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Gissing, Marriage, and Women's Rights
The Case of *Denzil Quarrier*

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Gissing's anomalous position among the Victorian novelists may be glimpsed by placing *Denzil Quarrier* (1892) next to another novel on the same subject, *Dr. Wortle's School* (1881). Trollope's brilliant little story is about a man and woman who live together as though married when in fact no legal ceremony has been performed. In each novel it is the woman who is, technically, the bigamist, yet in each she is given a reason for doing what she does (Mrs. Peacocke in *Dr. Wortle's School* had thought her first husband was dead when she "married" Mr. Peacocke; Lilian Quarrier's first husband, whom she was unable to divorce, was a criminal). Trollope, whose opinions on many matters were identical with those of his contemporaries, introduces his story gingerly – being quick to point out that he himself does not condone bigamy. "There is no one who reads this but will say that they should have parted," Trollope declares – with an eye, perhaps, on Mudie's reader. "Every day passed together as man and wife must be a falsehood and a sin." But Trollope goes on to juggle the odds by having his hero, Dr. Wortle, defend the Peacockes (his employees at a school) against the hysterical ravings of vengeful morality, which declares loudly that a man should be married to his wife. Trollope sympathizes, and means us to sympathize, with Wortle and the victimized pair, all of whom act in good faith, while their critics, often enough, do not. The power of social convention upon the mind of the novelist may be measured, however, in Trollope's ambivalent attitude toward the Peacockes, who in fact are exemplary people. Trollope's unclouded admiration is reserved for Dr. Wortle, who ably defends the pair in the teeth of society's voracious propriety. For a major theme of *Dr. Wortle's School* is that the conventions society finds proper should be observed – even when, as here, the attempted enforcement of conventional behavior is carried on with so little restraint and generosity. The novel condemns mysteries and secrets, which are said to be

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accompanied always by fear and guilt, and tells us that few things are worse than a lie. What counts, Peacocke ultimately decides, is "not what the drunken priest might think of himself, but what others might think of him." "It is not enough to be innocent," says the local bishop; "men must know that we are so." Trollope in his own voice puts it this way: "So much in this world depends upon character that attention has to be paid to bad character even when it is not deserved. In dealing with men and women, we have to consider what they believe, as well as what we believe ourselves." In the novel's most dramatic scene Dr. Wortle tells Peacocke that "no man [has] a right to regard his own moral life as isolated from the lives of others around him ... a man cannot isolate the morals, the manners, the ways of his life from the morals of others. Men, if they live together, must live together by certain laws." Those who deceive their neighbors, with or without cause, are dangerous in a world in which bad faith or deception or dishonesty is likely to weaken the links by which all men and women are so closely joined

together. George Eliot uses the metaphor of the web of humanity to argue this same point in several of her novels.

Mrs. Wade's attack on George Eliot in *Denzil Quarrier* for being so outspokenly conventional – despite a very unconventional private life – should tell us, if we need to be told, that Gissing does not share Trollope's belief in the essential wisdom of the Voice of Society. Indeed, the couple with the "guilty secret" (a well-worn device of the Victorian novelists, especially Dickens) is meant to command most of our sympathy in *Denzil Quarrier* – and this despite the fact that Lilian cannot claim, as Mrs. Peacocke can, that she thought her first husband was dead. Her husband Northway's arrest on the heels of their wedding impels her neither to defend nor to follow him – or even to remain loyal for more than a minute or two – but rather to abandon him on the spot (Gissing, who was once arrested, knew what it was to be alone in such circumstances). Ultimately Lilian goes to live as Quarrier's wife without benefit of any ceremony, legal or otherwise. She is a mistress masquerading as a wife. As such her crime, if crime it is, is surely a more spectacular one than Mrs. Peacocke's. But Gissing's defense of Lilian is more spirited than Trollope's of Mrs. Peacocke and, more importantly, it is rooted in wholly different ground. Gissing's argument is that society and its rules are usually unreasonable. "What we have to do is clear away the obvious lies and superstitions that hold a great part of the people in degrading bondage," Quarrier announces. Gissing's point of view is the obverse of Trollope's ("I cannot read him; the man is such a terrible Philistine," Gissing

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remarked of Trollope in an 1887 letter to his friend Eduard Bertz). When it injures no one, Quarrier says, "conventional wrong-doing... [is] not wrong-doing at all, unless discovered." It is not wrong *unless discovered* – that is to say, it cannot be wrong at all if convention declares it to be wrong; but God help you if you are found out. Gissing presses his attack on "imbecile prejudice" by declaring, again through Quarrier, that "Social law is stupid and unjust, imposing its obligations without regard to person and circumstance. It presumes no one can be trusted" (if it does presume that, then it is certainly right to do so in the case of Lilian and Denzil). Quarrier insists that society by its laws forces people to tell lies by making them hide their real feelings while they observe the proprieties. He himself lies about his relationship with Lilian because he craves respectability, society's approval, and, ultimately, a political career. To achieve these things lies must be told. Gissing's subterranean feeling that such things may indeed be worth having – a feeling that seeps through in all of his novels, no matter how anti-Establishment they may at first seem to be – can be glimpsed here too in the character of Quarrier himself, who despite the lies he tells and the various sorts of hypocrisy he practices on others is presented to us for the most part with his creator's sympathy intact. This, however, cannot muffle the attack on Society and those who represent its values – such as the Rev. Scatchard Vials, who is "ignorant and foolish," has "eyes like a ferret's," an "insinuating" manner, and an eye for heiresses; and the Mumbrays, who are "regarded as a centre of moral and religious influence" in Polterham despite their well-known "reciprocal disgust... physical, mental, moral" for one another. "These people," observes William Glazzard, "think themselves pillars of society, and the best of the joke is, that they really are what they imagine." As in Ibsen's play of 1877, the pillars of the community are seen by Gissing to be very hollow indeed – supporting a society, moreover, that would prefer not to look too deeply into any questions of leverage. The pronouncements of such an Establishment are therefore seen as morally unimportant, though they may have a paralyzing effect upon one's life. Lilian, says Quarrier, "is my wife, in every sense of the word that merits the consideration of a rational creature!"

It is typical of the relationship between Gissing's fiction and his private life that a few years later he would find himself saying more or less the same thing to his few friends about Gabrielle Fleury, the woman with whom he lived during the last years of his life in a

common-law union (there was a marriage ceremony for the benefit of Gabrielle's mother, but

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there was also another Mrs. Gissing – like Northway, conveniently institutionalized). Of course Gissing, as he was writing *Denzil Quarrier* in 1891, could not know what was going to happen several years later (he did not meet Gabrielle until 1898). But generally he is like so many of his characters – there is so much of himself in his work – that such bizarre “coincidences” are not unusual. In *In the Year of Jubilee*, published in 1894, Arthur Peachey having had enough of Mrs. Peachey, waits until she is out of the house and then packs up and leaves, taking their child to his sister to care for and moving himself into bachelor quarters, the location of which he keeps secret from his wife. Three years later Gissing played exactly this same role opposite his second wife Edith.

The marriage question is at the center of *Denzil Quarrier*, as it is at the center of so much of Gissing's fiction. He wrote about it obsessively because it was so important in his own life – especially, if one may judge from his letters and other private writings, his mental life. Like a good Victorian novel-hero, Gissing too had a “guilty secret”: as a young man he had gone briefly to jail for robbing the locker room of his college. He had done this to help the young prostitute with whom he was living (and from whom he had contracted gonorrhea); the crime cost him a university education – and, so he came to think, the love of any respectable woman. He went off to America, began to write stories, and became a novelist instead of what he was most temperamentally suited to be – a teacher of classics at one of the universities. The classics have survived without him; the chief beneficiary of such misery and miscalculation has been English fiction.

When he returned to England, Gissing, still in his early twenties, made the mistake of marrying Nell Harrison, the prostitute he had tried to help some years earlier. She was alcoholic, violent, promiscuous, and a pathological liar. Of course the marriage was a disaster, and Gissing finally left her. After her death in 1888 (the death certificate euphemistically listed the cause as chronic laryngitis) he was free to marry again, but hesitated. Should he try once more? If so, what sort of girl would marry him? Gissing in the late eighties had little money and few prospects: he was still struggling, and he was in his thirties. He had been in jail for, of all horrors, a working-class crime. Could he possibly marry a social equal? Gissing complained to Bertz that he was too poor to marry a respectable woman and that he could not live alone. He threatened to run out and propose to the first decent working-girl he saw.

