tormented, and effectively possessed by the supernatural force of a malicious, century-dead singer, also male. What is most notable about the description Magnus offers of Zaffirino's likeness in his portrait is the blurring of the sexes. He has a 'sensual, effeminate face',¹¹³ and a 'smile which was cruel and mocking like a bad woman's'.¹¹⁴ An almost identical situation occurs in 'Winthrop's Adventure'; again the narrator is describing a portrait of a singer, this time Rinaldi: 'The face was not beautiful; it had something at once sullen and effeminate, something odd and not entirely agreeable; yet it attracted and riveted your attention'.¹¹⁵ What stands out in both cases - as has become expected - is the dangerous power that may be exerted when beauty and the female are intertwined. In the stories which have been discussed, living men have been associated with a certain power, the power allowed by a patriarchal society to men to exercise feelings of obsession, lust, and possession of women, whether or not that power is ultimately successful, or whether it is crushed. (The main point is that these living men assume at the outset that there is no reason why they should not be successful.) However, for the female characters created by Lee, power - whether used for the good or the bad - is normally associated with the supernatural. As with Medea da Carpi, the powerful woman may herself be the supernatural agent, or, as in the case of the narrator of 'The Doll', power may be gained via the supernatural for a living woman. There may even be some doubt as to which category the woman falls into, as with 'Dionea'.

Clearly, in stories such as 'A Wicked Voice' and 'Winthrop's Adventure', the fact that fascination exists between two men is further complicated by the fact that the supernatural male influence has female, or effeminate, traits. As has been mentioned, both these stories see the living characters being brought to the brink of madness and

despair - or, in the case of Magnus, actually going over the brink - by their irresistible connections with these (fe)male agents of the supernatural.

Whilst it is impossible to ever definitely state Lee's true intentions with regard to the ambiguous gender roles she establishes in stories such as these, it does not seem to be overstepping the bounds of interpretation to read them in this way. That is, as an exploration of emotions raised by combined and conflicting issues of sexuality, gender, and power. That the supernatural should prove an apt genre within which to do this is borne out by the other Victorian women working in similar territory. Ada Trevanion's 'A Ghost Story' (1858), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' 'Since I Died' (1873), and Alice Brown's 'There and Here' (1897), are just a few examples.¹¹⁶ Whether the stories worked as a catharsis for Lee or not, this added ambiguity without doubt enhanced their subtlety and sophistication both as supernatural stories and works of literature.

Vernon Lee was a writer of great talents and immense learning. Even during her lifetime, though popular, and even immortalized in verse by Robert Browning¹¹⁷, her intellectuality drew a limited number of educated readers.¹¹⁸ As well as history and music, for example, she wrote on art, aesthetics, and sociology. Like Rhoda Broughton, she was also known for her conversation: 'She was very witty, though not humorous. At her best her talk was fascinating. She was a tremendous talker'.¹¹⁹ Gradually readers are beginning to rediscover that in her stories of the supernatural she combines this intelligence and wide-ranging knowledge with a great readability. Part of her attraction - but also the challenge - is that it is impossible to simply pin her work down as 'another ghost story' of predictable formula. What makes these stories yet more appealing is the extent to which the author involved her own emotions and concerns, in

a way that was seemingly extremely difficult in day-to-day life. Writing at a time of great change, on the borders of two centuries, Vernon Lee's tales reflect vexed issues of power, exploitation, sex and gender, fitted within a narrative frame of which she was mistress: the past as a living, intense force, and the influence of beauty, in whatever form. Vernon Lee has a huge amount to offer a modern reader; it is to be hoped that with the steadily increasing interest, and her papers now in the public domain, more of her supernatural stories may be reprinted. Then the past could continue to haunt us.

