

**“Smash the Social Machine”:
Neo-Victorianism and Postfeminism
in Emma Donoghue’s *The Sealed Letter***

Claire O’Callaghan
(University of Leicester, UK)

Abstract:

This article reads Emma Donoghue’s neo-Victorian novel *The Sealed Letter* (2008) as a postfeminist text that demonstrates the complex ways in which feminist concerns of the nineteenth century persist in the twenty-first-century present. I argue that Donoghue’s re-imagining of the Codrington trial from 1864 offers a reflexive postfeminist critique of the way in which female gender and sexual norms are culturally produced and maintained. In doing so, I propose that *The Sealed Letter* exemplifies the means through which Victorian ideas of women, gender, and sexuality prevail, while Donoghue’s rewriting of the case draws important parallels with instances of sexism and misogyny in contemporary culture. In reworking the Codrington affair, the novel illustrates long-standing feminist concerns such as the sexual double standard and homophobia that are the renewed subject of postfeminist criticism in the new millennium.

Keywords: culture, Emma Donoghue, feminism, gender, lesbianism, postfeminism, sexuality, sexism, women.

In Emma Donoghue’s neo-Victorian novel, *The Sealed Letter* (2008), the feminist pioneer, Emily ‘Fido’ Faithfull remarks that, when it comes to equality between the sexes, “history moves by fits and starts: certain battles must be fought again and again” (Donoghue 2009: 380). With this despondent remark, Fido draws attention to the recurrent nature of (some) feminist debates across history. Significantly, Fido’s point echoes recent concerns expressed by postfeminist scholars including Natasha Walter, Kat Banyard, and Rosalind Gill amongst others, who have drawn attention to the recurrent and damaging effects of attitudes and practices that have enabled the oppression of women across historical periods.

The present article explores how feminist neo-Victorian fictions provide a useful means of interrogating such long-standing feminist concerns that run through the Victorian past and extend into the

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postfeminist present. In *The Sealed Letter*, I argue, Donoghue’s representation of women’s sexualities reconstructs sexist and misogynistic responses to female sexual behaviours from the nineteenth-century past that parallel attitudes expressed in the new millennium, and which are the renewed subject of postfeminist criticism.

In what follows I approach this argument by first defining and contextualising the significance of postfeminist theory, before illuminating the potential of postfeminism for reading feminist neo-Victorian fiction. I will then discuss how Donoghue’s rendition of the Codrington trial of 1864 reflects contemporary postfeminist debates that affirm the persistence of ‘Victorian’ attitudes towards female gender and sexuality. Drawing on a range of postfeminist debates and sources, I provide a close reading of the two female protagonists in the novel to show the diverse ways in which women who ‘deviate’ from familial, marital and sexual norms continue to come under negative scrutiny. I demonstrate how Donoghue’s novel suggests that the veracity of women’s non-repressed sexuality and willful sexual behaviour is persistently placed on ‘trial’.

1. Contemporary Feminisms

To clarify the particular strand of feminist discourse being deployed in this article, it is necessary to be clear about the definition of the terms ‘feminism’ and ‘postfeminism’. Sarah Gamble notes that “a general definition” of feminism might state that feminism is “the belief that women, purely and simply because they are women, are treated inequitably within a society that is organised to prioritise male viewpoints and concerns” (Gamble 1998: vii). Feminism “seeks to change this situation”, although, as Gamble rightly comments, “there has never been a universally agreed agenda” for how this is to be achieved (Gamble 1998: vii, viii). However, the introduction of the term ‘postfeminism’ into the popular lexicon in recent years suggests that ‘feminism’ has become “an increasingly contested term” (Gamble 1998: viii). Typically, the post-ing of feminism has come to express two different points of view. When it is deployed with the inclusion of a hyphen, post-feminism describes a time after feminism (a period in which feminism is, perhaps, no longer relevant or is assumed to have succeeded in achieving feminist goals) or it can ascribe an out-datedness to feminist ideology (Genz and Brabbon 2009: 2-3). Such ideas can be found

in the works of Rene Denfeld, Naomi Wolf and the early works of Natasha Walter.

However, an alternative understanding to the post-ing of feminism is offered by Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabbon, who conceive of 'postfeminism' – without the hyphenated prefix – to designate a plurality of feminist positions from the second wave of feminism onwards (Genz and Brabbon 2009: 3). This deployment of postfeminism challenges the idea that feminism has succeeded in achieving its goals and continues to advocate a broad range of still current feminist concerns while recognising that new agendas have developed in the period since the Women's Movement. This definition is important because it avoids the suggestion of a semantic and generational rift between twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist discourses that cast one perspective in a hierarchical position to another, or that portray postfeminism as a "saboteur" to a previous feminist generation and its politics (Genz and Brabbon 2009: 3).

In suggesting that postfeminism continues feminist agendas *across* historical periods, scholars thus reject the idea that the contemporary world reflects a period *after* feminism by highlighting how 'old' feminist concerns are being revitalised in new and worrying modes. Walter's work stands out in this respect. In her powerful 2010 polemic *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, Walter rejects the post-feminist views that she expressed twelve years earlier in *The New Feminism* to confess that despite her previous conviction that we are living in a post-feminist age, she now feels that she "was wrong" (Walter 2010: 8). Walter points to what she calls the "return" of sexism and forms of misogyny as contributing to the continued oppression of women in the modern era, and she attributes the "return" of anti-feminist sentiments to "a stalled revolution" in which the successes of previous feminist generations are matched by "a resurgence of old sexism in new guises" (Walter 2010: 9, 10). Walter perceives the renewal of belief in biological determinism and prevailing notions of apparently natural sex roles and an imaginary feminine as co-existent with postfeminist ideals of female empowerment and sexual agency. She argues that the return of anti-feminist rhetoric threatens to re-cage women into restrictive modes of existence that undermine the gains achieved by feminism.

