



## Reading the Women's Sentimental Novel: A Romance

Tabitha Sparks

### Abstract

In "Reading the Women's Sentimental Novel: A Romance," Tabitha Sparks considers a large and diffuse body of mass-market fiction written by and for Victorian women. She argues that the author-focused interpretive approach that underwrites the study of the canon neglects the attraction of formula fiction, and even the robust recovery efforts of Victorian scholars have largely avoided a taxonomic reading of these novels. In an effort to uncover their objectives and appeal, Sparks reads periodical reviews and discussions of the professional woman writer to better understand the commercial – not artistic – standards assigned to the prosaic "lady's novel." She examines a subset of novels by Annie S. Swan, Sarah Doudney, Emily Jolly, and Adeline Sergeant to uncover a repeated subplot in which these novels' heroines become best-selling authors. The complete elision of the content of their best-sellers reveals and confirms the sentimental novel's self-conscious withdrawal from the literary caste wars of the day.

### Keywords

popular novel; non-canonical; women's fiction; sentimental; authorship; periodical reviews

**Date of Acceptance:** 27 June 2023

**Date of Publication:** 5 July 2023

**Double Blind Peer Reviewed**

### Recommended Citation:

Sparks, Tabitha. 2023. "Reading the Women's Sentimental Novel: A Romance." *Victorian Popular Fictions*, 5.1: 3-20. ISSN: 2632-4253 (online) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46911/FLWG9098>



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## Reading the Woman's Sentimental Novel: A Romance

Tabitha Sparks

“I really enjoyed reading this book, although at times it got very boring. The overall plot of the three girls making a living for themselves was interesting but also sometimes confusing.”

Readers of Victorian popular fiction (not this journal – the *oeuvre*) have been here before: the intermittent boredom, the hard-to-account for pleasure, confusion over what the girls are doing. This quotation comes from a student of several years ago and refers to Rosa Nouchette Carey's 1884 novel, *Not Like Other Girls*. Along with my student, I have grappled with the interpretation of sentimental novels like Carey's – the thousands of triple-decker novels that achieved commercial success at the time of publication and are all but unheard of today: without irony, we call this genre “popular fiction” or even less helpfully “genre fiction.” In the interest of narrowing down a sample, I have focused on a selection of sentimental novels written by women between 1856 and 1890 in which the tale of sacrifice, loss, and reward exemplifies conventional Victorian femininity. These novels feature a relatively small cast of characters who cross paths and reunite by miraculous turns of chance, while romantic and economic crises resolve through providence more often than design. It is easy and conventional to dismiss these novels as frivolous and hackneyed, useful foils to original art, by-products of cheap printing, underemployment, and excess leisure time.

As scholars and readers have been pointing out since the Victorian era, popular women's novels outnumber the canon that characterises “the Victorian novel” by the tens-of-thousands, though identifying a sample set can be challenging. Helen C. Black's *Notable Women Authors of the Day* (1892), which I have written about for this journal (Sparks 2019), collects 27 biographical sketches of novelists, among whom several are well known (Eliza Lynn Linton, Rhoda Broughton, Charlotte Riddell, and Florence Marryat), some modestly familiar (Amelia Edwards, Edna Lyall, and Jessie Fothergill), and others seldom cited beyond Black's own collection (Mrs Leith Adams and Mrs L.B. Walford). Today we have digital access to many of these novels: Troy J. Bassett's indispensable database *At the Circulating Library* indexes over 22,000 titles searchable by author, publisher, subject (and more), with links to many of the novels on platforms like Project Gutenberg and the Hathi-Trust.<sup>1</sup> Still, scholarly attention to mass-market, sentimental fiction remains exceptional; more scholars examine the

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the novels examined below are catalogued by Bassett's *At the Circulating Library* and available through links to Hathi-Trust, and others are available at archive.org.

professional development of non-canonical women writers and bypass considered appraisal of their fiction, as we see in the recent proliferation of work on publishing history.<sup>2</sup>

But now that we are decolonising, globalising, and un-disciplining Victorian Studies,<sup>3</sup> ignoring the sentimental novel reinscribes the Victorians' own pitting of the "literary" against the "popular" novel, a contest that with very few exceptions was also gendered.<sup>4</sup> Our objection to these novels might be their validation of traditional gender roles during a historical period that fostered feminist progress in the form of suffrage, the expansion of women's work and education, and sexual freedoms. As an object of scholarship, the sentimental novel's explicit conservatism makes it practically untouchable. But if we are serious about understanding and exposing the roots of the imperial and hegemonic politics that underwrote not only the Victorian era but continue to strangle and overdetermine contemporary experience, the dismissal of a mass cultural form can look myopic.

Over a decade ago, Nancy Armstrong, writing about the sensation novel, suggested that "we have to ask ourselves how to read these novels in their own terms, rather than as failures of realism," as "to read sensation fiction for its psychological complexity or sensitivity to social concerns is to fall in with those who defend what Leavis calls 'the higher features of art'" (2011: 139). As a genre, sensation novels have been vindicated by scholars, largely through their sharply Foucauldian encapsulation of history. Popular novels by Victorian women frequently deploy sensational elements, but their sentimentalism explains why so many have evaded the New Historical scrutiny that makes *The Moonstone* (1868) a testament to imperial guilt or *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) a commentary on the Lunacy Act. While matters imperial and lunatic are everywhere in sentimental novels,<sup>5</sup> their plotting usually follows a heroine's deeply subjective emotional experience at the expense of the civic networks and breakdowns so intricately devised by sensation authors like Collins and Braddon. For Pamela Gilbert, the scholarly prospects of this large and diffuse category of popular fiction are weak, at least according to conventional methods of interpretation. The sentimental novel, she writes, "seems a barren dead end if one seeks its progeny in the high-culture canon" and "of all modes of narration that have fallen from grace, [it is] the most generally reviled by 'serious' critics" (2013: 41). From the barren dead end of a reviled tradition, and without disputing these novels' conservatism or seeking subversive agendas that make them more relatable, this article attempts to take them seriously on their own terms.

What emerges after reading dozens of sentimental novels, however, is what seems like a studied and deliberate evasion of their own literary status, even as novel reading and writing

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<sup>2</sup> Joanne Shattock, Linda Hughes, Alexis Easley and Beth Palmer are some of the many scholars in the last few decades who have reconstructed the professional lives and challenges of Victorian women writers.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance the manifesto of the V21 Collective (<http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses/>), the *Victorian Studies* special issue "Undisciplining Victorian Studies" (Vol. 62, no.3, 2020), edited by Ronjaanee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff and Amy R. Wong, and the digital humanities project "Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom" (<https://undiscipliningvc.org/>) as recent examples of interventions into a field that has been Anglo-centric (as well as other metrics of majority populations).

