

CHAPTER 4

Women and the New Fiction 1880–1900

The last twenty years of the nineteenth century witnessed a quite unprecedented proliferation of women novelists – a phenomenon that did not go unnoticed in its time; a writer complains in 1894 that ‘the society lady, dazzled by the brilliancy of her own conversation, and the serious-minded spinster, bitten by some sociological theory, still decide . . . that fiction is the obvious medium through which to astonish or improve the world.’¹ I do not know whether solid statistical evidence could be adduced for the contemporary sense that women dominated the novel, if only numerically; but it is undeniable that they achieved a considerably higher representation in the ranks of professional authors than in any previous period. Nor were they all unknown or unrecognised minor talents: many women writers who are now forgotten were in their time widely read and discussed. Sarah Grand’s novel *The Heavenly Twins* sold forty thousand copies within a few weeks of its publication in 1893;² George Egerton’s first volume of short stories, *Keynotes* (1893), gave its name to a whole series of books published by John Lane, known as ‘Petticoat’ Lane partly for that reason; and a *Punch* parody of the same book, thinly disguised as ‘She-Notes’ by Borgia Smudgiton,³ follows the original in such detail as to suggest that all the magazine’s potential readers could reasonably be expected to know it.

But the significance of such women writers was not restricted to their numerical strength or their commercial success. They were perceived, and to some extent regarded themselves, as constituting by virtue of their sex alone a school or class of writers. They often claim to be writing with female readers in mind, and to be making a political or moral statement on behalf of their sex; Ella Hepworth Dixon, for example, wrote to Stead

that her novel *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894) was intended as 'a plea for a kind of moral and social trades-unionism among women.'⁴ The example of the trades union probably underlies the recurrent suggestion, in the 'New Women' fiction, that women must and will combine, either against men or against specific abuses. The solidarity of wife and mistress, or of virgin and whore, is often recognised as a crucial element in the struggle against the double standard of sexual morality, as, for example, in Lucas Malet's *The Wages of Sin* (1891) or Annie Holdsworth's *Joanna Trail, Spinster* (1894). In this situation, writing came, to a degree, to be regarded as in itself a political act of sexual solidarity. It is not surprising, then, that reviewers saw in the proliferation of women writers the marks of an organised school. W. T. Stead, reviewing a rather miscellaneous collection of novels and stories by women in 1894, unites them with this dizzying definition: 'The Modern Woman novel is not merely a novel written by a woman, or a novel written about women, but it is a novel written by a woman about women from the standpoint of Woman.'⁵ The last phrase isolates the factor which unifies in differentiation – the tendency for the central female characters, either individually or as a group, to be the centres of consciousness in the novel, rather than merely objects encountered by male subjectivity. In fact, this tendency is by no means confined to books by women, as the evidence of Meredith or Gissing indicates; indeed, Carolyn Heilbrun has named the whole *fin de siècle* period that of the 'Woman as Hero'.⁶ Nevertheless, the experiencing heroine was felt by many writers and readers to be the distinctive quality of women's writing, and this sense pervades much contemporary discussion.

One manifestation of the centrality of female characters was the introduction of a whole range of hitherto marginalised or suppressed subject-matter into the novel. The exploration of the experience of female characters involved a confrontation of sexual and marital relationships which had long lain on the unspoken and unspeakable periphery of fiction. Issues such as prostitution, rape, contraception, adultery, and divorce⁷ appear with increasing frequency and some explicitness, often provoking outrage and disgust in the critics. Arthur Waugh, in the somewhat unlikely setting of that citadel of decadence, *The*

Yellow Book, blames women writers for the prominence of sexual themes:

It was said of a great poet by a little critic that he wheeled his nuptial couch into the arena; but these small poets and smaller novelists bring out their sick into the thoroughfare and stop the traffic while they give us a clinical lecture upon their sufferings. We are told that this is part of the revolt of woman, and certainly our women-writers are chiefly to blame. It is out of date, no doubt, to clamour for modesty; but the woman who describes the sensations of childbirth does so, it is to be presumed – not as the writer of advice to a wife – but as an artist producing literature for art's sake. And so one may fairly ask her: How is art served by all this? What has she told us that we did not all know, or could not learn from medical manuals? and what impression has she left us over and above the memory of her unpalatable details?⁸

This criterion of teaching something 'that we did not all know' is one which does not seem to have been applied to the works of male authors.

In a sense, all this was undoubtedly exhilarating for female writers and readers, for it allowed them to take speech for themselves; one writer comments in 1896 that 'It is only during the last twenty years or so that the voice of woman has really been heard in literature.'⁹ Further, it opened up a far greater play of possibilities in both narrative and form, of which many women joyously availed themselves. Ethel Voynich's Gemma Bolla, for example, is a political activist in Italy (as is Mark Rutherford's Clara Hopgood).¹⁰ A particularly rich instance is the eponymous heroine of Lady Florence Dixie's *Gloriana; or the Revolution of 1900* (1890), who passes for a man in order to prove her abilities – which she undeniably does, becoming in turn headboy at Eton, champion Hunt Steeplechase jockey, Commander-in-Chief of para-military women's 'volunteer companies', sponsor of a successful Woman Suffrage Bill, founder of a Hall of Liberty where women students, athletes, and brass bands live and perform, and, perhaps inevitably, Prime Minister; ultimately, revealed as a woman, she finds love and marriage, sparks off a feminist revolution and is secularly canonised by succeeding generations. (This book, incidentally, has the distinction of what must surely be one of the earliest examples of a now familiar phrase, in its disclaimer of any antagonism towards men: 'The Author's best and truest friends . . . have been and are men.'¹¹)

Gloriana's feminist Utopia – albeit, for much of the book, a transvestite one – is only one instance of the profusion of alternative fictional forms in this liberation of experiment. Short stories, fantasies, dream-stories, essay fiction, and impressionistic sketches are all forms largely, though not of course exclusively, developed or re-worked by women writers in the period. So, Jane Hume Clapperton's *Margaret Dunmore: or, A Socialist Home* (1888), a dreary tale of eugenic 'socialism', mixes epistolary form, drama, and omniscient narration; Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) breaks its narrative with lengthy allegories; and many novels include brief or long passages of verse. The leisurely and particularised realist narrative is displaced by the fragmentary and unparticularised short story, by fantasy, by mixed modes of prose and poetry, and so on: but the period's challenge to the dominant fictional mode of realism took only in part the form of such experimentalism in genre. More than this, the characteristic narrative voice of the realist novel, that of the omniscient commentator who circumscribes and thus ironises the consciousness of the hero, is disturbed by the appearance of other kinds of voice which throw into question this distance between author and character. The 'New Woman' novel was often perceived as a work of propaganda or a disguised tract for precisely this reason: not because its ideological project is any more visible or determining than in other kinds of fiction, but because of the sporadic punctuation of the narrative by meditation, harangue or lyric, by an informing commitment which constantly threatens the circumscribing narrative voice.

Now I do not wish here to suggest – with the concomitant risk of reinforcing a sexual stereotype – that the 'New Woman' fiction is marked by its adjustment to a characteristically feminine subjectivity (an interpretation sometimes made at the time, as I shall show). It is rather that the pose of the 'objective' narrator – the anonymous, balanced reporter who can authoritatively interpret the behaviour and states of mind of the characters – is unsettled by the tension between this male voice (it is not an accident that so many female writers take male pseudonyms) and the periodic dissolution of the boundaries between author and character. It is as if at moments there is no mediating narrator; the writing of the fiction becomes for a time

its own action, its own plot, enacting as well as articulating the protest of the text.¹² *The Story of an African Farm* holds in tension the dispassionate Emersonian pose of the objective narrator, that 'Ralph Iron' who intervenes between author and text, and the commitment to a passionate vision – Lyndall's and Schreiner's – which is allowed only one articulate eruption into the narrative, but which informs and troubles the structure both before and after the chapter that bears Lyndall's name. In works by male writers, too, the realist narrative mode is frequently unsettled. The example of Hardy comes to mind: the abrupt and disturbing shifts in point of view in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* enact the threatened dominance of the distanced narrator. In this respect, the 'New Woman' fiction is at the opposite pole from the naturalist novel, which preserves a scrupulously 'scientific' distance from the particularities of its text; the difference between *Tess* and George Moore's *Esther Waters* (1894) resides partly in this question of the maintenance and manipulation of points of view.