- ¹ Vernon Lee, Hauntings: Fantastic Stories (London, 1906), p.18.
- ² *Ibid.* p.3.
- ³ Richard Dalby, ed., The Virago Book of Victorian Ghost Stories (London, 1992), pp. 3-58.
- ⁴ Lee, Hauntings, pp.105-34.
- ⁵ *Ibid.* p.196.
- ⁶ *Ibid.* p.197.
- ⁷ Vernon Lee, Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy (London, 1880).
- ⁸ Harriet Waters Preston, 'Vernon Lee', Atlantic Monthly, vol.55, Feb. (1885), pp.219-27, p.220.
- ⁹ Considered in Carlo Caballero, ' "A Wicked Voice": On Vernon Lee, Wagner and the Effects of Music', Victorian Studies, vol.35:4, summer (1992), pp.385-408, pp.386-8. For a discussion of Farinelli, cf. Robert Freeman, 'Farinelli, Carlo Broschi', The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, ed. by Stanley Sadie, 20 vols (London, 1980), vi, pp.397-8.
- ¹⁰ Preston, p.220.
- ¹¹ Peter Gunn, Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935 (London, 1964), ch.6.
- ¹² Biographical information on Vernon Lee's childhood is taken from the first five chapters of Peter Gunn.
- ¹³ Gunn, p.1.
- ¹⁴ Van Wyck Brooks, 'Notes on Vernon Lee', Forum, vol.45, April (1911), pp.447-56, p.449.
- ¹⁵ Gunn, p.4.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.10.
- ¹⁷ Vernon Lee, For Maurice: Fine Unlikely Stories (London, 1927). Apart from this, and Hauntings, Vernon Lee published another volume of supernatural fiction: Pope Jacynth, and Other Fantastic Tales (London, 1904).
- ¹⁸ Lee, Hauntings, p.xi.
- ¹⁹ Gunn, p.130.
- ²⁰ Lee, Hauntings, p.x.
- ²¹ 'Oke of Okehurst', for example, was dedicated to Count Peter Boutourline, who had urged Lee to write down what was previously an oral tale. Overcoming initial reluctance, Lee created the tale as a reminder of their friendship. Cf. Lee, Hauntings, pp.107-8.
- ²² Lee, Hauntings, p.116.
- ²³ *Ibid.* p.17.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.* p.17.
- ²⁵ Dalby, p.113.
- ²⁶ Lee, Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy, p.121.
- ²⁷ For a discussion of Pacchiarotti, cf. Kathleen Kuzmick Hansell, 'Pacchiarotti, Gasparo', The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, ed. by Stanley Sadie, 20 vols (London, 1980), xiv, pp.42-3. This extract records that as the last great soprano castrati, Pacchiarotti was famous for moving his listeners with renditions of pathetic airs, once leaving the orchestra unable to continue for tears in its eyes. He sang in London as well as in Italy, and was a favourite of society because of his cultured mind and modest behaviour.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.* p.122.
- ²⁹ Jessica Amanda Salmonson, ed., What Did Miss Darrington See? An Anthology of Feminist Supernatural Fiction (New York, 1989), pp.192-200.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.* p.196.
- ³¹ Julia Briggs, Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story (London, 1977), p.122.
- ³² Lee, Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy, p.96.
- ³³ Gunn, p.61.
- ³⁴ Lee, Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy, pp.120-1.
- ³⁵ Dalby, p.113.
- ³⁶ Caballero, p.400.
- ³⁷ Lee, Hauntings, p.202.
- ³⁸ Lee, Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy, p.119.
- ³⁹ Lee, Hauntings, pp.220-1.
- ⁴⁰ Caballero, pp.388-9.
- ⁴¹ Gunn, p.19.
- ⁴² Lee, Hauntings, p.237.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.* p.152.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p.132.

- ⁴⁵ Ibid. p.138.
- ⁴⁶ Salmonson, p.193.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid. p.199.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid. p.196.
- ⁴⁹ Cf. Salmonson's introduction to 'The Doll', pp.192-3.
- ⁵⁰ Irene Cooper Willis, 'Vernon Lee', Colby Library Quarterly, vol.5:6, June (1960), pp.113-16, p.114.
- ⁵¹ Gunn, p.167.
- ⁵² Ibid. p.130.
- ⁵³ Ibid. p.138.
- ⁵⁴ Caballero, p.385.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid. p.386.
- ⁵⁶ Lee, Hauntings, p. 122.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 109.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid. p.111.
- ⁵⁹ Review [anon.], 'Hauntings, by Vernon Lee', The Academy, vol.70, April (1906), p.358.
- ⁶⁰ Cf. Also Gabriel Oak, in Thomas Hardy, Far from the Madding Crowd (London, 1874).
- ⁶¹ Ruth Robbins, 'Vernon Lee: Decadent Woman?', Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe, ed. by John Stokes (London, 1992), pp.139-61, pp.147-8.
- ⁶² Lee, Hauntings, p.137.
- ⁶³ Ibid. p.137.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid. p.137.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid. p.136.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid. p.22.
- ⁶⁷ Peter G. Christensen, 'The Burden of History in Vernon Lee's ghost story "Amour Dure"', Studies in the Humanities, vol.16 (1989), pp.33-43, p.33.
- ⁶⁸ Salmonson, p.197.
- ⁶⁹ Vernon Lee, 'The Economic Dependence of Women', North American Review, vol.175:548, April (1903), pp.71-90.
- ⁷⁰ Vernon Lee, 'The Economic Dependence of Women', Critical Essays on Charlotte Perkins Gilman, ed. by Joanne B. Karpinski (New York, 1992), pp.90-102, p.93.
- ⁷¹ Ibid. p.95.
- ⁷² Ibid. p.92.
- ⁷³ Dalby, p.113.
- ⁷⁴ Gunn, p.88.
- ⁷⁵ Robert Browning, The Poems of Robert Browning (Oxford, 1928), pp.54-5, p.54.
- ⁷⁶ Lee, Hauntings, p.90.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid. pp.93-4.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid. p.96.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid. p.109.
- ⁸⁰ Salmonson, p.197.
- ⁸¹ Lee, Pope Jacynth, p.153.
- ⁸² Ibid. p.161.
- ⁸³ Lee, Hauntings, p.112.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid. p.191.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid. p.25.
- ⁸⁶ Diana Basham, The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society (London, 1992), p.173.
- ⁸⁷ Lee, Hauntings, pp.64-5.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid. p.74.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid. p.87.
- ⁹⁰ Ibid. p.82.
- ⁹¹ Ibid. p.89. For a discussion of Memling's work, cf. K.B. MacFarlane, Hans Memling (Oxford, 1971).
- ⁹² Ibid. p.90.
- ⁹³ Ibid. p.25.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid. p.35.
- ⁹⁵ Salmonson, p.193.
- ⁹⁶ Lee, 'The Economic Dependence of Women', ed. by Karpinski, p.100.
- ⁹⁷ Salmonson, p.199.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid. p.200.
- ⁹⁹ Lee, Hauntings, p.111.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid. pp.160-1.
- ¹⁰¹ Salmonson, pp.192-3.