<sup>4</sup> That is, both men and women wrote novels that were considered popular, but very few women wrote novels that joined the rank of literary realism.

<sup>5</sup> Sentimental novels that feature mental illness include *The Hidden Sin: A Novel* (Frances Browne, 1866), *A Casual Acquaintance: A Novel, Founded on Fact* (Lady Duffus Hardy, 1866) and *Wide of the Mark: A Novel* (Matilda Charlotte Houstoun, 1871). Imperial plots and locales are prominent in novels including *The Ordeal for Wives* (Annie Edwards, 1864), *Under Two Flags* (Ouida, 1867), *Scheherazade: A London Night's Entertainment* (Florence Warden, 1887), and *A Marriage in China* (Alicia Ellen Neve Little, 1896).

remain frequent subjects of discussion and occupation. Concurrent genres frequently negotiate their place on the high (literary) and low (popular) continuum, as we see in George Eliot's withering dismissal of "Mrs. Farthingale" and her penchant for "ermine tippets, adultery and murder" in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Eliot [1857] 2015: 39), or Mary Braddon's feckless Isabel Vane, who reads novels as conduct manuals in *The Doctor's Wife* (1864). In her takedown of superficial "lady's novels," Eliot's narrator validates realism's superior literary merit, while Braddon's hazards artistic insubordination in making sensation's dubious value the object of her novel. Sentimental novels seldom explore their own literary rank so directly, gesturing instead to their modest cultural purchase on a topical level, as we see in the following passage from Helen Mathers' best seller *Cherry Ripe! A Romance* (1877). Here, Mignon and Flora consider the inexplicable behaviour of Una's husband, Philip:

"And what is the story?" said Mignon eagerly; "he loved her, I suppose, and she did not love him, was that it?"

For lately, Mignon had been reading more than one love story; moreover, she had been thinking, and had somehow arrived at a far truer notion of love and love's requirements than she ever had before.

"If a man's love for a woman may be gauged by the pains he is at to win her," said Flora, "then Philip loved the fair Una very much indeed; if you measure it by his behaviour to her after he has obtained her, I should say that he disliked her extremely."

(Mathers 1877: 244)

This brief extract has many hallmarks of the genre: a dilemma arising from mercurial behaviour (Philip's apparent change of heart); a vulnerable young wife (Una); and a reference to the influence of fiction (Mignon's love stories). The first two issues are duly unravelled and solved through various machinations (secrets of the past revealed, miscommunications worked out, purity of motives confirmed), and the last issue – *Cherry Ripe!*'s implicit positioning among (other) love stories – creates the opportunity for a metafictional reflection upon the value of Mignon's reading practices. But the narrator retreats from this opportunity with a vague reference to Mignon's "thinking," which evidently surpasses the love stories in its insights. Sentimental novels are everywhere preoccupied with *the novel* as a theme, but as in this example, reluctant to implicate themselves or draw attention to their own literary function.

In the first two sections of this article, I draw upon the reviews of critics inside of the literary establishment as well as those defining and defending the professional woman writer to understand why sentimental novels avoid literary self-consciousness even as they continually reference novel reading and writing. The final section examines a common plot in novels by Emily Jolly, Adeline Sergeant, Annie S. Swan, and Sarah Doudney that enacts this self-effacement: a beleaguered heroine becomes a successful novelist, transforming her life through the profit and public acclaim generated by her writing career. But the novels-within-novels that effect this transformation remain wholly undefined – their content, titles, and critical accomplishment all unexplored. Paradoxically, the descriptive void that surrounds the heroines' literary achievements functions, I argue, as an errant signifier in these otherwise formulaic love stories, an unconsolidated symptom of the literary caste wars that marked the novel form in this period. The sentimental novels, prosaic and predictable as they are, hint in this muffled but persistent plot point at a scope beyond their own artistic conformism. Elsewhere I have argued that (other) Victorian women wrote metafiction to draw attention to the craft of writing, and so elevate their fiction to realism, a critical stature overwhelmingly identified with objective, masculine authority (Sparks 2022). In the sentimental novels studied

here, the occlusion of the heroines' literary successes thwarts a metafictional claim to influence, yet in its very persistence, troubles the genre's formal orthodoxy.

## The Victorian Sentimental Novel: Towards a Taxonomy

But first, my use of “sentimental” – more descriptive than taxonomic – demands further explication. By “sentimental novel” I do not gesture backward to Richardsonian and other eighteenth-century novels of sensibility that explore emotion as a sign of moral progress. Nor do I invoke a specifically American model, as described by critics including Nina Baym, which I discuss below. The novels at the heart of my analysis are sentimental insofar as their primary action comes from the predicament of a heroine suffering from some form of familial and financial instability that portends a circumscribed or loveless future – not to be confused with a sensation heroine's more dire and dramatic loss of legal identity, often through criminal means. “Sentimental” also encompasses highly contrived plots and coincidences more familiar to melodrama than realistic novels but does not conflate with didactic novels by authors such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Charlotte M. Young, or Dinah Mulock Craik. As a literary subgenre, the novels I am calling sentimental are aimed at a mass-market readership, and so fit into a popular formula more than they strive to be original or artistically innovative. Their value, that is, was activated in the real time of their reading and not towards a notion of literary art that would transcend time and place. For this reason, I have selected authors for this article who have been largely unstudied, a metric that makes Black's *Notable Women Writers* a particularly valuable source, as it bypasses so many of the novelists we deem important in favour of (now) esoteric ones. That Black also emphasises extra-literary attributes of the authors she interviews – their beauty, hospitality, home décor – confirms their cultural rather than literary stature.

To be clear, Victorian readers and critics did not designate a subset of women's novels “sentimental,” as I am doing; perhaps the closest categorisation would be the chiefly degrading term “lady novelist,” popularised by Eliot's damning article “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” and used routinely by critics like George Saintsbury in reviews, as I explore below. The sting of artistic ineptitude attached to mass market Victorian “lady novelists” has largely survived, in kind if not in name. When John Sutherland assures us that he “would never condemn any one to the lower reaches of Victorian fiction [as] life is too short and eternity scarcely long enough to read the 197-strong output of Annie S. Swan or all of the 251 works of L.T. Meade deposited in the British Library” (1989: 1), he does not explore the gendered basis of his judgment. An author like Charlotte Brontë, who also wrote under the name Bertha M. Clay, was one of the best-selling novelists of the century, but is not mentioned in Sutherland's *Companion to Victorian Fiction*: her more than 200 novels must exclude her from his attention. But one does not need to read all the works of a forgotten author to forge an understanding of her past appeal, and thanks to digitisation, the exercise of our curiosity or punishment can take place outside of the British Library. Sutherland's assumption that authorial distinction provides the basis for analysis infers canonical values, not the formulaic appeal that underwrites sentimental fiction. There are differences among these novelists, of course; some are more technically dextrous (Betham-Edwards), reliant on absurdity (Brontë), prone to violence (Cameron), proto-feminist (Crosselin), preachy (Meade), and so on, but the similarities between the authors and novels are more noteworthy than the differences.