The formal experimentation of the New Fiction, together with its openly sexual character, posed a significant challenge to the power of the editors of periodicals and the proprietors of the circulating libraries; so it is that this period sees the demise of the previously dominant mode of publication, the family serial and the three-decker.¹³ As early as 1885, Gissing was able to announce this change, and also to declare his enthusiasm for the modifications in narrative mode and voice which accompanied it:

It is fine to see how the old three volume tradition is being broken through. One volume is becoming commonest of all. It is the new school, due to continental influence. Thackeray and Dickens wrote at enormous length, and with precision of detail; their plan is to tell everything, and leave nothing to be divined. Far more artistic, I think, is the later method, of merely suggesting; of dealing with episodes, instead of writing biographies. The old novelist is omniscient; I think it is better to tell a story precisely as one does in real life, surmising, telling in detail what can so be told and no more. In fact, it approximates to the dramatic mode of presentment.¹⁴

It is interesting to note that Gissing welcomes the new forms primarily as a new and more thoroughgoing kind of realism. New journals, such as *The Yellow Book* and its imitator *The*

Savoy, sprang up to accommodate poems, short stories, and even fragments – Victoria Cross's 'Theodora. A Fragment' was one of the more notorious examples of the New Woman in action.¹⁵ Publishing houses were quick to open their lists to new writers whose work (sometimes enormously successful on the market) dealt with women or sex, as John Lane's 'Keynotes' series and Heinemann's 'Pioneer' series testify. The New Fiction had an enormous impact, not only on publishers, but on readers and critics too. Reviewers, especially those who wrote in the more long-established periodicals, reacted on the whole with shocked incomprehension. The vocabulary of realism, itself seen comparatively recently as outrageous, was rapidly pressed into service to accuse these new writers of disproportion in their emphasis on the sexual:

The new fiction of sexuality presents to us a series of pictures painted from reflections in convex mirrors, the colossal nose which dominates the face being represented by one colossal appetite which dominates life. . . everywhere it is a flagrant violation of the obvious proportion of life.¹⁶

After the initial modified praise of the novelty and freshness of the New Fiction, the figure of the New Woman exploring her own womanhood came fairly rapidly to be perceived as a tired cliché, fit matter for parody.¹⁷ In fact, satire or parody of the New Woman became for a time a sub-genre of its own, taking in such works as Sydney Grundy's play *The New Woman* (1894) and Kenneth Grahame's role-reversal satire *The Headswoman* (1898). The opponents or reformers of marriage were particularly popular targets; this passage is from William Barry's novel *The Two Standards* (1898):

Some, as, for instance, Miss Vane Vere, the well-known professor of Rational Dress and Dancing, spoke of "terminable annuities", by which it is suspected that they meant engagements lasting for a year and a day, but then to be dissolved at the pleasure – or, more likely, the displeasure – of either contracting party. Others – and among these Mrs. Oneida Leyden was far the most advanced – talked of "perfection". . . Thus to be perfect and to be married – at least always to the same partner – did not seem in accordance with the Higher Law. Mrs. Leyden was thought to have obeyed the Higher Law. Into this remarkable scheme a lady from the Turkish frontier, speaking many languages, and known by her eloquent books on the subject of woman's freedom, had brought fresh complications by recommending the Oriental household as a pattern for progressive people. But . . . this very Frau von Engelmacher had boldly announced

that superfluous babies should be handed over to the chemist, and was known to take a strong view in favour of vivisection.¹⁸

Nordau's tireless and massively influential castigation of degeneracy in his *Entartung* (1892; translated into English from the second edition in 1895) gave the critical hostility to the New Fiction a fresh impetus. Diagnosed in a reassuringly medical way as 'erotomania' or 'sex-mania',¹⁹ it was variously condemned for squalor, morbidity, pessimism and decadence, attributed with varying degrees of accuracy to the influence of French poetry, Scandinavian problem-literature, Thomas Hardy, and Oscar Wilde.²⁰ (Shaw, in the 1905 Preface to his previously unpublished 1880 novel *The Irrational Knot*, was to ridicule such attributions and argue that 'the revolt of the Life Force against readymade morality in the nineteenth century was not the work of a Norwegian microbe, but would have worked itself into expression in English literature had Norway never existed'.)²¹ The rhetoric of attacks on the New Fiction becomes highly physical, reflecting perhaps the 'physiological realism' it condemns:

Instead of walking on the mountain tops, breathing the pure high atmosphere of imagination freely playing around the truths of life and of love, they force us down into the stifling charnel-house, where animal decay, with its swarms of loathsome activities, meets us at every turn.²²

But even in the censuring of decadence, the difference of sex comes into play. A distinction was sometimes drawn between the varieties of degeneracy practised by male and female writers. As well as those books by men which openly took up the 'woman question' – such as the pro- or anti-free union novels of Grant Allen, William Barry and Frank Frankfort Moore – there were within the New Fiction a number of formally experimental works which dealt with sexual themes from a male point of view. William Platt's *Women, Love, and Life* (1895) mixes poetry, short stories, allegory and essays, and makes use of subject-matter including necrophilia and masochism. In his story 'A Passion', a woman experiences the greatest happiness she has never known through dying during a caesarean, refusing anaesthetics; she makes her husband swear always to wear a girdle made of her flesh. 'The Child of Love and Death' is yet more extraordinary in synopsis: a woman

conceives a child while giving her virginity to her newly-killed lover, in a vain attempt to revive him; after a fifteen-month pregnancy, she opens herself with a knife to release the child; she survives until the child is weaned; he devotes his life to preaching purity (carefully distinguished from chastity), and is beheaded by the king, who then orders a prostitute to have sex with his dead body; she, recognising the dead man's holiness, kills the king instead, addresses words of love to the headless corpse, and commits suicide. The sexual grotesquerie of Platt's volume (described by Hardy as 'mere sexuality without any counterpoise'),²³ and the rapturously breathless style of his prose, can both be seen in this description by a woman of the consummation of a love affair:

"He staggered up to me and the veins on his forehead stood big – he took me in his arms with no word but kissed me with red hot lips till the crisped skin of them crumbled on to my chin. No word passed – but – I would say it proudly and without shame were I standing now at the judgment seat of God! – the act of love passed between us."²⁴

Less extravagantly, Henry Murray's *A Man of Genius* (1895) and Francis Adams' *A Child of the Age* (1894; a reworking of his 1884 *Leicester: An Autobiography*) both exploit the same central situation: a struggling 'decadent' artist with a strong sense of his own abilities, living unmarried with a working-class girl whom he feels to be holding him back from the fame and fortune rightfully his. Both novels offer in passing somewhat cold-blooded reflections upon the nature of these relationships. Adams' curiously modern novel, a fragmentary dream-like first-person narrative, has the artist meditating upon his Rosy:

Then, when I was in bed, I considered what was the real condition of my feelings towards her. Without doubt, they were those of complete callousness and, perhaps, something more. . . . It seemed to me to be something little short of folly to stay here and be troubled with her. I ought to go out into the world and see its ways, so as to prepare myself for my work.²⁵

In Murray's more conventional work, a prominent motif is women's attraction towards force and glamour: 'Women are like nations, they admire and love most deeply the tyrant who most completely dominates them.'²⁶ Again, George Street's stories in *Episodes* (1895) and his novel *The Wise and the Wayward* (1896) adopt a man-of-the-worldly tone of aristocratic bore-

dom in incidents such as a wife's revealing to her sister-in-law that her feeling for her husband is "merely sensual. . . . It is simply because he is handsome and big and strong";²⁷ or a husband's laconic reaction to his wife's adultery with his best friend:

"You see," he continued, "you place me in a very tiresome dilemma. I must either divorce you and quarrel with a man with whom I am not in the least angry – he's one of my oldest friends and has only acted as I have acted many times – or I must put myself in the ridiculous position of the forgiving husband and allow him to laugh at me. Think! I must either quarrel with a man who was my chum at school, or appear absurd to him. See what you women do!" (*Episodes*, p. 112).

Ignoring 'decadent' books by women like Ella Darcy's *Monochromes* (1895) or Mabel Wotton's *Day-Books* (1896), and 'high-minded' books by men like Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* (1895) or William Barry's *The New Antigone* (1887), pre-determined notions of sexual difference allowed the New Fiction to be split along the fault-line of the author's sex. Arthur Waugh sees 'want of restraint' and 'the language of the courtesan' resulting from the 'ennervated sensation' of women's writing, while 'coarse familiarity' and the language of 'the bargee' follow 'a certain brutal virility' in men's.²⁸ A pamphlet, *The New Fiction*, published in 1885, distinguishes a 'revolting woman' novel and a 'defiant man' novel:

On the man's side it is cynical as well as nasty; it assumes that there is no world except Piccadilly after dark, or perhaps the coulisses of some disreputable music-hall. . . . On the woman's side it seems at least to be in deadly earnest, but many of the assumptions are the same, *mutatis mutandis*, and the expression of them is even less veiled.²⁹

Still more disturbing to the sensibilities of this truculently self-proclaimed 'Philistine', it should be noted, is that fiction of the 'morbid and lurid classes' which does not at once reveal the sex of its writer.

