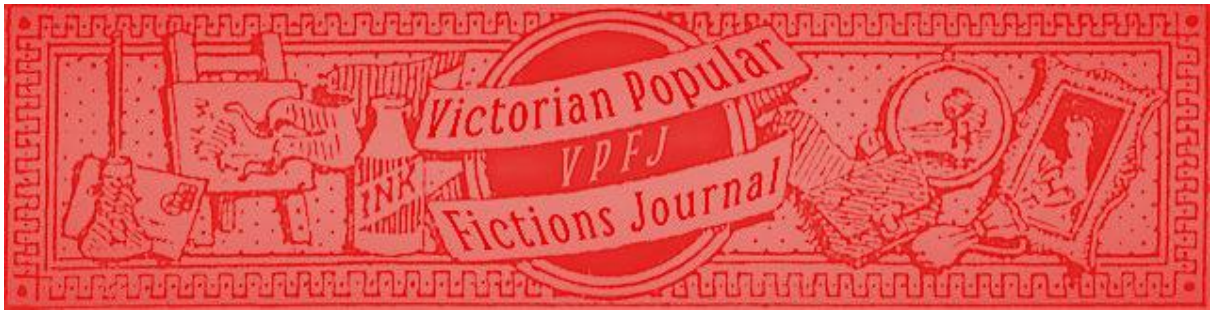

"The Evidence of [Her] Own Senses": Gender, Power, and Animal Symbolism in Florence Marryat's *Open! Sesame!* (1875)

Natasha Booth-Johnson

Abstract

This article investigates how Florence Marryat uses gendered, animalistic coding in her first Spiritualist novel *Open! Sesame!* (1875) to characterise the novel's villain, Agatha, and illustrate a conflict between male passivity and female agency. The novel plays with the tropes of Spiritualist and sensation fiction, presenting a partly sympathetic and incredibly calculating villain whose complex identity as animal, spirit, and (least of all) human nearly drives the romantic hero to his death. It is only through the male medium's strong-willed wife that he is rescued from his untimely demise. Agatha is frequently and intentionally othered, with animalistic language used to present her, in a multifaceted way, as both separated from her gender, and dangerously in tune with it. Marryat's Spiritualist fiction thus does not seek to advertise Spiritualism as a practice but instead uses it as a location through which to explore established sensation plots that dissolve binaries such as gender and class.

Keywords

sensation fiction; Spiritualism; Animal Studies; gender; villainous women

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"The Evidence of [Her] Own Senses": Gender, Power, and Animal Symbolism in Florence Marryat's *Open! Sesame!* (1875)

Natasha Booth-Johnson

On a dark, stormy evening in February 1873, author Florence Marryat and her close friend Annie Thomas, upon the recommendation of a friend, entered the home of a famed American medium named Mrs Holmes. The women appeared at the séance incognito, having removed their wedding rings, and Holmes was initially reluctant to hold the sitting, citing the poor weather and the absence of other sitters which, she claimed, would discourage the spirits from manifesting. After much persuasion, the medium acquiesced and, from within a darkened cabinet, produced the face of Thomas' deceased mother. The faces of Marryat's dear friend, John Powles, and that of her eldest daughter (who had died as an infant) followed soon after, and these apparitions would appear to Marryat in many séances over the coming years (Marryat 1891: 18-21). Marryat cites this experience as the beginning of an interest in Spiritualism that lasted the rest of her life, reflecting that, had the séance not produced such marvellous manifestations, she may have remained a non-believer. Within just two years, Marryat turned her pen to Spiritualist fiction and while she is perhaps most well known for her prolific literary career in the sensation genre (although she also sustained a career as an actress, opera singer, playwright, and editor of *London Society*) her Spiritualist novels reflect a fascinating intersection between two genres that brought together concerns about a woman's place in the changing world.

Marryat drew on her strong base in sensation fiction, utilising familiar tropes – assertive female characters, scandalous murder plots, and disguise – to tell her new Spiritualist stories. *Open! Sesame!* (1875), the earliest of these tales, experiments with the role Spiritualism may play in the established sensation genre. The novel (along with most of Marryat's other Spiritualist stories) not only tells the tale of a hero discovering supernatural abilities, but also explores how these talents – or their perceived existence – can be misused and the medium exploited. As Tatiana Kontou writes, "Marryat seemingly warns her readers not against Spiritualism, but against […] family members who might wish to exploit spiritualist affiliation for their own benefit" (2013: 149-50). In *Open! Sesame!* Marryat crafts a genuinely powerful male medium, the Earl of Valence, and illustrates his thorough manipulation by his sister-in-law, Agatha West, positioning Spiritualism within an expected sensation storyline and demonstrating the slippage between the two. *Open! Sesame!* is both a story about

