

Fiction and 'The Woman  
Question' from 1850  
to 1930



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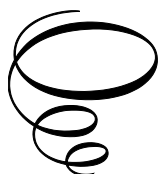
Edited by

Nicola Darwood,

W. R. Owens

and Alexis Weedon

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Fiction and 'The Woman Question' from 1850 to 1930

Edited by Nicola Darwood, W. R. Owens and Alexis Weedon

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## ‘THE WOMAN QUESTION’: CHRONOLOGY OF SIGNIFICANT DATES

1832—passage of First Reform Act, extending vote to middle-class men; first women’s suffrage petition presented by Henry Hunt to Parliament.

1837—accession of Queen Victoria.

1840—formation of National Charter Association (the ‘Chartist’ movement, which campaigned to extend the vote to working men).

1847—Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*; Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*; Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Princess*.

1848—Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; revolutions throughout Europe; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*; last large-scale Chartist agitation.

1849—Bedford College opens in London, the first higher education college for women in UK.

1851—Harriet Taylor, *Enfranchisement of Women*; Women’s Suffrage Petition presented to House of Lords; national census reveals demographic imbalance in favour of women.

1854—Barbara Bodichon, *A Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women*; Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House* (1854–63); Crimean War (England and France v. Russia); Florence Nightingale’s reform of hospitals and nursing begins.

1855—beginning of campaign for a Married Women’s Property Act.

1856—Dinah Mulock Craik, *John Halifax, Gentleman*.

**1857—Dinah Mulock Craik, ‘The Double House’** and *Nothing New: Tales*; Barbara Bodichon, *Women and Work*; Matrimonial Causes [Divorce]

Act, allows divorce on grounds of adultery by either husband or wife, but with additional requirements for a wife petitioning for divorce.

1859—Florence Nightingale, *Cassandra*.

1858—foundation of the *English Woman's Journal*.

1864—first Contagious Diseases Act, enables police to arrest prostitutes and send them to locked hospitals (extended in 1866 and 1869; repealed in 1886).

1866—George Eliot, *Felix Holt the Radical*; formation of Women's Suffrage Committee; John Stuart Mill presents first mass women's suffrage petition to House of Commons; Manchester National Society for Women's Suffrage is formed, as well as other suffrage societies in cities across Britain.

1867—passage of Second Reform Act, extending the franchise to smallholders and those paying a rent of £10pa; Lily Maxwell, shop owner meeting the property qualification and on the register in error (as she was not a man), votes in the election; her vote is later declared illegal.

1868—first public meeting about women's suffrage held at the Manchester Free Trade Hall.

1869—John Stuart Mill [with Harriet Taylor], *The Subjection of Women*; foundation of Girton College, the first women's college at Cambridge.

1870—first Married Women's Property Act, gives married women right to own their own property and money.

1871—Trades Unions become legal; George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871–2).

1872—formation of National Society for Women's Suffrage, which later, in 1897, becomes the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS).

1874—London School of Medicine for Women opens.

1878—foundation of Lady Margaret Hall at Oxford University; University of London accepts women as students.

1879—Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House* (performed in English in 1889); foundation of Somerville College at Oxford University.

**1880—Ouida, *Moths***; first women awarded degrees by University of London.

1881—Mark Rutherford, *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford*.

1882—second Married Women's Property Act, recognizes husbands and wives as separate legal entities and gives wives right to own, buy and sell their own separate property.

1884—Third Reform (Representation of the People) Act redraws boundaries to make electoral districts equal; third Married Women's Property Act, extends rights of women over property, and enables them to sue and be sued in their own name.

1885—Mark Rutherford, *Mark Rutherford's Deliverance*.

1886—Socialist League demonstrations in London; Marie Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds*.

1887—Mark Rutherford, *The Revolution in Tanner's Lane*.

**1890—Marie Corelli, *Wormwood*; Mark Rutherford, *Miriam's Schooling*.**

1891—introduction of free elementary education; Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

**1893—Mark Rutherford, *Catharine Furze***; formation of Independent Labour Party.

1894—George Gissing, *The Parasite*; Local Government Act allows women to vote in elections for county and borough councils.