Importantly, Genz observes that the current retro re-affirmation of family values and gendered norms, many of them formulated in and derived from Victorian culture, pervade all aspects of contemporary culture, from

modern political discourse to journalism (Genz 2009: 99).¹ Likewise, the recent veneration of the figure of the housewife – ‘the domestic goddess’, to borrow Nigella Lawson’s trendy term – reworks aspects of an idealised image of Victorian womanhood as well as reiterating (Victorian) domestic subservience through the discourse of New Traditionalism, which, as Susan Faludi comments, constitutes “a recycled version of the Victorian fantasy” in a new “cult of domesticity” (Faludi 1991: 77). Similarly, feminist theorists have argued that the legacy of conservative gender and sexual ideals from the nineteenth century means that traditional conceptions of gender are haunted by a “nostalgic tradition of imposed limitations” and “a rigid code of appearance and behaviour defined by do’s and don’t do’s” (Brownmiller 1986: 2). Postfeminist criticism, therefore, is a useful lens through which to view neo-Victorian fiction in order to highlight the overlaps, intersections and continuities (as much as dissonances) between feminist histories and cultural critiques of women, gender, and sexuality.

2. Neo-Victorianism and Feminism

Since the publication of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966, in which Rhys re-imagined the life of the incarcerated Bertha Mason from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), neo-Victorianism has proved itself as a particularly amenable literary form for feminist ends. Novels such as A. S. Byatt’s Man-Booker Prize winning *Possession* (1990), Sarah Waters’s *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002), Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and The White* (2002) and Belinda Starling’s *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007), among others, reflect Mark Llewellyn’s observation that the genre usefully enables contemporary authors to “re-write the historical narrative” of the Victorian period and represent “marginalized voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally ‘different’ versions of the Victorian” (Llewellyn 2008: 165). In doing so, neo-Victorian fictions have reconstructed a range of debates surrounding women’s gender and sexuality.

Faber’s novel, for instance, explores prostitution and, through the character of Agnes Rackham, examines sexual violence and the damaging effects of sexual abuse. Byatt’s ‘Morpho Eugenia’ (1992) and Waters’s *Affinity* explore Victorian medical practices and their relationship to gendered politics, as well as dominant perceptions of non-normative gender behaviour, respectively incest and lesbianism. The relationship between

gender and criminality is one concern of Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), while gender and racial oppression are themes in Adhaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (2000), Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus* (2003), and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2011). Although Donoghue has to date received scant critical attention in the field of neo-Victorian studies or beyond, her own writings contribute to the project of rewriting feminist histories and specifically those concerned with exposing the abuse of women. In addition to *The Sealed Letter*, her short-story 'Cured', published in *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002), recreates the harrowing experience of women who underwent cliterodectomy surgery in the nineteenth century at the hands of Victorian gynaecologist Isaac Baker Brown. Likewise, amongst other themes, she reconstructs the trauma of sexual abuses experienced by women during nineteenth-century American conflicts in her recent neo-Victorian short story collection, *Astray* (2012). Notably, her forthcoming novel, *Frog Music*, due for publication in 2014, will continue to explore violence against women by recounting the violent murder of Jenny Bonnet in San Francisco in 1864.

While neo-Victorian fictions, then, are recognised as contributing to the feminist revision and exploration of the past, the specificity of how feminist theoretical approaches to neo-Victorianism have been applied varies. For instance, in her 2005 study *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Women's Writing*, Jeanette King argues that neo-Victorian feminist fictions provide "an opportunity to challenge the answers which nineteenth-century society produced in response to 'the Woman Question'" (King 2005: 6). King rightly observes that neo-Victorian novels show how feminist concerns of the Victorian past remain "as politically charged" in the present day as they were "at the end of the nineteenth century, and continue to be debated in the popular and academic presses" (King 2005: 6). Yet while King goes on to provide an important discussion of first-wave feminist agendas raised in and by neo-Victorian novels by Waters, Byatt, Toni Morrison and Angela Carter amongst others, she tends to focus on nineteenth-century feminist debates (the Woman Question, as the title of her book indicates) as opposed to contemporary feminist theories and the responses to them in neo-Victorian texts.²

Notwithstanding this omission in King's important book, there is a small body of scholarly analysis that has applied recent feminist theories to neo-Victorian novels. For example, Nadine Muller has read both *The*

Journal of Dora Damage (2007) and *Fingersmith* (2002) in relation to third-wave feminist theories regarding pornography as well as debates on motherhood (Muller 2009/2010, 2011b). Likewise, Adele Jones has examined Michèle Roberts's *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) as reflective of French feminist theory, specifically Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic deconstruction of female identity politics (Jones 2009/2010). Meanwhile, Rachel Carroll has applied both second-wave feminist theories on heterosexuality as well as postmodern feminist discourse on identity politics to readings of Waters's *Affinity* (1999) (Carroll 2006, 2007).³ This paper contributes to the growing body of work by illuminating the potential of postfeminist theory as a tool for exploring neo-Victorian fiction. As evidenced above, postfeminist theory is an underexplored lens in relation to the genre. Significantly, in existent criticism on gender and neo-Victorianism, Cora Kaplan and David Glover suggest that contemporary feminist writers “use the Victorian period to revisit the unresolved issues of what kind of opposition gender is, and what kind of ethics and politics can be assigned to traditional femininity” (Kaplan and Glover 2009: 42). Kaplan and Glover's use of the word “unresolved” echoes the rhetoric of recent postfeminist scholarship utilised by critics such as Walter.⁴ Their point shares resonance with Genz's observation that women's lives “continue to be circumscribed by markers of femininity, feminism, and femaleness that measure [their] respective strengths and failures [...] in a cultural framework that is in a process of constant realignment” (Genz 2009: 7).