a medium and his discovery of power (told through flashbacks in the chapters titled "The Earl's Diary") and the tale of a manipulative villainess who seeks to seize his more tangible strengths (in the form of his wealth and title) for herself, from whom the medium's loved ones must rescue him. The story follows the heiress Everil West-Norman and her marriage of necessity to the Earl of Valence, her cousin. Agatha, the widow of Valence's brother, wishes to see the family title pass to her son and initially seeks to prevent the marriage by pushing Everil in the direction of a fortune hunter named Captain Staunton. When this proves unsuccessful and Everil and Valence marry, Agatha's intentions turn murderous as she seeks to ensure Valence's death before he can produce an heir. In examining the relationship between Valence and Agatha, this article is concerned with Marryat's depiction of the conflict between male passivity and female agency. Particular attention is paid to the villainess who is described throughout with references to a spirit and two animals: a cat and a snake. I argue that, by using the non-human and the animalistic in her characterisation, Marryat emphasises dangerous femininity and sets her villain apart from the novel's other characters. Although this does separate Agatha from humanity, Marryat is not entirely unsympathetic to her villain and evokes the reader's empathy by highlighting Agatha's precarious social position and maternal instincts.

Gendering Marryat

Marryat's literary career, while perhaps studied less than some of her contemporaries, has received a swell of scholarship over the past several decades. Her popular novel *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897) has received the most dedicated and consistent attention with a range of scholars such as Macfie (1991), Davis (2007), Willburn (2008), Hammack (2008), Ifill (2019) Cox (2022), Anatol (2022), and Stewart (2024) having considered the novel in relation to race, gender, and sexuality. Other work has been completed on Marryat's endeavours into the theatre (Newey 2005; Palmer 2009) and her sensation fiction (Palmer 2011; Depledge 2011a; Depledge 211b). Comparatively little study has been completed on Marryat's Spiritualist fiction which, when it does appear, tends to focus on several texts within a wider literary context (Dickerson 1996; Hamdan 2015; Kontou 2013). Instances of single-novel studies appear far less frequently (Lam 2020). In 2018, Sarah Lennox considered the seeming lack of interest in the wider scope of Marryat's work – outside of *The Blood of the Vampire*, which still remains her most widely discussed text – citing Kate Newey's earlier claims that "the current feminist literary criticism [focuses] principally on women's writing which fulfils paradigms of transgression and subversion" and suggesting that a perceived distance from feminist discourses prevented interest in the wider scope of her work (Lennox 2018: 9; Newey 2001: 147). While Newey's claim dates to 2001 and much work on Marryat has been produced since then, her criticism of feminist scholarship remains a significant point of contention two decades later. By nature of what it often seeks to do, feminist literary criticism focussing on the second half of the nineteenth century often homes in on the transgressive spaces of the New Woman or simply seeks out examples of perceived high quality (Marryat's published novels vary in this regard) within the sensation genre. Within the last decade, however, increased attention has been paid to Marryat's value in feminist discourses, with scholarly consideration of her frank depictions of domestic violence and marital rape (Pope 2018) and the ways in which her stories brought a too-often silenced problem into the public sphere.

Some of Marryat's writing may not be easily situated within Newey's definition of early twenty-first-century aspirational feminism, but neither is it impossible to examine her fiction with a feminist lens. As discussed by Greta Depledge, Marryat's sensation novels often place women in positions of explicit sexuality and desire (*Love's Conflict* 1865) and consider themes

such as marital violence (*The Nobler Sex* 1892), issues that meant her work was met in her own time with criticisms of immorality. Depledge reminds us that although Marryat did not seek "political and social answers to these problems", she did use the literary medium to give voice to "the frustration many ordinary women felt at the restrictions and expectations placed on them" (Depledge 2011: 314).[1] Catherine Pope concurs with this argument in her study on Marryat's fictional accounts of marital violence, stating that "by narrating the non-narratable, Marryat used her fiction to empower women and show how they could resist male oppression", offering an account (such as *Her World Against a Lie*, 1878) that was often "part novel, part instruction manual" on the rights women had to protect themselves (2018: 154, 147). Taking Pope's assertion that Marryat seeks to "narrate the unnarratable" in regards to women's position in Victorian society, this article approaches her Spiritualist novels with a view to those aspects of female experience that the author seeks to destabilise.

In *Open! Sesame!*, the woman seeking social and financial stability (which, in turn, threatens to upend the status quo) does so through underhanded means and is cast as the villain. While this is not unusual in Marryat's fiction, the dehumanisation of Agatha through animalistic terms, relating her often to a cat or a snake, is carefully balanced to reflect the nuance of her experience. Agatha's scheming separates her from conventional Victorian womanhood (depicted and emphasised through animalistic descriptions), but this does not necessary restrict her from Marryat's empathy. Significant voice is given to Agatha's motives through chapters told from her perspective and even when she is dehumanised and animalised, her dedication to motherhood (a defining factor of Victorian femininity) is not called into question and remains her redeeming characteristic. Agatha is never presented as unfeminine, but she is presented as non-human: by bringing these aspects together Marryat presents an image of her villain that embodies a dangerous, animalistic vision of femininity.