**1895—George Gissing, *Sleeping Fires***; Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*; Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*; Grant Allen, *The Woman Who Did*.

**1896—Mark Rutherford, *Clara Hopgood*.**

1897—George Gissing, *The Whirlpool*; Bram Stoker, *Dracula*; National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) is formed, uniting seventeen societies.

**1899—Kate Chopin, *The Awakening***; Mary Cholmondeley, *Red Pottage*; Boer War begins (ends 1902).

1900—formation of the Labour Representative Committee.

1901—death of Queen Victoria; accession of Edward VII.

1902—Women textile workers present petition to Parliament containing 37,000 signatures demanding votes for women.

1903—Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), whose members are known as suffragettes, formed in Manchester at the home of Emmeline Pankhurst.

1904—Millicent Mackenzie is appointed Assistant Professor of Education at the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire (promoted to full professorship in 1910).

1905—start of militant action by suffragettes.

1906—Labour Representative Committee wins 29 seats in Parliament and changes name to the Labour Party.

1907—Elizabeth Robins, *The Convert*; NUWSS stages large procession from Hyde Park to Exeter Hall; Women's Enfranchisement Bill is introduced to Parliament for its second reading, but is talked out; Dora Thewlis and seventy-five other suffragettes are arrested when WSPU attempt to storm Houses of Parliament; Qualification of Women Act allows women to be elected to borough and county councils and as mayor.

1908—Herbert Henry Asquith, an anti-suffragist Liberal, is elected Prime Minister; huge demonstration organised by WSPU at Hyde Park; suffragettes begin campaign of smashing windows, tying themselves to railings, etc.; Women Writers' Suffrage League (WWSL) is formed by Cicely Hamilton and Bessie Hatton; Women's National Anti-Suffrage League (WASL) is formed by Mrs Humphrey Ward; Edith Morley is appointed Professor of English Language at University College, Reading.

1909—Mary Cholmondeley, *Votes for Men*; Marion Wallace Dunlop becomes first imprisoned suffragette to go on hunger strike; Women's Tax Resistance League (WTRL) is formed to refuse to pay taxes.

1910—Evelyn Sharp, *Rebel Women*; WASL merges with the Men's National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage; Conciliation Bill, which would have granted suffrage to women owning property over the value of £10 is passed by House of Commons but fails to become law; suffragettes march on Parliament where they are brutally dealt with by police; death of Edward VII; accession of George V.

1911—large march of women demanding female enfranchisement; WSPU organises mass campaign of window-smashing in London.

1912—Parliamentary Franchise (Women) Bill is introduced but narrowly defeated; Labour Party includes female suffrage in their manifesto, the first political party to do so.

1913—the 'Cat and Mouse' Act (officially titled Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act) allows authorities to release suffragettes on hunger strike and then re-arrest them when they are well enough; Emily Wilding Davison dies after stepping out in front of the King's horse at Epsom Derby; thousands attend her funeral; NUWSS organises a 'Pilgrimage for Women's Suffrage' which concludes with a mass rally in Hyde Park; Caroline Spurgeon appointed Professor of English Literature at Bedford College, London.

1914—outbreak of World War One brings suspension of campaigns by WSPU and NUWSS; nearly five million women join the war effort; Asquith declares his allegiance to women's enfranchisement; The 'Rokeby Venus' is damaged by suffragette Mary Richardson.

**1915—Stella Benson, *I Pose*.**

1918—end of World War One; Representation of the People Act allows women over the age of 30 who meet a property qualification (about two-thirds of the total population of women in the UK) and virtually all men over the age of 21 to vote; Parliamentary (Qualification of Women) Act gives women over 21 the right to stand for election as an MP.

**1919—Clemence Dane, *Legend***; NUWSS becomes the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship; Nancy Astor takes her seat in the House of Commons as the first female MP; Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, opens professions to women.

**1921—Clemence Dane, *Bill of Divorcement*.**

**1924—Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire'.**

1928—Equal Franchise Act gives everyone over the age of 21 the right to vote.