In its re-imagining of the nineteenth-century past, neo-Victorianism is a particularly fertile genre to explore such old and “unresolved” feminist debates and draw attention to their equivalency in the present. If, as Kaplan and Glover suggest, the return to the Victorian past by neo-Victorian writers is, in part, an attempt to redress such concerns, then neo-Victorianism is an important contemporary feminist and historicist literary mode which calls into question those aspects of gender and sexual politics that have supposedly progressed since the nineteenth century. This point recalls Marie-Luise Kohlke's caution that neo-Victorian fiction should not only be read so as to “conveniently reassert our own supposedly enlightened stance towards sexuality and social progress” (Kohlke 2008: 352).

3. The Codrington Case

The Sealed Letter is a fiction based on the salacious facts of the Codrington vs. Codrington divorce trial of 1864, reported in British newspapers between July and November of that year.⁵ The polemical case holds a momentous place in feminist history, because it was considered “a test case of the Matrimonial Causes Act’s procedural workings” that radically brought debates surrounding women, gender, and sexuality into the public arena (Donoghue 2009: 206). The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 reformed British law on divorce by moving litigation from ecclesiastic courts to civil ones and no longer requiring an annulment or a private Bill of Parliament. From 1670 to 1852, Britain had had fewer than two divorces a year, but after the introduction of the Act, this figure rose to several hundred per annum (Donoghue 2009: 396).

The dispute itself centred on Vice-Admiral Harry Codrington’s legal separation from his allegedly sexually voracious wife Helen on the grounds of her long-term marital infidelities. In divorcing his wife, Harry – as per Victorian custom – removed the mother of his children from the lives of their two daughters, Nan and Nelly. Helen resisted Harry’s indictment and counter-charged her husband’s claim on grounds of negligence and cruelty, thus making him culpable for her sexual deviations and diverting sole responsibility for any extra-marital sexual liaisons. To complicate matters, however, and to great scandal, the family’s long-time friend, Fido, became embroiled in the Codrington’s legal proceedings. She was called as a witness in Helen’s defence to testify that Harry had attempted to rape her while she slept in a bed with his wife. However, Fido fled before she was due to speak in court and, when she finally returned to take the stand, Fido had rather peculiarly switched allegiance and become a witness for the Vice-Admiral himself. At the heart of Fido’s legal conversion lay a mysterious sealed letter, the shadowy contents of which have never become known (indeed, the letter has never been found), which threatened to damage the reputation of both women and undermine the sanctity of traditional Victorian gender and sexual ideals. Importantly, aside from the compressed legal “wranglings of the period 1858 to 1866 into the novel’s more dramatic time span of August to October 1864”, Donoghue does not alter any other known facts of the Codrington affair (Donoghue 2009: 392). What she does do, however, is creatively re-imagine through fiction the thoughts and insights of the three parties involved in the trial. As such, her

depiction of the relations between subjects that were not reported in media accounts at the time remains, as she admits, “guesswork” (Donoghue 2009: 394). Through the novel, then, Donoghue not only gives voice to the women involved in this historical scandal, but uses their voices to interrogate the gender and sexual politics of the case and its trial.

The timing of Donoghue’s fictional reconstruction of the Codrington trial is important for thinking through why postfeminism may usefully be situated in relation to neo-Victorianism. Her representation of the women’s resistance to non-traditional expressions of gender and sexuality echoes recent socio-cultural backlashes against changes in contemporary gender and sexual politics. Donoghue’s exploration of Helen’s willful sexuality in the Victorian era parallels recent debates on the effects of so-called raunch culture that have been the subject of media attention since 2002, when changes to venue licensing in the UK enabled the emergence of lap-dancing clubs along Britain’s high streets, an issue that has caused divides within contemporary feminisms just as in the general public. The vilification of female same-sex desire in the Codrington case also parallels the recent backlash against homosexuality in various European countries following a number of amendments to legislation, such as, in the UK, the Sexual Offences Act in 2004 that saw the abolition of sodomy as a criminal offence and the introduction of the Civil Partnership Bill in 2004, which granted same-sex couples the same rights as married heterosexual couples. In addition, there have been broader debates about ‘gay’ marriage since 2006 and the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 that sought to prohibit the promotion of homosexuality by UK local authorities.

While the timing of Donoghue’s retrieval of the Codrington case presents a means of illustrating, through fiction, how such debates remain apposite in contemporary culture, it also offers a cautionary reflection on the negative effects experienced by those who suffer the consequences of repression, misogyny, and homophobia. As I will now explore in detail, Donoghue’s portrayal of Helen and Fido replays some of the tensions and contradictions in negative attitudes towards female gender and sexuality that are, I argue, transhistorical and inevitably damaging.

4. The ‘Fallen Woman’

The Sealed Letter combines Victorianism’s departure from popular stereotypes of the prudish Victorian to reflect what Kohlke terms neo-

Victorianism's hyperbolic sexualisation of the past as "sexsational" (Kohlke 2008: 305). The novel demonstrates the extent to which Michel Foucault's rebuttal of the repressive hypothesis has liberated the straitlaced imagery of the Victorians (Foucault 1976). From the outset, Donoghue endorses Foucault's discursive thesis of Victorian sexuality – that far from being silenced or taboo, sex, in the nineteenth century, was spoken of everywhere in a broad range of contexts including the law, religion, education, and medicine. Indeed, Donoghue uses fiction to exemplify the breadth of Victorian sexual practices and the plurality of ways in which sex culturally manifested itself.