Despite its important recovery work, feminist scholarship in the last few decades has not established a critical approach to women's popular, sentimental novels. Lucy Hartley's otherwise thorough collection, *The History of British Women's Writing, 1830-1880* (2018),



does not mention any of the thousands of popular authors or novels that flourished in this era; the index lacks entries for “genre,” “popular,” “sentimental,” or “mass-market.” Talia Schaffer’s review article, “British Non-Canonical Women Novelists, 1850-1890: Recent Studies” (2006), considers the barriers to studying non-canonical novels, which include the trend towards “partisan advocacy” that has driven much feminist recovery work, and the excessive summary that a study of unknown novels demands (2006: 325). Schaffer’s deft summary of the meta-critical obstacles we face in reading (and writing about) forgotten, sentimental novels makes Nina Baym’s pioneering *Women’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* even more intrepid. Dodging both partisan rhetoric and excessive plot summary, Baym examines dozens of virtually un-heard of (in 1978) novels (and eliminates the one sentimental American novel that readers might know, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), on behalf of its explicit political message). Baym’s expansive reading enables her to identify the cultural work that made these novels so popular in their day, and her interpretation identifies collective ideals rather than authorial distinctions. The novels she reads all feature a heroine who manages to overcome social and economic obstacles through her own resourcefulness and particularly American ingenuity. Margaret Cohen’s *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* makes a similar contribution to nineteenth-century French novels by women. Cohen challenges the idea that women wrote idealist and sentimental novels because their social subordination put realism beyond their grasp (2018: 8). She cites their English counterparts (Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell, and Eliot) as proof that gender position did not wholly overdetermine the intellectual range of artistic production (9-10).

Extrapolating from both Baym and Cohen, sentimentalism offered Victorian women generic opportunities that served their interests and desires: they *chose* to write novels that depended on coincidence and sympathy to endorse formulaic plots. Readers, too, *chose* sentimental novels alongside or instead of realist ones. Such choices, moreover, countered a critical tradition that, as I will show, characterised both writers and readers of sentimentalism as not knowing any better – so less a choice than a reflexive response to consumer culture’s insidious control over a naive common reader. Standing reasons that explain sentimentalism’s popularity either mechanically reinforce its mass accessibility (realism was too difficult for many uneducated women to write or appreciate) or redirect it to extra-literary arguments (sentimental novels offered escape from circumscribed lives). But a mass audience consumes a particular literary world view on an unprecedented commercial scale deliberately, not through redirection or avoidance of something else.

Reading sentimental novels calls for a particular distinction between their historical and political engagement. These novels elide historical objectives such as a dispassionate and detailed portrayal of real events, or story worlds that replace heroes and villains with plausibly flawed characters. Devoid of detailed historical attention or partisan argument, sentimental novels are political in their aesthetic figuration of a social ideal. They are not often political in theme, represented events, or civic advocacy, nor do they stage political contests, such as Charles Kingsley’s defence of Chartism in *Alton Locke* (1850) or Wilkie Collins’s attack on vivisection in *Heart and Science* (1882). Differentiating these functions, as Russell Berman writes, “does justice to the literary character of literature *in its relation to politics*, and not just to the political message that may be contained in a literary work” (2007: 162, my emphasis). In the same way that a politician’s platform projects a best-case scenario instead of a perfectly credible and therefore uninspiring one, women’s sentimental novels imagine scale-models of social and moral fulfilment. Read through a historical lens, they are bad because implausible. Read as models of abstract political ideals like domestic morality and social cohesion, they

succeed by foregoing realism as a matter of course. Ironically, the consensus-thinking that excludes these novels from scholarly attention makes them a quiet political force.

Mid-century reviewers, as I show in the next section of this article, make a sport of deriding the sentimental “lady’s novel,” especially its extraneous detail, haphazard plotting, and errors of reason. More interesting to my analysis, however, is that when critics praise these novels (or aspects of them), they refrain from doing so with any critical specificity: not unlike the spectral novels written by sentimental heroines examined below, critics treat these novels’ interest and readability as strangely ineffable qualities. We see a different kind of reticence in later-century attention to feminine cleverness – or more often, how to avoid it. As professional authorship became a more prevalent occupation for women, prominent critics (and novelists) acceded to the propriety of the career choice if certain thresholds were not crossed. The critic Anne Mozley, for instance, approves of the woman writer who has “no sense of herself of being a star or special object of attention” (1868: 414). After this logic, plots in which heroines enjoy great success on behalf of completely unexplored novels satisfy the fantasy of literary achievement without exposing it to the kind of critique that sentimental novels did not (and do not) often sustain. If this repeated fantasy took a different shape – the inheritance of a fortune or a long-awaited engagement, for instance – its sparse description might more easily be absorbed into the sentimental formula of reward. But novels that routinely turn upon the achievement of stunningly successful novels without naming, exploring, or explaining their success refractively implicate an inadequacy of their own, one that sentimentalism’s unruffled harmony and resolution does not otherwise provoke.

## Sentimental Novels and the Periodical Reviewer

One of the primary instruments of division between women’s popular fiction and literary or realistic fiction was the periodical press. The most elite journals of the day – *Blackwood’s*, *The Westminster Review*, the *Athenaeum* – gleefully belaboured the flaws and absurdities of the “lady’s novel.” Even when they praise sentimental novels, the reviewers refrain from expanding that praise into a critical vocabulary or taxonomic index. Some reviewers struggle to reconcile the formulaic sentimental novel with a critical emphasis on originality and distinctiveness, or, they are reluctant to summarise these novels’ convoluted plots. An anonymous critic in *The Saturday Analyst and Leader* calls *Easton and its Inhabitants* (Eleanor Eden, 1858) “a work of considerable merit” but “refrain[s] from going into any particulars of the story, the plot being scarcely of that description which shows up favourably in an analysis” (“Real Life Novels” 1860: 722). The influential critic and historian George Saintsbury (1845-1933), an early proponent of modern fiction as a field of study, wrote over 200 signed “New Novels” columns for *The Academy* between 1873 and 1895 (Jones 1992: 118). He usually reviewed between four to six novels at once, giving equal attention to novels by men and women, few of which would be familiar to readers today. Saintsbury treats lady novelists as a group barely distinguishable from each other and prone to factual mistakes, unlikely characters, and haphazard plotting. He often belabours minor points to highlight these novels’ silliness. About *Riversdale Court* (1878), for instance, he writes that Mrs Forrest Grant “oscillates between Lord Frederick Riphon and Frederick Lord Riphon ... One would have thought that this knotty point was not so very difficult of solution; but as nine out of ten lady novelists make the mistake, there is obviously some obscurity in the matter which is not apparent to the critical mind” (Saintsbury 1878: 83). Just as often, Saintsbury’s summary judgments for or against “lady’s novels” are sweeping and imprecise. The author of *Cordoned Off* (1877), Anna C. Steele, “has, with the odd lack of judgment which not seldom distinguishes lady novelists, done

