

University of Vermont

**UVM ScholarWorks**

---

Graduate College Dissertations and Theses

Dissertations and Theses

---

2014

## The Victorian Governess as Spectacle of Pain: A Cultural History of the British Governess as Withered Invalid, Bloody Victim and Sadistic Birching Madam, From 1840 to 1920

Ruby Ray Daily  
*University of Vermont*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/graddis>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [History Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Daily, Ruby Ray, "The Victorian Governess as Spectacle of Pain: A Cultural History of the British Governess as Withered Invalid, Bloody Victim and Sadistic Birching Madam, From 1840 to 1920" (2014). *Graduate College Dissertations and Theses*. 291.

<https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/graddis/291>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at UVM ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate College Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of UVM ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uvm.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uvm.edu).

THE VICTORIAN GOVERNESS AS SPECTACLE OF PAIN: A CULTURAL  
HISTORY OF THE BRITISH GOVERNESS AS WITHERED INVALID, BLOODY  
VICTIM AND SADISTIC BIRCHING MADAM, FROM 1840 TO 1920

A Thesis Presented

by

Ruby Ray Daily

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
Specializing in History

October, 2014

Accepted by the Faculty of the Graduate College, The University of Vermont, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, specializing in History.

Thesis Examination Committee:

\_\_\_\_\_ Advisor  
Paul Deslandes, Ph.D

\_\_\_\_\_  
Abigail McGowan, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_ Chairperson  
Sarah Alexander, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_ Dean, Graduate College  
Cynthia Forehand, Ph.D.

July 31st, 2014

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the celebrity of governesses in British culture during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Victorian governess-mania was as pervasive as it was inexplicable, governesses comprising only a tiny fraction of the population and having little or no ostensible effect on the social, political, or economic landscape. Nevertheless, governesses were omnipresent in Victorian media, from novels and etiquette manuals to paintings, cartoons and pornography. Historians and literary critics have long conjectured about the root cause of popular fixation on the governess, and many have theorized that their cultural resonance owed to the host of contradictions and social conundrums they embodied, from being a 'lady' who worked, to being comparable to that bugbear of Victorian society, the prostitute.

However, while previous scholarship has maintained that governess-mania was produced by their peculiarity as social or economic actors, I intend to demonstrate that this nonconformity was extrapolated in visual and literary depictions to signify a more prurient deviance, specifically a fixation on human suffering. This analysis reveals that whether depicted in mainstream press or in nefarious erotica, popular interest in governesses was contoured by a fixation on their perceived relationship to corporal violence. Over the course of the nineteenth century governesses were increasingly portrayed as the victims of a huge range of internal and external threats, such as disease, sterility, assault, murder, rape, and even urban accidents like train crashes or gas leaks. Cast as flagellant birching madams in pornographic fantasy, governesses were also construed as deriving erotic authority through the infliction of pain on others. From imagining the governess as a pitiful victim of brutality or conversely eroticizing her as the stewardess of sadomasochism, all of these constructs rely on the dynamics of violation, on bodies that experience misfortune and bodies that mete that it out. Utilizing a wide array of sources and methodological approaches, I will demonstrate that the Victorian governess was not only popularly correlated with social or sexual irregularity, but that these themes were ultimately circumscribed by a larger preoccupation with the governess as an icon of violence and pain.

## **DEDICATION**

For my very beloved Grandmother and also for Doug—the former loves me unconditionally and the latter puts up with all of the weird books around the house. I don't know what I would do without their support.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	ii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	iv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
The History and Historiographies of the Victorian Governess .....	4
CHAPTER 1: A ‘MELANCHOLY INTEREST’ IN GOVERNESS DECLINE.....	18
Withering Beauty and Sexual Deterioration .....	23
Employer Cruelty, Governess’s Emotional Distress and Illness.....	31
“A Helpless Governess, Miss Renault”.....	44
Conclusion.....	53
CHAPTER 2: THE GOVERNESS AS BLOODY SPECTACLE.....	55
Historiographies of Violence and Criminality in Victorian England: Where the Governess Fits in.....	61
Male Predators and ‘Fallen’ Governesses: Suicide, Infanticide and Sexual Violence .	68
Women Hurting Women: Interpersonal Violence between Governesses and Female Employers and Students .....	79
Modern Dangers and Fatal Accidents .....	89
Conclusion.....	96
CHAPTER 3: ‘SPARE THE ROD AND SPOIL THE CHILD’—THE GOVERNESS AS SADIST.....	98
Corporal Punishment, Flagellation and the Governess in British Society .....	103
The Beautiful and Genteel Lady Authoritarian.....	114
The Ritualization of Pain.....	124
Conclusion.....	133
CONCLUSION.....	134
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	139

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	‘Considerate—Very!’ Charles Keene, <u>Punch</u> , 22 (October 22, 1864) Master George. “Cross, Disagreeable old thing, I call her! Miss Caroline. “Oh, Gregory! But we ought to give way to her; recollect, dear, she’s a very awkward age!”....26	26
Figure 2	The Boy’s Comic Journal (1894).....	27
Figure 3	‘Simple Addition’ <u>Punch</u> (May 20, 1871) New Governess. “Why are you staring so intently, Blanche, dear?” Blanche. “I was trying to count the freckles on your face, Miss Sandpole, but I can’t!”.....	28
Figure 4	‘Removal of Ancient Landmarks’ <u>Punch</u> (June 25, 1881).....	31
Figure 5	‘Vicarious Generosity’ <u>Punch</u> (December 20 <sup>th</sup> , 1879).....	34
Figure 6	‘No Sinecure’ <u>Punch</u> (July 20, 1878) Proud Mother (to the new Governess). “And here is a pencil, Miss Green, and a note-book in which I wish you to write down all the clever and remarkable things the dear children may say during your walk.....	36
Figure 7	‘The Governess’ by Richard Redgrave (1844).....	37
Figure 8	‘The New Governess’ by Thomas Ballard (1877).....	38
Figure 9	‘A Young Turk’ <u>Punch</u> (July 17, 1880).....	39
Figure 10	“She Only said, ‘My Life is Dreary.’” <u>Portraits of the People</u> , 1840.....	39
Figure 11	‘WANTED, A GOVERNESS’ <u>The Leisure Hour</u> (December 15 <sup>th</sup> , 1853)....	43
Figure 12	‘A Helpless Governess, Miss Renault. (Circa 1890).....	52
Figure 13	Frontispiece to ‘The Full and Early History of Harriet Lane, Wainwright’s Victim,’ Published by T. Taylor in London (date unknown). This booklet was probably published in late 1875 or early 1876, since Wainwright is depicted as at his hanging, and he was hung in December of 1875.....	65
Figure 14	Frontispiece depicting the flagellant-governess character Miss Mary Wilson. Likely first published in an early nineteenth-century edition of <u>The Exhibition of Female Flagellants</u> , and reused by pornographic publishers in the 1860s and 1880s for books like <u>The Romance of Chastisement</u> .....	116
Figure 15	Illustration from <u>Verbena House</u> , likely published by William Lazenby (circa 1882).....	117
Figure 16	Another illustration from a French edition of <u>Verbena House</u> entitled <u>Les Mysteres de la Maison de la Verveine</u> , Published by Charles Carrington (circa 1901).....	119
Figure 17	Gilt cover of <u>Experiences of Flagellation</u> (1885).....	120
Figure 18	Illustration from <u>Madam Birchini’s Dance</u> (circa 1872).....	123
Figure 19	Illustration from <u>Exhibition of Female Flagellants</u> , Published by William Dugdale (circa 1860).....	124
Figure 20	Illustration of flogging scene from the 1882 edition of <u>Verbena House</u> .....	128

## INTRODUCTION

The governess of nineteenth-century Britain served as the educational resource of the privileged in invariably private milieus, whether at private boarding schools or within the middle and upper-class home. This exclusivity explains the miniscule size of the governess population, which equated, in 1861, to roughly 25,000 in England and Wales combined, a demographic drop in the bucket when the total population of these regions came to over 20,000,000.<sup>1</sup> Yet, a mere .12 percent of the population managed to incite a century-long crescendo of public fixation. The governess was undeniably a fixture in the conventional, creative imaginings of Victorian Britain. In 1849, magazine writer Mary Atkinson Maurice remarked: “It is a curious proof of the present feeling towards governesses that they are made the heroines of many popular novels.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, newspapers, novels, journals, pamphlets and more anomalous texts like pornography were disproportionately preoccupied with what was, realistically, a socially liminal and historically temporal clutch of women. This thesis seeks to evaluate that obsession, and moreover argue that the culturally imagined governess was the primary symbol, and object, of an eroticized voyeurism fixated on a distinctly feminine form of misery, degradation and violence. While previous scholarship has maintained that governess-mania was produced by her social or economic peculiarity, I intend to demonstrate that

---

<sup>1</sup> Enumerators' Handbooks, Census of England and Wales, 1861, Public Record Office, London: Paddington (district 1, sub-districts 1-2); Crediton (district 292, sub-districts 1-4); Edgbaston (district 393, sub-district 2), as quoted in Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (London; Rio Grande: The Hambleton Press, 1993), xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Atkinson Maurice, *Governess Life: Its Trials, Duties, and Encouragements* (London: John W. Parker, 1849), 10, Google Books [http://books.google.com/books?id=AlsEAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=AlsEAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false) (Accessed April 13, 2013).



this nonconformity was extrapolated in visual and literary depictions to signify a more prurient kind of public gaze, specifically a fixation on feminine suffering.

It is well substantiated by historians and literary scholars that the literary and social reaction to the concept of governessing and governesses was a disproportionate one; this means that Victorian governesses may have existed and worked, but that most extant source material about governesses exists firmly in the realm of cultural ideologies and controversies. It was the *idea* of governesses that prompted an outpouring of commentary, lament, art, satire and fantasy. As the practice of governess education was always perceived as negative or broken (both then and now), many scholars have sought to unravel the paradox of this public interest by speculating on what was philosophically “wrong” with governesses, i.e. what it was about the act of women being governesses that unsettled contemporaries. This is a fruitful approach that has yielded many insights, but it is simultaneously limited by a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* analytic method. While the co-optation of governesses into the middle class home—and thus the swelling of their ranks—may have been problematic for middle class ethos, or a variety of gendered and classed standards of femininity, this does not fully explain their popularity as cultural icons, the mechanics of that iconography, or the persistence of governesses as an object of public interest well into the interwar years of the twentieth century. This model may explain why governesses initially attracted mass attention, but not why they were so compelling as to become a stereotype of Victorian culture that is still recognizable today.

When I began this project, I had few preconceived notions about what nineteenth-century social commentators, novelists, philanthropists, comedic writers, or other public

forums would have to say about the so-called ‘plight’ of governesses, and what I chiefly discovered was that they focused less on the problem they *embodied*, and more on the horrible things they supposedly *experienced*. It became clear that public fascination with the Victorian governess was often circumscribed, or even propelled, by heightened interest in, what historian Karen Halttunen calls ‘scenarios of pain.’<sup>3</sup> Whether depicted in the mainstream press or in nefarious erotica, the governess was contextualized by a wide spectrum of corporal violence and misfortune. As opposed to simply personifying tensions between ideal social roles and unfortunate realities, it seems that a huge variety of media was reacting to, and perpetrating, the idea that governesses were vulnerable to innumerable internal and external threats, from unhappiness, disease and insanity, to rape, kidnapping and murder. The Victorian governess seems to have constituted a site of biopolitics; a cultural register in which contemporaries could voyeuristically consume feminized suffering while grappling with its implications for women’s violent agency, moral culpability and, especially, vulnerability to a huge and ever shifting assortment of internal and external threats.

That pain and degradation were integral to portrayals of governesses in the nineteenth century is substantiated by the fact that governesses were one of the most important sadomasochistic characters in Victorian pornography. They were fetishized as the archetypal flagellant in birching fantasies, an erotic encounter that revolved around violent agency and the infliction, endurance and voyeurism of pain. Tellingly, all pornographic fantasy involving governesses prior to World War I (at least all that I have

---

<sup>3</sup> See Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo American Culture” *The American Historical Review* 100, no 2 (April 1995): 303-334.

consulted) conceived of her exclusively as an authoritarian sadist. Beyond proving that fascination with governesses and suffering could, and did, have erotic implications, this pornographic scenario also corroborates my claim that the cultural logic governing depictions of governesses—across the textual spectrum—was reliant on an imagined correlation between governesses and corporeal suffering.

The object of this project is thus to reevaluate the nineteenth century and early twentieth century fixation on governesses, and ultimately to prove that the figure of the governess was largely articulated through a myriad of discourses of female pain, a fact which has long been overlooked by historians and literary scholars alike. The ensuing account of the gendered and sexual discourses that were superimposed onto the identity of the Victorian governess is meant to provide a multivariate analysis of the governess as a cultural icon. In utilizing interdisciplinary methodologies I have consequently drawn together a relatively wide array of primary source materials, including advice manuals, newspapers, novels, philanthropic pamphlets, art and illustrations, medical treatises, and erotica. Much of my historical evidence exists in the ambiguous zone of cultural mores and imagined bodies, but, as will be seen, even the most fictive scenarios could reflect and affect the epistemological contours of society.

### **The History and Historiographies of the Victorian Governess**

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, elite members of the upper middle-class had begun to adopt the long-established aristocratic custom of employing a governess. Foregrounding the appropriation of this educational tradition was an intensifying commitment among the burgeoning middle-classes to sheltering girls and

women within a feminized domestic sphere, and a concomitant investment in the ideal that ‘genteel’ women should possess refined and ornamental accomplishments.<sup>4</sup> At first, the 1820s saw a spate of girls being sent away to boarding schools, but this raised concerns about their vulnerability, in a public environment, to “foreign” influences or bad companions—threats that their male siblings were thought to be able to withstand at their own public schools. The solution was to educate girls within the home. Ideally mothers would tutor daughters, but not all, or even most, mothers had the requisite knowledge or teaching skills to do so. The solution was to appropriate the concept of governesses from the upper classes, and by 1840 a slew of manuals were being published instructing middle class women on how to hire, oversee and interact with an in-home teacher of young children and girls, indicating that this was not only now expected of them, but an every-day reality that required new domestic management skills.<sup>5</sup>

Of course the growing wealth of the middle class was implicated in this transformation, both as an impetus to consolidate new categories of prestige and as the pecuniary circumstance that made employing additional household staff a tangible reality. Governesses were thus subsumed into the new domestic “paraphernalia of gentility”, as historian Jeanne Peterson put it, that defined the rising status of the middle classes, which included specialized domestic servants, carriages, the divorce of the workplace and the domestic space, and the increasingly dogmatic prescription of wives/mothers/daughters within the home.<sup>6</sup> A handmaiden of gentility, the nineteenth-

---

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, 20-21.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>6</sup> M. Jeanne Peterson, “The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society” in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, edited by Martha Vicinus (Bloomington, IN; London: Indian

century governess ornamented the middle and upper class home as a living status symbol—more than a servant, yet less than a family member—whose ostensible duty was to cultivate elite values and skills in children and female adolescents.

Ironically, the very values that generated upper middle-class demand for the governess—femininity delimited by domestic accomplishments, divorced from real-world employment—intensified the plight of financially desperate gentlewomen who were forced to become them. Bourgeois values came to insist that only lower-class women entered public space as economic agents, this kind of freedom being conceived of as simultaneously exacerbating and underscoring female degeneracy. In principle, governessing maintained the segregation of women from the world and thus could be embarked upon without a total loss of status; the field was, accordingly, inundated by indigent middle-class women, whose abundance and desperation drove down salaries, heightened competition and devalued their skill set.

Yet, although governessing was acknowledged as the only respectable option available to financially dispossessed ladies, and attempts were made to downplay the vocation as ‘work’, cultural and social tensions remained. Claims that the governess’s role as a supervisor of children in another family’s home constituted a benign, lateral move from one domestic sphere to another could not paper over the fact that she was an employee. Putting these theoretical evasions aside, the governess was a lady who worked in an era when feminine gentility was partially defined *by not working*. Moreover,

---

University Press, 1972), 5; Also, see Catherine Hall and Lenore Davidoff’s historiographical overview of the concept of “separate spheres” in both the introduction and conclusion of *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, Reprint 1997).

British society increasingly viewed the so-called ‘redundant’ woman (i.e. the unmarried and impoverished woman) with intensifying unease, perceiving her as a perversion of the very definition of femininity as a domestic exercise in wifedom and motherhood.<sup>7</sup>

Early histories of the governess were largely concerned with her literary manifestations or role in the historical progression of women’s education and rights, scholarship that was supremely cognizant of the governess as the overworked and miserable drudge of refinement rather than as an agent of enlightenment or learning.<sup>8</sup> Taking a different tact in 1972, Jeanne Peterson published “The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society”, arguing that the governess had profound social salience as both an indicator and disruption of middle-class values writ large (British society) and small (the home). Peterson’s emphasis is on the mutual bewilderment of the governess and her employers as they attempted to navigate the disruptive “status incongruence” inherent to an “employed gentlewoman.” On a day to day level, this “incongruence” seemed to have largely manifested in extremely awkward dinner conversations, resentfulness over perceived ‘slights’ and much miscommunication, all products of confusion over how ‘deference’ and ‘respect’ were supposed to play out in an employer-employee relationship among class equals. A ‘laboring lady’ was a social reality that so flagrantly defied increasingly codified middle-class gender identities that it often created tensions and doubts about how a family was

---

<sup>7</sup> A good example of this perspective can be found in William Rathbone Greg’s notorious, and misogynistically titled, article *Why are Women Redundant?* (London: N. Trubner & Co., 1869), Google Books (Accessed April 28, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> See *Hope Deferred: Girls’ Education in English History* (London, 1965) by Josephine Kamm or *Queen’s College, 1848-1948* (London: 1948) by Rosalie G. Grylls.

supposed to interact with the governess.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the emergent middle class, the aristocracy had utilized governesses for hundreds of years and possessed not only the physical space to enforce boundaries (governesses and their charges could be cordoned off in their own wing) but an implicit hierarchical distance from the governess who would never have been their social equal. Middle-class families were technically on par with their governess, but her subordinate position as an employee, and the close proximities of their more modest homes, meant that hierarchical labels (lady, servant, equal, subsidiary) were constantly called into question.

Peterson's contribution moved beyond the oft-commented upon drudgery of governessing—low pay, fierce competition, exhaustive required skill sets—and outlined the social and economic forces that produced the middle-class habit of employing a governess, as well as the fact that it constituted a highly problematic trend that strained definitions of gentility and femininity. She thus hit upon the interpersonal conflicts and undercurrent of social apprehension imbricated in the governess fad. Peterson was also the first scholar to suggest that middle-class employers and social commentators (such as the writers of etiquette manuals) deployed various deflective techniques to mitigate the theoretical conundrum of the governess, including the insistence that her service did not *really* constitute employment because she was still located in the domestic sphere, where she fulfilled her natural role as caregiver.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, she expounded on the (unsurprising) sexual anxieties generated by an un-related female interloper in the domestic space, which she insists underwrote the cultural maxim that all governesses

---

<sup>9</sup> Peterson, 10-14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 6-10.

were a “homely, severe, unfeminine type of woman.”<sup>11</sup> This stereotype was, according to Peterson, an attempt to assuage concerns that the governess could be a sexual menace, luring husbands and sons into impropriety. Finally, Peterson also exposed the widespread philanthropic impulses of institutions like the *Governesses’ Benevolent Institution* (founded in 1843) as institutionalized attempts to displace and resolve the perceived “governess problem” through advocacy and legislation, a movement that received widespread, and generally sympathetic, attention in the media.

Mary Poovey, in *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (1988) expanded on the “governess-as-problem” methodological approach suggested by Peterson, weaving it into contemporary dialogs on ‘working women.’ According to Poovey, humanitarian furor over the ‘plight’ of the governess masked fears that she constituted a kind of double agent who bolstered the middle-class ethos even as she subverted it.<sup>12</sup> *Uneven Developments* is written in the milieu of feminism and literary criticism; thus, her work approaches gender categories as formed at the interstices of gender and cultural politics in nineteenth-century Britain, with an emphasis on female professionalization and labor. According to Poovey, the governess was one of “the three figures that symbolized working women for the early and mid-Victorian public”—the other two being the needlewoman and factory girl—and this trio of representative female labor excited anxieties in an era when feminine employment was “specifically linked by middle-class male commentators to the danger of unregulated

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Mary, Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 143-150.



female sexuality.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, there was a widespread apprehension that all female employment was a theoretical approximation of prostitution that not only replicated but also could *lead to* the actual act, blurring the boundaries between literal sexual deviancy and latent perversity. Though the governess

...was charged with inculcating domestic virtues, especially in the case of young girls, and imparting the ‘accomplishments’ that would attract a good husband, she was simultaneously suspect as the notional sister to sordid working-class women, and was thereby not the bulwark against immorality and class erosion but the conduit through which working-class habits would infiltrate the middle class home.<sup>14</sup>

Poovey’s work primarily underscores the cultural paradox of the governess as a figure meant to reinforce middle-class values while the perceived promiscuity of female labor tainted that objective and troubled contemporaries. She ultimately claims that the social and cultural disruptions the governess engendered were papered over by the crusade (by writers, politicians, philanthropists etc.) to ameliorate a “governess plight,” emphatically defined by miserable living conditions rather than sexual depravity.

In 1993 Kathryn Hughes staged a historiographical intervention with *The Victorian Governess*, an exhaustive study of nineteenth century governesses—as both social entities and individuals—meant to illuminate the mechanics of their daily lives, education, professionalization, financial circumstances and demographics. Though she devotes half of a chapter to the cultural representations of governesses central to Poovey’s argument, Hughes is more concerned with contrasting social stereotypes of governesses with real-life data carefully accumulated and dissected to paint a factually

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid 128-129.

accurate portrait of the governess's life and context. Privileging her labor, domestic environs, social expectations and ultimate fate, Hughes builds evidence on the everyday realities of the governess. She thereby punctures many nineteenth-century stereotypes of the governess (as well as misconceptions perpetrated up to today) through social historical analysis; the most important example being her revelation that, contrary to the widespread perception of governesses as elderly spinsters, in reality "two-thirds of all governesses were under thirty, some were as young as eighteen."<sup>15</sup> Her careful conglomeration of known statistics and personal testimony is a self-conscious reaction against the ongoing power of "fictional representations" which have, according to Hughes, "blunted our curiosity about the practice of educating girls at home during the Victorian period."<sup>16</sup> Her insistence on detailed demographic and economic evidence is a particularly justified intercession in light of the preponderance of scholarship that fixates solely on the analysis of high literary fictional characters—even today fictive individuals like *Jane Eyre* and *Becky Sharpe* remain the locus of scholarly interest in governesses.

What these different analyses seem to hint at, without explicitly saying so, is that the various modes of interest in Victorian governess frequently hinged on her physicality. Peterson, Poovey and Hughes all touch upon the discourses rotating around the governess's culturally imagined body and associated iconography, but these arguments are tangential to their thematic purview: the former two are concerned with social constructions of gender generated by the Victorian middle class, with an emphasis on status hierarchies and labor; the latter is concerned with revealing the day-to-day

---

<sup>15</sup> Hughes, 118-119.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

subjectivities of the real-life governess. The historic import of the governess's body is only alluded to. In this same vein, previous scholarship has also failed to acknowledge the discursive importance of the pornographic governess, despite the fact that governesses were an exceptionally common erotic character in the persona of a sadomasochistic, corporal discipliner of children. Even books like Alice Renton's *Tyrant or Victim?: A History of the British Governess* (1991), that allude to the bio-discourses of domination and submission in their very titles, insist on viewing those polemics as entirely social, and circumscribed by questions of ethics and education rather than desire or bodily function.<sup>17</sup>

The erotic governess trope is, in some ways, the trump card of this project because, historiographically, it has been ignored or cordoned off in analyses of the culturally imagined governess. For example, while Hughes looks briefly at the potential socio-cultural implications of the eroticized governess, her treatment is casual and bounded by her focus on the experienced sexualities of governesses rather than the terrain of cultural topographies projected onto them. When they do address this pornographic genre, Hughes and other scholars also tend to borrow explanatory models from scholars like Ian Gibson and Steven Marcus, who examine governesses only as oblique characters in the wider fetish and flogging phenomena central to their work.<sup>18</sup> Thus, if the pornographic

---

<sup>17</sup> Alice Renton, *Tyrant or Victim: A History of the British Governess* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), 1-15.

<sup>18</sup> Ian Gibson, *The English Vice: Beating, Sex and Shame in Victorian England and After* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1978).; Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1964. Reprint, 1974). Steven Marcus's contribution to the historiography of governesses and flagellation will be discussed further in chapter three.

governess has come under direct scrutiny at all it has always been as a subsidiary of Victorian flagellation.

This indifference to the erotic-governess seems odd, especially since they were extremely conventional pornographic characters—an erotic stereotype analogous to the naughty cheerleader or the pizza delivery guy of contemporary pornography. Yet, despite their established place in the roles of British fantasy, histories of the governess rarely do more than briefly acknowledge the fetishization of governesses. Scholars assume that this was a unique manifestation of sexual compulsion and thus located outside the realm of historical context. While governesses, flogging and the flogging-governess have all been studied, evaluations of her sexuality and correlated role as archetypal flagellant have tended to dislocate the governess's culturally imagined body from its comprehensive historical context.

What this historiography reveals is that scholars have long focused on how the governess might have constituted a “problem”, or socio-cultural challenge to Victorian mores, while largely leaving unexamined the long-term manifestations and mechanics of this fascination. After all, governesses remained in the public eye from the 1840s until the interwar years, an eighty-year period that witnessed the fall from favor of governessing as an educational method, and yet barely dented their status as a cultural figure. What was it about depictions of governesses that retained socio-cultural currency over an eighty-year period? Some scholars evaluate depictions of the governess as a potential sexual interloper or metaphorical ‘fallen woman’; others pair this theory with a competing image of the governess as withered spinster; and still others view her as an

ambiguously-gendered stock character in flagellation pornography, whose discordant qualities denoted a hidden subtext. All of these categorizations have validity, but all are ultimately unsatisfactory as discrete explanations. I will argue that all of these ways of imagining the governess are knit together by one common theme: a fascination with female degradation and suffering.

