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'he'd let me turn the house into a theatre': rewriting the domestic in the sensational world of *East Lynne*.

Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton

One of the most famous of the 1860s sensation novels, Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), can be read as resisting – at least in part - the very obsession with sensational crime and invocations of nervous shock by which the genre is defined. The early pages of the novel suggest that it will foreground spectacular events, in the mode memorably described by Pamela Gilbert as 'camped up realism'¹; typically of the genre, the novel self-consciously redeploys domestic space as a 'stage' on which gender roles are constructed, played out and contested.

Sensation fiction depends for its effects, on just such a collision of the ordinary and the dramatic, in what Wilkie Collins famously called 'the secret theatre of home'. In her account of the 'redundancy' trope at mid-century, as connecting a perceived saturation of the mass market with cheap sensation fiction and a parallel surplus of women available for domesticity, Emily Steinlight observes that:

accounts of literary overproduction draw on a key trope of sensation novels of the decade. Rather than presenting the oversaturation of the market as a condition from which one can find refuge in the family, the novels of Braddon and Wood subject the household to the same forces of mass circulation and devaluation. They allow female characters of unknown origin to drift in and out of the domestic spaces of the novel as effortlessly as pages of newsprint (506).

However this article will argue that in its sustained focus on the domestic experience of women, and by side-lining the murder plot to the margins of the text, *East Lynne* reverses the narrative hierarchies of the sensation genre to which the novel itself belongs. In its preoccupation with feminine rituals and the negotiation of domestic space, *East Lynne* reclaims the value of domestic realism, as more than just a backdrop for exciting plotlines. While the novel does feature murder, sexual fall and

¹ Round table paper, Victorian Popular Fiction Conference 2011.

the hint of bigamy represented by a divorce and second marriage, the narrator is at pains to refocus the reader's attention periodically on the domestic experience of the women it represents.

Feminist criticism of the sensation novel has traditionally been concerned with the embedding of gender roles within sensational plots, highlighting the ways in which crime disrupts the apparently static domestic order (which may or may not be convincingly restored by the end of the novel). Nonetheless the original readers of *East Lynne* were obviously unlikely to participate in such plots. Intentionally or not, Wood aligns her characters with female readers, as she shows them discussing the Hallijohn murder, and later, Isabel's elopement, in cosy domestic settings.

Throughout the novel, sensational tropes such as murder and sexual scandal are relayed as stories by the characters themselves, as a form of social exchange. Ironically Levison's history is deployed as a means of facilitating new relations between women, when Barbara confides the story of his murdering Hallijohn and later eloping with Isabel, to the new governess 'Mme Vine'.

Memorably concerned with the ways in which gender determines experience, *East Lynne* (1861) saturates its sensational plot with a plethora of detail about the quotidian lives of its female characters, who are frequently seen managing servants, drinking tea and ordering dresses. The murder plot (as in Caroline Clive's 1855 *Paul Ferroll*, the original crime has taken place in the pre-history of the novel) is relayed in the first pages, but is quickly subordinated to a female-centred critique of gender and class, through the key figures of Lady Isabel Vane, Barbara Hare and Cornelia Carlyle. Specifically the novel explores the ways in which these three women compete for position within the village of East Lynne, and in the house of the same name, at a time when the figure of the 'redundant woman' was understood as both pathetic and a source of cultural anxiety. It is the home itself which is revealed to be both unstable and a site of ruthless competition between women, before becoming the sensational site of adultery and dashing aristocratic villains.

Like other sensation novelists, Wood introduces mystery and crime to the country setting, bringing melodrama over the threshold of the middle class home, in order to critique class and gender ideologies. But she also uses the conventions of sensation fiction as a means of mocking the gender and class anxiety with which the novel is itself concerned. In the first deliberately missed opportunity, the improvident earl, Isabel's father, dies without providing for her. He has also failed to explain that her home now belongs to Carlyle, who comes from a significantly lower class than her own. Compromised by remaining in the house under these circumstances, Isabel's position is rendered even worse when her father is held still to be accountable, and his corpse is arrested for the non-payment of his debts. The very uncertainty the reader feels, in deciding whether to read this scene as sensational or simply distressingly banal, suggests a parody of the fatherless young woman motif. When Isabel finally leaves East Lynne for Castle Manning, the home of her uncle, the new Earl Mount Severn has forgotten to provide sufficient cash funds for her immediate expenses. In this vulnerable position, Isabel is not decoyed away by a plausible villain, but instead undergoes the more prosaic embarrassment of being lent money by Carlyle.