1929—the first general election in which women over the age of 21 vote.

**1932—Clemence Dane, *Wild Decembers*.**

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Viviana Castellano** is a doctoral student at the University of Bedfordshire. She gained her BA in English Studies in 2012 and was awarded her Master of Arts by Research in 2014 for her thesis on female sexual desire in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women's literature. Her PhD research examines the fantasy world of *Game of Thrones* and is entitled 'The Grimdark, The Bad and The Ugly'.

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**Nicola Darwood** is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Bedfordshire. Her research interests are in fiction by women writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in particular Elizabeth Bowen and Stella Benson. She has published a number of articles on Elizabeth Bowen and Stella Benson, and her book *A World of Lost Innocence: The Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen* was published in 2012. She is co-editor of a new journal, *The Elizabeth Bowen Review*.

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**Lindsey Stewart** is a Visiting Fellow at the Open University. Her PhD (2018) examined the cultural mythology around the nineteenth-century psychiatric idea of monomania. Her research on *Mary Barton* and monomania has recently been published in the *Journal of Victorian Culture* (2019).

**Tom Ue** researches and teaches courses on nineteenth-century British literature, intellectual history, and cultural studies at Dalhousie University. He is the author of *Gissing, Shakespeare, and the Life of Writing* (forthcoming, Edinburgh University Press) and *George Gissing* (forthcoming, Liverpool University Press), and is the editor of *George Gissing, The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (forthcoming, Edinburgh University Press). He has held the prestigious Frederick Banting Postdoctoral Fellowship and is an Honorary Research Associate at University College London.

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**Jean-Michel Yvard** is Associate Professor of English at the University of Angers, France. His main research interests are in the history of ideas in nineteenth-century Britain. He has published widely on the secularization of religious and ethical conceptions, on agnosticism and atheism, and on the links between religion and science, philosophy and literature. His thesis,



defended in 2011 at the University of Sorbonne-Nouvelle, was entitled 'William Hale White ("Mark Rutherford") and the Crisis of Spirituality in Britain during the Victorian Era', and he is the author of many articles and book chapters on Hale White.



## INTRODUCTION

NICOLA DARWOOD, W.R. OWENS,  
AND ALEXIS WEEDON

In 1889, the popular science writer and novelist Grant Allen (1848–1899) wrote an article for the *Fortnightly Review* setting out some ‘Plain Words on the Woman Question’. His starting assumption was that population numbers had to be kept up and if possible increased, and for this to happen, all women would need to ‘marry and produce more than four children apiece’. While having ‘the greatest sympathy with the modern woman’s demand for emancipation’ and declaring himself to be ‘an enthusiast on the Woman Question’, Allen argued that nothing should interfere with the ‘prime natural necessity’ that ‘most women must be wives and mothers’. They should therefore not be educated to become ‘literary women, schoolmistresses, hospital nurses [or] lecturers on cookery’, however good in themselves such things may be. Instead, they should be ‘educated to suckle strong and intelligent children, and to order well a wholesome, beautiful, reasonable, household’. Due to an unfortunate dearth of marriageable men, and an ‘abnormally large’ number of ‘unmarried women in the cultivated classes’, ‘the Woman’s Rights women’ have thought it ‘possible and desirable for the mass of women to support themselves, and to remain unmarried for ever’. But, says Allen, although the ‘self-supporting spinster is undoubtedly a fact’, it is ‘an abnormality’, a ‘deplorable accident of the passing moment’. In his view, a ‘genuine Woman Movement’ must accept without reservation the truth that ‘maternity [is] the central function of the mass of women’.<sup>1</sup>

The various aspects of ‘The Woman Question’ mentioned here by Allen—education, suffrage, financial and emotional independence, marriage and motherhood—are all explored and debated in the chapters

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<sup>1</sup> Grant Allen, ‘Plain Words on the Woman Question’, *Fortnightly Review*, 46 (October 1889), pp. 448–458. Allen (born Charles Grant Blairfindie Allen) later became famous as the author of *The Woman Who Did* (1895), whose heroine disapproves of the institution of marriage, chooses to live with her lover and bear his child, and suffers misery as an outcast when he dies.

