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“Have everything new and made new again”: gendered vision and the “great sex question” in Ménie Muriel Dowie's *Gallia* (1895)

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<1> Although Ménie Muriel Dowie's *Gallia* (1895) has certainly benefited from the fairly recent rediscovery by academic literary circles of a whole series of late-Victorian texts classified under the umbrella of “New Woman” fiction, it remains one of the least known feminist novels written in the 1890s. This partly may be explained by the facts that Dowie's fiction only consists of three novels and a few short stories, and that she practically withdrew from the literary scene at the age of thirty-five(1). The New Woman school of novelists—an appellation which hides a complex and heterogeneous reality—took Great Britain and America by storm in the 1890s, championing through the press, but also through a work of fiction often didactic in tone, women's social and political advancement through education, with a particular focus on the issues of motherhood and marriage, (questions generally referred to as “the Woman Question”) as well as on those of public and private morality. Besides the “war of the sexes,” the New Women were interested in the topical issues of their day such as questions of national health and empire, class relations and labor. While the social, scientific and political biases informing New Woman fiction (and journalism) should not be overlooked(2) and the progressive nature of New Woman writings not be exaggerated, several influential critical works have convincingly highlighted the radical aspect of a number of New Woman novels, with a particular emphasis on gender issues(3). *Gallia*, through its appeal in favor of female independence, motherhood and self-respect, displays an undeniable affinity with the New Woman genre of fiction, whose ultimate aim was to open the eyes of readers on a number of injustices and on the plight of contemporary women in their struggle to break free from their biological destiny as well as from the artificial laws made by and for men. But *Gallia*'s preoccupations as a literary text extend beyond the themes usually found in New Woman fiction to tackle the questions of identity, meaning and interpretation, in relation to the issues of perception and perspective. Indeed, *Gallia* shows a concern with the activity of looking as an incessant move between the subjective and the objective, and it is through the prism of this problematization of vision, taken both in the literal optical sense of “the ability to see clearly” and in the figurative sense of “a conception of the world,” that this paper will tackle the novel's questioning of the dogmatic aspect of Victorian signifying practices and refashioning of a proto-modernist realist and polyvocal female aesthetic. But while the text exposes the persistent power of the constructs the subject elaborates around itself and others, and the difficulty for women to escape from not only stereotypes but also their conditioning (through sexuality, physical appearance, knowledge or social class), it eventually demonstrates the possibility of self-improvement and of choice, in a tone which is much more conciliatory and positive, but also more detached and flippant, than in many other New Woman novels: what is implied is that it is possible to learn how to “activate the individual eye”(4) in order to “see and know”(63), and ultimately achieve more open and equal relationships with male partners.

Gallia's demythologizing of womanhood

<2> Explaining her attitude towards men to her friend Margaret Essex, who accused her of being hard on them, Ménie Muriel Dowie's eponymous heroine simply replies, “I have dared to burst their cocoons; to wind off some of the strange silky poetry that has been wrapped round them by generations of women and their fellow-men” (152). Such an iconoclastic attitude, aiming at dissociating truth from falsehood (“silky poetry”) is a direct echo of one of the main undertakings of *Gallia* as a novel. Attempting to break the sacred aura of “mystery” around a supposed “female nature,” the text advocates a clean break with the “clouds of tradition, superstition, and legend” (87) where a romanticized conception of women is concerned. In accordance with the desire of a number of New Woman novelists to provide “true stories of life” and with the novel's emphasis on a truth which often lies beyond appearances, the aestheticizing as well as the mythologizing conceptions of woman appear as crucial focal points in the text. Indeed, the three main male characters of the novel are seen systematically (re)constructing women as nothing but objects of

the male gaze, (a trend often resulting in a desire to frame women within the reassuring limits of a painting), thus operating a form of “reduction” of the female sex.

<3> An examination of the idealizing “romantic” (male) attitude of woman “worship”, here exposed as a fundamental othering and silencing of women, underpins the novel. Among the different brands of responses to womanhood examined is that of the character of Robert Leighton, an aptly named art student in Paris, bent on a transfiguring “sentimental” conception of femininity. He stands *par excellence* for the (male) framing proclivity, especially when in the presence of Margaret Essex, the young woman he will eventually marry:

I am of course going to do a head in the old Italian manner, with a gold background. Gold is Miss Essex's inevitable setting. But it is among flowers that a large portrait should *seize* her.[...] I see a most fascinating theme, by using that sheet of poker-red nasturtiums as a background (159, my italics).(5)

Through the male gaze, Margaret thus becomes a catalogue of itemized body parts (“Face, hair, hands, all that wonderful gold shade”, *ibid.*) set in a décor which calls to mind popular Victorian allegories equating women with flowers such as lilacs, lilies or roses: “I shall do it! I shall call it ‘A Rose in Error’. No, ‘An Errant Rose’” (172). Bram Dijkstra showed how such sentimentalizing art of the “pure” “soul-woman” was ideologically loaded with reifying notions of female fragility and passivity of the “Eternal Feminine on its best behaviour.”(6) Interestingly, Ella Hepworth Dixon's *Story of a Modern Woman* (1894) satirizes this very same artistic trend through the character of Perry Jackson, a mercenary painter who, unlike the heroine Mary Erle, manages to enter the prestigious Royal Academy thanks to his *Time of Roses*. His motto could be summed up by his vibrant call for “Nothing but girls, and nothing but roses. Lord, you can't give the public enough of either of them.”(7)