From imagining that the governess was destined to become a shriveled crone or conversely casting her as the stewardess of sadomasochism, all of these constructs rely on the dynamics of violation, of bodies that experience misfortune and bodies that mete that it out. More importantly, the sources analyzed in this project reveal that the “governess-as-social-problem” rhetoric that has drawn the attention of most historians was actually increasingly displaced over the 1870s by a more generalized interest in a wide array of governess victimization, like governesses who fell prey to violent assaults, rape and even murder. Shorn of humanitarian moralizing about the abusive or punitive nature of governess labor, this new hermeneutic of governess suffering indicates that the governess increasingly became a more generalized medium for middle class female vulnerability over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It is also important to note that this fascination with feminine forms of pain or degradation fit into long-standing trends in how Britons (and Americans) related to concepts like brutality, pain and empathy cum sympathy. Historian Karen Halttunen claims that the eighteenth century cult of sympathy problematized the infliction of pain as an unacceptable cruelty, fostering the idea that common social practices like flogging or the physical abuse of subordinates were not only wrong, but also shocking and damaging

to the victim, victimizer, onlookers and society as a whole.<sup>19</sup> Brutality and pain, according to Halttunen, became for the first time, *shocking*. Yet sentimentalists were intrinsically upping the ante by making violence sensational, and in particular by making it a sPECTORIAL event. For example, reformers used “scenarios of pain” as political tools, deploying graphic depictions of acts like wife beating, sailor flogging, or slave whipping to convince skeptics that these practices were morally wrong. This strategy was predicated on the assumption that all ‘respectable’ people would be sickened and alarmed by images of violence, and thus spurred to action. This latent assumption about the shock-value of violence ultimately entailed that physical brutality was freighted with the social expectation that any reaction to violence besides intrinsic disgust was an unmentionable moral failing, even an obscenity. Therein, Halttunen argues that over the nineteenth century sympathetic aversion to cruelty blurred with, and contributed to, the voyeuristic consumption of pain, and this morbid fascination with violence ultimately had huge consequences for the politics, literature and sexual subjectivities of the time.<sup>20</sup> Pain became sensational, sPECTORIAL, and even lascivious. The intellectual philosophy that intended to disrupt brutality ultimately fostered a culture in which the sPECTORIAL nature of violence and pain were treated as almost equally significant as the infliction or endurance of it.

Operating on the assumption—as substantiated by Halttunen—that pain, and particularly the spectacle of pain, was an increasingly important, circumscribing force for the corporeal discourses of nineteenth century Britain, this project will interrogate the

---

<sup>19</sup> Halttunen, 323.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 334.

various models of suffering associated with governesses that gained cultural currency over the course of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. Therein, I hope to offer a new explanation for why a character as exiguous as the governess transfixed contemporaries, and how that trend mediated or fit in to contemporary anxieties and desires. Chapter one will survey one of the earliest and longstanding components of this trend, namely the widespread presumption that governessing often led to psychological and physiological trauma, the consequences of which could range from abject misery and lunacy to fatal exhaustion and illness. While the concept of governessing as emotionally and physically punishing persisted, these themes were increasingly subsumed, from the 1870s onwards, by a more explicit connection between governesses and outright violence that emphasized their vulnerability to brutality and violent forms of death. Chapter two will thus examine a late-nineteenth-century evolution in governess discourse, namely the shift from a focus on the internalized dangers of governessing to external threats like interpersonal violence and fatal disasters. Finally, chapter three will explore the governess as the stereotypical flagellator in Victorian erotica, a character device that intersected with popular imaginings of the governesses as imbricated in violence and pain. That corporeal pain was the primary function and object of the representational governess in mainstream media is underscored by the fact that this figure was appropriated, specifically, by sadomasochistic erotica. The governesses cache as an icon of feminized suffering was intentionally exploited to give piquancy to flagellation narratives.

Utilizing newspapers, cartoons, magazines, novels, biographies, etiquette manuals, paintings, erotica, and court records, I demonstrate that the Victorian governess was not only popularly correlated with sexual and gendered deviance, but violence and bodily disfigurement. Needless to say, the cultural complexity of the governess trope is astonishing in the context of their numerical insignificance and general irrelevance for the vast majority of British subjects. Socially liminal, economically powerless and sexually ambiguous, the governess cast a surprisingly long cultural shadow.



## CHAPTER 1: A 'MELANCHOLY INTEREST' IN GOVERNESS DECLINE

In 1869 the *Western Mail* and *The Echo* both published a story of governess woe, decline, insanity and death, “whose accuracy...is vouched for by the narrator, and which cannot fail to be read with melancholy interest.”<sup>21</sup> It was not a particularly original article, being analogous to scores of news pieces that had peppered the British media since the late-1830s, all of which bemoaned the hard labors and emotional abuse heaped upon governesses. According to this story, a large family had recently lost its patriarch and the ensuing destitution forced all of the daughters into governessing, the youngest being the final child to undertake this labor at the tender age of seventeen. With meager meals at home, and no food provided at her employer’s house, this daily governess “walked each day four miles to and from work” on top of her hourly toils as a young teacher. Eventually, due to an unusually hot summer, “the sun withered up flower and shrub, and also withered the brain of the daily governess”:

Day by day her strength melted away; at last she broke down. She could go no more to the daily lesson...Her cry from morn to night, as she rocked to and fro, pressing her hands on her burning forehead was, ‘Mother, mother, my brain is gone.’

The affliction of the brainless-governess allegedly only intensifies, and the narrator continues:

One day she was found with one hand copying verses from the Bible; with the other she had gushed [sic] herself with a knife.... I advised her mother to send her to a hospital for the insane. My advice was taken. I often went

---

<sup>21</sup> “The History of a Governess” *The Western Mail*, May 18, 1869.

to inquire after her. I found the place full of governesses....She soon became a raving lunatic

Finally, the governess dies in her cell “with a look as though she blessed the world which killed her.” To cap the tragedy, the narrative continues, “There was a post-mortem examination...Congestion of the brain was the cause of her death—hard work, they said, the cause of the congestion...A little food, a little thoughtfulness on the part of those who employed her, might have saved her life...”<sup>22</sup>

This saccharine account and others like it were probably not “true” in the strictest sense of the word; nevertheless, they were pervasive and reveal that controversy over governess welfare was an important current in mid-century British culture. Generally these narratives were advocating against governess hardship, but like the preceding account they usually did so by reciting a veritable laundry list of grim, worst-case scenarios. More somber etiquette manuals and stern economists might have occasionally attempted to make concrete arguments that the nuts and bolts of the employment market, or the management skills of governess-employers, were the keys to solving the ‘governess problem’. Certainly, it cannot be denied that the root issues for real governesses were almost exclusively financial; they simply were not paid enough to maintain a genteel standard of living. However, even the businesslike article by Alfred Pollard entitled “The Governess and her Grievances” published in 1889—with its statistical tables of year-by-year average salaries and insistence on written contracts—characterized “the present governess system” as one that inspires “almost morbid

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

horror.”<sup>23</sup> Pollard stated his impatience with newspapers “in whose columns the grievances of a certain class of governesses” are “noisily ventilated”, and yet, like many other writers, he could not help but fall prey to the dark melodrama that contoured the public imagination regarding the “governess plight.”<sup>24</sup>

Historians have often argued that this fixation on governess unhappiness and misfortune signaled that the treatment of governesses had become a sort of litmus test of gentility and morality during the mid-century. This was largely because the ability of employers to disrespect and exploit a fellow member of the upper classes implied, as Kathryn Hughes puts it, that “ladyhood was not an absolute state apart, but rather was open to constant challenge and revision.”<sup>25</sup> Cruelty to governesses suggested that the organizing principles of the middle class—namely their claims to respectability based on inherent moral and religious worth—were undercut and/or exposed as hypocrisies. Consequently, historians have claimed, the welfare of the governess was increasingly correlated with the overarching moral status of British society, prompting social commentators, etiquette writers and novelists to agonize over, and sermonize on, the imperative of creating a system in which governesses were treated respectfully. If “a little food, a little thoughtfulness on the part of those who employed her...” was all it took, then surely that basic level of consideration was something that all truly respectable people could manage.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Alfred W Pollard, “The Governess and Her Grievances” *Murrays Magazine*, Volume 4, no. 28, 1889, pg. 505.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 506.

<sup>25</sup> Hughes, 89.

<sup>26</sup> “The History of a Governess,” *The Western Mail*, May 18, 1869.

Although this explanatory model was an important addition to the historiography of governess-mania, it also proves to be somewhat inadequate in light of the discursive motifs that characterized this genre. What is missing is an acknowledgement of, and inquiry into, the fact that the British public's fixation on the unhappiness of governesses was largely perceived through the lens of their corporeality. While ostensibly concerned with the social issue of governess exploitation, the bulk of these narratives made implicit arguments that most governess misery was physical and/or had physical consequences. The thrust of this literature might be a social critique, call-to-action, or satire but it was oriented by, and foregrounded on, their physical suffering as a spectral event. The article opening this chapter is a good example, detailing a governess's bodily decline through starvation, lunacy leading to self-harm, and finally fatal brain disease.

This same article also demonstrates that the consequences of governess-misfortune were construed as more than minor grievances like fatigue or loss of appetite. The inflated rhetoric deployed to talk about governess misery frequently suggested—in what might appear to us to be an astounding leap in logic—that being a governess was so unnaturally taxing and isolating that it would likely result in serious ailments like sterility, insanity and/or *death*. Obviously the discourse that revolved around the 'governess problem' did not hinge on the potential, positive outcomes of a courteous and fair employer-employee relationship with governesses. Instead the popular press jumped to the other extreme, by putting cautionary tales of extreme misery and concomitant bodily decay on display. Therein, the elements of governessing that contemporaries

found most unfortunate or unnatural—like celibacy or working for money—were deemed not just unfortunate, but potentially fatal.

This chapter will thus analyze how governessing was perceived as both the antecedent and actuator, of female enervation; firstly by imperiling gender wholeness and/or sexual virility, and secondly as inducing drastic, even lethal, emotional and physical ailments. The first category revolves around the assumption that governesses—whatever their circumstances—were often prematurely ravaged by sterility, or were conversely bound to incite controversy if they were youthful or beautiful. This discursive thread demonstrates that the external features of the governess, particularly as linked to their gendered internal traits, were a site of intense debate and conflict. The second trend under discussion was similarly foregrounded on the idea that governess bodies were potentially ill equipped to maintain fecundity or health, but not because they were sexually defunct but rather because they were unusually permeable, or vulnerable to the negligence, indifference or harshness of the people and places that surrounded them. While their workload certainly could not compare to that of a working-class woman, and the interpersonal conflict they dealt with was largely confined to subtle rudeness or indifference, these objectively minor obstacles were perceived to have a significant, even deadly, effect on the weak and fragile governess. Teaching too many courses, having tea alone too many times, being snubbed by your students—these were the kinds of crises that could prove deadly for the Victorian governess of popular imagination.

### Withering Beauty and Sexual Deterioration

Governesses were, by definition, *unmarried*. This was not a benign fact for contemporaries but rather, according to nineteenth century logic, meant that they must be inherently ‘unnatural.’ According to social commentators like William Rathbone Greg (in his infamous 1869 article “Why are Women Redundant?”) and many of his peers, women were defined by their “natural duties,” i.e. their service to a husband and allegiance to his home and children; any alternative was “artificial”, “painful”, and divorced from the tenets of femininity.<sup>27</sup> By this standard, governesses were not really women at all. Therein, one way in which the media fixated on the governesses was in regards to whether or not they could lay claim to womanly attributes or feminine charms. This was actually a complicated question, because governesses were ‘old maids,’ or ‘spinsters,’ terms that carried heavy socio-cultural, and even medical baggage in Victorian society. That governesses were branded as this kind of unwomanly woman is born out in an 1848 article by the journalist Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, who declared that

She [the governess] is a burden and restraint in society...She is a bore to almost any gentleman, as a tabooed woman, to whom he is interdicted from granting the usual privileges of the sex, and yet who is perpetually crossing his path<sup>28</sup>

Eastlake took for granted that this category of woman was necessarily problematic on a sexed level—the governess was offensive because she was debarred from ever being viewed as a desirable. Moreover, her physical presence as a woman, the sex of her body and its existence, is deemed fundamentally troublesome and yet unavoidable.

---

<sup>27</sup> Greg, *Why are Women Redundant?* 1869. Google Books.

<sup>28</sup> Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, "Vanity Fair--and Jane Eyre." *Quarterly Review* 84, no. 167 (December 1848): 153-185.

While Eastlake does not mention the external appearance of these burdensome governesses, it was widely believed that their spinsterhood had consequences beyond annoying all the young men in close proximity. Medical opinion intoned that such unnaturally celibate women were destined for an unfortunate transfiguration from youthful virgin into a physically and psychologically aberrant form of androgyne. Medical literature like “Woman in Her Psychological Relations”, featured in *The Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology*, described ‘old maids’ as “angular, the body lean, the skin wrinkled”, physical characteristics produced by “the shrinking of the ovaria and consequent cessation of the reproductive nissus.”<sup>29</sup> The anonymous author moreover argued that in some cases this change was accompanied by a particularly unwomanly temperamental alteration, with the unmarried woman becoming “intrusive, insolent,” or “ungrateful, treacherous and revengeful.”<sup>30</sup> The author therein assumes that this dispositional change is naturally coupled with a physical one, the repulsive internal characteristics producing external signs like “a quaint untidy dress, a shriveled skin, a lean figure, a bearded lip, shattered teeth, harsh grating voice, and manly stride.”<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Anon. “Woman in Her Psychological Relations” *The Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology* IV (1851): 34-35, Google books.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*.

If spinsterhood produced body-altering symptoms in many normal women, a woman as eccentric as the governess was deemed especially likely to be physiologically transformed, and at an accelerated speed with more dire consequences. In the anthology of essays *Heads of the People; Portraits of the English*, the chapter on governesses revolves around the idea that being a governess was slowly, but surely, physically deforming the fictional protagonist. The unnatural and unpleasant aspects of governessing were portrayed as literally robbing her of youth:

Four years had wearily rolled over her head, but ten seemed to be added to her age. Her light, graceful figure had become large and heavy from want of air and exercise, and from torpidity of mind; her eye was dull, her cheek sallow, her manner apathetic; she suffered from constant head-ache; the daily walk of one hour round the eternal gravel walks of the square fatigued her almost to fainting. Her nights were...disturbed with frightful dreams and spent in restless tossing wakefulness...she had become irritable to a degree that made her life a perpetual struggle to avoid giving offense<sup>32</sup>

According to the logic of this text, governess labor sucked the life out of governesses, and the misery of this bodily decay concomitantly destroyed their naturally sweet temperament. Such governesses were almost textbook examples of spinsterhood; unattractive, shriveled and ill tempered.

---

<sup>32</sup> Miss Winter [pseud.], "The Family Governess", in *Heads of the People: or, Portraits of the English*, 209-216 (Cheapside, UK: Robert Tyas, 1844): 215.





*Figure 1*  
*Considerate—Very!* Charles Keene, *Punch*, 22 (October 22, 1864)  
*Master George. "Cross, disagreeable old thing, I call her!"*  
*Miss Caroline. "Oh, Gregory! But we ought to give way to her; recollect, dear, she's a very awkward age!"*

The conventionally ugly and unpleasant spinster-governess is depicted in the 1864 *Punch* cartoon ‘Considerate—Very!’ (*fig. 1*), in which a young girl urges her brother to pardon the governess for being a “cross, disagreeable old thing,” evidently because her irascibility is both compulsive and pitiable. The satiric logic at play is that governessing inexorably produces the old woman pictured listening at the door, whom even children recognize as physically and temperamentally flawed due to her humiliating, abnormal circumstances. In this sense, it doesn’t really matter why she is “awkward”; it is simply taken for granted that she is. In addition to bearing a grumpy expression, the governess in *fig. 2* also displays some of physical traits attributed to decayed spinsterhood, namely the gaunt body, thin hair and tight skin.

More seriously, the profession of governessing could be considered so ravaging that it might not only make governesses irritable and unappealing, but actually wither

them into oblivion. In 1844 a *Fraser's Magazine* article titled "Hints on the Modern Governess System" allegorically dramatized the 'decay' of the governess, a decay strongly marked by its physicality:

They [governesses] spring up suddenly in premature development, like plants in a hot house, --old in heart, aged in appearance, before the bloom of youth is brushed from their years, drawn upwards by the insufferable light, from which, in their glass houses, there is no shelter. It is no exaggeration to say that hundreds snap yearly from the stalk, or prolong a withered, sickly life, till they, too, sink, and are carried out to die miserably in the by-ways of the world.<sup>33</sup>



Figure 2  
*The Boy's Comic Journal* (1894)

According to this text, exposed to the harsh realities of governessing, young women's bodies precipitously shriveled and faded. The brutal circumstances of their occupation were, seemingly literally, written upon their features, rendering them "withered" and "sickly" before culminating in their untimely death. The misery and unnaturalness of their station in life apparently converted them from desirable young women into the dried up spinster and, shortly thereafter, a corpse.

Operating alongside the idea that governesses became undesirable because of their celibacy and unnatural labor was the suspicion that they might *always* have been physically and mentally defective. The financial imperative that drove a woman into governessing was predicated on familial males failing to care for her, a lapse that, among

<sup>33</sup> "Hints on the Modern Governess System," *Fraser's Magazine* 30 (November 1844), 574.



SIMPLE ADDITION.

*New Governess.* "WHY ARE YOU STARING SO INTENTLY, BLANCHE, DEAR?"

*Blanche.* "I WAS TRYING TO COUNT THE FRECKLES ON YOUR FACE, MISS SANDPOLE, BUT I CAN'T!"

Figure 3

'Simple Addition' *Punch* (May 20, 1871)

*New Governess.* "Why are you staring so intently, Blanche, dear?"  
*Blanche.* "I was trying to count the freckles on your face, Miss Sandpole, but I can't!"

other things, implied she still needed to be subsidized into adulthood because no one would marry her. Governesses might not have become ugly shrews because of their profession, but rather were forced to enter the field because they were undesirable

to begin with. This assumption plays into the humor of *fig. 3*, in which a child innocently alludes to her governess's profusion of freckles, blemishes that would have been considered very unfortunate in a culture obsessed with pure, fair skin. These dialogs about the desirability of the governess can ultimately be read as a cycling rhetoric in which the governess is forever-stripped of gender-wholeness: if she ever was young and beautiful these features would wither; she was fundamentally unappealing or a man would have been willing to marry her.

Social historian Jeanne Peterson interpreted the early nineteenth-century maxim that all governesses were a "homely, severe, unfeminine type of woman" as simply a means of imaginatively mitigating the governess as a sexual menace, calming the sexual

anxieties generated by an un-related female interloper in the domestic space.<sup>34</sup> Certainly Mary Atkinson Maurice, in her advice manual *Governess Life: It's Trials, Duties, and Encouragements* (1849) accuses some governesses of “sedulous attentions” to the father of the house, “and by delicate and unnoticed flattery gradually to gain her point, to the disparagement of the mother.” Fears of scheming governesses fostering marital discord, according to Maurice, “led to the inquiry, which is frequently made before engaging an instructress, ‘Is she handsome or attractive?’ If so, it is conclusive against her.”<sup>35</sup>

It is unclear whether this kind of hiring logic actually prevailed, but certainly magazines like *Punch* frequently insisted that beautiful, young governesses were less likely to find work. They often recommended (sarcastically) that the job-searching governess feign ugliness through the donning of spectacles, dour clothing or absurdly large bonnets:

To be perfect she should be ugly. Woes betide her if she be pretty! The mother suspects her, the young ladies hate her...Her dress, of course, must be of the very plainest. All light colours are prohibited as strictly as cousins. It is all the better, in fact, if she wears caps. A pair of spectacles, also, enhance the claims of a Model Governess, especially if she is not more than twenty<sup>36</sup>

This scenario implies that even if governesses did not resemble withered spinsterhood, they were required to emulate it or else face the serious consequences of being unable to secure a job. The imagined governess had no alternative but to endure gendered decay or emulate it.

---

<sup>34</sup> Peterson, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Mary Atkinson Maurice, *Governess Life: Its Trials, Duties, and Encouragements* (London: John W. Parker, West Strand, 1849), 14-15, Accessed April 20 2013, Google books.

<sup>36</sup> “A MODEL GOVERNESS” *Punch, or The London Charivari*, February 26, 1848, page 51.

Even the positives that could be attributed to governess spinsterhood could not offset her status as a kind of cautionary tale of wasted femininity. For example, governesses were expected to be of an appropriate age, and of appropriate demeanor, to supervise female children as they reached adolescence. Elizabeth Appleton advised mothers that governesses should always be significantly older than their charges: “your daughters should be young if their governess is so...there should be at least ten years between them.”<sup>37</sup> Appleton based this imperative on the fact that governesses and students should never be tempted by a similarity in age or disposition to become friends. Besides undermining the authority of the governess, she hints at the fact that governesses were supposed to shepherd teenage girls through the perils of sexual maturity and ‘coming out’ as potential marriage partners. If the governess and her female students were too close in age, they might abet teenage mischief rather than limit it; therein, a mature and strict governess would be a safer bet than a young or beautiful one. If it was theoretically preferable for them to be ugly, old-fashioned and supervisory, it was partially because the governess was supposed to be a stolid barrier to sexual deviancy. Yet even this supervisory role as the guardian of virtue fostered gloomy images of the governess as the tiresome domestic warden, who constrains her students as much as she prudishly shelters them. This is evident in *fig. 4*, where the pinched old governess reproaches her beautiful students for, what she anachronistically perceives as, worldly and morally suspect ambitions to lead public lives. Seated at a lower plane, and faced by the aggressive stance of her students, this governess is narrow and hard with a small

---

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Appleton, *Private Education; or, a Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies with an Address to Parents, Private Governesses, and Young Ladies* (London: Henry Coburn, 1815), 5.

withered face and flat chest, whereas her pupils are loose haired, wide and soft.

Proportionally, even the youngest girl dwarfs her. Their youth and beauty dominate the frame and the accompanying text privileges their corresponding supremacy in the outside world. In that vein, this particular cartoon also underscores the governess's low social status: her father "was only a poor half-pay officer." This is what governessing might doom a woman to: an exsiccated shell that was more witch than woman, with no claims



Figure 4  
'Removal of Ancient Landmarks' Punch (June 25, 1881)

contention, a space where her gendered vitality or enervation contributed to her isolation and misery. However the body or sexual subjectivity of the governess might be read, it was sure to be perceived as contributing to her sorrows rather than alleviating them.

### Employer Cruelty, Governess's Emotional Distress and Illness

Sick governesses were a very popular motif in mid-century Victorian Britain.

Both in the literary world and in philanthropic endeavors, the maladies of governesses

to beauty or status.

These pronouncements on the youth or sexual attractiveness of the governess all reveal that her body was automatically considered a site of

contention, a space where her gendered vitality or

were given a disproportionate amount of attention in an age of endemic illness. Even unsavory characters like destitute, alcoholic governesses who died from infectious diseases in poor houses could draw the sympathetic attention of the popular press.<sup>38</sup> While the poor might be blamed for their sickness by a society that viewed poverty as analogous with criminality and vice, the insertion of the word ‘governess’—always featured in the headline—into a narrative of destitution and disease signaled to the reading audience that, whatever the circumstances, this particular human was a victim of circumstance, even persecution.

One of the ways that contemporaries articulated this interest in governess ill health was in reading about, and donating to, the philanthropic institutions that sprung up to tend to the needs of governesses.<sup>39</sup> In 1847 the *Chamber’s Edinburgh Journal* penned a very sympathetic profile of the *Governesses’ Institute of London*, and while this establishment was actually a boarding house for governesses between jobs, the reader would be forgiven for coming away with the impression that it was more of a hospital for the governess infirm. According to the reporter, the matron of the institution had lamented,

‘It was sad to see how worn and weak they [governesses] often were when they entered the ‘home,’ and how, by a few weeks’ rest, and by the

---

<sup>38</sup> See, “Death of a Governess from Destitution” *The Belfast News Letter*, October 20, 1856.

<sup>39</sup> My examination of the records of the Governess Benevolent Institution indicates that they and their subsidiaries were very successful in canvassing for money and celebrity support. The ledger books housed in the London Metropolitan Archives contain the signatures, testimonies and cheques of famous personages like Charles Dickens, and into the twentieth century they received modest patronage from members of the royal family. See the folders: LMA/4459/C Investment and Finance Committee, and LMA/4459/M Annuties.

care of the medical attendant of the institution, they would become strong and well, and able to undertake another situation<sup>40</sup>

The subtext to this statement as construed by the reporter, whatever the original speaker meant by it, is that many governesses existed in a cycle of ill health, where they had to leave a position due to illness, and as soon as they were strong again they were forced to sacrifice themselves to the next ‘situation.’

Governessing, according to the rhetoric of the day discussed in the last section, sapped the health and enervated the body.

Sometimes the suffering of the governess was too deep-seated to ever be recovered from, as in the case of a dying seventeen year-old governess whose fatal sickness the article dwells upon:

In one of the upper rooms was an invalid—a girl of seventeen—for whom Mrs— told me everyone in the house was interested. She could not rise from bed, and the other inmates vied with each other in attention to her. One lady was reading to her when Mrs— knocked at the door to inquire how the patient then was. She came out to speak to us, and I was charmed to see the strong interest which she felt for her young charge, whose illness is, alas! consumption<sup>41</sup>

Though this melodramatic account would seem to serve the sensationalist needs of the paper rather than the philanthropic objectives of the institution itself, in fact the governess-oriented charities and institutions that proliferated in the 1840s and 1850s took advantage of this tragedy-rhetoric. Philanthropic groups like the *Governess Benevolent Institution* actually contributed to the narrative of tragic governess decline by printing their own materials that highlighted the same

---

<sup>40</sup> “A VISIT TO THE GOVERNESSES’ INSTITUTION IN LONDON” *Chamber’s Edinburgh Journal*, May 22, 1847, page 330.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*



themes of desperate physical affliction and victimhood.<sup>42</sup> Obviously, governess illness sold.

Another mid-century example, among many, of popular interest in governess illness is an 1854 profile of Florence Nightingale featured in *The Times*, where she is vociferously praised for becoming the head of a London hospital established solely to care for sick governesses. Nightingale's ministrations to the women are described as "tending those poor destitute governesses in their infirmities, their sorrows, their deaths, or their recoveries." According to this paper, Nightingale recognized what so many others did not, that this sad state of governess affliction was

...too frequently fomented, if not created, by the hard unreflecting folly which regards fellow-creatures intrusted [sic] with forming the minds and dispositions of its children as ingenious, disagreeable machines, needing, like the steam-engine, sustenance and covering, but, like it, quite beyond or beneath all sympathy, passions, or affections<sup>43</sup>



Figure 5  
'Vicarious Generosity' *Punch* (December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1879)

<sup>42</sup> This stance is all the more interesting because most of the records I have looked at seem to indicate that the charitable organizations dedicated to the 'governess plight' primarily dealt in elderly governesses who struggled to support themselves in retirement. Some were ill, but it was largely the result of old age and poverty rather than the stereotypically conceived young governess in the throes of some virulent disease. Examples of GBI promotional material can be found in the London Metropolitan Archives under LMA/4459/N Publications.