The resolution of dissident elements in the text repeatedly features such anti-climax in place of the expected denouement, most obviously when Barbara attracts the amorous interest of a man she believes to be a murderer; despite his dangerously alluring status as an army officer, with the treacherous sounding name of 'Thorne', he turns out to be entirely innocent. As the actual murderer, Levison has also used the name 'Thorne' by sheer coincidence, and is punished with transportation rather than death; this act of justice has anyway been pre-empted by the more satisfying moment when he is comically ducked in a pond. Educated as a lady and derided for her class ambition, Afy duly 'falls' in time-honoured fashion (like Isabel, she is a victim of Levison's seductive charm), but rehabilitates herself through marriage to a naive suitor, and is last seen planning fashionable sleeping arrangements to avoid his attentions. Through such parodies of the unscrupulous aristocrat and the class-crossing 'double' as sensational devices, the novel subtly suggests that sensation

fiction does not have the first claim to radical credentials, in the literary construction of gender.

Like *The Woman in White* (1860), the novel does make symbolic use of the double (most obviously Carlyle / Levison and Isabel / Barbara. As Jay observes, 'The world of East Lynne positively teems with doubles'; according to her reading, 'Such excess of parallels and contrasts complicates the simple dichotomy of moralized reward and punishment often preached by the narrator' (xxii). When Walter Hartright muses that 'If every sorrow and suffering set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of Miss Fairlie's face, then, and then only, Anne Catherick and she would be the twin-sisters of chance resemblance, the living reflexions of one another' (97), the reader is primed to expect that suffering will at some point reduce Laura to the same state of mental weakness as Anne Catherick. However the reversal of Isabel and Barbara is both less sensational and more complex. Where Collins makes a point about gender construction through the melodramatic device of substituting Laura for Anne and placing her in an asylum, Barbara politely offers cups of tea to the supposed Mme Vine, although the reader is later told that 'in her heart of hearts, she had never liked her. She could not have told why. Was it instinct? Very probably. The birds of the air, the beasts of the field, the fishes of the sea have their instincts; and man has his' (594).

East Lynne repeatedly shows sensation motifs as peripheral, emphasising instead the centrality of domestic female experience. Throughout the novel a carefully orchestrated series of domestic scenes allows the narrator to explore the ways in which femininity is played out across the different classes, through role playing and mirroring, refraction and mobility. In particular readers are knocked off balance by the conflicting views of Lady Isabel offered both by the narrator and by other characters. As Elisabeth Jay notes in her introduction to the OUP edition, 'we should perhaps not be surprised by the mixed messages [*East Lynne*] has conveyed to successive generations of readers' (xx), who have read the text as a vicarious indulgence in female rebellion, or conversely, as the condign punishment of illicit sexuality. The narrator's treatment of the mother turned 'fallen woman' Lady Isabel Vane, is notoriously inconsistent, contributing to the 'moral confusion' (Jay, xxiii) of

the narrative voice. Further raising the stakes, the novel is punctuated by the sentimental mode at key moments. Its affective scenes gave rise to some of the more memorable jokes of the period – ridicule of one stage production's 'Dead! And never called me mother!' is up there with Wilde's observation that it would take a heart of stone not to laugh at the death of Little Nell.

It is possible to read Isabel, as both Barbara and Miss Corny do, through the lens of class antagonism which features so prominently in other sensation novels such as *The Woman in White* and *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). As Maunder notes, 'That the aristocratic Isabel Carlyle's moral and physical degeneration is central to the novel can scarcely be contended, for her every mistake, however excusable, is met with a near-deafening chorus of condemnation, in which the loudest voice is that of the narrator herself' ('Stepchildren of Nature' 62). In his exploration of degeneration in the novel, Maunder contextualises this condemnation of Isabel's actions through mid-century debates over the moral future of the race; as he explains, '...by 1861 any moderately well-read woman or man would have understood the basic tenets of the degeneration debate and would have condemned Isabel's lack of self control accordingly. Thus, Mrs Henry Wood must herself be re-evaluated as a guardian of bourgeois propriety and the moral health of the nation' (69).