Agatha's unconventional (and non-human) womanhood is contrasted with Valence's unconventional masculinity. It is because of these balanced forces that Agatha's manipulations succeed for a long period before she is thwarted by a team of Valence's friends (consisting of his wife, Everil, his friend, Bulwer, and his doctor, Dr Newall). This article lays the groundwork for its analysis of *Open! Sesame!* by first establishing the framework that Spiritualism provides for a novel such as this and considering how Marryat adheres to and resists the typical gendered conventions (of female medium and male sceptic, for instance) associated with Spiritualist study. It then examines Agatha's role in the text and considers the ways in which her widowhood, combined with her animalistic descriptions, presents a multi-dimensional and challenging view of femininity. In bringing together this nuanced characterisation of a female villain and ascribing traits to the male hero that are often perceived to be feminine within a Spiritualist context, I argue that *Open! Sesame!* is a didactic example of the pragmatic approach Marryat believed a medium had to take to protect themself. Simultaneously, I present Agatha's character as a challenging depiction of what an ambitious woman may do in order to survive – concluding that while the characters may damn Agatha for her actions, the narrative does not explicitly do the same. Through this, Marryat's sympathy for unconventional and potentially dangerous women shines through. While Agatha is the villain, Marryat provides vital, sympathetic reasons for her actions and, although the narrative may condemn the extremes to which Agatha takes them, it presents her as acting in accordance with her animalistic nature – a cat that must protect its young.

[1] Marryat's "ordinary women" in this context are exclusively white. Marryat's Spiritualist and supernatural novels are seldom free from a racialisation dependent on whiteness, with *The Blood of the Vampire* being a rare exception. The necessity of whiteness in Marryat's depiction of Spiritual connection is an important area of study, but it is not within the scope of this article.

The Gender of Spiritualism and the Problem of the Male Medium

Plenty of work has been conducted on the ways in which Spiritualism offered women a new landscape for engaging in transgressive behaviour without necessarily sacrificing respectability. In twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship, Victorian Spiritualism – the practice of communing with spirits through a medium, tracing its origin to the American sisters Katherine and Margaret Fox who claimed to communicate with saints – has gained the reputation of engaging in the blurring of a once-strict binary between reality and unreality (Galvan 2016: 89). The Spiritualist medium (more often than not, a woman) crafted her own space within orthodox Victorian society, often outwardly typifying an extreme convention of womanhood: to allow the spirits to speak through her, the medium can be read as the ultimate passive vessel. This practice built upon the earlier mesmeric movement, which used so-called animal magnetism exercised by (usually male) practitioners to influence their (often female) patients. While mesmerism began as a fringe medical experiment, by the 1840s it became popular enough that most Victorians would have been aware of the practice, and many of them had partaken in it as audience members or patients (Winter 1998: 3). Spiritualism differed in the way it dispensed with the male control and placed power more firmly in the hands of women, allowing or even encouraging female practitioners to become successful and famous mediums (Basham 1992: 11). The transition from Mesmerism to Spiritualism signifies a movement away from masculine dominion within practices occurring at the juncture between the scientific and the supernatural worlds, a shift towards a kind of psychical performance in which women explicitly possessed the power to control not only their own bodies, but those of others.

The séance became a space in which unconventional female behaviour was excused, accepted, and even celebrated. Alex Owen, a foundational feminist historian of Spiritualism, writes that the medium's behaviour during a séance "signified a transgression and transposition of normative femininity" and adds that it was the very "structure of the séance [that gave] permission to infringe culturally imposed limits" (1989: 11). Owen's pivotal text, *The Darkened Room* (1989) understands the medium as a woman both able, and expected, to experiment with unconventional behaviour without risking negative social repercussions. While the séance room came with its own set of limitations, Owen argues that these were established in the context of, and in contrast to, those embedded into polite, middle-class, Victorian society. This was particularly notable given the many advancements and changes to the female role that took place across the scope of the nineteenth century: the latter half of the century in particular saw increased focus on a variety of social, personal, and political interests related to women and their roles both inside and outside the home. Marlene Tromp identifies Spiritualism as "provid[ing] a frame to bring into focus these issues" during a time in which they were already beginning to be "contested" (2006: 26). By embracing and cultivating an extreme version of "the notion of innate female passivity" the medium was granted the freedom to transgress, if only when inside the séance room (Owen 1989: 7). Owen emphasises that the medium "attained power because of qualities which were attributed to powerlessness" (234), forcing her to simultaneously exist as an example of typical Victorian womanhood while also embodying its opposite.