<sup>43</sup> "Who is Ms. Nightingale?" *The Times*, October 30, 1854, page 7.

Here we notice an interesting elaboration on governess illness, namely the claim that the unemotional detachment of employers was an important factor in governess ailments. In a society which seemed supremely aware of the fact that governesses began their careers due to financial hardship, it is striking that “sympathy, passion, or affections” are deemed much more important to their well-being than “sustenance and covering.” In the same breath that the article bemoans the destitution of governesses, it also implies that the *real* problem was the fact that the employers failed to be affectionate to their governess. The average governess could find shelter, but she was rarely given the kind of love that a philanthropist like Nightingale knew was necessary to save or soothe them.

What this account touches on is that narratives of governess illness often subtly—or indeed, not so subtly—implied that the woes of governesses were not entirely due to basic exploitative practices like low pay, poor working conditions and lack of long-term job security. While contemporaries certainly recognized these issues, they also tended to stress that the *worst* way governesses were abused, the mistreatment with the most negative consequences, was emotional or social in nature, and moreover that this form of abuse created internal ailments like disease. This attitude is underscored by the sneering reactions of male commentators and journalists to the philanthropist *Governess Benevolent Institution's* (GBI) crusade to professionalize the governess vocation through official coursework and training. A *Punch* satire envisioned the GBI classroom as a replica of an upper-class household, where “charitable ladies of great style” would volunteer their services by berating would-be governesses in mock schoolrooms or

snubbing them at simulated dinner parties in order to “familiarise the pupils with the life they may expect to lead.”<sup>44</sup>

In reality, the GBI (established in 1843) was attempting to

inaugurate fixed professional credentials through certificate programs and college classes in an effort to standardize governess accreditation and therein rates of compensation.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, while many publications vociferously crusaded for the improved treatment of governesses, they often scoffed at philanthropic endeavors predicated on the idea that the governesses required professionalization versus seeing them as helpless women plagued by a firmly domestic form of interpersonal conflict. The implication is that rather than hard work or poverty being the plague of governesses, it was rather they were isolated from pleasant society, treated rudely and never shown gratitude or affection.

This is corroborated by the fact that the most sympathetic pictorial images of governesses fixated on her emotional distress rather than her impoverishment. Tortured by her obtuse, demanding or even cruel employers and pupils, the governess of popular



Figure 6  
*'No Sinecure' Punch (July 20, 1878)*  
*Proud Mother (to the new Governess). "And here is a pencil, Miss Green, and a note-book in which I wish you to write down all the clever and remarkable things the dear children may say during your walk."*

<sup>44</sup> "Governesses' Benevolent Institution", *Punch or The London Charivari* 10 (1846), 216.

<sup>45</sup> Hughes, 186-188.

imagination was always perpetually frowning and close to tears (see figs 7 through 10). The object of these images is not to showcase the most basic components of governess-exploitation, like being required to teach too many subjects or struggling to remain financially solvent, but rather their profound sadness as caused by the cruelty of their employers, and the physical consequences of that emotional state.

To illustrate this point, it is somewhat ironic that the archetypal ‘victim’ governess of cartoons and caricatures is not only beautiful (the opposite of the spinster!) but also well dressed. In reality governesses struggled to maintain the standards of a



Figure 7  
*'The Governess' by Richard Redgrave (1844)*

lady's wardrobe because their pay was simply too low to easily accommodate the level of quality expected of their social station; moreover, quickly-ruined items like gloves were not only compulsory but could not be made at home. Yet the governess of paintings and illustrations are always beautifully dressed (see especially *figs. 6, 5 and 9*) and seemingly housed in a comfortable environment. The latent argument of

these images revolves around their loneliness, the indifference of their

employers, or their vulnerability to the casual cruelty of their students.



Figure 8  
*'The New Governess'* by Thomas Ballard (1877)

This 'sad governess' aesthetic trope was ubiquitous in both high and low visual formats. Two different paintings (*figs. 7 and 8*) were exhibited in the Royal Academy during the nineteenth century depicting almost identical scenarios of

governess suffering: the governess is isolated, clothed in simple and austere clothing (i.e. likely in mourning) and clearly miserable. *Figs. 5, 6 and 9* illustrate a similar, but satiric take on governess suffering, namely the emotional abuse of governess by beastly children and/or their demanding parents. Almost every image in this thematic vein makes explicit through titles or captions that what is being depicted is a "new" governess, as in *figs. 5, 6 and 8*. This signaled that the woman had only recently entered the governess misery-vortex, making it clear to the viewer that while her beauty and submissive temperament were still intact, her obvious deep-seated unhappiness was step one of a dark spiral into moral, physical and mental desiccation.

That these images of sad governesses were probably interpreted by contemporaries as having very serious implications is demonstrated by the 1840 book *Heads of the People, or Portraits of the English*. This text claimed to be an “index of the national mind,” and juxtaposed images of certain English “types” with fictive essays meant to illuminate their charms, moral failings, struggles and triumphs.<sup>46</sup> The chapter on the governess is fitted with an image of a young, genteel-looking woman



Figure 9  
'A Young Turk' *Punch* (July 17, 1880)



Figure 10  
“She only said, ‘My life is dreary.’” *Portraits of the People*, 1840

whose face registers a combination of melancholy and a submission to the inevitable (*fig. 10*). “My life is dreary,” quotes the accompanying caption. However, while the image is certainly stereotypical, it should be noted that the accompanying essay is devoted to proving that her life as a governess was not just unhappy, but a “*living death* [emphasis mine].”<sup>47</sup> Importantly, the governess protagonist, Lucy, works as a governess in a post that is actually enviable compared to many of her peers. She has a

<sup>46</sup> *Portraits of the People*, iii-iv.

<sup>47</sup> Miss Winter [pseud.], “The Family Governess,” in *Portraits of the People*, 215

“salary punctually paid”, her students listen to her, and the mother of the house is careful to observe “every propriety” so that she feels comfortable and respected.<sup>48</sup> “Of what had Lucy to complain?” queries the author, except that “she was merely excluded from all that makes life a blessing; dragging on a lonely existence.”<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, the narrative depicts Lucy as becoming physically and mentally incapacitated by her emotional isolation. The drooping, frail misery of the illustration was actually the harbinger of much more serious ailments, including a brush with death that is only forestalled by her father bringing her home to recuperate.

As this correlation between unhappiness and the body implies, nineteenth century media often used a semiotics of feeling—that was ultimately indistinguishable from a semiotics of the body—as a discursive mechanism for understanding the implications of the governess profession. Governess narratives often waffled between suffering being the *outcome* of governessing, and presuming that the internal life of governesses was the only grid through which they could be understood or evaluated. They therein confused whether the act of governessing (which included literally teaching children, being paid for work, or living in another person’s house) or the psychological/physiological state of being a governess, was the root cause of governess enervation and illness. This is demonstrated by contemporaries making contradictory statements about governesses being victimized by specific people or forces (suffering is an outcome), while simultaneously implying that governesses were inherently unstable, or somehow more internally tethered to the vicissitudes of external environments (suffering is a state of

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

being). According to *The Odd Fellow*, the stereotypical governess was unhappy and sickly because her employers were exploitative and insensitive, *but* she had also likely been victimized since childhood, when, through no fault of her own, she was singled out for mistreatment. “She has been the DISLIKED child,” wailed the paper, “and her remembrances of home are those of neglect towards herself and a constant preferment of her brothers and sisters.”<sup>50</sup> Like other additions to the genre, this account vacillates on whether their victimization stems from some kind of inherent quality that makes them vulnerable or fragile, or if this is the consequence of their specific kind of labor or circumstances.

Loneliness and isolation were certainly thought to be a huge component of why governessing was such a problematic practice, but it was often unclear whether anyone in particular was at fault for this dilemma. In her *Private Education: Or a Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies*, writer and former long-term governess Elizabeth Appleton grimly emphasized that governesses should anticipate being both uncomfortable and lonely, and should sensibly forego any hope of “domestic comforts”, and warned that “society you are not to expect...this blessing is never tasted by you, excepting at the firesides of your own family and friends.”<sup>51</sup> Her oft-repeated warning is that governesses will be ignored by all visitors and neighbors—who find her to be their class-inferior—culminates in the matter-of-fact injunction to “therefore make up your minds to the

---

<sup>50</sup> “The World We Live in,” *The Odd Fellow*, April 4 1840, page 1.

<sup>51</sup> Appleton, *Private Education*, 28.



deprivation of two grand female considerations;—society and settlement.”<sup>52</sup> As *Punch* magazine more pithily put it, “...who ever heard of a governess with friends?”<sup>53</sup>

These accounts do not necessarily state that employers are wrong in ignoring the governess, or offer solutions that would render her offices more emotionally fulfilling. They are more interested in detailing the potential, disastrous consequences of governess isolation. Moreover, as has been pointed out, the aggregate effects of governess loneliness were often *explicitly* coupled with the onset of disease and bodily decline in many popular magazines. An ongoing serial in *The Leisure Hour* entitled “Wanted, A Governess” made much of the “immense exertion” of the governess-protagonist, but ultimately the governess descends into mortal illness not because of fatigue “of such lassitude that I have flung myself on the bed, unable to undress until I had had ten minutes to rest” but because her spirit is “crushed” by the neglect and aloofness of her employer Mrs. Serle.<sup>54</sup> Under the annoyed gaze of her employers, depicted in the accompanying illustration (*fig. 11*), she collapses from a cold inflamed by their lack of friendliness and concomitant refusal to either keep her company, or allow her to fraternize with their guests. The crux of the narrative is when the employers indignantly rebuke her attempts to socialize with their guests or adult children during a Christmas party, largely by curtailing their young son’s attempts at cheering her.<sup>55</sup> This is portrayed as the final straw that precipitates a physical collapse under the weight of loneliness. By denying her both socialization and affectionate praise, the governess is never given

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>53</sup> “A MODEL GOVERNESS”, *Punch*, 1848.

<sup>54</sup> “WANTED, A GOVERNESS: CHAP. II.” *The Leisure Hour: A Family Journal of Instruction and Recreation*, December 15, 1853, no. 103, page 3.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

respite from her unusually severe workload or the familial woes that sent her into the workforce in the first place (typically, a dead father and a sibling of a delicate constitution). She therefore precipitously declines under the weight of segregation from good-willed human contact.

This kind of isolation from affection, love and care was also deemed to be one of the reasons that governesses went insane. It was considered common knowledge during the nineteenth century that lunatic asylums were filled with crazy governesses who had been mentally and physically broken by their profession.



Figure 11  
'WANTED A GOVERNESS' *The Leisure Hour* (December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1855)

Indeed, many writers assumed that it was even a statistical fact. According to popular media like *Fraser's Magazine*, their mental precariousness was mostly exacerbated by their simultaneous delicacy and isolation from human contact. In 1844 *Fraser's* warned that if governesses were not welcomed and loved it should come as no surprise that they suffered more than even

“factory-girls, shop-women...” or “servants...and prisoners” because, unlike these people, they alone were subject to social isolation. “It is only the governess...” the author warned “who must hear the echoes from the drawing-room and the offices, feeling that, in a house full of people, they dwell alone.”<sup>56</sup> That this should lead to “nervous irritability, dejection” and “lunacy and loss of energy” was, at least *Fraser’s Magazine* felt, inevitable. Lucy, from *Portraits of the People* is ultimately so overwhelmed by her “living death” as a governess that she loses her mind and deliriously jumps out of the window, ostensibly, it is implied, to try to get closer to the people she hears passing by in the streets in a crazed attempt to alleviate her loneliness.<sup>57</sup>

Ultimately, all of these categories of governess decline assume that the psychological fragility of the governess was directly correlated to physical decline. Whether their labor left them unusually susceptible to the cruelty of their employers, or whether they were individuals who were deemed uniquely predisposed to corporeal deterioration, both are predicated on the idea that governesses’ feelings and body were inextricably tethered, and therein the social unpleasantness of her position left her exceptionally vulnerable both psychologically and physiologically.

### **“A Helpless Governess, Miss Renault”**

While the scope of this project does not generally encompass the “facts” or “realities” of governesses or their work—being more concerned with the imagined governess—there is one available example of how the discourse of governess suffering

---

<sup>56</sup> “Hints on the Modern Governess System”, *Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country* (November 30, 1844): 575.

<sup>57</sup> Miss Winter [pseud.], “The Family Governess,” in *Portraits of the People*, 216.

did intersect with the life of one “real” governess, which seems relevant for illustrating the epistemological power of this trope for individual subjectivities. Even if real-life governesses were not all teetering on the cusp of spinsterhood and death as a result of internal “withering”, employer neglect and cruelty, or abject loneliness, real women could draw on the rhetoric of helplessness and physical hardship associated with governessing in order to court sympathy and bolster their own objectives. One example available to us is that of Jane Renault, a half-French, half-English woman born in Jersey. Information on Renault’s life as an itinerant and destitute former-governess is available because her actions and movements were obsessively documented by the *Charity Organization Society* (COS, later renamed the *Family Welfare Association*), which kept extensive records on her from the 1870s to the 1890s.<sup>58</sup> Significantly, Renault’s story is relevant for this analysis not because of any governessing work she actually did, but rather because she was obviously both aware of and intentionally exploited the notoriety of governess suffering and victimization. She also took advantage of the prevailing theory—fostered by charity organizations like the GBI—that it was a societal failing to ignore, or fail to ameliorate, governess misfortune.

Yet what is most interesting about the case of Renault is that her appropriation of this discourse did not go unchallenged. Over a twenty year period, Renault and the COS engaged in a small-scale publicity battle, not over whether or not she had actually been a governess or experienced the negative incidents she claimed to, but rather if she suffered

---

<sup>58</sup> These records are housed at the London Metropolitan Archives in the Family Welfare Association collection (Formerly Charity Organisation Society) under Renault, Jeanne (Jane), 1872-1893, A/FWA/C/D/332/001.

as severely as she claimed. Ultimately, Renault was arguing with an institutional body about whether she had the requisite classed and gender traits to qualify as a *suffering governess*, as someone who deserved the special social status and sympathy reserved for the imagined governess victim of popular imagination. Renault's claim to embody the maligned and miserable governess familiar to the nineteenth century reading public was thus negotiated and contested by the people whom she supplicated for aid. That certain people and administrative bodies felt entitled, even compelled, to police the boundaries of what constituted official-governess-suffering implies that that this discourse had important socio-cultural implications beyond the kind of morbid voyeurism that might have made this trope so appealing in the popular press. It was important to clarify who was entitled to governess victimhood, and who was not.

Renault entered the COS radar in 1874, when she applied for assistance after an incident on a steamship which, she claimed, had rendered her unable to work. According to her testimony, and the begging handbills she had printed for the next twenty years, she was engaged by an English family at some time in 1872 to accompany them to The Cape of Good Hope as a governess for their son. She was then around 34 years old.<sup>59</sup> As far as the COS could ascertain, she had indeed taken a serious fall on the deck of the steamship bound for Africa, but testimony of doctors and witnesses seemed to indicate that she had not been as seriously injured as she later claimed. A very reproofing letter from a COS committee member assigned to her case, dated February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1876, expressed doubt that Renault "suffers any agony whatever."

---

<sup>59</sup> See the initial applications for assistance, which are the first and second documents in the folder.

From the opening of her interactions with the COS, the severity of the pain Renault did or did not experience had become the lynchpin to whether or not she fit the parameters of a person who deserved charitable aid. Moreover, the COS did not take Renault's assessment of her own suffering seriously, largely, it seems, because they seemed to increasingly suspect that she was not particularly genteel. Committee members found her language "repulsive" and "unladylike", a clear black mark against someone who purported to be a governess, and thus a member of the middle classes. After several interviews, they told her that they would not even consider her claim unless she submitted herself for examination by doctors, which she refused to do. Ultimately, though the COS had definitive evidence that Renault had had a major accident on board the steamship, and had ceased to work since that incident, they rejected her claim because they doubted that her suffering was actually incapacitating. That she refused to subject herself to the scrutiny of appropriate authorities—medical experts—sealed their opinion of her as undeserving of aid.

Renault had more luck attracting the attention and sympathy of other charitable organizations and individuals. Much to their chagrin, the COS would receive many, many letters from a wide assortment of middle and upper class personages, institutions, church groups and other charities inquiring about her status. Having received Renault's begging handbills in the mail, or been approached by her personally, these concerned citizens were touched by her story and confused as to why the COS would refuse to assist someone who had so clearly been victimized by circumstances. Since the committee members who interviewed her personally over the years, and almost all of Renault's close

personal acquaintances and contacts they applied to for information (solicitors, surgeons, neighbors, etc.), seemed to find Renault disreputable and unpleasant, it can probably be assumed that what philanthropist groups and sympathetic people were responding to was her initial representation of herself as the governess-victim rather than her charming demeanor. Her supplications relied on the tropes of governess suffering, misery and bodily misfortune that were common currency for most literate, late-nineteenth century Britons. It would come as no surprise to the people that she supplicated that a governess might suffer misfortune, misery and serious physical incapacitation.

Integral to her campaign for charitable support were Renault's pleading handbills, which narrate her background, the accident on the steamer trip, her current utter helplessness and an ever-increasing litany of tragedies. Featuring bold print titles—like "AN APPEAL TO THE CHARITABLE. A CASE OF THE MOST DISTRESSING NATURE", "WILL A KIND PUBLIC REALLY SEE INTO THIS DEPLORABLE CASE?" and "URGENT HELP IS NEEDED. A HELPLESS GOVERNESS, MISS RENAULT."—these pamphlets invoke the discourses of tragedy and pain that suffused all mass-media governess imagery, even mimicking the typical wording of newspaper articles bemoaning the "governess plight." Renault's handbills and letters underscored both her respectability and her victimhood, arguing that her status as a benighted governess should be of concern for the entire community:

It has been hard to sustain life injuries and be prevented from obtaining an honest livelihood and then obtain no redress—(but persecution)...Owing to *heinous* evils she has been misrepresented, and the public deceived.  
[emphasis original]

This particular pamphlet seems to have been part of her repertoire during the early 1880s, and induced one curious (and slightly annoyed) Reverend Hondley to inquire as to what was conclusively known about Renault: “I have several times had to pay 2<sup>nd</sup> postage for [?] of the enclosed type and from the same writer. On what is she living? I saw her once and don’t believe she is sane.”<sup>60</sup> Well might he have thought so, as the pamphlet he enclosed with his letter is covered in Renault’s hand-written scrawl, an odd tendency of that intensified over time. That Renault seemed to become legitimately, and increasingly, deranged is yet another fascinating interstice between fantasies of governess deterioration and lived-reality. By the end of her life, Renault had moved beyond writing around the paragraphs of her pamphlets and had begun feverishly scribbling over the printed text itself (*see fig 12*), obscuring her own supplications and pleadings with even more, illegible entreaties for help and sympathy.

In September of 1877 Renault was arrested in Brighton and charged with begging after blocking a doorway while waving around several of her handbills and accompanying signs. According to the news report in *The Standard* (London), her placards featured titles like “English Atrocities!” and asked how they (the public?) could “allow a governess to starve!”<sup>61</sup> According to the police she had also informed passersby that “the people of a Royal mail steamer have *murdered* her, so to speak” (emphasis mine). As will be shown in the next chapter, this new invocation of ‘murder’ demonstrates that Renault not only co-opted the general rhetoric of governess bodily

---

<sup>60</sup> See the fifteenth letter in the collection.

<sup>61</sup> Article included in the Renault case file. Apparently a COS member mailed it to the main headquarters to be interpolated into the other literature, letters and applications they collected in regards to the governess.



deterioration, but also adapted her pitch depending on new developments in the trend. Later Renault would begin to claim that not only had she damaged her “spine, hip and collar bone” onboard the steamship, but “she was also shamefully assaulted in her cabin one Sunday morning while the others were playing cards.” Renault was thus implying that she had been physically violated in every way possible—externally through a dramatic fall through a porthole, sexually when she was helplessly subjected to molestation, and emotionally as her sufferings are slighted by society. As will be seen in the next chapter, this new invocation of sexual exploitation and violent assault was becoming increasingly common in discourses of governess-suffering during the last decades of the nineteenth century, which might have induced Renault to incorporate it into her own representations of her mistreatment.

Despite the fact that the correspondents with the COS increasingly expressed doubts as to Renault’s sanity and ability to support herself, this non-profit continued to actively discourage anyone from assisting Renault based on their belief that she was a fraud whose respectability was questionable. It is clear from the paperwork that they knew that the incident in which Renault had fallen had taken place, what was at issue was the acuteness of her suffering and whether or not she was deemed genteel enough to have the final say about the gravity of her physical and psychological well-being. Governesses portrayed in the popular press were portrayed as suffering cruelly simply from being somewhat socially isolated or enduring a few snubs from their employers—let alone falling dozens of feet from a ship deck. But imbricated in this supposed sensitivity to negative stimuli or events were ideas about the vulnerability of upper class women,

assumptions that their inborn gentility equated with fragility and therein obliged ethical onlookers to either feel sympathy, or ideally intervene. The COS was locked in conflict with Renault (and associated spectators) over the legitimacy of her femininity, and therein her claims to governess-victimhood. By insisting that she neither felt the pain she claimed to, nor possessed the upper class qualities that would entitle her to help, the COS was trying to short-circuit the entire discourse of governess suffering that Renault was claiming as her identity. Importantly, they won out by convincing the many middle class, and even aristocratic, inquirers eager to help a wounded governess that she was no such thing. One letter included in her case file is from the secretary of an aristocratic Lady whose name is, unfortunately, totally unintelligible (hopefully further research will discover her identity through the coat of arms emblazoned on her stationary), saying that she had been made aware of Renault's plight and was prepared to help her if the COS could ascertain the validity of her claims. The COS made carbon copies of their responses to the secretary, which reveal that they sent him a packet of documents "proving" that Renault was not reputable. The secretary responded with gratitude intimated that he and his patroness were no longer interested in assisting Renault.

By April of 1892 the secretary of the *Yorkshire Union of Ladies' Associations for the Care of Girls* had informed the COS that one of her correspondents "says Miss Renault is suffered to be mad by her neighbors, & is apparently very poor." In December of 1893, the last concerned and curious onlooker (a local living in Linslade, a town in Bedfordshire) contacted the COS for information on Renault. Apparently Miss Theobald had met Renault recently, and observed that her life had "the appearance of a very sad

one” and that she seemed to have done “her utmost to maintain herself...[as a?] legitimate lady.” A month later, she thanked the COS for supplying her with a packet of information on the former-governess, and concluded—what is the last document in the Renault case file—“From what I hear, there seems little doubt now but that Miss Renault’s mind is affected.” The irritated tenor of her letter, and the underlined “now” might signal embarrassment that she had wasted philanthropic energies on a disreputable lunatic masquerading as a “legitimate” suffering “lady.” Ultimately, while Renault had turned to the trope of governess suffering as a mechanism for supporting herself, the subsequent dismissal of her claims by institutional bodies like the COS demonstrate that whilst insane, injured and diseased governesses might be portrayed with sympathy in sensationalist melodrama, real life governesses suffering from real maladies did not necessarily have authority over how their own experiences of misfortune were

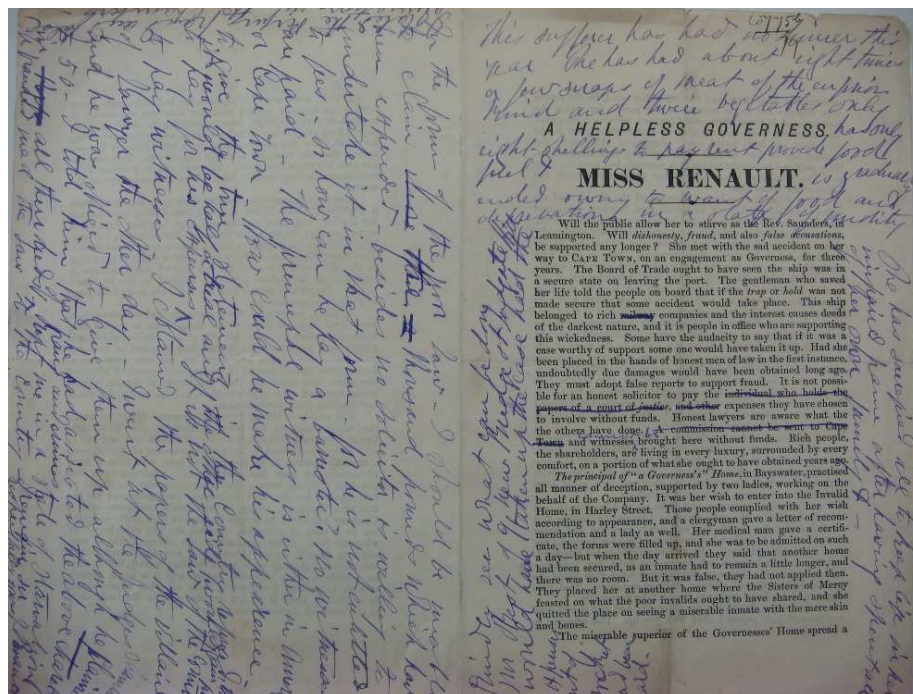


Figure 12  
 ‘A Helpless Governess. Miss Renault.’ (circa 1890)

interpreted, or whether they would be deemed worthy of assistance.

### **Conclusion**

Obviously Britons of the late nineteenth century believed that this very particular form of labor could impugn female physical and emotional wellbeing with preternatural speed and totality—or, at least, were fascinated by the idea that it was so. This is an important and often overlooked facet of mass-interest in governesses. Rather than governess-mania being simply the corollary of the social and moral conundrum she presented, it also encompassed a kind of fascination with the supposed mental and physical consequences of governessing. Their atypical and uniquely disturbing status as laboring-lady in a harsh and unforgiving labor market actually took a thematic backseat to maudlin chronicles of governess enervation and despondency. The governess was always somehow inherently “wrong”—be it physically or emotionally—or inherently victimized, and importantly these two states amounted to the same thing: bodily infirmity or decay.

The imagined governess body and its internal deterioration must be considered both a locus for, and driver of, popular fixation on governesses. The fact that there was a glut of saccharine governess woe in sensation news reporting, cartoons, articles and painting makes it clear that their psychological cum physiological misery was profoundly salient for contemporaries, especially at the outset of governess-mania during the mid-century, when debates over the gendered infirmity of female bodies had the most cultural significance. Later, growing concern with articulating the chaos of modern life or urban spaces—coupled to subtle changes in the status of women—meant that this governess-

enervation was much less talked about (though never totally absent). As we shall see in the next chapter, rather than remaining static, governess mania subtly shifted its focus, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, from enervated governess-bodies to blood-spattered ones.