making up this collection. As the scope of his article indicates, from the mid-nineteenth century and into the twentieth century 'The Woman Question' encompassed not only 'votes for women', but gender equality more widely, including all kinds of economic, professional, domestic and sexual issues affecting girls and women. Debates over 'The Woman Question' were some of the most disruptive and fiercely contested during this period. Among the most influential of the early contributors were Harriet Taylor and her husband, the great liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill. In 1851 Taylor published a combative short work entitled *Enfranchisement of Women*, in which she argued that women should have full equality with men, and furthermore that their duties as mothers should not prevent them from seeking paid employment. She also contributed to Mill's famous work *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which argued strongly that there should be no legal subordination of one sex to another, and even went so far as to describe the position of women in England as worse than that of slaves.

Partly through the efforts of campaigners like Taylor and Mill, the lives of women changed considerably in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century. For example, a series of Married Women's Property Acts passed in 1870, 1882 and 1884 granted married women the right to own and control their own property (which had previously been owned and controlled by their husbands upon marriage). There were (slow) advances in educational opportunities for women, with the establishment of women's colleges in London (1849, 1874), Cambridge (1869) and Oxford (1878, 1879). The struggle over voting rights for women began as early as 1832, when a women's suffrage petition was presented to Parliament at the time of the passage of the 'Great Reform Act' which extended the franchise to middle-class men. A similar petition was presented to the House of Lords in 1851. In 1866 John Stuart Mill presented the first mass women's suffrage petition to the House of Commons. The National Society for Women's Suffrage was formed in 1872, later (in 1897) becoming the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. It was followed in 1903 by the more militant Women's Social and Political Union whose members were known as 'suffragettes', prepared to engage in direct action such as smashing windows and tying themselves to railings. Many suffragettes were imprisoned and forcibly fed when they went on hunger strike.

All this agitation meant that the role and position of women in society, relations between women and men, indeed the very nature of 'woman', were discussed more widely than ever before. Not surprisingly, many works of literature focussed on the lives and experiences of women, and

themselves contributed to the debates over 'The Woman Question'. One of the most widely-read poems of the nineteenth century was Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854–63), which celebrated the virtues of marriage and domesticity for women. Other writers took as their subject the desire of women to be treated equally with men, and represented this in a great variety of ways. A famous example is Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*, first performed in English in 1889, which quite openly challenged the idea that women have no other role in life than to be married, and that they have no identity of their own within marriage. The play's depiction of a woman rejecting her husband and walking out on him and her children shocked and appalled contemporary audiences.

In bringing together this collection of essays, we have decided to focus attention not on famous writers or works, but on fiction written by authors who, in the main, have attracted relatively little critical interest in recent years. Writers discussed include Stella Benson; Kate Chopin; Marie Corelli; Dinah Mulock Craik; Clemence Dane; Arthur Conan Doyle; George Gissing; Ouida; and William Hale White (who wrote under the pseudonym 'Mark Rutherford'). While most are no longer as well-known as when they were publishing their novels and stories, many of them were extremely popular with the reading public of their time, and some were compared by critics to writers who are now more often in the forefront of Victorian studies. As Nicola Diane Thompson has shown, George Eliot was compared to Craik and Ouida's *Moths* was considered as good a novel as Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*.<sup>2</sup>

Responses to 'The Woman Question' as well as to works of fiction which dealt with it in the period between 1850 and 1930 were extremely varied.<sup>3</sup> So, appropriately, there is a good deal of variation in the approach and individual focus of the chapters in this collection. The novels, short stories and authors are discussed in chapters arranged in broadly chronological order, and taken together, as well as individually, these chapters offer original insights into how changing attitudes towards women, marriage, independence and suffrage were represented in fictional form over this long period.

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<sup>2</sup> Nicola Diane Thompson, 'Responding to the Woman Questions: Rereading Noncanonical Victorian Women Novelists', in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. by Nicola Diane Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1–23 (p. 7).