nearly all she could to spoil her book” through her “alarmingly pretentious style,” “absurdly inappropriate misdeeds,” and characters written in “shreds and patches.” After this catalogue of defects comes a mystifying verdict: “the book is still one of decided interest, of infinitely greater interest than many books against which no such definite charges can be brought” (Saintsbury 1877: 91). Describing *Miles Harling* (1880) by Anna Weber, Saintsbury complains that “the author has not yet attained to the faculty of drawing a man,” and “as often happens with lady novelists, the heroine ... is so severe a satire on the female sex that few men would, with the fate of Orpheus before their eyes, have dared to draw her” (1880: 5). Once again, these comments do not prepare us for a sentence that begins, “Moreover,” only to completely reverse course: “the actual interest of the story – that mysterious quality which, somehow or other, eludes critical analysis, and of which the most skilful analyst can only say that it is or it is not present – is very considerable” (5). Saintsbury approves of an earlier novel by Weber, *At Sixes and Sevens* (1877), for its “singularly distinct and original [heroine] amid the hundreds of similar heroines who have gone before her,” before praising qualities that could be mistaken for insults, including the author’s depiction of “hero-worship,” “impulsiveness,” “hatred and yet careful performance of drudgery,” and “placid indifference to small scandal” (1877: 91). In a crowning example of his own critical imprecision, Saintsbury only ventures to call these features “very well brought-out” (91).

Edward Purcell, another contributor to *The Academy*’s “New Novels” column, follows Saintsbury’s underhanded praise and failure to account for the sentimental novel’s erratic appeal. In a column that reviews four novels by women, Purcell assures us that by “devoting this article entirely to lady novelists, we are far from insinuating that their faults mark them off as a class apart. But, placing them in order of merit, we cannot fail to be struck in every one with the unsatisfactory plot, which, in *The Violin Player* especially, utterly mars the latter half of the story” (1880b: 340). Since *The Violin Player* (Bertha Thomas, 1880) occupies the first rank of his hierarchy, his judgments of the other three disclose faults increasingly dire, thus undermining his professed neutrality towards lady novelists as a class. In another review, critical prowess fails Purcell utterly when he attempts to make sense of Anna Drury’s *Called to the Rescue* (1880):

The more one studies lady novelists the more hopeless it seems to make them out. Here is Miss Drury who, by every established rule, ought to have written a typically bad novel. She never looks an inch below the surface; her characters – or rather, her puppets – are all outside; she has no particular power of insight or description; and she actually glories in improbability. And yet, to our annoyance, she has the assurance to write a very good novel indeed. Calmly relying upon and emphasizing her defects, she remains triumphantly and most provokingly readable.

(1880a: 42)

Purcell’s “annoyance” with Drury’s unaccountably readable novel discloses his critical agenda as well as explaining why he does not bother to identify what makes this novel “provokingly readable.”

Over a decade later, the discussion of sentimental novels has neither coalesced into a generic discussion nor drawn closer attention to the novels themselves. Prolific journalist J.B. Firth’s review, “Some Aspects of Sentiment” (*The Westminster Review*, 1892), distinguishes “sentiment” from “sentimental” by describing the first as a subsidiary feature of the novel genre, and the second as its own desultory category: “to describe a novel as sentimental is to suggest that it contains sorry reading, and will only be acceptable to readers of a very inferior culture” (1892: 136). “Hundreds of sentimental stories are issued yearly, and the supply is undoubtedly due to the demand for them; yet these are not the novels that create a sensation,



and around which is waged the battle of the critics” (125). “Fiction,” he continues later in the article, “has been much devoted to the interests of the ‘clever little woman,’ who, like Becky Sharpe, has enough to do to keep her head above water” (137). In his cheap shot to the obvious (“the supply is undoubtedly due to the demand”), Firth invokes Thackeray’s anti-heroine to exemplify the philistine taste of an unsophisticated feminine readership.

### “Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever”<sup>6</sup>

By directing his contempt towards “clever little wom[e]n,” Firth extends a decades-long conversation in the periodical press and sentimental novel that ponders the uses and abuses of feminine cleverness, a conspicuously sensitive topic for women writers. In an 1868 contribution to *Blackwood’s*, Anne Mozley (1809–91) contemplates this vexed trait and its relationship to women’s literary and professional prospects. Mozley’s name surfaces occasionally as a reviewer of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot; she was the first critic to discern that Eliot’s *Adam Bede* was written by a woman (Jordan 2004: 315). Mozley contributed articles and reviews to *Blackwood’s*, *The Christian Remembrancer* (published by her family), and the *Saturday Review* on topics ranging from theology to children’s literature (Jordan 2004: 327-9). Her unsigned article for *Blackwood’s*, “Clever Women,” recognises “the benign work of progress in a given period for one particular oppressed class ... the class of clever women” (1868: 411). No one, she writes, “particularly likes or cares to take [this class] to its bosom – [they] have always a hard battle to fight, but ... certainly fight it now under less disadvantage than they did fifty years ago” (411). Mozley defines “clever women” as intellectual seekers who replace intuition with logic, who “pursue a subject in all its bearings” and “trace it to its cause” (411). These habits earn them “veiled reproach” because they testify to “intellect at the expense of something distinctly feminine” (1868: 411). In contrast, the “ideal woman ... does not reason; her processes of thought are intuitive so far that she can give no account at how she arrives at them” (411). After a painstaking classification of the clever-woman genus, Mozley contrasts the professional opportunities of the governess and writer, determining that writing better suits the unpopular class of her subject. Mozley’s apprehension around feminine cleverness and its odour of immodesty echoes Helen C. Black’s use of the term in her *Notable Woman* portraits. While “clever” does not always need qualification when attributed to her authors, Black’s favourite modifying adverb discloses the descriptor’s risky tilt into intellectualism or self-promotion. She notes Mrs Alexander’s “clever little story” and “clever little shilling stories,” Miss Marryat’s “clever little illustrations and caricatures,” and describes how “clever little” Mrs Hungerford “passes three hours every morning” at her desk (Black 1893: 64-5, 86, 112).