It is unclear whether Edith Underwood was the first, but propose to her he certainly did, shortly after picking her up in the street. Again, the results were catastrophic. She was stupid,

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she wouldn't learn, he grew ashamed of her, he refused to take her out, she grew violent, and ultimately Gissing walked out on her too – in the manner described (before the event) in *In the Year of Jubilee*. Gabrielle, whom he met the following year, was both intelligent and attractive, eminently respectable and solidly middle-class – he couldn't believe his luck. But there was a Mrs. Gissing. So Gissing and Gabrielle lived together in France after walking through a farcical marriage ceremony – and Gissing, though he could not exist without complaining, had at any rate finally found a woman to live with who was his intellectual equal. The final tragedy was that his health failed before he had had time to enjoy his new life for more than a few years.

These bare facts – the striving for respectability, the guilty secret, the liaisons with inferior women, the final flouting of convention – may help us to understand why, in *Denzil Quarrier* as in many of Gissing's other novels, there is an obsessive hatred of society's formal rules, a hatred generated largely by the novelist's suspicion that he could never live up to them,

that they would be too much for him in the end. Like Dickens, Gissing saw himself as an outsider trying to get in; and when it became clear that poverty, bad luck, his own sense of inferiority and his self-destructive urges were going between them to make his whole life a desperate battle, a struggle to the death with superior forces, the logical result for Gissing the novelist was to fight back through his fiction, and in it to attack this thing that had always barred his way – that is, society itself and all of its conventions. These are the roots of Gissing's anti-Establishment bias in *Denzil Quarrier*. He is at once the most radical and the most conventional of the Victorian novelists – yearning for conventional respectability yet hating society for not letting him have it. It is in this sense that his position among the novelists is anomalous. Nor is it any accident that he wrote essay after essay – and, finally, a monograph – on Dickens, whom he saw as being very much in the same mould.

Gissing plays with the marriage theme in every novel, looking at it from various angles and trying out different fictional situations. If the relationships between men and women have anything in common throughout his books it is that, as in the novels of Henry James, none of these relationships comes out right. Sometimes it is because the woman lacks the domestic virtues (as both Nell and Edith did) and the result is domestic disorder. Sometimes a discrepancy in social position or origins causes problems. Often one of the partners (usually the man) has more education than the other, which is at the root of a temperamental incompatibility. Some-

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times the man does not earn enough to satisfy the woman, who is used to (or simply wants) better things. No matter what the causes of inequality, the theme of the unequal marriage runs through all of the novels without exception. Exogamy is Gissing's great subject, and he was an expert on it. In Trollope's novels the marriage question is important, but the lovers are usually of the same class; their problems are to choose correctly among several suitable possibilities and/or to brave and conquer parents' or guardians' opposition to their choice. Jane Austen's treatment of the marriage theme is generally like Trollope's; so is Thackeray's and Meredith's, and indeed that of most of the English novelists who have much to do with the subject. Rarely is there any question of class, and this is because Jane Austen and Thackeray and Trollope and Meredith do not have many poor or uneducated people in their novels. A gentleman does not marry beneath him, nor does a lady: to do so would be to betray society's trust. Such betrayals were not the stock-in-trade of the nineteenth-century novelists, most of whom found themselves having to massage the expectations of their mostly female and decidedly middle-class readers, who had their own ideas about heroes and heroines and made these feelings felt, often at close range. So in *Dr. Wortle's School* the central problem is not class or suitability but rather the reconciliation of private conduct with public standards. In *Denzil Quarrier* the point is made that often one must lie in order to live as one likes, society's rules being frequently unreasonable or irrational. That deception, unconventional behavior, and liaisons outside of one's class usually end in disaster is what Lilian's story tells us. Her fate scuttles the hypothesis, sometimes advanced by commentators on this novel, that *Denzil Quarrier* is in fact a defence of the conventions. The novel may be an acknowledgement of the power of convention – but not, surely, a defense of that power. For we cannot admire what destroys Lilian, the most sympathetic character in the book. Gissing in his novels almost always leads the things he likes to defeat; it is his way of expressing his view of things, as it was Hardy's. Indeed, Lilian's end rivals that of a Hardy heroine; the climactic death-by-drowning scene in *Denzil Quarrier* suggests that Gissing had read *The Return of the Native* (1878) with care (his Diary, as a matter of fact, shows that he reread it in September 1890, just a year before he began to write *Denzil Quarrier*). Surely Gissing was no less contemptuous of society's moral judgments than his great contemporary, though just as surely he was more frightened of them. In the novels of both writers people are ground in the mill of the conventional, whose precepts they transgress only at

great peril. In two early stories, “The Sins of the Fathers” (1877) and “All For Love” (written in

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1880, first published in 1970), Gissing tried out a similar idea – in each someone marries supposing a former lover or spouse to be dead, in each the absent one shows up inconveniently, and in each there is a death by drowning (in “All for Love” there are two). But in these stories the young Gissing’s mode is melodrama rather than analysis, and questions of convention and conformity are never seriously touched upon. *Denzil Quarrier*, Gissing wrote to Bertz in February 1892, might well “give some offence to the extreme philistine wing” – which shows, at least, where he thought the novel stood on the issues of freedom and convention.

The political story, and especially the question of female emancipation, lies behind these other issues, and Gissing moves between them with some skill in *Denzil Quarrier*. Queen’s College had been founded in 1848, Bedford College in 1849. The influential Society for Promoting the Employment of Women opened its doors in the 50s; the Married Women’s Property Act, though not passed into law until 1882, was first introduced in Parliament in 1856. Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* was published in 1869; Girton College was founded in 1872. The seventies saw the agitation for women’s rights reach a sort of crescendo, and Gissing, whose novel is set in the years 1879-80, was very much interested in the subject. Dickens had advised women to stay home; Trollope treated the feminists with great irreverence – especially in *He Knew He was Right* (1868-69) and *Is He Popenjoy?* (1877-78), which depicts them as masculine, rude, unattractive, hypocritical, petty, and even criminal. George Eliot, as Mrs. Wade complains, gave the feminists no encouragement. As Quarrier’s political address at Polterham plainly shows, Gissing was ambivalent on the subject of women’s rights. His own life-experiences told him that well-educated women were hard to find. He wanted women to receive the sort of education that would make them fit wives for educated men and enable them to take a more intelligent part in the political and intellectual debates of the day. Young women, Quarrier declares, should not be sent ignorant into the world – a ubiquitous complaint of Gissing’s. Quarrier goes on:

“The ordinary girl [is] sent forth into life with a mind scarcely more developed than that of a child. Hence those monstrous errors she constantly [commits] when called upon to accept a husband. Not one marriage in fifty thousand [is] an alliance on terms fair to the woman. In the vast majority of

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cases she [weds] a sort of man in the moon. Of him and all his world she [knows] nothing.” (VII)

In *The Odd Women* (1893), written only a year after *Denzil Quarrier*, Mary Barfoot pleads the feminist cause even more eloquently:

“If woman is no longer to be womanish, but a human being of powers and responsibilities, she must become militant, defiant. She must push her claims to the extremity ... I don’t care whether we crowd out the men or not. I don’t care *what* results, if only women are made strong and self-reliant and nobly independent ... There must be a new type of woman, active in every sphere of life ... Whether woman is the equal of man I neither know nor care ... That has nothing to do with it. Enough for us to know that our natural growth has been stunted.” (XIII)

Widdowson, in the same novel, is Gissing's incarnation of male chauvinism. Seduced by a garbled understanding of Ruskin, Widdowson believes that a woman gives up all rights (even opinions) when she marries and that her husband becomes responsible for everything she does. "His duty was to manage her ... To regard her simply as a human being was beyond the reach of his intelligence." Regarding women as "born to perpetual pupilage ... at the mercy of craft, ever liable to be misled by childish misconceptions," Widdowson perceives women as being "very like children; it was rather a task to amuse them and to keep them out of mischief. Therefore the blessedness of household toil, in especial the blessedness of childbearing and all that followed."

And yet in the same novel it is announced – by Mary Barfoot herself – that "Most women, whether they marry or not, will suffer and commit endless follies." The prospect of women abandoning the kitchens and linen closets of England scared Gissing to death: "Back with them to nursery and kitchen, pantry and herb garden," shouts Martin Blaydes in *Our Friend the Charlatan* (1901). Neither of the two most sympathetic characters in this novel – Constance Bride and Lord Dymchurch – has any use for women's rights. "I hate talk about *women*. We've had enough of it, it has become a nuisance – a cant, like any other," Miss Bride announces. Lord

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Dymchurch muses: "Women militant, women in the public eye, were on the whole displeasing ... But he was satisfied with an occasional laugh at these extravagances."

Gissing, who knew at firsthand how slatternly housekeeping could affect a man's life and work, picks Ruth Pinch as his favorite character in Dickens because she's so domestically competent. No home-loving woman, he declares in *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (1898), could ever be an imbecile. Indeed, a woman is right to "delight in her dainty little aprons, her pastry-board and roller." A little garden and a few babies should suffice for her happiness. Dickens, Gissing says, tells women all they need to know: "in his pages they ... will recognize how justly he pointed out the way of safe reform; no startling innovation, no extravagant idealism, but a gentle insistence on the facts of human nature, a kindly glorifying of one humble little woman, who saw her duty, and did it singing the while."

