

The Starving Feminine Body in Gissing's *The Odd Women*

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Introduction

<1> The frequent mention of food—and its scarcity—is a prevailing motif in the world of the spinsters and unmarried factory girls who populate George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893). Gissing, who spent part of his early life in “food-obsessed poverty,” takes great care to describe the Madden sisters' meager meals, many of which resemble his own at certain times of his life: “plain rice ... with a little butter, pepper, and salt’ or ‘mashed potato and milk’” (Ingham x). The diets of the Madden sisters not only reveal the plight of their poverty—more specifically, the feminization of poverty—but also the ways that their society monitors women's intake of food through the feminine ideal. In Victorian England, women starved not only from poverty, but for beauty and for virtue. A tiny waist was a symbol of a woman's self-will and repudiation of carnal appetite. The bodies of the older Madden sisters, Alice and Virginia, are visibly wasting away, which emphasizes their status as “odd women,” those unmarried women whose “useless, lost, futile lives” (Gissing 44) represent a kind of social waste. Many of the sisters' wasted lives are the result of a society that has deemed them as wasted, “futile” women. Due to the oppressive gender and economic structures in which they live, the Madden sisters find different ways of subverting society's control over their bodies—all self-destructive—from alcoholism to suicide. With his focus on food and the body, Gissing reveals the feminine body to be starving in a physical sense, but also starving in a social context, as long as society offers such few options for women.

The Feminization of Poverty

<2> Throughout his work, Gissing is a vicious commentator on the effects of poverty on the human condition. In Gissing's malevolent providence, Dr. Madden is killed on his way to buy his daughters an insurance policy that would have given their lives a security that will be absent forever. Instead, the daughters become helpless victims of society who might well have never existed (at one point Monica thinks, “How much better if the poor girls had never been born”) (38). George Orwell believed that Gissing's primary theme in *The Odd Women* could be

summarized by the following three words: “not enough money” (15). Gissing’s biographer John Halperin expands on the novelist’s economic determinism:

No other novelist has written so movingly of the pulverizing effects of poverty and the money-race on the sentient spirit and of the ways in which human feelings can be degraded by economic pressures. It is the focus on the individual confronted by circumstances, social and financial, beyond his control that gives such power to Gissing’s best novels—the confrontation of men and economic systems, the brute force of money, the negation of the individual in a money-grubbing system. (5-6)

Halperin claims that in contrast to Dickens, who cannot help but “sentimentalize the poor” (263), Gissing ruthlessly exhibits the hopeless destitution that his characters’ economic station has brought.

<3> More specifically, Gissing exposes the poor conditions of women, as a class in society that is economically dependent on men. In a letter to Eduard Bertz, Gissing lamented the effects of women’s lack of education: “I am convinced there will be no social peace until women are intellectually trained very much as men are. More than half the misery of life is due to the ignorance and childishness of women” (171). Early in the novel, the sisters’ patriarch, Dr. Madden, makes the following ironic statement as he advises his daughters: “No, no; women, old or young, should never have to think about money” (6). Of course the women throughout the rest of the novel will do little but worry about money. He tells Alice his reasons for shielding his daughters from financial conversations: “I don’t think girls ought to be troubled about this kind of thing ... Let men grapple with the world; for, as the old hymn says, ‘tis their nature to.’ I should grieve indeed if I thought my girls would ever have to distress themselves about money matters” (5). Conventional Victorian gender codes encourage these middle-class women to leave their house completely unprepared to support themselves and instead to depend on the financial support of either father or husband. Because of their ill preparation for the world outside of their father’s home, not having been educated with “a professional object” (7), the Madden sisters fail to find suitable employment through which they might be able to eat and live healthily.

<4> Furthermore, the meager wages that this society allocates to women’s work contribute to the cycle of poverty in which these women are caught—unless they can marry. Gissing is meticulous in showing the financial state of his characters, and the women especially do not fare well compared to the men. Widdowson lives on £600 a year, while Everard’s salary is a decent £450. In comparison, Alice’s salary is £16 a year when she works as a nursery-governess, and Virginia’s is £12 as a “companion” (15). From a reference to another shopgirl’s salary, readers can surmise that Monica receives about £15 while working six days a week for thirteen to sixteen hours each day at the drapery factory (31, 42).

<5> The women's paltry meals are the outward symbol of their tiny incomes. Alice tells her sister, "If it came to the very worst, our food need not cost more than sixpence a day—three and sixpence a week. I do really believe, Virgie, we could support life on less—say, on fourpence. Yes, we could dear!" They looked fixedly at each other, like people about to stake everything on their courage" (19). When living in poverty, as these women do, the bare minimum of living from day to day requires the utmost courage. Another scene that underscores their miserable financial state is the "feast" for Monica's birthday, one they call "luxurious": "There was a tiny piece of salmon, a dainty cutlet, and a cold blackcurrant tart" (40). Their "feast" is a feast for no one, not even for the honored guest. The hosts hardly partake of it either, for "Virginia, at home a constant vegetarian, took no share of the fish and meat—which was only enough for one person," and Alice has a separate meal altogether, "a dinner of gruel" she makes upstairs (40).