<sup>3</sup> The literary debate is extensively represented and analysed in *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America 1837–1883, Volume 3: Literary Issues*, ed. by Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, and William Veeder (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

In Chapter One, Lindsey Stewart considers Dinah Mulock Craik's 'The Double House', a short story first published in an American magazine in 1856 before appearing the following year in a second volume of Craik's short stories, *Nothing New: Tales*. 'The Double House' can be seen as an intervention in the public debate about marriage and divorce leading up to the passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857. In Craik's story, Stewart argues, the marriage between Dr Evan Merchiston and his wife Barbara is presented as a 'suffocating game of control and subjugation during which the wife's identity is horribly crushed'. Craik reworks mid-Victorian ideas of domesticity, giving them a sensational twist. Her story appeared during a period in which 'sentimental' women's stories were in abundance and whose readership primarily consisted of the 'surplus' women so deplored by Allen in 'Plain Words on the Woman Question'. Stewart ends with the thought that 'The Double House' may have been designed to suggest to Craik's 'spinster' readers that marriage is not always as wonderful as it is cracked up to be.

Chapter Two, by Laura Cox, also considers the representation of family life, taking as her focus Ouida's *Moths* and Marie Corelli's *Wormwood*. Published in 1880 and 1890 respectively, these two novels, Cox suggests, argue against prevailing notions of domesticity, with Ouida in particular being castigated for her lack of respect for these nineteenth century ideals. Cox places *Moths* and *Wormwood* within the context of an apparently insatiable desire for conduct books, the passage of the Married Women's Property Acts in 1870 and 1882, and the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s. Although both Ouida and Corelli were reviled by a number of male reviewers, their books sold in vast numbers. Cox argues that these authors refashioned characteristics of the sensation novel of the mid-nineteenth century to intervene in contemporary debates, challenging gender conventions and revising the perception of what a 'woman' could be, beyond the prescribed roles of wife and mother.

In Chapter Three, Jean-Michel Yvard discusses the Bedford-born writer William Hale White, better known as 'Mark Rutherford', the pseudonym under which he published six remarkable novels between 1881 and 1896. In each of these he includes sympathetic accounts of the lives of women. In *Clara Hopgood* (1896), for example, one of the protagonists, Madge Hopgood, becomes pregnant while engaged to be married, and refuses to marry the father-to-be when she realizes that she does not truly love him. What is striking is that in this Victorian novel there is no criticism of her actions. According to Claire Tomalin, there had been nothing like it in previous English literature: 'Madge Hopgood is [...] the first English heroine to elect to become an unmarried mother on a point of

principle, and to be given unequivocal credit for her decision by her creator'.<sup>4</sup> Yvard argues that although White cannot be described as a feminist writer in the militant sense of the term, he nevertheless contributed significantly to contemporary discussions about the roles of women and their autonomy (or lack of it) in society. In his novels, White depicts their frustrations at being unable to fulfil their aspirations, criticizes the limited educational and cultural opportunities available to them, but also presents challenging portraits of free-spirited and rebellious women. At the same time, however—and in some ways like George Eliot, whom he greatly admired—his novels often end on an ambiguous and uncertain note, seeming to advocate a patient, resigned acceptance of the situations women find themselves in and a renouncing of aspirations to the happiness they have been looking for.

Chapter Four is also devoted to White's fiction. Elisabeth Jay's argument in this chapter is that although novels of White's such as *Miriam's Schooling* (1890), *Catharine Furze* (1893) and *Clara Hopgood* (1896) are ostensibly set back in the 1840s, they are by no means accurate 'historical' representations of this earlier period, but are instead reflecting upon and reacting to issues of gender relations current in the 1880s and 1890s, the era of the 'New Woman'. In many respects, Jay argues, White's heroines enjoy more self-determination and freedom than would have been available to them in the 1840s, and to that extent they are born out of their time. His women may seem to demonstrate an admirable sense of self-determination, but in other respects, according to Jay, the feminine ideal to which White clings seems more like the mid-century ideal for women: silent self-sacrifice.