So Gissing wound up feeling something like this: increased liberty was making some women more unmanageable, encouraging them to neglect their children and abuse their husbands. When the beds were made and the dishes washed, then – and only then – women should be free to go to meetings and gather material enough to converse intelligently with their husbands over supper. This was Gissing's version of female emancipation – notably more sympathetic, actually, than the positions taken on the issue by many of his contemporaries, yet surprisingly moderate given his passion for educating women. When women get involved in public affairs the result is "scandalous neglect of the house," Toby Liversedge declares in *Denzil Quarrier*; and he goes on to tell the story of a man who locks up his wife to keep her at home, at the conclusion of which everyone laughs uproariously. In his political address, Quarrier says that if a woman doesn't become a "wife and mother" her life is "imperfect." Still, he finds woman's aspirations "beyond the physical" utterly natural.

Gissing's complicated attitude toward the female sex has many manifestations in *Denzil Quarrier*. Certainly it is no accident that it is Mrs. Wade, the novel's leading feminist, who cold-bloodedly watches Lilian go to her death when only she could have intervened. She refuses to act because she wants Quarrier for herself; throughout the novel she is obsessed by him. A woman who thinks that most other women are silly and worthless and generally a "great reactionary force," who spends much of her time chasing after another woman's husband, and

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who ultimately “assists” at the death of his wife, is by any odds an unusual representative of the women’s-rights movement – unless, of course, the novelist is making a point.

Mrs. Wade’s questionable political credentials are part of the leisurely commentary in *Denzil Quarrier* upon politics itself. As in *Our Friend the Charlatan*, Gissing equates political aspirations with various kinds of moral charlatanism. The Liberal-Radical candidate, Quarrier, is living a lie. Eustace Glazzard, having extorted money from a dying friend, goes on to sublimate his frustrated political ambition in treachery and sadism (Glazzard equates politics with “excitement,” and Gissing seems to suggest that political and treacherous impulses are generated from similar sources). Northway, another would-be politician, is also an extortionist, with the emphasis on blackmail. Still another frustrated politico, Mumbray, is a living embodiment of cant and humbug. The Tory candidate, Welwyn-Baker, is incompetent and lazy (too lazy, as a matter of fact, to appear in the novel). Gissing regarded the political process as another manifestation of society’s hollowness – a charade in the course of which honest people are hoodwinked by hypocrites and only pretensions are taken seriously. Politics, for him, is a game played at by people who would like to be thought respectable; but the louder they talk the less they mean. Gissing had touched on this theme in the person of Dalmaine in an earlier novel, *Thyrza* (1887).

Yet at the heart of *Denzil Quarrier* lies the theme of the unequal marriage and the guilty secret it hides, vintage Gissing and the best thing in the book. The domestic scenes rather than the public ones give this so-called political novel its chief interest and its intermittent power, and this is undoubtedly because Lilian has something of Edith Gissing in her. On 7 November 1891 Gissing, who still considered the young Edith gentle and pliable, wrote to his sister Ellen: “Edith does very well – improves much in every way. I am more than satisfied with her. The house is orderly, everything punctual.” This letter (still unpublished), dated exactly five days before he finished writing *Denzil Quarrier*, may help to explain why Gissing will never be considered a great radical; more importantly, it may also help to explain why his relations with women were often stormy – stormy enough, indeed, to find their way inevitably into his fictional autobiographies, one after another.

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Gissing and the Female Surrogate

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In Gissing’s world of deception and self-deception women appear as alien and ambiguous creatures who can destroy men by their inept housekeeping or challenge them with a virtuous resolution that cripples the spirit even as it inflames the flesh. The sexuality of thwarted desire is a constant in the relationship between men and women and the ensuing anguish denotes the familiar Gissing ambience. Marriage is the charnel house of desire and aspiration, a place where the flesh decays from boredom and the mind withers from a multitude of niggling cares. It is Gissing who defines most clearly certain contemporary masculine attitudes towards women in literature and life. He also reveals a method of alleviating the plight of the penniless gentleman by means of a female surrogate. When Gissing created Rhoda Nunn he portrayed a young woman – but he had a certain kind of man in mind.

The preponderance of women as central characters in the Victorian novel is explicable in terms of the prevailing social censorship. Dickens lamented to Forster that it was impossible to create a man in the full reality of his being. Unlike Balzac and Sand, he was compelled to present “an unnatural young gentleman” who “is not to have, I will not say any of the

indecencies you like, but not even any of the experiences, trials, perplexities, and confusions inseparable from the making of all men." Despite Dickens' revealing qualification it was the area of sexual experience that most clearly marked the boundaries between the emotional lives of men and women. The young middle class woman was not sexually promiscuous and she could be presented realistically without undue offence to Mrs. Grundy. Women read French novels but they did not frequent brothels or consort with prostitutes. Virginity was the maiden's natural state but the male celibate was, like Mr. Arabin in *Barchester Towers*, more of a comic anachronism than an accepted type. It was known and expected that men would relinquish chastity at an early age whereas women were to remain chaste in body, if not always in thought. So there is a continuing pattern of reliance upon a young woman as the controlling vision within the novel. Sexual encounters were few and oblique in presentation but the sexuality of the imagination could be presented within a received range of symbolic tropes. Man expressed his sexuality physically, woman in reverie and dream, and the latter mode contrived to evade the harsher strictures of the moral code.

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Gissing challenged the morality of his age and the musty censorship of Charles Mudie, nevertheless he had to conform in order to publish, albeit reluctantly and with rancorous protest. In Gissing's novels women seem to be punished as much for the restrictions imposed upon the novelist as for the pain and despair they caused the men who loved them. Men did not sin unless tempted by women and yet women were protected by Mrs. Grundy from an honest rendering of the chaos they engendered. If only man could live without woman, if only he could be free of the hunger of the flesh! It is an old complaint, sharpened and refined in Gissing because of the personal grief for which he held women responsible and the blighting censorship on his work, a censorship designed to shield the very source of human suffering from a recognition of its guilt. Frailty is male in Gissing's work, sin is female. In consequence, the women who chafe against the bonds of society and literary convention are forced to conform like Nancy Lord of *In the Year of Jubilee*, a young woman who relinquishes all ambition to be the wife "Nature" had ordained for her, or Eve in *Eve's Ransom* who blushes with delight when told that after many vicissitudes she has acquired the manner of an English lady of the married sort. These women submit, others do not, and they are sentenced to death as implacably as Mrs. Grundy cast the rebellious writer into oblivion. Thyrza dies in the novel of that name after dressing her hair like a child and wishing she could return to happy innocence; Alma Rolfe takes an overdose of chloral in *The Whirlpool*; Monica Widdowson dies while giving birth to a child and imploring her husband's forgiveness in *The Odd Women*; Lilian Northway drowns herself in *Denzil Quarrier*. It is a familiar theme in the novels of the period and Gissing exploits it with particular relish. Death, either self induced or inflicted by circumstance, is the fate of the rebellious woman. The list can be augmented with examples from Hardy and William Hale White, Morrison and Meredith.

By the end of the century woman had become an emblem of suffering and social injustice, partaking both of the nature of mimetic being and literary trope. The clamour against the oppression of women led to the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1880 and it was these acts which demonstrated most clearly that women had to be protected by special legislation because they were incapable of defending themselves. It is not the strong and self sufficient who require legal protection. Exploited socially and economically like Monica Madden, women demanded the suffrage and many showed that they were prepared to give their lives for it. This demand for the rights of women discloses some of the most ambivalent and suppressed feelings in men. For many like Ibsen and Gissing, votes for women meant a new

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meritocracy of the intellect, a society in which temperate and doughty women would provide a bulwark against the mob and natural human depravity. It was conservative in origin and limited in its perspectives. Essentially this support for women was an expression of male need for female companionship that surpassed the merely infantile and inane. It was also, and openly sought as a means of buttressing a crumbling class structure. Votes for women meant, in effect, brighter conversation and the continuing authority of men.

Gissing's well known letter to Eduard Bertz expresses these views with singular aptness. "My demand for female 'equality' simply means that 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. The average woman pretty closely resembles, in all intellectual considerations, the average male *idiot* – I speak medically. That state of things is traceable to the lack of education, in all senses of the word." In Gissing's view, women, educated middle class women, would provide the virtuous confirmation of class that middle class men required in a mutable and increasingly democratic society. Of course, educated and emancipated women were best conceived of as an ideal – in reality they grated upon H.G. Wells no less than upon Gissing. Beatrice Webb was savagely parodied in *The New Machiavelli*. Gissing's Jasper Milvain dismissed Marian Yule as "a clever school girl" that he remembered only for the ink stains on her fingers. Lady Ogram in *Our Friend the Charlatan* is a monster of intellectual egoism. Intellectual women had a tendency to challenge men in a way that was both disturbing and unnerving. Too many of them were beginning to demand a social revolution and were even offering to lead it. What was required was an intellectual woman who reflected and illuminated the male mind and did the chores without complaining like Nancy Lord. Clearly it was a concept best left as a Platonic ideal.