<4> Leighton's art is also reminiscent of Pre-Raphaelite portraits in the Rossetti vein.(8) As we know, the Pre-Raphaelites were influenced by the Quattrocento (“the old Italian manner”), while often setting women against flowery backgrounds (especially in the 1860s). At any rate, Leighton stands for the “topos of the romantic artist, inspired to produce great art through the thwarted love for a beautiful, unattainable woman.”(9) Robert Leighton is said to be “enthralled by Margaret, of whom he made sketches in a dozen fictitious characters” (158).(10) Despite Margaret's protestations, (“Robbie, you think of nothing but painting me,” 172) Leighton's gaze relentlessly fictionalizes and objectifies the woman, a process amounting to symbolic murder: “They strolled off together, amid a chorus of laughter and shrieks of horror; but the earnest-minded artist and his *victim* heeded them not” (159, my italics). Thus, Leighton's vision is here synonymous with an absolute subjectivity which leads to a re-presentation of reality not determined by objective veracity but by the overall impression made on the creating subject who substitutes his reading to the object itself. Talking about the peonies on Margaret's dress, Leighton elaborates on the power of art to reinvent, refashion and rewrite reality. In many ways, Leighton opts for his vision(s) against the visible and, more importantly, against knowledge: “Actually we *know* they are pink. Relatively, we *see* they are bluish-purple. One paints what one sees” (159). Later, Leighton explains: “I'm painting in people in greyish gold and purple just now. I mean, that's how I *see* them you know. Well after all, a man *only* wants a manner” (171, my italics). This page echoes an earlier passage when Margaret, had explained to Mark Gurdon, a friend of Robert Leighton who had fallen in love with her, what the nature of the artist's vision should consist in:

It is the *effect* that I have to search for, and the central principal movement. I can't explain it at all -I never could explain anything - but you know that an artist has to look at *effects* through half-closed eyes; if you are to be broad, if you are to get your planes of colour right and your values, you musn't go darting weasel-gimlet glances here and there for minor little details (70, my italics).

<5> The artist's vision, focusing on “effects and not things” (to use the text's own terminology), is balanced against that of Margaret's cynical Oxford-educated brother Dark Essex, with whom Gallia falls in love before being brutally rejected. He clearly appears as the incarnation of a “reactionary,” (41) mythologizing conception of womanhood. An adept of the “old-fashioned style of woman”(11) as inspiration and guardian of civilization, he exhibits contempt towards contemporary female claims for emancipation, a contempt certainly aimed at concealing “a fear of imminent besiegement, betrayal and collapse”(12):

He could not free his mind from the single and only conception of woman of which

he was capable, and he looked on what are called, tiresomely enough, new developments in women as fresh forms of wiles, the arts of the nineteenth-century Eve (42).

The terms “arts” and “wiles” are reminiscent of the nineteenth-century literary and aesthetic constructions of womanhood as intrinsically duplicitous and akin to a modern-day form of witchery, a theme which manifested itself through the second half of the century's taste for representations of enchantresses and sorceresses such as Circe, Medea, or Morgan-le-Fay whose representations proliferated around the time of the publication of *Gallia*.⁽¹³⁾ Indeed, if the 1890s saw the emergence of the New Woman “in fiction and in fact,” the period also witnessed the climax of a long-standing tradition in the visual arts which had gained accrued regularity and intensity since the 1860s and which, by the 1880s and 1890s had led to the production by first-rank artists of female portraits more suggestive and audacious than ever before. The apparition of extremely daring portrayals of sexualized females in the works of Gustave Moreau, Edvard Munch, Franz von Stuck as well as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, John William Waterhouse and Aubrey Beardsley are famous illustrations of this aesthetic trend.⁽¹⁴⁾ As we know, such images had strong mythical, religious and legendary substrata, and represented sexually-aware malevolent females intent on destroying their male victims after shamelessly seducing them. Dowie playfully hints at her familiarity with such imagery of demonized females by having her heroine, as she is battling with the realization of her “disgraceful immodesty” at a dinner party with Dark Essex, fleetingly re-appropriating the snake, an arch-symbol of feminine evil depicted with obsessive insistence in the second-half of the nineteenth century coiled around the female body: “Shame is a snake, and you may cut its head off and it will live still. Jealousy, humiliation—the vipers of the feeling world. But shame —shame is a snake and it is knotted all around me” (49).⁽¹⁵⁾ The emergence of the late nineteenth-century *femme fatale* has been interpreted as the manifestation of an extreme form of misogyny, as motivated by a male anxiety regarding (female) sexuality, and more broadly, as a cultural production embodying a complex of paradigms threatening to overthrow the patriarchal and imperialistic structures.⁽¹⁶⁾ These various explanations seem equally valid to account for the 1890s vilification of the New Woman, who was perceived in some quarters as “a profound threat to established culture”.⁽¹⁷⁾ Most interestingly, Essex's casting of the emancipated woman as “a nineteenth-century Eve” hints at a partial, if not total, overlapping of the two female types at the level of the collective unconscious. One might add that this conflation was strongly encouraged in the popular anti-feminist press to exaggerate the sexual threat posed by the New Woman. In this respect, *Gallia* foregrounds the difficulty to counteract the persistent influence of such prejudices and misconceptions, as the narrative voice elaborates on Dark Essex's “mental attitude”:

One of two things inevitably happens to such men. Either they marry the pretty foolish-kitten style of person, and say triumphantly, "Of course I was right; just look at Mabel, dear little soul!" when they cannot be contradicted; or the undying womanhood in the woman who burns and argues with them falls a *victim* to their masculinity (42, my italics).

