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Beyond the subversion / containment binary: Middlebrow fiction and social change

Cornelia Wächter and Kate Macdonald

1

The relations between cultural change and literary production have been subject to extensive research and discussion, particularly in the study of twentieth-century British literary culture. Avant-garde or high modernism is commonly characterised by radical uncertainty on an ontological as well as an epistemological level, which finds artistic expression in the subject matter, as well as in aesthetic experimentation. In the words of Michael Levenson, "[t]he catastrophe of World War I, and, before that, the labor struggles, the emergence of feminism, the race for empire, these inescapable forces of social modernization were not simply looming on the outside as the destabilizing context of cultural Modernism; they penetrated the interior of artistic invention".[1] While critics havealways readily acknowledged this with regard to avant-garde literature of the period, more popular, more accessible, and less rhetorically innovative literary genres have received little attention, or have been regarded as unacceptably conservative in their form and content. Since the 1990s, however, a straightforward distinction between avant-garde modernist writing and popular, accessible literature has been challenged in a number of ways.[2] Largely influenced by cultural studies, new scholarly approaches have "[discouraged] the popular view of modernism as a highly selective and monolithic coterie of privileged white male artists".[3] The assumption of inherent conservatism in less experimental writing has been shown to be reductive.[4] We

[1] Michael Levenson, "Introduction", *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 1-8, 4.
[2] See, for instance, Lynne Hapgood and Nancy L. Paxton, eds., *Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel, 1900-30* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).
[3] Lisa Rado, "The Case for Cultural/Gender/Modernist Studies", *Modernism, Gender, and Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach*, ed. Lisa Rado (New York: Garland, 1997), 3-14, 12.
[4] See, for example, Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991).

recognise that lines of distinction between the content and nature of cultural productions remain provisional and permeable, or simply nebulous, as Nicola Humble describes it. [5] Nevertheless, we believe that there are differences between the literary 'brows' (classically, the highbrow, lowbrow and middlebrow) that can be revealed by exploring the interrelations between literature and cultural change.

In the present article we argue that British middlebrow literature often adheres to conservative plot structures aimed at a generic market, and that its impact in socio-cultural terms requires and rewards scrutiny. As Jane Eldridge Miller observes, "it was not easy for [Edwardian] New Woman novelists to change the signification of strongly rooted conventions which associated marriage with feminine success and the suffering or death of the heroine with some kind of moral retribution",[6] avoiding the trap of narrative containment. We will examine the subversive potential within such containment, with suicide, one of its classical forms, as an example. To this purpose, we will use Victoria Cross's novel *Six Chapters of a Man's Life* (1903)[7] to illustrate a distinctively middlebrow way of contesting constructions of gender and sexuality. Its publication at the beginning of the avant-garde period indicates that Cross was among the New Woman novelists who in the words of Eldridge Miller "tried to make their heroines' failure an indictment of society, not an indictment of their heroines' ideals."[8]

Although the earliest known use of 'middlebrow' dates from 1923,[9] it was defined in 1884 by Walter Besant as a recognised literary phenomenon without using the term.[10] Kate

[5] Nicola Humble, "Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading". *Modernist Cultures* 6.1 (2011), 41-59, 42.
[6] Jane Eldridge Miller, "The Crisis of 1895: Realism and the Feminization of Fiction", *Modernism*, ed. Tim Middleton (London: Routledge, 2003). 38-68, 48.
[7] Victoria Cross [Annie Sophie Cory], *Six Chapters of a Man's Life* (London: Walter Scott, n.d.).
[8] Eldridge Miller 48.
[9] Marjorie Bowen in *The Daily Chronicle*, cited in *The Queenslander*, 12 May 1923, 7.
[10] Walter Besant, "The Art of Fiction", *The Art of Fiction*, by Walter Besant and Henry James (Boston MA: Cupples, Upham & Co, 1885). 1-48, 38-39.

Macdonald and Christoph Singer have shown how middlebrow was a transitional mode at the end of the long nineteenth century, and present evidence to demonstrate the legitimate use of the term to categorise texts produced after 1900.[11] Gender and related issues of identity are central to understanding the evolution of middlebrow as a reading experience and as a marketing concept for this transitional period, when Cross was active. Our discussion will show how reading the novel in terms of John Fiske's concept of the *producerly text*[12] allows us to uncover severe social criticism in an apparent case of the narrative containment of gender- and sexuality related anxieties.

2

The category, or accusation, of 'middlebrow' is applied indiscriminately by critics to the producer, the distributor and the consumer, thus defining it from the outside. It is important to consider how such a critical perspective also applies bias. The best-known use of the term, from *Punch* in 1925, refers to the taste of the reader, or, more accurately, the consumer, since middlebrow cultural forms are not confined to the novel. In 1925, these consumers are "a new type, the 'middlebrow' […] consist[ing] of people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like".[13] In 1924, Irish music reviews used 'middlebrow' as a cultural indicator referring to consumers' musical taste,[14] and a London drama critic referred to plays "designed to appeal to that middle area which lies between high-brow and low-brow".[15] Taste is, therefore, crucial in assessing the cultural position of middlebrow.

