THE PHILANTHROPIST IN NEO-VICTORIAN LITERATURE: (IM)PROPER FEMININITY, GENDER INVERSION AND FREAKISHNESS

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Abstract

The present article singles out the female philanthropist in neo-Victorian fiction to explore the patriarchal unease regarding the unsexing effect of feminism in the mid-Victorian era as well as the literary constructions and contestations of the concept of gender inversion. I will examine how social anxiety regarding feminists materialises through repeated attempts of locating physical traces of gender inversion on the body both then and now. First, I will analyse Michel Faber's use of Victorian sensationalist perspectives on the New Woman through the lens of freakery in *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002). Then I will explore how Emma Donoghue challenges dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity to support lesbian advocacy in *The Sealed Letter* (2008).

Keywords: Neo-Victorian, female philanthropy, gender inversion, improper feminine, freak, female masculinity, lesbian, Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Emma Donoghue, *The Sealed Letter*.

Resumen

Este trabajo se centra en la filántropa de la ficción neo-victoriana para examinar los efectos des-sexualizadores del feminismo en la era victoriana, así como las figuraciones y rupturas literarias del concepto de inversión de género. En particular, se pretende analizar cómo el resquemor social que despierta el feminismo se materializa en intentos reiterados por descubrir huellas corporales de la inversión de género. Para ello se analizará la perspectiva sensacionalista victoriana sobre la figura enrarecida de la Nueva Mujer en la obra de Michel Faber (*The Crimson Petal and the White,* 2002), así como el desafío a los discursos dominantes de la masculinidad y la feminidad que sustentan la identidad lesbiana en *The Sealed Letter* (2008), de Emma Donoghue.

Palabras clave: Neo-victoriano, filantropía femenina, inversion de género, lo impropio femenino, *freak*, masculinidad femenina, lesbian, Michel Faber, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Emma Donoghue, *The Sealed Letter*.

Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 74; April 2017, pp. 15-39; ISSN: e-2530-8335

In the introduction to the special issue of the journal *Neo-Victorian Studies*, entitled "Neo-Victorianism and Feminism: New Approaches", the editors Tara MacDonald and Joyce Goggin emphasise how "it is striking that neo-Victorian narratives typically contain little in the way of feminist collectives and communities" (7). Neo-Victorianism is a historical genre that is highly preoccupied with gender issues, and its revisionary enterprise stretches far beyond a mere rescue of lost voices and the re-imagination of the fates of marginalised people to retrieve them from historical oblivion. Certainly, this sub-genre of modern historical fiction is used as a vehicle to criticise ideals, politics and cultural beliefs and prove a fruitful ground for contemporary authors to explore present-day issues and how they stand in relation to the past. As Marie-Luise Kohlke affirms "the neo-Victorian novel has been engaged in feminist consciousness-raising, whether directly or indirectly, both of its audience and its often outcast, persecuted, and exploited female character" (207). In recent years, several scholars have made an effort in establishing a link between first, second and third wave feminisms to explore the interface between feminist politics in Victorian period and twenty- and twenty-first-century feminist agendas in neo-Victorian literature.[1] Yet, as MacDonald and Goggin have noted, "neo-Victorian texts do not always perform in the ways that critics want them to, and the neo-Victorian media are not consistently as self-reflexive and radically feminist as academics may hope" (7). This paper explores Victorian philanthropy as a potential feminist community and singles out the female philanthropist in neo-Victorian literature in an attempt to disclose why contemporary authors insist on focusing on her body.[2]

Although Victorian feminist communities have been scarce in the neo-Victorian novels, the female philanthropist has appeared as an urban female character in at least four novels up to this moment, namely: Florence Banner in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), Emmeline Fox in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), Lady Jocelyn in Belinda Starling's *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2007) and Fido Faithfull in Emma Donoghue's *The Sealed Letter* (2008). In these works, the female philanthropist is mainly a supportive character to the female protagonist with the exception of *The Sealed Letter*. The main character in Donoghue's novel is the social activist, writer and philanthropist Emily Faithfull (1835-95) and the narrative is set in the mid-Victorian period against the backdrop of the early stages of the women's movement. Notwithstanding, one common feature of the afore-mentioned novels is that all situate philanthropy on the axis of sexuality.