Acknowledging explorations of the relationship between Spiritualism and its expectations of feminine passivity and power by scholars such as Owen and Tromp, the focus of this article is Marryat's depiction of the male medium in *Open! Sesame!* and the extent to which the passivity he displays enables his exploitation by a villainous woman. My consideration of Agatha, the novel's villain, centres on Marryat's portrayal of gendered power dynamics through the positioning of her character at the intersection of human, animal, and

spirit. Across the scope of her Spiritualist fiction, Marryat utilises both male and female mediums. The eponymous medium in *The Strange Transfiguration of Hannah Stubbs* (1896) is possessed by her husband's murdered first wife who uses Hannah's body to enact revenge upon the man who killed her. The medium does not seize the power she is already believed to possess but instead falls victim to abuse by a female spirit and dies, unaware of the atrocities committed by her own hand, at the novel's conclusion. In other stories, the male mediums blighted by spirits resist acknowledging their abilities. In "The Ghost of Charlotte Cray" (1883), for instance, a dead woman haunts her former lover after she is set aside for a younger bride: in death, she embodies a power far more tangible than that which she possessed in life. The male narrator's ability to see spirits allows the eponymous Charlotte to pursue him, unrelenting, until her wish to meet the wife for whom he abandoned her is fulfilled, all while he believes himself to be falling into insanity. Similarly, in "The Invisible Tenants of Rushmere" (1883), a male narrator refuses to believe the evidence of his own eyes when his family is haunted by spirits, entirely disregarding his family's experience due to his deep-seated scepticism, once again believing in his own madness over the possibility of spiritual interference.

Open! Sesame!, however, differs from these examples in the attitude of its medium. Valence aligns more with Hannah Stubbs, the voiceless victim of her own immeasurable power easily taken advantage of by those around her, than with the narrators of "Charlotte Cray" and "Invisible Tenants" who resist their mediumship. While male mediums were less common than their female counterparts, they were not unheard of. Marryat was likely aware of the male medium Daniel Donglas Home, famous for his levitations, and may have also been familiar with the American medium John Shoebridge Williams, who, while less famous, is now known for being concerned that the spiritual connection to his dead daughter was making him grow breasts (Carroll 1997). Marryat's male medium does not levitate, nor does he acquire female physical attributes, but he does engage in a slippage between typical Victorian masculinity, which encouraged discipline and mastery of emotion, and Spiritualist femininity, which relied upon extreme passivity.

While Spiritualism's association with passive femininity did not preclude men from partaking in mediumship, their doing so challenged constructions of masculinity, embodying what Brett E. Carroll defines as a "means of reconceptualizing masculinity" within a female domain that upheld virtues of gentleness and submission (1997: 28). Valence's affinity for Spiritualism, then, as well as the suicidal state he inhabits for much of the novel (due only to his spiritual guide's insistence that he will die) marks him as an effeminised man who is unable, as Amy Milne-Smith remarks, to "control his emotions," leaving him "unable to live up to the [masculine] standards of the age" (2022: 2). Without the protection of the mastery of emotion vital to the Victorian understanding of masculinity, Valence is easily manipulated and Agatha confidently exploits his passivity to such an extent that he nearly dies from his belief alone.

Open! Sesame!'s initial reception in the press was unfavourable, a response with which Marryat was familiar (while many of her novels did also receive positive reviews, just as many were reviewed negatively), and a consistent reason for this was Valence's characterisation: his imperfect masculinity was not well received. Marryat presents her male hero as possessing "a sensitive and emotional temperament", describing him as "too slight and delicate", traits not typically ascribed to Victorian ideals of masculinity (Marryat 1875: 254, 256). Pope interprets him as a gay man in the first half of the novel, disinterested in women and obsessed with "an almost grotesque form of 'femininity'" in the form of Spiritualism (2020: 167). It is only after he consummates his marriage with Everil, Pope argues, that he begins to become more virile and masculine, but even then, he retains his interest in the feminine sphere of the spiritual.