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- ¹⁰² Jenny Uglow, 'Introduction', Victorian Ghost Stories, ed. by Richard Dalby, pp.ix-xvii, p.ix.
- ¹⁰³ Elizabeth F. Libbey, 'The Vernon Lee Papers', Colby Library Quarterly, vol.3:8, Nov. (1952), pp.117-19, p.118.
- ¹⁰⁴ Burdett Gardner, 'Who Was Vernon Lee?', Colby Library Quarterly, vol.3:8, Nov. (1952), pp.120-22, p.120.
- ¹⁰⁵ Robbins, p.140.
- ¹⁰⁶ Gunn, p.9.
- ¹⁰⁷ Phyllis F. Mannocchi, ' "Vernon Lee": A Reintroduction and Primary Bibliography', English Literature in Transition, vol.26:4 (1983), pp.231-67, p.231.
- ¹⁰⁸ Preston, p.223.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p.224.
- ¹¹⁰ Salmonson, p.197.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid. pp.193/197.
- ¹¹² Ibid. p.198.
- ¹¹³ Lee, Hauntings, p.207.
- ¹¹⁴ Ibid. p.235.
- ¹¹⁵ Dalby, p.112.
- ¹¹⁶ Salmonson, pp.15-24; 229-35; 135-47.
- ¹¹⁷ Gunn, p.2.
- ¹¹⁸ Ibid. p.161-2.
- ¹¹⁹ Willis, p.115.

CONCLUSION

In the ghost story, the past is not something which can be simply left behind and forgotten. There is no straightforward linear progression from previous times onwards; instead, the past can intrude into, and has immediate bearing on, the future. As Jay comments when discussing her arrangement of Margaret Oliphant's biography: 'linearity has a tendency to become conflated with the notion of progress and as such is peculiarly ill-suited to deal with the cyclical rhythm of women's lives'.¹ Thus in an era when a primary ethic was the forward thrust of science, technology and commerce, the supernatural tale proved a perfect foil. As its short format was suited to its women authors, so the cyclical nature of the ghost story adapted to their message. There was no nostalgic longing for the past, but a reminder of its continuing power, both positive and for evil. Insights into the mistakes and triumphs of humanity could hopefully be gleaned. Lee's fiction, for example, concentrates on the dangers of an intrusive past which her Victorian characters cannot leave alone. Gaskell's offers both a warning against a repetition of man's darker episodes, as well as a celebration, in her love of folklore, of an enduring and flourishing wisdom. The writers featured in this thesis recognized the balance required in both embracing and breaking from the past.