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[1] See for example Caterina Novak (2013) and Claire O'Callaghan (2013). Nadine Mueller's Doctoral Thesis, *The Feminist Politics of Neo-Victorian Fiction, 2000-2010* (2011), is another useful source.

[2] The research behind this paper has been supported by the research project FFI2013-44154-P "Nuevos parámetros críticos en torno al concepto de la huella y su aplicación a la literatura reciente en lengua inglesa" (Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, Government of Spain) and research network FFI2015-71025-REDT "VINS: Victorian and Neo-Victorian Studies in Spain Network" (Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, Government of Spain).

In general, neo-Victorian literature infers contemporary gender theories onto the Victorian discourse on female sexual desire. Specifically, Sarah Waters incorporates Judith Butler's notion of gender performance into *Tipping the Velvet* where the early feminist movement is contextualised within lesbian sisterhoods and Victorian Sapphic erotica. Similarly, in *The Journal of Dora Damage*, Lady Jocelyn's engagement in the "Ladies' Society for the Assistance of Fugitives from Slavery" is rather libidinous than altruistic. As Caterina Novák points out, Lady Jocelyn is portrayed as "a caricature rather than an accurate depiction of a Victorian society woman that appears deliberately designed to deflect the reader's sympathies and serves as a foil for Dora" (121). Thus, the novel limits the philanthropist to an eroticized context in which the sisterhood objectifies the male racial Other by targeting liberated slaves as objects of sexual curiosity and erotic explorations. Kohlke links this literary sexualisation of the Victorians to the reader perspective and holds that "by projecting illicit and unmentionable desires onto the past, we conveniently reassert our own supposedly enlightened stance towards sexuality and social progress" (2). Although the scholar addresses neo-Victorianism in terms of "the new Orientalism" (12), her statement also brings issues regarding sexuality and gender equality to the forefront, which, I find, questions our own knowingness about the Victorians as well as it provides insight into contemporary society.

The scope of this paper is to explore why the neo-Victorian philanthropist is situated on the basic premise of women's sexuality and for what purpose. The ensuing analysis focuses on contemporary constructions and contestations of the concept of gender inversion by taking a closer look at the philanthropists in two neo-Victorian novels: Emmeline Fox as characterised by Michel Faber in *The Crimson Petal and the White* and Emily Faithfull as re-imagined by Emma Donoghue in *The Sealed Letter.* Both novels are set in the aftermath of W.R. Greg's seminal essay on the surplus of unmarried women in England, "Why Are Women Redundant" (1862). This text testifies to the anxiety aroused by the excess of single women who would not be able to fulfil their roles as mothers and wives. Thus, Faber and Donoghue arguably hark back to a period imbued with social anxiety regarding gender roles and women's social position. First, I will establish a connection between the Odd Woman and the philanthropist with the aim to demonstrate that a socio-historical background sustains the novels under analysis. Then, I will examine how Faber and Donoghue address the figure of the female philanthropist as an Odd Woman by invoking the female freak and female invert—two figures associated with gender transgression, hybridity and anomaly. On the one hand, I aim to demonstrate that Faber engages with Victorian sensation fiction and freak-show discourses in his portrayal of Emmeline Fox. On the other hand, I will analyse how Donoghue bespeaks lesbian identity in the past casting the philanthropist in terms of female masculinity in the *The Sealed Letter*. Taking this as a starting point, I hope to disclose how social anxiety regarding feminists materialises through repeated attempts of locating physical traces of gender inversion on the body both then and now.