## CHAPTER 2: THE GOVERNESS AS BLOODY SPECTACLE

On the night of December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1893 a governess was savagely murdered in a dense forest near Stoke-on-Trent. Her body was not discovered immediately because, as newspaper reports would later dramatically put it, the estate she lived on was “the most lonesome place imaginable.”<sup>62</sup> In quantifiable terms, this meant the house was over a mile and a half from town and more than a half mile from the road. The owner of the estate, a fruiterer in London, and his family split their time between town and country, relying on the young governess Miss Kate Daney or Dungey—accounts do not concur in regards to the spelling of her name or her exact age—to look after the grounds during their weekly absences. Daney was in the habit of letting two local boys spend the night when the family was away, probably as a safety measure. On this particular night these children knocked for Daney to let them in, but there was no answer. Unable to find a way into the locked house, they dawdled outside for a few hours before eventually fetching neighboring farmer George Dawson. The boys told him that they had heard strange rustling sounds as they approached the house, prompting Dawson to search the dark woods where he subsequently found Daney’s body.

The sight must have been both gruesome and disturbing for the small group, as Dawson’s later statements confirm. The governess’s head had been smashed in, her ears cut off, and she was randomly sliced around her neck and scalp. According to early newspaper reports, once the police arrived and forced their way into the residence they found evidence of a violent struggle, including ripped out hair, scattered jewelry and

---

<sup>62</sup> “Shocking Murder of a Governess”, *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin, Ireland), December 11, 1893; “The Murder of a Governess”, *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin Ireland), December 12, 1893.

blood splatter. They hypothesized that Daney had been surprised in the house by a burglar, entered into a violent scuffle, and managed to escape before being chased down and ultimately slain in the woods (how this accorded with the supposedly locked-up home is unclear). The assailant had apparently used a tool like a pruning hook to slash at her head and neck; and multiple objects were conjectured as the weapon involved in smashing in her skull including a cudgel, a poker or the industrial potato masher used to prepare food for the pigs.<sup>63</sup> Since there was no forced entry or evidence of any theft, the police ultimately concluded that the murderer had not intended to burglarize the house, and thus the motive for the attack remained unknown.

This act of savage butchery was broadcast throughout the United Kingdom, namely in England, Wales, and Ireland. Yet it can be postulated that the incident was less shocking (or at least novel) to a reading public that was, by the mid-1890s, rather used to hearing about assaulted or murdered governesses. Narratives of violence perpetrated upon governesses in didactic stories, court cases and newspapers abounded, and were almost always characterized by feminine helplessness and a sort of ghoulish eroticism; governesses were stalked by leering uncles, assaulted by their employers, duped and murdered by secretly-married boyfriends, axe-murdered when home alone, kidnapped walking to work, or dismembered by a lunatic. Macabre tales of compromised and violated womanhood became one of the primary ways that the turn of the century reading public encountered governesses. This narrative became prevalent in the media during the 1870s, and remained the most ubiquitous characterization of governesses well into the

---

<sup>63</sup> *The Manchester Guardian*, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1893

interwar years (indeed, even when ‘governesses’, as such, were no longer common). As discussed in the previous chapter, the unhealthy governess body, destroyed from within by natural, if horrible, corporal ailments, persisted as a trope, it was increasingly eclipsed by governesses violated from without, by violent forces or attackers. In fact, ‘governess’ became a sort of by-word for a woman who had been violently assaulted. This trend is observable in the case of Miss Daney, whose employment was more as a housekeeper than as an educational resource to family children. Nevertheless, every headline associated with the case singularly identified the dead woman as “the governess.” This was a *very* common convention, and there are dozens of analogous examples.

The case of the Daney murder is also instructive for illuminating other defining characteristics of this new fixation on governess-violation. Firstly, it was both bloody and sensationalist. Press narratives emphasized the gruesome spectacle of the Daney murder-scene: they described the “blood splashes on the walls”; the “terrible spectacle” of the body next to “a broken hedge and a stick with blood upon it”; and noted that the body was clammy and cold by the time it was found.<sup>64</sup> The lonely and isolated circumstances that had left Daney vulnerable to attack were also dramatized and heightened, especially the remoteness and density of the woods. For its part, the *Freeman’s Journal* found it “difficult to understand how a woman could consent to live there all alone.”<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> *The Illustrated Police News* (London), December 16<sup>th</sup> 1893; *Freemans’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin, Ireland), December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1893.

<sup>65</sup> *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin, Ireland), December 12, 1893.



Secondly, this particular homicide case reproduced the dichotomies and tensions erected between ‘criminal’ behavior and private acts of violence. The press (supposedly informed by the police) initially reported that the murder must have been committed by a robber—despite the sadistic and emotive savagery involved in mutilating the body and practical fact that the house was locked from the inside. However, it eventually became obvious that the person who killed the governess likely knew she would be there alone and was familiar with the parameters of the house and property. Someone she knew, someone she perhaps even trusted enough to let into the house, killed her. Therein, the interpretation of the murder produced by both police and press speculation moved from an unknown, mercenary perpetrator to a community member or acquaintance with unknown objectives. For Victorian Britons, these were two very different kinds of murderers. As historian Clive Emsley points out, from the mid-nineteenth century on “criminality tended to be seen as, essentially, a class problem” and the lower classes were branded as the natural representatives and agents of ‘criminality.’”<sup>66</sup> In the Victorian understanding, a ‘criminal’ was defined by uncontrolled aggression, acquisitiveness, and laziness—all traits believed to be innate to the lowest classes.<sup>67</sup> Significantly, Daney’s murder turned out not to be the outcome of the rampant ‘criminality’ of the hardened poor, but rather perpetrated by a member of her own community. Emsley argues that upper-class law breakers could be and were castigated; however social commentators and even the courts perceived their actions as less ‘criminal’ than immoral—these were, as he says, “‘rotten apples’ within their social class” rather than new additions to the rolls of

---

<sup>66</sup> Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in England, 1750-1900* (Pearson Education Limited, 1987; reprint, UK: Pearson, 2005) 56-57.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 92.

the criminal classes.<sup>68</sup> In this vein, the cultural preoccupation with governess-related-violence was not generally contoured by the social problems caused by ‘criminal classes’, but rather seemed to reflect an interest in the “bad apples” and fraught interpersonal relationships that could exist in the upper classes. There were of course exceptions to the rule, but the predominant trope was that of the governess as threatened by circumstances and people that populated her own intimate and circumscribed upper class world. The media portrayed governesses as threatened not by an unknown other, but by the milieu and people with which she is most intimate. The danger was—chillingly enough—to be found in everyday life.

Yet, it is important to bear in mind that this chapter explores not only a statistically minute population—governesses—but also a very limited range of violent acts or actions potentially associated with them. As Kathryn Hughes has shown, governesses were not only a tiny fraction of the general population but their life trajectories were not markedly different from other women of their age and class.<sup>69</sup> As far as social historians and their statistical analyses can reveal, governesses were *not* regularly assaulted, stalked maimed and killed. Recognizing the disproportionate status of violence associated with governesses in the press and literature reveals that popular responses to governess-violation were rooted in the socio-cultural climate, rather than causally produced by any statistically significant uptick in violence against a numerically insignificant female community. While real people may have been reading about real

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 56-57.

<sup>69</sup> Hughes, 20-28.

experiences and acts (like the murder of Daney), the inflated importance of these incidents was reliant on *cultural* preoccupations with injured or dead governess bodies.

In addition, the media and literature during this time period cannot be relied upon to report unfolding stories with an assiduous commitment to accuracy, or even trusted not to fabricate incidents altogether. Naturally, cultural arbiters like reporters or sensationalist writers also exercised selectiveness in what they chose to broadcast to the public and how to package that information. In her doctoral thesis on representations of both female victimhood and criminal behavior in nineteenth century England, Radojka Startup emphasizes that the didactic and narrativising structure of sensationalist media from this era offers “extremely limited historical possibilities” as far as discovering any hard ‘truth’ about crimes or court cases. Instead, Startup argues that the narrative constructions of violence and criminality in both press accounts and literature reveal how sensationalist murder or assault cases “became a significant arena in the production and contestation of social knowledge.”<sup>70</sup> Pertinent to this analysis, Startup also underlines the function of courtroom dramas and ongoing press reporting of illegal violence as venues for both exploring and contesting social roles, as many different perspectives and voices vied to establish ‘the facts’ about moral or social culpability for violent behavior. In the same epistemological vein, this chapter will thus not analyze the mechanics of legal or court practice, growing police surveillance, or the reality of on-the-ground crime statistics, but rather the social and cultural dynamics of media portrayals of governess-related violence during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Specifically, I am interested in

---

<sup>70</sup> Radojka Startup, *Damaging Females: Representations of women as victims and perpetrators of crime in the mid nineteenth century* (PhD diss., University College of London, February 2000), 44.

unpacking why, beginning roughly in the 1870s, the governess was represented as literally and figuratively vulnerable to, and enmeshed in, physical brutality and mutilation. The ongoing commercial viability of the dead and/or injured governess genre attests to both its thematic flexibility and the discursive strength of the root attractant: the bloodied and/or threatened body of an ‘odd’ woman.

### **Historiographies of Violence and Criminality in Victorian England: Where the Governess Fits in**

Ironically, burgeoning coverage of governess-violation was coterminous with the long-term decline of criminal violence in Britain. Although reliable crime statistics are difficult to accrue or tabulate, in the case of homicide it is at least relatively clear that since the Middle Ages murder rates in Western Europe had declined from 20 to 1 per 100,000 (this decline is conjectured to have been even more precipitous in Britain specifically).<sup>71</sup> As is demonstrated by historian Martin Wiener in his book *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness and Criminal Justice in Victorian England*, major violent crimes like homicide and rape were a “statistically minor part” of criminal law, or even criminal behavior, in the nineteenth century, yet violent crimes were nevertheless perceived to be both rampant and indicative of social and moral disarray.<sup>72</sup> Historic retrospective reveals that there was probably not a ‘crime wave’, as contemporaries generally believed, but rather violent crime became more newsworthy and thus gave the illusion of prevalence. Historian Rob Sindall, in his study of Victorian street violence, notes that prior to the 1850s newspapers did not regularly cover either cases heard before courts, or alleged

---

<sup>71</sup> Matt Wiener, *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

criminal activity (with the exception of certain murder cases).<sup>73</sup> While violent robberies, assault and homicide were nothing new to the second half of the nineteenth century, designated crime columns devoted solely to tracking their occurrence certainly were.

Recent scholarship has also postulated that the technical decline of interpersonal violence and concomitant magnification of its public visibility was interlocked with changing standards of acceptable gendered behavior. These new standards had particular salience for men; unlike earlier codes of manliness that emphasized masculine aggressiveness, nineteenth century gender norms began to insist on masculinity delimited by respectability, physical and emotional restraint and protectiveness towards subordinates. Inversely, women were understood to be both inherently good and fundamentally weak—their virtuousness and vulnerability made protecting them a moral imperative. Within this gender order, men were thus expected to rein in their baser instincts in the interests of safeguarding the defenseless innocence of women. According to Wiener, the very definition of violence (in both socio-cultural and legal terms) came to be circumscribed by arguments about the protected status of women and the inborn, violent urges of men.<sup>74</sup> This is not to say that these arguments produced instant, or unilinear, revolutions in attitudes towards male rights and female subordination, as Wiener deftly shows, but rather that these new discourses had enough cultural currency to at least disrupt long-term assumptions and complicate social and legal perspectives.

---

<sup>73</sup> Rob Sindall, *Street Violence in the Nineteenth Century: Media Panic or Real Danger?* (London; New York: Leicester University Press, 1990), 6.

<sup>74</sup> Wiener, 40.

Most histories of violence in England acknowledge gender as an integral component of attitudes towards violence and categorizations of violent behaviors. The active emphasis is on men, despite the fact that the rationale pivots on the inherent characteristics and needs of women. Undeniably, men have historically perpetrated crimes more frequently than women. Moreover, as Clive Emsley states in his book *Hard Men: The English and Violence since 1750*, during the nineteenth century “women were not expected to be physical, except in the sense of the physicality of bringing children into the world and nursing them.”<sup>75</sup> Unlike women, English men were exhorted to be restrained even as their physicality was a given. Thus, monographs like *Hard Men* and *Men of Blood* interrogate violence and categorizations of criminality as they were implicated in temporal modes of masculinity, which often intersected with class stereotypes (for example, lower class men were assumed to be less in control of their violent impulses).

What is unique about violence associated with governesses is that it does not fall neatly into categories of feminine victimization at the hands of criminal men or feminine criminality. While depictions of violence against governesses could implicate men as threats and aggressors—especially those with whom they had a romantic relationship—a wide variety of individuals, and environmental or social forces were equally highlighted as injuring or killing governesses. The press eagerly reported on violent episodes involving governesses and their neighbors, acquaintances, employers, fiancées, students and even inanimate threats posed by trains, gas leaks or drowning while leisure bathing.

---

<sup>75</sup> Emsley, 12.

Moreover, they were not depicted just as victims of these threats but also seemingly became *emblems* of violence in general. For example, the closing decades of the nineteenth century saw governesses become almost a by-word for women who had been violently attacked, maimed or killed. This is demonstrated by the propensity of popular media to ascribe the title “governess” to assaulted or murdered women who were either not governesses, or had only worked as governesses either once or for very short periods of time. Examples abound, as when newspapers covering the 1873 prosecution of an uncle who was stalking and sexually intimidating his niece constantly referred to the latter as ‘the governess’ despite the fact that Maria Roper was currently, and had been for some time, working as a ‘lady manageress’ for refreshment rooms operated by Spiers & Ponds.<sup>76</sup> The penny sheets and articles covering the gruesome murder of milliner’s apprentice Harriet Lane by her lover Henry Wainwright (who disinterred her body from the floor of his shop and cut it up into manageable, movable pieces in order to transport it to a safer location) mentioned without fail that Lane had “once” been a governess, or ruminated on the veracity of the rumors alleging that she had “once” been a governess in the past. Even the prosecution made a point of questioning her sister Alice Day about whether or not Lane had ever held a post as a governess. The significance of this information was such that the judge ultimately felt compelled to warn the jury that they must not take Lane’s previous, possible employment as a governess into consideration when coming to a verdict.<sup>77</sup> Obviously, in the context of her brutal murder, Lane’s

---

<sup>76</sup> *Proceedings of the Central Criminal Court*, April 7 1873, page 399.

<sup>77</sup> “The Full and Early History of Harriet Lane, Wainwright’s Victim” (London: T. Taylor ‘Caxton House’ on Bolt Court, Fleet Street, n.d.)

occupation as a governess was considered more salient than her more recent work as a milliner.

This begs the question of what function governesses had for societal obsessions with interpersonal violence involving women, or why the governess resonated with readers as the

ultimate victim of bodily violation. As always, the tenuous social and cultural status of the

governess complicated her ability to serve as a straightforward reflection or representative of normative femininity. This is further complicated by the fact that one of the primary thrusts of gendered proscriptions of interpersonal violence was greater scrutiny of *spousal* violence. One of the central claims of Wiener's book *Men of Blood* is that the prerogative of men to abuse or assault women, particularly their wives, in the private realm was not only increasingly contested during the Victorian era, but was concomitantly a matter of great anxiety and intervention for legislative bodies, the courts, social commentators and media. Furor over interpersonal violence was, in most cases,

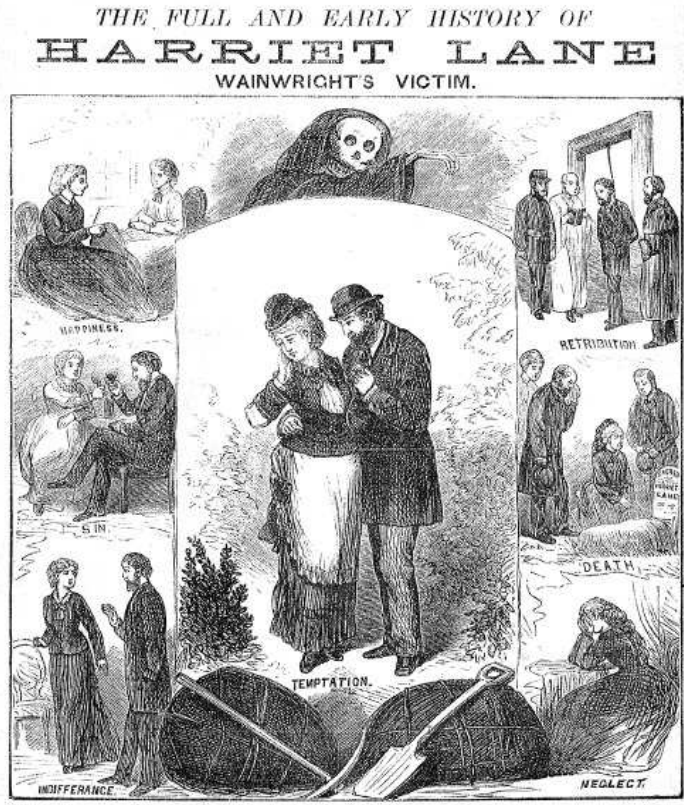


Figure 13  
Frontispiece to "The Full and Early History of Harriet Lane, Wainwright's Victim," Published by T. Taylor in London, (date unknown). This booklet was probably published in late 1875 or early 1876, since Wainwright is depicted at his hanging and he was hung in December of 1875.



according to Wiener, often about the delimiting of masculine perquisites in an age when the treatment of women was intertwined with their rising status as mother, moral compass and arbiter of familial respectability; nowhere was this issue more thorny or imperative than within the domestic abode. Unmarried and, by definition, lacking their own domestic sphere, governesses might represent female vulnerability in general, but portrayals of violence associated with them could not play out in the register of interpersonal *domestic* violence per se. If idealized womanhood was the driving force for new attitudes towards, and prioritization of, interpersonal violence, what role did the intrinsically flawed and subversive governess play as bloody female victim-of-violence par excellence?

The transition from fixation on the social plight of the governess to their susceptibility to, seemingly every day, environmental threats seems to indicate that the closing decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the governess becoming a register for the (perceived) vulnerabilities of the middle class in general. If agitation over interpersonal violence of all kinds was, ultimately, about the behavior of men, governesses offered an opportunity to ruminate on violence detached from these reigning discursive currents. This is borne out by the variety of ways in which governesses were portrayed as violated, significantly because they were depicted as injured or killed by a wide array of culprits, including women, children, or even inanimate objects like trains, cars, and poisonous gases, in addition to men. This would indicate that, unlike much of the interpersonal violence fixated on in the media, violence associated with the governess was less about inter-gender dynamics than the relationship of middle-class femininity to

violence itself. If unnaturally truncated from 'true' womanhood, i.e. becoming the wife and bearer of children to a man, governesses were therein endowed with the ability to represent respectable, middle class femininity in unusually flexible and self-reflexive ways—albeit ones that often dwelt on aberrance and suffering. The furor over governesses seems to have thus transitioned from discomfort with governessing itself, to an evocation of the perils of modern middle class life. This manifestation of cultural fixation on governess suffering was less about her specific duties or circumstances than using her peculiar identity as a medium for middle class anxieties.

This is not to say that this was the only discursive utility of the representational governess, who simultaneously functioned as a cautionary tale as about feminine helplessness, or fed the mill of sensationalist literature, which was constantly groping for bloody tales of woe and misfortune. Categories of violence associated with governesses during this time period reveal a great multiplicity of meanings that the violated female body could bear, and this chapter will examine three in particular, namely vulnerability to men as embodied by doomed romances, vulnerability to abusive work environments and vulnerability to the modern urban world. The chapter begins with one of the most historiographically explored avenues, namely the idea of the governess as 'sexually precarious.' This analysis will scrutinize the claim by previous historians that contemporaries were interested in the maimed or dead governess only as she embodied the 'fallen woman' stereotype, arguing instead that this was only a sub-facet of a wider interest in the governess as physically and emotionally violated in a multiplicity of ways. This will entail looking at governesses as menaced by male predators and imbricated in

suicide and infanticide. These topics are knit together by overarching debates about moral culpability in the case of romantic or sexual deviancy (most governess suicides being attributed to disappointment in love). Secondly, interpersonal violence between governesses and their female employers and students is also considered, particularly as it reveals uneasiness about the implications of upper-class women abusing other women of similar social status. Finally, governesses killed through bloody accidents in modern, urban spaces will be examined as, temporally, the final trend in representations of violated governesses. This last section reveals the ability of governesses to encapsulate anxieties about both the public status of women in the early twentieth century and the perils of modern inventions and activities. Ultimately, analysis of these categories of violence as they intersect with the representational governess will demonstrate that this particular cultural stereotype became a register for both negotiating and voyeuristically consuming the violation of the female body. Often, this process blurred the lines between violence and sensuality, which will be the subject of the next chapter.

### **Male Predators and ‘Fallen’ Governesses: Suicide, Infanticide and Sexual Violence**

As noted previously, historians and literary scholars have long conjectured about the Victorian fascination with the figure of the governess. Most recent scholarship has tended to argue that this popular fixation was actually predicated on controversy over the sexual precariousness of the governess, particularly as they embodied a “fall” from respectability analogous to the concept of middle-class women ‘falling’ into prostitution. According to some literary scholars and historians of Britain, the governess excited so much interest because she represented a culturally fraught and contested sexual grey

zone, one that constantly negotiated their status as women who worked versus ‘working women’, and therein any attendant correlations with outright prostitution.

Yet, this historiographical analysis fails to take into account the widespread association between governesses and violence. Interpreting the allure of the governess as simply embodying stained (class) dichotomies between prostitution and purity fails to take into account the full dynamics of most representations of governesses, which are overlaid with themes of physical suffering as much as, or more than, sexual disorder. Moreover, governesses were considered uniquely susceptible not only to the machinations of men, but also to the potential negative consequences of any romance. Isolated and lonely, governesses were considered to be both easy prey and emotionally fragile. Moral culpability was a factor, but these sources reveal less hand-wringing over governesses’ sexual irregularity than more general concerns about the heightened vulnerability of women (specifically middle class women) to the pitfalls of romantic entanglement, which included sexual indiscretion but could also encompass something as mundane as a broken heart.

This is substantiated by the fact that accounts of governess’s romantic or sexual behavior were equally concerned about the potential for love affairs to go wrong as with the moral attributes of the governess herself. Newspapers featured incidents of governesses killed by illicit lovers as eagerly and frequently as those murdered by their perfectly respectable fiancés or ex-boyfriends. For example, in 1904 *The Manchester Guardian* excitedly reported on a case in which George Ritson, stung by the refusal of his former sweetheart, governess Florence Royle, to say goodbye before he departed for

Canada, shot her in the head.<sup>78</sup> Ritson's gun was actually only loaded with blanks—by his own admission he only intended to scare Royle—but unfortunately he fired the gun at close range and the blank cartridges lodged in her skull. If the governess had been, in some way, morally culpable for the violent episode, the paper chose not to report those details and instead focused on the bloodiness of a doomed romance. They certainly didn't question the fact that the governess was found, half-dead on the street, in the early *morning*, begging the question of what she had been doing out in public the previous night.

This tolerant stance on the sexual propriety of women is actually less surprising than it might first appear. In her book on breach of promise law during the nineteenth century, Ginger Frost maintains that

...expectations of gender were far harder on men than women in courtship. Proper manly behavior demanded honesty, kindness to inferiors, responsibility for sexual immorality, and especially the keeping of promises. Though women also had to pass character tests, theirs were not as strict<sup>79</sup>

However, while men were held to higher standards, women had much more to lose, including their chastity or even—in the case of protracted courtship—many years of their young adulthood, essentially locked in a holding pattern as they waited for their 'real' lives as wives and mothers to begin. In the realm of courtship and romance women were considered to be both captive to the intentions of men (be they honorable or dishonorable) and thus at a distinct disadvantage that entitled them to sympathy. Frost

---

<sup>78</sup> "The Shooting of a Nursery Governess, The Accused in Court" *The Manchester Guardian*, April 6, 1904.

<sup>79</sup> Ginger Frost, *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class and Gender in Victorian England* (Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 9.

convincingly traces this dynamic through the courtroom, where women were hugely successful in suing men for seducing them and thereafter refusing to get married, often regardless of mitigating circumstances, like if the woman had herself jilted other men in the past.<sup>80</sup> Consequently, when governesses had unfortunate liaisons with men there were multiple cultural registers in which it could resonate, one of which was to view men as the initiators of sexual intimacy and women as the easily influenced recipient who relied on their good intentions. As a sort of discursive allegory for female suffering, governesses were an apt vehicle for extrapolating and sermonizing on the potential negative outcomes of romance and sex for respectable women. As Judith Walkowitz states in her important historical contribution *City of Dreadful Delight*, “concern over ‘dangerous’ sexual practices focused on much more than disorderly sexual conduct...”<sup>81</sup> These dangers were dramatized through narratives of governess romance-gone-bad, where the outcome is more gruesome than a breach of promise lawsuit.

None of this is to imply that the symbolic correlation of prostitution and governessing did not exist or cause controversies. In the late 1870s, former governess Maria Ann Roper pressed libel charges against her uncle Henry Pearson, who had been hounding her employers and acquaintances for her address under the pretext that she was leading “an abandoned life of immorality” on the streets of London and that he was acting on behalf of her worried parents.<sup>82</sup> Pearson had been telling Roper’s employers and acquaintances that she had formed an illicit relationship during her residence as

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>81</sup> Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>82</sup> “The Trial of Henry Pearson”, April 1878. *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*.

governess with the Palmer family, specifically with Mr. Palmer. He framed this first sexual lapse as the ignition to further deviancy, declaring that subsequently she became intimate with the local surgeon, chemist, druggist and neighbors, before finally becoming a streetwalker. Prior to the court case, Pearson's slurs on Roper's moral character had resulted in her losing at least one job and even threatened the employment of her brother. It is obvious from the court records that Maria Roper had not carried on illicit relationships with her employer *or* become a prostitute; indeed she had never even been out of contact with her parents that he claimed were so anxious about her.<sup>83</sup> Her uncle was consequently sentenced to two years in jail. What is illuminating about this incident is that her stalker uncle's smear campaign overtly mirrored the governess cum fallen woman trope. The sinister undertones of his quest to locate Roper probably indicate a sexual obsession with his niece, and it is not a stretch to conjecture that in representing his search for her as an attempt to save her from depravity he not only invented a handy cover story—one that would resonate with the social welfare trends of the time—but also articulated his own fantasies.

Clearly, governesses were vulnerable to this sort of sexual accusation. However, in this instance the 'fallen woman' stereotype was dismissed by the courts and popular press as ridiculous, and more indicative of Pearson's own immorality than that of his niece. *The Times* stated that Roper was "to all appearances and in manners a most respectable young woman" who aroused "the sympathies of the whole audience...not only out of regard for the apparent wrong which had been done to her, but for the

---

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

seemingly unnatural feelings towards her which animated the prisoner [her uncle].”<sup>84</sup> *The Manchester Guardian* claimed that the magistrate was particularly disgusted by the case, and “regretted his inability to order the prisoner the cat in addition to the sentence of two years’ hard labor.”<sup>85</sup> Their reaction does not reflect anxieties about the governess-as-prostitute, but rather aligns with an overarching perception of governesses as vulnerable to male acquaintances and their sexual plotting.