[11] Kate Macdonald and Christoph Singer. "Introduction: Transitions and Cultural Formations". *Transitions in Middlebrow Writing, 1880-1930*. Ed. Kate Macdonald and Christoph Singer. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 1-13.
[12] Fiske, John. "Moments of Television: Neither the Text nor the Audience." *Television, Audiences and Cultural Power*. Ed. Seiter, Ellen, et al. London: Routledge, 1989. 56–78. 99.
[13] "Charivari", *Punch*, 23 December 1925, 673.
[14] 3 May 1924, *Freeman's Journal*, 6.
[15] Anon, 'The London Season', *The Saturday Review*, 7 June 1924, 581.

It is important to consider the cultural evidence, and what it tells us about production as well as consumption. Middlebrow emerged in the early years of the twentieth century after a long and unconsidered gestation, developing "different relations with broader trends in society".[16] Examining the publication history of a text that was reissued over several years or even decades in differently-priced editions, or how the career of a novelist relates to their record of production, or the marketing of a magazine that survived against vigorous competition in a crowded market, will help us to understand how middlebrow sold as well as how it was read.

This examination shows how middlebrow publications and authorship function in parallel with other streams of cultural production, and with its market as well as its producers. Macdonald and Singer have noted that

> the difficulty with studying middlebrow […] is that it never had any organization, and had no standard-bearing leaders or advance forces. Modernism had Futurists, Impressionists and Vorticists to attract the public's attention and prime the market for the production of avant-garde literature and art in the 1910s. There was no such trumpet-blast of a moment for middlebrow. Middlebrow never had a manifesto.[17]

Middlebrow emerged from a Victorian reading culture in which taste derived from literacy, social aspiration and self-improvement produced demarcations that solidified much later into cultural value judgments. For the period we are considering, middlebrow is most usefully conceptualised as one of several possible points on a continuum of reading taste and intensity. Highbrow sits to one side, mass market and lowbrow on the other. The actual loci on the continuum depend on the individual cultural values and aspirations of the consumer.

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[16] Brooker, P and A Thacker, 'General Introduction', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines. Vol 1. Britain and Northern Ireland 1880–1955*, Brooker, P and A Thacker (eds) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–26, 18.
[17] Macdonald and Singer "Introduction" 5.

Humble draws our attention to the remarkable difficulties in defining the term. In the interwar years, there was an almost pathological worry about classification that she identifies as indicative in itself, suggesting to "make sense of [middlebrow] not by replicating the elaborate processes of ruling in and out which the guardians of the highbrow pursued so obsessively, but in understanding that those acts of inclusion and exclusion were absolutely the point".[18] The very process of definition is a process of containment, positioning middlebrow both as an act and an object. This speaks to the fluidity of middlebrow as a cultural force, and also identifies the temporal moment when this fluidity was most challenging to the modernist project. This was the 1920s, when, as Humble notes , class consciousness reinforced 'brow' consciousness. [19] Education and intellectual snobbery completed the process of containing middlebrow within a palisade of highbrow criticisms. Humble's point that middlebrow became most challenging to critics at the moment when English literature in British education became "recognised as a serious subject, one capable of rigorous examination" connects directly to the rapid containment of middlebrow texts as unworthy of the newly possible 'study'. [20] In the 1920s and 1930s, the canonising forces of literary criticism set middlebrow authors, texts, forms and genres aside, segregating them until very recently from critical scrutiny. But at the beginning of the twentieth century, middlebrow was more evanescent, not needing to be contained. Macdonald and Singer assert that "middlebrow emerged as a miasmic force, an uneffaceable cultural presence that existed through market forces despite the semi-organized efforts of some modernist critics to restrict and shame its consumers".[21] In the early years of the twentieth century, containing such a miasma was not yet a concern.

[18] Humble, "Sitting", 43.
[19] Humble, "Sitting", 44-45.
[20] Humble, "Sitting", 45.
[21] Macdonald and Singer, "Introduction" 5.

3

Nicola Humble has theorised the reading position of middlebrow consumers by using the body, suggesting a visual delineation between sitting forward and sitting backward when reading, with the position of the body being intimately related to the assumed cultural value of the text under study, or the text being consumed. The difference between 'study' and 'consume' is significant, since Humble asserts that to lean back while reading connotes relaxation, while to sit forward invokes a conscious intellectual effort. The former position is middlebrow, the latter is highbrow.[22] Yet she also notes that one of the characteristics of any discussion of a middlebrow text or author is "the nebulousness of the divide between the highbrow and the middlebrow" . [23] This supports the suggestion that middlebrow as a reading position depends upon many variables: the eye, the taste, the perspective of the beholder.