<6> Can men *see* women for what they “really” are? At the beginning of the novel, the pragmatic, ambitious, apparently dispassionate character of Mark Gurdon,⁽¹⁸⁾ whom Gallia will eventually choose as the father of her child, combines Leighton's “sentimental” streak with Dark Essex's archaic conception of the female sex: in other terms, his vision of women is also shaped by the old Victorian angel/demon dichotomy. His short romantic attachment to Margaret Essex, a type of woman fanning the “white flames” of men's virtues (154), is described as having been “compounded of idealised passion and fancy—they are very poor wear,” (85) while the terms used to characterize his sexual passion for Cara Lemuel, met in Robert Leighton's Paris studio, are strongly reminiscent of those used to describe the influence of the *femme fatale*: “Gurdon found an unnatural *abandon* made easy to him by the wiles and magic of the girl's walk, or song, or strange dance” (104). Interestingly, Mark's brand of vision is first presented as that of the matter-of-fact selective flâneur: “I can walk a mile and see nothing, but if I bring my head into play, my eyes will register with photographic accuracy, and I have complete pictures of places, people, and things firmly on the retina of my brain” (70). Watchful of the slightest details, Mark could be said to be absorbed in the realm of the visible, conceived as univocally defining: “Mark looked about him after the fashion of a man who notices things not effects” (10). Indeed, his character is an adept of the Victorian assumptions that looks and personality are intimately bound up, that reality has to be envisaged as a text to be read. To him, only one signified can ever correspond to a given signifier. As the reader is given the content of Mark Gurdon's thoughts about Cara, we read: “Her dark skin, rime colour and easy eye had a *single* meaning” (85, my

about *Gallia*, we read: "Her dark skin, ripe colour and easy eye had a single meaning" (35, my italics). This rigid decoding of reality leads him to erroneous interpretations. A case in point is Mark's misreading of the character of Margaret Essex as "cold and inhuman" when he first sees her: "I know the sort of woman Miss Essex is: it was written all over her—in her walk, in her face, the swing of her gown" (24). The woman here is constructed as a blank page awaiting the inscription of male fantasies.

<7> Thus, the novel, while highlighting the ideological constructs informing Victorian male representations of women, tackles the broader question of vision and its relation to truth, a key preoccupation at the time of its conception. Kate Flint in *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* analyzes the Victorian fascination for the question of the reliability of the human eye and for the problem of interpreting what one saw. Captivated by the technology of vision, the Victorians, as the century progressed, increasingly took into account the psychology as well as the physiology involved in the act of seeing. As a result, the role of "subjectivity, of inwardness, came increasingly to be stressed."⁽¹⁹⁾ Exploring the mechanisms of aestheticizing but also those of stereotyping in a wide-ranging criticism of Victorian social practices of seeing, the novel stages the male tendency to "sum up" women either as an outward form or as a type, both reductions conveniently circumventing a direct confrontation with the reality of female experience, and ultimately denying women's existence.⁽²⁰⁾ The violence latent in such a negation of the particulars of the female condition and in a belief in the "transparency" of beings is often brought to the surface of the text, and in that respect, Gallia's hostile reaction offers an interesting slant on the "war of the sexes": "He would at his most intolerable, shake his head with a smile—a sort of 'My dear, I see through you' expression, which whipped her to the point of longing to hit him" (42, my italics). In many ways, what Dark Essex focuses on, during most of his dealings with Gallia, is, again, the "effect through half-closed eyes" which we saw earlier as characteristic of the painter's vision in the novel.⁽²¹⁾ However, Dark Essex is gradually made to understand the limits of female categorization, and to realize the necessity of a fundamental and necessary disjunction between aspect and character. The body, and in particular the female body, was as Kate Flint explains, "the central site for debates concerning the relationship between inner and outer, between assumptions concerning surface and essence on the one hand, and the misleading guidance which exteriors can offer about interiority or the other."⁽²²⁾ Gallia does not fit into any of Dark Essex's rigid female categories; he therefore declares her a "misshapen" woman, who shamelessly "betrayed" him visually:

I was only misled by your appearance into thinking you the sort of woman you looked.[...]As I look at you now, you are the sort of being an amorous-minded man, which you know I am not, would sell his whole career to kiss. It is your outward form that looks so; it does not suit you mind (128).