But notwithstanding this apparently conservative narrative stance, the picture of upper class degeneration is offset by the sustained sympathy the reader is encouraged to feel for Isabel, achieved through the sheer length of the novel (she is centre stage for most of the three volumes) and through the accumulation of detail this format allows. She is definitively not a precursor to Lady Audley, whose major crime is arguably to claim a class status to which she has no right, rather than her dubious legal position as being already married to George Talboys. In *East Lynne* the emerging themes of illicit sexuality and social instability are specifically focused on, and mediated through, the value placed by the characters themselves on the idea of home rather than class.

Notwithstanding this focus on segregated domestic space, one of the novel's most important contributions to the emerging sensation genre lies in its persistent use of repeated or refracted images, to draw seemingly opposing or unrelated characters into new relations. Most shockingly, Carlyle's behaviour links him to Levison, in the threat he poses to Barbara at the start of the novel. His very display of affection for her, giving her the present of a locket during a moonlit conversation outside her home, is apparently the reverse of Levison's casual act of desecration, as he carelessly breaks the cross given to Isabel by her mother before her death. Nonetheless his failure to register the possible implications (it is an intimate gift, worn next to the skin and designed to carry hair or a picture of the giver), leads to disaster, when Barbara assumes that it is a love token. Unable to withdraw emotionally when she learns of her mistake, she ultimately risks her reputation when she is overheard by a gossip-loving servant, declaring love for Carlyle even after his marriage to Isabel.

Heidi Hansson notes that emotion in the novel is a key trope linking female characters, who variously struggle with and fail to control, their passions. Notably 'The same pattern occurs regardless of what social class the female character belongs to' (160). Elsewhere the novel repeatedly uses the recognisable 'sensation' strategy of attaching significance to seemingly unremarkable events or objects. However it often deploys repeated tropes to link different characters, rather than to create plot twists. In the first chapter of the novel Mrs Hare is too afraid to order tea before the usual time, despite her thirst. When Mr Hare churlishly tells her to wait, despite Barbara's intervention, he both reveals a tyrannical appropriation of her domestic role (tea drinking is routinely associated with feminine authority over the home routine) and foreshadows Cornelia's autocratic behaviour when she symbolically denies Isabel tea on her return to East Lynne as Carlyle's wife, later in the novel. This denial of the woman's rightful position in the house is significant, not least because Isabel's ultimate desertion of the home is linked as much to her lack of confidence as it is to her more titillating infatuation with Levison.

Isabel's final return to East Lynne, disguised as Mme Vine the governess, provides an obvious opportunity to position her against Afy, the other class-crossing fallen

women and former mistress of Levison. Instead she is implicitly compared to the vaguely comical Cornelia, whose contempt for attractive dress seems to have inspired her own disguise (including enormous glasses and cumbersome wrappings around her face and throat). This connection is reinforced when she retires from her first meeting with Carlyle and Barbara, and Carlyle dismisses the question of who she resembles with the words, 'I don't know. Nobody in particular. ... Let us have tea in, Barbara' (414). Characteristically, the sensational motif is once more supplanted by a domestic detail as a focus of interest.

Linking Mrs Hare to Isabel, and (as forceful younger characters who must find their place in the well-ordered home) Barbara to Carlyle, these repeated allusions to the ritual of tea-drinking reinforce the importance of a carefully balanced domestic order, and the consequences of failing to achieve it. Barbara is ultimately assimilated into the domestic world of the novel, signalled by her competent management of East Lynne. Isabel's upper class education had left her incapable of adhering to this middle class ideal, leaving her vulnerable to her sister in law's interference, as is made clear during the painful scene in which she admits at breakfast on the first morning, that she has no idea how to order meat from the butcher.