Since woman had been generally accepted as the emblem of social injustice, it was not difficult for a writer like Gissing to use her as a surrogate for a victim felt to be more oppressed by modern society than any other. This was the gentleman, the middle class man of no visible means of support who could not be expected to work and who could not hope to inherit or marry money. Even Dickens had problems in this regard and there is a considerable evasiveness in his novels as to the way a man can make money without sacrificing his status as a gentleman. Quite simply the Dick Swivellers of Dickens' world have to inherit money or go to the wall or Australia. Even though the quality of a gentleman was felt to be an endowment of nature not confined by any particular class, there were distinctions that all observed if they did not

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acknowledge. Gentlemen were not born to be tradesmen: they did not engage in trade and they were not to be seen handling money in the course of business. They never stole and they never went to prison. The gnawing anguish in Gissing's life was that he had been raised as the son of a tradesman, had been educated in the Classics as a gentleman and had then been sentenced to imprisonment as a thief. And yet he held a passionate conviction that he was a gentleman and knew that he was set apart from the poor whose poverty he shared, by reason of temperament and intellect. His life was a tormented quest for the rank and status of a gentleman in society, a quest that was continually betrayed by the women he chose to marry. All too often those women seem like scapegoats for a sense of inadequacy and guilt that Gissing chose to project upon his wife and mistress.

Gissing's quest entailed a life of secrecy and half-truths, of hysteria and strain. Nothing could be more false to Gissing and his work than to imply that his literary evasions, his creative subterfuges, were the result of deliberate choice. Money, marriage and inheritance play as dominant a part in his writing as they do in Trollope's – but to a different end. What leads to affirmation in Trollope becomes a denial of all social forms in Gissing. How was the gentleman

to survive? Who would provide for him when rich relations were unfeeling and rich women cold? It was hardly a question that could be put as genially and as bluntly as Trollope did at the conclusion of *The Claverings* when Theodore Burton said of his sister-in-law and her new husband: "Providence has done well for Florence. And Providence has done very well for him also; – but Providence was making a great mistake when she expected him to earn his own bread." That a gentleman should be expected to earn his own bread was itself an affront and a denial of society's implicit ordering by rank and class.

No writer was more concerned with the preservation of class than Gissing. Bitterly as he railed against the failings of his own society he feared a future society in which class would be abandoned and the gentleman not simply slighted, but abandoned. No one was more alert to every nuance of voice and gesture that betrayed working class origin, or more resentful when not treated with proper deference by his presumed inferiors. His novels are a catalogue of notes on class. Thus Miss Ringrose in *Eve's Ransom* belonged "to a class which especially in its women, has little intelligence to boast of." And class carried not only social connotations but innate characteristics of behaviour as well. Workers were poor because in blood and spirit they were more brutal than the middle class, and environment only confirmed their inherent inferiority. Against this proletarian testimony of moral and economic failure the impoverished gentleman required irresistible evidence that would affirm his essential difference from those

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whose poverty he shared. This is a major theme in all Gissing's work. Its resolution can take a traditional form – Everard Barfoot in *The Odd Women* inherits some money and marries more in Agnes Brissenden. There is another solution which makes use of a psychological subterfuge.

Rhoda Nunn stands as the female surrogate for the alienated middle class gentleman. Being female she has the strength to renounce marriage as the initial condition of independence just as Constance Bride does in *Our Friend the Charlatan*. These women reject the very substance and soul of society – marriage. They make or acquire money in a way not given to a gentleman and can then state like Constance: "At this moment, I should as soon think of taking a place as kitchen-maid as of becoming any man's wife. I am free, and have power to assert myself – the first desire, let me assure you, of modern women no less than of modern men." It simply would not have been credible for a man to renounce sex, and its social form, marriage, in quite this fashion. Moreover it would have been unseemly for a gentleman to speak at such length of his rights, of his desire for power and freedom, but it could be tolerated from this strange new creature – the emancipated woman. She inveighs against marriage and its servitude, she demands intellectual and emotional freedom and she gains it at a price which betrays the writer's loss of nerve at this point. The emancipated woman is always left as a solitary – there is no place made for her at society's table. Constance Bride sits alone just as the curtain comes down on Vivie at her books in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. In his own life George Bernard Shaw had chosen the most traditional means of curing his poverty.

Opponents of the women's movement like Robert Lowe had always argued that to give women the suffrage would not be a single act of social justice. Certainly it would not confirm the status of the middle class. It would, on the contrary, inevitably lead to universal suffrage with the mob at the polls and a subsequent change in the structure of society. This is the issue that set the Pankhursts at odds – Christabel wanted the suffrage and hoped for an intellectual aristocracy run by the Webbs of the world, Sylvia knew that changing woman's role in society would mean a different world. There was a distinct affinity of perception between the arch conservatives and the radical feminists. Gissing dimly felt this but it was tempting to use the images of oppression derived from women and then to transfer them to a more personal and often anguished concern. Rhoda Nunn speaks for the middle class man but she is left as an emotional and social neuter. There is talk of work that flourishes like the green bay tree just as

Constance Bride speaks vaguely of asserting herself for the good of others. Gissing could not,

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and would not, develop his concept into an active engagement with society. Emancipated women tended to behave like Annie Besant organizing the matchgirls or Eleanor Marx encouraging the gasworkers to strike. What Gissing required from his new women was not a social statement but a psychological and sexual manifesto.

It simply was not credible that a man could reject sex. This was a denial of the very nature of man. It is significant that after meeting an intellectual woman, Edith Sichel, in London, Gissing read Darwin's *Origin of Species* and was in a "troubled state of mind." Intellect and sexuality in a woman were contrary to Gissing's view of nature. It was more comfortable to think of such women as the embodiment of men, a not uncommon conclusion. But they were stronger than men because they could abjure that house of humiliation – marriage. It was enough for Rhoda Nunn to know that she could love to be able to live without it. Gissing felt this would be impossible for a man. Moreover because they were women they could work in fields that would cost a gentleman his rank. Gissing needed women and then despised them because of that need. If only man could place his head and heart in the body of a woman he would know power and freedom – he would be a Rhoda Nunn.

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The Gospel of Work in *The Odd Women*:
Gissing's Double Standard

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The revived women's rights movement of the past decade or so has helped reawaken interest in George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, a novelistic treatment of feminism with no new edition for more than fifty years until it was reissued in 1968 (1). Gillian Tindall's review, in the *New Statesman*, of the 1971 paperback edition was even given a feminist heading: "Women's Lib 1892." (2) It is natural enough that critics with an interest in women's studies, and also in male writers who were not total chauvinists, should notice Gissing and *The Odd Women*. Among late-Victorian males, Gissing had more sympathy than most for the struggles of intelligent women to win equal treatment in the world of education and jobs. Still, in spite of his undeniable sympathy, the curious women's "libber" deserves a warning label: this novel may be dangerous to your feminist good temper. Gissing was, at best, an ambivalent feminist, because of his own self-centered obsession with money and social position, both of which, he felt, should have descended, by right, to his own intelligent male self. His book is further distorted by a private grudge against his own wife.

The oddest thing about *The Odd Women* as a novel is the contrast between the gospel of work preached by its feminist heroines and the gospel of unearned leisure that is the living faith of most of its feckless males. The spokespersons of the book's liberated women are Mary Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn, who run a vocational school dedicated to the feminist proposition that, at least for women who are single, the proper place is in the office. Specifically, these two reformers train their female recruits to type and do clerical work; run bookstores; manage pharmacies; and even, in one case, publish a women's newspaper. (3) In an eloquent feminist speech, Miss Barfoot proclaims that the purpose of finding new forms of work for women is not, primarily, the earning of money, but, rather, full self-development as "rational and responsible

human beings” (chap. xiii, 135). Worthwhile jobs will make women “conscious of their souls” and will free them from a dependence that has “stunted” their “natural growth” (chap. xiii, 136). Miss Barfoot is, in fact, applying the high Victorian gospel of work to those till now excluded from its blessings as a lesser sex without the Law. She extends to middle class women the good news according to Thomas Carlyle: “Older than all preached Gospels was this unpreached,

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inarticulate, but ineradicable, forever-enduring Gospel: Work, and therein have well-being. ... The ‘wages’ of every noble Work do yet lie in Heaven or Nowhere. Not in Bank-of-England bills ...” (4) The economic facts of Miss Barfoot’s own life underscore her devotion to a gospel of meaningful labor. Like a number of others in the book, she has inherited “a modest fortune” from rich dead relatives, but, unlike those others, she rejects a life of idleness. Instead she uses her legacy to advance her gospel of work among her sister women (chap. vi, 54). This feminist leader clearly agrees with Carlyle’s conclusion that “idleness is worst, idleness alone is without hope ...” (5)

In astonishing divergence, however, the men in the novel tend to live and preach a shameless gospel of idleness, as though they inhabited a different moral universe from that of Gissing’s women. Everard Barfoot, man’s lackadaisical spokesman, scorns salvation through work. “Why,” he asks his cousin, Miss Barfoot, “is the man who toils more meritorious than he who enjoys?” Everard confesses his own silky faith in the “ceaseless exercise of all one’s faculties of pleasure” (chap. viii, 82). In Everard’s case, however, the ideal of living for “pleasure,” a vulgar echo perhaps of Walter Pater, is based on the unaesthetic realities of dividends and compound interest.