Balance is perhaps at the very centre of the ambitions of Victorian women's supernatural stories. With the exception, perhaps, of Lee, none of these five writers imagined or desired a social revolution. (Lee's career, of course, benefited from freedoms that the earlier writers had not been able to take full advantage of.) Whilst Lee spoke out radically against the institution of marriage, as it stood, and what she regarded as the enslavement of women, as well as on other issues, such as pacifism, about which she felt strongly, the other writers battled in a quieter way. They did not hate men (neither did Lee), nor abhor marriage or the family, but they realized the

insidious nature of injustices which had become enshrined in patriarchal ideology. Assumptions which on the one hand demanded that women be the moral and spiritual angel in the house, whilst at the same time citing them as inferior, weak and irrational, angered them. Conversely, the fixed notions of masculinity placed on men exerted equal pressure. It was largely the sheer inflexibility of such rules against which they fought. They disputed hardened, unquestioned dogma, which insisted that a woman conform to one ideal and a man to a strictly separate other, and which, these women saw, was responsible for so much unnecessary unhappiness. They were frustrated by the limitations it enforced, and the abuses it permitted. What they envisaged was a system that allowed for greater respect for women, and for collective and individual strengths. The female characters in these stories are adept at managing alone, but they also gain from inclusion in networks and communities of other women. Once again there is a balance to be achieved.

There were differences in the extent to which women writers worked from within the patriarchy. Lee was arguably the most independent - possibly because of the time at which she lived and wrote - choosing to live alone and at a distance from society and its regulations. Although she did not deliberately flout the latter, she felt happy to strike out in whatever literary direction she felt inspired, heedless of popular opinion, morality or expectation. She was capable of offending, especially on a personal level, but showed no indication of needing approbation. She was able, to a greater extent than any of the featured writers, to dedicate herself to writing. Broughton's reputation was partly established - intentionally or not - on her ability to shock her audience, yet she relished the upper-class world she had been born to, and had no desire to disrupt that. Gaskell was the only one of the five who remained married for a long period, and therefore had to take into account the dynamics of that relationship, although Oliphant certainly

retained family duties after her husband's death. It is clear from the comments of both, however, that such family ties, as well as causing some impatience and sorrow, also brought happiness and an additional meaning to their lives, and it is impossible to suggest either would have exchanged their situations for Lee's exclusivity of purpose. It was balance, as Gaskell so very often stated, which was sought after. Oliphant had a vested interest in ostensibly remaining within the accepted ideology, according to the way she marketed herself. Falconer's attitude to religious issues in Cecilia de Noël brought about much debate. As her notes reveal, the issue of God's existence, the centre of so much anxiety, was, in the words of Cecilia, 'just the same to me as if they should ask me whether the sun was shining, when all the time I saw the sunshine on their faces'.² She had her own certainties, and no wish to denigrate Christianity, but did want others to recognize and reject hypocrisy, embracing instead the central tenet of love for others. Their efforts towards change may at times have been subtle or subversive, but evinced determination, nonetheless.

All of these writers, *in their different* ways, illustrate how an individual can be repressed, with the various outcomes, be it tragedy or escape. *The supernatural can be* vengeful, illuminating, cathartic and empowering. For the author it could involve working through troubling personal issues, such as loss, loneliness, or struggles in determining a sense of self. In addition it could illuminate issues on a wider social scale. In both cases the stories deal with matters that could affect anybody, as well as concerns pertaining exclusively to women. The supernatural always allows for assertive action and change, and demands re-evaluation and self-examination, whether on the part of creator or reader. However open or implicit the challenge, the encouragement to question is consistently there. With the emphasis placed firmly on those haunted, a supernatural encounter is never something which merely 'happens' to a character. The

short story was not only ideally suited to women's writing, but was the perfect vehicle for containing a message. Succinct, any underlying themes would not be lost in bulky narrative, but would be available should the reader choose, or be able to see it. The ghost story, as this thesis has attempted to illustrate, was peculiarly effective in conveying hidden agendas and forbidden topics.

As women's and the individual's rights have progressed during the twentieth century, the subversive contributions of these women have been overshadowed, and perhaps viewed as redundant, as more open methods of comment and protest have become possible. Much would be lost, however, if this significant period, when so much courage was demanded in initiating the very freedoms we give so little thought to today, was allowed to sink from view and memory. Each of these writers is distinct in style and content, yet they share a common bond in their explorations of a genre that furnishes such wealth of opportunity for broadening women's experience. Lanoe Falconer once said that, 'Nowhere can "signs of weariness, of haste, in fact of scamping," be so inexcusable as on the miniature canvas, or ivory, of the short story'.³ These stories stand on their own merit, for the undoubted talent displayed in them, and also because of their message. It is appropriate recognition of these women that readers should still be able to witness their true fighting spirit.

¹ Elisabeth Jay, Mrs Oliphant: 'A Fiction to Herself': A Literary Life (Oxford, 1995), p.3.

² Lanoe Falconer, Cecilia de Noël (London, 1891), p.180.

³ Lanoe Falconer, 'The Short Story', Atalanta, vol.6, Oct.-Sept. (1892-3), pp.457-9, p.459.

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