Her mistake is to assume that her inability to manage the household is an innate failing rather than simply a gap in her education. As Judith Flanders explains, 'Professionalization, a set of skills to be mastered, was not confined to the outside world: women were expected to acquire the necessary skills to be good managers, administrators, organizers in their own realm' (79). Isabel does not confide in her husband and start to acquire these skills, purely because she feels embarrassed by the presence of Cornelia. Tellingly, as Jeanne Elliott notes, 'To an almost absurd degree she is unaware of the value of money, the way it is earned, and the requirements of domestic economy. She has no idea of her husband's income. When Miss Carlyle tells her she is ruining Archibald by her extravagance, she accepts the accusation, and suffers prolonged feelings of guilt' (337). Isabel Vane, Steinlight notes, 'is just one too many in a household already overpopulated with women. Thus, for all the scandal of her seduction by the classic libertine who carries her off to France, her flight from East Lynne is not so much a desertion of her proper place

as a concession to her own self-evident redundancy (510). Specifically, Isabel feels that she has been edged out of her proper role by threatening middle class women, who are capable of performing it better than she can herself.

By contrast Barbara, who effectually deputises for her invalid mother, will finally be rewarded for her capable management of the home, when Cornelia is ejected from East Lynne to make way for her as Carlyle's second wife. Carlyle himself comments explicitly that this decision is based on his belated knowledge of Isabel's suffering – by implication, he links the tyranny of the respectable female with the disgrace of the fallen woman, and is careful to pre-empt a repetition of this disaster.

The ways in which female characters negotiate domestic spaces is a crucial feature of the novel. The narrator constantly draws the reader's attention both to the moral value of home, with the concomitant loss of caste involved in being expelled from it, and to the ways in which women inhabit space and move from one scene to another. Barbara is fully aware that her appearances at Carlyle's office compromise her, but as an invalid, her mother is even further restricted. For this reason she cannot exercise her right as a married woman, and see him in connection with Richard's plight as the supposed murderer of Hallijohn. When the Earl of Mount Severn dies early in the first volume, Isabel is forbidden to be with him for the last few hours of his life and the narrator admits that had she been his sister, Carlyle would literally have turned the key as he left her in another room. In this scene Carlyle exerts the generic authority of 'a hardy, callous man [who] can go where you may not' (87), although unknown to Isabel, he is also the new master of East Lynne.

Throughout the novel, the reader has been directed to see representations of home, and women's movement within it, as a more crucial direction of character than the dramas of the plot itself. For this reason Isabel occupies different roles within the same aristocratic (later middle class) home, and different roles again during her brief residence at her uncle's house and her two interludes in lodgings abroad. At the start of the novel she is, unknown to herself, already playing a part which is no longer hers by right. During her first visit to East Lynne, the young women from neighbouring families appear in their best clothes at church, only to find that Isabel's refined taste has led her to dress with perfect simplicity. By contrast she

ostentatiously wears evening dress and diamonds for Mr Kane's concert, in order to signal both her regard for Kane himself and her patronage of the event, as a leader of county fashion. It is during this very concert that she is summoned to her father's deathbed. He dies deeply in debt, leaving his daughter wholly unprovided for, a double catastrophe that leads to her closer intimacy with Carlyle, and ultimately to her marriage, and subsequent adulterous elopement with Levison.

Isabel's fall from a position of rank and influence is first signalled by the ambivalent place she occupies in her uncle's house during his absence, where she is viewed with hostility and resentment by his wife, the new Countess Mount Severn (there is no obvious connection between Emma Mount Severn and Barbara Hare, but Isabel will come full circle as the unwanted inmate of Barbara's family circle at the end of the novel). From Castle Manning she returns to East Lynne as Carlyle's wife, with a concomitant loss of caste.

Following her marriage she will twice occupy lodgings in France, an indicator of dubious reputation in many novels of the period (perhaps most famously, Thackeray's *Becky Sharpe* is suspiciously at home in French towns). Gissing would satirise this attitude as late as 1893, when a character in *The Odd Women* advises the repressed Widdowson against taking his wife to France on holiday. He describes the French as 'an immoral lot' on the authority of Ouida's novels, and advises that 'You'd have all sorts of people trying to make acquaintance with Mrs Widdowson. They're a queer lot, I believe' (178). It is during her stay in Boulogne that Levison, taking advantage of the relaxed etiquette permitted to English visitors, insists on escorting her whenever he sees her leaving the house. Ironically reworking Carlyle's claims to social freedom on the grounds of his family relationship to Barbara, the narrator shows Levison inviting himself into Isabel's lodgings, 'He probably deemed that between connexions great ceremony might be dispensed with' (207).