A reviewer for *The Examiner*, one of only a handful of publications to review the novel, was overwhelmingly critical of *Open! Sesame!*, opining that Marryat should be "ashamed" to publish such "morbid fantasies" and decrying her as "pander[ing] to vulgar taste" ("Miss Marryat's *Open! Sesame!*" 1875: 552). They then add that they "cannot bring [them]selves to say hero" when referring to Valence and describe him as "the principal male character" instead (553). The inference is that Valence does not live up to the standards of masculinity expected of a literary romantic hero and so becomes unpalatable to a mainstream audience, or at least to this reviewer. Another critic, writing in the *Saturday Review*, criticised Marryat's readership, claiming that "no man of sense to whose unhappy lot it falls to read such a novel as this troubles himself about understanding it" ("*Open! Sesame!*" 1875: 605). The scathing implication here is that Marryat's novel cannot satisfy an appropriately masculine man, thus aligning her (female) readership with the enjoyment of nonsense, a criticism often also levelled at Spiritualism itself. The *Saturday Review* also makes comment upon Valence's passivity, noting that "in days gone by, young though he was, he would have been called an 'old woman'" (605). Both reviewers disparage Valence and identify him as an effeminate hero. The criticisms they raise are concerned with Marryat's subversion of gender roles but take little issue with Marryat's Spiritualist beliefs, which are dismissed somewhat flippantly as barely worth consideration. To these reviewers, the idea that a man – supposedly the intellectually superior gender – could fall victim to overt Spiritualist manipulation by a woman is more offensive than the practice itself.

Marryat's subversion of gendered traits associated with Spiritualism is a vital aspect in Agatha's manipulation: without Valence's characteristic passivity, Agatha would be entirely unable to seize control of him. The inversion of typical masculinity with spiritualist femininity positions Valence in conflict with Agatha's more dangerous, animalistic femininity. Agatha discovers the same weaponised power that many female mediums were granted, but locates this not through passivity but through direct and tangible manipulation. While claiming to share an interest in Spiritualism, Agatha in no way embodies the ideal of the passive vessel – in fact, she is separated from womanhood almost entirely, presenting an opposition not only between the individuals, but between the gendered aspects of their characters. Valence, a combination of masculine power (through the wealth and status he inherited) and feminine passivity (through his successful trance mediumship), is placed in opposition to Agatha who, while she lacks the tangible power of wealth and status, is rich in her possession of an underhanded, primal power associated with her more animalistic traits.

Dehumanised Femininity in *Open! Sesame!*

Valence's failure to conform with the typical model of Victorian masculinity plays into his refusal to balance empirical evidence with his own spiritual beliefs. Engagement with the scientific process was always necessary, according to Marryat's *There is No Death*. In this 1891 memoir, Marryat criticises over-believers as people of 'low intellect' and 'weak nerves', targeting them with just as much vitriol as the sceptics who sought to undermine the practice altogether (Marryat 1891: 50). In *Open! Sesame!*, Valence initially begins his domestic Spiritualist study with caution: he expresses disdain for spirit-rapping after his first experience, describing it as "puerile" (Marryat 1875: 178). However, as soon as the spirit of his dead father visits him and informs him that "[his] powers are great", he believes all he sees and hears (179). Following this, he becomes secluded in his home and separated from both his friends and his reason, rendering him susceptible to a blossoming friendship with Agatha when she arrives. Agatha claims that her immediate interest in Valence's work stems from having herself partaken in séances with her late husband, Valence's brother. Valence's passivity – a reflection

of his unconventional masculinity – allows Agatha to gain control over him easily, securing her power via their shared interest in the spiritual world.

Through the stolen identity of her spiritual alter ego Isola, Agatha strongly impresses upon Valence that he will die, leading him to wither and weaken despite a lack of identifiable physical ailment. The advancement of his physical symptoms aligns with his increasing reliance upon Agatha and his continued dedication to the passivity of his Spiritualist practice. Valence's certainty in his own demise is never questioned, but we see the moment he learns the time and date of his death through his closest friend, Bulwer. Likely reminiscent of the theosophist Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Open! Sesame!*'s Bulwer possesses an uncanny foresight that will ultimately help him solve the mystery of Valence's illness. In the paragraphs before Valence's revelation Bulwer narrates a "confused vision" of "Valence in some extreme danger […] whilst Mrs West, transformed into a huge scaly serpent, writhes in folds between them and prevents him coming to the rescue" (169). Bulwer imagines Agatha not only as a dangerous predator associated with powerful women who are often perceived as villainous – Eve, Medusa, Cleopatra – but also as an animal that is notably phallic in shape. Here Agatha's dangerous femininity (mixed with the inferred masculinity of the phallic shape of the snake) directly overpowers not only Valence's passive version of masculinity, but Bulwer's more typical masculine presence, too. In Bulwer's vision, she "writhes" between Valence and Bulwer, forcibly keeping them apart and exerting a strength not typical of such a "small" Victorian woman (31). In so doing, she exerts ownership over Valence and prevents Bulwer from undermining her power over him.