Not only tone and language, but also the form of the fiction, could be derived from the sex of the author through the idea of a distinct and inherent female temperament. The German critic Laura Marholm Hansson writes in 1896 that:

Woman is the most subjective of all creatures; she can only write about her own feelings, and her expression of them is her most valuable contribution to literature. Formerly women's writings were, for the most part, either

directly or indirectly, the expression of a great falsehood. They were so overpoweringly impersonal, it was quite comic to see the way in which they imitated men's models, both in form and contents. Now that woman is conscious of her individuality as a woman, she needs an artistic mode of expression, she flings aside the old forms, and seeks for new.³⁰

But if the woman writer's mind was ceaselessly returned to her sex, her body was often denied it. In the general attacks on the New Fiction, women writers above all were subjected to a great deal of personal abuse and innuendo about their sexual inclinations. Stead – a relatively sympathetic reviewer – concludes from *Keynotes* that its author is a hermaphrodite, and generalises that the Novel of the Modern Woman is often written by 'creatures who have been unkindly denied by nature the instincts of their sex', who have not 'had the advantage of personal experience of marriage and of motherhood.'³¹ Again, C. E. Raimond's novel *George Mandeville's Husband* (1894) takes as what is clearly meant to be a representative case a woman novelist (the 'George' of the title), whose ruthless devotion to her own mediocre talent demands the sacrifice first of her husband's artistic career, and then of her only child's life. There can be no mistake about the kind of novelist George Mandeville is:

His wife was not long in realising that she had found her mission. Yes, she had "oracles to deliver". She would be not only a novelist, but a teacher and leader of men. She would champion the cause of Progress, she would hold high the banner of Woman's Emancipation. She would not consent, however, to be criticised by the narrow standards applied in these evil days to woman's work. She was assured she had a powerful and original mind – she would not allow the soft veil of her sex to hide her merit from the public eye. She would call herself "George Mandeville".³²

Mocked as a 'large, uncorseted woman' (p. 9) whose size and coarseness make her sexual demands repellent, she moves in a circle composed entirely of 'effeminate' actors and ugly, fanatical, 'advanced' women. Her husband is devoted to their daughter, from whom he extracts a promise that she will never write or paint, because women's artistic productions are tainted with the vices of amateurism and mediocrity which corrupt taste and lower standards. This is the height of his paternal ambition for her: 'Rosina should never struggle and toil; she should be no more than a dignified looker-on at this new Dance

of Death. . . . Rosina should *be*; the less she "did", the better' (p. 114). Rosina, neglected by her mother, dies of brain-fever. It would be naive, and worse, to be surprised that this novel is the work of a woman; but it is perhaps allowable to be surprised that the pseudonym 'C. E. Raimond' conceals Elizabeth Robins, friend of Wilde, pioneer actress in Ibsen's plays, and later author of the suffragist play *Votes for Women* (1905). (Nor, it must be said, does the novel lend itself to an interpretation as parody, as a brilliant and strategic adoption of the male narrative voice, skillfully undermined by the manipulation of point of view.) Stead's 'phallic criticism', to borrow Mary Ellmann's phrase,³³ and Raimond's account of the woman novelist, lead to the heart of the double-bind: the trouble with women writers is that they are women – or else that they are writers.

The representative role of the woman writers, and the frequency with which such terms as 'the woman question', 'the problem novel', and 'tract' or 'propaganda' recur in contemporary discussion of the New Fiction, draw attention to the form taken by this irruption of the feminine into the novel. Women, as writers or as characters, are identified as at once the source and the focus of a 'problem', the precise terms of which may vary between, say, the fate of the 'surplus' women when men are outnumbered in the population, and the levelling out of the double standard. The woman writer and the New Woman alike are invariably called upon as spokeswomen: they represent, and are represented by, their sex – or, more accurately, their sex as it is bounded by their class-situation. The symbolic names of many such heroines reveal this – names like 'Ideala', 'Speranza', 'Angelica', 'Newman', and 'Eve'.³⁴ Despite the historical component implicit in the name 'New Woman', it is the typicality of sex which is dominant. The woman is continually returned to her sex, identified, analysed, and made to explain herself on the basis of her difference, her divergence from the male norm (there is, after all, no 'Man Question').³⁵ This determining typicality of sex marks a shift in the ideological project of novels about women during the *fin de siècle* period, away from the immediately preceding concern with womanliness, and toward the elaboration of a concept of womanhood – a distinction which I shall try to make clear.

'Womanliness', as John Goode has shown,³⁶ signifies that

which is womanly, or like a woman: it is womanly to be like a woman, and a woman is one who behaves in a womanly fashion – the evident circularity of the definition makes more or less overt its reference to a socially-constructed concept. Womanliness is in this sense recognisably a political concept, proposing an external standard of judgement – it is possible, and indeed common, for a woman to be unwomanly – rather than an inherent disposition. It may (especially in the hands of women writers) hold out a promise of satisfaction to the womanly woman, but its aim is clearly the imposition and maintenance of sharply differentiated sexual roles. Dinah Craik's *The Woman's Kingdom*, first published in 1869, but evidently still popular enough to be reprinting in the 1890s, is structurally paradigmatic for the novel of womanliness: the contrasted fatherless or orphaned sisters can be traced back to Jane Austen. The novel's Ruskinian title, and its epigraph from 'Of Queen's Gardens', betray its frame of reference, that all-powerful but indirect 'influence' which every woman must choose to exert, but which she must never wield. The two sisters here are a teacher, plain, but intelligent and generous, and a convalescent, beautiful, but selfish and petty. They meet two precisely complementary brothers – a doctor, not handsome, but full of character and strength, and a sickly artist, handsome and charming, but weak and unstable. The exact symmetry of character, profession, age and appearance is striking. The frivolous couple drift into equivocal relations, almost marry, but do not; he wastes his talents and becomes a vagabond, while she makes a wealthy but empty marriage and has only a single daughter to show for it. The good pair, however, form a strong and stable relationship – this is the quality of it:

She watched him coming, a tall figure, strong and active, walking firmly, without pauses or hesitation . . . There he was, the ruler of her life, her friend, her lover, some day to be her husband. He was coming to assume his rights, to assert his sovereignty. A momentary vague terror smote her, a fear as to the unknown future, a tender regret for the peaceful maidenly, solitary days left behind, and then her heart recognised its master and went forth to meet him; not gleefully, with timbrels and dances, but veiled and gentle, grave and meek; contented and ready to obey him, "even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord."³⁷

He comes, she waits; he asserts, she assents. The two marry, live on a small income but in great happiness and mutual respect, the doctor's integrity sustained by his wife's influence. Her womanly virtues are rewarded with a family of sons. The connection between the acceptance of the womanly role and the successful marriage is so overt that the novel's religious rhetoric barely conceals the underlying economism.

But perhaps the major exponent of the fiction of womanliness is Eliza Lynn Linton, who reinforced her essays on *The Girl of the Period* (collected in 1883) with a helpfully schematic exposition of the concept in novels such as *The Rebel of the Family* (1880). Here there are three sisters, all of marriageable age and slender financial resources, to be contrasted. The eldest has every appearance of being an exemplary woman: quietly elegant, unassuming, she seemingly aims only to please:

When she heard a new-comer say in a loud whisper to his neighbour: "What a charming smile Miss Winstanley has!" or: "What wonderful style there is about her!" or: "What a graceful person she is, and how delightfully well-mannered!" then her soul was satisfied because her existence was justified. She had done her duty to herself, her mother, her future and the family fortunes. She had therefore earned her right to be well-dressed and taken out into society, as fairly as a workman, who has laid his tale of bricks, has earned his pint of beer and his stipulated week's wages.³⁸

But the incongruously clear-sighted economic metaphor should alert the reader to the trap, for Thomasin's exemplary behaviour is vitiated by her excessive awareness of its value as a commodity. Her motivation is too self-consciously directing her behaviour, and so her discretion and modesty are transmuted into 'this quiet immorality, this cynical good sense, this apotheosis of worldly wisdom' (III, 203). The figure of Thomasin, with her 'masculine' name, reveals something of the contradiction inherent in Linton's situation as a woman writer serving the ideology of womanliness: the novel's project is to show that womanliness is the only guarantee of success on the marriage-market, and yet to propose as a naturally womanly quality a selflessness which would necessitate ignorance of that fact. The womanliness of the project is undercut by Linton's unwomanly awareness of its fictionality, and this, as I shall argue, necessitates a certain dexterity in the manipulation of point of view.

If Thomasin is one of the figures from Linton's essays, the self-seeking girl of the period, then the youngest sister is another – the pleasure seeker. She is a kind of early Dickens heroine – blonde, blue-eyed, flower-like, lisping. But her sweetness and charm are undermined by her frivolity and lack of solid moral principle. Here again, though, that principle shows itself to be largely a matter of making the best use of her commodity-status. She fails the womanly ideal in the opposite direction, by failing to realise the full marketability of her charms: she is, literally and metaphorically, cheap. Her sisters only narrowly save her from 'falling' – a possibility telegraphed from the first in her name, Eva.

The middle sister, Perdita, represents the middle way – a way which, again as the name suggests, is temporarily lost. Her combination of an intelligent mind and a generous heart causes her to be ruthlessly sacrificed by her sisters, but also gives rise to a certain questioning rebelliousness in her. She realises that her abilities are stifled by her narrow life, and longs for the change of sex which alone seems to offer a way out of the problem:

The heart and soul of all poor Perdita's lamentations and day-dreams was always this wish – that she had been born a boy and could go out into the world to make a name for herself and a fortune for her family! . . . The *Sturm and Drang* period with her was severe; and, seeing how the current of modern thought goes, it was an even chance whether it would end in some fatal absurdity or work through its present turbulence into clearness of purpose and reasonableness of action (I, 31).