<6> After emphasizing their scarcity of food, Gissing describes the ill effect of the women's poverty of diet and lifestyle on their physical features. Alice's "face would not have been disagreeable but for its spoilt complexion; the homely features, if health had but rounded and coloured them, would have expressed pleasantly enough the gentleness and sincerity of her character. Her cheeks were loose, puffy, and permanently of the hue which is produced by cold" (13). Virginia "had also an unhealthy look, but the poverty, or vitiation, of her blood manifested itself in less unsightly forms. One saw that she had been comely, and from certain points of view her countenance still had a grace, a sweetness, all the more noticeable because of its threatened extinction" (14). These descriptions depict the beauty that is both present and hidden in the women's faces, implying that, if it were not for their adverse social conditions, Alice and Virginia would be otherwise healthy.

<7> Food scarcity exists in both the domestic sphere of Alice and Virginia and the working life of a factory girl like Monica. In this sphere, the shopgirls' meals are regimented and controlled by the proprietors of the company. Monica explains to her sisters the strictly regulated times for eating while working: "There's twenty minutes for each meal ... but at dinner and tea one is very likely to be called into the shop before finishing. If you are long away you find the table cleared" (41). Even during the one day off that these young women are meant to enjoy, their lives and meals are rigidly controlled: "Messrs. Scotcher and Co. acted like conscientious men in driving them forth immediately after breakfast, and enjoining upon them not to return until bedtime. By way of well-meaning constraint, it was directed that only the very scantiest meals (plain bread and cheese, in fact) should be supplied to those who did not take advantage of the holiday" (31). Scanty meals are a constant in these women's lives, whether in day-to-day sustenance or as punishment.

The Feminine Appetite of Self-Restraint

<8> Beyond their meager wages, Victorian women were also denied full nourishment as part of the feminine ideal. In her book *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, Anna Krugovoy Silver argues that the slender body became the ideal form for Victorian women. Silver of course does not claim that all women during this time suffered from an actual eating disorder (although the first anorexic case was diagnosed in 1873) but that the anorexic body became a powerful cultural model, as fat was considered to be unfeminine. In their 1892 book of conduct, *Beauty of Form and Grace of Vesture*, authors Frances Mary Steele and Elizabeth Livingston Steele Adams discuss the pernicious effects of fat and offer methods of fat reduction:

In an ideal condition there is fat enough to round all the surfaces to smoothness, no more. Excess of fat should be burned away by exercise ... Increased fat is induced by refusing to use the waist muscles, binding them in enervating corsets. Corpulence destroys beauty of form and grace of motion. It can be reduced by persistent exercise of the muscles of the abdomen and by the use of two instead of three meals a day. (80)

Therefore, it was by means of a woman's restrictive clothing and eating that her gender identity would be molded. To be feminine was to be weak and hungry.

<9> Although Alice and Virginia do not seem to be the type of women concerned with conforming to the standards of beauty in their culture, they do exemplify the coexisting Victorian notion that the denial of food represents a woman's self-control and moral virtue. Silver writes of the Victorian "understanding of the body as an entity that must be subordinated to the will and disciplined as an emblem of one's self control" (27). *The Ladies' Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness* by Florence Hartley, for instance, advises women not to "bend too much forward over your food." She argues, "To eat fast, or appear to be so much engrossed as to be unable to converse, is ill-bred; and it makes those around you suspect that you are so little accustomed to dining well, that you fear to stop eating an instant, lest you should not get enough" (102). Thus, a woman's denial of her will began on the plate. Likewise, in *The Odd Women*, both Alice and Virginia view their malnutrition as a discipline of will and exemplary self-restraint. In her extreme hunger, Alice proclaims, "Yes, I must struggle against it." The narrator then remarks, "If both of them had avowed their faintness as often as they felt it, the complaint would have been perpetual. But they generally made a point of deceiving each other, and tried to delude themselves; professing that no diet could be better for their particular needs than this which poverty imposed. 'Ah! it's a good sign to be hungry,' exclaimed Virginia" (24). Both women must delude themselves into believing that their constant hunger and their ability to resist eating is a good work, a worthwhile pursuit. Their meager meals bring them a kind of distorted pride, an illusion that they are more virtuous than others. Alice justifies their paltry dinner of mashed potatoes and milk with the statement, "The Irish peasantry live almost entirely on that ... and they are physically a fine race" (25). The irony is that Alice can

associate a poor diet with physical superiority when the narrator has taken great pains to emphasize the two sisters' poor health and appearance. In this society, women were instructed to go without, to deny themselves so that others (more specifically, their male counterparts) could have their fill.

<10> While the denial of food exhibited a woman's discipline and self-control, a small waist also announced her spiritual purity. The designation of women as the "angels in the house" advanced the gender ideology that women were the purer and more spiritual sex. Elaine Showalter describes the "ascetic ideal" for Victorian women who were "[e]ducated to believe that woman's chief superiority to man lay in her greater spirituality, her greater distance from the merely animal passions of lust and sexual desire" (xxi). This asceticism has a historical precursor in the medieval female martyr who used starvation to demonstrate her religious devotion. In *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*, Joan Jacobs Brumberg explains, "In the medieval period fasting was fundamental to the model of female holiness. The medieval woman's capacity for survival without eating meant that she found other forms of food: prayer provided sustenance, as did the Christian eucharist—the body and blood of Christ—ingested as wafer and wine" (43-4).

<11> In the Victorian context, if a woman had a large waist, her company saw her as also having a large carnal appetite—a quality indecent for a woman. To have a large physical appetite was to have a large sexual appetite—the two were synonymous—and it was improper for a woman's body to exhibit such a disordered desire. The Victorians went so far as to classify food as "male" or "female" according to their perceived effects. In *Female Beauty, as Preserved and Improved by Regimen, Cleanliness, and Dress*, published in 1837, Mrs. Alexander Walker cautions women that "Immoderate indulgence in [meat] often becomes pernicious" (63). Along with meat, women were discouraged from eating spicy, salty, and rich food lest they awaken sexual desire (Silver 45).

