"You can choose between the life of a fugitive, and the life of a dog!": The Marital Prison in Mary Eliza Haweis' *A Flame of Fire*.

Mary Eliza Haweis was a writer and illustrator between 1848 and 1898. At eighteen, Haweis had one of her own paintings exhibited at the Royal Academy and this skill in drawing and painting transferred easily to illustration. Haweis would later illustrate her own works with historically accurate period sketches. It was Haweis' artistic talents that caught the attention of a suitor, her future husband, the Reverend Hugh Reginald Haweis. The meeting between Haweis and her future husband was a pivotal moment not only for her personal life but for her professional one. Hugh Reginald was an author and popular preacher, who had experience within the world of writing and publishing. Haweis was self-taught whereas Hugh Reginald had a formal education, having been to Cambridge, and he seemed to have read her manuscripts and poems. Haweis wrote in a diary entry that he said, "there was so much good in them so much undeveloped power – but they were without form" to which she recorded, "I said I knew nothing about the rules of prose or poetry." Hugh Reginald gifted her a volume of Emerson's poetry and *Ruskin's Stones of Venice*. Ruskin would go on to be a key figure in Haweis' aesthetic philosophies, showcased in her works on aesthetic dress and household design. His influence on her identity as a writer is clear, but he should not be given much of the credit. Haweis' pen was unrelenting, writing in a variety of forms including novel writing, writing for the periodical press, children's fiction, design and fashion advice, and housekeeping advice. However, this paper will focus upon her novel writing with her only published piece of fiction – *A Flame of Fire*. New Woman fiction as a genre enabled women to utilise a quote "more detached, less self-revelatory medium for the exploration of controversial, intimate or painful autobiographical matters"[1]

This paper poses the following statement:

The institution of marriage, supported by legislation, eroded away at the identity of Victorian women, and the purpose of Hawes' novel is to challenge and confront inequalities in the law which saw women struggle for divorce. The institution of marriage, through the use of Gothic imagery, transforms the very real laws surrounding, for example coverture, into imprisonment. The heroine, in her bid to escape an abusive husband, must, as the title of this paper says choose between *the life of a fugitive and the life of a dog.*

Though her public readership would not have necessarily connected the story of *A Flame of Fire* to Haweis' life, it is clear from a letter to her son in 1897 that the family should do so. She wrote: "I will send you a copy of my novel when out – a 'novel with a purpose' of course…Poor Rennie! Poor May! Anyhow it is coming, like the Judgement Day." The use of these nicknames for herself and her husband – Rennie and May – couple with her likening it to the judgement day clearly implies that the novel's purpose was to shed light on her own experiences with marriage. During the 1890s, the relationship between Haweis and her husband truly broke down. For years, Haweis had been sustaining the household with the income from her books and yet they were losing money at an alarming rate. It became clear, later, that her husband was spending their money on his extramarital affairs. Perhaps it was the influence of the women writers that Haweis was in contact with, evidenced by the letters she received from Sarah Grand and Mona Caird, or perhaps it was a desire to demonstrate not only the woman's special point of view, but her own point of view that led to the publication of *A Flame of Fire* in 1897. Of course, it is impossible to fully understand the circumstances, especially since many of Haweis' letters and memoranda were likely destroyed, but it is not a stretch to suppose the breakdown of Haweis' marriage coupled with her exposure to this 'New Woman' literary scene encouraged her to publish, at last, the work which she had almost certainly been working on many years before. The novel was a modest success during the period, despite it being comparable thematically to novels such as Diana of Crossways, The Wing of Azrael and The Heavenly Twins which all addressed being trapped within an abusive failed, or loveless marriage.

To briefly summarise, the novel centres on the heroine Aglae and begins on the day of her marriage. Her husband, Quekett, is described as 'manly' and a 'tyrant' frequently and is quick to exert his dominance over his young, naïve, wife. Aglae suffers physical and emotional abuse as Quekett beats her and flaunts his mistress in front of her. Aglae flees in outrage, but finds herself unable to legally free herself from her husband. Her husband demands she return to his home, citing the 'restitution of conjugal rights' act. Ultimately, Aglae is freed from her husband, who is discovered

[1] Heilmann, New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism

to have committed bigamy. She is immediately re-married to an earlier suitor, but the novel does not end with marital bliss, as one of her children is attacked by a bull and dies in the final scene.