One area where Donoghue demonstrates the breadth of female sexual experience is through the figure of Helen Codrington. Helen represents the so-called 'fallen woman', a figure who Lynda Nead observes "was understood" to denote "lost innocence" (Nead 1984: 30). The fallen woman is, of course, a clichéd binary to Coventry Patmore's equally hackneyed description of 'The Angel in the House' as per the title of his 1854 narrative poem. Helen embodies the fallen woman not only because she rejects the virtues ascribed to Patmore's paragon but because she embraces all that the fallen woman stands for. As an adulterer Helen is maligned as the negative figure in a dominant gendered binary. Martha Vicinus notes that in the Victorian context, Harry Codrington brought "every resource of class, money, and social property" to bear so as to ensure that Helen was penalised for her transgressions (Vicinus: 1997: 76). In her fictionalisation of the events, Donoghue gives prominence to the very reasons for Harry's disdain. From the outset, Helen is described by Fido as "the most un-English of Englishwomen [who] always waltzed her way around the rules of womanhood" (Donoghue 2009: 12). Repeatedly, Helen is depicted away from the domestic sphere, engaging – unchaperoned – in shopping expeditions, socialising, and other frivolous pursuits that Harry pejoratively describes as "wild", "irregular" and "stepping beyond [the] bounds" of female propriety (Donoghue 2009: 102).

Further, Helen's actions are far removed from stereotypical notions of female virtue and innocent sensibility; she dupes Fido into collusion with her adultery with Colonel Anderson, a position which, according to Victorian custom, in turn compromised Fido's respectability. Donoghue shows Helen to be engaged in a "constant struggle" with marital and domestic responsibilities (Donoghue 2009: 102), and Harry's lawyer, Mr

Bovill, argues that *Codrington vs. Codrington* places on trial “[a] woman who has been no real wife – who has neglected her household and maternal duties, thwarted and opposed her husband, and repeatedly dishonoured him with other men” (Donoghue 2009: 255). Here, Donoghue’s replication of commentary stated during the trial captures the gendered politics of the day. Bovill’s statement infers the justness of Harry’s treatment towards his “wife” by repeatedly emphasising negative and moralising descriptors relating to Helen’s infringement.

However, by rewriting the *Codrington* trial from a contemporary feminist perspective, Donoghue re-imagines the public hearing of female sexuality. Vicinus suggests that, in its historic context, Helen’s failure to adhere to the standards endorsed by Victorian ideals of womanhood made the *Codrington* trial “a test as much about the public obligation of a wife as [...] technical adultery” (Vicinus 1997: 76). As such, Donoghue positions the reader at this post-Foucauldian moment, so as to reflexively critique the sexism of history. This authorial positioning exposes the sexist subtexts that underpinned Victorian attitudes towards women, and reveals the limiting and moralising logic by which society perceived gender roles.

Importantly, such issues remain of real concern to postfeminist scholars. Rosalind Gill, for instance, observes that typically, women’s choices – both gendered and sexual – are invariably situated within a moral rather than political discourse (Gill 2011: 70). Through her multi-voiced and multi-faceted portrayal of Helen (both from her own view as well as from Fido’s, Harry’s and the court’s), Donoghue shows how attitudes to female gender and sexual behaviour (unlike those of their male counterparts) are embroiled in questions of morality and moral philosophy, while suggesting that both Victorian and contemporary approaches to ‘woman’ are utopian ideals far removed from egalitarian sociality.

Nead indicates that historically, Victorian ideals of womanhood functioned to enshrine women’s roles as mothers, wives and daughters (Nead 1984: 26). Through Helen, Donoghue exemplifies how women’s ‘deviant’ gendered and sexual behaviour is doggedly associated with their roles as mothers in ways that men’s sexuality is not associated with fatherhood. Despite Harry’s grudging agreement that Helen “loves her girls” (Donoghue 2009: 97), both he and Helen’s father link her private behaviours to her maternal role in such a way as to invoke biological determinism. For example, Mr Bovill reads a letter in court from Helen’s

father reflecting such an essentialist and patriarchal notion: “I can only express my hope that my daughter will alter her conduct and avoid disgracing her husband, children, and family, in time to save herself from ruin” (Donoghue 2009: 299). Similarly, the family friend Mrs Watson speculates that “Helen had not found in motherhood the normal womanly fulfillment, and I formed the belief that she was ... well, taking refuge in flights of fancy” (Donoghue 2009: 268 original ellipses). In this invocation of actual testimony from the trial, Donoghue shows how, historically, Helen’s inadequacies as a mother were believed to be the cause of her “criminal” behaviour (Donoghue 2009: 268). Notably, the removal of the Codrington children from the marital home reminds the reader of the patriarchal bias in the early nineteenth century that granted fathers sole legal guardianship of marital offspring, and even after the 1839 Infants and Child Custody Act and the (post-trial) 1883 Custody Acts continued to do so in the case of wives separated or divorced on account of their adultery. Mrs Watson pointedly tells Helen that “it’s only a woman’s virtue that induces her husband to leave his children in her custody” (Donoghue 2009: 177). While Helen’s children have been removed, she is denied access to them. Her response is, understandably, one of trauma: “there is no punishment worse than the terror of losing one’s child” (Donoghue 2009: 110). She confronts Mrs Watson, who is taking care of the children and continues to encourage Harry to deny Helen access to them, and ends up in a rather modern-sounding dispute that concludes with Helen threatening to “do something worse, you bitch, if you don’t bring down my children” (Donoghue 2009: 178). By fictionalising those aspects of the Codrington trial that are not recorded as part of the trial records, Donoghue utilises fiction to underline the breadth and complexity of Helen’s predicament. The range of responses to her motherly behaviour – condemnation, anger, and disdain – perform a reflexive feminist critique of divergent moralising attitudes surrounding women and the maternal.