<12> Virginia's attitude toward food shows a similar preoccupation. Her pride in her vegetarianism and her distrust of meat reveal that she has digested this social regime of eating, having divided food into categories of "pure" and "impure." Virginia associates vegetarianism with simplicity and humility. In the beginning of the novel, she proudly exclaims to her landlady Mrs. Conisbee, "I—in fact, I am a vegetarian, and as the meals I take are so very simple, I feel that I might just as well prepare them myself" (12). When Virginia visits Rhoda, however, along with introducing Virginia to new ideas about women's role in society, Rhoda also tempts her with the prospect of meat. Virginia is enticed by her offer: "Months of miserable eating and drinking in her stuffy bedroom made an invitation such as this a veritable delight to her. Seated in the dining-room, she at first refused the offer of meat, alleging her vegetarianism; but Miss Nunn, convinced that the poor woman was starving, succeeded in persuading her" (28). The

narrator remarks upon the immediate difference that the small piece of meat makes on Virginia's overall appearance: "A slice of good beef had much the same effect upon Virginia as her more dangerous indulgence at Charing Cross Station. She brightened wonderfully" (28). The "dangerous indulgence" at the station refers to Virginia's glass of brandy, another item belonging to the masculine category of consumption. In Virginia's view, both the meat and the alcohol are "dangerous," and it is no accident that Rhoda is the one to tempt Virginia with meat, as her new feminist ideas break down former distinctions of gender. In addition, it is through the eyes of Rhoda, the novel's most enlightened female character, that readers see the truth about Virginia's starving condition. Rhoda later remarks: "Virginia is starving, must be starving. Poor creature! I can never forget how her eyes shone when I put that joint of meat before her" (121). A woman who begins to partake in the "dangerous" substances of meat and alcohol may turn into a woman who begins to question other social expectations of her gender, as Rhoda has.

The Social Control of Bodies

<13> Beyond society's control over women's eating is the larger effort to control women's bodies. In Victorian England, a woman's body was not her own but the property of her husband. Monica's overbearing husband Widdowson, who represents the Victorian Old Guard, urges Monica to read John Ruskin. Ruskin's essay "Of Queen's Gardens," published in 1865, became a central text for the conservative answer to "the woman question"—that women should remain in their passive and domestic role. Widdowson summarizes his Ruskinian views to Monica as follows: "Woman's sphere is the home, Monica. Unfortunately, girls are often obliged to go out and earn their living, but this is unnatural, a necessity which advanced civilization will altogether abolish ... I sincerely believe that an educated woman had better become a domestic servant than try to imitate the life of a man" (171). As discussed earlier, it is exactly the sisters' lack of education that has prevented them from being able to care for themselves. Alice and Virginia, as "odd women," do not marry and do not know how to earn a living, and thus live feebly off their father's inheritance. Though Monica marries in order to avoid becoming another "odd woman," Susan Colón argues that her oddness only takes a different form after marriage: "she may have too little education and energy to succeed in the working world, but she also has too much of those qualities to be happy in a traditionally confined marriage" (446-7). Middle-class women like Monica, then, are in a double bind. They cannot find success in a profession or in marriage, since society has not fully supported women's needs or desires in either role. In Monica's marriage, Widdowson maintains a controlling hold, telling her, "There's as much difference between [men's and women's] minds as between their bodies. They are made for entirely different duties" (183). As long as society views men as mind and women as body, women will have the bodies that men will be able to control.

<14> Another means of gendered control in Victorian England was to perpetuate the view that women's bodies were weaker, more prone to "nerves" and fatigue. The novel, too, presents the female body as tiresome and burdensome. Virginia's body is weak: "Her tall meagre body did not seem strong enough to hold itself upright" (14). Later the narrator remarks, "Virginia felt tired in body, but a delightful animation, rarest of boons, gave her new strength" (23). For Monica, toward the end of the novel, her "mind and body are beset by weariness" (338). Rhoda tells Monica to "Strengthen yourself in body and mind" (349). In contrast, the only time the word "body" is used to describe a man in the novel is for Everard, when Miss Barfoot remarks, "My cousin is a fine specimen of a man, after all, in body and mind" (99). Men's bodies are the portrait of health, while the bodies of the female characters are made to suffer.

<15> Along with the image of the weary body is that of the trapped body. Monica is drawn to Bevis because she hopes he can help her "abandon herself, body and soul" (256). Later, Rhoda and Everard discuss the burden of women's clothing, which circumscribes the freedom of the body. Everard proclaims, "As in everything else, women are trammelled by their clothes; to be able to get rid of them, and to move about with free and brave exertion of all the body, must tend to every kind of health, physical, mental, and mortal" (284). As Everard suggests, women's clothing during this time was a physical hindrance that inhibited their other freedoms as well. Debates about the corset, the ultimate image of a Victorian woman's physical restriction, had reached their height during the time *The Odd Women* was published, in the 1880s and 1890s (Kortsch 56). The debates about whether corsets were dangerous to the mind and body of a woman occupied a central place especially in the writings of female authors of this period. Christine Bayles Kortsch explains, "Many New Woman writers eschewed tight-lacing, if not the corset itself, as a symbol of women's societal restrictions. For some, the novel served as a pulpit from which to preach the evils of tight-lacing: Sarah Grand, for example, gave her heroines ample time to ridicule corsetry as a 'deformity' and as a metaphor for small-mindedness" (57). Tight-lacing is a perfect symbol of the Victorian woman's circumscribed freedom: she wears her social stricture on her very body. As an undergarment, the corset is the concealed device of social control and discipline; at the same time, the corset deforms and inscribes the body with its control, making the body the visible location of this control. By turning women into deformed, frail objects, men could more easily rule over them. By shrinking them in body, men could also shrink them in mind.