Middlebrow can be regarded as a type of reading position, and as a textual form it can also be regarded as *inviting* such a reading position. Humble relates 'consumption' to Roland Barthes' 'readerly' texts and 'study' to 'writerly' texts. [24] We, however, share the view of Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter that middlebrow texts are best characterised as *producerly* in John Fiske's terms.[25] Fiske famously contests the common claim that popular entertainment, especially television, almost forces consumers into passive reception. To that end, he complements Barthes's two types of fictional text, the readerly and the writerly, with a third one: the *producerly text*.[26] According to Barthes, the readerly text is suitable for passive reception without noticeable or deliberate cognitive effort. "[C]ontrolled by the

[22] Humble, "Sitting" 42.
[23] Humble, "Sitting", 42.
[24] Humble, "Sitting", 41-42.
[25] Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter. "Introduction: 'All Granite, Fog and Female Fiction'." *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890-1945.* Leiden: Brill, 2016. 1-17, 3.
[26] Fiske, John. "Moments of Television: Neither the Text nor the Audience." *Television, Audiences and Cultural Power*. Ed. Seiter, Ellen, et al. London: Routledge, 1989. 56–78. Print. 99.

principle of non-contradiction",[27] it is a text catering to escapist tendencies. In Fiske's words, it "invites an essentially passive, receptive, disciplined reader who tends to accept its meanings as already made. It is a relatively closed text, easy to read and undemanding of its reader".[28] In its relation to its socio-cultural context, the text sides with and serves to perpetuate the dominant ideology. This type of text can be associated with the lowbrow – catering to 'the masses' – as well as being used to encompass all that is 'popular'. The writerly text, by contrast, is cognitively demanding and forces the reader into an active reading process and active participation in the generation of meaning – 'studying' in Humble's terms. This could be paradigmatically represented by avant-garde modernism, the "highbrow", in its demands to not just "make it new" but also to "make it difficult" and thereby to evoke defamiliarisation, in Russian Formalist terms. However, it would a mistake to neatly assign the 'writerly' with the avant garde, and the 'producerly' with indistinguishable mass-market fiction. Similar to the importance of the individual perspective in placing a text or an author on a "brow" continuum, noted above, the "browness" of a text depends primarily on who is reading it. A well-read and highly-educated reader could find a "writerly" text relaxing, and thus call it middlebrow, whereas a less educated reader might find it demanding, calling it highbrow: thus the same text could be given different "brow" values by different readers, an example of the variables mentioned above. If we think of a middlebrow novel as a producerly text, Fiske would thus describe it as having

> the accessibility of a readerly one, and can theoretically be read in that easy way by those of its readers who are comfortably accommodated within the dominant ideology […], but it also has the openness of the writerly. The difference is that it does not require this writerly activity, nor does it set the rules to control it. Rather, it offers itself up to popular production.[29]

[27] Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. 1974. New York: Hill and Wang, 2008. Print. 156.
[28] Fiske 99.
[29] Fiske 99.

The complex of variables that influence a reader's response to a text will include acknowledgement of its "producerly", "writerly" and "reader" qualities, which it may have in different amounts, at different points within the text, and may also vary depending on other variables, such as having prepared the text beforehand with study or acquiring background knowledge on its cultural reception, or having read it accidentally, on a train, at leisure. These variables also influence the reader's adoption of the 'studying' reading position or leaning back in relaxed consumption. The text does not simply fortify a single dominant ideology. In fact, we maintain that the middlebrow often presents a significant challenge to dominant ideologies, especially regarding gender and sexuality, while still allowing for the possibility of narrative enjoyment. [30]

4

From a constructivist perspective, the *distinction* of the brows has a close relationship and is intertwined with patriarchal ideology. This is particularly pronounced in the modernist period. Tellingly, Bonnie Kime Scott notes that perhaps the most-quoted statement in her introduction to *The Gender of Modernism* (1990) was that "by the middle of the twentieth century, modernism had been 'unconsciously gendered masculine' in its selection of privileged authors, and in its style and concerns".[31] While avant-garde modernism was generally connoted as masculine and superior, the middlebrow was connoted as feminine and inferior,[32] and this gendered categorisation was directly related to class anxieties and growing concerns regarding literary commercialisation and the sanctity of the academic canon. In Pierre Bourdieu's words, "the manner of using symbolic goods, especially those regarded as

[30] See Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter. "Introduction". 3-4.
[31] Bonnie Kime Scott. Introduction. *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*. Ed. Bonnie Kime Scott. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007. Print. 1.
[32] Melissa Schaub, *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction. The Female Gentleman* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 3-4.

the attributes of excellence, constitutes one of the key markers of 'class' and also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction".[33] Literary taste is such an "attribute of excellence" and not purely subjective; it is the product of exposition and formal education. Immersion in the 'right' kinds of cultural products generates the 'connoisseur' or 'native speaker' of high culture, whereas institutionalised education without sufficient immersion can only ever produce the (typically middle-class) 'second-language learner' (59-61). Taste or 'cultural language proficiency' gives the guardians of high culture the leverage to expose those encroaching upon their sacred space as impostors, and those closest to the borders of one's own group on the social ladder are those met with most emphatic derision, often even visceral intolerance (49).