Bulwer's distrust of Agatha is consistent throughout the novel, and this is emphasised on another occasion through Marryat's use of snake-like language. When Valence announces the date of his death, Bulwer narrates that

> He cannot trust the widow, even on the evidence of her own smooth tongue; nor can he quite understand why, since she was awakened by [Valence's] scream she did not come to the assistance of her brother-in-law sooner. He sees that, although she wears a white wrapper, she is completely dressed underneath, and her hair is neatly wound about her head. Would a woman accustomed to [being] called upon at night in so terrible an emergency as a sudden disorder of the brain be likely to do her hair before rushing to the presence of the invalid?
>
> (174)

Bulwer's observations here echo the dream from which he has recently awoken – the description of Agatha's "smooth tongue" conjures imagery of easy deception, and, combined with the description of her hair "wound about her head", recalls the snake from Bulwer's vision to connote a Medusan image of snake-like hair. The association of snakes with dangerous, uncontrolled femininity is a long-standing one, with scholars such as Angela Giallongo arguing that snake women have, across history, "come to symbolise the sub-humanity of the female" (2018: 3). Giallongo suggests that Medusa in particular can be understood as "an emblematic symbol of Otherness" and "an allegory for the conflictual relationships between masculinity and femininity" (3). I suggest that this is the cultural connotation reflected in Marryat's use of serpentine language to describe Bulwer's response to Agatha's villainy. His mental depiction of her as a snake echoes the danger she poses, but in a way that presents the threat as, at its core, intrinsically female. The phallic nature of the serpent, when presented alongside the female body, crafts a layer of otherness intrinsic to the Medusan image of the snake-woman. She is non-typical in her gender, balancing aspects of masculinity and femininity in a way that highlights, for her prey, the danger of both.

These serpentine descriptions of Agatha are verbalised by male characters – firstly, Bulwer, and later Dr Newall who, in the novel's concluding sequence, announces that "Mrs West is a snake in the grass" – whose utterances effectively other her (Marryat 1875: 299). While the men identify Agatha as a snake, the narration more broadly refers to her as a different animal – a cat. Frequently, Marryat omits Agatha's name in favour of describing her as "the Cat" (36, 68, 70, 79, 80, 360) and "the little widow" (78, 126, 134, 140, 150, 154, 170, 188, 214, 265, 279, 284, 315, 318). While this technique is also used for other characters ("the Earl", for instance), albeit not as frequently, its application to Agatha cements her dehumanisation. She is othered consistently throughout the text; while Bulwer expresses suspicion at the novel's midpoint, she is established as both an outsider and a potential threat much earlier in the novel during which her social standing is a point of contention, as is her ambition. We learn through Everil's guardian early in the text that Valence's brother "made a marriage much beneath him", to which Everil replies that "we all know Agatha was a governess" (23). This conversation, before Agatha is even introduced, establishes her as an outcast, her role rife with the implications that, in order to marry so far above her station, Agatha is willing to flout and challenge social codes. Furthermore, as a young, widowed woman Agatha's position in the family is tenuous and unclear; in order to maintain her power, Agatha must continue to negotiate the bounds of her station. The animalistic descriptions Marryat uses throughout the text begin at this early stage when she writes that

> She is a Cat, though few women know it, and fewer men, for Agatha West is of that order of women who draws both sexes to her indiscriminately, and deceives the masculine more effectually than any other feminine creature on earth.
>
> (31)

Most striking here is the emphasis upon Agatha's non-human identity, referring to her in the same sentence both as a cat and as a "feminine creature" rather than a woman. Much like the snake, the cat is an animal with a well-documented historical association with women – particularly, with a dangerous kind of femininity.

In calling Agatha a "Cat", with emphasis on the capitalisation of the noun, Marryat positions her somewhere between humanity and animality. She is an elevated cat, somewhere in the space between human (represented by the capitalisation of the word as a proper noun or name) and the non-human. Whilst this slippage mirrors the inconsistency of her humanity, the connection to cats keeps her femininity within these bounds consistent. As with the snake imagery, it is her *expression* of femininity that is ultimately dangerous. With a similar connotation of deceit and subtlety, the cat's association with femininity emphasises the threat these women may pose. The clearest connection between cats and women is through historical accounts of witchcraft, in which the cat was believed to serve as a familiar (Parish 2019). In literature, however, the association may go further, and Monica Flegel remarks that "when a woman is compared to cats in a nineteenth century novel, she probably possesses a sexual independence or, at the very least, a selfishness that makes her unsuited for her role as a domestic angel" (Flegel 2015: 20). Pope understands Agatha as a threat due to her asexuality, but I interpret her differently (Pope 2020: 169). While no explicit mention of Agatha's sexual history is made, the implication contained within her rise from governess to the aristocracy implies what Flegel identifies as the "rampant sexuality" associated with cats (Flegel 2015: 20). Agatha's relationship to her own sexuality needs only to be inferred; as a widow with a child, Agatha is explicitly sexually experienced and, furthermore, currently unmarried. Although she pursues no dalliances in the novel, being firmly set on her goal to gain Valence's title for her son (the reason for Pope's interpretation), a sexually experienced

unmarried woman is nevertheless a cause for potential anxiety, especially when paired with her association with cats.