This passage dramatizes the (un)making of a female stereotype by exposing as its source a fundamental male "mismeasure" or misreading of women. The emphasis is laid on this paradox (at a time when bodies were supposed to reveal the truth of the person inhabiting it) that the female body, considered by many middle-class women as an obstacle preventing them from engaging fully with the world they lived in, functioned on the contrary for the male gaze as a seductive surface supposed to be defining. *Gallia* represents a challenge to those asserting the dominating nature of the gaze and subtly urges its readers to go beyond the visible, and not to believe in the "transparency of signifying systems."⁽²³⁾

Femininity, subjectivity and truth in *Gallia*

<8> Most New Woman novelists resented essentialist readings of womanhood and the belief in the existence of a "Soul of Woman and its Sphinx-like ambiguities and complexities."⁽²⁴⁾ Standing in sharp contrast with the typified, aestheticized or mythologized conceptions of womanhood, *Gallia* consistently calls for a new (gendered) "way of seeing"⁽²⁵⁾ bound to lead to a reappraisal and a redefinition of traditional sex roles. It has already been noticed that the novel, often staging its heroine surgically dissecting her emotions,⁽²⁶⁾ provided a great contribution to the developing knowledge of feminine psychology. The text forcefully promotes the idea that "observation is never removed from the exercise of subjectivity"⁽²⁷⁾ and that seeing differs from individual to individual.⁽²⁸⁾ Thus, an authentically female perspective on the world would not be distorted by stereotypes and misconceptions, even less by one's social status or upbringing: "One likes to know the amount of indebtedness to people [...] I could not have a feeling of self-respect unless I had estimated just the amount of my debt to that class of society which assures my class a great deal of its immunity" (34). It is beyond the surface of the visible that one can contemplate "things as they are" (118). "Sometimes there are moments in life when one actually sees a little

things as they are" (118). "Sometimes there are moments in life when one actually sees a little further—when emotion and excitement lift one above the shoulders of the colder crowd" (187, my italics). Indeed, as Brimley Johnson, quoted by Lyn Pykett, explained in 1920, many of the New Women writers sought "with passionate determination for that reality which is behind the material, the things that matter, spiritual thing, ultimate Truth."(29) The quest for pure and absolute Truth is essentially utopian in nature; besides, the novel demonstrates that one can never completely shed one's belonging to a particular nationality, gender or class. What's more, through indications of ulterior motives behind characters' utterances and characters' inner responses to other protagonists' lines, the novel shows that our apprehension of reality, of others, and of ourselves is always already partial, fragmented and reliant on tentative interpretations.(30)

<9>However, the reader is given to understand how awareness and accurate observation can lead to accrued knowledge, itself at the heart of a "full" experience of the "real."(31) Gallia, who gladly admits that she is "not good at summing up people," (34) is often portrayed watching individuals(32) and the world around her intently, noticing "things" as well as their "effects." Her mind is described as being "wideawake," (61) "alert and ready" (145). Indeed, Gallia's penchant for observation is inseparable from intense ratiocination:

[Gallia's] eye, instead of seeming clouded by the impossible problems she had a taste for considering, had the far outward look of a person who had thought through something, who had found foothold *beyond*. I think it was Herbert Spencer who considered that a thinker should regard each solution reached, not as solid ground, but as a raft that would bear him for a time. Gallia, having swum strongly in fell currents, had climbed to a new raft (98, my italics).

Gallia's new scopic regime fully takes into consideration the part of personal investment (subjectivity) involved in the act of looking, which nevertheless has to strive towards absolute impartiality and truthfulness. Hence, Gallia's main grievance against politicians is that they are not dealing with objective truth, but instead are prisoners of ideology and power interests: "They never seemed to be interested in real things. (...) All they said and all they thought seemed so far away from real things as they really are" (118). Gallia proudly claims that her way "is a great deal more in accordance with the facts" (152). Dowie's devising of an authentic female vision is very close to Ella Hepworth Dixon's *Story of a Modern Woman* in which Mary Erle escapes social convention and anonymity by means of her own artistic imagination. Associating the heroine with an expression of reality (evocative of Impressionism) rather than a servile imitation of it, the novel successfully foregrounds the workings of a convincing, coherent female subjectivity:

At the fruiterers', the mounds of golden oranges, crimson apples, and scarlet tomatoes flamed with startling assurance against the blurred, brownish grey of the houses, the pavement, the very atmosphere. She was curiously alive, now, to effects of colour, to "values"; everywhere the girl saw a possible picture.[...] Mary pictured her lover reading that charming message from over the seas, as he sat in a an Indian verandah in a white flannel suit, with a hazy background of punkahs and date palms (95).

<10> Of course, the elaboration of this new vision is one of the forms the redefinition of realism (and of fiction itself) took in the 1890s, as literary experiments multiplied to develop a specifically female perspective and form of fiction. How could one write womanhood? As Lyn Pykett remarks, "the attempts of the New Women writers to write for women, to write about women, and in some cases to write woman herself, led them to use the available forms in new ways and to look for new (often self-consciously modern) ways of writing."(33) It can be argued that *Gallia* with its extended use of free indirect speech and interior monologue,(34) its organization in short fragmented episodes, its refusal of the "grand synthesising vision of the traditional realist novel", (35) and finally with its multiplication of voices and perspectives in order to "challenge fixed views"(36) anticipates the advent of modernism in literature. Crucially, none of the novel's assertions are unambiguous, including those related to the main protagonist, who is seen wavering in her views. In this respect, the consciousness of the mutability of one's convictions and of the possibility of change gradually leads the reader towards a possible resolution (which would not be synonymous with female resignation) of the "war of the sexes."