The 'fatal absurdity' which threatens Perdita takes the form of a third of Linton's *Girl of the Period* cast of characters: one of the 'Shrieking Sisterhood', the New Woman Bell Blount, who, 'hardened', 'unsexed', 'ungraceful', 'mannish' and 'monstrous' (I, 282–3), lectures on women's suffrage to an audience of 'mannish' women and 'weedy' men. She also poses a more direct sexual threat to Perdita's womanliness, for she lives as the 'male' partner in a lesbian relationship which exactly reproduces the structures of power and dependence of a heterosexual marriage. (This relation of feminism to lesbianism also appears in other contemporary novels, such as James' *The Bostonians* and George Moore's *A Drama in Muslin* (both 1886).) Perdita, though repelled by the coarse talk and advanced manners, finds herself fascinated by the purposefulness of Blount's life. Her

moral worthlessness is finally exposed, however, in her betrayal of Perdita's secret love for a local chemist – a betrayal which, although motivated exclusively by sexual jealousy, also serves to discredit her public role as a suffragist. Thus delivered from the dual threat of suffragism and lesbianism, Perdita finds the way that was lost in the prospect of a marriage which is given a certain spuriously radical air by its social 'unsuitability'. But, though her 'rebellion' (stressed in the novel's title) consists in marrying for love rather than for money, the true reward for her womanliness comes in her acquiring both: her chemist makes good and rescues her family from financial ruin. Her accession to womanliness is dependent upon her at once knowing that it will serve her well (in contrast to Eva) and not knowing it (in contrast to Thomasin); the difficulty of effecting a coherent reconciliation between the two means that the narrative voice must, at a certain point, abandon its privileged insight into Perdita's consciousness, and distance her by interposing a mediating interpreter. And so it is that, by the end of the novel, she has resigned the right to speech, and it is her husband who gives the final placing of her experience for the reader – that she has found "a woman's duties higher than her rights; the quiet restrictions of home more precious than the excitement of liberty, the glare of publicity" (III, 287). *The Rebel of the Family* is a parable of the woman's voluntary subjection of herself to a standard of womanliness which, though it is perceived as personally restrictive and unjust, nevertheless constitutes her only means of survival.

Many of the New Woman novels rebel against the limitations and uniformity imposed by this concept. The novels of liberal feminism have as their project, to quote John Goode, 'the possible freedom of woman conceived as a rational application of the social contract';³⁹ they tend either to be programmatic, embodying a future resolution of the woman question – and hence to take non-realist forms like fantasy – or to concentrate on the symptoms of the contemporary oppression of women, and so to take the form of a realist novel revolving upon the woman in society rather than in a single love-relationship. The characteristic structuring device of the novel of womanliness, the contrasting sisters, gives way to that of the brother and sister: the disparity between their respective abilities and fates

gives focus to the liberal feminist programme of 'equality' with men in education, professional opportunities, sexual morality, and marital rights and responsibilities. (The precursor in this case is rather George Eliot than Jane Austen). So, for example, Gertrude Dix's *The Girl from the Farm* (1895) shows a classics graduate forced to postpone her career in order to look after her father, while her weak and selfish brother passes his time in the seduction of local servants; Lady Florence Dixie's *Redeemed in Blood* (1889) is concerned with equal rights of primogeniture for its sibling aristocrats; and Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) are a boy and a girl, inseparable in childhood, but subsequently forced apart by the differing expectations of their parents and teachers. Waldo and Lyndall, in Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, are quite different, however, in part because Waldo is not in any degree complicit in the sexual oppression of Lyndall, but is rather her male counterpart, outcast and misunderstood; the submerged parallel between woman as bearer of children and male artist surfaces in the fact that Waldo's two major projects, his sheep-shearing machine and his carved stick, each take him nine months to bring to fruition.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Lyndall's long speech draws an explicit contrast between the lives marked out for them by their difference of sex:

"We all enter the world little plastic beings, with so much natural force perhaps, but for the rest – blank; and the world tells us what we are to be, and shapes us by the ends it sets before us. To you it says – *Work*; and to us it says – *Seem*. . . . To us it says – Strength shall not help you, nor knowledge, nor labour. You shall gain what men gain, but by other means.

Then the curse begins to act on us. It finishes its work when we are grown women, who no more look out wistfully at a more healthy life; we are contended. We fit our sphere as a Chinese woman's foot fits her shoe exactly, as though God had made both – and yet He knows nothing of either. In some of us the shaping to our end has been quite completed. The parts we are not to use have been quite atrophied, and have even dropped off; but in others, and we are not less to be pitied, they have been weakened and left. We wear the bandages, but our limbs have not grown to them; we know that we are compressed, and chafe against them" (II, 39–42).

This intensely physicalised sense of chafing against cramping limitation pervades the feminist novels; the analogy between the Chinese practice of footbinding and the constraints upon the growing middle-class girl recurs.⁴¹ But Lyndall's percep-

tion that she is actually *shaped* by what is inscribed upon the 'blank' infant is unusual; more common is the image of a compression that, released, will allow the 'natural' form to reassert itself. Correspondingly, the women of these novels *undergo* their experience, restlessly rubbing against its restrictions. Interestingly, a considerable bitterness is often directed toward the figure of the mother, bearer of the vestiges of womanliness. The womanly woman is a kind of impending threat, to be killed or maimed in self defence, rather as Virginia Woolf talks of needing to murder the hovering Angel of the House before she could write her fiction.⁴² The experiencing heroine is polarised: she is all certainty, aspiration, desire, while her doubts and contradictions are split off and embodied in the Mother who binds her about with prejudice and custom. Tant' Sannie, the mother-figure in Schreiner's novel, is a grotesque caricature of the womanly woman, hugely fat and endlessly receptive, consuming dried apricots and dessicated husbands with the same indifferent rapacity:

"marriage is the finest thing in the world. I've been at it three times, and if it pleased God to take this husband from me I should have another.

Some men are fat, and some men are thin; some men drink brandy, and some men drink gin; but it all comes to the same thing in the end; it's all one. A man's a man, you know" (II, 297–9).

Perhaps the clearest case of such a polarisation occurs in Mona Caird's two novels, *The Wing of Azrael* (1889) and *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894); in both, the mother is the focus of a curious mixture of guilt, resentment and pity. Every mother, for Caird, is one more link in a long chain binding women to renunciation and sacrifice, and every mother demands vicarious restitution. The mother in both books is at once disabling and disabled, a tyrannical invalid whose very helplessness adds force to her demands:

She realized now, with agonising vividness, the sadness of her mother's life, the long stagnation, the slow decay of disused faculties, and the ache that accompanies all processes of decay, physical or moral. Not only the strong appeal of old affection, entwined with the earliest associations, was at work, but the appeal of womanhood itself: – the grey, sad story of a woman's life, bare and dumb and pathetic in its irony and pain: the injury from without, and then the self-injury, its direct offspring; unnecessary, yet inevitable; the unconscious thirst for the sacrifice of others, the hungry

claims of a nature unfulfilled, the groping instinct to bring the balance of renunciation to the level, and indemnify oneself for the loss suffered and the spirit offered up. And that propitiation had to be made.⁴³

The resignation of that final sentence finds an echo in many of the feminist novels of failed rebellion. Netta Syrett's *Nobody's Fault* (London, 1896) ends rather similarly, with the woman's renunciation of her lover for the sake of her widowed mother: "It isn't a question of duty, inclination, religion, or *anything*, but just the one overwhelming necessity of not breaking the tie of blood" (pp. 251–2). It is the 'tie of blood' that binds fastest of all in the attempted revolt, and often plays a crucial role in defeating or subverting the woman's protest. The defeat from without, or the collapse from within, usually follows the same cycle: anger and resentment finding expression in violence, suppressed or actual; then a total, self-imposed submissiveness of behaviour combined with the attempt to preserve some inner space of protest; rebellion, sparked off by the prospect of a desired lover, marriage, or career; and a grim final result. Caird's *The Wing of Azrael* (1889) – a novel which, she claims in her Preface, aims 'not to contest or to argue, but to represent'⁴⁴ – is paradigmatic: Viola Sedley, child of a self-martyring mother and a domineering father, is tormented by the cynically clever Philip Dendraith. She pushes him over a cliff, and, although he is not seriously hurt, is so horrified and frightened by her own anger that she falls into a submissive and numbing religious fatalism. Later they marry, and he is exasperated by her passivity:

If she had been a haughty, rebellious woman, giving him insult for insult, sneer for sneer, he might have understood it; but she professed the most complete wifely submission, obeyed him in every detail, and when he reviled her she answered not again; yet behind all this apparent yielding he knew that there was something he could not touch – the real woman who withdrew herself from him inexorably and for ever. (II. pp. 111–12).