1. SETTING THE SCENE: PHILANTHROPY AND WOMEN IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN

Philanthropy was widely spread in Victorian Britain and catered for women's participation in the public sphere.[3] As will be discussed below, it afforded women a space of social contestation to the unbalanced gender relations inscribed by the public/private ideology. Several critics have drawn attention to the porosity of dichotomous realms, among those, Martha Vicinus who highlights that the definition of women's proper sphere started to widen by the 1860s. She holds that women who were involved in charity work managed to bend the limits between the public and the domestic, and hence, "expand[ed] their fields and their personal horizons" (*A Widening Sphere* x). Drawing on the work of Vicinus along with Mary Poovey, Lynda Nead, Lyn Pykett, Judith Walkowitz and Elaine Showalter, I will argue that the female philanthropist used the ideology of domesticity to take active participation in the public sphere from the mid-Victorian era onwards. This new socio-historical perspective on the nineteenth-century philanthropist proves a fruitful ground for historical literature to explore gender issues.

The nineteenth century is distinguished for its rigid gender norms and moral values, yet, it was also an era imbued with social unrest. Victorian media expressed concern for the uneven categorisations of sex and gender, and frequently evoked the notion of gender inversion. For instance, comic pictures of mannish women were published in *Punch* to portray the anxiety that emancipated women triggered among the male ruling elite.[4] Parallel to this, female sexual desire and lesbianism, as synthesised through male scientific perspectives and the medical gaze, classified unfeminine conduct in terms of gender inversion. For example, this comes to the fore in the writings by sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing or Havelock Ellis.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, critics such as Mary Poovey, Elaine Showalter and Lyn Pykett have drawn attention to the social construction of femininity in the Victorian period and traced the development of the Odd Woman back to the period around the 1850s and 60s. Then, femininity was perceived in terms of the proper and improper feminine as circumscribed by binary frames, i.e. the public/private divide or male/female and mind/body dichotomies. Accordingly, Pykett sustains that the proper feminine "is a system of difference which marks off woman as essentially different from man", whereas, the improper feminine is "the proper feminine's suppressed other" (7). The scholar argues that in the 1860s the

[3] For a detailed analysis of Victorian women's involvement in philanthropy see Elizabeth Prochaska *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (1980) and Ellen Ross *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918* (1993; or her more recent volume, *Slum Travelers: Ladies and London Poverty, 1860-1920* (2007).

[4] For illustrations of the threatening image of emancipated women and gender equality see *Punch* cartoons at www.punch.photoshelter.com. Especially cartoons by George Du Maurier, as for example, 'Passionate Female Literary Types: The New School' (1894) or 'The Coming Race' (1874).

ideological framework that enshrined women's nature and gender roles was constantly put under pressure (19).

Many feminist critical approaches to Victorian gender politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s take Greg's figure of the redundant woman as a point of departure. Poovey sees Greg's text as an example of how the domestic ideology was promulgated through images and social institutions to frame a set of values that dictated the sexual difference between man and woman. Labelling the social normativity that surrounded gender as "the ideological work of gender" (Poovey 2), the critic stresses how ideologies exist not only as ideas: "[i]nstead, they are given concrete form in the practices and social institutions that govern people's social relations and that, in doing so, constitute both the experience of social relations and the nature of subjectivity" (2-3). Similarly, Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (1990) produces a sustained account of how the single woman caused unease as she did not fit into a binary gender system. The critic affirms: "sexual anarchy began with the Odd Woman" (Showalter 2). The impact of the social anxiety caused by the Odd Woman became readily apparent as gender struggles were increasingly being fought out and contested within the public realm as the century evolved.

Lynda Nead and Showalter have drawn attention to the conceptualization of femininity in the mid-Victorian era. On the one hand, Nead's study of femininity in the 1850s proves that "through the discourse of medicine, respectable femininity was not only defined as socially significant and personally gratifying, it was also designated normal and healthy" (25). On the other hand, Showalter pays attention to deviance and maintains that the Odd Woman "undermined the comfortable binary system of Victorian sexuality and gender roles" (19). Along these lines, I will delve into how gender transgression is represented in terms of female masculinity, and subsequently probe how this feeds into neo-Victorian representations of female philanthropists.