Late nineteenth-century accounts also make surprisingly little distinction between forms of sexual and physical intimidation. For example, in 1889 a governess named Rebecca M’Shane sued the Stewart family (with whom she had long been acquainted) for recovery of furniture that she alleged belonged to her and which they refused to return. The radical *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, however, largely glossed over this aspect of the litigation to emphasize the predatory relationship between the Stewarts and the governess, the latter being represented as an impressionable orphan with a small inheritance. Apparently, the Stewarts lured M’Shane into living with them (without telling her legal guardians) and pressured her into giving them large sums of money. Meanwhile, the father of the family “made improper overtures to her, which she resented; but he proceeded with his conduct and the result of the intimacy was that a child was born.”<sup>86</sup> Not only had Mr. Stewart seduced, or possibly raped, the governess but also “on several occasions he treated her in such a manner that she was black and blue about the body, and once he gave her two black eyes.” According to press accounts, the Stewarts

---

<sup>84</sup> “The Fourth Court” *The Times*, April 10<sup>th</sup> 1873, page 11.

<sup>85</sup> “A Surgeon Sentenced to Two Years Imprisonment for Libel” *The Manchester Guardian*, April 10<sup>th</sup> 1873.

<sup>86</sup> “Misfortunes of a Governess,” *Reynolds Newspaper*, December 8<sup>th</sup> 1889.



also physically prevented the governess from leaving, until she finally escaped by walking over four miles to a train station in the dead of night, thereafter reuniting with her male guardian.

It is revealing, and not a little comical, that the paper was compelled to conclude this dramatic tale of violent duress by recounting that when M'Shane informed her guardian about what had happened (including bearing an illegitimate child!) his immediate reaction was apparently to engage his solicitor to seek compensation for some furniture that the Stewarts refused to return. However much the reporter might imply otherwise, the reality of the court case was, after all, not about the illegitimate baby or physical abuse, but about recovering property. This illuminates not only the sensationalist bent of the media, but its priorities—namely governesses who fell victim to predation, particularly if it was physical or sexual in nature. What is more, letters read during the trial seem to indicate that the governess had been in a willing sexual relationship with Mr. Stewart, a fact that the paper does not comment upon, preferring instead to call attention to sexual, physical and financial exploitation of the governess.

Even in circumstances where governesses had obviously not only given in to temptation, but actively engaged in sexual misconduct, condemnation of such behavior coexisted with general concerns about the “seduction” and abuse of middle class women. An interesting example of this is uniquely situated in New York City, in which an English governess named Julia Curran was severely beaten and then finally strangled. Curran was killed in a cheap hotel that the press implied was involved in organized crime; even more damningly she had seemingly willingly entered the hotel with her

attacker while masquerading as his wife so they could secure a private room.<sup>87</sup> Regardless of the incriminating circumstances, *The Observer*, at least, emphasized mitigating circumstances like nationality, feminine vulnerability and social standing. While the reports admit that Curran might have been Irish, the headlines nevertheless read “*English Girl Strangled in Hotel*”, and the text referred to her as “an *English* governess [emphasis mine].” Clearly, her status as both an Englishwoman and a governess signaled that she deserved sympathy. The prestige of former employers was also invoked, the papers listing them by name as the Portuguese Minister at Stockholm, Lady Bellew in Galway, Ireland and Earl Grey in Montreal. They also printed the claims of Curran’s brother-in-law that she had been “lured to the hotel when ill and bewildered”, and in the same breath noted that Curran “was a stranger” to New York, only visiting with friends.” Thus, even in a case where a governess was seemingly consorting with men in a sexual context, it was construed as yet another example of their bodily vulnerability to a gauntlet of dangers—from youth and illness, to strange men and cities.

The most pervasive category of media that openly discussed governess’s sexual and romantic entanglements was in regards to their committing suicide. Significantly, some of these accounts did invoke the idea of the ‘fallen woman’, or respectable woman degraded by sexual immorality. “SAD SUICIDE OF A GOVERNESS” printed in *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, September 15, 1872, recounts the suicide of an American governess who jumped off the Waterloo Bridge, seemingly because she was unwilling to become a prostitute. According to testimony, and a suicide note found on the body,

---

<sup>87</sup> “Murder Mystery in New York: English Girl Strangled in Hotel Lured to Death” *The Observer*, August 25<sup>th</sup> 1912.

governess Alice Blanche Oswald traveled from the United States in the employ of a British woman who subsequently abandoned her on their arrival in London. After the American Consulate refused to pay for her return voyage, and she ran out of possessions to pawn or sell, Oswald felt that the only recourse left to her was prostitution, an untenable choice according to her letter: "I cannot tread the path of sin, for my dead mother will be watching me."<sup>88</sup> Financially debarred from returning to her country, and cast out from the only occupation available to her, this particular young woman preferred suicide to the prospect of sexual labor. The message is clear: if governessing failed, the only thing the governess had left to sell was her body. Drowning in the river was also a form of death that Victorian explicitly associated with prostitutes, the dirtiness and urban context of London water making it a particularly apposite grave for the impure streetwalker.<sup>89</sup> Other forms of sexual deviancy could also be seen as provoking governesses to kill themselves, as in 1870 when *The Western Mail* speculated that governess Emily Goulstone took a fatal dose of prussic acid because she felt guilty over her "illicit connection" with her employer, a parish priest.<sup>90</sup>

However, governesses were equally likely to be portrayed as killing themselves over romantic disappointments that did not hint at sexual dissolution, as in 1891 when the governess of a pastor hung herself from a picture rod after her fiancé broke off their

---

<sup>88</sup> "SAD SUICIDE OF A GOVERNESS." *Reynold's Newspaper*, September 15, 1872, News Section, London; Also reported on in *The Manchester Guardian* under the title of "The Miseries of a Poor Governess", September 11, 1872.

<sup>89</sup> Lynda Nead discusses the iconography of prostitute suicide-by-Thames in *Myths of Sexuality* on page 125.

<sup>90</sup> "Inquest" *The Western Mail*, August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1870.

engagement.<sup>91</sup> Another case, one that garnered attention throughout the UK and even in the colonies, was the suicide of a twenty-five year old governess named Rose Linnock in March of 1899. After her long-term romantic interest terminated their relationship in a “very strong and unkind letter, declining to have any further communication with her” Linnock killed herself by ingesting laudanum while alone on the Hampstead Heath late at night. The man’s harsh letters and her response to his final missive were found on her body and caused a huge sensation when the coroner publicly read aloud the following paragraph, printed word-for-word in most articles:

Your very humiliating letter is before me as I write; otherwise I could never have believed that it was possible for any man to give expression to so much loathing, hatred and contempt for a weak woman as your letter contains....Your words have wounded me very much, and I cannot answer them. You are one of the nobler sex; I am only a woman. Your words have stabbed me too deeply for words, and I cannot resent them. They are unkind, uncalled for, and very cruel; but...

“And there she ended” said *The Times of India*, a paper which also misspelled Linnock’s name and singularly claimed—likely with an eye to drama rather than truth—that the dead governess had been some sort of cripple, “deformed since she was four years of age”.<sup>92</sup> Obviously, the case lent itself to tropes of both governess misfortune and truisms about the emotional fragility of women and the power of men to injure them. In this case, the man involved apparently didn’t even intend to wreck such havoc. When called to the inquest to shed light on their relationship he responded to the coroner’s accusation that he had been “really very cruel and unkind” by arguing that he had no idea the woman

---

<sup>91</sup> “Romantic Suicide of a Governess”, *Reynold’s Newspaper*, August 30, 1891.

<sup>92</sup> “Suicide of a Governess: A Pathetic Letter”, *The Times of India*, March 24<sup>th</sup> 1899.

would take his letter so seriously, especially since his feelings for her had never been particularly passionate.<sup>93</sup> Apparently even men who were neither attempting to injure or seduce a governess could nevertheless cause their downfall.

In the context of doomed romance, governesses could also commit violence as well as be subject to it. In 1899 a nineteen-year-old governess and her father brought a seduction suit against her former employer, a widowed doctor, which revealed “when he first made attempts she scratched his face so severely that he bore the marks for days afterwards.”<sup>94</sup> More seriously, governesses could also garner public attention for killing their illegitimate babies. Yet even in the most shocking cases of governess infanticide the popular press was not particularly condemnatory. In February of 1865 when governess Susan Anne Medbury was arrested for attempting to dispose of the body of her illegitimate baby, press accounts are neutral if not sympathetic. It is not clear from the article whether the baby was stillborn or whether Medbury had killed it shortly after birth, but her attempts to conceal the corpse are graphically described—specifically that she left it inside a padlocked wooden box, sewn up in canvass for months before the subsequent, putrid smell alerted others to its contents.<sup>95</sup> Tellingly the thematic core of this literature is the gruesome discovery of the body, rather than speculation about the morals of the governess herself. Most accounts of governesses killing their infants seemed primarily interested in the violence itself, rather than angst over the ramifications of pre-marital sex or alarm that governesses might be killing babies. There was little to

---

<sup>93</sup> “Two Pathetic Incidents of the Weak: Suicide of a Governess on Hampstead Heath” *The Illustrated Police News*, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 1899.

<sup>94</sup> “Fulham Doctor and Governess. Action for Seduction.” *Reynold’s Newspaper*, January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1899.

<sup>95</sup> “Extraordinary Case of Concealment of Birth” *The Wallaroo Times and Mining Journal*, May 1865, page 5.

no speculation about whether she had murdered a live infant or hidden the corpse of a stillborn, and despite the grim circumstances Medbury was only condemned to one month in jail.<sup>96</sup>

In the end, this survey of literature featuring governesses' romances and sexual sins does not discredit earlier theories about their "sexual precariousness", but rather indicates that such a model is inadequate for fully explaining their iconic status in Victorian media. The cultural work done by the physically and sexually compromised governess was about more than linkages between female labor and sex; the multivariate 'precariousness' of governesses made them an effective medium for interrogating and exorcising a huge variety of transgressions and violations that were both common and contested in middle class life. This included anxieties that surrounded courtship and the likelihood that middle class women could be taken advantage of sexually and emotionally by the men they fell in love with. Rather than operating as the homologue of governess-labor, sexual immorality seems to have been conceived of as yet another mortal danger lurking in the lives of governesses.

***Women Hurting Women: Interpersonal Violence between Governesses and Female Employers and Students***

On Saturday afternoon, November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1880, the governess Miss Rosa Parlby was walking down the hall of her employer's house in Bedford, when the wife and mother of the family—Mrs. Annie Karlake—rushed out of her own dressing room and struck Parlby over the neck with a whip. She then began to slam the governess against a cabinet until Parlby's screams alerted her student and Karlake's daughter, Miss Karlake, to see

---

<sup>96</sup> "Proceedings of the Central Criminal Court," February 27, 1865, page 59.

what was happening. The younger Karlake helped the governess hold her mother down until they thought she had calmed. Yet, when they released her she lunged at Parlby again and kicked her violently until once again restrained. The governess was severely injured and fled the house to seek both medical attention and police intervention.

According to the reporter for *Reynold's Newspaper*, the community was agitated by both the unusual social prominence of the involved parties and the secretive manner in which the case was handled by the authorities. Annie's husband Kent Karlake was a wealthy Queen's Counsel and the case was heard by a special sitting of the divisional magistrates of Bedford. Spectators were prohibited from attending, with the exception of two members of the press and the latter were ordered to leave the courtroom immediately upon sentence being passed.<sup>97</sup>

There was no ostensible rationale for the attack. Karlake's behavior was not explained beyond some statements about her having "taken a great dislike" to the governess.<sup>98</sup> In one significant, but maddeningly vague, statement, Parlby admitted that she had "for some time...been in great bodily fear of her mistress."<sup>99</sup> Court testimony and a series of—apparently bizarre—statements made by the lawyer for the defense similarly revealed very little about the dynamics of the undoubtedly troubled relationship that preceded the attack. Multiple newspapers covering the story, even in an abbreviated form, commented on both the confusion and reticence of the defense lawyer, the *London Magnet* calling him "tongue-tied."<sup>100</sup> Besides entering a guilty plea one of the few

---

<sup>97</sup> "A 'Lady' Horsewhipping Her Governess", *Reynold's Newspaper* (London), November 21, 1880.

<sup>98</sup> "Country Intelligence-Assaulting a Governess" *The London Magnet*, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1880, page 2.

<sup>99</sup> "Horsewhipping", *Reynold's*.

<sup>100</sup> "Country Intelligence-Assaulting a Governess" *The London Magnet*, November 22, 1880, page 2.

coherent statements he made was that he had “never had such a cruel, such a painful case to conduct before.” Karslake was ultimately fined £100 and her husband was bound by the courts to ensure that she “ke[pt] the peace for twelve months.”<sup>101</sup>

The details the press chose to report and the thematic spin they gave them distinctly implied that Mrs. Karslake’s greatest failing was a lack of respectability. Headlines needled her social stature through the sarcastic deployment of quotation marks, one reading: “A ‘Lady’ Horsewhipping Her Governess”. (Interestingly when, a few months later, this story was run in a New Zealand newspaper, it was a verbatim reprint with the exception of the caustic quotes around ‘lady.’<sup>102</sup>) The *London Daily News* ominously implied that there were even more perverse, secret layers to Mrs. Karslake’s moral disorder, as “there were matters in the case which it was not thought proper to mention, and Mr. Mitchell [the defense lawyer] pleaded guilty for the purpose of letting the matter drop.” Moreover, “there had been several letters written, which it would not be advisable to read publicly...”<sup>103</sup> Karslake is thus framed as not only violent, but also imbricated in some unmentionable behavior that was apparently damaging enough to make a guilty plea preferable to exposing it to public notice. The allusion to secret letters implies that the shameful information was possibly sexual in nature.

However, the press did not simply condemn Karslake as a disgrace to her class, they further underscored her impropriety by highlighting the feminine respectability and vulnerability of her victim. Most papers took the time to offer a brief background

---

<sup>101</sup> “Horsewhipping”, *Reynold’s*.

<sup>102</sup> “A Lady Horsewhipping Her Governess”, *The New Zealand Herald*, Volume XVII, Issue 5985, 22 January 1881, Page 7.

<sup>103</sup> *The London Daily News*, November 15, 1880, pg 6



narrative for Parlby that revealed that she was very young and accomplished. The *London Daily News* claimed that Parlby was “a lady of considerable position and high education” and most emphasized that she had mastered a wide variety of European languages.<sup>104</sup> Thus, while the reader primarily gleans that Karslake is upper class and prone to unexplainable violence, her governess is conversely portrayed as a particularly defenseless, if talented and refined, young woman who comes from a respectable social circle. Moreover, the press amplified her victimhood by fixating on her suffering: her flight from the house while wounded; days of medical treatment; her hysteria at the trial as she attempted to recount the painful events. Despite their eagerness to offer a blow-by-blow account of the attack, they were conversely largely uninterested in Karslake’s mental state or reaction to being prosecuted.

This simultaneous fascination with Karslake’s behavior and disinclination to even conjecture on its root cause can be explained on several levels. For one, as has been discussed, violence was generally considered to be the purview of men. Historically women were linked to crimes like witchcraft, prostitution and infanticide—immoral behavior that was, as Louise Jackson and Shani D’Cruze argue, “primarily associated...with women’s sexual and reproductive functions.”<sup>105</sup> Yet even in the case of these long recognized modes of feminine crime, this era saw a great deal of reticence on the part of judges, juries and public opinion to condemn women as criminals—reflected in decreasing rates of women being prosecuted, convicted and, especially,

---

<sup>104</sup> *The London Daily News*, November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1880, pg 6

<sup>105</sup> Shani D’Cruze and Louise A. Jackson, *Women, Crime and Justice in England since 1660* (New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2009), 2.

executed.<sup>106</sup> Reluctance to accuse or punish female transgressors was fostered by gendered perceptions of female weakness, or the idea that women didn't have the grit to commit serious crimes knowingly, and that if they did so it was more than likely that they were insane. By the end of the Victorian era the rate of women being acquitted on the grounds of insanity had almost tripled.<sup>107</sup>

Criminal insanity on the part of women was usually blamed on the explosive nature of their reproductive capacities. These natural forces were deemed so powerful that should they go awry the results were presumed to be catastrophic. Literary scholar Andrew Mangham, in his monograph on violent women in Victorian literature, argues that sensation fiction of the time heavily featured women's capacity for violence, but almost exclusively as a facet of gendered disorder. Bodily stages of the female life were regarded with as much fascination as trepidation: the beginning of menstruation could incite girls to attack their families and lovers; insanity brought on by pregnancy could lead inexorably to infanticide, child murder and husband-killing; the cessation of menstruation could cause women to shrivel emotionally and physically, and therein lead them to harbor diabolical intentions towards community children.<sup>108</sup> According to Mangham, the trope revolved around the perversion of women's most vaunted roles and feelings, their special relationship to lovers or children were perceived as easily inverted by the very biological processes (sexual maturation, pregnancy and birth) which created

---

<sup>106</sup> Wiener, 120.

<sup>107</sup> Wiener, 133.

<sup>108</sup> See: Andrew Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture* (Hampshire, UK; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), especially chapter one "Explosive Materials: Legal, Medical, and Journalistic Profiles of Violent Women", 7-39.

those bonds in the first place.<sup>109</sup> Thus, crimes like husband poisoning and infanticide were “explainable” and, however perverse, fit neatly into reigning understandings of female behavior.

Yet this language and literature of feminine violence was unsuitable for explicating the behavior of women who abused their governesses. On one hand, the categories used to make sense of female violence were essentially predicated on their reproductive bodies and concomitant relationships to husbands and children, but they had no such relationship to the governess. Their association with the governess was, significantly, not inherently gendered at all, but rather characterized as one of supervisor and subordinate. Therein, the most accurate description of this sort of aggression is that against an employee, and thus implies that the mother of the house was not acting as the uncontrollable container of reproductive energies but rather as an abusive boss who terrorizes an employee in the workplace. The latter characterization would also create uncomfortable connections between the exulted domestic abode and the capitalist economy from which it was supposed to offer respite. Moreover, the inherent weakness of the female mind and body becomes theoretically tenuous in the context of one adult woman attacking another adult woman of roughly equivalent age and social standing. Karslake, for example, was certainly a poor model for feminine fragility when whipping, body slamming and kicking her governess—the latter being a full-grown woman in her mid-twenties.

---

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 9.

This unique altercation—between two unrelated middle class women—obviously interested contemporaries, but it also challenged popular understandings of appropriate middle class behavior and the capacities of women to be violent. Moreover, they were uncomfortable with the implications of an employer-employee relationship between upper class women. These power inequalities were thus reformulated as moral characteristics: the governess represented a “respectable” woman, who was passive and weak; the female aggressor was scapegoated as a “disreputable” woman who lacked decency or kindness. This simplistic dichotomy between “passive” and “bad” would quickly break down if real incidents were interrogated too closely, thus most accounts made a concerted effort to downplay mitigating circumstances or refused to investigate or report any history of rancor or disagreement between a governess and her employer. Indeed, these narratives become almost surreal as they depict graphic violence that is seemingly random and totally inexplicable. Like in the Karlake case, the mother-aggressor is usually not framed as insane, justifiably aggravated or even someone who is temperamentally violent—they are just nebulously bad or mean spirited. While this explanation for cruel behavior was very one-dimensional, it also subtly implied that even women in the domestic abode could be abusers, an interesting twist on the widespread rhetoric that men perpetrated violence in the home. The moral of the conflict is therefore that truly “good” women—i.e. those that are passive, innocent, and inherently vulnerable in all ways—are at risk of abuse and violation in all circumstances, indeed even the denizens of their own class and gender could take advantage of their helplessness.

That woman-on-woman violence was at the heart of public interest in these cases (rather than the generalized appeal of sensationalist violence) is corroborated by the fact that male actors are almost entirely sidelined in these narratives. While Mr. Karlake was ultimately endowed with the legal responsibility of controlling his wife's aggression, the violent agency is ascribed solely to Mrs. Karlake. It is not even clear if he was home when the incident occurred. Indeed, the press usually ascribed full responsibility for the brutalization of governesses to the wife/mother, even when there was evidence to the contrary. In July of 1911 a governess brought a slander action against her former employer, the assistant director of education for Cheshire, and his wife. However, the defamation suit against the husband was sidelined by a press eager to recount the physical altercation between the two women that occurred at the crux of the drama. As told by the popular press, the wife had triumphantly informed that governess that she and her husband had "laid a trap" using marked coins, intending to prove that the governess had been stealing from them. She claimed that prior to the husband leaving that day they had put the marked money in a conspicuous purse, and now that half of it had disappeared she intended to forcibly search the governess. Reporting their subsequent conversation (which may have come from the court records or the reporter's imagination) the mother supposedly exclaimed, "Wait until the Doctor returns, and we will strip every stitch of clothing off of you and find your secret pockets." The governess became frightened and tried to escape into the garden where the woman followed the governess and took her purse, and then, finding no marked money inside, violently attempted to search her person, knocking off the governess's hat and tearing open her blouse hooks.<sup>110</sup> Between

---

<sup>110</sup> "A Governess's Slander Action" *The Times*, July 8, 1911, page 17, Issue 39632, col. E.

the erotic implications of one woman tearing off the clothes of another, and the unusual interpolation of supposed conversations between the women, this press account is thematically very similar to pornographic fiction—a point that should be born in mind for the next chapter.

This particular narrative fixates on the governess's body as both the foreground of conflict and an object of scrutiny. It is both accused of harboring stolen property and used as a justification for the assault, the wife claiming that she had the right to search the governess because she “knew you were guilty the moment I accused you, because you blushed.”<sup>111</sup> This press narrative is entirely in sympathy with the governess (as, incidentally, were the courts who awarded her £250 in damages), a stance which underscores the bad behavior of the female employer who both misreads the governess body and feels wrongly justified in her impulse to subject it to violence. She is, in every sense of the word, both cruel and violent as seen by the popular press. The reports never questioned whether or not the governess could have been guilty, thus sidestepping the issue of what did, in fact, happen to the coins, and if nothing had what that implied about the mother's sanity. Moreover, the paper implies that the wife is singularly responsible for the assault, despite the fact that she clearly indicates that he is as involved in the ploy to oust the governess as herself. In focusing on the attack and the altercation between the two women—rather than the slander suit or previous conspiring with the husband—the implication is that the violent agency is entirely that of the wife. Prior to being violently searched, the governess also apparently had agreed to the search only if a policeman or a

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

*male* neighbor could be present. The husband is thus painted as less culpable, and the governess looks to men to save her from the physical invasion of an inexplicably cruel woman.

Even in cases where the mother and wife of the family were not directly responsible for violence perpetrated, she is nevertheless perceived to be at fault. ‘The Stories of Miss Thomas’s Wrongs’ printed in the *Western Mail* described the tribulations of a governess who took up a post as the governess of the three daughters of Mrs. Haigh of Grimsby Hall. Apparently, the governess arrived at the mansion and was informed that the mother was an invalid and never saw anyone, so she awkwardly introduced herself to the daughters and attempted to begin their lessons. Thereafter, things went from strange to terrible when the daughters began tormenting the governess, first by ignoring her and mocking her attempts to tutor them and then, more seriously, by nailing down her windows and then smoking out her bedroom with small fires or sulfur dropped down the chimney, or pouring cold water over her face to wake her in the middle of the night.<sup>112</sup> The governess wrote letters to the mother (who seems to have lived in the same house!) begging her to intervene, but when she received no reply she eventually left the household, and later brought an assault suit against the family. The subsequent trials largely revolved around the question of whether the children, or the mother, were at fault (pertinently, while referred to as ‘children’ and ‘girls by the press, the students ranged in age from 16 to 20 years old). The first trial concluded that Mrs. Haigh should be prosecuted rather than her daughters, as it was her duty to control her children and protect

---

<sup>112</sup> ‘The Stories of Miss Thomas’s Wrongs’, *The Western Mail*, 1889.

her subordinates. The appeals case ended on a technicality and was dismissed. Importantly, the press gave very little background information on the Haigh family—other to imply that the mother was a lazy, bad mother—but did offer a bleak background for the governess, who was “an orphan, 21 years of age, her father having been a ship-owner and her mother the daughter of an English clergyman.” Besides being born the granddaughter of a priest, her personal references are revealed to be pastors and gentlemen, thus corroborating her claims to victimhood through an emphasis on the respectability and morality of her social circle. Whatever the legal outcome of this unfortunate episode, the narrative promulgated by popular media is one that underlines the vulnerability of “good” middle class women to the selfish and violent impulses of even their own brethren.

### **Modern Dangers and Fatal Accidents**

Historian Rob Sindall succinctly narrates the irony of the Victorian era in that the most powerful class in a society, namely the burgeoning middle classes, had “a growing feeling of security in all aspects of life except that of physical confrontation, primarily on an individual level and secondly on a class level.”<sup>113</sup> Sensationalist literature of the time both reflected and contoured these fears, placing street crime and sexual disorder at the center of social disorder, particularly as it played out in the urban landscape.

While hysteria about the threat of the thronging poor is reflected in some popular press narratives of assaults on governesses, it is not the dominant motif. Some examples of common thievery or lower class brutality against governesses do exist, for example,

---

<sup>113</sup> Sindall, 7.



*The Northern Echo* (based in Darlington) covered a case in which a governess was partially strangled and repeatedly bludgeoned with a knobbed walking-stick by a local farm hand who was enraged when she (mistakenly, according to her account) ignored his shouted command that she stop walking in his field and return to the public footpath.<sup>114</sup> In a later incident, reported on in 1906 by *The Manchester Guardian*, an indigent and probably intoxicated ex-soldier attacked a governess passerby with the intention of taking her purse, causing both to fall into a deep ditch before he escaped with her money and jewelry.<sup>115</sup> However, these incidents are deviations in the genre. This does not mean that governesses were or were not robbed or assaulted in public spaces by lower class individuals but rather that this kind of incident was less salient to the objectives of the press and interests of their readers. Instead, most accounts of governesses injured or killed by accidents or public are similar to an October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1887 article that ran in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, reading:

#### TERRIBLE DEATH OF A GOVERNESS

Miss Coleman, a governess in the employ of a medical gentleman at Tamworth, Warwickshire, met with a frightful death yesterday. She was going on a visit to some relatives, and while crossing the metals at Kingsbury station was knocked down by a train that she had not observed. The body was frightfully mutilated, the head being carried along a considerable distance, and not found until some hours afterwards<sup>116</sup>

Though short, this article is representative of a slew of media blurbs that appeared throughout the nineteenth century and into early twentieth century regarding governesses who were maimed or killed in public spaces. Ghoulish and often abrupt, these articles

---

<sup>114</sup> *The Northern Echo* (Darlington), September 19, 1881.