It is only with her fall that Isabel is able to travel freely through public spaces outside the home. At this point, the novel highlights its sensationalist characterisation, as the aberrant character becomes fully liberated for the first time. Again, it is the female protagonist who supplies this sensational interest, in contrast

to the somewhat perfunctorily handled murder plot on which her story hinges. Able to visit her for the first time after her separation from Levison, the Earl of Mount Severn resumes responsibility for her welfare, making her an allowance 'to take care – so far as I can – that you do not lapse lower' (303). The narrator's covert insistence on her innate purity is forcefully expressed in this scene, as Isabel is slow to apprehend the significance of the remark. She acquiesces in her uncle's judgement that she will live 'quietly' (308); however her fallen and therefore more independent status actually allows her a greater degree of freedom and mobility than she had enjoyed at the beginning of the novel, the last occasion on which she had received money from him. Shortly after this she is seen travelling by train with her and Levison's child, in notable contrast to the closed coaches in which she was confined during her time as an Earl's daughter, and later a solicitor's wife.

Isabel will take up residence at East Lynne for a third and final time, by the melodramatic (and morally questionable) device of disguising herself and presenting herself as a governess. As the new governess to her own children, Isabel typifies and also complicates what would become a familiar trope of sensation fiction, the threatening 'outsider' who successfully infiltrates the respectable middle class home. In 1864 Sheridan Le Fanu would capitalise on this anxiety through the rebarbative figure of Mme de la Rougierre, who terrorises the motherless young Maud Ruthyn and persuades her kind but abstracted father to ignore her complaints. In this formulation the governess inveigles her way into the upper class home and plots with her accomplices at a distance, to tempt a solitary young woman to 'fall', through either persuading or if necessary coercing her, into marriage to a dissolute cousin who wishes to secure her fortune. The governess herself is already suspect, as a foreigner (she is French), and finally turns out to be the former mistress of Maud's murderous uncle.

In this context Isabel's status is doubly problematic, because having worked as a governess for the last two years, she both is and is not what she appears to be, a point which is emphasised in her French title 'Mme'. In what is surely a mocking allusion to the 'foreign' infiltration of the middle class home as a staple of sensation fiction, Justice Hare's parodic denunciation of French governesses makes the point

sufficiently clearly, 'You may laugh, Miss Lucy: but I can tell you, you'd have been changed into a frog, or something worse, if they had turned you over to a French madmoselle. If your poor mother hadn't had a French madmoselle of a governess in the first years of her life, she'd never have – have –' (424). Employed partly to protect Lucy from the moral effects of having an adulterous mother, as a governess, Isabel is in any case difficult to place, even without the added complications (for the reader at least) of her rank on the one hand, and her history as the divorced wife of her employer on the other.

In her study of the Victorian governess, Kathryn Hughes argues that the ambiguous status of this figure was the perfect vehicle for exploring gender construction, playing on readers' fears that any educated lady could potentially 'fall' to the position of governess:

Once this elision had been made between the governess and all middle-class women, the way was open for novelists to use her to explore far more than life in the schoolroom. As a lady who was nonetheless exempt from some of the more constricting aspects of ladyhood, she represented the perfect place to mount an enquiry into the social and moral codes which middle-class women were increasingly obliged to observe (4).

Hughes notes that as the paid performer of tasks symbolically associated with the mother, and specifically with maternal instinct, 'She marks the point at which the ideology of bourgeois femininity began to break down to reveal itself as a pragmatic and provisional set of myths and rules which buttressed the existing political and social order' (204).

Specifically, the governess could be described in terms of fallenness, making her an appropriate vehicle for *East Lynne's* depiction of the Isabel of volume 3:

Although the vast majority of governesses had not been the victims of actual seduction, the paradigm of the fallen woman seemed a particularly appropriate way to understand the situation of those women who had been brought up to expect a life of leisure before being obliged to 'descend' to the schoolroom. They too had 'fallen' from an absolute state of gentility, while still

managing to cling to the outward forms of behaviour which marked their former state (120).

Taking this idea to its logical extreme, the narrator once again uses a recognisably realist plot, the arrival of a new governess, as a sensational device for getting Isabel back in to the house. This act of infiltration anticipates Wilkie Collins's use of the disguise motif in *No Name* 1862, in which the beautiful Magdalene Vanstone disguises herself first as a middle aged governess of unremarkable appearance, and subsequently as a servant, in order to pursue her plot of revenge against Noel Vanstone. At one level Isabel's altered appearance – caused by the train crash in which her illegitimate child is killed, and she herself is assumed to have died - is suggestive of the device repeatedly used by Dickens, in which transgressive characters such as Estella in *Great Expectations* (published in the same year as *East Lynne*) are punished by the loss of their all-powerful beauty.