Viola endures his humiliating and sadistic treatment out of a sense of duty towards her mother, even when she realises that she loves someone else. Her mother's death offers a glimmer of hope, and Viola arranges to elope with her lover. Trapped at the last minute by her husband, whose sexual interest in her is re-aroused by this sign of rebellion, she stabs him, flees from the momentary horror in her lover's eyes, and jumps over the cliff

to her death. (The combination of desperate resignation and anger erupting into violence prefigures Hardy's Tess.) Other equally bleak resolutions occur – death, breakdown into convention, or the renunciation of personal desire and the acceptance of a joyless future.

'Happy endings' are usually to be found only in works which permit of a clearly-defined programme for the liberation of women – works which eschew realism for fantasy or prophesy. I have already mentioned the feminist Utopia of *Gloriana*; into the same category falls Jane Hume Clapperton's *Margaret Dunmore: or, A Socialist Home* (London, 1888), which shows the trials and tribulations of 'a Provincial Communistic group – ladies and gentlemen who intend to live, rather than preach, Socialism; and who hope to rear children of a purely Socialistic type' (p. 23). After both practical and emotional vicissitudes – chapped hands from large-scale potato-peeling, and a potentially adulterous affection – a satisfactory régime is established on the basis of communal domestic labour for the women, meetings of self- and group-criticism, and a eugenic meliorism derived from the works of Patrick Geddes. A lecture hall is then set up to pass on the benefits of the community's experience to the working class.

The programmatic fantasy is a form taken up by several of the male feminist-sympathisers. George Noyes Miller's novel *The Strike of a Sex* ([1895]) is a dream-vision, in which women successfully withdraw their labour – the pun, intentional or not, provides the novel's structuring metaphor – in order to get an unconditional guarantee from the male 'management' that "no woman from this time forth and forever, shall be subjected to the woes of maternity without her free and specific consent in all cases" (p. 51). This is to be effected by the implementation of 'Zugassent's Discovery'. The novel's form rather curiously mimics its subject in that it constantly approaches the point of defining this discovery, but repeatedly breaks off before the climactic revelation is made. Readers of Miller's pamphlet *After the Strike of a Sex* (1896) – or those who understood the significance of the phrase 'Member of the Oneida Community' that appears on the title page below the author's name – were to find out that it is *coitus reservatus*.

Without doubt the oddest of the fantasy solutions to the

'problem' of women can be found in Henry Dalton's *Lesbia Newman* (1889), a work whose chief distinction lies in its containing characters named The Rev Spinosa Bristley and Fidgefumbblasquidiot Grewel. A politico-religious prophecy, it moves somewhat bewilderingly from the mild unconventionalities of Lesbia's membership of a bicycle club and a Reformed Dress Society, to events of rather wider significance: the Tsar is assassinated by "two Nihilists, ladies in the Empress' suite" (p. 171), Ireland throws off the yoke of the English only to put itself under the voluntary tutelage of the United States, world revolution breaks out in Cork harbour, the twenty-four-hour clock is introduced (a matter of equal importance, it appears), the Catholic church returns to the true faith as the Church of our Divine Lady and appoints women priests and vestals, and women – disdaining the intermediary of the morally inferior male – acquire the ability to secrete the 'zoosperm' and procreate by parthogenesis.

Most liberal feminist novels, however, content themselves with seeking rather humbler reforms; paramount amongst them is the reform of the concept and practice of marriage. The 'Anti-Marriage League', of which Margaret Oliphant writes in her review of *Jude the Obscure* and of works by Grant Allen,⁴⁵ begins rather earlier, with the female *Bildungsroman* of the 1880s in which marriage and sex are the crucial educational structures. The difficulty of establishing a satisfactory relationship between an anti-stereotype heroine, capable and independent, and a situation for her adequate to her sense of oppression often leads to the punctuation of realism by melodrama. Few marriages, for instance, are simply boring, or mutually irksome; 'bad' husbands and wives must be alcoholic, syphilitic, cruelly selfish or monstrously violent. Shaw remarks humorously on this tendency in his Preface to *The Irrational Knot*: 'I had made a morally original study of a marriage myself, and made it, too, without any melodramatic forgeries, spinal diseases, and suicides, though I had to confess to a study of dipsomania' (p. xxv). The melodrama is intensified by the desire to make representative the experience of the female characters, and the shift away from a single focal heroine to a number of female characters sometimes lends a note of extravagance to the marital abuses evoked. Sensitive and intelligent women are

almost invariably married to violent, boorish, or venereally-diseased husbands with a string of past or present mistresses and illegitimate children in tow. *The Heavenly Twins* offers two complementary cases of the spectre of hereditary syphilis and the possibilities of eugenic feminism, one an example, and the other a warning. Evadne refuses to live with her 'moral leper' of a husband until prevailed upon by parental pressure and the threat of the law. Even then they live, at her insistence and at some cost to her health, on terms of celibacy, despite his attempts to seduce her by leaving 'salacious' advanced literature – Zola, Sand, Daudet, Spencer – where he hopes she will find and read it. The saintly Edith, on the other hand, marries the depraved Sir Mosley Menteith in ignorance, bears a sickly child, and dies of syphilitic brain-fever.⁴⁶

Some other novels explore, not the experience of marriage, but its institutionalised status, vindicating or challenging conventional legalised marriage through alternative forms of relationship: sexless marriage, parthogenesis, lesbianism, or celibacy, by choice or necessity.⁴⁷ But the fiction of marital reform is unquestionably dominated by the 'free union', which, on its own valuation, differs from common-law marriage in that it is contracted as a matter of principle, for the sake of humanity or of moral evolution, and not on the grounds of inclination or pragmatism. It is based on the notion of substituting the sanction of personal feeling for the degrading economic basis of legal marriage: the exchange of financial support by the man for exclusive contractual rights to the woman's sexual activity is redefined as, in Stead's phrase, 'monogamic prostitution.'⁴⁸ A character of Shaw's puts the case:

"Somebody said openly in Parliament the other day that marriage was the true profession of women. So it is a profession; and except that it is a harder bargain for both parties, and that society countenances it, I dont [sic] see how it differs from what we – bless our virtuous indignation! – stigmatize as prostitution."⁴⁹

If marriage is to be re-interpreted as prostitution, then non-marriage is often carefully distinguished from it by the scrupulous avoidance of any taint of sensuality; the heroine is protected from confusion with the pathetic victim of a plausible seducer by being herself the initiator, while the man is reluctant. Here is one such high-minded offer:

"Were I to do as you bid me, to go with you before priest or registrar, I should degrade myself beyond redemption. This, Rupert, is the woman's protest against the old bad order, her martyrdom if you will. It is for man to renounce honours, wealth, glory, the power which involves dominion over the weak, and is founded on their weakness. What can a maiden renounce? I will tell you. Do not shrink if I say it, conscious of the unsullied life I have led and the innocent love that is beating in my heart. Rupert, she can renounce respectability."⁵⁰

This woman, incidentally, backs up her plea in a rather less self-congratulatorily idealistic fashion by threatening to kill herself if Rupert rejects her. But the tone – the pre-ordained martyrdom, the stress upon the 'unsullied' and 'innocent' nature of the woman's life, and the preservation of the female role of loving self-sacrifice – is characteristic, and makes clear the free union's exact reproduction of the ideology of marriage (loving, lasting, monogamous). The 'union' undermines the 'freedom'.

The novel of free union has only two possibilities: for or against, martyrdom or marriage. Of the first kind, the best known example (though neither the earliest nor the best) is Grant Allen's *The Woman who Did* (1895). The novel's project is from the first the martyrdom of Herminia, in the 'feminine' heroism of suffering. All doubt or contradiction is marginalised, as Herminia's boredom in Italy, where Alan has brought her, is rapidly resolved by his death. Herminia's experience leaves her wholly untouched, and her consciousness is so utterly and unironically circumscribed by the narrative voice that the novel can simply ride over the increasingly obvious and necessary compromises of her principles which suggest how little of an 'alternative' the free union is, how futile the martyrdom she has elected. This sub-text was at once visible to its conservative reviewers:

Those who do not know the author, but who take what I must regard as the saner view of the relations of the sexes, will rejoice that what might have been a potent force for evil has been so strangely over-ruled as to become a reinforcement of the garrison defending the citadel its author desires so ardently to overthrow. For there is no mistaking the fact. From the point of view of the fervent apostle of Free Love, this is a Boomerang of a Book.⁵¹

For the 'pro-marriage league', these contradictions form the substance of the narrative, allowing of a contrast between 'theory' and the 'reality' of living which is invariably resolved in

favour of the latter. There are sacramental defences of marriage,⁵² but it is more common to see the free union confronted with, and undermined by, social ostracism, self-doubt, and jealousy. In H. Sidney Warwick's *Dust o' Glamour* (1897), the woman's increasing sense of shame, her insecurity and the social restrictions upon their life together which cause her lover to become bored and cold towards her, are all redeemed by the final marriage. In Frank Frankfort Moore's *I Forbid the Banns* (1893), the relationship deteriorates as a result of sexual jealousies and anxieties that are given frankly economic expression:

He felt, when looking at her, as a man might feel who is in possession of a certain charming property, but who knows that he has no title-deeds, and that, consequently, he may be turned adrift at any moment. What is the noblest property in the world to anyone, so long as the title-deeds are in the possession of someone else?⁵³

It was probably this self-mocking urbanity of tone that modified the enthusiasm of the reviewers for its argument:

On the whole the book is a blow on the right side in the discussion, though it could be wished that the author's standpoint had been rather less that of expediency and more that of principle.⁵⁴

Here again, the relationship is saved by legal marriage, which, dissolving all the contradictions of the preceding narrative, is represented as an unproblematic resolution. In almost every case, 'for' or 'against', the fiction of the free union represents the relationship in a vacuum, unrelated, for the woman at least, to any other area of activity. The concentration upon the woman's role in the relationship, and upon the double standard which presses upon her experience of that role, imparts an air of liberalism which is belied by the unchallenged reproduction of the 'feminine sphere' of home and family.