<sup>115</sup> "Attack on a Governess" *The Manchester Guardian*, September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1906.

<sup>116</sup> "Terrible Death of a Governess" *The Pall Mall Gazette* (London), October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1887.

implied that sudden death could lurk in your neighborhood or on your daily commute. Unlike other narratives of physical danger that threatened the governess or was even internal to her being, this trope saw the material context, rather than other people, as a potential hazard. Obviously, the vulnerability of governesses in one realm made them apt vehicles for encompassing danger in another.

It has long been established by historians of the Victorian era that Britons were both profoundly excited by, and anxious about, the rapid development of urban centers and the attendant technological innovations that made this growth possible. Earlier on in the century, those who had the capacity to explore and exploit urban spaces were generally the privileged, meaning upper-class men. Metropolitan space became particularly contested and fetishized during the 1880s, in part because London was the largest city on earth, with a parallel social, financial and political importance to match, but also because it was increasingly wracked by new forms of media, public leisure activities and mass-philanthropic or political movements.<sup>117</sup> Rapid commercialization and new modes of mobility fostered (or festering, depending on who you asked) in urban centers allowed marginalized groups like working men, political radicals, or women to imagine urban space as a realm in which they could, and should, venture—to shop, protest or undertake charitable endeavors. But these transformations in urban culture and landscape did not go uncontested or fail to evoke anxieties, particularly in regards to the implications of women forging onto the streets. As Judith Walkowitz says, “the city...was interpreted as a negative environment for respectable women, one that

---

<sup>117</sup> Walkowitz, 18.

threatened to erase the protective identity conferred on them by family, residence, and social distinctions.”<sup>118</sup>

Governesses had a unique relationship to public space, largely because they defied traditional explanations for, or perceptions of, women’s movement in urban areas. For a very long time any women moving in urban spaces were categorized as prostitutes, as Judith Walkowitz’s work demonstrates. However, at the turn of the century, city spaces were slowly redefined as a leisure space for women, a transition which historian Erika Rappaport reveals was enabled by the entrenchment of shopping as an activity that was both respectable and inherently feminine.<sup>119</sup> Not being a prostitute or a shopper, the governess fit neither the category of the average female city dweller nor that of a visitor—rather, she was an anomaly, being a respectable, middle class woman who had to move through urban space for work. Importantly, unlike a working class woman, the governess was not perceived to be either culpable for or desirous of this state of affairs. She was not an agent in public space but a victim of it.

Therein, as a social actor who awkwardly bridged independence and dependency, mobility and confinement, the governess was a middle class woman with an unusual amount of exposure to public spaces that was not defined by immorality or leisure, but rather by movement. This is encapsulated by the invention of a vehicle called a ‘governess car’, which became popular around 1900, and featured a design conducive for a woman to transport children. A late addition to the roll of horse-drawn carriages, the

---

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>119</sup> Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London’s West End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

governess car was very small (so that it could be pulled by a small horse or pony, beasts that a lady could control) and oriented around safety and stability, having higher walls than a dog-cart and a low center of gravity so that it wouldn't topple over easily.<sup>120</sup> Though it could technically seat four adults, it was really intended for a woman and little children. Governesses' special relationship to urban space is thus underscored by a mode of transportation that was intended to serve their unique need for a safe and respectable way to traverse the city without the supervision of a guardian or male servant.

Yet despite the ostensible respectability of a governess moving in urban space, and the obvious recognition that she needed to do so encapsulated signaled by the invention of the governess cart, the turn of the century saw more fixation on the consequences of governesses moving in urban space rather than less. The daily reports of urban accidents which peppered nineteenth century media increasingly featured the governess as a victim of the city landscape: killed while stepping off a tram, knocked down by motor-lorries, or mauled by traffic accidents. Even the governess car—constructed to be safe and woman-friendly—could be construed as a source of mortal peril. In 1906, for example, a governess standing next to her governess car was killed, along with the seven-month-old baby she was carrying, when her startled pony knocked her over and caused her and the infant to be crushed under the passing wheels of a heavily laden lorry.<sup>121</sup> Beyond the dangers posed by her own vehicle, the first decade of the twentieth century portrayed *all* modes of urban transportation as extremely dangerous

---

<sup>120</sup> Trev Broughton and Ruth Symes, eds. *The Governess: An Anthology* (Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 44-45.

<sup>121</sup> "A Sad Street Accident" *The Manchester Guardian*, March 5, 1906.

for the traveling governess. As governesses became less and less common, the pre-war years nevertheless saw the continued publicization of their violent ends, though now as victimized by urban space and the modern conveyances that dotted its landscape.

Governesses were undeniably a conduit for middle class anxieties about urban space, but it should not be forgotten that this was also an exercise in the voyeuristic consumption of gore and violence. As early as 1858 the *Southern Medical and Surgical Journal* featured a pithy blurb that revealed the morbid entertainment value of a governess violated by urban mishap. In the glibly titled “Value of a Young Lady’s Teeth,” the journal informed its readers that “an English governess was recently knocked down by a carriage, and lost by the accident all her teeth” and that the Paris courts had deemed the accident worth 8,000 francs in compensation.<sup>122</sup> Subtexts of morbid amusement or sensationalist indulgence were often more pronounced when the governess was injured or killed while residing in other countries. The accidental deaths of English governesses in France were frequently announced in British newspapers, as in 1913 when a governess and the two French children she was with died when their motor-car suddenly plunged into the Seine in a freak accident (the car hadn’t even been moving or turned on, just sitting on the embankment).<sup>123</sup> A year later, the *Manchester Guardian* featured the death of an English governess residing in the suburbs of Paris who had been gruesomely killed by a train. She had apparently spent the day visiting another English governess in the city, and on her return journey her umbrella caught on a carriage of a

---

<sup>122</sup> “Value of a Young Lady’s Teeth” *The Southern Medical and Surgical Journal* XIV, no. 4 (1858): 290. Nineteenth Century collections Online.

<sup>123</sup> “Motor-Car in the Seine-Children and Governess Perish”, *The Manchester Guardian*, April 21, 1913.

passing train and she was dragged for some time before being mangled under the wheels.<sup>124</sup> More exotically, media also showcased the violent deaths of British governesses who resided in the colonies, as when a railway accident in Egypt mortally wounded a governess passenger, or when a governess in Cape Town had her foot smashed off when the cab she was in collided with a train.<sup>125</sup> Presumably, the foreign locale both heightened the drama of these incidents and allowed readers to enjoy the horrors from a greater remove. Of course middle class women everywhere could be hit by trains or killed in car accidents, but not all were an eminently vulnerable governess, doubly menaced by colonial dangers or foreign urban centers like Paris.

Governesses were not only portrayed as killed by modern transportation, but also by modern inventions or leisure activities. In 1901 a governess and her fourteen year old student drowned while swimming at a beach in Ireland, the governess having “dashed into the water” when the girl suddenly began to scream and thrash. As *The Irish Times* melodramatically put it “the catastrophe is somewhat shrouded in detail, but there can be little doubt that the little girl, finding herself gradually sinking, threw her arms about her would-be rescuers neck and thus caused a double sacrifice.”<sup>126</sup> Leisure bathing was a new trend for Britons at the turn of the century, and thus a governess drowning with her student while doing so had connotations of modern peril. Another modern peril was that of monoxide poisoning in houses fitted with gas stoves. In 1923 a woman described only

---

<sup>124</sup> “Englishwoman’s Death in France” *The Manchester Guardian*, July 17, 1914.

<sup>125</sup> “Railway Accident in Egypt”, *The Manchester Guardian* June 1<sup>st</sup> 1908; *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, May 5<sup>th</sup> 1908.

<sup>126</sup> “A Young Lady and her Governess Drowned” *The Irish Times*, June 28<sup>th</sup> 1901.

as an “old lady” governess in her mid-80s died from gas poisoning as she sat in her armchair—a relic of the past killed by innovations of the modern age.<sup>127</sup>

Accounts of governesses killed in urban accidents were not ubiquitous, probably because governessing was an increasingly defunct mode of education for young children or teenage girls. Governesses had never been common, but in statistical terms they were essentially non-existent by the interwar years. Regardless of how nominal this mode of referencing governesses might have been in the scope of published materials, it was one of the final ways that a mass reading public encountered this social actor as a member of daily life, rather than as a historic actor or fictional character. This final evolutionary stage in the discourse of physically imperiled governesses rarely commented on their duties, unhappiness, spinsterhood or even suffering. ‘Governess’ had become equivalent with victim, and evoked the modern condition rather than specific concerns about the fraught social or gendered dynamics of her life as a female, middle class laborer. Her violation was an analogy that now had little to do with the specifics of her job; her socio-cultural import had morphed into a cautionary tale on the sudden deadliness of modern space.

### **Conclusion**

All of the cultural mechanisms for both invoking and exorcising the ‘governess problem’ grappled with the void between what all women were supposed to be (wives and mothers thoroughly circumscribed by domesticity) and what governesses were (well-educated and middle class and yet functioning as an employee in non-familial spaces).

---

<sup>127</sup> “Gas Poison Peril” *The Manchester Guardian*, January 27<sup>th</sup> 1923.

The tensions generated by this the gap between the socio-economic reality and gendered philosophy were coupled with bodily harm from the beginning of governesses becoming an important cultural figure, firstly through a model of internal disease and decay, and later in the mode of violence. The governess was particularly handy as a way to reflect on the multiple registers in which gendered violence and violation could operate, which included, but was not limited to, violence perpetrated by men. Their social, financial emotional and physical vulnerability could be mobilized to brand them as ideal representations of the need to protect women from violence or modern, often urban, threats. Moreover, they invoked the ranging socio-cultural battles over the limits of gendered aggression even as they sidestepped some of the most fraught issues associated with it, namely violence within the family unit—particularly that against wives and children. The governess refracted some of these cultural anxieties by being injured in a home, but not *her* home. Family members, but not *her* family members, assaulted or killed her. She was menaced by urban space and modern practices, not sexually or socially (as was the discursive norm), but *literally* in disastrous encounters with the objects and engines of the city landscape. The ambiguity of her position thus made her an ideal candidate for representing and exorcising cultural anxieties about violence as intersected with contemporaneous debates over romance, femininity and urban life, even, or especially, as she obviated some of the most socially subversive aspects of these debates.



### CHAPTER 3: 'SPARE THE ROD AND SPOIL THE CHILD'—THE GOVERNESS AS SADIST

Beyond their prevalence in the news and fiction, governesses were also ubiquitous in Victorian pornography. However, the erotic *British* governess (for the same cannot be said of the French) is almost exclusively imagined as a flagellating sadist. Besides the erotic memoir *The Romance of Lust* (circa 1870), no pornographic book published after 1820 or pre-dating 1901—that I know of—ever depicts a governess as anything other than a sadomasochistic flagellator. While incestuous trysts with family members or the seduction of domestic servants were hugely prevalent in Victorian pornography, the governess seemed to be the sole member of the middle-class household who was excluded from the orgiastic free-for-all. Rather than engaging in penetrative anal, oral or genital encounters, she was an erotic actor whose appeal and function revolved around punitive violence. Indeed, I initially began this project because I wondered why governesses were exclusively co-opted for this very specific fetish, when their theorized sexual precariousness as pseudo-prostitute and/or domestic interloper would seemingly incite more conventional fantasies. Why were governesses not being fantasized about as the potential sexual partner of employers or students? What was it about the governess that made her so suitable for violent fantasies, while largely precluding her from other kinds of imagined pleasures?

When I turned to extant scholarship for an answer I realized that while I had assumed that governess pornography was a facet of popular fascination with governesses, historians and scholars who deal with her celebrity have tended to assume that the

birching governess was an oblique manifestation that had little or no bearing on cultural understandings of her sexuality or body. Why? Because most scholars believe that the fetishized governess was actually, secretly supposed to embody a man. Steven Marcus set this prevailing methodological standard in his groundbreaking 1967 book *The Other Victorians*, arguing that the governess flagellation scene was a transposition of the common nineteenth-century practice of public school teachers disciplinarily birching their male students. Consequently, Marcus theorized that governess flagellation pornography was an obfuscation of homosexual desire. The ostensibly female governess beating the seemingly female student was a screen for the actual context—upper class men harboring violent same-sex desires contingent on their formative school experiences.

According to Marcus, safely prescribed as female on female, this same-sex scenario served as a “kind of last-ditch compromise with and defense against homosexuality.”<sup>128</sup> Upper class men, terrified of their homosexual impulses and (supposedly) faced with a dearth of homoerotic pornographic materials, co-opted the governess and her students as stand-ins for their real desires. In support of this theory, Marcus alleged that the rod was a masqueraded penis, and beyond these “detachable appendages” the typical erotic governess featured “muscular biceps”, “hairy arms and thighs” and a large “phallic” body that distinctively marked her as, indeed, a him.<sup>129</sup> In this theory, the governess body was nothing more than an unconvincing disguise—a tool that allowed closeted men to indulge in homosexual fantasies at a remove.

---

<sup>128</sup> Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1964. Reprint, 1974), 269.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

Successive scholarship has relied on Marcus's analysis of flagellation pornography with little or no modification, which seems problematic when some of his assumptions are patently untrue (such as his argument that male same-sex pornography did not exist in the Victorian era, when in fact male-male anal and oral sex were very common in both erotica and nascent obscene photography). By taking Marcus's analysis as the final word on flagellation, most historians, with a few exceptions like Coral Lansbury and Sharon Marcus, have therein tended to ignore or glance over the flagellating governess because they assume that she is simply an ambiguously-gendered, pornographic stereotype.<sup>130</sup> Even author Ian Gibson's book on flagellation in British society fails to make the connection between governess-mania and the governess as archetypal flagellant, an omission exacerbated by his belief that the minutiae of the flagellation fantasy were ultimately ancillary to the bigger issue of cyclical sexual abuse in the British education system.<sup>131</sup>

This scholarly disregard has precluded careful analysis linking the sadist-governess into the widespread furor associated with governesses in orthodox media. By assuming that all flagellation pornography was produced in a nexus of internalized abuse and homosexual repression, this extremely prevalent Victorian sexual fantasy has been shorn of its relationship to a wider, discursive cultural web. I attempt to partially address that gap here, firstly by contending that it is a sweeping generalization to assume that the

---

<sup>130</sup> Coral Lansbury argues that the pornographic-governess was obviously a woman, but does so in the context of her becoming the tool of misogynistic violence: *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers and Vivisection in Edwardian England* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 112-119; Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 135-148.

<sup>131</sup> While this is the primary thesis of *The English Vice: Beating, Sex and Shame in Victorian England and After*, Gibson makes this stance particularly explicit in the conclusion.

erotic-governess was always, even necessarily, a foil to homosexuality. In the first place, the “hairy arms” and mustaches alleged by Marcus are strangely absent in all texts that have been consulted for this project. But even more importantly, the topography of British governess-obsession indicates that she was an overt stereotype with explicitly sexualized baggage contingent on her femininity. As has been shown in chapters one and two, the body of the governess was an object of intense public scrutiny, much of which hinged on her feminine capacity to experience violence. This particular body was not a meaningless or neutral construct that could be co-opted by those with ulterior motives in a totally straightforward manner; it was an established icon of *female* violation. It is improbable that texts which conceived of the governess as the agent of sadomasochism could really have little or nothing to do with her mainstream notoriety as an emblem, or vector, of corporeal pain. Beyond it being implausible that these two trends would have been theoretically independent of one another, it is also evident that flagellation erotica mimicked the voyeurism of governess-woe stories in conventional media, and conversely influenced the contours of that same literature by perpetuating links in the popular mind between governesses and ritualized pain.

This final chapter is predicated on the idea that while governess pornography is ‘fiction’ and highly circumscribed by the fetishistic logic of sadomasochism, this does not sever the connection between the genre and other types of mass media that purport to be ‘real’, ‘factual’ or reflective of contemporary social problems. Consequently, governess pornography demands analysis and historicization as a source that participated in, and was reflective of, widespread cultural trends. Therein, I have two objectives in

chapter three; firstly to prove that governesses were not “secretly” men, and, secondly, to therein argue that governess pornography was actually an interactive extension of wider fascination with governesses and bodily pain. By “interactive” I mean that it was a genre that was both permeated by, *and* actively contributed to, discourses which linked the governess to the corporal experience of pain. I will begin with a brief overview of corporeal punishment and pornography in British society, how they intersected in flagellation fantasy, and where the governess fit into this trend. Next, I will argue that the erotic governess was emphatically not a man; a claim substantiated by both the illustrations that accompanied flogging erotica and the emphases in the text on the desirability of her most ladylike features.

The gender of the pornographic governess is very important to establish, largely because it proves that the erotics of the flogging narrative were predicated not on homosexuality but on a form of sadomasochism that fetishized *female* capacities for brutality and suffering. Moreover, by recognizing that the pornographic governess was a woman—and that her femininity played a large role in the sexual narrative—it opens up the possibility of seeing this fantasy as yet another manifestation of the wider fascination with governesses and pain. This chapter will thus conclude by charting the ways in which governess pornography mimicked and manipulated orthodox literature in a huge variety of ways, from philosophizing on the humanitarianism of whipping, to fixating on the bloodiness of violation.

### **Corporal Punishment, Flagellation and the Governess in British Society**

Flagellation is defined as ritualistic corporal punishment administered with a specialized implement—usually whips, canes, switches or the birch (the latter being a bunch of long twigs tied together, usually after having been brined). As a disciplinary measure, flogging reached back into Roman times and was associated with religious self-mortification practiced by some Catholic monastic sects. Flagellation as a sex act was/is traditionally administered to the buttocks, and was initially understood to be an aphrodisiac or form of sexual aid for erectile dysfunction, the physiological argument being that beating the backside brought blood rushing into the pelvis, thereby heating and exciting “seminal matter.”<sup>132</sup> Early pornographic texts that depicted flagellation did so in this capacity, as in the 1749 classic by John Cleland *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* when one of the protagonist’s lovers, Mr. Barville, is supposedly too corpulent and thus torpid to achieve erection unless he is lashed on his buttocks until he bleeds.<sup>133</sup>

In the nineteenth century, pornographic depictions of sexual flagellation morphed from a prelude to sex, or form of foreplay, to the main event. Many pornographic texts began and ended with the flogging narrative, eroticizing not genitalia or the capacity of the rod to arouse these body parts, but the infliction of pain itself. The most important components of the narrative became the agents, mechanisms, and signifiers of pain, from the implement of punishment, the authority of the victimizer and submission of the victim, to the signs of violation on the buttocks like bruising, slash marks and pouring

---

<sup>132</sup> Lisa Z. Sigel, *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 30-31.

<sup>133</sup> John Cleland, *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (Paris: Isidore Liseux, 1749), Project Gutenberg EBook. Accessed July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

blood. In Britain this trend was correlated with the increasingly fetishistic tenor of pornography. Previously, obscene English literature had oriented around the ‘bawdy’, an erotic sensibility that Karen Halltunen defines as “an innocent and unself-conscious kind of sexual writing especially attentive to themes of cuckoldry and scatology, which tended to treat sex as an uncomplicated animal act and source of ribald humor.”<sup>134</sup> The eroticization of flogging was something new; it was not predicated on the naturalness of the human body and its desires, but rather glorified the capacity of humans to be sexually excited by the perverse, to be pleased by pain. Corporeal violence was at the epicenter of the fantasy, and tellingly traditional components of erotica—like erections, orgasms or penetration—became ancillary. Sometimes the victim enjoyed it, sometimes not. Sometimes the person inflicting the whipping enjoyed it, sometimes it wasn’t clear. Sometimes one or the other achieved orgasm, sometimes not. This pornographic fetish privileged the dynamics of authority, submission and the apparatus of violence that enforced those boundaries over sexual arousal or physical satiation. Consequently, many of these narratives did not feature coitus, or if there was sexual penetration it was usually briefly described before rushing on to the next violent encounter.

This new variety of sexualized flagellation was considered to be quintessentially British; in France, erotic flagellation came to be known as “le vice Anglais.” Modern scholars have corroborated this particularization of flogging as a British fantasy or sex practice. Ian Gibson, author of *The English Vice: Beating, Sex and Shame in Victorian England* (1978), dubbed the eighteenth and nineteenth British obsession with flogging

---

<sup>134</sup> Halttunen, 314.

“flagellomania” and argued that while sadomasochistic flogging was “almost totally absent in France, Spain and Italy” it was conversely “widespread in Britain, especially in England.”<sup>135</sup> This is borne out by the writings of the erudite pornography devotee Henry Spencer Ashbee (1834-1900). In addition to being a respected businessman, Ashbee’s second hobby cum occupation was as a prolific collector and bibliographer of erotic literature and media. His life’s work *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature* (1877) is an exhaustive compendium of known and extant obscene materials, and even today constitutes *the* authoritative, primary source on Victorian erotica, specialized fetish brothels and pornographic publishing. This foremost expert was in no doubt that flagellation was a beloved and specifically English practice:

The propensity which the English most cherish is undoubtedly Flagellation. That the rod has been used in all Roman Catholic countries by the priests as an instrument to serve their own lubricity of course is not to be denied...yet this vice has certainly struck deeper root in England than elsewhere, and only here, I opine, can be found men who experience a pleasure rather in receiving than in administering the birch. Nevertheless, this is a fact, and did not discretion forbid, it would be easy to name men of the highest positions in diplomacy, literature, the army, &c., who, at the present day, indulge in this idiosyncrasy, and to point out the haunts they frequent. Books innumerable in the English language are devoted to this subject alone; no English bawdy book is free from descriptions of flagellation...<sup>136</sup>

For nineteenth century Britons who actively contemplated the sexual culture of their nation it was considered simply “a fact” that the English had a unique relationship to “the rod” that was not equaled by any other Anglo or European society.

---

<sup>135</sup> Gibson, x.

<sup>136</sup> Henry Spencer Ashbee (Pisanus Fraxi, pseud.), *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, Being Notes Bio- Biblio- Icono- raphical and Critical on Curious and Uncommon Books*, 1885 (Facsimile Reprint, New York: Documentary Books. Inc., 1962)



As Ashbee's reference to the "men of the highest positions in diplomacy, literature, the army, &c.," implies, flagellation fetishes were generally, if not always, the preserve of aristocratic men. Some scholars have attempted to explain this propensity by arguing that the male elite of Britain had been perverted by the physical abuse endemic to the public school system, much as the child victims of sexual abuse internalize their trauma and then cyclically reenact it on the next generation of victims.<sup>137</sup> There is probably some truth in this, as the Victorian upper classes that patronized public schools *were* disproportionately fixated on flagellation, and those institutions practiced forms of birching that could certainly enable and or even normalize outright aggression or child-oriented sexual proclivities. Yet this theory is also theoretically unhelpful because it implies flagellation could *only* exist as a form of senseless brutality or pedophilia when, in fact, flagellation as punishment, however revolting, was also girded by gender discourses and, most of all, class-based identities.

Historically, birching had become increasingly salient for public school students as a masculine litmus test, or rite of passage, during the very first decades of the nineteenth century. This codification of flagellation as an emblem of prestige, according to historian William Watterson, was predicated on the need of the newly powerful middle-class to consolidate and mark their status.<sup>138</sup> Those without an aristocratic heritage, newly enlisted in the rolls of the public school, could prove their elite manliness

---

<sup>137</sup> This is the central thesis of Ian Gibson's book *The English Vice*.

<sup>138</sup> William Collins Watterson "Chips Off the Old Block": Birching, Social Class, and the English Public Schools." *Nineteenth-Century Studies* 10 (1996): 100.

and inherent gentility by successfully (that is stoically) enduring a birching. Moreover the ‘weals’ and bruising left by the birch, according to Watterson,

...identified one’s private person with the public institution of the school. They built character, fostered male bonding in the name of public suffering well borne (‘glory’), and contributed to the illusion that the public schools were theaters of individual heroism and ‘natural’ aristocracy instead of the places of pre-determined privilege that they were.<sup>139</sup>

Birching thus functioned as mechanism for confirming and reinforcing upper class male identities. Tellingly, ‘birching’ was also an expensive form of corporal punishment that required a significant outlay of money. Unlike cheaper implements of punishment like canes or switches, the “birch rod” was time-consuming to craft and broke into pieces as the punishment was inflicted and thus could never be reused.<sup>140</sup> At Eton, during the early nineteenth century, the school found it necessary to charge every student a guinea per year or more to cover the school’s birching costs, even if that individual student was never actually beaten.<sup>141</sup>

Most forms of corporal punishment for children went unquestioned in Britain until the 1860s, when ‘romantic’ conceptualizations of childhood and the increasing vigor of child welfare advocates began to render the practice problematic.<sup>142</sup> By this time, flogging was not only an entrenched practice in elite public schools, but rigorously endorsed by the powerful men who had passed through that system. Many members of parliament, for instance, were sympathetic to the endeavors of humanitarian activists to

---

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 93-110.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> See: Louise A. Jackson, *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England* (London: Routledge, 2000). While Jackson is primarily interested in the problematization of sexual interaction with children, she also examines how other forms of abuse, like violence, concomitantly became socially taboo.

have the corporeal punishment of children banned in Britain, but they caveated their support when it came to birching. They protested that birching was a necessary component of the upbringing of the male elite, and was, moreover, patently different from the irritated slaps or drunken beatings that were endemic among the poor.<sup>143</sup> It was expensive, deliberate, public and ritualized, with its own props and customs that all men of a certain class would recognize and even regard with nostalgia. More importantly, it served a function—it branded you as one of the elite and demonstrated your ability to personify upper class characteristics like stoicism, bravery and even leadership as an example to younger students. As the poet Algernon Swinburne put it in a letter to a friend, “Is a butcher’s blood to tingle, a tailor’s flesh to wince, from the discipline of nobles, the correction of a prince?”<sup>144</sup>

It should come as no surprise, considering the overtones of privilege and refinement embedded in educational birching, that nineteenth century flagellation erotica was, as Iain McCalman remarks, “an elite pornographic sub-genre noted for its stylistic sophistication, high cost and upper-class readership.”<sup>145</sup> This fetish literature was produced by industry specialists, consisting of a tight-knit band of pornographic publishers who often moved in the same social circles as their sophisticated, bibliophile clientele (especially prior to the 1890s). Famous British literati like the journalist George Augustus Sala, poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, parliament member and patron of the arts Monckton Milnes (Lord Houghton), and rich antiquarian Henry Spencer Ashbee

---

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 5-6.

<sup>144</sup> Cecil Y. Lang, ed. *The Swinburne Letters* (Volumes I-VI. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), I 74-75.