From this point the reader's sympathy is invoked by a series of tableaux, in which Isabel re-enacts Barbara's part as the jealous witness of domestic intimacy. This third volume includes a reprise of an earlier scene in which Barbara had watched as Isabel played and sang to Carlyle; Isabel now watches unseen as Barbara sings the same song in the same room:

Lady Isabel stole across the drawing-room to the other door, which was ajar. Barbara was seated at the piano, and Mr Carlyle stood by her, his arm on her chair, and bending his face on a level with hers, possibly to look at the music. So, once had stolen, once had peeped the unhappy Barbara, to hear this self-same song. *She* had been his wife then; she had received his kisses when it was over. Their positions were reversed (431).

Notably the sexual jealousy between the two women is played out in more detail than the actual relationship of Barbara and Carlyle.

However the most obvious tension is focused on the management of the children; with its requirement for a high degree of co-operation, the role of the governess is both one of authority over the children themselves and deference to the mistress of the house. Prior to her brother's second marriage, Cornelia has controlled the

domestic hierarchy with both insight and determination. In an obvious undermining of the Richard Hare plot, Cornelia hears him in the house but assumes that Miss Manning is stealing in for an assignation with Carlyle, a response which both acknowledges and undermines the class equality between employer and employee. In the continued dialogue between realism and sensation, it is surely no coincidence that the feared interloper, the amorous governess, turns out to be 'only' the assumed murderer, Richard Hare.

The narrator assures the reader that 'governesses at East Lynne were regarded as gentlewomen; treated well and liberally' (402). However it quickly becomes clear that Barbara, who might be expected to be similarly aware of the presence of a young and attractive 'social equal' in the house, is less comfortable in her own managerial role than was Cornelia. Perhaps reassured by the extraordinary appearance of her new inmate, she begins the interview with Isabel by outlining her views on the relative positions of mother, governess and children. Candidly admitting, 'I never was fond of being troubled with children', (406), she argues that a nurse should have 'the *trouble* of the children, their noise, their romping... But I hope I shall never fail to gather my children round me daily, at stated and convenient times, for higher purposes... A child should never hear aught from its mother's lips but persuasive gentleness, and this becomes impossible, if she is very much with her children' (407). Flanders suggests that, 'The two women agree on this point, and as the reader has spent hundreds of pages learning to sympathize with Lady Isabel it is hard to imagine that hers was not Mrs Henry Wood's view too' (38). Nonetheless this conversation between the two women further complicates the relationship between them. Perhaps surprisingly, Isabel's first instinct is to seek Barbara's approval as a fellow mother, albeit the comments have pointedly referred to Isabel's children rather than Barbara's own. Speaking of her own child in a slightly altered register, she says that, 'If I and Mr Carlyle have to be out in the evening, baby gives way. I should never give up my husband for my baby; never, dearly as I love him' (409).

That Barbara, like her predecessor, feels uncertain in her own role is apparent in her manner of addressing the 'governess', which veers from the familiar, as she gossips

about Isabel herself, to the abrupt 'you will be ready at three o'clock' (514) to take William to the doctor. Again, Isabel is liberated rather than constrained by her fallen status, at least in the sense that she is now permitted to be present at the death bed of her son. Notably Carlyle, who had forcefully kept her away from her father, is now similarly protective of Barbara (who is expecting their second baby), ironically shielding her rather than Isabel, from the news that the child is dying.

Towards the end of the novel, the defining strands of domesticity and drama are re-threaded, in keeping with the conventions of the sensation genre. Isabel's own death is the plot device that allows her to be alone with, and reconciled to, Carlyle at the end of the novel. Hughes suggests that:

Fair where Isabel is dark, faithful where she has been flighty, maternal where she was sexual, Barbara represents the ideal of English motherhood from which the governess has fallen, the Madonna to Isabel's Whore. Significantly, there is only space for the two women in the book as long as they continue to embody these polarities. Once Lady Isabel has been recognised and forgiven by Carlyle, she is no longer required to live out the darker side of female nature, and her harrowing deathbed scene effectively brings the narrative swiftly to a close (8).