Clarity of vision and gender relations

<11> Exploring the mechanisms of labelling in an era obsessed with what Kate Flint calls

“classificatory procedures” and offering a fundamentally new feminine slant, the novel sets about demonstrating how knowledge, intelligence and independence can be used to dispel the hypocrisy surrounding the Victorian conception of gender roles. Gallia's straightforward allusion to the “state regulation of vice” in front of her mother and aunt at the beginning of the novel sets the tone for the rest of a narrative which manages to engage with topical problems young middle-class females would have been confronted with (such as the Marriage Question), while tackling sexuality in an extremely matter-of-fact way. Gallia is often portrayed dealing with sexual matters in a level-headed and rational fashion, devising nomenclatures and classifications aimed at replacing the “romantic narrative with a frank and particularly instructive representation of human and in particular sexual relations”(37) and substitute ignorance (the “yoke of the day”) with knowledge. The ultimate aim is to come as close as possible to Truth itself through (the fantasy of) a new language which would adhere to reality:

Things themselves are infinitely less confusing than the names they go by. One may recognise the thing itself, and one may even understand and feel familiar with it, but, over and above this, one must know its exact name (86, my italics).

<12> Thus, *Gallia* undertakes a thorough analysis of human sexuality, which results in a series of iconoclastic distinctions which seemed at the time to “overthrow all existing laws and customs.”(38) This rational and unselfconscious treatment of the sexual experience appeared as “sheer audacity” to contemporary reviewers:

Gallia is remarkable for extraordinary plainness of speech on subjects which it has been customary to touch lightly or to avoid, and the anatomy of emotion shows a coolness and daring [...] for which the ordinary male reader finds himself unprepared. (39)

However, it has to be said that *Gallia* came out during the year that followed the publication of the most influential New Woman novels which had already offered a similarly dissecting approach to sexual relations. But by separating the issue of love from that of marriage, sexual desire from love, romantic from maternal love, *Gallia* forced a re-evaluation of the relations between men and women, probably closer to Mona Caird's *Daughters of Danaus* (1894) and George Egerton's sophisticated short stories in *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894) than to Sarah Grand or Grant Allen's brand of New Woman fiction. To quote Lyn Pykett, *Gallia* “puts the complexities of female emotions under the microscope, satirically demystifies the sanctities of romantic love, marriage and motherhood, and adopts a stance of unmasking the network of sexual, economic and psychological exploitation upon which modern marriage is constructed.”(40) As several of her fictional New Women counterparts, *Gallia* is seen taking the sexual initiative,(41) or experiencing sexual desire: “If there was anyone in the world whose hand clasp she would have been passionately glad of, that person was Essex.” (88) Tall and slender, hating coquetry which she deems vulgar, a smoker endowed with a “brisk, boyish habit of thought,” (39)(42) *Gallia* enjoys great bodily freedom, as she demonstrates during her horse rides across the countryside. Governed by reason rather than instinct or intuition, *Gallia* is an avid reader of social ethics (Spencer and Mill) and first appears to the reader as fiercely individualistic. More importantly, she is an uncompromising adept of honesty to herself and to others, chiefly when it comes to sexual relations between men and women: “I have loved you—it is right that you should know it; I love you still, and may do so for a long time” (56). The text insists on the fact *Gallia*'s frustrations and resentment are that experienced by many other women(43) but the narrative does not confer any iconic status to *Gallia*, whose experience is shown as being thoroughly individual: “All this was the result of her *particular* sort of education on her *particular* nature” (38, my italics). Thus, the reader is made to feel he is presented with an original and convincing assessment of a given female character.

<13> In keeping with the era's interest in individual motivations as well as shifts and changes influencing human behaviour and subjectivity, *Gallia* is seen undergoing major upheavals in her “scheme of life” (125) which gradually enable her to be “lifted above the shoulders of the colder crowd” (187) and see clearly for the first time in her life. The revelation of motherhood as *Gallia*'s true calling and as the path to a serene acceptance of woman's condition has been diversely interpreted among critics. Is *Gallia* hanging on to maternity as “the most valuable attribute of femininity—the definer of sexual difference, even of woman's superiority?”(44) Is the novel putting across the editor of *Shafts* Margaret Sibthorp's notion that maternity was “the highest and holiest function that our life holds, from its ordinary physical capacity to its wide and grand and full meaning in Universal Motherhood?”(45) Is *Gallia* launching on a “career”(46) as

regenerator of the race? First of all, *Gallia* stages the acceptance of motherhood as a substitute for sexual passion as the heroine sublimates sexual yearning into the desire to bear a child: "I certainly hope to bring up a child. I think it is all I do want" (126). A few pages later she explains, "There is something more than love in the world. [...] There is motherhood.[...] I could spend myself and lose myself in my child, if I had one, and ask for no return.[...] I shall marry solely with a view to the child I am going to live for" (129). Having first been jilted by Dark Essex, and then lost her mother, Gallia decides to bury all further prospects of romantic love and to devote her whole life to motherhood: "The first sort of love, the amorous love, is over and done with me. (...) The capacity for mother love, I think, is very large in me" (128-9). "Mother love" is here equated with a rational type of love, the antithesis of passion, as romantic or amorous love, in the wake of Darwinism, was being reduced to a mere biological impulse. Indeed, as Gail Cunningham explains, Gallia, in the course of the novel, "shifts her evaluation of men from the romantic to the reproductive."⁽⁴⁷⁾ In an interesting reversal of situation, the instrumentalized male body is inserted in the text as object of a sexualized female gaze determined to pick a "breeder":

His voice was not the only good thing about Mark to strike a girl's fancy; there was a firmness and a faint pinkness about his face which did not suggest a London life in any way, and yet would have been too delicate for a countryman [...] His eyes were bright and clear, his teeth were perfect [...] Gallia saw these things rather as a dealer might notice the points in a horse than as a lady might perceive a young man's claims to handsomeness (121).