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The Odd Woman posed a challenge to the assumed clear-cut biological division between men and women. Hence her ambiguous gender status confronted the social division of male and female roles as well as sexuality. Subsequently, the Odd Woman's androgynous nature found its way into the medical discourse on women as sexology developed into a new discipline. William Acton's *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* (1867) was later followed by Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) and Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* (1897), and together they have become three key texts that testify to the male medicalised gaze on gender in the Victorian period. Acton wrote extensively on sexuality in the aftermath of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) to scientifically demonstrate how gender roles were supported by biological evidence that distinguished men as sexually active from women as passive or asexual. Later, Krafft-Ebing described women as "more spiritual than sensual" (4). The social uncertainty that surrounded the figure of the Odd Woman was embedded in the circumvention of biological femaleness and cultural concepts of the proper feminine. Generally, the label "Odd Woman" makes reference to the superfluous unmarried women who were forced to "lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own" (Greg 5). Moreover, this term

is also highly pertinent to her status as "unusual" or "strange". The Odd Woman harboured a slippery and ambiguous identity, which was much speculated about by sexologists. This is indebted to the difficulty in defining her according to Victorian gender ideology and fitting her into the cult of domesticity.

Following the lead of Showalter, Pykett affirms that the anxiety of sexuality and gender was articulated in women's writing in the Victorian period. In *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (1992), the scholar examines how the social unrest regarding gender instability was mediated in women's writing. In this work, Pykett provides a detailed taxonomy of opposed female identities in agreement with the proper and improper feminine:

> a set of polarities...: the domestic ideal, or angel in the house; the Madonna; the keeper of the domestic temple; asexuality; passionlessness; innocence: self-abnegation; commitment to duty; self-sacrifice; the lack of legal identity; dependence; slave; victim. In the economy of the improper feminine, woman is figured as a demon or wild animal; a whore; a subversive threat to the family; threateningly sexual; pervaded by feeling; knowing; self-assertive; desiring and actively pleasure-seeking; pursuing self-fulfilment and self-identity; independent; enslave; and victimiser or predator. (16)

Pykett's definition of the proper and improper feminine serves as a key referent to analyse the female philanthropist as, I suggest, this female urban figure was a liminal character who straddled these two opposing images of femininity.

The Victorian philanthropist destabilised the separation of gendered spheres as dictated by the public/private divide, and subsequently, unsettled the gender dichotomy of male/female. Several scholars have paid attention to the porosity of the public/private divide and demonstrated how philanthropy was informed by domestic ideals, and thus, approved of. Martha Vicinus, Judith Walkowitz, Mary Poovey and Deborah Epstein Nord have approached this female urban type from different angles coinciding on the point that female participation in the public sphere in terms of philanthropy was condoned by society rather than condemned since these women performed activities that were underpinned by the ideal of domesticity (183). The female philanthropist corresponds aptly to the definition of the proper feminine as she is self-abnegate and committed to charity. Yet, simultaneously, she possessed features of the improper feminine such as being knowing, self-assertive and in pursuit of self-fulfilment. Thus, this female urban character was occupying the middle-ground between two polarities of femininity. In this regard, the philanthropist used charity work as a strategy to venture out into the public sphere. As Vicinus claims, rather than stepping out of their assigned gender roles they "[t]ransformed their passive roles into one of active spirituality and passionate social service... women did not reject the Victorian myths but reinterpreted them" (*Independent Women* 5). In other words, middle- and upper-class women inscribed their domestic roles with new meanings as they expanded their domestic duty onto public charity work. By pushing the ideal of domesticity into the public realm, these women turned philanthropy into a strategy of agency and mobility. As a result,

the public sphere became a scenario where gender roles were challenged within the context of philanthropy.