Even when Aglae rejects Quekett's controlling behaviour she has little legal ability to reject him. Haweis references a real case, known as the Clitheroe Case, which was a pivotal moment for women's rights in the Nineteenth Century, and which she writes was "of far-reaching importance to women" (A Flame of Fire, 273). This case challenged the law known as Coverture in which men could sue for the 'restitution of conjugal rights'. Aglae is clearly acting as a mouth-piece for Haweis when she exclaims that it is "a disgrace to a civilized country!" (A Flame of Fire, 257). Coverture was the legal doctrine in which, upon marrying, the woman's legal rights were subsumed into those of her husband. It was literally meant that she was under her husband's 'cover' – his protection. Yet who protected her from her husband? This law came under intense scrutiny with the rise of the women's rights movement. Married couples were required by law to cohabit and if this were violated spouses could sue for the 'restitution of conjugal rights.' It was mainly husbands who made use of this legislation to force their wives, who would otherwise wish to live apart, to cohabit. Whilst this is the surface meaning, the true nature of the act was one of forced sexual relations. This was a principle issue that women's rights activists had with the law, but it was not only women activists who saw this problem. It is identified by John Stuart Mill in The Subjection of Women in which he wrote that the husband can quote "claim from her and enforce the lowest degradation of a human being, that of being made the instrument of an animal function contrary to her inclinations (The Subjection of Women, 57)

Quekett has control over Aglae's money, but even more worryingly he has control over her body. She is confronted with only two choices: she can continue to flee from him, pursued tirelessly, or she can return and effectively give herself over. As Aglae correctly states "it is a choice merely between two evils, and the restitution of conjugal rights is the worst!" (A Flame of Fire, 258).

Haweis is keen to link women's lack of bodily autonomy to their lack of financial autonomy. Thus, Aglae becomes a "possession" (A Flame of Fire, 87) taken by Quekett quote "like an empty house" (A Flame of Fire, 87). It is an intentional choice on Haweis' part to compare Aglae with a house; the English law that defined wives as 'feme covert' erased women's legal identity, making them simply an extension of their husband – an empty being to be taken as a possession. By likening Aglae's body to a house Haweis can metaphorically show the sexual relationship between the characters, in which Quekett is an intruder violating boundaries. Aglae, like the empty house, is infiltrated – occupied – penetrated – conquered.

Sex, particularly non-consensual sex, is another tool by which to strip away women's identity and Aglae voices concerns that Haweis may have perhaps been unable to give words in any other form of writing. Fiction was an opportunity to speak freely upon matters that are often difficult to voice. By addressing the 'restitution of conjugal rights' as Aglae, Haweis is spared any prying into her own marriage. Haweis is devoted to showing how women are helpless under Nineteenth Century marriage law, though Aglae's plight is not confined to Victorian women.

Living in Quekett's household, obeying his orders and acting as his wife is one of the options that the heroine is offered – the life of a dog. There are traces of sadomasochism that underscore the Aglae/Quekett relationship. Aglae contentedly assumes "her subordinate position" (A Flame of Fire, 83) like a dog heeling for it's master. The innocence, sexual or otherwise, of the heroine is critically important in narratives of domestic abuse. This innocence draws the heroine towards dangerous, but nevertheless magnetic, men. Aglae has little to no understanding of her own sexuality before she meets Quekett. Her susceptibility, or gullibility, is bound to her misunderstanding lust for love. Though Haweis does not show non-consensual sex in the novel, it is clearly an underlying threat. Quekett does not force himself upon Aglae but the scene where they kiss is fraught with problematic imagery as she is said to be "struggling helplessly and feeling as incapable as a small bird in a vice" (*A Flame of Fire,* 67). Laws which required women to live with, and sleep with, their husbands was a means by which to subjugate and demean – to keep them in a subservient position, unable to take political action. Issues of consent that surface in Victorian women's writing, though they are frequently covert and brief, ought to be explored for they feed into the larger narrative of sexual violence enacted against women who were often legally unable to withhold their consent.

Once Aglae has escaped her husband's proximity, he comes to claim her insisting she return in quote "the face of law, decency, and her duty as a mother" (Flame 234). Quekett, supported by the marriage legislation that Haweis and other campaigners desperately wanted repealed, is technically in the right yet he is portrayed decisively as a Villain.