Subversion Through the Body

<16> In response to the patriarchal structures set up to monitor and check women's bodies, many of the women in the novel turn their bodies into political statements, ultimately subverting and rejecting society's control. In her impassioned speech to Monica about the need for social reform, Rhoda proclaims, "I wish girls fell down and died of hunger in the streets,

instead of creeping to their garrets and the hospitals. I should like to see their dead bodies collected together in some open place for the crowd to stare at" (42). Rhoda advocates that women exhibit their dire situations to the society that has produced them, using their bodies to bear witness instead of hiding them away. And indeed, throughout the novel, women subvert the attempts of men to control them, rewriting the social text with their bodies.

<17> Rhoda and Mary remain unmarried by choice, refusing to relinquish their bodies to a husband. In fact, Rhoda makes it her life's mission "To scorn the old idea that a woman's life is wasted if she does not marry" (204). The celibacy in the novel, especially after a long courtship subplot between Rhoda and Everard, was a daring move on Gissing's part and one which contemporary critics of the novel decried. Marisa Palacios Knox writes of many critics' disappointment at Rhoda's infuriating celibacy: "In these critics' eyes, Rhoda is a victim, rather than an exemplar with whom women should or even could identify" (114). Heated debates about female celibacy in the 1890s likely influenced critics' complaints about Rhoda's trajectory. Erin Williams explains that during the time the novel was published, "female celibacy ... attained the level of social menace in the mid-1890s, a period when women activists and New Women novelists not only enumerated the injustices of marriage but also employed socialist rhetoric in calling women to organize themselves in the manner of a trades union in order to abstain from marital union altogether" (259). In remaining celibate, women were accused by some men of acting against their biological instincts (Williams 259). One of the most subversive acts to be undertaken by Rhoda and Mary, then, is to threaten the social order by withdrawing their bodies from the economic marketplace altogether.

<18> Whether single or married, the Madden sisters also find various ways of regaining ownership over their bodies. Though Monica may not necessarily view herself as a "New Woman," she attempts to regain the power she has lost in her marriage to Widdowson by refusing to let her body be locked up in his house. Instead, she fights for free and unencumbered movement. Before they are married, Widdowson endeavors to police Monica's movements in the city through his voyeurism. While the figure of the *flaneur* was typically male, and for centuries women were restricted from walking freely in the streets without supervision, Monica continually challenges Widdowson and insists on her right to walk freely out-of-doors. After meeting him, Monica senses Widdowson's surveillance as she travels through London: "Whenever she went out in the evening, it was with expectation of seeing him somewhere in the neighbourhood; she felt assured that he had long ago come to look at the house, and more likely than not his eyes had several times been upon her" (82). Widdowson justifies his role as spectator to Monica with the following: "I can't live without seeing you ... If you refuse to meet me, I have no choice but to come wandering about the places where you are. Don't, pray don't think I spy upon you. Indeed, it is only just to see your face or your form as you walk along" (82-3). Despite his claims otherwise, Widdowson continues to spy on

Monica throughout the rest of the novel, watching her “form,” and attempting to control her actions through his fixed gaze.

<19> Once Widdowson succeeds in convincing Monica to marry him, a more intense form of possessiveness emerges. Deirdre David argues that “Monica ... is the victim of male ideology twice over—once as theorized by her father and once as practiced by her husband” (124). Widdowson becomes an authoritarian in every aspect of their domestic life. The narrator explains, “in his view of their relations he was unconsciously the most complete despot, a monument of male autocracy. Never had it occurred to Widdowson that a wife remains an individual, with rights and obligations independent of her wifely condition. Everything he said presupposed his own supremacy; he took for granted that it was his to direct, hers to be guided” (170-1). Widdowson uses the social institution of religion to validate his tyranny over Monica; religion is to him “a precious and powerful instrument for directing the female conscience” (173). The various institutions of society, whether they be religious, political, or educational, all work together to subject women’s bodies to the rule of men.

<20> After they are married, Widdowson tries to restrict Monica to the house, though she constantly fights for the right to move freely about the city. As they discuss inviting Virginia for dinner, Widdowson advises Monica to send a message to Virginia instead of leaving his confines to bring her back. Monica replies, “I had rather go. It makes a change for me.” The narrator comments, “This was a word Widdowson detested. Change, on Monica’s lips, always seemed to mean a release from his society” (175-6). As the tension between the couple increases, Monica wonders in exasperation, “What could he do? If Monica persisted, what means had he of confining her to the house—short of carrying her by main force to an upper room and there locking her in?” (279). Monica tries to release herself from Widdowson’s domestic tyranny, but her leaving the house only causes Widdowson to suspect her and lay guilt on her for seeking any kind of independence apart from him, even before her rebellious meetings with Bevis. Because her husband cannot control her body as he wants to, he compares her body to a prostitute’s. He asks her, “What is your word worth? The prostitute in the street is sooner to be believed. She has the honesty to say what she is, but you—Where were you yesterday when you were not at your sister’s? Where were you this afternoon?” (277). As Sally Ledger writes, “Widdowson’s paranoid desire to closet Monica away from the public spaces of the city derives at least in part from the fear that any woman who shows herself in public might turn out to be a ‘public woman’” (269). Monica continues to challenge Widdowson’s firm grip over her and fuel his paranoia, both through her insistence on venturing outside of his four walls and through her affair with Bevis.