Marriage and motherhood are two focal issues of Chapter Five, by Tom Ue, in which he discusses George Gissing's novel *Sleeping Fires* (1895) and Arthur Conan Doyle's short story 'The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire' (1924). With nearly thirty years between them, Ue argues that the maternal plot in both works adds to our understanding of 'The Woman Question'. Gissing often focused on the role and position of women in novels published towards the end of the nineteenth century, and although many reviewers of *Sleeping Fires* preferred to comment on the portrayal of the male characters, they overlooked the importance of Gissing's characterisation of the two 'motherly' figures, Lady Revill and Mrs. Tresilian, in the moral and educational development of the young Louis Reed. The apparently negative portrayal of motherhood in the character of Lady Revill can also be seen in Arthur Conan Doyle's Mrs.

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<sup>4</sup> Claire Tomalin, 'Afterword' in Mark Rutherford, *Clara Hopgood* (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), p. [302].

Ferguson, the mother in 'The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire'. As Ue argues, however, the accusation that she is a vampire is, in this case, totally erroneous and she is, in fact, a victim rather than a perpetrator of crime.

The role of motherhood is further considered in Chapter Six, where Viviana Castellano discusses the quest for sexual autonomy and emancipation in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Published in 1899, this novella examines the ramifications of a woman exploring and prioritising her own emotional and sexual needs at the expense of her husband and, ultimately, her children. As Castellano notes, like other novels of the late nineteenth century which focused on such controversial ideas, *The Awakening* was considered by some to be vulgar, while others praised Chopin for her courage in publishing such a daring text. Castellano argues that Edna Pontellier's decision to walk into the sea at the end of novella signals the necessity for Edna, and perhaps all women of the period, to divest herself of the chains of patriarchy so that she can awaken and live her life to the full, independently.

In her discussion of Stella Benson's *I Pose* in Chapter Seven, Nicola Darwood explores the most divisive issue of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: women's suffrage. Using Benson's unpublished diaries, she traces changes in Benson's own beliefs regarding suffrage, from vehement disapproval of the idea of women having the vote, to a strong conviction that this should be an inalienable right for all women. While working for the Women Writers' Suffrage League, Benson completed *I Pose*, her first novel, published in 1915. In part, the novel allows Benson to articulate her own views, but she also explores some of the complicated ethical questions raised by and within the suffragette movement. Her protagonist takes the final, irrevocable step of detonating a bomb in the church in which she is due to get married, thus destroying not just the church but also striking a blow against an oppressive patriarchal system.

In Chapter Eight, the final chapter, Alexis Weedon considers Clemence Dane's continuing role in the ongoing struggle for female emancipation, following the partial enfranchisement of women in Britain in 1918. In her discussion of a number of Dane's works—including *The Women's Side* (1926), *Legend* (1919), *Wild Decembers* (1932) and *Bill of Divorcement* (1921)—Weedon explores how these works reveal much about the tensions inherent in the expectations of women at the end of the nineteenth century and in the earlier decades of the twentieth century. As a 'superfluous woman', or a 'self-supporting spinster' of the kind denigrated by Grant Allen, Dane questioned why women should have to take a gamble and risk their lives and their reputations to find their own places in



the world, instead of being able to play an equal part and gain an equal share of the new economic and social benefits opening up for all.

In providing critical accounts of some key works by these generally understudied but important writers, we hope that this collection of essays significantly extends understanding of how fiction in this period could be used to represent female characters who, in varying degrees and with mixed success, sought to defy the social, sexual and political constraints placed upon them. The short stories, novellas and novels considered in this volume demonstrate how fiction contributed in striking and memorable ways to debates over 'The Woman Question' and gender equality—debates that continue to have relevance in the twenty-first century.

### **Acknowledgements**

The papers from which the chapters in this book have emerged were first presented in 2018 at a one-day symposium on 'Literature and "The Woman Question"' organized jointly by the Mark Rutherford Society and The Research Institute for Media, Arts and Performance (RIMAP) at the University of Bedfordshire. 'Mark Rutherford' was the pen name of the novelist William Hale White (1831–1913) who was born in Bedford, and it thus seemed highly appropriate to host the symposium at the Bedford campus of the University of Bedfordshire. The theme of the symposium was chosen to mark the one hundredth anniversary of the passage of the Representation of the People Act in 1918, which for the first time allowed women over the age of thirty to vote in general elections. We would like to express our special thanks to Nick Wilde and John Monks of the Mark Rutherford Society, and also to colleagues at the University of Bedfordshire for their help and support in the organization of the symposium.