Bourdieu observes that "[t]he ideology of natural taste owes its plausibility and its efficacy to the fact that […] it *naturalizes* real differences, converting differences in the mode of acquisition of culture into differences of nature."[34] Patriarchal ideology operates in an analogous manner, not only constructing one gender as inferior to another, but also naturalising the constructedness of gender as expressive of biological difference. Literary taste and gender are both parts of an individual's *habitus,* and both are deployed to justify factual inequality. With reference to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Paul Delany points out that

> [t]he purchasing power of the female reader generated the successful female popular author, a constant target for modernist misogyny. Women's power as consumers and sponsors of art made them, in the eyes of Pound and Eliot,

[33] Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Oxon: Routledge, 2010. Routledge Classics. 59.
[34] Bourdieu 61.

> threats to their phallic autonomy. The modernists routinely produced work of *ressentiment* against the milieu that sustained them.[35]

Accordingly, the dictate of taste, supporting the hegemonic 'masculine' avant-garde as the 'true' form of art, served to subdue both the aspiring middle classes and women in their reading choices and literary output. For that reason, following Faye Hammill, any study of middlebrow writing "is in part a feminist undertaking, since it involves attention to an undervalued literature which was, indeed, mainly produced by and for women".[36]

Victoria Cross was among the great commercial successes of the Edwardian period, singled out byEzra Pound for derision.[37] Bemoaning the degeneration of literary standards, he wonders scathingly:

> Is literature possible in England and America? Is it possible that the great book and the firm book can appear 'in normal conditions'? That is to say, under the same conditions that make musical comedy, Edna What's-her-name, Victoria Cross, Clement Shorter, etc. etc., so infernally possible!
>
> It seems most unlikely![38]

One of the most derided but also highly successful genres for middlebrow and lowbrow production was the romance. Martin Hipsky speaks of "the meteoric rise of the woman-authored love-story in Britain".[39] This commercial success is directly related to a market in which "[r]omance sold, and romantic novels required a love story with a happy ending, especially if they were to be sold as cheaper fiction to the less highly educated".[40] In its

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[35] Delaney, Paul. "Who Paid for Modernism?" *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Interface of Literature and Economics*. Ed. Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen. London: Routledge, 1999. 335-351.
[36] Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture between the Wars*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007. 6-7.
[37] Petra Dierkes-Thrun. "Victoria Cross' *Six Chapters of a Man's Life*: Queering Middlebrow Feminism." *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890-1945.* Leiden: Brill, 2016. 202-227, 202-203. Further citations in parentheses.
[38] Ezra Pound. "Meditatio." *The Egoist* 3.3 (1 March 1916), 37.
[39] Hipsky, Martin. *Modernism and the Women's Popular Romance in Britain, 1885-1925*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2011. Print. xii.
[40] Kate Macdonald, "Edwardian Transitions in the Fiction of Una L. Silberrad", *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 54.2 (2011). 220.

demand for the marital ending, the romance genre makes explicit the tensions between subversion and containment, between contestation and conservatism. Numerous works of middlebrow fiction explore alternative role identities for women – only to finally lead them safely into marriage or to inflict a narrative death penalty on their bodies and aspirations. To quote Suzanne Clark, the failure of 'sentimental' novels to "invent a revolutionary order beyond patriarchy has made the happy endings seem hollow to succeeding generations of political women".[41] Clark, however, contests this view by asserting that "the sentimental has also successfully functioned to promote women's influence and power."[42]

One can argue that instead of constituting simple reaffirmations of the dominant ideology, both marriage and demise endings can be regarded as what Ehland and Wächter have described as forms of "*anxiety management* that allows unsettling issues to be raised while maintaining at least a superficial impression of narrative stability and security".[43] Applying Fiske's concept of the producerly text, this suggests that it is the reader's choice to what extent the ending cancels out any subversive ideas presented over the course of the narrative. Additionally, as we will demonstrate, even the ending of a novel can challenge established values, reaching beyond the text to target the reader's moral framework.

5

In Cross's *Six Chapters of a Man's Life,* Theodora, the female protagonist, oscillates between a feminine and a masculine gender identity – to the great satisfaction of her male partner. At the end of the novel, however, Theodora commits suicide by drowning, triggered by a psychological backlash of internalised heterosexist, patriarchal norms. A dominant hegemonic reading of this ending would render Theodora's death an obvious case of

[41] Clark, Suzanne. *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. 38.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ehland and Wächter. "Introduction"., 3.

reaffirming the dominant ideology – the narrative punishment of a 'deviant' character as demanded by the laws of censorship and public sensibilities. In her preface to *Six Chapters*, Cross invokes an obedient morality:

> The following pages from a human life came into my hands after that life had ceased to be, and from the terrible story of reckless transgression and its *punishment* contained in them, it seemed to me that Humanity might learn some of those lessons which Life is ever striving to teach it.[44]