For Gallia's sudden conversion to motherhood has been interpreted as the logical consequence of her eugenicist ideas, exposed in Chapter Eighteen:

How can we wonder that only one person in ten is handsome and well-made, when you reflect that they were most likely haps of hazards, that they were unintended, the offspring of people quite unfitted to have children at all? (113)

Angelique Richardson has focused recently on the eugenic feminists' belief in "rational reproduction" (a concept which appeared in the context of the social purity movements of the 1880s) and on the idea of "eugenic love," which could be defined as "the replacement of romance with the rational selection of a reproductive partner in order better to serve the state through breeding."⁽⁴⁸⁾ As she puts it, "Eugenic fiction would collapse this division between love (as poetry) and marriage (as sexual reproduction)." Indeed, "Love was to be no more no less than the rational reproduction of the species."⁽⁴⁹⁾ But if *Gallia* does emphasize the importance of the (rational) female choice of a reproductive partner on the grounds of his fitness to be a father, thus aligning itself with the writings of social purists such as Ellice Hopkins or Frances Swiney, the text is closer to Mona Caird's insistence on self-fulfilment than to Sarah Grand's self-sacrificial maternalist approach. There is little doubt that the heroine's preference for Mark Gurdon comes down to his being a "fine and strong and healthy" fellow, "and of healthy stock" (129), but as Helen Small remarks:

Gallia's avowed concern for the future of society sits uncomfortably with her unrepentant -indeed ruthless -individualism.(...) She has evidently taken to heart Spencer's defence of individual freedom against state intervention.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Dowie was keen not to have *Gallia* labelled as "platform", "emancipated" or "New Woman" fiction⁽⁵¹⁾: it would therefore be contrary to the spirit of the novel to read Gallia's decision to be a mother through the prism of contemporary pro-maternity feminist literature. Indeed, it is not so much to serve the state in the context of "civic motherhood" that Gallia wants a child, as to exercise her absolute personal subjectivity and freedom, and ultimately transcend the sterility of individualism.

<14> Crucially, Gallia decides to have a child because Dowie has her heroine push her resolution to "follow her own life and her own ideas" (90) to its ultimate logical resolution:

A mother has those feelings, which are more than mere love, because she has done something for the child, because she has borne it. She has performed a kind of self-sacrifice, which I have always thought the most subtle kind of selfishness in the world. Motherhood is selfish after all. So it comes in with my belief that the highest sort of selfishness is the only true and good religion (91).

It is therefore undeniably for her own benefit and fulfilment that Gallia wants to be a mother. In a thoroughly playful and ironic text, Dowie might very well have been merely provoking her readership in typical *fin-de-siècle* decadent manner, but such an audacious wording of the reason behind “woman's highest mission”, radically reinterpreting the Victorian myth of the self-sacrificing mother, must have sounded nothing short of groundbreaking at the time of the publication of the novel.

<15> But Gallia's conversion to motherhood also appears as her acceptance that through fruitful interaction, men and women can transcend the solipsistic isolation of the self, and possibly learn how to reconcile individual aspirations with the demands of social convention: “I would love any man who attracted my mind, who shared my tastes—I mean my sort of love, you know” (154). Gallia's sharp assertions never take the shape of an open challenge to patriarchy as her position towards men is considerably more moderate than many of her fictional counterparts: “I like men extremely. I'm more at ease with them than I am with women; I've known far more of them intimately. I'm not sure that I don't think their make-up much honester than women's” (152). Unlike many female crusaders, Gallia does not depict the male sex drive as causing cosmic degeneracy as in Emma Frances Brooke's *Superfluous Woman* (1894) for instance.

<16> The more positive mood of Gallia compared to other more bitter and disenchanted New Woman novels has already been commented upon.⁽⁵²⁾ Even though one has to agree with Lyn Pykett's assertion that Dowie's female characters are all “revealed as pursuing chimeras”⁽⁵³⁾ and acknowledge that Gallia does surrender to convention by accepting to marry Mark Gurdon,⁽⁵⁴⁾ one also has to underline the fact that the heroine is not portrayed as handing over her independence:

She thought of her duty, she thought of her free choice, she thought of her ideals. She belonged now to the man beside her, she had chosen to belong to him; and he was hers, she had selected him to be hers. "I will love our child", she said (191).

The novel therefore seems to suggest that the pressures of convention can be circumvented through compromise and adaptation. At the beginning of the novel, Dowie portrays Gallia's character as an inflexible idealist:

As a woman, she took honour and honesty very seriously, well knowing them to be among the latest branches of study open to her sex and deeply sensible of their importance; but of the necessity for compromise even in such holy of holies, she knew nothing (61).