## CHAPTER ONE

# DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES: DINAH MULOCK CRAIK'S 'THE DOUBLE HOUSE'

LINDSEY STEWART

Dinah Mulock Craik's writings were mid-nineteenth-century best sellers, but more recently they have tended to languish on the outer reaches of university English syllabi as popular stories with a typically conventional, conservative tone. In this chapter I consider her short story, 'The Double House', first published in Britain in 1857 on the eve of legislative change and shifting social attitudes towards marriage. Unlike her other prose I argue that this fiction offers a disturbing glimpse into the contemporaneous domestic sphere by exposing the exploits of a controlling husband and a cruelly subjugated wife. In the four sections that follow, I outline the legislative and social background to 'The Double House'; detail briefly the circumstances in which Craik came to pen such an anomalous work; consider the story itself; and, finally, discuss the reception of Craik's writings by readers and critics.

### **The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857**

Whereas previously upon getting married man and wife became 'one flesh', legislative change to the institution of marriage in 1857 also heralded discursive change.<sup>1</sup> The biblical context of a sacred rite became overshadowed by the possibility of separate finances. Up to this point a married woman had no legal rights to property as it was customarily believed that such rights might upset marital harmony. Should she have property of her own, all of it had to be relinquished on her wedding day and her husband became her trustee, effectively taking ownership of her

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<sup>1</sup> See Genesis 2:24: 'Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.'

land and goods. This was to change in 1857 with the passage of Viscount Palmerston's Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act. This famous Act was debated in Parliament by devout Christians led by Gladstone on the one hand, and reforming Whig lawyers supported by Caroline Norton on the other. During her acrimonious separation from a controlling and jealous husband, Norton had been denied access to her own earnings from writing, and to her three infants who were considered the all-inclusive 'property' of her husband. The parliamentary debate reverberated in newspaper columns and letters pages. Several bishops bitterly objected to the bill's reforms on the grounds that granting divorce privileges to women might make divorces too eagerly sought. Passions ran high. A typical article of 1857 supporting legislative change was headed 'The Woman's Question'. Its author remonstrated with the bishops as follows:

If some of the lord bishops [...] could but take the place, and live the daily life, for a short time, of some women, it would put all their abstract theories and wire drawn arguments to a very speedy flight—to sit alone night after night watching for the step which will not come; to bear the sharp words, and perhaps sharper blows, when it does; to know that the earnings which ought to have been laid out on the comforts and necessaries of home, have been squandered in rioting and sin; or, worse still, property that has been given or acquired for her use and benefit, seized and spent when or how they will, whilst she, utterly powerless, can but stand still and look on.<sup>2</sup>

With its final passing into law, the Act initiated a small but principled change by enabling a deserted wife to protect any subsequent earnings she accrued from the claims of an estranged husband. More widely, it made divorce, previously the preserve of the very wealthy, available to both middle-class women and men through civil rather than ecclesiastical proceedings, albeit with a residual double standard: a man had only to prove his wife's adultery, whereas a woman had to prove her husband's adultery, and additionally that he was guilty of either cruelty, desertion, incest or bigamy. These incremental changes were to lead to significant later reform, in particular the Married Women's Property Act of 1870 which permitted married women to retain and control their earned income. In the first year of the new Divorce Act of 1857 there were three hundred petitions to the new court, as against three in the year before. A slow but rising trend for divorce in the nineteenth century had begun, which was to

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Woman's Question', *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 31 May 1857, p. 7.

accelerate in the new century.<sup>3</sup> With it came the opportunity to read the salacious details of ‘rioting’ and ‘sin’ in other people’s marriages.