Authorial intent and narrative execution thus apparently present Theodora's suicide as punishment. In Petra Dierkes-Thrun's words, however, while "[t]he novel's pseudo-moralistic preface serves to temper some of the expected criticism presenting its story as a moral lesson, […] given the novel's sensational sensuality, this feels rather disingenuous" (218). We go even further in maintaining that 'contained within this containment' is a subversive exploration of queer identities that may not be contained, and instead levels severe criticisms at society. There are sufficient cues in the text which make it apparent that the internalised norms and values which ultimately drive Theodora into suicide are culturally contingent and deleterious, and that it is not the character's 'deviancy' which is harmful and erroneous, but rather society's construction of deviancy. While Adorno, for instance, would grant such defamiliarising potential to avant-garde literature only, this middlebrow text illustrates how processes of defamiliarisation with regard to the queering of gender and sexuality can be traced in more popular iterations as well. We will demonstrate how the text stages the interaction between internalisation and resistance within the protagonists precisely so as to unveil naturalised deleterious concepts of gender and sexual identity.

[44] Cross, n.p.; our emphasis.

Victoria Cross is one of the pen names of Annie Sophie Cory, a prolific and extremely successful middlebrow writer of – in her day – notoriously scandalous novels. [45] The pseudonym is "evocative at once of courage, and of annoying Victoria and transgressing Victorian values".[46] It thus serves to metonymically represent Cross's work, which in its exploration of gender transcends even the challenges the New Woman represented to Victorian ideals of femininity. Cross's work "casts the New Woman as a passionate *sexual* being who feels and expresses unconventional desires that challenge major taboos", and, as Dierkes-Thrun emphasises, "[t]hat she did so as a hugely successful early middlebrow writer makes her all the more relevant to both modernist and feminist scholarship today" (204).

Six Chapters of a Man's Life originated from Cross's short story "Theodora, a Fragment", published in *The Yellow Book* in 1895.[47] Associated with avant-garde culture, *The Yellow Book* "was meant to provoke or challenge the repressive bourgeois morality of the Victorian age – thereby realizing Oscar Wilde's vision of a yellow book […] in which 'the sins of the world were passing in a dumb show before him'".[48] In 1993, this short story was anthologised by Elaine Showalter in *Daughters of Decadence*[49] as one example of "stories offer[ing] a feminist point of view on issues of sexuality, aesthetics, 'decadence', and quest" in contestation of male hegemony in modernist criticism.[50] According to Showalter, Cross is among those female authors who form "the missing links between the great women writers of the Victorian novel and the modern fiction of Mansfield, Woolf, and Stein".[51] Showalter goes

[45] Although Cory used several pen names, we will refer to her as Cross throughout this chapter, as this is her most well-known pseudonym.
[46] Gail Cunningham, "Introduction", *Anna Lombard,* by Victoria Cross (London: Continuum, 2003), vii-xxv, vii.
[47] Victoria Cross. "Theodora: A Fragment." *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly.* Vol. IV (January 1895). London: John Lane. 156-188. Web.
[48] Sabine Doran. *The Culture of Yellow: Or, the Visual Politics of Late Modernity*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. 48.
[49] Victoria Cross. "Theodora: A Fragment." *Daughters of Decadence: Woman Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle.* Ed. Elaine Showalter. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993. 6-37.
[50] Elaine Showalter. Introduction. *Daughters of Decadence: Woman Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle.* Ed. Elaine Showalter. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993. viii.
[51] *Ibid.*

on to maintain that "Theodora: A Fragment" "is a fragment both because Cross has taken her imagination to its limits, and because she hints that women's sexual narratives are unfinished".[52] The same can be said of the ensuing novel, although Cross is by then established as a middlebrow writer rather than representing avant-garde decadence, and in spite of the novel's apparent anxiety management.

Theodora, the heroine, is markedly androgynous. Apart from straddling the gender boundary, the characterisation of this figure also refutes the (heteronormative) reproductive purpose of the female body and opens up a space to present a sexuality with no purpose other than pleasure. Albeit 'contained' by introductory remarks of a clearly moral nature, warning against excess, Cross challenges ideals of femininity and undermines binary constructions of gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Moreover, as Dierkes-Thrun observes, "Cross' choice of a male first-person narrator, Cecil, […] allows both author and female readers to 'cross-dress' by delving into the mind of a modern man as he struggles with his fascination for a mysterious New Woman" (208). However, Dierkes-Thrun also argues that while Cross drafts a radically new relationship between the New Woman and the New Man, the author does so only to "[demonstrate] the New Man's inability to meet [this New Woman] on equal physical and mental grounds" (207). While the present chapter follows Dierkes-Thrun's reading of the novel as a genuinely queer text, it contests her reading of the ending, by foregrounding both the New Man's *and* the New Woman's limitations in shedding internalised ideologies. Both characters come to realise that while one may question and challenge norms on an intellectual level, the forces of internalisation and embodiment are resilient. Cross deploys the homodiegetic narrative situation, with a New Man as the narrative voice, to explore the struggle between internalised norms, values and roles and their contestation.