In a surprising turn for an admirer of George Eliot, Mozley defends a professional sphere that can accommodate professional women without elevating them to an undeserved stature. “It’s a late triumph of womanhood that a woman should write as a habitual occupation, and yet have no sense of being a star or a special object of attention,” for “singularity suits no one, and especially it does not suit women” (414). As Mozley explains it, the work produced by this clever collective of women illuminates the appeal of popular novels because of, not despite, their homogeneity. Just as clever women benefit from repressing their singularity, their literature fulfils a practical and useful function:

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<sup>7</sup> Kingsley (1858: 5).

Readings, and readers, and books, and authors, all mean something different from what they once did; they have lost the weight that used to attach to the words. It is vain to regret this. The fact cannot be controverted that there is an immense demand now for a certain class of writers whose business it seems to be to supply reading for persons who did not read at all fifty years ago. People have grown too lazy or too restless to develop in themselves or others the good talk that used to be the world's best refreshment, and they ask from literature a substitute. Our higher periodical literature is this substitute, and a very appropriate one for female talent.

(426)

Although she does not mention Charlotte M. Yonge's 1865 novel, *The Clever Woman of the Family*, Mozley's critique of feminine cleverness recalls that novel's heroine, Rachel Curtis. Driven by a missionary commitment to working women and convinced of her own intellectual superiority, Rachel learns over the course of the novel to exchange pride for a more anonymous understanding of altruism. Like Mozley, Yonge's Rachel defends women's vocational opportunities (and also regrets the default occupation of governessing), and comes to appreciate how the saintly invalid, Ermine Williams, earns a respectable living as an anonymous writer. Ermine, in turn, exemplifies Mozley's "intelligent women, quietly yet successfully employing their powers for the mutual benefit of their readers and themselves, [and so] doing more for the intellectual advance of women than an erratic woman of genius can do by her most brilliant triumph" (427).

A *North American Review* article, "Literary Women in London Society" (1890), also recommends that women writers keep to their appropriate station. The author, Mrs Campbell Praed (1851–1935), describes "literary women" in practical terms, explaining that they "take to literature as a business, and are neither ashamed of it nor made self-conceited by it. They make no more fuss about it than a man does about being a doctor or a lawyer. They lead the simplest, most domestic, of lives"; as they "send their clever books into society [...] they stay behind and envy not" (1890: 331). If French literary women are associated with salons and public life, Campbell Praed observes, in England "the reverse may be noticed, and with one or perhaps two striking exceptions the literary woman counts for nothing in English politics," for "[l]iterature with English women runs almost wholly into fiction" (334-5). Given the profile of highly politicised New Women and their daring fiction by 1890, we must look back at the title of Campbell Praed's article and its nod to "London Society" to contextualise this perspective. The women she distinguishes are those who write of and for "society," which "will not stand strain or even stress of mind and brain," a category that evidently excludes more strident and controversial novelists like Sarah Grand and Ouida. The brand of women's fiction Campbell Praed describes pursues "analysis, and not action," for "to dissect human nature under its society swathings needs the skill of a Balzac or a Thackeray, while the feminine counterpart of a Balzac or a Thackeray is difficult to find" (336).

An unsigned article in *Cassell's Family Magazine* compares the rarity of earlier women writers (Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, Lady Morgan, and Miss Mitford) to their prevalence in 1885: "literary ladies nowadays are so common they excite very little interest in the public mind and attract but small attention" ("Our Autograph Books" 1885: 539). The author infers that talent is no longer a requirement for women to publish, as "[a]lmost every woman whom one meets has dabbled in literature of some kind, successfully or unsuccessfully. One writes sentimental poetry, another articles on cookery, another pamphlets on women's rights. A great many write novels; a very few write good, clever books" (539.) The saturation of the field, however, does not totally dispel its influence, and with the qualified praise we see in Mozley and Campbell Praed, this author concedes that "now in the literary heavens thousands of these minor stars are twinkling and shining, and giving each a little help to lighten the darkness of

the world” (539). Again, women writers are acceptable as an undifferentiated group, if they do not strive for personal greatness or instructive value.

In “*Dorothy’s Literature Class: Late-Victorian Women Autodidacts and Penny Fiction Weeklies*,” Kate Macdonald examines the educative opportunities proffered by the *Dorothy*, a weekly published in London from 1889 until 1899. Aimed at working and lower-middle-class women, the *Dorothy* eschewed sensation and controversy by addressing a “family” readership and the importance self-improvement (2016: 26). Primarily composed of fiction in the sentimental and moralistic vein I have been exploring, the non-fictional material “showed a close concern for the literacy and numerousness of the *Dorothy’s* readers.” Macdonald explains:

[The magazine] covered a wide spectrum of abilities, and relied on participatory journalism and reader response. The *Dorothy* printed English composition exercises, poetry competitions, sewing instruction in the form of dialogues, a literature class, book reviews, word-search and counting competitions, and accepted short stories and tales from its readers for publication. (26)

The magazine’s emphasis on literary fluency included a regular column, “*Dorothy’s Literature Class*,” which advised its readers that “[e]very girl should have a fair knowledge of the literature of her own country” (29). The class assigned a syllabus consisting of “*Tennyson* [sic], *Kingsley’s Westward Ho*, *Hans Andersen’s Fairy Tales*, *The Autocrat* by OW Holmes, and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Merchant of Venice*” (29). This curious representation of “literature of [a girl’s] own country” includes Danish and American authors (Andersen, Holmes), a naval novel set in Elizabethan England (*Westward Ho*), a collection of essays about contemporary New England life (*The Autocrat*), and Shakespearean plays set in Denmark and Italy. (Tennyson’s poems are a conventional choice, but the slipshod substitution of his name for book title weakens the pedagogical authority.) No women authors are represented, despite the *Dorothy’s* keen solicitation of poems and stories from its readers and the devotion of the bulk of each magazine to sentimental fiction. More to my point, Macdonald notes that the magazine’s literary improvement scheme “contrasted with ‘the colossal amounts of formulaic romance fiction’ that the *Dorothy* published” and suggests that “some effort was being made to encourage [the] readers to explore better fiction than the kind they bought [the magazine] for” (34-5).