One particular characteristic of the female philanthropist has attracted scholarly attention, especially in the twenty-first century, namely, agency. While she appropriated a female space in the public sphere and gained authority, she also stood cultural debates concerning the denaturalising affect on femininity. Whether philanthropic visits to the slums were spurred by altruism, religious endeavour, class curiosity or sisterly affection for the outcast, female charity workers upheld a superior position of authority that instigated a feeling of empowerment. Paula Bartley insists on the fact that ladies' associations, for instance Ladies' Association for the Care of Friendless Girls and Ladies' National Association, held a women-centred approach that was "framed within a window of power and authority" (75).

Class issues circumscribed philanthropy, mainly because charity consisted in a unidirectional support where the accommodated classes helped the poor. Indeed, reform institutions and organisations that aimed at helping women were often constituted and run by women, who were thus endowed with authority. As Vicinus's study has demonstrated, women from the bourgeoisie "brought their social skill to bear upon slum work, but rather than using their education... they emphasized a nonprofessional shared women's world" (*Independent Women* 215). Hence, women from the accommodated classes took advantage of their domestic knowledge and social skills by adapting their knowledge into a charity appliance, which subsequently ensured them access to the public sphere. In other words, by working within the social and gendered framework that rested on a whole set of binary oppositions, women could experience a sense of independence, authority and control as they moved across the city. As a result, when speaking about female philanthropy, critics concur on the point that it was a rare chance for women to venture out into the public sphere and exert agency. All this pinpoints the slums as a social space were women could negotiate new roles and widen the domestic sphere into the public arena.

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Women travelled through urban spaces while they moved across the city, and, as Ross remarks, by the 1860s female activists gained unprecedented access to new geographical sites and social arenas while most public spaces still remained inaccessible, i.e. "respectable women in the mid-nineteenth century were formally excluded from voting and office holding, from most economic activity, and from vast majority of professions and trades" (*Slum Travelers* 18). Vicinus understands this as a crack in the door, noticing that women who were active in charitable societies privileged independence and agency above financial reward (*Independent Women* 220-21). Accordingly, the female philanthropist was a liminal urban figure both spatially and socially. On the one hand, she was situated upon the threshold between the public and the private spheres—she was able to move in and out of the public realm in her role as an arbitrator of domesticity and morality in the slums areas. On the other hand, she utilised the public sphere a social space of self-reliance and self-assertion. In sum, the philanthropist was a liminal woman who managed to circumvent spatial boundaries to probe the resilience of gender roles. As I hope to demonstrate in the novels under analysis, writers of neo-Victorian fiction deploy

this feminist perspective on the female philanthropist with the aim to invoke the spatial and gendered continuum of the philanthropist as a basis to depict the tension between the proper and improper feminine. In order to achieve this, authors bespeak the porosity of the public/private dichotomy focusing on female inclusion, presence and participation in the public sphere.

2. THE FEMALE PHILANTHROPIST IN MICHEL FABER'S *THE CRIMSON PETAL AND THE WHITE*: PROPERLY MALE, IMPORPERLY FEMALE

The philanthropist Emmeline Fox first appeared in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) and later in the short story "Chocolate Hearts from the New World" as part of the short-story collection *The Apple: Crimson Petal Stories* (2006), which is based on characters from the novel.[5] In both narratives Emmeline Fox's male physical features are emphasised to the effect of neutralising her femininity and enhancing her masculinity. In this regard, I will examine how her character complies with the improper feminine rather than with the proper feminine as described by Pykett. Hence, I will argue that Faber's depiction of the female philanthropist testifies to what Poovey defines as "the ideological work of gender" (2). Accordingly, this ideology is underpinned by dualisms as "its apparent coherence and authenticity, on the one hand, and its internal instability and artificiality, on the other" (3). She further argues that "representations of gender constituted one of the sites on which ideological systems were simultaneously constructed and contested" (3).