It can be inferred from the text that men's restrictive views, if carefully examined and understood, can become part and parcel of women's “journey to womanhood” and development of a “clear mental vision.”⁽⁵⁵⁾ Gallia, in a burst of gratitude to Dark Essex's coldness with her exclaims, “I was hot-spirited, raw, impatient; clever, sensitive shy, vain, self-conscious; with an abnormally developed sense of the ridiculous. [...] What a cynicism I found in you! What crude brutality you served out to me!” (176) Conversely, Gurdon “who only had feeling enough for himself” (27), is raised to a new level of awareness, through his admiration and love for Gallia:

He had never had anything like this emotion to quell before—he had not believed himself capable of it—now it choked him.[...] This, this now was his first moment of feeling; he was indeed hoisted above the shoulders of the crowd; he was scarce able to breathe for the tumult in his breast (190).

Thus, women, through openness, abidance to a strict code of truth (to oneself and to others) and enlightened vision, can “save [their] souls for [them]selves” (59). Indeed, *Gallia's* emphasis on the salutary epistemological value of observation is one of its most striking features.

<17> The novelty of New Woman fiction was clearly perceived by contemporary critics, as Laura Hansson's remarks show: “Now that woman is conscious of her individuality as a woman, she needs an artistic mode of expression, she flings aside the old forms and seeks for new.”⁽⁵⁶⁾ The ironic and iconoclastic value of Mémie Muriel Dowie's *Gallia*, which playfully assails cherished beliefs, among which that in the “sufficiency of the visible,”⁽⁵⁷⁾ while in no way reducing the significance of the constraints put on women by the middle-class establishment, is therefore not to be underestimated. The text foregrounds a shift away from a mode of reading “relying on an *a*

priori meaning, or set of meanings [...] waiting to be unlocked and described.”(58) Fictionalizing rupture and regeneration, two important notions contained in the epithet “new” in the “New Woman” appellation, *Gallia* is a skillful novel, where the fictional and the didactic are aptly balanced, and which certainly strikes the twenty-first century reader with the accuracy of its microscopic examination of the self.

Endnotes

- (1) See Helen Small's introduction to *Gallia* (1895), London, J.M. Dent, 1995, p. 164. Page numbers for quotations will subsequently appear in brackets within the body of the text.(△)
- (2) See Angelique Richardson's *Love and Eugenics: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman*, Oxford, O. U. P., 2003.(△)
- (3) See Gail Cunningham's, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel*, London, Macmillan, 1978; Sally Ledger's *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997 and more recently, Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis's (eds.), *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, University of London, 2001.(△)
- (4) Flint, Kate, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, Cambridge, C. U. P., 2000, 196.(△)
- (5) Nasturtiums, in the language of the flowers (whose symbolism was widespread in Victorian art and literature), stand for “victory” or “conquest in battle.”(△)
- (6) See Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, Oxford, O.U.P., 1986, 16.(△)
- (7) Dixon, Ella Hepworth, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), London, Merlin Press, 1990, 98.(△)
- (8) Rossetti's legacy would have been very palpable in the *fin-de-siècle* cultural life and environment. The Aesthetic and Symbolist movements were very inspired by the later developments of Pre-Raphaelitism and it is worth noting that in the late 1880s and 1890s numerous biographies or reminiscences of Rossetti were published such as William Michael Rossetti's *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer* (1889). His own *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters and a Memoir*, F.G. Stephens's *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* and Esther Wood's *Dante Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement* were all published the same year as *Gallia*..(△)
- (9) Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock, “Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature,” *Art History*, 7, 2, June 1984, 207.(△)
- (10) This fascination inevitably calls to mind Rossetti's own, first with Elizabeth Siddall and later with Jane Morris.(△)
- (11) Margaret Essex is clearly put forward as belonging to the latter category. *Gallia* concludes: “You are the being that biology will never explain. You keep alive the old tradition about souls and angels and saints and spirits” (154).(△)
- (12) Dowling, Linda, “The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s,” *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 33, 4, March 1979, 439.(△)
- (13) See for example Collier, Wright Barker and Hacker's versions of *Circe*, dated respectively 1885, 1890 and 1893, as well as John William Waterhouse's *Magic Circle* (1886), *Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses* (1891) and *Circe Invidiosa* (1892).(△)
- (14) These images were overwhelmingly though not exclusively produced by male artists. For an overview of *femme fatale* iconography, see Patrick Bade's *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women*, New York, Mayflower Books, 1979; Virginia Allen's *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon*, New York, Whitson Publishing Company, 1983 and more recently Henk Van Os's

Femmes Fatales, Groninger Museum of Antwerp, Wommelgem, 2003.(^)

(15)See John Collier's *Lilith* (1887) or Franz von Stuck's *Sin* (1893). The association of Gallia with the serpent is first hinted at by Gallia's aunt, Mrs Leighton (33), suggesting Gallia's abnormality and monstrosity, an accusation often leveled at emancipated women by the conservative press.(^)