[52] *Ibid.* xi.

Cecil Ray, the 28-year-old narrator, is an English geographer who has spent several years working in the East and displays a keen, even erotic interest in its indigenous peoples (4-5). His encounters with other cultures and the perpetual proximity of death in the East have allowed him to recognise and liberate himself from the social constraints of late Victorian values in England. His erotic tastes in particular do not correspond to Victorian standards of gender and sexuality. He says to a friend: "I think I have heard of men remaining celibates before now, especially men with my tastes" (35) – but what exactly his tastes are remains unclear (cf. Dierkes-Thrun 211). They appear to defy categorisation and may therefore be best described as queer in the sense that the term can "[signify] the messiness of identity, the fact that desire and thus desiring subjects cannot be placed into discrete identity categories which remain static for the duration of people's lives".[53] Hence it is unsurprising that Cecil is immediately attracted to the equally queer Theodora: "What a face it was […]. The mouth was a delicate curve of the brightest scarlet, and above, on the upper lip, was the sign I looked for, a narrow, glossy, black line" (13). Theodora's face displays the unique combination of a decidedly feminine mouth with the masculine feature of the moustache. It synecdochally represents an ambivalent character in terms of biological sex and gender. Sometimes masculine and feminine traits in body and character are directly juxtaposed – in other respects Theodora rather appears to oscillate between the masculine and the feminine.

The immediate attraction is mutual, and Theodora decides to leave England and its social constraints, cross-dressing as Cecil's male companion 'Theodore'. Like many other female protagonists in New Woman literature, Theodora deploys cross-dressing to gain a degree of freedom that is still a male prerogative. Even beyond New Women fiction, the

[53] Noreen Giffney. "Introduction: The 'q' Word". *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*. Ed. Michael O'Rourke and Noreen Giffney. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2009. 1-13, 2.

female cross-dresser was a prominent discursive figure at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Alison Oran observes,

> Cross-dressing women were both disruptive and respectable. Newspapers represented them as exciting, sensational figures, yet applauded them for successfully following what were quite conservative ideals of masculine behaviour. Within a familiar story formula they were safely entertaining, yet sowed the seeds of the insurrectionary idea that gender was not innate but a social sham.[54]

Much feminist literature of the time appropriated contemporaneous theories of the 'invert' – often without any ties to queer sexualities. As Heike Bauer purports, feminists "appropriated a notion of female inversion understood as a form of rational female masculinity, formulating an affirmative feminist project that politicized gender but marginalized female same-sex sexuality".[55] Due to the fact that Theodora's relationship with Cecil thrives precisely on Theodora's gender ambiguity, cross-dressing in *Six Chapters* represents more than the mere appropriation of the theory of inversion in order to challenge the patriarchal order. To borrow Anne McClintock's words, as a cross-dresser Theodora becomes "the transgressive embodiment of ambiguity".[56]

Sometimes Cecil is very obviously attracted to the 'man' in Theodora, at other points her female sex is equally present and relevant. Her breasts, for instance, while having "little suggestion of the duties or powers of nature" nonetheless have "infinite seduction for a lover" (66). Like many other New Woman characters' bodies, Theodora's does not seem to have the shape for easy childbirth (41), but is designed rather for sexual pleasure. The homoerotic

[54] Alison Oram. *Her Husband Was a Woman: Women's Gender-Crossing and Twentieth Century British Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2007, 17.
[55] Heike Bauer. "Theorizing Female Inversion: Sexology, Discipline, and Gender at the Fin de Siècle", *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18.1 (2009), 86.
[56] Anne McClintock. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

aspect of her bodily appearance becomes particularly obvious when Cecil first encounters Theodora as Theodore. He narrates: "My brain seemed suddenly to reel. Here was what I had been desiring and craving put into my very hands freely" (108). Conversely, there is at least the insinuation of same-sex desire in Theodora, when Cecil observes her "making love to another girl" (204) in her male disguise. While "making love" did not mean anything more than a public flirtation at the time (and the novel does not insinuate anything more intimate in this context), Cecil's jealousy emphasises the same-sex attraction between Theodora and the object of her affections. Significantly, what is same-sex desire for Theodora is heterosexual desire for the girl, exposing the de facto fluidity of the supposedly stable binary categories of sex, gender and sexuality.

Judith Butler avers that "[t]he cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of 'identities' cannot 'exist' – that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender".[57] The ease and success with which Theodora passes between her feminine and her masculine identities testifies to "the performative construction of gender within the material practices of culture"[58] and the arbitrariness of gender as a sex-based social construct. Theodora/Theodore demonstrates that the convincing performance of gender is not contingent upon one's biological sex. What is more, those of Theodora's physical features which are not traditionally associated with the female body, such as her moustache, draw attention to the social construction of biological sex, which is "far from uncomplicated and by no means innocent of ideology."[59] Theodora thus exemplifies sex- and

[57] Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 1990. New York: Routledge, 2006. 24.
[58] Butler 35.
[59] Alan Sinfield. "Transgender and Les/Bi/Gay Identities." *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*. Ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000. 150–65. Print. 154.

gender fluidity in defiance of cis-normativity or the idea that one's biological sex clearly and unambiguously predetermines an equally unambiguous gender identity.