In 'Chocolate Hearts from the New World', Emmeline is characterised as Dr Curlew's unmarried daughter who is more concerned with philanthropy than with finding a suitable husband. The short story is presented from the point of view of Dr Curlew, who describes Emmeline as being on the verge of becoming a spinster: "five years left before it is all over. Not her life, you understand; her prospects for marriage. The same physical features that made him such a distinguished-looking man... were a calamitous inheritance for a girl" ("Chocolate Hearts" 59). In contrast to *The Crimson Petal and the White*, in which a richer description of her character is provided, little more is said about her character in this short story. Nonetheless, Faber emphasises her masculine physical features as the major defining component in her character and this is an idea I will delve into in my analysis of the novel. In addition, her father approves of her philanthropic endeavour because he perceives it as a possibility to attract a husband. Taken this, the short story is worth mentioning as it brings the author's choice to depict Emmeline either as Miss Curlew or the widowed Mrs Fox to the forefront, and hence, it adds to viewing her as an Odd woman.

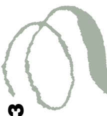
[5] "Chocolate Hearts from the New World" is set chronologically before *The Crimson Petal and the White*.

The significant lack of references to her married life enhances her status as an Odd Woman. As mentioned above, the novels under analysis are set in the period following W.R. Greg's "Why Are Women Redundant", and Emmeline Fox, in particular, embodies the social inquisitiveness that transgressive women caused. Faber emphasises her masculine features and portrays her as "improperly feminine", according to Pykett's description. Poovey highlights how "the message that the natural difference between 'manly' men and 'womanly' women dictated social roles permeated mid-Victorian culture" (6). In this regard I propose that Emmeline Fox disrupts the ideological frame of gender. The philanthropist is a liminal character both physically and socially as her character embodies "an inter-sexed subject, one who is anomalous in terms of conceptions of clear-cut, binarily opposed notions of male and female" (Grosz 59). Similarly, Emmeline Fox occupies the middle-ground in-between public/private spaces and male/female gender identities as she, on the one hand, transgresses spatial boundaries by taking active participation in the public sphere, and on the other hand, destabilises Victorian notions of male activity/female passivity as she gains authority and agency. Notwithstanding, as I will argue, Faber situates female agency on the axis of sexuality and evokes the hybridity of freak exhibits to describe gender transgression.

Emmeline Fox's philanthropic endeavour disconcerts the male characters as she straddles the proper and improper feminine. While she possesses qualities such as self-sacrifice and self-abnegation, she enjoys male privileges like authority and urban mobility. This philanthropist takes active participation in the public sphere and performs a social role outside the domestic realm. As Doreen Massey sustains, "the attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control, and, through that, a social control of identity" (179). Consequently, Emmeline Fox circumvents the limits that have been designated by patriarchal normativity to control gender and space. In the role of a philanthropist, she manages to assert self-identity and independence. This is revealed during a conversation between Agnes and William Rackham, when her independent character is disclosed:

> She... doesn't even wish to remarry, he says.' 'Oh? What does she wish to do?' 'She spends almost all her time with the Women's Rescue Society.' 'Working then?' '... Charity, she's a volunteer, she's expected to do... well, whatever she's asked to. The way Dr Curlew describes it, I understand she spends entire days away at the Refuge or even on the streets themselves, and that when she visits him afterwards, her clothes fairly stink. (Faber, *The Crimson Petal* 144-45)

The passage reveals how Emmeline Fox has encountered an alternative lifestyle in her role as a charity worker within the Rescue Society. And we can clearly see a tension between the proper and improper feminine. While she is expected to perform charity work, her presence in the streets seems excessive and improper. Thus, Emmeline Fox's unwillingness to remarry relies on the fact that she prefers the independence and social mobility she is granted by philanthropy, to the stability and economic safety of marriage.