<sup>145</sup> Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 215.

were all flagellation enthusiasts and tended to consort with other men who were similarly interested in literature and sadomasochism. Ironically, these bibliophiles relied on their mainstream literary cachet and intellectual social networks to further their prurient pornography collecting. Their business contacts in the publishing world assisted them in both acquiring and printing salacious (indeed, illegal) texts, and their acquaintances operated as information pools for locating rare obscene material.

These men not only collected obscenity, but also wrote it (usually anonymously, but sometimes openly). The erudite snobbery that characterizes this genre is evident in George Augustus Sala's text *The Mysteries of Verbena House or, Miss Bellasis Birched for Thieving* (1882), for which he chose the pseudonym 'Etonensis', meaning 'Old Etonian.' Swinburne contributed poems to the *Whippingham Papers*, a small volume fixated exclusively on the birching of schoolboys (a deviation in the flagellation genre).<sup>146</sup> Milnes likely authored the flagellant poem *The Rodiad*. He also co-sponsored Burton's secret *Kama-Shastra Society*, a dummy publishing firm meant to conceal the clandestine investment of elite men in printing and circulation of eastern sexual texts.<sup>147</sup> This organization facilitated Burton's translation, annotation and publishing of *The Book of the Thousand and One Nights*, colloquially known as *The Arabian Nights*, in ten volumes with six supplementary additions.<sup>148</sup>

Ashbee's life work, *The Encyclopedias of Erotic Literature*, has already been described, and it is through this text that we know of the kinds of pornographic

---

<sup>146</sup> Swinburne, Algernon Charles. *The Whippingham Papers: A Collection of Contributions in Prose and Verse*. London: 1881.

<sup>147</sup> Ian Gibson. *The Erotomaniac: The Secret Life of Henry Spencer Ashbee* (De Capo Press, 2001), xii.

<sup>148</sup> Sir Richard, Burton, *The Erotic Traveler*, ed. Edward Leigh (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), 175.

magazines and subscriptions that were available to his social circle. We know, for example, that the notorious erotic journal *The Pearl* (July 1879 - December 1880) had an extremely limited distribution and was sold, as a set, at the prohibitively high price of eighteen pounds.<sup>149</sup> Beyond being expensive and difficult to acquire, *The Pearl* also frequently printed original flagellation material that would appeal to its wealthy male clientele, including serial stories like “Miss Coote’s Confession” and “Lady Pokingham; or They All Do It.”

Yet, however elite and aristocratic birching and erotica tended to be, the correlation between the two was not exclusive to a privileged group of fetishists. While historians have long claimed, and rightly so, that the exorbitant prices of pornography and intensity of government repression made obscene literature inaccessible for all but most elite of British men, they have often failed to recognize that pornographic tropes thrived in conventional literature, and were therein accessible for even women or the working classes.<sup>150</sup> This is particularly true in the case of the governess, who was knit into the fantasy of pornographic flagellation in a way that was, seemingly, thematically accessible to the masses. Innuendo and sly jokes in popular press frequently alluded to the fact that governesses, or onlookers, might enjoy the birching of female students, and loose associations between “discipline” and the governess make it clear that contemporaries both instinctively connected the governess with corporeal punishment and were aware that this practice had subversive, lascivious potential.

---

<sup>149</sup> Ashbee quoted in Siegel, 88.

<sup>150</sup> Sharon Marcus offers an especially nuanced and convincing set of arguments about the diffusion of pornographic fantasy in British popular culture in chapter three of *Between Women*, entitled “The Feminine Plaything”.

An 1857 newspaper article in *The Leader*, provocatively titled “How to Kill a Governess” testifies to the fact that governesses and flagellation were popularly correlated, even within the well-worn genre of dead governesses. The article reports on a recent incident in which a London woman’s cruel behavior precipitated the death of the family’s governess: when the governess fell ill with typhoid fever, the mother had apparently pinned a note on her chest, sewed her salary into her clothing and then stuck the insensible woman on a boat back to France where she suffered a protracted death as concerned fellow passengers looked on helplessly.<sup>151</sup> The journalistic obsession with mistreated governesses and their grisly ends has already been expanded upon, and this article is no exception. It imagines, for instance, that the initial steps to “get rid of” the governess likely included her employers dragging the helpless woman out of bed and forcibly dressing her.

The paper is also typical in contemplating the just penalty for such brutality, but it does so by suddenly veering into a rhapsodic flagellation fantasy. According to the article, the mother deserved punishment meted out by “three rural viragos” who would select “nine thongs, and inflict mercilessly upon the tender Mrs.— the discipline anciently applied to vestals, mediievally to nuns, modernly to maidens in Siam, and generally to vicious children.”<sup>152</sup> This abrupt foray into fantasy—female-on-female flagellation, vestal virgins, nuns, exotic “maidens”—culminates in the lament, “...and we regret the abolition of the Bridewell whipping-posts.” The author obviously assumed that

---

<sup>151</sup> “How to Kill a Governess.” *The Leader* (London) December 19, 1857, page 1215. *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*. Accessed Feb. 25 2013. Document URL <http://ncco.tu.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5SeM5>

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

many of his readers would draw an explicit connection between ritualistic flogging and the governess. It was a literary trope that would make cultural sense to the public, or at least titillate those readers in the know.

Another common, subtle allusion to flogging in orthodox literature was the media's tendency to bandy about "white slave" as a description or qualifier of the governess.<sup>153</sup> In an era in which humanitarian railing against slavery in the colonies and United States made the whipping of slaves their *piece de resistance*, few readers would fail to make the connection between the governess being a "white slave" and the castigation of the lash. Such articles might even combine this allegory with explicit allusions to corporeal punishment as did *Punch's* 1865 article "Wanted, A White Slave—Cheap", which slyly nods to the disciplinary component of a governess's job while mocking the "enslaving" demands of 'governess wanted' ads:

What a happy country this should be, if ladies by birth of refined habits, strict principles, able to teach four children good English, correct French music—to say nothing of "order and discipline"—are so plentiful that they can be had for £30 a year!<sup>154</sup>

These kinds of furtive genuflections to "order and discipline" leave little doubt that at least some Victorian Britons were not blithely naïve about the potentially dissident implications of corporeal punishment.

From the 1840s to the 1870s there was also a prurient trend in which legitimate magazines like the *Family Herald*, *The Queen*, and particularly *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* featured debates on the corporal punishment of children that became

---

<sup>153</sup> "White Slavery" *The Times*, January 20, 1857, page 12; the article "Wanted A Governess on Handsome Terms" *Punch*, 9 (1845), page 25, accused of man of treating the governess "as a horse, that he would work her like one."

<sup>154</sup> "Wanted, A White Slave—Cheap." *Punch*, January 14, 1865, 21.

forums for suspiciously explicit depictions of girls being beaten by their mothers and governesses.<sup>155</sup> From 1867 to 1870, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* featured a particularly intense debate about whether or not girls should be corporally punished, but specifically if they should be flogged on their naked backsides. Though framed as a debate on the education and discipline of children, and whether writers were advocates or opponents, all of these magazine correspondences detailed the ritualistic chastisement of young women by older women, characterized by stripping, and measuredly beating the victim.<sup>156</sup> In fact, it was not traditional or common to spank, birch, or flog girls on their exposed buttocks (they were much more likely to be slapped or rapped on the knuckles), so this controversy was really about the imagined possibilities of corporeal punishment, rather than a record of contemporary customs or standard practices.

Though it is almost certain that many of these letters were forgeries produced by prurient flagellation fetishists, they were nevertheless a public mediation on the static narrative-structure of all flagellation fantasy, in which young girls were dominated and shamed by older women, who were very likely to be portrayed as governesses.<sup>157</sup> Revealingly, all of the correspondence about the birching/flogging of girls was later republished on its own as a specialized booklet, which was in turn plagiarized and printed verbatim by hack pornographic publishers looking to make quick cash.<sup>158</sup> We can draw from these examples that far from being an anomaly of the pornographic realm, the

---

<sup>155</sup> Gibson, 236.

<sup>156</sup> Sharon Marcus offers a truly excellent analysis of this trend in *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, New Jersey; Oxfordshire, UK: Princeton University Press, 2007). She is particularly interested in how narratives of women dominating girls played into overarching discursive trends in women's fashion magazines, plates and aesthetics.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 135-148.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.



governess circumscribed by sadism had enough cultural currency to be salient for general readers. We can thus also assume that rather than operating in isolation from the mainstream milieu, orthodox literature clearly coexisted with and cross-referenced overtly libidinous governess imagery.

Thus far, I have only proved that eroticized violence was correlated with the figure of the governess in mainstream venues and then reflected back by underground, illicit literature. It is not obvious from this analysis whether the governess's gender-deviancy was co-opted as a means of approximating masculinity. We return to the conundrum of who, or what, the pornographic governess represented, and whether or not she was supposed to be a man.

### **The Beautiful and Genteel Lady Authoritarian**

Throughout his iconic encyclopedias of erotic literature, bibliophile Henry Spencer Ashbee mocks flagellant literature for its mind-numbingly uniform vocabulary and plot devices. Putting aside his sneering (and keeping in mind that most scholars suspect that it was actually a winking nod to a predilection for the fetish)<sup>159</sup> Ashbee is utterly correct. The thematic conventions of this genre *were* extremely repetitious, and at the epicenter of this thematic iteration was the governess, the flagellant superstar. Accordingly, portrayals of the governess were remarkably; three examples various erotic texts will suffice to illustrate her most common features and attributes. *The Exhibition of Female Flagellants in the Modest and Incontinent World* (a frequently plagiarized, flagellant text of the

---

<sup>159</sup> His biographer Ian Gibson is seems convinced that Ashbee was a flagellation enthusiast, a sub-claim to his larger argument that Ashbee was the real author of *My Secret Life*, see: *The Erotomaniac: The Secret Life of Henry Spencer Ashbee* (De Capo Press, 2001).

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) offers the following reminiscence of “Louisa Ticklebum” on her former governess:

No woman in the universe ever took more pleasure than this Governess in whipping the bums of her little pupils...Louisa has often declared she could never account for her partiality to feeling and exercising the rod but through her being often severely whipped by this woman, who, though forty years old, to use the language of a celebrated writer, “Possessed the easiest and most elegant delivery, and accompanied her speech with the action of an arm of exquisite form, and a hand as white as snow, and with a frown on her face which, without lessening its beauty, gave a true expression of her resentment.”<sup>160</sup>

In the same vein, another book entitled *Venus School Mistress, or Birchen Sports* describes its governess-protagonist thus:

There are, I hope and believe, very few persons who possess this power of rod-magnetism. It was, however, my lot, and that of most of my companions, to encounter such a one in the person of our preceptress, Mrs. Martinet, of Shrewsbury House. Never was will so intensified as hers; she could have looked down a bull in mid career [sic], and this strong will was seconded by a commanding figure and great bodily powers...She was a large woman, scarce past the prime of life, and still handsome; though few, I think, ever ventured to criticize very closely her features. Her dresses were always of the richest materials and she had a weakness for jewelry and perfume.<sup>161</sup>

And yet another description from another edition of *Exhibition of Female Flagellants*:

...at this period the lady might be about thirty. She was by not exactly handsome, yet she possessed those requisites whipping gentleman and

---

<sup>160</sup> *The Exhibition of Female Flagellants in the Modest and Incontinent World*, London: Printed for G. Peacock, 1785, Vol. 2 of the series *The Library Illustrative of Social Progress* (London: J.C. Hotten, 1872), 74.

<sup>161</sup> Wilson, Mary [common flagellant pseudonym]. *Venus School-Mistress or Birchen Sports: Reprinted from the Edition of 1788 with a Preface by Mary Wilson, containing some account of the late Mrs. Berkeley* (1788, Reprint 1898. Reprint, New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), 40-46.

ladies idolise so highly. She was tall, and very lusty, had a quick black eye, a neat plump white hand and arm, and was in her nature as well as appearance, as proud as any woman the lovers of birch would desire to exercise the rod.<sup>162</sup>

These preceding quotes reveal several conventional traits of the birching governess: she was strong, thirty-years of age or older, generally attractive, and displayed physical markers of upper-class status, like rich clothing and white skin. Her most

commented upon features are her fierce eyes or expression, and elegant arms and hands. The birching governess in *fig. 14* is a good pictorial example with an early provenance, dating from

before 1860, and possibly as early as the 1830s. (The illicit nature of obscenity, and the concomitant efforts of publishers to conceal dates or locations in an effort to outwit censors, precipitates this ambiguity. Most images and texts have indeterminate origins.)

This particular illustration features a stock character named “Mary Wilson” who was frequently listed as the author of flagellant works purporting to be memoirs of a birching-madam. Note that her delicate feet, wasp waist, and luxurious clothing are juxtaposed with her commanding stance and the birch rod held aloft in the air. *Figs. 15* and *16* are later illustrations featured in two different editions of *The Mysteries of Verbena House*,



*Figure 14*  
*Frontispiece depicting the flagellant-governess character Miss Mary Wilson. Likely first published in early nineteenth-century edition of The Exhibition of Female Flagellants and reused by pornographic publishers in the 1860s and 1880s for books like The Romance of Chastisement*

---

<sup>162</sup> *The Exhibition of Female Flagellants* (London: William Dugdale, c. 1860.), 22

one published in London in the early 1880s and the other in Paris by English publisher Charles Carrington in 1901. Though published decades later, these illustrative portraits of Miss Sinclair—the fictional protagonist of *Verbena House*—are extraordinarily similar to that of Mary Wilson, with the exception that they actually have a victim to bring the raised birch down upon.



Figure 15  
 Illustration from *Verbena House*  
 Likely published by William Lazenby (circa  
 1882)

Obviously, these are not beastly women who can barely disguise their huge, hirsute bodies in feminine drag. They, conversely, display a multitude of feminine markers, from their piles of hair and feminine silhouettes to their dainty costumes. Indeed, one of the most consistent thematic elements of images of flagellation scenes are women dressed in luxurious clothing with overtly feminine adornments like flounces and lace.

The cover of the 1885 edition of *Experiences of Flagellation*, for instance, features a beautiful gilt embossing of a woman in a frilly dress, with well-coiffured hair, lounging on plush furniture as she directs a young girl to kiss the birch rod (fig. 17). Such imagery signaled to the reader, before they even opened the book, that this was a tale about physical tyranny, but tyranny couched in feminine luxury. Though surrounded by other women, the flagellating governess of fig. 16 is the most fussily and ornately dressed, her gown being covered in ruffles. Fig. 18, also set in

a classroom, features a heavily corseted governess, with a satiny gown embellished with lace and embroidery. All governesses are mid-swish, with their birch rods raised in the air. Ultimately, these are the most distinctive and aesthetically conventional components of the flagellating image and seem to indicate that the erotic logic at play was one predicated on the juxtaposition of femininity and authoritarianism.

Lest it be thought that the pictorial scene was embellished by the imagination of the illustrator, pornographic texts also allotted a great deal of time and space to describing the clothing of the flagellating governess. For example, according to the narrator of *Verbena House*, Miss Sinclair always wore “a cap about the size of a modern bonnet, of right [sic] point lace” and “dressed usually in black watered silk with a gold chain round her neck, terminating with a dainty watch and trinkets at her waist and worn outside the belt....”<sup>163</sup> Miss Sinclair’s equestrian garb—a “dark-blue riding habit, with a neatly varnished boot peeping from beneath her skirt, and a cavalier hat with a sweeping scarlet feather”—is also detailed, with a particular aside about her riding trousers made of “chamois leather with black feet...the leather portion reaching from the waist to the top of the thigh.”<sup>164</sup> The importance of the riding suit is underlined when Miss Sinclair decides she needs a gentle implement to punish a small child and is advised to use the “light, little, half-penny switch, that the boy James beats your riding habit with.”<sup>165</sup> The object used to care for her most sensual and unique outfit is thereby co-opted as a

---

<sup>163</sup> Etonensis [Pseudonym], *The Mysteries of Verbena House; or, Miss Bellasis Birched for Thieving*, 1881-1882 (1882; Reprint, Birchgrove Press, 2011), 10.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

disciplinary tool; the most important objects of fixation in the text—bottoms, switches and clothes—are allied through violence and discipline.

Conventional also, in this genre, is an emphasis on the respectability of the surroundings. Furniture, eating habits, interior design, wallpaper, and the architectural spaciousness of the boarding school are all described and moreover hinted at in accompanying illustrations.<sup>166</sup> In every image featured in the present chapter (*figs. 14-20*), the governess not only bears the markings of status on her body, but also is foregrounded by well-appointed rooms, sometimes with draperies, rich carpets, paintings, plush furniture or the accouterments of the upper-class classroom. The carpet depicted in *fig 15*, for example, is specifically identified by the text as an imported “Brussels carpet.”<sup>167</sup>

It seems likely that this preoccupation with material aesthetics was an argument for the governess’s status as a lady substantiated through luxurious commodities. By clothing the governess in expensive, highly feminized

garb and surrounding her in comfort, the texts and illustrations are making implicit



Figure 16  
Another Illustration from a French edition of  
*Verbena House* entitled *Les Mysteres de la*  
*Maison de la Verveine*,  
Published by Charles Carrington (circa 1901)

---

<sup>166</sup> There is also a long-standing trope in flagellation pornography in which the governesses don particularly beautiful outfits that coordinate with the colors of their ‘punishment room’ or the ribbons on their carefully crafted birch rods. This trend seems to have begun to recede during the 1890s.

<sup>167</sup> *Verbena House*, 120.

arguments about her class and gender status. This was the visual and material reinforcement of assertions by both flagellation enthusiasts, and the texts produced for them, that birching was an expertise and recreation of women, specifically elite women. According to Ashbee, “It is a well-known fact that women are, and always have been, even more fond of wielding the rod than men, and this passion pervades the higher rather than the lower classes.”<sup>168</sup> Elite women, specifically, were thus perceived as uniquely adept at wielding the rod and it was assumed that they enjoyed it the most. Many texts also explicitly state that the administration of the birch was among the best ways to highlight the elegance of a woman’s demeanor and bodily features—showing off her physical precision, the contrasting pallor and rosiness of her skin as it glowed from physical exertion, and the vigor of her character in enforcing morality and justice.

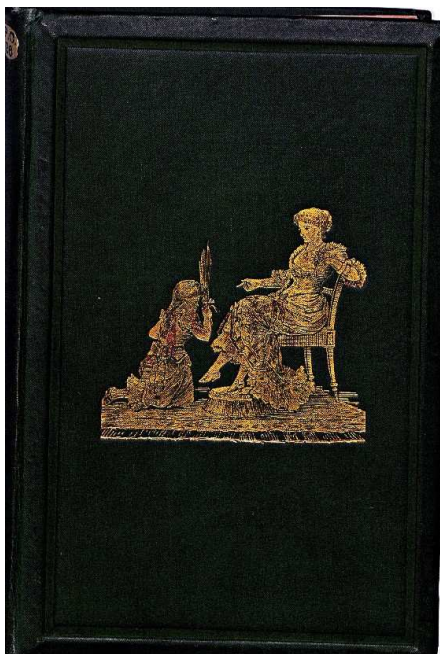


Figure 17  
Gilt Cover of  
*Experiences of Flagellation* (1885)

Exemplifying this rationale is the fact that a huge number of the texts under discussion here feature stories in which governesses find husbands, or receive inheritances, because men fall in love with them after observing their dexterity at corporeally punishing children. Birching functions in these narratives as both a uniquely feminine endeavor and a foil for their gendered charms.

Despite the fact that, in reality, birching was endemic to the male public school, rather than girl’s

---

<sup>168</sup> Ashbee, *Index Librorum Prohibitum*, xlvi-xlvii.

boarding schools, readers and writers of birching fantasy were obviously transfixed by the idea that it was actually an exceptionally *ladylike* activity. In support of this theory, none of my research conducted in the British Library, the London Metropolitan Archives or utilizing the numerous reprints of Victorian flagellant pornography, has revealed Marcus's portrayal of hairy arms, vague mustaches or overtly phallic bodies. Instead, all extant images and portrayals of Victorian governesses are remarkably feminine.

I believe that the age of the pornographic governess, and her disciplinarian temperament, has contributed to the mistaken notion that she was somehow a man. Miss Sinclair of *Verbena House*, for example, is certainly a “spinster” as the term is basically understood in that she is unmarried and approaching infertility. Aesthetically, she is matronly rather than virginally delicate, being described as tall, with strong arms and large pillow-breasts that are explicitly called “fleshy.”<sup>169</sup> Moreover, “the cessation of her [Miss Sinclair's] menstrual flux” states the author baldly, “was nigh in a few years.”<sup>170</sup> Yet though she is neither fecund nor fragile this does not mean that she is automatically male. Importantly, spinsterhood and middle age are not equated with masculinity, instead these texts both address and invert the socio-medical discourses on feminine spinsterhood that reigned in the conventional press, insisting that spinsterhood could actually be a particularly alluring form of womanliness. The description of Miss Sinclair's bodily features purports that she is actually a kind of paradox who ruptures stereotypes of spinsters by being unusually beautiful and sensual:

...she was a fine, tall, shapely ‘maid-matron’—if you will accept the paradox—of about two-and-thirty....I mean that although she was ‘Miss

---

<sup>169</sup> *Verbena House*, 118.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.



Sinclair' to all outward intents and purposes...her form was yet so richly and voluptuously developed, her eyes were so full of light, and her lips of colour, that it seemed a misuse of the terms to speak of her as a spinster. Those eyes, by the way, were hazel. She had very small, white, plump, and yet firm-looking hands...<sup>171</sup>

This was obviously a writer who was aware of, and interested by, the socio-medical discourses on female spinsterhood that stripped them of gender wholeness and sexual desirability. The point of this paragraph is to both entertain and challenge these assumptions, and argue that a social actor widely conceived of as a physical perversity—an unmarried older women—could actually be alluring *because* she violated expectations about women's sexual subjectivity and agency.

Thus, in *Verbena House*, like other flagellation texts, feminine-eccentricities like spinsterhood are treated as erotic assets; they are translated into a kind of deviancy that celebrates an inversion of the 'natural' order, not by inverting gender but rather by imagining spinsterhood as the pinnacle of voluptuosity. The governess is a "paradox", to use the *Verbena House* author's turn of phrase, in that she is a 'spinster' and yet she is very beautiful, even sensual. She is genteel and wealthy, and yet she is a dominatrix. She is middle-aged, and yet she had not physically declined; the authority of age actually empowers and underscores her deviant control over subsidiaries. She is an amalgamation of the sterile, aged spinster and eminently desirable victim-governess. Where she differs from these paradigms is not in her gendered characteristics, but in that she perversely delights in her situation.

---

<sup>171</sup> *Verbena House*, 10.

In that vein, unlike the victimized governesses discussed in previous chapters, the flagellating governess seems to be healthy, wealthy and in every way master over her surroundings and subordinates. These narratives thus do not point to the “social precariousness” of the governess, nor her function as a façade for homosexual desire, but rather fetishize aspects of her femininity that give her incongruous authoritarian power—from her age and unmarried status, to apparent professional and financial success. No real



Figure 18  
Illustration from *Madam Birchini's Dance*  
(circa 1872)

governess could indulge in jewels and perfume like the protagonist of *Birchen Sports*, nor open a very large boarding school without financial backing from family members or male investors, like Miss Sinclair. Flagellation pornography fetishized those aspects of the governess that made her the ‘odd woman’ of Victorian society, underscoring the subversive potential of that oddity by making her rich, confident and robustly physical. That this kind of celebration of female maturity and power was interpreted by later scholars as a manifestation of the masculine probably says more about the mindset and culture of the time period when that theory was hypothesized than about the terrain of Victorian desire.

Ultimately, one of the primary erotic drivers of the flagellation narrative was the juxtaposition of the raised birch—poised to discipline and punish—and the elegance of an elite *woman's* body and surroundings. Femininity is imperative to the sexual ethos at play, as is a playful, likely self-conscious inversion of the conventional logic that conceived of governesses as either vulnerable or sexless. The overtly erotic governess was the doppelganger of the conventionally understood governess, a character who turned the perversities associated with a certain class and category of woman into strengths.

### **The Ritualization of Pain**

Erotic literature did not only play with the gender discourses that revolved around



Figure 19  
Illustration from *Exhibition of Female Flagellants*, Published by William Dugdale (circa 1860)

the governess, but also mirrored and transmuted the contours of popular fascination with governesses as circumscribed by violence. Though the fundamental act of discipline that was eroticized—birching—was likely co-opted from the context of public schools, this literature also drew on the rhetoric and sensationalist tropes that characterized mainstream dialogues of governess-woe.

One of the most important ways these texts elaborated on the silences of conventional literature was in regards to the spectral nature of pain. Mainstream texts exploited the fact that mass audiences obviously wanted to read about, and look at, graphic violence, but they skated the uncomfortable implications of this interest by couching violent narratives in didacticism, or packaging the product as a cautionary tale. Conversely, the voyeurism of flagellation pornography is explicit. That watching pain and suffering is the erotic object of the text is underscored by the frequency with which one character secretly views the act of punishment from a hidden location. For example, in an early, illustrated edition of *The Exhibition of Female Flagellants*, the father of a family covertly watches as his governess whips his children:

As soon as she [the governess] came to the house she went to the work-room, and calling the young culprit to her, a girl about thirteen, Miss, shaking her large rod, said 'here is something that shall make you good! Come, come, up with your frock and petticoats. I must see all, come, kiss the rod and beg a good whipping.' Then holding her upon her lap she whipped her for full ten minutes until the blood ran down. Mr. D. who was in an adjacent room peeping through a hole, was all the time in a kind of ecstasy! He had never seen a woman whip with so much grace!<sup>172</sup>

---

<sup>172</sup> *The Exhibition of Female Flagellants: Printed at the Expense of Theresa Berkley, for the Benefit of Mary Wilson* (London: William Dugdale, c. 1860), 106. British Library, 31.g.29.

The accompanying illustration for this scene (*fig. 19*) attests to both the sloppiness of pornographic editors (who were willing to cobble together texts and images that didn't sync up) and their intrinsic awareness of what made the flagellation narrative salient for their clientele. While the image erroneously portrays the father looking in through a window, rather than looking through a peephole, the drawing retains what is ultimately the most important element: the infliction of pain spectorially consumed by both the agents and the voyeurs of violence. His delight is in *seeing* a woman beat a child bloody. The illustrator also inserted a second woman into the scene (not mentioned in the text) who is potentially supposed to be masturbating to the sight of the young girl being beaten. The voyeurism of the scene is thus tripled by the illustration; the peeping-tom father watches another watcher become sexually excited by the infliction of violence.