The dehumanisation and negative connotations – deception, slyness, sexuality – of Agatha's cat-like identity are complicated by Marryat's simultaneous references to the cat's association with positive femininity. When Marryat writes that "even Cats, we know, are very faithful mothers", she presents Agatha's motherhood as the one unmarred facet of her femininity, the only aspect of it that is not tempered by the threat it poses (1875: 32). This reminds us that every one of Agatha's actions, no matter how villainous, is done in pursuit of security for herself and her son which, for many, is a goal with which to empathise. Here, the feline reference highlights Agatha's role as a mother which, to many Victorians, was a sign of ultimate femininity. In so doing, Marryat constructs a highly sympathetic villain, albeit one who fails to balance the delicate slippage between appropriate dedication to one's child and dangerous, animalistic femininity that must be controlled. While both the cat and the snake connote a relationship with dangerous femininity (cats as the witch's familiar and representative of uncontrolled sexuality, and snakes as figures of death, both predators but one more easily tamed than the other), together they embody a duality that indicates Agatha's femininity is fundamentally non-human.

Agatha does not, at any point, resist her animalistic identity. Using these facets of her personality to secure her position as Valence's confidant, she criticises others to deflect from her animalistic identity even as she simultaneously accepts it. When she seeks to convince Valence that Everil has been unfaithful to him, for instance, she condemns Everil using similar language, describing her as a "sly puss", a phrase loaded with the same inferences, in this instance, of uncontrolled female sexuality (284). Agatha also calls Everil a "sly puss" earlier in the text when Everil is getting dressed for dinner to meet Valence. Agatha uses this turn of phrase to compliment Everil's choice of clothing: "you have chosen the color that becomes you best, too, you sly puss!" (95). The word choice prompts the desired reaction and Everil, unwilling to appear flirtatious, is manipulated into wearing an "unbecoming dress" (96). Everil's actions resist the accusation of slyness and feline behaviour, and so Valence is disbelieving when Agatha takes this charge to Valence. He does not doubt Everil at all, and Agatha's attempt falls flat. Although it is not until a later revelation of Agatha's goals that this scene can be understood with Agatha's true intentions in mind, the comment nonetheless highlights her manipulative tactics. By implying that Everil is being "sly" and cat-like, Agatha inadvertently presents us with a self-referential description.

The conversation between Agatha and Valence in this scene quickly diverts to their next séance and the spirit Isola. Valence tells his sister-in-law that while she was away from home he felt no need to seek Isola's advice, sharing that he is no longer confined to solitude due to his happiness with Everil. Agatha does not push him further, instead conceding

> Well, go on, be as happy as you may. And don't let this little snake in the grass have any power to mar your happiness.
>
> (285)

Agatha here explicitly refers to herself as "a snake in the grass," perhaps to test that she is able to do so and maintain Valence's trust. The fact that Agatha is, in this conversation, attempting to steer Valence away from the happiness he claims to currently enjoy without studying Spiritualism makes her comment subtly menacing. She outwardly hints to Valence what she attempts to deflect onto Everil by calling her sly. In using this phrase, "snake in the grass," to refer to herself in the same conversation in which she calls Everil a "sly puss," she both accepts and subtly deflects her animalistic identity onto another woman. This time,

Valence does not acknowledge either turn of phrase, whether aimed at Everil or towards Agatha herself, and this is how Agatha may deduce that her control on him is beginning to slip.

In spite of these two examples of subtle deflection, which are conducted with the aim of achieving her final goal, Agatha consistently embraces and embodies her non-human identities. Alongside the cat and the snake, a third is added through Isola, with whom she enacts her plan to see Valence dead. To quote Pope, Isola is "all softness and femininity […] representing the hyperfemininity of the mid-Victorian womanly ideal" (2020: 165). The femininity she employs as a spirit is dramatic and artificial, using clever drapery and a blonde wig to enchant her victim. She lures Valence into a belief in his own demise through this example of extreme, but fundamentally unrealistic and non-human, femininity. Agatha's identity as Isola is less consistent throughout the text than her identity as a cat because her involvement in Valence's ailment is revealed more slowly rather than presented upfront. I argue that, when considered together, Agatha's identity as cat, snake, and spirit separates her from humanity. By describing her primarily as an animal, and secondarily as a spirit (albeit a falsified one), Marryat presents Agatha as triply non-human, emphasising her villainous role through language that dehumanises and, at the same time, continues to embrace femininity. Due to her combined identity as both animal and spirit, power remains firmly in Agatha's grasp for most of the novel. She utilises Spiritualism's muddying of binaries to her advantage and traverses her non-human identities with ease. By embracing non-human identities that have power within a supernatural space (the spirit guide and the witch's familiar) she can enact more power within the séance than outside of it, but the power she exerts there may begin to fade due to Valence's contrasting passivity. She engages in a consistent blurring of boundaries between masculinity and femininity, and humanity and inhumanity, appropriating the empowering aspects of mediumship while Valence is left with the less empowering facets of passivity and illness.