The unspoken divide between the literature that the *Dorothy* was teaching in its literature course and the fiction that comprised the bulk of its issues shows up again and again in the sentimental novel’s commentary on feminine literary acumen, which it treats as a form of situational ethics. In Matilda Betham-Edwards’ *Kitty* (1869), when the heroine becomes a governess in the home of Dr Norman, a widower, his erudition intimidates her:

He was a learned man, a gentleman, and a recluse; it puzzled her very much to handle such idiosyncrasies as these. She was clever, and had read a good deal, but not the sort of reading that would recommend itself to him; Kitty felt she had better play the part of an ignoramus altogether. (67)

Elsewhere, narrators and heroines carefully distinguish between an enthusiastic reader and a blue stocking. Mrs H. Lovett Cameron’s heroine May Crocker (*Worth Winning*, 1882) impresses her future husband by reading Shelley to him:

“I never see you wasting your time over trashy novels, as my sisters do.”

[...] “Pray don’t make me out a ‘blue,’” she said with a little blush; “I assure you I often read novels, and do you know, I am rather ashamed of being so fond of poetry.”

(92)

When the languid Lady Alice in *A Crooked Path* (Mrs Alexander, 1890) reports that a mutual friend has described Kate, the heroine, as “very learned and studious,” Kate baulks: “How cruel of her to malign me! ... Learned I certainly am not, but I am fond of indiscriminate reading, though not studious” (134). When Hilda Stanton’s father in *Mr Arle* (Emily Jolly, 1856) objects to her writing aspirations, she staves off his unspoken reservations: “as to those literary ladies to whom, I think, you owe your prejudice against the tribe, were they not learned, scientific, mathematically-inclined beings? I don’t mean to ridicule such ... but they are as terrible to me, as to you. Is there the slightest fear of my becoming one of that genus?” (28). These careful denials of intellectualism carve out a literary identity that, like the sentimental novel itself, shuns conspicuous effort.

### “Unwearying delight in literary toil”<sup>7</sup>

To review my argument so far, we have seen that periodical reviewers like Saintsbury and Purcell cannot account for a sentimental novel’s interest and readability; instead, Saintsbury conjures a “mysterious quality which, somehow or other, eludes critical analysis” (1880: 5). Other periodical writers including Mozley and Campbell Praed endorse or tolerate female authorship as long as it remains unassuming and apolitical. With these parameters in mind, I turn to a pervasive figure in the sentimental novel, the heroine who becomes an author, to see how such a character could be aligned with artistic production that is at once ineffable and modest. The deployment of the author-heroine in these novels, that is, must accommodate the artlessness and amateurism assigned to the sentimental novel and novelist, even as she – invariably in my examples – achieves great success. The subtitle of this section, taken from Sarah Doudney’s *A Woman’s Glory* (1883), encapsulates the ambivalence surrounding these heroine novelists, for whom literary “toil” manages to be delightful and lucrative.

What exactly does a bestselling, artless, amateur novelist look like? She looks like Hilda Stanton (Emily Jolly, *Mr Arle*, 1856), Eunice Swift (Sarah Doudney, *A Woman’s Glory*), Ursula Vivian (Annie S. Swan, *Ursula Vivian*, 1884), Esther Denison (Adeline Sergeant, *Esther Denison*, 1889), and many others.<sup>8</sup> The sentimental heroine who becomes a novelist, usually inspired by innate sensitivity and financial need and often against parental approval, is a familiar, if not quite stock, character. Because she fits into a sentimental formula, her career trajectory follows a predictable course that starts with an inchoate aspiration, moves to early success, public acclaim, and then – as these novels end in marriage – disappears entirely. The

<sup>8</sup> Doudney (1883: 175).

<sup>9</sup> Other sentimental novelist-heroines include Agnes Atheling in Margaret Oliphant’s *The Athelings* (1857), Helen Reay in Adeline Sergeant’s *Adrienne Hope* (1866), Julia Raymond in *Robert Forrester: A Novel* (Mary Thompson, 1876), Miss Whitman in Linda Villari’s *In Change Unchanged* (1877), The Little Story-Teller in Annie Swan’s *A Lost Ideal* (1898), Molly Carew in E. Owens Blackburne’s *Molly Carew* (1879), Margery Featherstone in John Strange Winter’s *Confession of a Publisher* (1888), and Ilva in Amelie Rives *The Witness of the Sun* (1889).

formula also completely omits what the heroine writes, beyond vague references to fiction or “a novel.”

Emily Jolly’s *Mr Arle* (1856) exemplifies the genre’s enthusiasm for piety and attenuated suffering. Heroine Hilda Stanton’s father’s death transpires over all three volumes, only surpassed by the length of time it takes for Hilda and the title character to become engaged. After assuring her father that her plans to become a writer will not transform her into the “learned” genus – as quoted earlier – Hilda must continue to defend her work until it is no longer mentioned. She even attributes the development of her gift to routine household tasks, as she tells her father:

You were only content when you saw me sitting at work, but I have smiled since, remembering how threads of fancy were woven into wools of romance, while I plied my needle diligently. Long mornings spent over some purely mechanical task, cultivated my dreamy habits more than the reading of the wildest romances would have done.

(Jolly 1856: 29)

When Mr Stanton reads Hilda’s first attempts, he cautions against the professional identity of “authoress” rather than the work itself: “for God’s sake – and don’t be shocked at my strong speaking – think of your literary pursuits only as a means, never as an end – be the woman, not the authoress. Any striving after name and fame, for their own sakes, must end in misery” (30).

As Hilda continues to write, the narrator continues to mute any suggestion of forced ambition, even as “a passion” consumed her efforts: “it was strange how her eyes could look so calmly on what she set down; from so intense an experience that how it had been evolved from so still a life as hers was inexplicable” (129). Mr Stanton and Mr Arle’s admonitions against women writers are not limited to Hilda’s example. Other, minor characters veer into this subject erratically, as we see in this conversation between Mr Larne, a passing acquaintance of Hilda’s family, and Mrs Bellingdon, a friend:

“You were going to enlighten us as to the sex of the writer of that book, Mr Larne,” Mrs Bellingdon said, her white face flushing slightly at the significant tone.

“I’ve given it the needful half glance while I spoke; it’s written by a woman, and a young one. I detest this fashion of female authorship; it’s one of the most hateful features of the age.”

(161)

This conversation neither includes nor refers to Hilda, whose career takes place largely off the page. Without descriptions of her work or details about her process of publication, we abruptly learn of her progress from Mr Arle:

“Bye-the-bye, have you heard how famous you are becoming? Did I tell you anything about it?”

“No,” spoken with a very uninteresting face.

“Among a certain ‘literary set,’ it was my misfortune to mix a little with, the last part of the time I was in London, I heard some tale of yours, that has appeared lately, spoken of with unmeasured praise; and brilliant successes prophesied for your future – have you heard anything of the kind?”

“A little, from papa.”

“Does it not give you pleasure?”

“I hardly know; I do not much care.”