As mentioned earlier, charity work was partly indebted to cross-class empathy and sisterly affection, but also situated philanthropists in the position of authority as these ladies offered advice, gave domestic instructions and expressed sympathy for the poor.[6] Accordingly, Dorice Williams Elliott refers to the female philanthropist as "the Angel Out of the House" holding that "[m]iddle-class women's volunteer philanthropic work was centrally concerned with two social and ideological issues—the appropriate role of women and the relations between the classes" (4). Certainly, the moral values cherished by volunteering charity workers and the altruistic labour performed in the impoverished areas were supported by the ideal of domesticity and underpinned by feminine qualities. Hence, society approved of this female social participation in the public sphere. Similarly, Prochaska contends that the duty of servitude that was embedded in the evangelical doctrine expanded to middle- and upper-class ladies' philanthropy, and more importantly, was considered "the most obvious outlet of self-expression" (7-9). Thus, philanthropy was not necessarily motivated by altruism, but as several critics have noted, also indebted to women's pursuit of agency and subjective experiences.

The Rescue Society grants Emmeline Fox the possibility to move within the slums and interact with its dwellers and when her consumptive state impedes her from participating in the organisation she complains to "be going mad with boredom" (Faber, *The Crimson Petal* 432). This testifies to the fact that she finds personal fulfilment outside the home rather than adhere to suffer and be still as Sarah Stickney Ellis famously stated. As Walkowitz notices, middle-class women used the role of philanthropy to make hazardous journeys into the East End slums "in search of adventure and self-discovery" (52), and, as a result, enjoy social freedom. Emmeline Fox's journey in the underground as she traverses the city is clearly linked to her independence:

> I was in the city, on my way to visit a wretched family I'd visited before, to plead with them once more to listen to the words of their Saviour. I was tired, I felt disinclined to walk far. Before I knew what I was doing I was in the Underground Railway pulled by an engine, mesmerised by the alternation of darkness and light, speeding through the earth of a sixpence. I spoke to no one; I might as well have been a ghost. I enjoyed it so much, I missed my stop, and never saw the family. (194-95)

The fact that Emmeline Fox misses her visit to the poor family because the thrill of speed and freedom of movement she experiences during the ride in the underground train reveals that she does not necessarily perform charity work because of altruistic interests. Conversely, she rejoices in the privileges that urban excursions grant her otherwise gender-delineated environment.

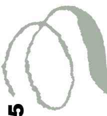
As argued earlier, for Victorian women the impoverished areas functioned as a social space outside the patriarchal framework, and I find that Emmeline Fox's

[6] Ellen Ross offers a comprehensive study of cross-class relationships in the context of female philanthropy in *Love and Toil* (1993).

unwillingness to remarry relies on the fact that she prefers the independence and social mobility she is granted by philanthropy to the stability and economic safety of marriage. Women's urban mobility clearly hinges on gender as they cannot frequent the streets at the same extent and under the same conditions as men. As Pilar Hidalgo's study of female *flânerie* in the literature of modernity has demonstrated, women's access to leisure in the city is not a mere question of participation/non-participation, but what is more, women's leisure depends heavily on the social and emotional demands by others (95). In this context, Emmeline Fox's independence and accessibility to the streets is connected to her self-sufficiency as a widow who lives on her own, and thus, freed from patriarchal restraints.

Significantly, mobility and agency converge within the subjective experience acquired through charity work. Women who took active participation in charity organisations challenged the public/private dichotomy in a dual manner—they managed to proclaim a female space within the public sphere simultaneously as they encountered privacy with the public realm. Wendy Gan contends that the cityscape was an ideal setting to subjective explorations of gendered space:

> [f]or women, being in the city was an escape from the domestic world and an experience marked as a new kind of spatial freedom. This transgressive incursion into male territory, however, was not the only appeal of the city for new urban modes of consciousness that privileged male reserve and aversion ... also provided women with a way to transform public spaces into private, creating a kind of public privacy. (48)



As a consequence, philanthropists not only destabilised the gendered ideology of separate spheres, but they also found a way to move outside the patriarchal framework. This is portrayed in *The Crimson Petal and the White* as the figure of the female philanthropist turns the city into a site of personal fulfilment not only through altruistic endeavour but in relation to her experience of freedom of movement and power.