When we first meet Barfoot, he is happily retired from all productive labor since an unripe twenty-nine. He has spent roughly three years on a pleasure tour of Japan, with side trips to Egypt and Turkey (chap. viii, 77, 78, 82, 86). Everard’s life of travel is supported by an unearned annual income of £450, which he nevertheless complains is a “pittance” that leaves him “wretchedly poor” (chap. ix, 89; chap. xvii, 178). Objectively considered, his bleat seems absurd. In England in the late 1880s – the span in which most of the novel is set – £450 would have been, in fact, excellent earnings from a man’s yearly labors, let alone from dividends and interest. At this particular time, the average yearly income for a family would have been about £150, (6) and Everard has no family or anyone else to support but his own languid self. The reader wants to believe that Gissing is being satiric, yet the tone suggests the agreement of the novelist with his egocentric dawdler. And both feminist leaders, Mary Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn, accept, without question, Everard’s whining claim that he is “poorly provided for” (chap. viii, 86). When his rich brother dies, Mary, Rhoda, the narrator, and Everard himself seem to regard the resulting legacy as his just male reward. Revealingly enough, the total sum is never actually mentioned but only the unearned increment: “not much less than fifteen hundred a year”

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(chap. xviii, 188-89). The emphasis is not on capital, which might after all be put to productive use, but on the annual manna that falls without effort from the heaven of investors. Even Barfoot, complainer that he is, feels satisfied at last about his income. After celebrating his inheritance by travels through France and Italy, he proposes that Rhoda join him in a life of world tourism, beginning first by rambling off to exotic Constantinople on the Orient Express (chap. xviii, 190, 191-92; chap. xxi, 214-15; chap. xxv, 253). Yet Everard’s complacent satisfaction with his life of unearned leisure seems an unintentional obscenity, juxtaposed, as it is, with the miseries and toil of “the odd women.” At one point, for example, two unemployed sisters, Alice and Virginia Madden, have faced the prospect of trying to survive on “fourteen

shillings and two pence a week ... 'is such a life worthy of the name?' asked Virginia in tones of awe" (chap. ii, 14).

For much of its length, in fact, *The Odd Women* contains some of the most moving portrayals, in late-Victorian fiction, of women's economic hardships. Of the six original Madden sisters, Gissing's central exhibits of feminine hard times, three die young: one by tuberculosis, one by accidental drowning, and one by suicide brought on by too heavy a work load as a teacher (chap. ii, 11-12). Among the survivors, Alice drudges on as an underpaid governess who finds consolation only in religious daydreams (chap. ii, 13-14, 19; chap. vii, 63-64; chap. xxviii, 305). Virginia works, for wretched wages, as a companion to invalided women but turns for relief to brandy and gin (chap. ii, 11, 13, 18; chap. xi, 112-13; chap. xxiii, 140-41). The scene in which this secret alcoholic is first discovered drunk by her sisters has a poignancy surpassing most of the rest of the novel. All the details here are objectified and judged with unerring intelligence: Virginia's shameful yet pleasant befuddlement, her sisters' shock and dismay, and the narrator's clear awareness that this gin-drinking drudge is the victim of a broad social pattern of injustice to women (chap. xxviii, 301-05). There is much of the same intelligence in the far more extended treatment, by Gissing, of the youngest sister, Monica – the book's chief example of the miseries of an unliberated woman.

Although she is the most sexually attractive of all the Madden sisters, Monica begins by slaving in a drapery shop that is both cheap and nasty (chap. iv, 25-26, 34-35). She tries to escape the indignities of her life of unskilled labor by marrying the first presentable man whom she happens to meet on the street (chap. iv, 31-33; chap. v, 38-46; chap. xi, 110-12; chap. xii, 121.22). Yet her apparent escape leaves her, in fact, even less free than before. Her rescuer,

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Widdowson, turns out to be a complete male supremacist (chap. xv, 151-53; chap. xvi, 162-64). But far more disturbing to Monica, he is, just as totally, an ineffectual south-London Othello; a Herne Hill stay-at-home; and, worst of all, a bore, with no more sexual attractiveness for her than an ill-made male simulacrum. Monica concludes that she was better off selling draperies from 8:00 A.M. to 9:30 P.M. than married, all day and all night, to her dried-up rigid mate (chap. iii, 21; chap. iv, 25; chap. xix, 201). She tries to run off with a young man named Bevis, and even when he reveals himself as too big a coward to help her to elope, she remains in estrangement from her husband (chap. xxii, 228-35; chap. xxix, 306). The most effective details in the Monica-Widdowson sequences are those that show how grotesquely mismatched these two actually are. For example, his house-bound habit of changing his calendar, straightening his desk, and winding his watch, in the same identical order every night, contrasts absurdly with her yearning for trips abroad and lively mixed soirées (chap. xv, 155, 158; chap. xvi, 161-72). There is one detail, however, that does not seem right in Gissing's depiction of this dismal mismatch. Widdowson, like Barfoot, has been rescued from work, at a rather young age, by a rather large inheritance.

Widdowson has retired at only forty two (he lags behind Barfoot slightly), from what he regards as the "hideous fate" of working as a clerk (chap. v, 41-43). Curiously enough, this is the fate for which the novel's feminist leaders train most of their recruits, in order to make them "nobly independent": "Because I myself," Miss Barfoot explains, "have had an education in clerkship, and have most capacity for such employment, I look about for girls of like mind, and do my best to prepare them for work in offices" (chap. xiii, 135, 136). The contradiction seems extraordinary: clerkship, a living hell for men and a feminist salvation for women. At any rate, Widdowson is saved from his own living hell by a sudden downpour of cash. Like Barfoot, he inherits from a very wealthy brother. Yet the sum of Widdowson's inheritance, just like that of Barfoot's, is never added up but only the annual interest. "I am not so rich," Widdowson protests, "as to have people pressing for my acquaintance. I have only about six hundred a year"

(chap. v, 44). His “only” reminds one of Barfoot’s complaint about his yearly £450, though Widdowson is actually satisfied. The contrast between thinking small and thinking very big about unearned income may help explain why Barfoot is praised as “a fine specimen of ... man ... in mind” and Widdowson is belittled as having “no particular force or character” nor “a very active brain” (chap. viii, 87; chap. v, 39). Even more importantly, Barfoot on his travels around the world, has the knack of spending cash well, but Widdowson, though generous, is completely uncreative, in his life as suburban house-hound, at the art of spending money. His idea of

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enjoyment is staying alone with Monica in his south-London villa and gloating that she and it are both his (chap. vii, 73; chap. xv, 151-52). Completely unlike the feminist gospel of work, the whole duty of man in the novel is conspicuous consumption, mainly through tourism. And Widdowson, who shrinks from the tiniest vacation across the English Channel, fails at the traveler’s art of using his cash well (chap. xv, 158-59).

Even those men who happen to stick to their jobs – all of them minor characters – seem inadequate examples of salvation through work. Dr. Madden, for one, the Madden sisters’ father, thinks that men should work and not women, but he himself is a doctor with an absolute distaste for the need of earning a living. This sluggish lotos-eater actually reads to his daughters from the choric song of Tennyson’s “The Lotos-Eaters” and dies prematurely without enough savings to protect them from a lifetime of labor (chap. i). The only two men in the novel who doggedly stick to work are hardly held up as models to encourage male readers to go and do likewise. Bevis supports his mother and also three sisters by working for a successful wine merchant, yet Gissing treats this young man scornfully for refusing to risk his job by running off with Monica (chap. xvi, 169-70; chap. xxii, 229-35). The other male example of a conscientious worker is Mr. Micklethwaite, a mathematician who delays his marriage to a loyal fiancée for seventeen years of hard teaching labor. When he finally earns enough to support her, she is “wrinkled, hollow-cheeked, sallow,” and exhausted (chap. ix, 88-93; chap. xiii, 124). Though Micklethwaite has admirable persistence, his needs would have been far better met, Gissing seems to be saying, by the early death of rich relatives.