The emergence of New Woman fiction was disruptive enough to warrant a revival of Gothic themes. New Woman fiction makes use of Gothic imagery to portray political unrest. For instance, the opening lines of Mona Caird's The Wing of Azrael are: "over the park hung a white and stealthy mist, touched by white and stealthy moonlight…the mist was thick, but one could see through it to a large white house" (The Wing of Azrael). This house is where the reader finds the heroine, Viola. She is literally trapped within its walls, whilst being emotionally and socially trapped by the expectation of her parents that she should marry. Viola is told by her father that a woman who will not marry quote "has no meaning; she is in the way; she ought never to have been born. She is neglected, despised, left out; and who cares whether she lives or dies? She is alone" (The Wing of Azrael). Viola, just like Aglae, is imprisoned by the institution of marriage causing her to beseech: "am I always to be your wife, never myself? (The Wing of Azrael).

The Gothic threat, portrayed in the opening pages as the house, is instead marriage. The heroines of older Gothic fiction found themselves literally trapped in great and terrifying mansions and castles, whereas her successors find that "marriage itself becomes the horrific factor" (Murphy 151).

Quekett comes to claim his wife in a chapter that opens with the same imagery found in Caird's novel: "It was cold and raw out of doors, a chill moon glimmering through a pallid veil that betokened further rain, and a mist hung over the distant water" (A Flame of Fire, 237). Mist and moonlight pervade both narratives, adding a supernatural threat to the visceral threat posed by marriage. Out of the mist comes Quekett "like an apparition from hell" to bring Aglae back to him, eliciting "horror" and "tears of terror" (A Flame of Fire, 233). Aglae hides when she sees Quekett's approach as returning to him would mean quote, "outrage, restraint, prison itself" (Flame 239). Here, Haweis echoes Wollstonecraft famous lines from Maria or The Wrongs of Woman, in which Maria claims that "Marriage has bastilled me for life" (Maria 95).

In Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho, the archetypal gothic novel, the heroine, Emily, is confined within a castle but the true horror of Emily's confinement is the isolation from any semblance of familiarity or kindness. The castle walls are transformed into a prison when Emily realises how alone she truly is. For Aglae, and other New Woman characters, marriage was just as isolating. Aglae was swept away from her childhood home and family, placed in Quekett's household, and left to her duties, becoming a quote "lonely and unloved woman" (A Flame of Fire, 149). Emily is terrified by the sublime castle Udolpho because it makes her confront her own vulnerability, but for Aglae it is marriage that looms dark and foreboding. Separated from her family, Aglae has lost quote "a good deal of security" (A Flame of Fire, 146), and thus marriage has become her own "massy walls" from which she cannot escape. Aglae is broken by her imprisonment, becoming no longer "bright and striking" (A Flame of Fire, 16) but "languid and exhausted" (A Flame of Fire, 95). Marriage becomes vampiric in the following passage from the novel:

"Every individual fibre of Aglae's nature had its own exhausting and persistent leech, only to be discovered by a general uprooting, and to such experiments the whole constitution of marriage is opposed" (A Flame of Fire, 128).

Haweis clearly advocates here for separation, divorce, from the husband – the leech.

The control that the husband exacts upon the wife is a form of patriarchal vampirism sanctioned by the law. Aglae's individuality is sucked from her the longer she remains tied to her marriage bond. Instead of being the victim of literal bloodsucking Aglae is prey to unjust, parasitical, legislation which offered little possibility for women to successfully seek divorce. Although Haweis is not the first to compare the law with vampirism, one need only remember the "bloodless and gaunt" (Bleak House, 692) Vholes of Dickens' Bleak House, she is amongst writers who tailored this metaphor specifically to women.

Thus, denied a separate legal identity, and denied the rights to a divorce Aglae struggles throughout the novel to reconcile her different identities: from maiden to married to mother, each process destabilises her sense of self further. The novel is a hall of mirrors, reflecting a different Aglae at every turn.

Identity is therefore explored through the key lens of marriage. Marriage clearly threatens autonomy through the law of coverture, the problematic issue of consent, and the lack of sexual education. By becoming *Wife*, women are no longer *Myself*. The identity of the aptly named feme sole is fractured into the competing branches of female identity: socialite, housekeeper, caregiver, sexual partner, etc. The female identity is illusive precisely because it does not exist, cannot exist when women are constantly denied the opportunity to cultivate it. And so, does Aglae ever find herself?

Does Haweis? Is it even possible? Perhaps it is more suitable to say that through reading *A Flame of Fire* Haweis, her proxy Aglae, and indeed the reader have found the possibility of numerous selves.