While the subdued eroticism of the final encounter between them seems to be vaguely suspected by Barbara, whose first question on hearing of it will be, 'has this taken your love from me?' (623), it is containable within the moral economy of the novel because, as Maunder notes, 'Isabel's tragedy takes place within a cultural framework centred around family and home that Isabel both understands and ultimately seeks to uphold' ('Mapping the Victorian Sensation Novel' 9). Or as Sally Shuttleworth puts it, 'The more she sins, the more angelic she becomes' (47). However the final death scene reasserts Isabel's moral status only by confining her again, rendering her too weak to leave the room and ask to see her former husband. Their renewed intimacy can only take place in the sanctioned context of the sickroom. During these last moments, Isabel's voice becomes increasingly weak, allowing Carlyle to bend his head 'until his breath nearly mingled with hers. But, suddenly, his face grew red with a scarlet flush, and he lifted it again' (616) as he

remembers Barbara. This near miss, by implication, sanitises the long deferred moment when he 'suffered his lips to rest upon hers' (617), a farewell kiss permissible even then only because Isabel is at the point of death.

While at least it accords Isabel a proper death scene, *East Lynne* quickly reverts to an obviously parodic treatment of the fallen woman plot, through the attention devoted to Afy Hallijohn in the final chapters. Unlike the unfortunate Isabel, 'Her yielding to the sins of the flesh only causes her a few months of embarrassment and the loss of her gentlemanly suitor' (Elliott 342), and it is Afy whose desire for the ideal home will be finally achieved, through her marriage to Jiffin, a minor character produced purely for this purpose. As she plots this marriage, Afy mentally redesigns the house itself, imaginatively furnishing it in fashionable style (more knowing than her aristocratic counterpart, she has already decided that she and her husband will have separate beds). In imagining how she would furnish Joe Jiffin's house, she ironically echoes the keynote of the novel itself, 'I'm sure he'd let me turn the house into a theatre' (532). Afy is of course Isabel's comic double, but elements of both characters surely appear in the governess turned Lady of Braddon's 1862 *Lady Audley's Secret*.

As suggested in the 'dead and never called me mother' jokes which continued throughout the century, *East Lynne* itself would become subject to parody by other writers. The trope of the repentant and dying woman, repeatedly foreshadowed in the text, would be redeployed in 1867 in the 'almost fallen' Kate Chester of Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely But Too Well*. Just as *East Lynne* warns the reader of Isabel's fall long before her marriage and climactic elopement, Kate's sexual frailty (and her early death) is disclosed early on, and the narrator reverts to it insistently throughout the novel. Like Isabel, Kate is repeatedly tempted by a known libertine, although she is rescued from her planned elopement, and instead devotes herself, like Gaskell's Ruth, to tending the sick.

Her failure to die in a fever hospital after refusing to leave her work at the height of a malaria epidemic, only underscores the familiarity of this trope. The reader is encouraged to assume at this point that the expected outcome is simply being

deferred - that Broughton is subtly undermining the familiar device of the heroine who repents, loses her looks and dies young, only becomes clear in the last pages of the novel. Kate has been the only person present at the deathbeds of both her serious lovers (her cousin George has been easily rerouted to her sister), allowing her to contrast the religious overtones of the one, who really does fall a victim to the epidemic, and the despairing Byronic remorse of the other, who is thrown by his horse. In the event her own death, while it symbolically finishes the novel, is an anti-climax assigned not to her tragic youth, but to a time when 'youth was just beginning to merge into gray beautiful middle age'; the reader is simply told, 'he who is always reading over the long muster-roll of human names came to the name of Kate Chester; and she, hearing, rose up' (375).

This ostentatious failure to provide readers with a dramatic ending, echoes the comic resolution of *East Lynne*, with its triumphant display of Afy's ambivalent status; as she swaggers through the public streets, she reminds the reader that she is both fallen *and* the intended bride of a respectable townsman. This final renegotiation of female experience, radiates beyond the text itself, as novels such as Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* and Broughton's *Not Wisely But Too Well*, suggest new ways of imagining and negotiating the figure of the motherless young woman. Read against each other, such re-workings create a palimpsest, allowing the character of Isabel herself to be constantly rewritten.

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