Some texts actually introduced a third party who was ceremonially present to underscore the importance and solemnity of the punishment. One of the many protagonists of *The Birchen Bouquet* is sent to a strict boarding school as a child, where she is beaten in a variety of quite elaborate sadomasochistic contexts (including while being strapped to a sawdust filled, carpet-covered "punishment ball") for different childish offenses; however, when she slaps a fellow student in rage the governesses who run the establishment decide that she is out of control and bring in the local rector to oversee her punishment.<sup>173</sup> After she is prepared for the birching in a special flagellation room, where the entire school is assembled to witness her degradation, the rector lectures

---

<sup>173</sup> *The Birchen Bouquet; or Curious and Original Anecdotes of Ladies fond of administering the Birch Discipline, and Published for the Amusement as well as the Benefit of those Ladies who have under their Tuition sulky, stupid, wanton, lying or idle young Ladies or Gentlemen.* (London[?]: Edward Avery, 1881), 42. British Library, P.C. 13.h.14/I.

her for her moral failings and emphasizes shame of the punishment: “only think what you will grow up like, you will be a pest to yourself and others if such a temper is not curbed...Don’t you feel degraded that Mrs. Smart should think it necessary to have you punished in my presence?”<sup>174</sup> The official witness is thus construed as underscoring and heightening the pain and shame incumbent to bare-bottomed beatings. The rector’s viewership is deemed both necessary and central to the act of administering pain, and he looks on solemnly as the governesses take turns until the girl is violently beaten into submission. Pastors were often cast as this kind of flagellant bystander, and were conceived of as the allies of governesses in their flagellant endeavor, simultaneously lending moral and religious weight to its enactment and enjoying the lascivious sight. (Interestingly, we have seen this association between governesses and the clergy before in mainstream literature, and this seems to have directly influenced their insertion into the pornographic context).

*Fig. 20*, an illustration from an 1882 edition of *Verbena House*, represents yet another category of voyeurism, this time with a crowd of onlookers, most of which are probably supposed to be other female students or subordinate governesses, and one being the male servant of Miss Sinclair (who looks quite pleased to be there). By featuring a voyeur, designated bystander or crowd of witnesses these texts were mirroring and playing on the fact that these pornographic texts always had a built in viewer—namely the reader. By making the reader an observer of observers of pain (or even the observer of an observer of an observer of pain), this multiplication of spectators sanctified the act of consuming

---

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 40.

pain through viewership as much as it did inflicting or enduring it. These texts not only extrapolated on the Victorian penchant for spectral pain that was evident in popular media but also celebrated and underscored the erotic potential of looking in ways that mainstream literature could not.

That the visuality of pain is at the erotic core of the flagellation narrative is further underscored by the sexual proclivities of the governess herself. The birching-governess is sexually excited by her victims' bottoms and genitalia, but most of all she is fixated on their involuntary, physical reactions to violence, i.e. the changing color of their backsides, screaming, bleeding, etc. Though the governess eagerly gazes on the genitalia of her students she rarely has overt sexual contact with them, the climax of these acts is not consummation of desire through oral or genital pleasure, but an infliction of pain so severe that it elicits the visual markers of violence.<sup>175</sup> Much like in narratives of

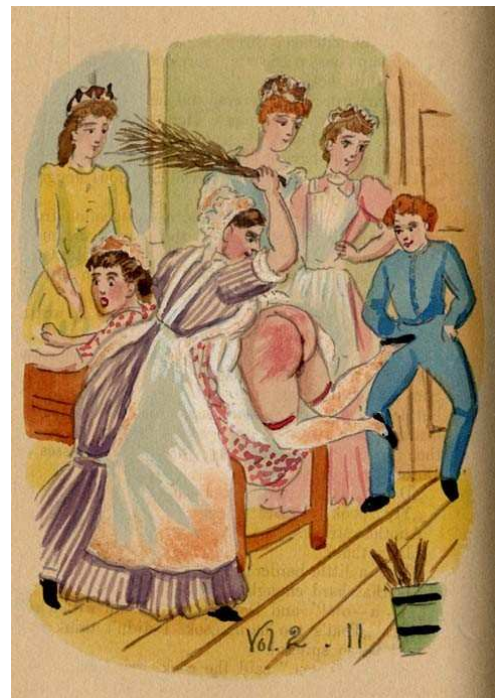


Figure 20  
Illustration of flogging scene from 1882  
Edition of *Verbena House*

governesses and their lovers, rapists or seducers in the popular press the sex act itself is mitigated in favor of a fixation on aggression, subordination and pain.

---

<sup>175</sup> This begins to change at the turn of the century, an example being *Tales Told Out of School*, published in 1901 by Charles Carrington, which features a boarding school but emphasizes heterosexual sex between teachers and students (British Library, P.C. 19.b.20.).

In this vein, flagellant literature always dwelled lovingly on the ‘weals’, ‘plum-pudding’ bruising, slashes, and copious bleeding produced by a ‘scientifically’ applied flogging. For example, “Miss D.” one of the many, many governesses of *The Exhibition of Female Flagellants* and “the daughter of a clergyman,” opens a girls boarding-school in her mid-twenties, in order to facilitate her “favorite passion”, i.e. “whipping...a dozen girls a day.” The apparent object of her whipping frenzy was to beat her students until she could see the physical effects of the punishment:

As she was an experienced hand at whipping she seldom dismissed them till their posteriors and thighs were as red as scarlet. Her pleasure was to cut them, and generally whipped till the blood would come...Many mothers approved of her conduct very much.<sup>176</sup>

This text does not deny that the governess is sexually excited by flagellation, or that she became a governess as a means of facilitating this sexual pleasure; however, “her pleasure” is not masturbatory or coital, it is in cutting her victims, specifically, until they bleed. Tellingly, angry, red lacerations inflicted by the governess are the aesthetic focal points of *figs. 15, 19 and 20*.

Besides being a bloody spectacle, these texts also emphasize the transformative effects of violence on the female body—a thematic that mimics many of the decline, decay and violation tropes of mainstream governess literature, albeit much, much more graphically. The climax of *Verbena House* is the intensely gory scene when Miss Sinclair birches the title character Miss Bellasis for stealing money, lying about it, and then purposefully indicting another student in the crime. The mercilessness of the governess, the increasing physical consequences of the punishment, and the transformation of the

---

<sup>176</sup> The earlier copy of *The Exhibition of Female Flagellants* (London: William Dugdale, c. 1860.), 43-44. British Library, P.C.31.g.29.



girl's skin from beautiful youthfulness to a disfigured mess, are teased apart and drawn out for as long as possible. Almost animalistic, the governess knows "nothing but the ruthless idea to *murder* those splendid posteriors [emphasis mine]." At first the girl's buttocks are only "beginning to change colour...into two red spots" and then "the dividing line of the two globes now appeared strangely white in comparison with the other swollen and inflamed parts..."<sup>177</sup> The scene reaches its climax as the governess

...cuts at the parts that presented the most weals, and soon from the capricious arabesques a slow stream of blackened sanguineous fluid began to issue gently forth...the once lovely lovely buttocks became a hideous mass of raw, gory flesh; the blood which had got red and bright flowing freely, even trickling down to the tops of the offender's stockings, which soon became spotted and stained.<sup>178</sup>

By juxtaposing the image of the "lovely, lovely buttocks" with their transformation into a "hideous mass of raw, gory flesh", this narrative exposes what is often left unacknowledged in conventional governess-woe tales: the morbid allure of a destroyed female body. Where this text differs is in making the governess the agent, rather than the recipient, of female bodily violation.

Yet though these texts are certainly bloodthirsty, they also emphasize that the positive effects of corporeal punishment sanctify pain and suffering as necessary, even wholesome. In so doing, they co-opt the humanitarian, social activist tone of popular governess narratives by coupling the behaviors and character of the governess to the moral status of British society. This is mainly accomplished by arguing that without governesses willing to discipline children for their misdeeds there would be many

---

<sup>177</sup> *Verbena House*, 105.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

immoral and selfish children that would grow up into a population of similarly ill-tempered adults.

Supporting this logic, the pornographic governess never punishes her students without a just cause. The discipline of these narratives self-consciously effaces capriciousness, and instead the narrative structure relies on misdemeanor and subsequent—and, it is emphasized, *well-deserved*—punishment. *Experiences of Flagellation*, printed in 1885, featured many mini-stories of women who were spoiled as children, became selfish or aggressive, and were subsequently ‘saved’ by the infliction of brutal corporal punishment. One protagonist begins her tale by making clear that it is one of redemption:

I...call myself ‘Gratitude,’ because I am anxious to show my gratitude for the fact that I owe my present position as a useful, happy English lady to the firm discipline I experienced at the very turning-point of my life. I was brought up in a loving home, I had every possible advantage; but admist [sic] it all I became sullen, self-willed, and disobedient and idle. I was the grief of my parents and a byword to my companions. However, soon after I was fifteen I most fortunately was sent to Mrs.----’s school for young ladies, in Brighton, where I showed the same evil disposition which I had evinced elsewhere, but where, most fortunately and happily for me, it was checked and cured.<sup>179</sup>

After being whipped brutally and frequently, the narrator continues,

...I became cheerful, obedient, unselfish. My parents and friends the next holidays could hardly believe that I was the same girl. I stayed three years with Mrs.--- at Brighton, leaving her when I was nineteen with much regret. I am now twenty-four, and hope to be married at Easter to *the best man in the world*, who never *could* have loved me had not sensible, wholesome discipline changed my evil nature, as the means under Higher Power of doing so.<sup>180</sup>

---

<sup>179</sup> *Experiences of Flagellation. A Series of Remarkable Instances of Whipping Inflicted on both Sexes, with curious Anecdotes of Ladies fond of administering birch Discipline. Compiled by an Amateur Flagellant.* (London: Printed for Private Circulation, 1885, British Library, cup P.C. 26.b.35), 60-61.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

As this text would have it, the shame and brutality encompassed in bare-bottomed beatings administered by stern governesses were in line with the wishes of even God—stringent and violent punishment ensures happiness, respectability, and honor. Indeed, in a broader sense the flagellant author and his governess-mouthpiece frequently insist that all social disorder is the consequence of leniency with children. Note that ‘Gratitude’ specifically comments that she is now an admirable ‘English lady’, thus underlining the national imperative of whipping for ensuring that the women of England are “happy and useful.” The serial story *Miss Coote’s Confession, or The Voluptuous Experiences of an Old Maid* actually closes with the dramatic claim:

We live in an age so dissolute that if young girls were not kept under some sort of restraint and punished when they deserve it, we shall see by-and-by nothing but women of the town, parading the streets and public places, and, God knows, there are already but too many of them!<sup>181</sup>

This implies that without elite and respectable women willing and eager to discipline girls, that there would be no more respectable women at all. Thus, the governess—who was popularly conflated with degradation—is positioned as the ultimate blockade against feminine decay. The author of *Verbena House* even closes the story by arguing that all women should read about flagellating governesses, because it would ensure the gendered strength of the English nation. “Above all,” sermonizes the author “let the weaker sex have a sight at these pages, for while female flagellants exist, England will never want for soldiers or

---

<sup>181</sup> “Miss Coote’s Confession, or The Voluptuous Experiences of an Old Maid; in a series of Letters to a Lady Friend.” In *The Pearl: A Journal of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading, Three Volumes in One* (July 1879-December 1880. Reprint, North Hollywood, CA: Brandon House Books, 1967),120.

sailors, or bright-eyed obedient, sensible housewives.”<sup>182</sup> The morality of Britain is once again tethered to the governess, though this time through her capacity for, rather than vulnerability to, violence and brutality.

### **Conclusion**

All of the literary and aesthetic tropes under discussion in this chapter were culturally significant because they worked in tandem, producing an erotics of feminine marginality and misery. The non-normative sexual appeal of the governess was broadly located in an eroticization of female misery and mediations on feminine agency. While the birching governess’s authoritarianism has been mistakenly interpreted as a signal that she must be a man, or at least imbued with masculine features, she was actually sexually enticing because she played on contemporary ideas about varieties of female defectiveness, turning vulnerability, impotence and weakness into a deviant source of power.

---

<sup>182</sup> *Verbena House*, 144.

## CONCLUSION

As unmarried, impoverished women fallen from the middle classes, governesses certainly constituted a “problem” for reigning Victorian ideologies about femininity and class. Yet, as this work has endeavored to demonstrate, the undeniably diminished socio-economic prospects of the average governess was not to be the primary object of contemporary fascination. Instead, her financial and social degradation proved to be the igniter for widespread interest in the parameters and possibilities of her female capacity to physically suffer. The stereotypical, morbid governess narrative was increasingly detached from the actual material hardships of governess labor because the dark allure of the governess represented more than the paradox of a “lady” who worked, and certainly catapulted past the daily inconveniences or embarrassments of genteel impoverishment. Rather than simply lamenting the poor pay, reduced social circumstances, or frequent interpersonal awkwardness that most governesses did experience, these problems served primarily as springboards for imagining a much more physical—and lethal—trajectory of suffering. The nineteenth century thus saw the emotionally isolated or destitute governess appropriated and extrapolated as icon of profound female misery, insanity, disease and death. Well into the twentieth century the governess would operate as a cultural interstice where categories of female violence and vulnerability were both reinforced and interrogated.

Governesses were cultural icons for such a long period of time, and represented in such a variety of ways, that the “governess-as-problem” or “governess-as-prostitute” historical models were never sufficient as general explanations. While illuminating and

necessary for unpacking this trend, these analyses nevertheless fail to integrate the culturally imagined governess in all of her iterations. This survey of the multiplicity of ways in which Victorians imagined the governess should make abundantly clear that the governess primarily functioned, across the board, as a medium, or site, of bodily violation. I would argue that the governess was such an effective symbol of femininity as allied to violence because her socio-cultural oddity gave her the discursive flexibility to be all things to all men. Whether contemporaries were fixated on the idea of internal decay, the violent consequences of heterosexual courtship, the dangers of the modern city, or the sexual possibilities encapsulated in flogging, the governess was fertile ground for exorcising these various fantasies and anxieties because she defied assigned identities or gender expectations. The governess had staying power as a figure that could both embody and disrupt—even undermine—conventional musings on gender identities and the concomitant moral status of Victorian society.

Though it may come as a surprise, governess-mania circumscribed by violence actually demands further investigation than could be accommodated within the scope of this project. Much of the archival material that it was necessary to omit was particularly apposite to trends and controversies of the twentieth century. For example, 1900s and 1910s fiction and newspaper articles featured governesses-turned-feminist-activists subjected to police brutality, or governesses kidnapped while participating in modern activities like recreational ice skating or shopping. There is also an interesting spate of cases directly prior to World War I in which governesses were implicated in a number of poison pen cases—sometimes as perpetrators and sometimes as victims—that (as far as I

can glean, the newspapers are cagey about what the letters say exactly) often revolved around the question of whether governesses were particularly promiscuous or, conversely, helpless objects of men's vicious desires. These scenarios evoke a slightly different set of questions, such as how the governess—with all of her cultural baggage—played into turn-of-the-century debates about the gendered bodies and sexual agency of so-called “new women.” For example, how did the representational governess of the twentieth century compare or contrast with furor over new, yet analogous figures, like the female college student? While histories of the governess's role in female empowerment have been written, it still remains to be seen how her long-term, biopolitical status as a British fantasy of female violation played into new, twentieth century debates about the rights and agency of women.

I would also suggest that there are even more connections to be made between ‘odd’ women in general and the importance of bodily suffering as an expository mechanism of nineteenth and twentieth century culture. Alternative avenues of future research involve other categories of ‘odd’ women, who (perhaps unsurprisingly) seem to have been similarly connoted in the popular imagination by pain and suffering. I discovered hints in the archive that stepmothers, and perhaps aunts, were equally imbricated in discourses of interpersonal pain and suffering, albeit with their own unique cultural baggage and aesthetic dynamic. Contiguous with the governess trope is the general assumption that eccentric women were more likely to be shadowed by violence, particularly when it came to questions of authority over subordinates like children or servants. These alternative narratives and actors seem to thus offer even more ways to

conceive of atypical women and their culturally imagined capacity to both inflict and endure corporeal violation.

Ultimately, the cultural complexity of the governess trope is astonishing in the context of their numerical insignificance and functioning irrelevance for the vast majority of British citizens. I have asked and attempted to answer a broad range questions about this cultural phenomenon, especially as pertaining to the operations of agency, subjectivity, deviance and desire. What form did popular fixation on governesses take? What was the stated purpose as opposed to seeming, underlying motivation of the writers, artists and philanthropists who articulated and fed popular interest in governess suffering? Why did nineteenth century and early twentieth century British imagery and literature indicate an increasing fixation on violence? On whose body did suffering land (i.e. who was the victim and who was the perpetrator)? How did changes in the conventions of British pornography mirror shifts in mainstream media towards an erotics of pain? How did gendered eccentricity play into prevailing ideas or fantasies about violence and victimhood?

While these questions may not have been answered, or indeed *be* fully answerable, the objective of this project has been to at least show that governess-mania was inherently characterized by violent corporeality, and moreover argue that this foregrounding cultural motif is imperative to an historical analysis of their celebrity. From fiction, social commentary and art (popular or highbrow), to humanitarian advocacy, crime reporting, satire and pornography, governesses were culturally defined by their relationship to physical suffering. They were ultimately so evocative for nineteenth and early twentieth



century British audiences not simply because they were “odd,” but because that oddity was perceived to have destructive behavioral and corporeal implications. The marginality (both numerically and socially) of governesses left a tremendous amount of room for articulating growing concerns and fantasies about the parameters of women’s violent agency and physical vulnerability. Socially liminal, economically powerless and sexually ambiguous, the Victorian governess cast a surprisingly long cultural shadow.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### *Primary Sources*

#### London Metropolitan Archives

Family Welfare Association (Formerly Charity Organisation Society), Renault, Jeanne (Jane), 1872-1893, A/FWA/C/D/332/001.

Governesses Benevolent Institution, 1841-1952; Schoolmistresses and Governesses Benevolent Institution, 1952, LMA/4459.

#### Books

Appleton, Elizabeth. *Private Education; or, a Practical Plan for the Studies of Young Ladies with an Address to Parents, Private Governesses, and Young Ladies*. London: Henry Coburn, 1815.

*The Birchen Bouquet; or Curious and Original Anecdotes of Ladies fond of administering the Birch Discipline, and Published for the Amusement as well as the Benefit of those Ladies who have under their Tuition sulky, stupid, wanton, lying or idle young Ladies or Gentlemen*. London[?]: Edward Avery, 1881. British Library, P.C. 13.h.14/I.,

Ashbee, Henry Spencer (Fraxi, Pisanus, pseud.) *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature, Being Notes Bio- Biblio- Icono- raphical and Critical on Curious and Uncommon Books, Volumes 1-3*. 1885. Facsimile Reprint, New York: Documentary Books. Inc., 1962

Cleland, John. *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. Paris: Isidore Liseux, 1749. Project Gutenberg EBook. Accessed July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

Etonensis [Pseudonym] or George Augustus Sala. *The Mysteries of Verbena House; or, Miss Bellasis Birched for Thieving*. 1881-1882. Reprint, Birchgrove Press, 2011.

*The Exhibition of Female Flagellants: Printed at the Expense of Theresa Berkley, for the Benefit of Mary Wilson*. London: William Dugdale, c. 1860. British Library, 31.g.29.

*The Exhibition of Female Flagellants in the Modest and Incontinent World, London: Printed for G. Peacock, 1785*, Vol. 2 of the series *The Library Illustrative of Social Progress*. London: J.C. Hotten, 1872.

*Experiences of Flagellation. A Series of Remarkable Instances of Whipping Inflicted on both Sexes, with curious Anecdotes of Ladies fond of administering birch Discipline. Compiled by an Amateur Flagellant*. London: Printed for Private Circulation, 1885. British Library, P.C. 26.b.35.

Greg, William Rathbone. *Why are Women Redundant?* London: N. Trubner & Co., 1869. Google Books.  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=R0aQ36xR1sAC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0](http://books.google.com/books?id=R0aQ36xR1sAC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0) (accessed April 28, 2013).

- Lang, Cecil Y, editor. *The Swinburne Letters*. Volumes I-VI. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.
- Maurice, Mary Atkinson. *Governess Life: Its Trials, Duties, and Encouragements*. London: John W. Parker, West Strand, 1849. Google Books (accessed April 27, 2013).
- The Pearl: A Journal of Facetiae Voluptuous Readings*. 1879-1881. Reprint, New York: Grove Press, 1968.
- Swinburne, Algernon Charles. *The Whippingham Papers: A Collection of Contributions in Prose and Verse*. London: 1881.
- Venus School-Mistress, or Birchen Sports: Reprinted from the edition of 1788, with a preface by Mary Wilson*. c. 1810. Reprint of 1840 edition. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968.
- Winter, Miss [pseudonym]. "The Family Governess", in *Heads of the People: or, Portraits of the English*. Cheapside, UK: Robert Tyas, 1844.

#### Newspaper and Journal Articles

- "Amongst the Masses." *Punch* 52. December 7, 1867.
- Anon. "Woman in Her Psychological Relations" *The Journal of Psychological Medicine and Mental Pathology* IV (1851): 34-35, Google books.
- Eastlake, Lady Elizabeth. "Vanity Fair--and Jane Eyre." *Quarterly Review* 84, no. 167 (December 1848): 153-185
- "Englishwoman's Death in France" *The Manchester Guardian*. July 17, 1914.
- "Governesses' Benevolent Institution", *Punch or The London Charivari* 10 (1846): 216.
- "A Governess's Death by Poison—A Question of Identity," *The Times*, November 6 1911, 3 col. E
- "THE GOVERNESS GRINDERS" *Punch, or the London Charivari*, October 27, 1855.
- "Hints on the Modern Governess System." *Fraser's Magazine* 30 (November 1844): 571-583.
- "The History of a Governess." *The Western Mail*, May 18, 1869.
- "How to Kill a Governess." *The Leader*. December 19 1857. *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*. Web. 25 Feb. 2013. Document URL <http://ncco.tu.galegroup.com/tinyurl/5SeM5>
- "Letter XXIX: From the Hon. Mrs. Flint to Lady Honoria Asphalt on the Choice of a Governess." *Punch or the London Charivari* 6-7 (1844): 165.
- "Miss Coote's Confession, or The Voluptuous Experiences of an Old Maid; in a series of Letters to a Lady Friend." In *The Pearl: A Journal of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading, Three Volumes in One*. July 1879-December 1880. Reprint, North Hollywood, CA: Brandon House Books, 1967.
- "A MODEL GOVERNESS." *Punch, or The London Charivari*. February 26, 1848, page 51.
- "Motor-Car in the Seine-Children and Governess Perish." *The Manchester Guardian*. April 21, 1913.

- “Murder Mystery in New York: English Girl Strangled in Hotel Lured to Death” *The Observer*. August 25 1912.
- “The Murder of a Governess”, *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*. December 12, 1893.
- Pollard, Alfred W. “The Governess and Her Grievances.” *Murrays Magazine* 4, no. 28 (1889): 505-515.
- “Railway Accident in Egypt.” *The Manchester Guardian* June 1, 1908; *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, May 5<sup>th</sup> 1908.
- “SAD SUICIDE OF A GOVERNESS.” *Reynold’s Newspaper*. September 15, 1872, News Section, London.
- “Shocking Murder of a Governess”, *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, December 11, 1893.
- “Value of a Young Lady’s Teeth” *The Southern Medical and Surgical Journal* XIV, no. 4 (1858): 290. Nineteenth Century collections Online.
- “A VISIT TO THE GOVERNESSES’ INSTITUTION IN LONDON.” *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1847, page 330.
- “WANTED, A GOVERNESS: CHAP. II.” *The Leisure Hour: A Family Journal of Instruction and Recreation* 103. December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1853.
- “Wanted A Governess on Handsome Terms” *Punch*. Volume 9 (1845), Page 25.
- “Wanted, A White Slave—Cheap.” *Punch*. January 14, 1865. Page 21.
- “White Slavery” *The Times*, January 20, 1857, page 12 Issue 22582, col C
- “Who is Ms. Nightingale?” *The Times*, October 30, 1854, page 7.
- “The World We Live in,” *The Odd Fellow*. April 4 1840, 1.
- “A Young Lady and her Governess Drowned” *The Irish Times*. June 28, 1901.

### *Secondary Sources*

#### Books

- Bending, Lucy. *The Representation of Bodily Pain in Late Nineteenth-Century English Culture*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.
- Broughton, Trev and Ruth Symes, editors. *The Governess: An Anthology*. Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton Publishing, 1997.
- D’Cruze, Shani and Louise A. Jackson, *Women, Crime and Justice in England since 1660*. New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2009.
- Emsley, Clive. *Crime and Society in England, 1750-1900*. Pearson Education Limited, 1987. Reprint, UK: Pearson, 2005.
- Frost, Ginger. *Promises Broken: Courtship, Class and Gender in Victorian England*. Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 1995.
- Gibson, Ian. *The English Vice: Beating, Sex and Shame in Victorian England and After*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1978.
- Hughes, Kathryn. *The Victorian Governess*. London; Rio Grande: The Hambleton Press, 1993.
- Jackson, Louise A. *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England*. Routledge: London, 2000.

- Lansbury, Coral. *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers, and Vivisection in Edwardian England*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
- Melville Logan, Peter Melville. *Nerves and Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century British Prose*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1997.
- Mangham, Andrew. *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture*. Hampshire, UK; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Marcus, Sharon. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England*. Princeton, New Jersey; Oxfordshire, UK: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Marcus, Steven. *The Other Victorians: A Study of Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*. New York: Basic Books Inc., 1964. Reprint, 1974.
- McCalman, Iain. *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Nead, Lynda. *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.
- Pearl, Sharrona. *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Poovey, Mary. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Rappaport, Erika. *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Renton, Alice. *Tyrant or Victim: A History of the British Governess*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991.
- Sigel, Lisa Z. *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815-1914*. New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Making Modern Love: Sexual Narratives and Identities in Interwar Britain* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).
- Sindall, Rob. *Street Violence in the Nineteenth Century: Media Panic or Real Danger?* London; New York: Leicester University Press, 1990.
- Startup, Radoija. *Damaging Females: Representations of Women as Victims and Perpetrators of Crime in the Mid Nineteenth Century*. Doctoral Dissertation, University College of London, February 2000.
- Walkowitz, Judith. *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*. Reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Wiener, Matt. *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness and Criminal Justice in Victorian England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

### Articles

- Beller, Anne-Marie. "Sensation Fiction in the 1850s" in *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, edited by Andrew Mangham, 7-20. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

- Halttunen, Karen. Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture." *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (April 1995): 303-334.
- Peterson, M. Jeanne. "The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society." In *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, edited by Martha Vicinus. Bloomington, IN; London: Indian University Press, 1972.
- Watterson, William Collins. "'Chips Off the Old Block': Birching, Social Class, and the English Public Schools. *Nineteenth-Century Studies* 10 (1996): 93-110.