Cecil and Theodora also defy convention in terms of gendered power structures. Theodora is financially independent, well-educated, and, as Cecil observes, "[i]t was not her mere income that was of worth to her, it was her peculiarly independent and uncontrolled position, the habit of command and influence […]" (96). Moreover, she is the one being "mad upon looks" (39), and in this sense Cecil is presented as the object of her erotic gaze – a role traditionally occupied by women. In contrast, even though she has a "handsome face" (13), that alone would not have been enough to attract Cecil, and, in terms of their culture's beauty standards, her moustache renders her unattractive as a woman. It is her queerness and her rebellious mind that attract Cecil. The couple openly and explicitly challenge the constrictions of a very obviously culturally constructed morality and negotiate their relationship on radically different terms. As Theodora observes, "[w]hat one feels […] with both religion and morality is that there is no absoluteness about either. Both are merely […] things of time and place; both vary distinctly with the latitude" (22-23). Cecil's ideal is the complete freedom of both lovers: "Intolerant myself of the least interference with my own will, I avoid, from a sort of fellow-feeling, trying to control, even where I have the power, the wills of others" (233).

However, as both characters come to realise, while one may question and challenge norms on an intellectual level, the forces of internalisation and embodiment are not to be underestimated. Cross deploys the autodiegetic narrative situation to explore the struggle between internalised norms, values and roles and their contestation. As readers we experience with Cecil how the desire to be different and the will to question convention does not automatically liberate us from the power of conventions. In spite of his convictions, Cecil, for instance, experiences repeated bouts of patriarchal possessiveness.

The novel's turning point is brought about when Theodora is gang-raped in an exotic Egyptian club. Cecil and 'Theodore' have gained access to this underground establishment, in which an all-male audience watches a supple young male dancer. The collective erotic excitement grows into a demanding, aggressive frenzy – urging, pushing, pressing the dancer on until he faints on stage. Cecil kisses Theodora in the wake of this frenzy, and she immediately realises: "They have seen you kiss me. We have betrayed ourselves. Nothing now will satisfy them but […] our lives" (241). What exactly constitutes the betrayal, however, remains unclear. Theodora may or may not have been identified as a woman. It may have been the punishment of a heterosexual couple for having invaded a closeted homosexual space, or, in the words of Dierkes-Thrun, the kiss may have "[exposed] the preceding dance, and presumably all men who attended it, to a threatening interpretation of the whole gathering as homoerotic arousal" (220) – thus violating the fiction of a rigid boundary between the homosocial and the homosexual.

When it becomes obvious that they have only two options – to leave Theodora to be raped or to lose both their lives – Cecil is overcome by a strong desire to kill his lover, which parallels his previous desire to possess her (248). Embodied patriarchal norms designating the woman as an object and possession, and assigning her a reduced 'value' as 'spoilt' by rape, rise to the surface in a character who prides himself on his defiance of conventions. It is Theodora who explicitly defamiliarises the naturalised notion of honour:

> My honour! A convenient term for the preservation to yourself and your own egotistical, jealous, tyrannical passion, of this flesh and blood. […] Cecil, you accepted me for your own desires as Theodora; you can't now, for those same desires, turn me into a Lucretia! (249)

In Roman historical legend, Lucretia is the epitome of female virtue – demonstrated first in "a contest to test the virtue of their wives" held among young princes during the siege of

Ardea.[60] The Roman historian Livy tells how during the banquet given in celebration of Lucretia's 'victory', "Sextus Tarquinius was seized by an evil desire to debauch Lucretia by force. Not only her beauty but also her chastity spurred him on".[61] After the ensuing rape, Lucretia throws herself at the mercy of the males in her family and wails:

> What can be well when a woman has lost her honor? The marks of another man are in your bed. But only my body has been violated; my mind is not guilty. […] Though I absolve myself of wrongdoing, I do not exempt myself from punishment. Nor henceforth shall any unchaste woman continue to live by citing the precedent of Lucretia.[62]

She immediately kills herself. Lucretia's virtue and sense of honour have much in common with the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House – to which Theodora is diametrically opposed. To quote Aisha K. Gill, "in societies with honour-based value systems, honour is typically equated with the regulation of women's sexuality and their conformity with social norms and traditions".[63] Up to this point Theodora *and* Cecil had been in open defiance of Victorian morality, but now only Theodora realises that 'honour' is a concept in the service of an "idea", i.e. patriarchal ideology (251), and she is unwilling to sacrifice both their lives to this concept, since she realises that allowing the men to violate her body is their only chance of survival.