But under the increasing pressure of those biologicistic accounts of sexual difference which I have already outlined, the feminist revolt against the womanly took on a new impetus. Writers like George Egerton, rebelling against the womanly ideal, sought to tear aside the veil of convention and hypocrisy in order to reveal the real woman beneath; but precisely this notion of a 'real' woman marks a falling back onto biological or mystical essentialism. Womanhood, in contrast to womanli-

ness, is not an ideal or an aspiration, but an immanent natural disposition, originating in a pre-determining physiological sexual differentiation. The ideology of womanhood necessarily predicates certain kinds of experience as female, and in doing so it privileges the interiority of the female writer and, in turn, of the female narrative voice. It draws much of its strength from its protest against the existing social oppression of women, but it subverts that protest by an appeal to the 'natural' which reinforces the enclosure of women's experience by their physiological organisation. The political content of the ideology is hidden beneath its elevation of anatomically-specific female skills and abilities, which does not allow for deviation except in the sense of a far more literal 'unsexing' than that implied by the failure of womanliness.

'Womanhood' can be invoked both by those who perceive themselves as feminists – as the mystico-physiological feminism of Ellis Ethelmer witnesses – and by avowed anti-feminists like Iota. Her novel *A Yellow Aster* (1894) concerns a young woman, distinctively 'modern' in that she has been cheated out of her womanhood by the rationalistic and scientific upbringing that her well-intentioned parents have given her. The title is also the novel's central symbol: Gwen Waring is the 'yellow aster', a hybrid result of human experiment upon nature. The difficulty occasioned by her education is that the spontaneity of instinct and emotion is dammed up by her constant introspection and self-analysis; the unspoken postulate of a hostile duality of body and mind finds an echo in many contemporary 'woman question' novels.⁵⁵ Receiving a proposal of marriage, she is moved to accept by the dim promptings of a so far unidentified "'something outside me"',⁵⁶ despite her lack of emotion and a positive aversion to the sexual side of marriage.

She turned away to hide the crimson in her cheeks.

"Then this one-flesh business, this is a horrid thing."

She squeezed her hands into her eyes.

"This is maddening!" she cried, and sprang up and stood looking out of the window.

"One flesh!" she murmured breathlessly, "One flesh!" (II, 87).

The honeymoon leaves Gwen feeling degraded, possessed, irrevocably altered, and her subsequent pregnancy leads her to

send her husband away in revulsion. The "'something outside me"' now comes to the fore, in the form of the something inside her – the baby, agent and embodiment of the impersonal force of the maternal instinct. Only after a kind of rebirth (she almost dies during a long and difficult labour) does her impeded womanhood assert its supremacy. She bursts into a grateful rhapsody over wife- and motherhood:

"I am a woman at last, a full, complete, proper woman, 'and it is magnificent. No other living woman can feel as I do; other women absorb these feelings as they do their daily bread and butter, and they have to them the same placid everyday taste, they slip into their womanhood; mine has rushed into me with a great torrent – I love my husband, I worship him, I adore him – do you hear, my dear?" (III, 172–73).

This conclusion is successfully reached, however, only through the repression of Gwen's feminist protest; her earlier half-contemptuous envy of the 'full, complete, proper woman' has been given powerful expression in terms that cast an unsettling ambivalence over her final surrender:

"A very strong woman is docked of half the privileges of her sex. . . . Helplessness is such supreme flattery. . . .

The parasitical, gracious, leaning ways, the touch of pathos and pleading, – those are the things I should look for if I were a man, they charm me infinitely. Then that lovely craving for sympathy, and that delicious feeling of insecurity they float in, which makes the touch of strong hands a Heaven-sent boon to them – those women, you see, strew incense in your path and they get it back in service" (II, 126–27).

And further, the final mark of Gwen's triumph is that she has come to resemble exactly the idealised portrait of her which she has earlier dismissed as "'pre-ordained to the rôle of bride"' (II, 154), and which has been the occasion of an odd distinction between the 'cold living abstraction' and the 'warm, big-hearted, divinely-natural creature, alive there on the canvas' (III, 26). In order to be 'alive', to become 'divinely-natural' – the phrase conferring upon physiology the power of divinity – Gwen must, paradoxically, become static, fixed, a cultural object. Throughout the novel she has been the centre of consciousness, but at the end she is abruptly presented as a portrait, framed by the window, and perceived through the consciousness of her returning husband. Her accession to womanhood is also the resignation of her right (fully exercised

in the rest of the novel) to speech: 'she just sat dumbly on the floor' (III, 204). The trajectory of the novel's project is deflected by the ambivalences that threaten its uncertain grasp of point of view.

The most prominent and able of the writers concerned with womanhood, however, is George Egerton. Her stories – especially those in her first volume, *Keynotes* – unsettle the expectations and responses of the reader in their innovatory alternation of abrupt and enigmatic narrative compression with overflowing linguistic excess, and in the unprecedented candour of their reference to sexual themes. It was probably the combination of this last with a male pseudonym – though 'George' had by now acquired from Eliot and Sand a certain tradition as a woman writer's name – that led the first reader of the stories, T. P. Gill, to express his views on them to the author in a swaggeringly 'one of the boys' tone:

To put it brutally you would not (however Scandinavian your ideas may be) invite your coachman, or even your bosom friend, to 'assist' while you and your wife were engaged in the sacred mysteries. Why the deuce should you write it all out for them and give it them to read about! . . . For example, take the effect on a young fellow in his student period . . . of a particularly warm description of rounded limbs and the rest. It puts him in a state that he either goes off and has a woman or it is bad for his health (and possibly worse for his morals) if he doesn't.⁵⁷

A second, highly embarrassed letter followed when the author was revealed to be one Mary Clairmonte.

Egerton clearly conceived of herself very much in terms of writing *as a woman for women*; her subject-matter ('the *terra incognita* of herself')⁵⁸ and her manner of writing are alike felt to be determined – or rather, her own phrase implies, restricted – by her sex alone: 'one is bound to look at life through the eyes of one's sex, to toe the limitations imposed on one by its individual physiological functions.'⁵⁹ 'The eyes of one's sex': the phrase is ambivalent, evoking at once a personalised sense of gender-identity, and a sense of what is shared with all other women. It recalls the lack of particularity with which Egerton's stories are invested by the avoidance of names and absence of personal histories for characters identified only by their sex:⁶⁰ each woman serves to represent the immanence of her womanhood. The breaking of stereotype reveals a further ideological struc-

ture within, for the project of the stories is the nature of woman as essential and universal. The stress on physiology in the quotation above is characteristic and important, for it is by virtue of physiology that woman is bound to her 'nature'. The stories foreground the exclusion of women in society, but in a way that allows that protest to be recuperated into the ideology of womanhood. For what is repressed in male-dominated society is represented as something disruptive of the very terms of that society: the 'natural' – woman, instinctive, intuitive, enigmatic, wild:

[Men] have all overlooked the eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks in the mildest, best woman. Deep in through ages of convention this primeval trait burns, an untameable quality that may be concealed but is never eradicated by culture – the keynote of woman's witchcraft and woman's strength.⁶¹

In this terminology, with its implied analogy between sexual difference and the polarisation of nature and culture, there dwells an unexpected echo of Ruskin. Certainly, Egerton's glorying in the subversive amorality of her women is wholly foreign to Ruskin, but the shared analogy serves to draw out the implications of such a representation. The insistence, in Egerton's stories, upon certain common qualities in women and upon certain images of them – witch, elf, gypsy, sphinx – locate them, as if constitutionally, outside the social framework, and shift the site of their oppression into the realm of nature.

Nor does Egerton's noble female savage mark the irruption of repressed female desire into the male order, for it is the distinctive feature of the ideology of womanhood that it recuperates desire into instinct – here, "the deep, underlying generic instinct, the 'mutterdrang', that lifts her above and beyond all animalism, and fosters the sublimest qualities of unselfishness and devotion."⁶² The unresolved contradiction between the 'instinct' and the transcendence of 'animalism' marks the spiritualising of the woman's sexuality through reproduction; motherhood is made not merely an anatomical potentiality common to most women, but, to take up Egerton's own word, the 'keynote' of womanhood. Physiology becomes at once the ground and the expression of women's moral qualities:

"the *only divine* fibre in a woman is her maternal instinct. Every good quality she has is consequent or co-existent with that. Suppress it, and it turns to a fibroid, sapping all that is healthful and good in her nature" (*Discords*, p. 100).

