

“Scatter my words among womankind? Mary Eliza Haweis’s Unextinguished Hearth”

Mary Eliza Haweis’s novel *A Flame of Fire* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1897) was written, she insisted, “to vindicate the helplessness of womankind.” The *Spectator* reviewer saw that helplessness in the face of the law and of social institutions, rather than any innate weakness, is meant here: “Her heroine marries in the first chapter, and continues to suffer for it through the chapters that follow.” As crossed by Aglae Dorriforth, “that bright isthmus which links maidenhood with marriage” resembles “that soft state preceding sleep when things are getting double, but not yet dissevered from reason” (*Flame* 38). Once it is passed—to leave Aglae, as Mrs Henry Quekett, the wife of “a worthless tyrant” (174)—the sleep of reason begins.

Haweis’s novel is one of many inveighing in the 1880s and 1890s against the indignities done to women, and the temptations presented to men, by the courts and the law. However, it is a far less predictable and routine performance than *The Spectator* supposed. The unravelling of the domestic ideal becomes a peculiarly poignant theme when treated by a writer whose previous advice books on interior decoration had put her in the public eye as a prime proponent of ideal domesticity. Haweis had also written two books aimed at introducing Chaucer to young readers (1876 and 1881), in both of which she wrestled in particular with the Marriage Group of tales and wondered how the story of Walter and Griselda would unfold in the modern world. By 1897, Haweis had seen at first hand how true it was that “people cannot bear such treatment now”; and she knew more than enough to answer her own question, belatedly, in *A Flame of Fire*.