Cecil finally gives in to Theodora's plea and is forced to leave her in the club for seven nights, where – we can infer – she is raped repeatedly by several men. When she is released, it appears as though the narrative justifies the killing of a woman to protect her from this kind of violence. Theodora herself wails: "Oh, Cecil, Cecil, it would have been better had

[60] Livy. *The History of Rome: Books 1-5*. Trans. Valerie M. Warrior. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006. 79.
[61] Livy 80.
[62] Livy 81.
[63] Aisha K. Gill. "Introduction: 'Honour' and 'Honour'-Based Violence: Challenging Common Assumptions." *"Honour" Killing and Violence: Theory, Policy and Practice*. Ed. Aisha K. Gill, Carolyn Strange, and Karl A. Roberts. 1–24. Print.

you shot me as you wished" (264), and the description of her violated body seems to fortify this. Her next words, however, reveal what this is really about: "'Oh, I have lost you! I know I have lost you! You won't care for me now", and Cecil the narrator adds: "the wild, bloodshot eyes met mine in an agony of unutterable, intolerable shame" (264).[64]

Ironically, this is the point where Cecil comes to love Theodora most fully: "when she came back to me disfigured and degraded – I loved unselfishly" (265). Theodora is no longer simply the object of desire but loved unconditionally and altruistically. Unfortunately, embodiment runs deep, and in Theodora's subsequent fevered dreams it becomes very apparent that her mind is unable to battle her internalised notions of the female as pure object: "In all her raving the same theme recurred incessantly, the certainty that I should condemn her, the certainty that no pity and no mercy could be expected of me" (269). In her own mind – as well as in Cecil's prior to and during her ordeal – the violent penetration of her body by several men reduces Theodora to her primary sexual characteristics, dissolves all ambiguity and gives precedence to patriarchal norms. To return to Butler, up to this point, Theodora had been an individual whose gender *did not* follow from her biological sex; whose practices of desire *did not* 'follow' from either sex or gender, since both were ambiguous – but now she has been thrown back into "[t]he cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible [and which] requires that certain kinds of 'identities' cannot 'exist'."[65]

In the throes of a fever attack Theodora finally commits suicide. In this sense, the narrative may be considered to have safely managed social anxiety and contained its subversive potential. This, however, would ignore the fact that over the course of the novel

[64] On shame as a very effective means of social control, see J. Brooks Bouson. *Embodied Shame: Uncovering Female Shame in Contemporary Women's Writings*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2009. 1; Daniel M. T. Fessler. "From Appeasement to Conformity: Evolutionary and Cultural Perspectives on Shame, Competition, and Cooperation." *The Self-Conscious Emotions: Theory and Research*. 174-93. 174.
[65] Butler 24.

we have witnessed Cecil's struggle with the opposing forces of internalisation and liberation. Through him we have vicariously experienced the deleterious effects of naturalisation – and Theodora's ending is presented as its tragic culmination:

> Murdered her! I thought. Not I, but the egoism of men's love, that gave birth to that delirious fear of me, instead of the sweet confidence and trust with which she should have come back to my arms. In her reasoning moments, indeed, I had been able to convince her, that of me, she need have no terror. […] But in the delirium, the instinctive knowledge of what men are, the intuitive sense of how little strain their love will bear, and the dread born of both, these had oppressed and haunted her. […] And these thoughts had murdered her. (294-6)

Cecil speaks of "the egoism of men's love" and Theodora's "instinctive knowledge of what men are", but considering Theodora's previous words on the deleterious force of "an idea", i.e. patriarchal ideology, indicts more than just men: all who are complicit in its perpetuation.

6

Eldridge Miller draws attention to the fact that

> [f]or many readers the nervous breakdown, illness, madness and suicide that were characteristic of New Woman novels did not connote high tragedy but, rather, confirmed that the heroine had gone too far outside her sphere, and suffered because she tried to do things for which she was unsuited; the social order triumphs by the very fact that it has endured and the woman has not.[66]

According to this view, the New Woman character's challenges to the established order would be safely contained by her narrative punishment. Such a reading position corresponds to Humble's sitting backward and simply 'consuming' the text; it is dominant-hegemonic in the sense that it allows the text to reaffirm dominant ideologies. *Six Chapters* may thus be

[66] Eldrigde Miller 48.

read as a thrilling tale of sexual transgressions – and ultimately as the cautionary moral tale the author ostensibly announces in the preface. In this position, Theodora's transgressions are contained, and her suicide reaffirms patriarchal notions of female 'honour', the loss of which is irreversible. 'Studying' the text, 'sitting forward', by contrast, allows us to uncover its subversive potential. This also demonstrates the alteration in the classification of the text by the changing variables of pose, of reading with the purpose of learning, and of the questions being asked. *Six Chapters* may remain a middlebrow novel, but it changes its nature from "writerly" to "readerly" and to "producerly" by the reader's actions. Read in this light, Cecil's final accusations render both male and female readers complicit in Theodora's death – male readers by way of the generalisation of "the egoism of men's love", and female readers by women's (often involuntary) complicity in patriarchal ideology through internalisation. The novel thus reaches out to its readership and demands a reassessment of arbitrary gender norms and associated moral demands. It aims at cultural change.

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