<21> Ultimately, Monica’s strivings to separate her body from Widdowson’s domain are not successful. Her death has an ironic symbolism: she dies fulfilling her prescribed role in Victorian

society, giving birth to Widdowson's child. Her body is not even permitted to die on its own terms. In this society, it is only through her body dying by result of another's that she can escape from her domestic and social confinement.

<22> In the cases of the other Madden sisters, Gissing rids the novel of half of them rather quickly: Gertrude, Martha, and Isabel all die by the second chapter. Martha's death follows a similar trajectory as Monica's. We are told that Martha drowns "by the overturning of a pleasure-boat" (15). Martha, like Monica, is punished in her effort to seek freedom and pleasure. Isabel also drowns—but by her own hand. She was "worked into illness" and "drowned herself in a bath" (16). Isabel joins the many young women whose plight of poverty kills them, which is exactly what Rhoda and Miss Barfoot are attempting to work against. But Isabel can only defy her society by speaking through suicide, thereby turning her body into an emblem of subversion. Gail Cunningham, in "'He-Notes': Reconstructing Masculinity," discusses the fate of so many female protagonists of New Women novels, which end in death and destruction. She writes that "late-nineteenth-century society continued to be so arranged as to make a lived experience of [New Women] principles necessarily self-destructive" (95). Because society had no place for the new ideas of the New Women, there was nowhere for them to go but toward their own destruction. Gissing turns the Maddens' dead, wasted bodies into discursive texts themselves, the shameful remnants of a society that has consumed them.

<23> For the "odd women" of the novel—Alice and Virginia, who remain unmarried—their bodies are not controlled by a husband, though they are still controlled by the mores of the patriarchal structure. Virginia's resolution to her unfortunate social condition is to escape into alcoholism. Ironically, alcoholic excess is her dissent against deprivation of food. Alice tells Monica, "My dear, at Mrs. Conisbee's she starved herself to have money to buy spirits; she went without any food but dry bread day after day" (340). Virginia's wasting away her body with alcohol is a response to the society that has told her that her body is already wasted, belonging to the "useless" "odd women" of this generation.

<24> In becoming an alcoholic, Virginia upends the traditional notions of Victorian womanhood. Not only does alcohol belong to the "male" category of consumption, but a female alcoholic in this era was viewed as a disgrace, standing in utter contrast to the morally superior "angel in the house" whose primary role was in the caregiving of children. Debbie Harrison explains, "As the mothers of the race, women who drank were seen as moral and financial destroyers of the family unit and responsible for the begetting of a new generation of alcoholic children" (132-3). Male alcoholics were bad enough, but a female alcoholic was reprehensible. According to Julia Skelly, "Whereas male alcoholics were regarded as nuisances at best and potential criminals at worst, female alcoholics held a special place in the popular imagination as a particularly villainous type of fallen woman; not only a threat to her own body and her children's bodies,

but also to the social body of the British nation” (5). This belief led to the horrific psychiatric practice of sterilizing women who were alcoholics, which remarkably continued until the 1950s (Straussner and Attia 5). Women were supposed to be the temperate ones—indeed, it was they who led the temperance movement. In *A Victorian Woman’s Place: Public Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, Simon Morgan writes that “[w]omen ... were strongly encouraged to support the temperance movement, and the temperance press were quick to argue that temperance was a ‘woman’s issue.’” In response, women took up the cause in high numbers “with a missionary zeal that appealed to evangelical piety” (99). The social stigma of female alcoholism, then, forced women to hide their drinking in shame (as Virginia does). Anja Muller-Wood points out that even in the novel, “[t]he ‘cause so strange’ is never explicitly identified and named” (112). The sisters’ reaction to Virginia’s alcoholism shows the great taboo of having a female alcoholic in the family. Alice blames Monica, claiming that she has had “a bad influence” on Virginia (340). Alice tells Widdowson of Virginia’s drunkenness “with embarrassed appeal in her wet eyes” (369). Furthermore, the sisters immediately arrange that Virginia be institutionalized, as befits a woman who is mentally ill.

Conclusion

<25> *The Odd Women* has long been recognized as an important literary text to address “the woman question,” an issue on many people’s minds in the fin de siècle, and one that was answered with new feminist social action. Showalter contends that the historical fact of the “odd women” in society convinced feminists that “the traditional view of women as wives and mothers was outmoded, and that social policies which denied women any alternative roles were cruel and anachronistic” (ix). Gissing’s novel, then, according to Patricia Ingham, “is best illuminated by showing how it engages with all the major social and sexual issues that were fiercely debated as the nineteenth century approached its close. The debates were fuelled, as in other centuries, by the sense of dissolution that accompanied the century’s end. The period was often seen as anarchic in predictable Armageddon scenarios” (ix). Although critics have questioned Gissing’s personal views on women and debated his true allegiance to the feminist cause, in *The Odd Women* Gissing does much to reveal the plight of Victorian women, especially those in poverty. Gissing uses the bodies of the Madden sisters as discursive texts that announce their subjugated position within a society that starves them. In the coming decades, women would continue to use their hungry bodies in subversive ways, most famously in the suffragettes’ hunger strikes. The novel itself follows Rhoda’s urging to showcase these women’s exploited positions, “their dead bodies collected together in some open place for the crowd to stare at” (42). The novel’s crowd of readers are left to stare at the dead bodies of Gertrude, of Martha, of Isabel, and of Monica. By fixating on his female characters’ literal and figurative hunger, Gissing reveals the tragedy of women in his society and anticipates the dire need for feminist social reform that would continue to transform women’s lives in the next century.