(230-1)

Hilda's most direct response to her growing fame occurs later in the novel, when she receives payment for a recent manuscript. She tells her brother that her book "will be out very soon, and I shall receive a much larger sum for it than I had at all expected. You see, my good news is only about that base thing – money!" (278). The money that Hilda earns will allow their father to travel to Spain for his health, so her "base" earnings are hardly acquisitive. Meanwhile, Mr Arle continues to oppose Hilda's writing. When they finally pledge their love to each other, Hilda's devotion to her future husband indirectly ends her writing career: "His wife – Lyon Arle's – on any such terms! Sooner toil, starvation, eternal separation from all she valued: because – she loved him!" (323). While the support of her family had justified her writing, here her love for Arle transcends whatever sacrifice he could ask of her.

The efforts in *Mr Arle* to qualify Hilda's ambitions and exempt her from the "clever" authoress' persona correspond to the positioning of the writer in *Ursula Vivian: The Sister-Mother*, by Annie S. Swan, and *Esther Denison: A Novel*, by Adeline Sergeant. Swan's coming-of-age story opens with the young heroine's aspiration to be "the greatest author of my time" (1884:15). Her dream intensifies when she discovers that her family has fallen into debt by her father's imprudence, which transforms it into an appropriately selfless objective: "the talent which had hitherto found its expression in school-girl rhymes and nonsense compositions for the amusement of her fellows would henceforth be consecrated to nobler ends" as Ursula vows, and so "clear the honour of the Vivians" (14, 57). Subsistence compounds honour when her parents die in quick succession and the care of her four younger brothers falls to her. The eldest brother, Robert, works in London, and agrees to split the familial debt with Ursula: "'you will pay one half, I the other,' said Ursula. 'I can work for myself, too, Robert, and in time be as rich as you'" (84). As proof of her earning power, Ursula "took a magazine from the sideboard drawer. Turning over its pages, she pointed him to a story which occupied a prominent place. 'It is mine,' she said. 'I got ten pounds for it, and the editor asks me for something more as soon as I can write it'" (84). Robert's surprise at Ursula's achievement is also the reader's; the acceptance and publication of the story are not narrated.

The obstacles Ursula faces in her early career are easily conquered. Writing a story for the *Family Magazine*,

was not all smooth sailing for our young authoress. . . She could not work up to her own ideal. What author can? And she could not be content to go upon lower ground. In despair, one day, she despatched the first eight chapters in its rude state to the editor, begging him to read it and tell her if he thought she should go on it with it.

(112)

Editor Samuel Mayfair does not hesitate in his encouragement: "Dear Madam, Go on with the story by all means. It will make its mark" (113). She sells the finished story for 50 pounds, and Mayfair tells her that "it might with great advantage be published in book form." Encouraged by this "very good beginning," Ursula's "work grew easier and pleasanter every day" (116). Attention shifts to her care of her brothers and their various subplots until the narrator mentions that "her new story was progressing. It was a more ambitious effort than her former one, and she resolved to send it to one of the best publishers in London" (130). As we saw in the *Dorothy's* literature class, *Ursula Vivian* indirectly values fiction of an echelon higher than its own.

Further attention to Ursula's literary achievement emphasises its triumph in reverse proportion to its explication. In a rare allusion to her work the narrator writes that Ursula "received a communication ... concerning her story. I need not transcribe it here. Suffice it to say that it was entirely satisfactory ... Her contract with the publisher was sealed, the story went



to press, and Ursula wrote on” (197-8). “She had done very well,” we read in a late chapter; “and was likely to do better, in the path she had chosen. Her name was beginning to be well known among literary people, and her stories were beginning to be asked for. That, of course, meant money in Ursula’s pocket” (245). Meanwhile, the “crown of her womanhood” (207), her engagement, supersedes the writing career by presumably appeasing her need to earn money; neither her writing or her literary reputation receives further mention.

The title character in *Esther Denison* loses her parents early and must accept a stifling position as a governess. For most of the novel she secretly pines away for her childhood friend, Sebastian, who has ill-advisedly married a selfish and profligate woman, Nina. After a four-year gap of time, Esther has left her position as a governess and become a successful writer under the name of “John Florian” (whose work is never described); under her own name, she joins the staff of a newspaper. For the first time, “the life that she now led was delightful to her. When she had got over the strangeness of working amongst men only – which, to one of her cloistral experience, seemed at first to her decidedly odd and a little alarming – she began to take pleasure in her various experiences” (Sergeant 1889: 279). She works most closely with Mr Thorne, the fiction editor, who asks her here about the status of a writing competition:

“How many manuscripts have come in for the Christmas story competition?”

“Seventy-four.”

“Have you looked at them? Of course they are all by women. I wish women were never taught to write! –”

The growls of editors and sub-editors did not disturb Esther’s equanimity. She laughed and went on writing. “The best story, I think you will find, is by a woman.” ...

“What is it about” said the editor, leaning back indolently and regarding the ceiling.

Esther felt inclined to tell him to read it for himself; but on second thought she answered amiably: “It is a ghost-story. About a man who was haunted by the spirit of two dead children. He had no rest until he found out their story and made restitution of some property –”

“Hackneyed,” said Mr. Thorne, with disgust. “No woman was ever able to make a plot. In fact to make entirely new plots appears to be a lost art. *Almost* a lost art. *My* plots are always entirely new.”

... “A wonderful gift,” said Esther, with satiric intention.

“Isn’t it?” he said naively. “It’s a real genius that, you know. But I’m a man.”

(280-1)

Esther’s (unnoticed) mockery of Mr Thorne’s dismissal of women writers offers the novel’s most sustained critique of sexism in publishing. More often, Esther simply accepts the bias against her, which comes from all sides. Her friend and Sebastian’s wife Nina marks disapproval of Esther’s work more subtly:

“So you have written a book, Esther?”

Yes, Esther had written a book. It had been out three months.

“I haven’t read it,” said Nina. “I don’t read many novels; I have so little time for reading that I like serious improving books when I do read.” This is the way in which the young novelist’s friends stab him as soon as his book is published. Esther had heard the remark before.

(364)

The omniscient announcement of Esther’s book (which has not been mentioned before) and observation that a novelist’s friends “stab him” when he publishes a book diffuses Nina’s

rudeness through the impersonal masculine pronoun. Had we read that “Nina stabbed Esther” with her remarks, their effect would have been particularised to Nina’s general animosity instead of a predicament suffered by the “young author”; the narrator’s resignation to the trials of publishing makes them appear inviolate.