Donoghue also draws attention to the way in which the gendered punishment that Helen receives in losing her children works only to enforce restrictive modes of womanhood based on marital and familial relations. While changes in women’s civil rights have rectified the patriarchal and biased law that denied Victorian women access to their children in the event of parental legal separation, what remains consistent between the nineteenth century and the present is, as *The Sealed Letter* illustrates, the vilification of

women’s seemingly aberrant behaviours which are linked to the maternal as a means of social control. In recent postfeminist criticism, Kim Osgood and Jane Allen point out that in contemporary culture, positive middle-class rhetoric is focused towards the figure of the “yummy mummy” (Dhaliwal 2007: n.p.). The ‘yummy mummy’ is late twentieth-/early twenty-first-century slang for affluent and attractive young mothers. Nirpal Dhaliwal, writing in *The Times* newspaper, harshly defines yummy mummies as “bankrolled by a husband working [...] in the City”, dressed “in designer outfits” and carrying “the latest must-have bag”, while their “hair and nails are perfectly groomed” (Dhaliwal 2007: n.p.). The “yummy mummy”, then, largely recycles the notion of woman as aesthetically pleasing and decorative, reflective of a man’s social status rather than any female accomplishment.

While Dhaliwal vilifies the class privileges of such women, by contrast, more deviant maternal behaviour is frequently attributed to the so-called Chav Mum, “a figure of mockery who functions as a simultaneous site of humour, disgust and moral outrage” (Allen and Osgood 2009: 7). British celebrities such as Kerry Katona and the glamour model Katie Price are representatives of this latter category, while the American singer Britney Spears functions as their US counterpart, especially since Spears, echoing Helen Codrington, lost custody of her children and was put under the conservatorship of her father due to mental health problems. Although the Chav Mum is strictly related to contemporary working-class discourses, like the middle-class Helen, she is judged primarily by her excessively sexual and “wanton” behaviour (Osgood and Allen 2009: 7), even if wealthy in her own right. The Chav Mum represents the “new and pernicious” manifestation of the historical vilification and abjection of femininity and motherhood, and functions as a means of channelling anxieties around social change, gender and sexuality (Osgood and Allen 2009: 8). Donoghue’s neo-Victorian fiction parallels feminist debates surrounding motherhood in the twenty-first century and highlights how motherhood remains a means of subjecting women’s behaviour to surveillance and measuring it against traditional norms, in an attempt to maintain supposedly moral heterosexual values.

Through her reconstruction of Helen, Donoghue also defends the eroticism of women’s sexual desire and sexual agency against long-standing and repressive – arguably Victorian – attitudes to female sexuality. The

novel shows how, in the nineteenth century, fidelity in marriage was, as William Houghton suggests, “the supreme virtue, and sexual irregularity the blackest of sins [...]. Adultery, especially in the case of a wife, and no matter what the extenuating circumstances, was spoken of with horror” (Houghton 1957: 356). In challenging this moral predicament, Donoghue’s rewriting of Helen presents a woman not only willfully breaking her marital vows but doing so simply for lust and the thrill of desire. Helen tells Fido that she is roused by “[t]he excitement of having a handsome, sparking fellow hang on one’s every word” (Donoghue 2009: 41). Helen’s carnal desire is most apparent in the scene during which she and Anderson visit a hotel for a sexual liaison. There, after shocking Anderson by smoking a cigarette and asking him if he “likes the taste”, Helen’s thoughts convey the pleasure she feels during their encounter:

He plunges his face into the curve of her bodice, his arms thrashing about in her layers of diaphanous silk [...]. Oh, how could she have ever learned to do without the hot weight of this man, his strong movements on her, inside her? [...] Bone and scalding flesh, the grapple of every muscle, every thrust a pledge, signed and sealed. (Donoghue 2009: 161-162)

Donoghue here gives voice to the pleasure in Helen’s sexual experience; her desire challenges received views of the period which suggested that “the enjoyment of sex was an exclusively male prerogative” (Furieux 2011: 768). As the gynaecological doctor William Acton famously commented in *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* (1857), “the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled by sexual feelings of any kind” (Acton 1857: 235). Significantly, in the novel, Harry reveals his endorsement of this belief: “I was labouring under the misapprehension that [Helen] wasn’t a passionate person”, believing that “once a woman had completed her childbearing, her redundant carnal urges fall away” (Donoghue 2008: 142, 95). To his cost Harry learns that women *are* sexual beings: “Of course Helen’s a passionate person [...] how can he explain his long-held view that, after two babies, all her yearnings were ... north of the equator?” (Donoghue 2008: 142 original ellipses).

While Acton and Harry’s Victorian views have been much criticised (and somewhat lampooned) by feminists and cultural critics alike, the idea that women are lesser sexual beings than men continues even today. One need only recall the broadcaster and comedian Stephen Fry’s recent chauvinist comment that women dislike sex and only engage in sexual activity with men in exchange for being in “a relationship with a man, which is what they want” (Fry, qtd. in Flynn 2010: 56). While the gay rights advocate Fry is, of course, no expert in women’s sexuality, his views endorse the long-held belief that “sex is a natural aspect of masculinity”, while women are “less sexually motivated than men” (Redfern and Aune 2010: 50). The parallel between Acton’s medical perspective and Fry’s twenty-first-century cultural commentary evidences what Gill describes as the “reloading” of sexism in contemporary culture (Gill 2011: 62). Gill suggests that although “sexism has quite literally disappeared from much feminist academic writing”, scholars need to continue to “think about sexism [...] and its intersections with other axes of power” (Gill 2011: 62). Reflecting Gill’s comment, Donoghue’s lengthy portrayal of Helen’s unconstrained sexual desire serves both to confound androcentric views of women’s sexuality and to interrogate sexist parallels within contemporary culture that work to perpetuate myths concerning female sexual inferiority and male sexual privilege.