Endnotes

(1) See Said, 3-8, 12, 21, 95, 121-123, 205-206, 221-222, 274. (▲)

(2) Said's preliminary definition of Orientalism, just preceding the quoted passage, suggests not only a movement beyond the geography bounds of previous definitions of the Orient but also Orientalism's broader epistemological and ideological ambitions: "To speak of Orientalism . . . is to speak mainly, *although not exclusively*, of a British and French cultural enterprise, a project whose dimensions take in such disparate realms as the imagination itself, the whole of India and the Levant . . . the spice trade, colonial armies and . . . administrators, a formidable scholarly corpus, innumerable Oriental 'experts' and 'hands' . . . a complex array of 'Oriental' ideas (Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality), many Eastern sects, philosophies, and wisdoms domesticated for local European use—the list can be extended more or less indefinitely" (4; emphasis added). (▲)

(3) In addition to the fact that Burton's "Sotadic Zone" encompassed the Levant in its wide geographical net, we would suggest that Jewishness's historically ambivalent positioning in British culture—as both assimilated and yet still markedly "other"—qualifies it for the commodious ideological category that is "the Oriental." For example, Tress finally finds the object's possible *political* associations with nihilism as threatening as its Russianness. It's also worth clarifying that, while part of what renders the story's Russian characters foreign for Tress is their Jewishness, our intent is hardly to collapse Orientalism with anti-Semitism. If anything, the Russianness and political otherness of the ikon is *equally* as anxiogenic for Tress as its (associated) Jewishness. The tale's anti-Semitism is a good subject for further study, in light of the history of British anti-Semitism as well as Marsh's own German-Jewish ancestry. (▲)

(4) A shared awareness of the dynamic and uneven tensions between normativity and nonnormativity—and the latter's enduring susceptibility to the former—makes queer theory and postcolonialism natural partners for analysis when considering *Curios*. For the aspects most relevant to our purposes, see Halperin, chapters 8, 9, and 10. (▲)

(5) See Pietz's "The Problem of the Fetish, I," "The Problem of the Fetish, II," and "The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa," as well as Patricia Speyer. Barbara Benedict's overview of English cultural perspectives on collecting in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries help contextualize Marsh's positioning of collecting as a criminal tendency: "curious men's . . . pursuit of monstrosities or curiosities . . . made them monsters or curiosities themselves Satires discipline[d] curiosity, turning it into the popular condemnation of elite fraud [which] idiosyncratically value[s] objects . . . or people" (50-51). Other cultural histories of collecting relevant to our analysis—and indicative of the wide cultural reach of imperialist collecting as

well as the interdisciplinary spectrum of collection studies—include Luisa Calè and Patrizia Di Bello; John Elsner and Roger Cardinal; Michael Hatt; Victoria Mills; Werner Muensterberger; Judith Pascoe; Susan M. Pearce; Susan M. Pearce, Rosemary Flanders, Mark Hall, and Fiona Morton; and Michael Robinson.⁽⁶⁾

(6)See Nunokawa, *The Afterlife of Property*, 15-16, 40-42, 61-76.⁽⁶⁾

(7)See Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 10-11.⁽⁷⁾

(8)See Jasbir Puar; and Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan.⁽⁸⁾

(9)For occurrences of the word “curious,” see Marsh, 8, 18, 27, 77, 99, 126; for “curio,” see 13, 50, 116, 130, 134; and for “curiosity/ies,” see 95, 116, 117.⁽⁹⁾

(10)Sir Richard Burton’s hypothesis regarding the so-called “Sotadic Zone” provides a classic Victorian example of conflating putatively nonnormative sexualities with nonnative/Orientalist Others. In an appendix to his 1885 translation of *The Arabian Nights*, Burton posited that “the Vice” of male homosexuality was endemic to specific geographical areas and their corresponding ethnicities, almost entirely non-British and nonwhite (206-207). As defined by Burton, the Sotadic Zone spanned from the Mediterranean coasts of Europe and Europe (including Egypt) across Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Afghanistan, China, Japan, the South Seas Islands, and North and South America—all areas associated with British or European colonialism. As a means of ideologically containing and projecting homosexuality onto a subjugated, uncivilized non-Western Other, the Sotadic Zone is as overdetermined as it is fragile. Burton hypothesized, on the one hand, that homosexual intercourse is native to specific, non-Western/nonwhite races and locales, that it was viscerally disgusting to white British citizens, and that British bodies are constitutionally incapable of having gay sex. At the same time, however, he worries that homosexual intercourse *is* capable of being engaged in by British citizens—if, the implicit logic goes, they are seduced by travel within the Sotadic Zone or perverted by the invasion of a sacrosanct, fundamentally heterosexual Britain by non-Western bodies and/or habits. For a discussion of the shadow cast by the Sotadic Zone on Victorian literature, see Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 182-198.⁽¹⁰⁾