The equipoise of 'healthful' and 'good', and the only half-figurative 'fibroid', reveal a moral organicism invoking nature as the ratification of that morality of vicariousness prescribed for women by womanliness and womanhood alike.

A strength of Egerton's writing is the space it makes for female anger and protest. But, as Elaine Showalter has remarked,⁶³ the anger and violence are constantly directed towards other women or towards children: the woman in 'Wedlock' murders her step-children to avenge her husband's callous rejection of her own illegitimate child; and the wife in 'Virgin Soil' holds her mother responsible for the abhorrence she feels for sex with her husband. Showalter argues that the anger is deflected from its true, justified target – the husband in each case – and that the 'real' struggle between husbands and wives is thus concealed. It is true that there is an absence of confrontation, but that absence is necessitated by the primacy of enigma in Egerton's account of the nature of woman; her women are incomprehensible, inexplicable, to men, and so confrontation gives way to juxtaposition. The typical Egerton woman – small, slight, pale, full of quivering nervous strength and neurotic changes of mood – attracts male characters and narrator by her eroticised difference from the male. In this feminist ideology of womanhood, that difference confers a strength which the men try to wrest from her by a mixture of threat and cajolement:

"You wait on me, ay, no slave better, and yet – I can't get at you, near you; that little soul of yours is as free as if I hadn't bought you, as if I didn't own you, as if you were not my chattel, my thing to do what I please with; do you hear" (with fury) "to degrade, to – to treat as I please? . . . [Yet] you pity me with all that great heart of yours because I am just a great, weak, helpless, drunken beast, a poor wreck" (*Keynotes*, p. 145).

Husbands are brutal, drunken, and weakly dependent (as in 'A Shadow's Slant') or else well meaning, but coarse, simple, and limited in understanding (as in 'An Empty Frame'). In neither case can they satisfy the complex needs of their wives. The women are bound by "that crowning disability of my sex"

affection (*Keynotes*, p. 127), or by the emotional dependence of the man, or by their children; they treat the bullying child-man they have married with a vaguely contemptuous pitying affection:

"There, it's all right, boy! Don't mind me, I have a bit of a complex nature; you couldn't understand me if you tried to; you'd better not try!"

She has slipped, whilst speaking, her warm bare foot out of her slipper, and is rubbing it gently over his chilled ones.

"You are cold, better go back to bed, I shall go too!" (*Keynotes*, p. 123).

The recurrent imagery of hunting – traps, cages, fishing, wounded birds – powerfully conveys the sense of intuned violence in these claustrophobic marriages.

Enigma, dominant 'keynote' of womanhood, structures many of the stories. In her retrospective note on *Keynotes*, Egerton describes the task of the woman writer as 'to give herself away'.⁶⁴ Something of this idea of self-surrender is caught in the frequency with which her stories take the form of a woman telling her story for herself, in direct speech, to a listener who is most often also a woman, though sometimes a man. But this woman's story is not co-extensive with the text; rather, it is framed and delineated by an 'objective' or first-person narrator who represents the woman to the reader as enigma, erotic or otherwise. The embedded narrative does not carry all the immediacy and authority of the framing narrative which situates it as partial; narrator and teller of the woman's story never coincide. The woman appears to the narrator from the first as the embodiment of a question (often, when the narrator is implied to be male, an erotic question) or a mystery. The sense of something tantalisingly withheld colours the objectivity of the external description of her actions:

Free to follow the beck of one's spirit, a-ah to dream of it, and the red light glows in her eyes again; they have an inward look; what visions do they see? The small thin face is transformed, the lips are softer, one quick emotion chases the other across it, the eyes glisten and darken deeply, and the copper threads shine on her swart hair. What is she going to do, what resolve is she making? . . . Again her eyes wander out with an appealing look (to whom do they appeal, to part of herself, to some God of convention?) towards the camp (*Keynotes*, pp. 151–2).

Into this erotic tension established between woman and narrator (and, by extension, reader) breaks the moment of the

woman's story, the moment when she 'gives herself away', promising at once the explication of the enigma and the dissipation of the 'woman's strength' which it gives her. Yet, because it is a narrative of direct speech, given by her in response to, and confirmation of, the narrator's question, her self-sufficient inaccessibility is preserved; just as the woman desired is never possessed by the male narrator, her consciousness is never possessed by the narrative voice. The embedded narrative, far from dissolving the enigma, implies a logic and a motivation which remain inaccessible. Even when the narrator has privileged access to the woman's consciousness, that access is partial and abridged. In 'A Cross Line', the narrator makes a very intimate entry into the woman's mind, in the fantasy which dominates the story; but precisely because it is her fantasy, it offers itself only as the possibility of interpretation through a psychoanalytic interrogation which the text will not sustain. It illumines, but it does not explain or circumscribe, the consciousness of the woman. When the woman 'gives herself away', the self-revelation confirms the narrator's erotic gaze.

Against the restriction of the claustrophobic marriages in the majority of the stories is set the notion of the expansion of womanhood – sometimes literally, as when a significant part of the 'freeing' of the woman in the fantasy of liberation 'The Regeneration of Two' is the abjuring of corsets. In that story, the restitution of womanhood, the freeing of nature from the grip of history, is effected by the attacks on contemporary sex-role degeneration of a vagabond poet:

"I lay my heart on the brown lap of earth, and close my eyes in delicious restfulness. I can feel her respond to me; she gives me peace without taxing me for a return. I sought that in woman, for I thought to find her nature's best product, of all things closest in touch with our common mother. I hoped to find rest on her great mother heart; to return home to her for strength and wise counsel; for it is the primitive, the generic, that makes her sacred, mystic, to the best men. I found her half-man or half-doll" (*Discords*, p. 197).

His spiritual 'rescue' of her is counterpointed by her physical rescue of him, when she nurses him back to health after a near-fatal illness in repayment of his debt: "You stung me to analyse myself . . . To see what significance the physical changes in my body had from where the contradictions of my

nature sprang – to find myself" (*Discords*, p. 241). By now she has become the 'sacred, mystic' woman he had sought: infinitely restful, endlessly receptive, the 'great mother'. The expansion of womanhood ends in a confinement. The woman's restless dissatisfaction is recuperated by a sanctified nature and its demiurge, physiology, into the maternal role of 'restfulness . . . peace . . . home', bringing the ideology of womanhood full circle back to the womanly ideal against which it had defined itself.

All this may seem rather far from the highly plotted, serialised novels of Thomas Hardy. And yet, the New Fiction of the 1880s and 1890s in some ways took up the experiments with genre and narrative voice, revolving upon the central female characters, that had marked Hardy's writing career from the beginning. His experimentalism was contextualised and given a significant contemporaneity by the practices of many of these lesser-known writers. He was unquestionably aware of the areas of debate aroused by the fiction of the New Woman and of the controversy it provoked,⁶⁵ and the sense not, certainly, of belonging to a school, but of participating in a moment of change in fiction which was recognised as important, seems to have imparted a new boldness to that experiment. It is with *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, for instance, that he claims a new significance for his fiction; there is no longer any question of being merely 'a good hand at a serial', for he makes a public and unequivocal statement of his views and intentions:

I will just add that the story is sent out in all sincerity of purpose, as an attempt to give artistic form to a true sequence of things; and in respect of the book's opinions and sentiments, I would ask any too genteel reader, who cannot endure to have said what everybody now thinks and feels, to remember a well-worn sentence of St. Jerome's: If an offence come out of the truth, better is it that the offence come than that the truth be concealed (p. xv).

It is the phrase 'what everybody now thinks and feels' that most strikingly reveals a new sense of being buoyed up by contemporary opinion. That sense must have been reinforced by Hardy's awareness of the New Fiction and of the critical debate around it. Certainly, it is in the novels of the late 1880s and the 1890s – in *The Woodlanders*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* – that the sexual and marital themes that have always

been important in Hardy become more overtly and polemically central to his fiction. This in turn will raise new problems in the handling of genre and of narrative voice, turning most particularly upon the articulation of tragedy, realism and polemic. In the chapters that follow, I propose to look at these late novels in the light of such tensions and ambivalences, which are often shared by works of the New Fiction.