In the latter part of the book, Gissing’s obsession with large unearned incomes creates major distortions in his treatment of married life. Here the emphasis shifts from the oddness of spinsterhood to the troubles of being married, but the economic framework is still odd indeed. With Widdowson retired on six hundred pounds a year, the vast span of time that he spends alone with Monica is wholly atypical of marriage. The pair have little else to do but to kill their hours of leisure or to argue about the best way of getting through those hours. Widdowson’s prescription for Monica’s wedded bliss is for her to fritter away her time in three basic segments. “During the whole of the morning she was to be absorbed in household cares. In the afternoon he would take her to walk or drive, and the evening he wished her to spend either in drawing-room or library, occupied with a book” (chap. xv, 152). But Monica finds housework a bore, would rather be with anyone but Widdowson, and prefers cheap romances to more

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respectable books recommended by her husband (chap. xv, 160; chap. xvi, 162-63, 164-65). One might suggest, cynically, that both Monica’s toying with adultery and her husband’s jealous spying on her are necessary projects for filling up their endless days together. In an ordinary marriage of the period, however, even a house-loving husband would have had to leave his wife to go to work, and his absence would have been at least as likely to bore her as his presence.

Gissing’s unconvincing portrayal of marital economics can be contrasted, revealingly,

with *Middlemarch*, that great anatomy of wedded unbliss and occupational disappointment. *The Odd Women*, incidentally, owes much to George Eliot's novel: specifically, the linking of the Monica-Widdowson sequence and the Rhoda-Barfoot one by Rhoda's unjustified jealousy of Monica, which leads to their climactic scene of mutual reassurances (chap. xxvi, 271-78; chap. xxix, 310-18). Obviously enough, Rhoda-Monica = Dorothea-Rosamond. In *Middlemarch*, however, the lives of the various husbands are grounded in the work of their vocations – vocations that exclude women. Lacking the saving grace that comes from meaningful work, a wife such as Rosamond cannot understand her husband's love of medicine. Exclusion from male vocations limits even the noble Dorothea, who must suppress, as helpmate, her own ardent drive to achieve salvation through labor. Though many of the men in *Middlemarch*, such as Dr. Lydgate, fail in their chosen work, George Eliot conveys, as few other novelists have, the value of a genuine vocation in enriching human capabilities. Those men in *Middlemarch* who are the worthiest husbands also have a love of their profession. And women, too, it is clearly implied, would be made better wives by being allowed to develop in meaningful varieties of work. By contrast, in *The Odd Women*, the lives of Gissing's males are completely void outside of home and marriage. It never occurs to Widdowson, or even to the narrator, that this middle-aged loafer is a failure as a husband for pretty much the same reasons that he failed in the working world: an unwillingness to organize his petty drives and wishes in an effort that concerns someone else. Yet Barfoot, that other man of leisure, says that women can be polished into adequate wives only by "strengthening" their "minds and character" through teaching them a useful profession (chap. x, 102). The thought never flashes upon him, nor apparently upon his creator, that Barfoot's own shiftless way of life is unusually bad training for a husband. He can think himself a delightful companion for Rhoda only because he assumes that men, unlike women, do not need worthwhile vocations to improve them into adequate spouses.

This strange double standard in Gissing's gospel of work makes the Rhoda-Barfoot sequence the weakest in the novel, though it might, perhaps, have been the strongest. The

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unsuccessful courtship of the book's most militant feminist by its most egoistic male should obviously have hinged on Rhoda's commitment to work and Barfoot's desire to have her to himself. She might even have insisted, if the sequence had gone right, that Everard demonstrate his worthiness of her by settling down to useful labor – precisely the demand, in *Middlemarch*, that Mary Garth makes of Fred Vincy. But this logical development of the Rhoda-Barfoot theme is closed off to Gissing because of his unwillingness to judge, with objectivity, his young perpetual tourist who flees the world of work across Europe, Africa, and Asia. Although Gissing clearly wants us to admire Rhoda's dedication to work, he also wants our assent to Barfoot's opposing gospel of premature retirement: "... to work for ever is to lose half of life" (chap. viii, 82). The result is a jumbled compromise. At first, Barfoot makes a tentative effort to persuade her to renounce her feminist occupation, but he quickly shifts ground and argues, instead, that "marriage" to him would "in no way" interfere with Rhoda's noble labors (chap. xvii, 181-82). Yet neither her nor the narrator is able to explain how Rhoda could join Barfoot in a life of world travel and also go on working steadily. Still, the argument fritters out, so that Gissing must manufacture an alternate issue for their sexual debate.

Barfoot proposes, to Rhoda, an unbinding "marriage" without formal ties, but she insists that he demonstrate the genuineness of his love by going through a legal ceremony (chap. xxv). This argument is the wrong one for the novel – wrong for the character of Rhoda and, even more importantly, wrong for the theme of injustice to women. Rhoda is a single-issue feminist, and that issue is women's work. In keeping with her type name of Nunn, she has taken the monkish position that females should abstain from all sexuality in order to perfect their work-starved souls through meaningful occupations (chap. vi, 60-61). The choice for Rhoda is

far more stringent than simply work versus marriage: it is work versus sex itself, and she votes for work every time. It is therefore pointless for her to debate the merits of married sex as opposed to free love. Either course would mean, for Rhoda, unconditional surrender. Her concern should be, in any case, how love, sex, and marriage would help or hinder her career, and even the most sanctified of weddings could not adjust her suitor's itinerary to her own working life. The novelist himself seems uneasy about the relevance of all this sexual debate, for he blurs it by making both Barfoot and Miss Nunn less than half sincere. They are both concerned, primarily, with testing the other's love (chap. xiii, 130-31; chap. xvii, 176-79, 184; chap. xxv, 254, 261, 264-67; chap. xxvi, 268-69; chap. xxx, 325-27). The debate becomes far more appropriate to, say, a musical comedy ("the interest," thinks Barfoot, "would only be that

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of comedy") than a sympathetic study of "the odd women" (chap. xiv, 148).

Instantly dissolvable marriages seem particularly out of place within the novel's economic framework. Marriage, in the book, is the untrained woman's refuge, an escape from exploitation by cynical employers. Though Monica, for one, comes to regret her choice of marriage over even hard labor, her husband shields her from any need to work by continuing to support her (along with both her sisters!) in spite of a bitter estrangement (chap. xxvii, 289). By contrast, in a world where most single women drudge simply to keep alive and where young retired males neither toil nor spin, Barfoot's proposal seems indecent. The instant dissolution of marriages might benefit such men but hardly such women, tossed back, as they would be, into a market-place of second-class jobs. Even the demands for women of the book's feminist leaders would not solve this dilemma. All they ask are a few additional jobs on the middle rungs of labor (chap. xiii, 134-137). Their program, indeed, seems embarrassingly modest when one remembers that, as early as 1860, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson had challenged men's monopoly of the doctor's healing art – the calling, in the novel, of languid Dr. Madden, hardly a male credit to the profession. Yet without equality in labor, Barfoot's companionate marriage would be, for most women, little more than a cruel joke.

The irrelevancy of "free unions," like the nonsense about men who retire at twenty-nine, is thrust into the novel by the author's private obsessions and not his public theme. Two brief anti-marriage anecdotes, early in the book, reveal his personal grudge: (1) a joke-loving Mr. Poppleton is driven out of his mind by his wife's inability to understand his humor (chap. viii, 79-80); (2) a Mr. Orchard is driven out of his country in his flight from his vulgar wife and her constant battles with servants (chap. viii, 80-81). These grumbles about wives have a disconcerting resemblance to Gissing's own complaints, while he actually was writing *The Odd Women*, about his own Edith, Mrs. Gissing number two: "I have written it very quickly, but the writing has been as severe a struggle as ever I knew. Not a day without wrangling & uproar down in the kitchen. Not an hour when I was really at peace in mind. A bitter struggle." (7)

The Odd Women, in short, starts out to be a very effective study of social injustice to women, but it is deflected, at less than midcourse, by the author's male resentments. In his finest novel, *New Grub Street*, his resentment of commercial insistence that men be aggressive served to heighten his sympathies for women in their largely passive social roles. In his later book, however, Gissing's male grudges obtrude in unbalanced grumblings about man as woman's victim: "You are bitter," Barfoot says to Rhoda, "against the average man for his low morality;

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but that fault, on the whole, is directly traceable to the ignobleness of women." And Gissing makes his feminist actually agree with the basic "facts" of Barfoot's complaint! (chap. x, 102, 104). At such moments, the novelist's judgment of the relative claims of men and women seems

very badly askew. To talk complete sense, in truth, about the other sex, one has to be far more honest about one's own sex than Gissing was able to be in *The Odd Women*.