Despite her successful novel, the “incompleteness of a single woman’s life” leave Esther “wanting,” until a catastrophic event occurs (383). Sebastian, Nina, and their three children are shipwrecked; Sebastian and one child survive. Esther helps him recuperate and they marry, only to face more shocking news: first the two missing children, presumed dead, resurface, and then Nina herself appears at Esther’s door, a wraith reclaiming her lawful husband. “Fortunately,” we read, “little journalistic work was required of [Esther] at this time” (404). Broken-hearted, Esther retreats to a convent,

But as yet she found she could not work much. She had a novel on hand, but it did not advance in her seclusion. For the production of fine imaginative work, it may be good to have experienced great emotions, but not to be experiencing them while the work is in progress. (489)

This is the last reference to Esther’s career, as Nina soon dies for good, and Esther reunites with Sebastian and the children.

The author in *A Woman’s Glory* (Sarah Doudney, 1883), Eunice Swift, is a secondary heroine to the ravishing Bride Netterville, whose romantic entanglements take centre stage. Eunice, the black sheep of a socially ambitious family, enters the novel inauspiciously: endowed with “useless gifts” (“of what use, she would ask herself, was a memory that could retain whole pages of Shakespeare?”) she works as a governess (Doudney 1883: 45). Eunice’s writing ambitions are indefinite, for the “idea of being a celebrity had certainly never occurred to [her] ... Even the hope of earning money by her pen was only a half-formed thing” (46). Her first reference to writing for the public occurs alongside the sudden production of her body of work and is orchestrated on her behalf by Bride’s connection to a society woman, Cora Wallace.

“Do you think it will ever be printed?” sighed Eunice, with a pile of manuscript on her knee. “They say fools are always trying to write books. Am I a fool or not? It’s so difficult to tell.”

“If you are one,” said Bride, “I prefer fools to wise people . . . I’m going to lend your manuscript to Cora Wallace. She is a clever woman, fond of books.”

Miss Wallace accepted the offer of critic without hesitation. The manuscript had fallen into good hands. The earlier part of Cora’s life had been spent among literary people, and she had learnt to read and reflect.

(89)

Cora deems the story “really clever” but notes Eunice’s explicitly feminine subject matter: “I have thoroughly enjoyed her bogles and fairies.” “I’m going to ask my godfather to look after her,” Cora tells Bride. “[Y]ou must have heard of Mr. Redcliffe? He writes historical works, and no end of heavy books. And yet, in his spare hours, he has written stories for children” (94).

If the romantic pairings in *A Woman’s Glory* are fraught with gossip, misdirection, purported betrayals and broken engagements, Eunice’s literary career falls into place with this one intervention. Mr Redcliffe deems Eunice’s story “really almost perfect in its kind” and she learns, through Cora, that she will “get a letter from a publisher very soon” (124). Mr Redcliffe also hires her, sight unseen, as his amanuensis, effecting her immediate move to London and a

drastic transformation: “Eunice was no longer the quiet, gloomy girl ... Her real self was coming to the surface at last” (177). The narrator describes her room in London:

[h]ere were her well-used books; her desk, ink, pens, and paper; all the slender stock-in-trade of an author. It was delightfully easy to write now; her thoughts were fresh and sweet, unembittered by resentful feeling and wounded pride. And so the work had made speedy progress, and the worker rejoiced in her labour.

(176)

With a lack of any details, Eunice’s career appears easy and uncomplicated, and the narrator serenely foresees that “[s]he might hope to rise steadily and surely in the world ... just high enough to be lifted above the reach of want and care” (141).

At the end of Doudney’s novel, Eunice’s fortunes are fulfilled through a particularly mawkish success story. Her book “proved to be a veritable success ... [it] was intended for the nursery; but fashionable fathers and mothers seized it with delight” (208). One of her devoted child readers, Ida Lennox, dying “from an incurable disease of the spine,” leaves Eunice a generous bequest of six thousand pounds, the entire amount of her mother’s dowry. The conveyance of this money from dead woman through dying child, discrete from the taint of a commercial nexus, “would make few changes in [Eunice’s] mode of life,” the narrator assures us, but “she would not have to work so hard, that was all” (353). The mitigation of Eunice’s success reflects not a limited talent, but the constraints of nature; her “rich fancy and brave spirit might combine to make her independent and strong, but nature had not intended Eunice Swift to be a self-sufficing woman” (192). Likewise, though Eunice receives the legacy from Ida for her writing, it fulfils a higher purpose: the heroic Captain Torwood loves her but cannot afford to marry her until he can pay a debt of six thousand pounds – the exact amount she receives from Ida.

## Conclusion

After reading dozens of sentimental novels, I am fascinated by the repetition of the plot in which a heroine becomes a famous novelist through work that is neither named nor described. (The only description among these novels is of Eunice’s bestselling “story” about “bogles and fairies.”) The heroines’ writing careers, moreover, enable real benefits: they extend a parent’s life (*Mr Arle*), support an orphaned family (*Ursula Vivian*), a single woman (*Esther Denison*), or provide the means for her marriage (*A Woman’s Glory*). In all of these novels Jolly, Swan, Sergeant, and Doudney outline a career that remains out of reach and categorically inimical to popular women novelists; they inoculate their novelist-heroines from the merciless attacks of periodical reviewers and the grasping ambitions associated with “clever” women by excluding the descriptive criteria that could invoke a metafictional reflection upon their own novels. This necessary separation between the idealised novels and careers attributed to the heroines and the novels that imagine them tacitly denotes the distance between sentimental novels as a middle-brow generic category and the fantasies and illusions that are their stock-in-trade. On an explicit level, the three sections of this article unravel the expectations surrounding the sentimental novel. Powerful critics like Saintsbury excised them from serious criticism, even when they were deemed good. Pragmatists like Mozley and Campbell Praed defended popular fiction as a respectable outlet for women’s work and entertainment, provided it did not strive for a higher order. And as if in response to these parameters, Jolly, Sergeant, Swan, and Doudney attend to the basic prescriptions of the genre by rewarding their deserving heroines

with a non-taxing and unexpected literary success that leads – in some fashion – to a happy marriage. The only aberration in this sequence is the suggestion by evasion that the books the heroines wrote were superior to the ones that told their stories, a suggestion that intimates more ambition than the genre otherwise admits.

The subtitle of this article nods to what can seem an impracticable quest to attribute meaning to a self-effacing genre, which landing my argument upon the discursive void around novels by sentimental heroines might appear to reinforce. But without the identification of such patterns or absences, these novels are not on their own very fruitful objects of research, as the neglect that stems from our author-based (or canon-based) interpretative approach has long indicated. Meanwhile, Matilda Betham-Edwards' declaration of her own literary tastes can remind us of other metrics of appreciation. "George Sand I regard as the greatest novelist of the age," Betham-Edwards tells a fawning Helen C. Black. "George Eliot's sombre realism repels me" (Black 1893: 131).

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