However, scenes of sexual eroticism in the novel are also suggestive of postfeminist criticism which holds that, while the sexual objectification of women continues, it is now paralleled by what Gill calls the emergence of sexual subjectification – the move to being a seemingly knowing sexual subject which itself is problematic. Gill states:

Where once sexualised representations of women [presented] passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze, today sexualisation works somewhat differently in many domains. Women are not straightforwardly objectified but are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects. (Gill 2007: 258)

In her critique of such sensibilities, Gill derides media outlets and “technologies of sexiness” for enabling sexual subjectification, seeing them as promoting a false consciousness of sexual empowerment which constructs a feminine subject endowed with agency who is, in fact, only

endorsing a regime of male heterosexual power through her sexual availability (Gill 2007: 259).

In *The Sealed Letter*, Donoghue reflects Gill's concerns through her portrayal of Helen's relationship with Anderson. Helen's sense of sexual agency is problematised by the Colonel. While Helen is enamoured of Anderson's wit, charm and his prowess in the bedroom, Donoghue suggests that Anderson exploits Helen's sexual agency, as Helen herself implicitly recognises. For instance, following their encounter on Fido's sofa at the beginning of the text, Helen reflects, "Damn the man and his impetuosity" (Donoghue 2009: 59). Similarly, when walking around the Cremorne Gardens in London, despite Helen's request to return home, Anderson cajoles her into having sex with him in the park: "Just a little further, won't you, to show you've forgiven me?" (Donoghue 2009: 85). While Fido's reaction to Anderson's behaviour is one of outrage, Helen's is one of self-disgust and disbelief at her compliance. Interrogating her past behaviour, she wonders, "Did she sell herself twice over for a bit of merriment?" (Donoghue 2009: 264). That Donoghue both poses this question and resists answering it outright suggests that there is no easy answer to the negotiation of women's sexual agency in a male dominated culture, and that this sexual quandary persists.

Notably, Donoghue's exposure of Helen's complicity in her own sexual exploitation recalls long-standing feminist debates concerning women's participation in their own subjugation. Proposed by Simone de Beauvoir as long ago as 1949 in *The Second Sex*, this view has been reinvigorated recently by Ariel Levy in her 2006 text, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. Here, Levy voices concern about how women, licensed by the seeming gains of feminist idealism, make sexual objects of themselves because, the terms "'[r]aunchy' and 'liberated' have become synonyms", a view that Levy rejects (Levy 2006: 5). *Female Chauvinist Pigs* calls for a reassessment of this cultural climate, questioning if "it is worth asking ourselves if this bawdy world [...] we have resurrected reflects how far we've come, or how far we have left to go" (Levy 2006: 5).

5. Double Standards

Through *The Sealed Letter*, Donoghue investigates a range of inequalities between the sexes. A specific concern is the sexual double standard through

which men are granted greater sexual freedoms than women. Significantly, although this belief goes back “at least a couple of centuries”, the sexual double standard was indelibly enshrined in the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, the very law under which Harry petitions for divorce (Redfern and Aune 2010: 50). The Act meant that:

Men could obtain a divorce for simple adultery, whereas women had to prove adultery combined with bigamy, incest, desertion or cruelty. A husband also had property interest in his wife, and her value decreased if she committed adultery; Section 33 of the Act enabled a husband to sue a co-respondent for damages. (Vicinus 1997: 74)

As Vicinus implies, not only were wives under the patriarchal authority of their husbands, but their relationship – and a woman’s virtue in particular – was constituted in terms of commodification. In her neo-Victorian return to the nineteenth century, Donoghue exposes such Victorian hypocrisy by articulating the broader socio-cultural price that women pay for exercising female sexual agency within patriarchal society. Helen observes:

The law belongs to men [...]. What about the double standard? A man’s reputation can survive a string of mistresses, but if I admit one intrigue, let alone two, I’ll lose everything. My name, my children, every penny of income. (Donoghue 2009: 85)

As Helen suggests, while a man’s reputation can be exonerated for sexual misdemeanours, women are damned for a single “intrigue”.

Although it is a point of difference between the past and the present that women have more civil rights today and are unlikely to experience the entirety of all that befell Victorian women, the novel exemplifies the negative effects of such persistent hypocrisy. Here *The Sealed Letter* shares a striking parallel with contemporary culture as the novel’s reference to Helen’s stained dress – a yellow gown that Helen showed Mrs Watson after announcing that “the climax of evil” had been reached (Donoghue 2009: 271) – evokes parallels with President Bill Clinton’s sexual exploits with the White House intern, Monica Lewinsky.⁶ Donoghue herself notes that

although such details may seem like an “anachronistic allusion” to the 1990s, they are, in fact, “real details of the Codrington trial” (Donoghue 2008: 392).

In the novel, Harry describes Helen as a “whore” (Donoghue 2007: 139), a term that Feona Attwood notes has long been used to denigrate women because of their sexual practices and to control their behaviour and social positioning (Attwood 2007: 233, 235).⁷ While the dresses – Helen’s and Lewinsky’s – are said to reflect a lack of sexual decorum on the part of women, both cases reveal how the female body is constituted with traditional gender and sexual politics of the past and present; they demonstrate the particular denigration of women in scandals in ways that do not parallel the treatment received by their male counterparts.