NOTES

- (1) George Gissing, *The Odd Women* (London: Blond, 1968; New York: Stein and Day, 1968).
- (2) Gillian Tindall, "Women's Lib 1892," *New Statesman*, 24 June 1971, pp. 886-87. *The Odd Women* was first published in 1893. The 1971 reissue had two simultaneous publications – Toronto: George J. McLeod; New York: W. W. Norton.
- (3) George Gissing, *The Odd Women* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), chap. iv, 36; chap. vi, 54; chap. xiv, 141; chap. xxxi, 336, hereafter referred to in the text by chapter and page number.
- (4) Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1912), bk. III, chap. xii, 193, 196. The work was first published in 1843.
- (5) Carlyle, bk. III, chap. ii, 141.
- (6) See, for example, Sidney Webb, "Historic," in *Fabian Essays in Socialism*, ed. G.[eorge] Bernard Shaw (New York: Dolphin Books, n.d.), p. 66, n. 19.
- (7) Diary of George Gissing, II, 4 October 1892, courtesy of Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection; The New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

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Gissing's Correspondence with Clara Collet, M.A.,
Social Investigator and Reformer

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Among the few thousand letters from George Gissing which are known to have survived, there is a substantial minority addressed to women. Of crucial importance in various ways are his letters to his mother and sisters and a very few other female relatives, his love letters to Gabrielle Fleury and his correspondence on literary matters with Edith Sichel. The correspondence with Clara Elizabeth Collet is also well worth considering; its existence has been known since 1927, when some extracts from the less personal letters of the later period were included in the volume of *Letters of George Gissing to Members of His Family*. Recently Gillian Tindall in *The Born Exile* quoted some other – more personal – passages, but the bulk of the 165 letters still awaits careful study, to say nothing of publication. One may safely claim that they have no equivalent in bulk and content, while with regard to the period they cover – the ten years between June 1893 and June 1903 – they rank next to the letters to the Wakefield relatives considered as a whole. They are unique in that they were written to an intellectual young woman of outstanding capacity, who was a witness of Gissing's domestic life during the

greatest part of his married life with Edith Underwood, and played the role of a peace-maker between husband and wife; unique also in that they are complemented by a handful of letters from Edith and over a hundred from Gabrielle Fleury to the same recipient, extending from the turn of the century to the late 1920s.

Born in 1860, the daughter of Collet Dobson Collet – a man remembered for the active part he took in the agitation for the repeal of the taxes on the press, particularly the repeal of the newspaper stamp – Clara Collet attended the North London Collegiate School, then taught for some seven years in a secondary school at Leicester. In 1885 she decided to read for a London degree and graduated three years later. Political economy was her favourite subject, but her interests covered many fields of human knowledge. She tried her hand at fiction and was surely one of the best educated women of her time. After obtaining her M.A. degree at London University in 1888 she worked with Charles Booth for four years, her special field being accounts of women's work in the multi-volume *Life and Labour of the People in London*. When she left Booth in 1892, she quickly became Labour Correspondent of the Board of Trade and this was her position when she made Gissing's acquaintance some months after he completed *The Odd Women*. In the year of his death she became senior investigator (1903-1917) and

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continued her work with the Ministry of Labour until her retirement in 1920. She wrote and published many articles and pamphlets on economic subjects, and she was a great reader of serious fiction – thus she came to read Gissing's novels in the 1880s and to write in 1891 an article on them in the *Charity Organization Review*. A few years after his death she bought back from A. H. Bullen, Gissing's former publisher and friend, the eight titles he had brought out in the 1890s, together with *Born in Exile*. To this and many other praiseworthy actions on Gissing's behalf, she was led by the high esteem in which she held his work, and she took her duties as co-executor of his will very seriously. If one leaves apart Gissing's three wives, Clara Collet is undoubtedly the woman whose role in his life was the greatest and the most significant. His letters and the mass of secondary material connected with them make this very clear.

The interest of this correspondence is broadly speaking threefold. First, it is a valuable source of information on Gissing's own works; his novels and short stories, past and present, his plans and commitments; his relations with publishers and literary agents. Despite the abundance of details not to be found elsewhere, this aspect of the correspondence should not be overstressed. One feels that many things, perhaps the most characteristic, were left unwritten by Gissing – not at all because he did not fully trust Miss Collet, but because they often met, generally at Gissing's home in Brixton, then in Epsom, rarely in London, and spent whole afternoons discussing literary, social and political matters. She was the only regular visitor who called on the Gissings and succeeded in remaining on good terms with Edith even after George had separated from her for good. Like Eduard Bertz, Clara Collet was kept posted on Gissing's literary earnings, and she could follow his later career from both the writer's standpoint and the public standpoint. She was aware not only of her friend's public acts but of their motivation – usually referred to by Gissing in an apologetic, self-deprecatory manner, though he could also stress his motives with great self-confidence, for instance when Miss Collet misinterpreted the title "In the Year of Jubilee" before reading the novel.

The second area of interest concerns literary matters in general. Gissing delivered himself of many judgments on writers, contemporary or otherwise, English and foreign. He praised Daudet's *Lettres de mon Moulin* in emotional terms – "a book such as could be written only by a young poet, an exquisite idealist. How I envy you when you sit down to it for the first time! If possible, go into a quiet spot in the open air, and have at least a couple of hours free before you. To me, the only objection to the book is that it makes me languish insufferably for that southern scenery which it describes ... Do, I beg of you, like this book!" In another early letter, we see

him steering clear of Zola, as possibly too crude for a lady: "No, no; I should never have thought of sending you anything of Zola's"; but in 1896, he made amends for this while reading *La Débâcle*: "Ah, but he is a big, strong man, say what one will!" And he warmly approved of Zola's courageous and humane attitude in the Dreyfus case. Gissing appears as a reader of travel books, of literary recollections and memoirs; of French literature (with the Goncourt brothers, Flaubert, Gyp, the Abbé Prévost, Renan), of Latin and Greek literature, but also of contemporary English literature. His opinions in these letters generally tally with those expressed elsewhere. Thus we read of Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto*: "It is not only a remarkable, but in some respects a grand, book ... It is much more than a story: a chapter of world-history, and done in a very noble spirit." After attending a dinner in honour of Anthony Hope Hawkins at the Authors' Club he observed: "What an assembly on the whole! Respectable tradesmen ... Well, literature is now on all fours with the butter-trade." One wonders whether, in connection with Arthur Morrison and one or two other contemporary writers, he did not make concessions to his friend's taste. Whereas in his diary he passed no comment on *Tales of Mean Streets* and called *A Child of the Jago* "poor stuff," he wrote to Miss Collet about the former volume: "You are very right about Morrison's book. I read it with great satisfaction, and felt throughout that the man saw both sides of his subject." The correspondence bristles with names of contemporary writers – foreground figures like Meredith, Hardy, Kipling, Stevenson and Wells, but also minor writers and men of letters such as Besant, Hall Caine, Andrew Lang, James Payn and Alfred Austin. The impression one derives from these judgments, anecdotes and passing mentions is that Gissing found in Clara Collet an intelligent listener and that he took genuine pleasure in her intelligence. He treated her as an equal, as a "comrade in arms" – to use the title of one of his short stories – and had no fear of being misunderstood; one even feels – at least so long as they saw each other fairly regularly – a sort of intellectual alliance (or should one say fraternity?) between them, which must have been a balm on Gissing's wounds as an artist and as a man. Even before he met her, he made a touching confession: "The great kindness of your letters encourages me to write to you in this off-hand way: I feel as though I had a friend in you – tolerant and human." This is just what she was going to be. His response to women of brains, especially if they were not eyesores or old frumps, were always extremely sympathetic. The case of Mrs. Henry Norman, alias Ménie Muriel Dowie, author of the feminist novel *Gallia* and herself a new woman of the better type, is characteristic: "On Thursday I went to see Mrs. Norman. Yes, she is very interesting; I am glad to know her, and I believe that as Johnson said of somebody – 'she is fundamentally sensible.' Her book [that was *Gallia*, 1895]

prepared me to like her ... It is really well written, with a good deal of artistic shapeliness and restraint." Contrary to the impression we have when reading his letters to Edith Sichel, we find no attitudinising, no mental stiffness born of pride and limited confidence in his correspondent.