(11)As in so much Orientalist discourse, “connoisseur[ship]” is ideologically aligned with knowledge, whereas in reality, as Said and Sedgwick respectively argue in regard to postcolonial and queer theory, it’s ignorance—most often a pretended, structured ignorance—rather than knowledge that constitutes and wields hegemony’s power (Marsh 13). For the relevant passages in *Epistemology*, see Sedgwick, 3-8; in Said, see note 1 above.⁽¹¹⁾

(12)Thing theory considers the ways in which an entity loses its use value and becomes a thing, undermining the subject/object polarity operating, within the context our discussion, between

the collector (or the collector's mind) and his objets. Thing theory usually confines itself to examining the role of Marx's theory of commodification, which ties use value to labor and thingness to the alienation of value from the means of production. However, Bill Brown and Arjun Appadurai, among others, trouble these notions of value within a consumer/producer model by locating objets outside the marketplace and inside contexts of private collection and museal display.⁽¹⁾

(13) "The Puzzle," another *Curios* tale, summons the apparently ubiquitous nineteenth-century specter of masturbation. Tress's statement that "[i]t would be too much of a joke if Pugh's precious puzzle exploded in my hand" echoes contemporary anti-masturbation rhetoric circulating around orgasm and self-abuse: not only the fear of compulsion but of the compulsion, the terror and/or the thrill, of not being able to stop. Regarding Victorian-era anti-onanism, see Jean Stengers and Anne Van Neck, 99.⁽²⁾

(14) This school of camp theory (which tends toward narrow formalism and views camp as problematically unprogressive or apolitical) has its origins in Sontag, 275-292. Noteworthy discussions that more or less hold to this line of thinking include those by Andrew Ross, Moe Meyer, Richard Dyer, and Richard Dyer and Derek Cohen. Although Dyer's emphasis on camp's "equivocality" might seem to move him closer to Babuscio, Bergman and Halperin, his worry that camp "can trap us if we are not careful in the endless enjoyment of pursuit at any price" evinces an affinity with Sontag and company. Dyer and Cohen's admission of gay culture's ability to limn "the constructedness of gender identities, role play and sexual behavior" is undercut by the assertion that "[w]hatever [gay culture's] limitations, we have to work with it in order to move beyond it" (Dyer 61; Dyer and Cohen 22). The Sontag school also views camp as an inhering in the object (thus, the frequent worry about camp's superficiality). By contrast, the broader view of camp one finds in Babuscio, Bergman, and Halperin considers it to be constituted by the *relation* between viewer and object—a perspective that retains a healthy awareness of both progressive as well as the reactionary tendencies in gay culture.⁽³⁾

(15) See Babuscio, 19-29. It's important to note, along with Babuscio, Bergman, and Halperin, that camp at once honors *and* mocks queer pain, marginalization and claims for social respect. To critique *only* heterosexual claims to social respectability and clout would be untrue to the gay cultural insight that *all* roles and identities are performances, not essences; such a limited critique would involve a blindness to the fact that gay (sub)culture and its participants cannot fully escape their formative straight acculturation.⁽⁴⁾

(16) *OED*.⁽⁵⁾

(17) In his investigation of the connection between curiosity and psychosexual fetish, Michael Robinson considers the camp implications of the term "knack" (or "knick-knack"), which—for

the “seventeenth-century *virtuoso*, an Italianate and effeminate collector-figure, said to keep ‘knacks’”—carries with it connotations of both curios and male genitalia (689). The act of collecting itself may be queer, whether the tricks are inanimate objects or sexual conquests.([^](#))

(18)Werner Muensterberger examines the psychological impulses that inform collecting and how the act of collecting resolves the tension between the id and the ego, highlighting “the spectacle many collectors make of themselves, their emotional involvement in the pursuit of their objects, their excitement or distress in losing them, their at times peculiar attitudes or behavior” (3). Although Muensterberger is describing transatlantic collecting throughout the centuries, his account could also be read as pertaining to Pugh and Tress.([^](#))

(19)In Wilde’s essay, Vivien (the Decadent counterpoint to the Romantic Cyril) advocates for the superiority of Art and artifice over Nature: “My own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature’s lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition” (3).(a href="#">^)

(20)*OED*.([^](#))

(21)As Wilde puts it, “After all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence. If a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might . . . as well speak the truth”—truth being, for the Decadent Wilde, ethically inferior and ineptly crafted (6).(a href="#">^)

(22)See Muensterberger, 3.(a href="#">^)

(23)For the functions of camp in its relation gay femininity, see Halperin, 317-338.(a href="#">^)

(24)See Karl Beckson, 186-192.(a href="#">^)

(25)Pugh styles himself a “bric-a-brac hunter” in “Lady Wishaw’s Hand,” another tale in *Curios*, partly in order to disown an even more unsavory label: being known as a “curator of an anatomical museum” (117). While defended by some as venues of public health education, anatomical museums were also viewed as pornographic for their display of embalmed human genitalia. See Elizabeth Stephens.(a href="#">^)

(26)Presumably, the reference is to *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599), an Elizabethan anthology of poems attributed entirely to Shakespeare by the publisher. The fact that only five out of the collection’s twenty poems are agreed to be authentic Shakespearean works lends the allusion by Tress added significance in a tale predicated on theft, lying, and forgery. Ironically, “The Cabinet” is the one tale in *Curios* where the artifact proves genuine or fails to involve some element of trickery in manufacture or design.(a href="#">^)

(27)Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 20-21, 26.(^)