(16)Eddy de Clerk offers a definition of the *femme fatale* as characterized by “an extreme form of independence, the conviction that she needs nothing or no-one, the implicit assumption that she will be admired, the feeling that she is above criticism [...] a tendency to ban every sign of weakness, vulnerability or neediness from her emotional repertoire” (Van Os, 43). He adds that “she is above all else focused on power” thus echoing Eliza Lynn Linton's famous description of the “Wild Woman” (herself an amalgamation between the *femme fatale* and the New Woman) as pursuing “supreme power over men” (*The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. XXX, No 176, Oct. 1891, 596).(^)

(17)Dowling, 435.(^)

(18)“Mark was not by any means of man of sentiment” (27).(^)

(19)Flint, 270.(^)

(20)See Lynne Pearce's *Woman, Image, Text: Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991.(^)

(21)Comparable in that respect to Leighton, Dark Essex is tempted to silence the emancipated woman by framing her. Catching sight of Gallia against the cloister of Westminster Abbey, he exclaims, “Quite a Royal Academy success. [...] You'd be the picture of the year” (124). Interestingly, at the house party, he is portrayed “with eyes half-shut and blinking at long intervals beneath his hat brim” (163).(^)

(22)Flint, 14.(^)

(23)Flint, 21.(^)

(24)Stutfield, Hugh, “The Psychology of Feminism,” *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, January 1897, p. 104. This type of discourse is ironically echoed at the beginning of the novel in an allusion to the “enigma” Gallia stands for in the eyes of the “respectable” girls calling upon Lady Hamesthwaite (39).(^)

(25)Berger, John, *Ways of Seeing*, London, BBC and Penguin, 1988.(^)

(26)See p. 148, “She was searching diligently in her brain for the reason of a sensation she had experienced. She was perplexed because it seemed to her she had been guilty of a logical inconsistency.”(^)

(27)Flint, 30.(^)

(28)See p. 25 of *Gallia*: “To the outsider, it was a very picturesque scene. To the student it was Monday afternoon.”(^)

(29)Pykett, Lyn, *The Improper Feminine*, London, Routledge, 2002, 196.(^)

(30)See for instance p.3, “Gurdon didn't know in the least what she meant.” See also p. 47, “All she knew in the strange confusion of the moment was, that this was not herself, not the old self she had eaten and slept and risen and walked with for so many years.”(^)

(31)The character of Mrs Leighton, Robert Leighton's grandmother, embodying an astute, self-reliant type of woman, is thus described as having “lived a long time with her eyes open and seen many things” (32).(^)

(32)See for example: “She watched him keenly” (57); “Gallia watched Mark carefully” (121); “Gallia's roving glance” (150).(^)

(33)Dowling, 435.(^)

(34) Several pages could be said to anticipate the "stream of consciousness" technique (see 27-28, 52 or 85 for examples).(A)

(35) Pykett, 195.(A)

(36) Ibid. (A)

(37) Richardson, 162.(A)

(38) Oliphant, Mrs, "The Anti-Marriage League," *Blackwood's Magazine*, Jan. 1896, 141.(A)

(39) [Anon.], "Gallia," *The Saturday Review*, 23 March 1895, 383-4.(A)

(40) Pykett, 152.(A)

(41) "The other night [...] my whole soul wrapped itself up in one thought; it seemed to sit with folded arms inside me, waiting for you, wanting you to kiss my hand. I didn't know it then, but I believe now that that means I love you" (55).(A)

(42) Again, Dowie is seen re-appropriating and reworking stereotypes.(A)

(43) "Such is an outline of her character, no uncommon one as I said before. There are a great many Gallias in the world nowadays, and they are for the most part, very unhappy people" (39). (A)

(44) Bland, Lucy, "The Married Woman, the "New Woman" and the Feminist: Sexual Politics of the 1890s," in *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914*, Jane Rendall, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1987, 153.(A)

(45) Quoted in Bland, *ibid.*(A)

(46) Dowling, 185.(A)

(47) Cunningham, Gail, "'He notes': Reconstructing Masculinity," in Richardson and Willis (eds.), 99.(A)

(48) Richardson, 9.(A)

(49) Richardson, 92.(A)

(50) Introduction to *Gallia*, xxxix.(A)

(51) When advised by friends to write about her ideas, Gallia ironically replies, "One would only be grouped with all the other women who are said to be leading the "Sexual Revolt" and that would do the ideas harm, for no one would take them seriously" (115).(A)

(52) See A.R. Cunningham's "New Woman Fiction in the 1890s," *Victorian Studies*, December 1973, 184.(A)

(53) Pykett, 148-49. See for instance, "What chatter it is to talk of being free, or of getting free! As if we ever could!" 186.(A)

(54) We can compare Dowie's description of the "dead women of the world" "triumphing in [Gallia]" (188), with Dixon's narrator's conclusion that "Destiny always won the game"(254).(A)

(55) See Dixon, p. 155-6: "And with the clarity of mental vision which is one of the first signs of ripened powers, Mary contrasted the two men: Perry with his ridiculous manners, his good heart, his stubborn determination to get on, and his curiously keen knowledge of the public; Vincent with his smooth, charming phrases, his good looks, his vacillating nature."(A)

(56) Hansson, Laura Marholm, *Modern Women*, trans. Hermione Ramsden, 1896, 78-9.(A)

(57) Flint, 25.(A)

(58) Flint, 216.(A)