Paula Broadwell comments that the race to “slut-shame” female parties in public sex scandals is an old and tired game (Broadwell 2012: n.p.). She reflects that, in light of the recent sex scandal surrounding ex-CIA chief General Petraeus who, it was revealed, had a series of extra-marital affairs while in office. Broadwell argues that the effects of such scandals serve only to ruin the lives of apparently deviant women while the male figures are absconded and seem to “walk on water” (Broadwell 2012: n.p.). Her comment is particularly important since Broadwell, also Petraeus’s biographer, was one of the women “slut-shame[d]” when it emerged that she was one of Petraeus’s mistresses.

Donoghue’s incorporation of actual media reports from the Codrington trial replicates and parallels such reductive yet persistent attitudes. She includes a full article from *The Times* newspaper of 1864 that focuses on Harry’s rank and “considerable distinction” in the navy, while Helen’s name is merely recorded in passing, with attention instead being drawn to her father, the British official Christopher Webb Smith (Donoghue 2009: 205). Similarly, in a more sensationalist manner, newspaper reports of the day made headlines of the locations where Helen was accused of having sex. While today such salacious gossip and sensationalism may be reserved for the tabloid press rather than the broadsheet newspapers, as Broadwell points out, the effect of such media hype is not to focus on professional reporting but to act as a moralising discourse in favour of traditional gendered and sexual behaviours. As the next section will show, *The Sealed Letter* exemplifies a range of ways in which female sexuality is used to scapegoat women in order to reaffirm male power.

6. Homosexuality and the Abjection of Woman

If Helen illuminates the ways in which socio-cultural discourse serves to vilify women who resist marital and maternal norms, Fido shows how women who reject heterosexual gender and sexual roles are socially abjected. Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune observe that sexism and homophobia are felt “especially hard” by those who do not conform to conventional gender and sexual roles (Redfern and Aune 2010: 61). Donoghue pays particular attention to Fido’s role as a lead figure in the first-wave feminist movement, portraying her as a hard-working activist. Fido is also proud to be a spinster, believing her status endorses “the cause of rights for women” (Donoghue 2009: 15). Indeed, she defiantly declares, “I’m one of these ‘new women[,] I live snug and bachelor-style on Taviton Street” (Donoghue 2009: 15, 10). Her comment reflects Yopie Prins’s observation on the historical agency of elective spinsters in the first wave of feminism, that

generation of unmarried middle-class women that [...] played an important role in the transition from mid-Victorian Old Maid to *fin-de-siècle* New Woman; during the last three decades of the century, single women were beginning to redefine familial relations and conventional female domesticity. (Prins 1999: 46)

Donoghue’s recreation of Fido’s single lifestyle also finds an important parallel in contemporary culture. In her insightful *The New Single Woman*, Ellen Kay Trimberger demonstrates how, despite sociological evidence indicating that twenty-first-century single women are “satisfied singles”, cultural messages continue to stigmatise them:

although the word spinster is no longer used, some of the negative attributes attached to her linger. The [...] single woman is often seen as an isolated loner, an unhappy striver who overinvested in work, or a neurotic loser who again and again fails at relationships. (Trimberger 2005: x)

As Trimberger shows, while second wave feminism supported the opening of new possibilities for women beyond marriage and the home, cultural

myths continue to perpetuate the idea that (particularly heterosexual) relationships are synonymous with personal happiness. Donoghue illuminates both historic and contemporary feminist responses to this idea. Despite Fido's pride in her bachelor lifestyle, which she sees as a sign of "the icy chains of prejudice shaking loose" (Donoghue 2009: 30), Donoghue also points to the hostilities that Fido faces because of her unmarried status at various junctures throughout the novel.

7. Female Same-Sex Desire

At the heart of *The Sealed Letter* lies the suggestion of lesbianism. The juxtaposition of heterosexual and homosexual prejudices is important because, as Redfern and Aune's assert, "sexism and homophobia walk hand in hand" (Redfern and Aune 2010: 63). *The Sealed Letter* exemplifies how "at the root of homophobia lie deeply entrenched sexist attitudes about what is acceptable behaviour for men and women" (Redfern and Aune 2010: 63). In its historical context, the Codrington trial not only speculated on the danger posed by single women to society and its norms, but "more controversially, it expose[d] unease about women's friendships and the possibility of lesbian sex" (Vicinus 1997: 75).

In the novel, Donoghue shows how Harry and his prosecution team metaphorically "splash" Fido "with a bucket of filth" through the implication of a sealed letter said to affirm his suspicions of Fido's "poisonous role" in the Codrington marriage (Donoghue 2009: 305, 300). The prosecution declares that Harry was so concerned about the negative influence that Fido played in his marital discord that he entrusted his views on her pernicious role to paper. The document in question is the sealed letter of the novel's title, and its contents are contrived to implicate Fido in lesbianism and both women in engaging in same-sex sexual practices. Such cryptic referencing to homosexuality recalls Terry Castle's articulation of lesbianism as apparitional. Castle argues that "the lesbian [has been] ghosted – or made to seem invisible" within culture, because she "represents a threat to patriarchal protocol"; she challenges "the moral, sexual, and psychic authority of men" (Castle 1993: 4-5). The prosecution's conspiracy evokes Castle's metaphor through the 'spectral' contents of the unseen letter. However, whereas Castle uses the apparitional lesbian as a lesbian-feminist critique of homophobic culture, Donoghue shows how the very same signification is used to control women. Donoghue suggests Fido

switches legal allegiance because of the threat she faces through exposure of the letter's content. In other words, a fear of being 'outed' (to use a contemporary term), or of being perceived as sexually deviant, controls Fido's behaviour.