*The Times* hailed the new Divorce Court’s presiding judge, the Hon. Sir Cresswell Cresswell, as the ‘Confessor-General of England’.<sup>4</sup> Whilst adulterous behaviour might be expected from aristocrats (‘professional seducers’) and plebeians (‘drunkards and wife-beaters’) *The Times* lamented ‘the strange revelation of the secret doings of the English middle classes’ who were once the ‘golden mean’ between these two extremes. Prior to the Act’s passing, aside from the Norton scandal, revelations of marital strife associated with criminal proceedings had also appeared sporadically in the national press. In 1855, for instance, *The Observer* reported on a murder case in Stoke-on-Trent of a Mrs Sproston who had been killed by her husband in a fit of a so-called jealous monomania. Previously respectable and well known in the town, he had killed her in a brutal attack with his cavalry sword. Perhaps owing something to lurid fictional flourishes on the part of the journalist, but also fostering an increasing sensitivity towards domestic crime, the report included sensational details of her wounds, the belief that she had sunk upon her knees and begged for mercy, and her resultant and apparently sweet countenance in death.<sup>5</sup> Further such newspaper reports of more prosaic marital anguish from the new divorce court’s proceedings served to fuel this cumulative air of anxiety circulating around the institution of marriage.

For fiction writers, whose work often relied on the mainstay of the marriage plot, this moment of social change afforded the opportunity to construct female protagonists with a new legitimized agency. It was no longer radical to suggest that a woman might want to leave an unhappy marriage. Before the 1857 Act, what Anne Humphreys calls ‘divorce novels’ were based upon a pattern which she describes as the ‘Caroline Norton plot’. This pattern represented women’s disadvantaged position in a manner which Humphreys argues ‘is consistent enough to be a trope: a brutal and/or egregiously adulterous husband is repeatedly excused, forgiven, and often nursed by the heroic wife until finally he or she dies as

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<sup>3</sup> See Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: A History of the Making and Breaking of Marriage in England 1530–1987* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Sir Cresswell Cresswell is Holding up a Mirror to the Age’, *The Times*, 12 December 1859, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Shocking Tragedy at Wheelock’, *The Observer*, 7 May 1855, p. 8.

in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë (1848).<sup>6</sup> Brontë's heroine returns to act as medical attendant to her debauched husband, Arthur Huntingdon, a man 'given up to animal enjoyments', during his last sufferings before death.<sup>7</sup> He repents his behaviour and Brontë's specific didactic message is a warning against the perils of drink, whilst simultaneously offering her readership a broader narrative curative which attacks male selfishness and female self-effacement. It is well established by critics that this trope of nursing a maimed or disabled husband, which both Anne and Charlotte Brontë used, allows the reader to glimpse a more equitable relationship, and is pertinent to the story I shall discuss in this chapter. Humphreys points out that without the closure of a husband's death the narrative options were either scandalous or grim for the wife: she took her chances and left, or submissively endured a bad marriage. For the husband the narrative options were desertion and/or bigamy (as was the case with Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*).

Following the 1857 Act's arrival and the possibility of a lawful exit from the contract of marriage, the nature of the marital union came under gentle but pessimistic scrutiny even by those of a more socially conservative persuasion. Coventry Patmore's serialized poem *The Angel in the House* (published in four parts, 1854–63), and Sarah Stickney Ellis's best-selling conduct book *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (1839), both counselled women to give minute attention to their wifely duties. In the remainder of this chapter I will examine a hitherto neglected short story by a writer now, paradoxically, perceived to be the most 'domestic' of them all.<sup>8</sup> I shall argue that Dinah Mulock Craik's 'The Double House' (1857) illustrates the divergent cultural responses to the nascent Woman Question, even amongst those who might otherwise be described as articulating the Victorian *status quo*.

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Humphreys, 'Breaking Apart: The Early Victorian Divorce Novel', in *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. by Nicola Diane Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 43–44.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. by Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 357.

<sup>8</sup> John Sutherland, *Lives of the Novelists: A History of Fiction in 294 Lives* (London: Profile Books, 2011), p. 150. Sutherland notes that 'No novelist was more domestic than Miss Mulock'.