NOTES

- 1 Hubert Crackanthorpe, 'Reticence in Literature: Some Roundabout Remarks,' *Yellow Book*, 2 (1894), 269.
- 2 Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (London, 1978), p. 57.
- 3 *Punch*, 106 (1894), 109 & 129.
- 4 W. T. Stead, 'The Novel of the Modern Woman,' *Review of Reviews*, 10 (1894), 71.
- 5 'Novel of the Modern Woman,' p. 64.
- 6 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Towards Androgyny: Aspects of Male and Female in Literature* (London, 1973), pp. 47-112.
- 7 Prostitution is central in Annie E. Holdsworth, *Joanna Trail, Spinster* (London, 1894) and Arabella Kenealy, *The Honourable Mrs. Spoor* (London, [1895]); rape in George Moore, *A Mere Accident* (London, 1887) and [Edith Johnstone], *A Sunless Heart*, 2 vols. (London, 1894); adultery in George Slythe Street, *Episodes* (London, 1895) and George Meredith, *One of our Conquerors*, 3 vols. (London, 1891); and divorce in Meredith, *Diana of the Crossways*, 3 vols. (London, 1885) and George Egerton, 'A Little Grey Glove,' in *Keynotes* (London, 1893), pp. 91-114.
- 8 Arthur Waugh, 'Reticence in Literature,' *Yellow Book*, 1 (1894), 218.
- 9 H. E. Harvey, 'The Voice of Woman,' *Westminster Review*, 145 (1896), 193.
- 10 Ethel Voynich, *The Gadfly* (written 1895; published London, 1897); 'Mark Rutherford' [William Hale White], *Clara Hopgood* (London, 1896).
- 11 Lady Florence Dixie, *Gloriana; or, the Revolution of 1900* (London, 1890), p. ix.
- 12 Cf. Mary Jacobus, 'The Difference of View,' in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (London, 1979), pp. 16-17.
- 13 See Guinevere L. Griest, *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (London, 1970).
- 14 'To Algernon Gissing,' August 1885, *Letters of George Gissing to Members of his Family*, collected and arranged by Algernon and Ellen Gissing (London, 1927), p. 166.
- 15 'Victoria Cross' [Nivien Corey], 'Theodora. A Fragment,' *Yellow Book*, 4 (1895), 156-88.

- 16 James Ashcroft Noble, 'The Fiction of Sexuality,' *Contemporary Review*, 67 (1895), 493.
- 17 E. g. M. Eastwood, 'The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact,' *Humanitarian*, 5 (1894), 375-9; and H. S. Scott and E. B. Hall, 'Character Note. The New Woman,' *Cornhill*, NS 23 (1894), 365-8.
- 18 Dr William Barry, *The Two Standards* (London, 1898), pp. 345-6.
- 19 'Erotomania' is used by, among others, Hugh Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics,' *Blackwoods*, 157 (1895), 833-45; and Noble, 'The Fiction of Sexuality.' 'Sex mania' is more common; users include Janet E. Hogarth, 'Literary Degenerates,' *Fortnightly Review*, 63 (1895), 586-98; and Hugh Stutfield, 'The Psychology of Feminism,' *Blackwoods*, 161 (1897), 104-17.
- 20 In, respectively, Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics'; E. Purcell, 'Degeneration. By Max Nordau,' *Academy*, 47 (1895), 475-6; William L. Courtney, *The Feminine Note in Fiction* (London, 1904), pp. xxvi-xxvii; and "'New" Art at the Old Bailey,' *Speaker*, 11 (1895), 403-4.
- 21 George Bernard Shaw, *The Irrational Knot; Being the Second Novel of his Nonage* (London, 1905), p. xxv.
- 22 B. A. Crackanthorpe, 'Sex in Modern Literature,' *Nineteenth Century*, No. 218 (1895), p. 614.
- 23 1 June, 1896, *One Rare Fair Woman: Thomas Hardy's Letters to Florence Henniker 1893-1922*, ed. Evelyn Hardy and F. B. Pinion (London, 1972), p. 52.
- 24 William Platt, *Women, Love, and Life* (London, 1895), p. 122.
- 25 Francis Adams, *A Child of the Age* (London, 1894), p. 223.
- 26 Henry Murray, *A Man of Genius*, 2 vols. (London, 1895), I, 18.
- 27 George Slythe Street, *Episodes* (London, 1895), p. 30.
- 28 'Reticence in Literature,' p. 217.
- 29 'The Philistine' [J. A. Sterry?], *The New Fiction (A Protest against Sex-Mania), and Other Papers* (London, 1895), pp. 83-4.
- 30 *Modern Women: An English Rendering of Laura Marholm Hansson's 'Das Buch der Frauen'*, by Hermione Ramsden (London, 1896), pp. 78-9.
- 31 'Novel of the Modern Woman,' p. 74.
- 32 'C. E. Raimond' [Elizabeth Robins], *George Mandeville's Husband* (London, 1894), p. 7.
- 33 Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (1968; rpt. London, 1979), pp. 27-54.
- 34 These names appear in, respectively, 'Sarah Grand' [Francis Elizabeth McFall], *Ideala* (London, 1888); Dixie, *Gloriana*; Grand, *The Heavenly Twins*, 3 vols. (London, 1893); Henry Robert S. Dalton, *Lesbia Newman* (London, 1889); and Arabella Kenealy, *Dr Janet of Harley Street* (London, [1893]).
- 35 Except in Laura Marholm, *The Psychology of Woman*, trans. Georgia A. Etchison (London, 1899), pp. 235-53, where it appears in the context of a Nordau-inspired lament for the decline of sharply-differentiated sex-roles.
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- 37 Dinah Maria Mulock Craik, *The Woman's Kingdom. A Love Story*, 3 vols. (London, 1869), II, 18–19.
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- 39 'Woman and the Literary Text,' p. 238.
- 40 'Ralph Iron' [Olive Schreiner], *The Story of an African Farm*, 2 vols. (London, 1883), I, 175 and I, 288.
- 41 E.g. in Grant Allen, *The British Barbarians, A Hill-Top Novel* (London, 1895), pp. 93–4.
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- 44 Mona Caird, *The Wing of Azrael*, 3 vols. (London, 1889), p. xi.
- 45 Margaret O. W. Oliphant, 'The Anti-Marriage League,' *Blackwoods*, 159 (1896), pp. 135–49.
- 46 Also relevant here is Ménie Muriel Dowie, *Gallia* (London, 1895).
- 47 See, respectively, 'Lucas Cleeve' [Adelina G. I. Kingscote], *The Woman Who Wouldn't* (London, 1895), and John Smith, *Platonic Affections* (London, 1896); Dalton, *Lesbia Newman*; George Moore, *A Drama in Muslim: A Realistic Novel* (London, 1886); and Holdsworth, *Joanna Trail, Spinster*, George Gissing, *The Odd Women*, 3 vols. (London, 1893), and Emma Frances Brooke, *A Superfluous Woman*, 3 vols. (London, 1894).
- 48 'Novel of the Modern Woman,' p. 65.
- 49 *The Irrational Knot*, pp. 121–2.
- 50 Rev. William Barry, *The New Antigone: A Romance*, 3 vols. (London, 1887), II, 148.
- 51 W. T. Stead, 'The Book of the Month. "The Woman Who Did." By Grant Allen,' *Review of Reviews*, 11 (1895), 177; cf. 'Recent Novels,' *Spectator*, No. 3, 483 (1895), 431–3; Percy Addleshaw, rev. of *The Woman Who Did*, by Grant Allen, *Academy*, 47 (1895); and Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 'The Woman Who Did,' *Contemporary Review*, 67 (1895), 625–31.
- 52 E.g. Victoria Crosse, *The Woman Who Didn't* (London, 1895), and Barry, *New Antigone*.
- 53 Frank Frankfort Moore, 'I Forbid the Banns,' *The Story of a Comedy which Played Seriously*, 3 vols. (London, 1893), III, 122.
- 54 Elizabeth R. Chapman, *Marriage Questions in Modern Fiction, and Other Essays on Kindred Subjects* (London, 1897), p. 23.
- 55 In anti-feminist works, it takes most often the form of a mental or physical collapse occasioned by an attempt to develop intellectual or artistic abilities lying outside the 'natural' feminine sphere; see, e.g. Jessica Morgan in George Gissing's *In the Year of Jubilee*, 3 vols. (London, 1894); Alma Frothingham in his *The Whirlpool* (London, 1897); and Phyllis Eve in Kenealy's *Dr Janet of Harley Street*.
- 56 'Iota' [Kathleen Mannington Caffyn], *A Yellow Aster*, 3 vols. (London, 1894), II, 51.
- 57 Quoted in *A Leaf from the Yellow Book: The Correspondence of George Egerton*, ed. Terence de Vere White (London, 1958), p. 23.
- 58 'George Egerton' [Mary Chavelita Dunne Golding Bright,] 'A Keynote

- to "Keynotes",' in *Ten Contemporaries: Notes Toward their Definitive Bibliography*, ed. 'John Gawsworth' [Terence Armstrong] (London, 1932), p. 58.
- 59 'A Keynote to "Keynotes",' p. 58.
- 60 Cf. Wendell V. Harris, 'Egerton: Forgotten Realist,' *Victorian Newsletter*, No. 33 (1968), 31–5.
- 61 *Keynotes* (London, 1893), p. 22.
- 62 *Discords* (London, 1894), p. 101.
- 63 *A Literature of their Own*, pp. 213–14.
- 64 'A Keynote to "Keynotes",' p. 58.
- 65 See Chapter 7 below.