(28)“Some of the most distinctive and pervasive features of gay male culture,” insists Halperin, results from a “simultaneous identification with the values and perspectives of both the privileged and the abject. . . . Gay male culture typically operates in two social registers at once, adopting the viewpoint of the upper and lower strata of society, of the noble and the ignoble, and relying on the irony fundamental to camp to hold aristocratic and egalitarian attitudes together in a delicate, dynamic equipoise” (182-183). The only contrast to gay cultural work is that Pugh and Tress’s split allegiance may be perceived—by themselves or by other agents of cultural normativity—as a shortcoming rather than a strength.(^)

(29)Levi’s wife, also Jewish, says that “for money, he would sell anything; his wife, his child—himself!” (83).(^)

(30)Ethnic slurs intrude even on the chapter titles, which include “The Jew Boy Pursues” and “The Jew Boy Haunts.”(^)

(31)Tress describes Levi’s wife as “obviously a Jewess, with . . . the big, velvety black eyes, which are a hall-mark of the race.” Also typical is the worry that race’s legibility might be disguised: apart from her eyes, the woman’s “features were as daintily fashioned as any Christian’s” (82).(^)

(32)It’s certainly possible to interpret the anti-Semitic stereotypes in “The Ikon” as validating speculation that Richard Marsh changed his name from Richard Heldmann in order to hide his father’s German-Jewish ancestry and thereby either evade cultural bias or obey an internalized anti-Semitism (see Baker ix). For Julian Wolfreys, by contrast, a lack of evidence of anti-Semitism in Marsh’s life as well as “his marriage as Heldman in the Church of England” hardly lends credence” to such a claim (11). Minna Vuohelainen offers a different and at least plausible explanation in her introduction to the Valancourt edition of Marsh’s novel *The Beetle* (1897). Based on contemporary news accounts about a con man also named Richard Heldmann, Vuohelainen suggests that Marsh reinvented himself to escape his own criminal past—namely, having served eighteen months in jail for check fraud.(^)

(33)See W. C. Harris and Dawn Vernoooy, 352, 366, 369-371, 378-380.(^)

(34)When frantically demanding “Have you seen?” Levi’s wife seems worried that Tress has uncovered her shameful secret; when, in the next breath, she declares “[t]here is nothing to see,” she’s obviously trying to convince him the ikon is an unremarkable memento of her homeland (85). Her frantic, conflicting words have a deeper subtext. The depth of her attachment to a Russian Orthodox Christian ikon is puzzling not simply because she’s Jewish, but because, as Tress himself finds out, there’s simultaneously something *and* nothing there to

see here (depending on one's perspective: collector or objet, native or foreign, heteronormative or queer). In terms of the ambivalent character of the object as discussed in "The Pipe," the ikon turns out to be at once a hoax *and* authentic: while it's certainly not a genuine ikon of Russian Orthodox art, it *is* authentic, if in a sentimental, heteronormative way the collector either is incapable of recognizing or is simply unmoved by. (▲)

(35) Given that the word's homosexual connotations may have yet been in their infancy at the turn of the century, some might balk at reading "queer" to mean "homosexual" as unduly speculative. But its speculative nature is much to the point. As Sedgwick notes in *Epistemology of the Closet*, it's the "blackmailability of Western maleness"—the merest possibility that any man *could* be read as queer, an anxiogenic charge to which Western maleness has proven particularly vulnerable (20). Also relevant is Sedgwick's nuanced reading of Marcher's "secret," in Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle," as less a definitive homosexuality than its terrifying *possibility*: "the outer secret, the secret of having a secret, functions, in Marcher's life, precisely as *the closet*. It is not a closet in which there is a homosexual man. Instead, it is the closet of, simply, the homosexual secret—the closet of imagining *a* homosexual secret. . . . Whatever the content of the inner secret . . . it is one whose protection requires, for him, a playacting of heterosexuality that is conscious of being only window dressing" (205-206). Marcher's inner secret, like Pugh and Tress's, cannot be finally determined as gay, but neither can it be determined as straight. It's that indeterminacy—and the accompanying worry that one might be merely *subject* to the pejorative charge of homosexuality—that discomfits these men so. (▲)

(36) If in "The Cabinet" Pugh frets about potential exposure as a criminal (of one sort or another), here Tress confronts a similar anxiety: the vertiginous uncertainty, described above by Sedgwick, about exactly "who is in control of information about [one's] sexual identity." The woman's "queer" history has illuminated, much to Tress's chagrin, the outlines of his own "glass closet," a space whose "potential for exploitiveness," for the "asymmetrical" exertion of knowledge, literally makes him ill (79, 80). (▲)

(37) Denisoff is writing specifically about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and the novel that inspired it, Joris-Karl Huysmans's *A Rebours* (1884). Both novels end with the destruction of a work of art, as when Wilde's protagonist slashes the portrait that, supernaturally, has aged *for* him and kept him as ageless and frozen as the figures on Keats's Grecian urn. (▲)

(38) The concluding fate of the heterosexual fetish in "The Ikon" seems to offer a not entirely dissimilar outcome to that observed by Jeff Nunokawa in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. That text's strategy of the "double-life," Nunokawa argues, is a "management style" in which the performance of "dissident" "desire works not to subvert heterosexual normativity, but rather to cooperate with it" (*Tame Passions of Wilde*, 42, 44, 45). One might wonder, then,

whether moments of resistance to hegemony by Marsh's camp collectors are entirely sincere or wholehearted, whether camp's disdain for heteronormativity's trappings—given "The Ikon"'s triumphant reunion of mother, dead child-fetish, and the sacralized family—has been merely for show, and thus whether dissident nonnormativity has been knowingly complicit in its own defeat. (^)

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