Conclusion

In her first published Spiritualist novel, Marryat traverses the expectations of gender through presenting a feminised hero who embodies the traditionally feminine traits of passivity necessary for his success in Spiritualism and contrasting him with the complicated, dangerous femininity of her villain. Agatha exerts tremendous power over the narrative, inverting the gendered hierarchy in which she, as a young widow, might tend to fall at the bottom, and placing herself as an elite puppeteer of those around her. Throughout the text, Agatha is associated with predatory femininity through the animals with which she is associated. Marryat's descriptions of her as a "feminine creature", a "cat", and Bulwer's interpretation of her as a "scaly serpent" complicate her femininity and seek to separate it from her human qualities but simultaneously imply that she acts on animal instinct rather than pure malice. Her complex, non-human identities complicate the more idealistic femininity she represents as a "faithful mother", but the lengths to which she embraces her animalistic side prevent this from taking precedence over the threat she poses.

Agatha's attempts at securing Valence's inheritance are fruitless, however, her manipulations having failed due to the combined efforts of Valence's friends. The novel's ending unveils Agatha's deception but, more importantly, seeks to re-masculinise Valence. Agatha's plots are uncovered by Bulwer, with the assistance of his premonition-like visions, and her hyperfeminine spiritual identity is revealed to be nothing more than artifice. Agatha is, it is revealed, nothing more than human, the threat of her hyper-femininity dissolved. To uncover this, the group plot for Everil to stoke Valence's jealousy and awake his masculinity at long last. After Everil apparently elopes with Staunton, Valence enters a jealous rage as

predicted. While Agatha joins the team on their mission to end the scandal, she is oddly silent throughout the whole ordeal, only offering a few sparse words to discourage the search. The focus of the conclusion, then, does not centre on Agatha's manipulation, but rather on the way Valence may recover from it. Pope identifies the moment in which Valence aims his gun at Staunton and declares that he will "cram this pistol down your throat" as the rebirth of Valence's masculinity (Marryat 1875: 371). The act of threatened violence – with a distinct connotation of sexual assault from the phallic gun – towards Staunton is balanced against Valence's assertions that he will not give up Spiritualism entirely, but will now approach the practice with more of Everil's tenacity, dissolves the passivity and effeminacy that allowed Agatha's manipulations to take root.

Although the villain is ultimately unsuccessful in her murder plot, *Open! Sesame!* anticipates the themes Marryat continues to explore in her later novel, *The Blood of the Vampire*, in which she considers a sympathetic villain who cannot control the violence she commits. Harriet Brandt's vampirism is an inheritance from her mother who is described as a "revolting creature" with a "half-formed brain", her villainy stemming from her grandmother being bitten by a vampire bat (Marryat 1897: 115). The similarities between these two novels lies in the associations of their villains with animal instinct. For Harriet, she is unable to control her actions, but this is not the case for Agatha. In *Open! Sesame!*, Agatha remains in full control of her actions, but it is her circumstances that inspire sympathy. While the result is similar – Agatha seeks to commit murder, while Harriet inadvertently does so– the two women's intentions are what marks them as different. Nonetheless, the connection between a sympathetic villainess and her association with animals or animal instinct brings these texts together and indicates a consistent interest in the villain's agency over her own behaviour.

Marryat's Spiritualist fiction does not seek to advertise Spiritualism as a practice but instead uses it as a location through which to explore established sensation plots. Her characters are just as likely to suffer from Spiritualism as they are to benefit from it, and in *Open! Sesame!*, she pairs this with a complex and multifaceted view of gender through the animals she associates with her villain. The intentional othering of Agatha by Bulwer and Dr Newell, who both understand her as the predatory and untameable snake, versus the narrative conception of her as a cat, a domestic animal Marryat associates with motherhood but also often characterised by uncontrolled sexuality, creates a complicated image of her as a villain. Agatha's ability to traverse multiple non-human identities and embrace a dangerous embodiment of femininity allows her to subvert her outcast role in the West family, a task in which she very nearly succeeds. If the boundaries between the living and the dead, the human and the non-human may be traversed or dissolved, then so too may other binaries such as gender and class – and this is the complicated trail Agatha blazes across the text. Exerting power in a way that is necessarily feminine but simultaneously dangerous and tinged with masculine symbolism such as the phallic snake, Agatha's embracing of this slippage ultimately brings her incredibly close to achieving her goals. Valence keeps his life due to the assistance of his friends and Agatha's plans are thwarted, but the success she experienced for much of the novel highlights the gendered possibilities that power and Spiritualism can allow for a disenfranchised woman, even a villainous one.

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