The third area of interest in these letters is of course that of personal relationships. Confronted with this shrewd, earnest, level-headed young woman who was convinced even before she met him that he needed her, Gissing gradually confesses himself, at first largely unconsciously, then deliberately when after his flight from home in February 1897, he sought relief in self-humiliation. She won his respect and esteem by showing those qualities he had attributed to some of his most recent female characters – Mary Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn – and other qualities which, with his painful awareness of the cultural and human rift between the sexes in his day, he had not imagined a woman three years his junior could ever show for his benefit unless love prompted her actions. One day, while she had gone to the play with Edith

Gissing, whom she had invited, he received a letter in which she promised to pay for his son's education should he himself break down. Together with protestations of gratitude it drew from him this typical remark: "Is it not something that you make me think more kindly of the world than is my habit?" Thus was sealed a pact of friendship between the two; each was aware that Edith might become suspicious, but they defeated her potential jealousy by meeting in her presence. Clara Collet's tact and worldly wisdom bridged the gap between the wife's unintellectual nature and the husband's hyperintellectual personality. She considered equably the material problems of the Gissing household (by helping them to find lodgings or servants) as well as her friend's rising to professional eminence in the mid-nineties. Her visits assumed for Gissing the function of a safety-valve as they were for him as many opportunities to obtain from her profitable and soothing advice. He could write to her deprecatingly about his own work with the certainty that he would not be misunderstood – that the recipient of his letters could read between the lines. There was between them an association of minds which helped Gissing to put up with the consequences of his second disastrous marriage. Yet Miss Collet's apparent imperviousness to material cares, her practicality, had two consequences. First they led Gissing to think of himself as weaker than he actually was (one catches him calling himself "a purblind underling" and masochistically declaring that his own monstrous folly – a concomitant of his feeble will – is not to be outlived). This was an indirect homage to her strength of character, a concession he made to the opinion he thought she had of him. Secondly, he could never bring

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himself to confess his first marriage (and even less its prologue, the expulsion from Owens College on an issue of personal conduct) until he fled from the domestic inferno in 1897.

There were four phases in their correspondence or rather what is left of it, since Clara Collet destroyed Gissing's letters covering the eighteen months from February 1898 to July 1899, that is from the moment when, now he was at least partly free, she warned to him embarrassing and the time when he settled with Gabrielle Fleury in Paris. The first period – until they first met at her home and at her invitation – shows Gissing alluding to his new domestic life at Brixton in a propitiatory tone and with mild impatience at material cares (the removal, the wife staying at a farm-house until the flat is ready for her, the servant question, "the exigent little mortal"), inviting Clara Collet's sympathy and indulgence. He writes as it were with uplifted hands, taking her and the universe as witnesses of the malignity of matter. Then, in the second phase – the longest one, until he went to recuperate at Budleigh Salterton – we find an intellectual companionship, Gissing's delicacy dictating some concessions to his friend. He responds modestly to her queries about his work, they compare notes about the march of their respective intellects. She would like to draw the uneasy, peevish wife out of her domestic solitude but Edith will not let herself be coaxed more than once or twice out of her home. Clara Collet tried repeatedly, as she thought, without saying so to Gissing, that the misery of the couple was due to his fits of ursine mood. On April 21, 1895, he explained the situation as he saw it: "All hope must be abandoned that [Edith] will ever find any pleasure or satisfaction away from home – unless it be (and the exception is doubtful) with her own relatives. I have made several efforts to bring about friendliness between her and my own people: with the sole result of making her regard them with a fierce antipathy, – so that I cannot now, even mention one of their names, as I value my peace ... My people do not understand this, and I cannot well explain it to them, for they are conscious only of good will on their own part. – Even so it is difficult to tell *you* that this invitation, and all like unto it, are of necessity declined. A folio volume would hardly exhaust the troubles of the situation." Careful as she was to pacify the irascible wife, determined as she was to view the unnatural union between George and Edith from Edith's standpoint, she nearly got involved in a domestic quarrel when Gissing decided to entrust Walter to the care of his mother and sisters in Wakefield. "For the last two

months,” he explained on April 23, 1896, “there has been a daily quarrel here, in which, at any moment, the boy could hear venomous abuse of his father and all his father’s relatives and friends. When, on the Sunday before we left, Edith told the child that she never wished to see him again and that she wished he had died in one of his illnesses, – that he was a little wretch, –

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and so on, and so on, I quickly took the resolve.” From then on Clara Collet became a confidante of a new kind – she was told of the insults flung at him and he was glad she could some day if need be serve as a witness and testify in his favour. When he had time to reflect quietly he doubted whether his wife was quite sane.

The third phase in the correspondence is the most personal and, as has been observed, it became so personal that a part of it was not allowed to survive. No document extant, not even Gissing’s diary, throws such vivid light on the circumstances which brought about the collapse of his second marriage. The letter of February 13, 1897 with its graphic account of the fateful quarrel would make it possible to reconstruct the scene if only one had a portrait of Edith to complete one’s vision of it. When Clara Collet, who was genuinely concerned, asked him to connect those aspects of his past as she had heard them from him with information of a gossipy nature which had reached her through other channels, he unburdened his heart to her: “I can set your mind at rest. Here is an explanation: not once, but twice, have I made an ass of myself. My first wife was a hopeless drunkard, and died miserably in 1881 or 2, I forget the year. This will seem to you incredible. Is there another such imbecile walking the earth?” Then came some curiously fair assessment of the situation: “Against Edith’s character not a word can be said. The marriage was regular as that of any grocer. She is perfectly sober – in everything but language. She has good qualities and would have made an ordinary mate for the lower kind of London artisan.” Further instances of his detachment recur later in the same letter when he notes: “I do *not* strongly desire absolute separation. I would endure anything that allows me to do my work in peace ... I do *not* want to rob her of the sight of Walter, and cannot dream of taking the little child away. I wish to act with all possible good feeling – if she will allow me to do so. I have wished it all along, and – as a reward – am driven from my own house with abuse and enmity. To the end of her life she will be friendless, for she suspects everyone that comes near her of baseness and ill-will. She is the only woman I ever knew who has no one whom she even calls a friend. Since I knew her, she has never received a letter from any acquaintance.” And after that, confessing that his short story “A Lodger in Maze Pond” was about his own silly self, he once more revelled in self-mortification: “So now, dear friend of mine, do not think gloomy things about the days gone by, and do not trouble overmuch about the present. There is no one to blame but myself in the last resort. I, of course, am to blame for taking that poor girl out of her natural sphere; whence all her trouble and mine. It was grossly selfish; it was utterly unintelligent behaviour; it showed the unteachable man.” He could not bring himself to tell

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Clara Collet openly about the Manchester disaster, but as she was aware of it she must have been as moved by his reticence as by a possible confession. He correctly traced his mournful journey through life to its source: “The bad beginning of it was when, at 16 or so, I was most foolishly sent to live alone in Manchester in miserable lodgings. Hence all subsequent ills and follies.”

Gissing’s candour mollified her. Though they had always been excellent friends, neither had probably understood the other very thoroughly so far. For all her humanity and generosity, she had perhaps viewed Gissing and his family as objects of interest, while he admitted that he had been inclined to think of her as very self-reliant, rather scornful of weaker people and

especially impatient of anything like sentimental troubles. She was now gentler, more sympathetic, doubtless because of a double realization – namely that Edith was a loathsome creature and that Gissing, for all his weakness, had also shown an extraordinary courage in living down the scandal which had tainted his honour. He was grateful to her for her greater sympathy, but would not let himself be hugged even in writing. So he discouraged the pity she now threatened to lavish upon him: “A woman,” he conceded while not expected to do so, “must always more or less despise the man who, in his relations with women, has shown himself lacking in sense, lacking in self-respect, lacking in delicacy, lacking in ambition.” And he kept her at a distance by idealising her. “Your place as a human being is vastly removed from mine; you stand far, far above me – so far, indeed, that your sympathy for my troubles must for ever be imperfect.” And he gently brushed aside her request that he should send for her if he found himself desperately ill. Indeed he told her that he had been between life and death at Cotrone some weeks before and that he had felt satisfaction in the thought that he was giving trouble only to strangers – people whom he paid for it.

The gap which follows in this fine sequence of letters is rather puzzling. Why was the correspondence for this particular period destroyed? We know that Clara Collet could not approve of Gissing’s call upon Gabrielle Fleury to sacrifice her life for him, but the notion of jealousy cannot be entertained – it is belied by the letters from Gabrielle to her from 1899 until the late 1920s, belied also by Gissing’s last letters – the fourth phase and the least personal one, of which some aspects have been known for fifty years. Clara Collet herself wrote to H. G. Wells that in these intimate letters she destroyed Gissing expressed his anxiety that none of Edith’s sickening accusations should be believed.

As it is, the whole of this correspondence constitutes an impressive record of Gissing’s changing moods and uneasy circumstances. It lies somewhere between the letters to his mother and sisters whom he always had to humour or contradict or half-heartedly approve, and the love

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letters to Gabrielle Fleury in which hope and sentiment had precedence over reality and reason. It shows him at his least demonstrative, aware that he was being observed, judged and assisted by a personality much stronger than his own, aware of the pits that lay around their relationship. That is why, although these letters are in some respects more candid than the correspondence with any other female friend or relative, they are never relaxed or intimate or genuinely confidential. The barrier of sex between these two persons was never quite overcome – to him she remained “dear Miss Collet” and he only became George to her after his death. The communion of their intellects prevented the communion of their hearts.

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