Of course, the exposure of such homophobic belief is the very point of Donoghue's novel. She shows how lesbianism was viewed, and continues to be perceived, as a “dangerous affront to male sexual prerogatives” (Vicinus 1996: 3). In her critique of homophobia, Donoghue highlights the public retribution that Fido faces as a result of this allegation: her office at Victoria Press is vandalised, and the words “something stinks” are painted in red on the wall (Donoghue 2009: 313). One implication of the graffiti is that Fido's sexual behaviours, as earlier indicated, are equated with “filth”, while in the contemporary context “LGBTs are still subjected to death threats, hate crimes and extreme social sanctions” (Redfern and Aune 2010: 63).

However, through the revelation at the end of the novel, Donoghue continues to problematise traditional gender and sexual politics. Harry wins the case and divorces Helen, and she leaves London, punished for her transgressions. However, Donoghue re-imagines – and reveals in the novel's final pages – that Fido and Helen were not only lovers but that Fido was the first person with whom Helen was adulterous.⁸ In undermining Victorian sexual values and fictionalising a suggestion that history could only imply, Donoghue embraces ambiguous and contradictory female subjectivity as explicated in postfeminist discourse. Hence, when Helen admits that she “couldn't bear marriage and motherhood” and sought “a little excitement” elsewhere, her confession problematises dominant narrow conceptions of female gender (Donoghue 2009: 387). Helen's statement also problematises the coupling of 'woman' and 'mother' by refusing to conform with labels such as 'good' or 'bad' woman and/or 'good' or 'bad' mother. In other words, her conclusion jolts the reader into questioning just how far dominant ideas of womanhood have 'progressed' and to evaluate their own moralising logic. Throughout the novel, then, Donoghue invites the reader to re-assess incoherencies in dominant traditional approaches to female gender and sexuality. Instead of adopting a moralising and patriarchal stance towards women's behaviour, her novel advocates paying greater attention to the depth and complexity of sexual politics in which 'woman' has long been and continues to be constituted – and mired.

8. Continuing Concerns

In *The Whole Woman*, Germaine Greer proposes that each feminist generation should “produce its own statement of problems and priorities” (Greer 1999: 1). While Greer’s observation is judicious in alerting contemporary feminist scholars and activists to new modes of discrimination, Donoghue’s novel demonstrates the equal importance of highlighting continuities between the nineteenth century and the present, reminding us that seemingly ‘old’ problems persist. The gains of feminism remain fraught with “unresolved” tensions and contradictions (Kaplan and Glover 2009: 42), and *The Sealed Letter* resonantly illustrates this reality. In exposing the subtle yet destructive means through which society corrals women into rigid modes of sexuality, gender and desire, Donoghue’s novel critiques long-standing dominant attitudes towards the female gender. Although the final predicaments faced by Helen and Fido show the perils and pitfalls encountered by women who challenge the dominant social order, *The Sealed Letter* demonstrates that neo-Victorian feminist texts offer a sophisticated means of exposing oppressions of the past whilst shedding new light on feminist politics in the present moment. The effect of Donoghue’s novel, then, is perhaps best summed up by Fido, who comments that feminism does not “mean to smash the social machine, only readjust its workings” (Donoghue 2009: 36).

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Notes

1. For more on this cultural pervasiveness, see Whelehan 2009.
2. Nadine Muller makes a similar observation in her use of King in relation to third-wave feminism and neo-Victorianism more broadly (see Muller 2011a.) I am grateful to Dr. Muller for sharing her unpublished work with me.
3. While it would be impossible to list all of the more generalist, gendered readings of neo-Victorian fictions, these examples not only emphasise the breadth of neo-Victorianism’s own investment in modern feminisms, but also

draw attention to the paucity of current scholarship applying late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century feminist theories to the genre. This constitutes both a gap and an opportunity for advancing the significance of neo-Victorianism’s engagement with and response to contemporary feminisms, as well as exploring the flexibility of neo-Victorian texts themselves in capturing or reflecting feminist concerns of the present as much as those of the past.

4. In addition to Walter, Rosalind Gill calls for feminist scholars to revitalise feminist scholarship by taking up concerns that have “quite literally disappeared” from feminist academic writing (Gill 2011: 11). Sexism, the topic of Gill’s paper, provides one such example.
5. As the ‘Author’s Note’ to the novel indicates, Donoghue bases her narrative on “extensive reports on Codrington v. Codrington in *The Times* for July 30, August 1 and 2, and November 18, 19, 21, and 24, 1864, supplemented by the *Daily Telegraph*, *Spectator*, *Reynolds’s Magazine*, and *Lloyds Weekly London Newspaper*” (Donoghue 2008: 391). For further readings of the case see Fredeman 1974, Stone 1994, and Vicinus 1997. Vicinus reads Fido as an astute woman who manipulated the British legal system to disentangle herself from disgrace, whereas in Donoghue’s novel, Fido emerges as guilty merely of seducing Helen.
6. Lewinsky is said to have had sexual encounters with President Clinton from 1995-1997 and kept a blue dress that bore a semen stain resulting from her administering oral sex to him. The dress became a central piece of evidence in the trial against President Clinton.
7. For a recent discussion of postfeminist responses to the use and effect of negative language, see Attwood 2007.
8. It is worth noting that, in 1868, Emily “Fido” Faithfull published a bestselling novel entitled *Change upon Change* (later published in America as *A Reed Shaken in the Wind*) in which a male protagonist named Wilfred falls desperately in love with his cousin, Tiny. In the ‘Author’s Note’ to *The Sealed Letter*, Donoghue speculates that, after testifying in the trial against Helen, Fido’s novel was published “more in sorrow than anger” (Donoghue 2009: 393), words which imply that Fido had probably been in love with Helen but had been hurt by the events of the Codrington trial.

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