Up to the moment I have concentrated on Emmeline Fox as an Odd Woman in relation to the Victorian ideal of femininity and domesticity. I have argued that this causes unease among the male characters as she straddles the proper and improper feminine in her role as philanthropist. Interestingly, the male characters constantly attempt to find physical evidence of her social gender transgression, and I propose that Faber echoes the Victorian freak-show discourse drawing on the taxonomy of male/female, normal/abnormal and human/animal. As several critics have demonstrated, the freakishness of human exhibits often stemmed from gender transgression,[7] and in literature the female freak frequently conveys as a "transgressive

[7] See for example, Leslie Fielder *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (1978); Robert Bodgan *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Profit* (1990); Rachel Adams *Side Show USA: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (2001); Marlene Tromp, ed. *Victorian Freaks: The Social Construction of Freakery in Britain* (2009).

potential of the unfeminine woman in a patriarchal culture" (Garland-Thomson 16). In these lines, authors like Pykett and Craton agree on the idea that the representation of deviant women as freakish circulated widely in press and sensation fiction from the 1860s onwards.[8] Pykett contends that Victorian sensation writing mirrors "a crisis of definition, a panic over the instability of established gender norms and categories" (123). Similarly, Craton finds that "the importance of gender roles in sensation fiction undoubtedly reflects the urgency of so-called Woman Question in the second half of the century" (67). Following the lead of these scholars, I wish to bring to the fore how Faber retrieves the motif of the freak as Emmeline Fox is visualized as an Odd Woman through the eyes of male characters.

The view of human oddities in the freak show stems from the blurring of lines between binary economies as human/animal, male/female, normal/monster and self/other. Firstly, Emmeline Fox is described as unattractive, and more importantly, self-assertive. Significantly, her unsightly appearance and gender transgression is mediated by images of freakishness. In the following excerpt her deviance is cast in an animalistic fashion as Boadley wonders: "'how can [Henry] stand the sight of her?' groans Boadley. 'She looks like a greyhound! That long, leathery face, and that wrinkled forehead – and always so terrible attentive, just like a dog listening for commands"' (*The Crimson Petal* 154). Her physical aspect, independent lifestyle, unconventional conduct and penetrating gaze disconcert the male characters. As a result, they attempt to find corporeal proof of her gender transgression, which is reminiscent of the process of enfreakment. Alexa Wright affirms that "freaks represent the values and concerns of the society that has produced them", and explains how the physiognomic tradition of reading the human body, found new outlet in the nineteenth-century freak show where the deviant body turned into site of ideological inscriptions (80).

Even though the consumption-affected philanthropist does not answer to the ideal of feminine beauty and bourgeois decorum, Henry Rackham is beguiled by her strength and posture: "that peculiar soul Emmeline Fox is unadorned. She holds her head as high as if she were beautiful, and holds her body as if she were strong" (190). In addition, Faber draws on Victorian prejudices regarding the New Woman whose presumed unfeminine habits are reflected in the masculine traits of her physical description. If the nineteenth-century freak discourse "eagerly exploits the ideological expectations of normative culture, and the Victorian freak performer holds a remarkable potential to expose the concerns and assumption of that culture'", then, the odd body in literature both asserts and questions normative culture (Craton 37). Rather than being promulgated by her physical aspect, Emmeline Fox's deviance is anchored in the social construction of gender. Since she embodies the improper

[8] See chapter 10 "Reviewing the Subject of Women: The Sensation Novel and the 'Girl of the Period'" in Lyn Pykett's *The Improper Feminine* (1992), and Lilian Craton's chapter on "Female Masculinity in Sensational Fiction 1860-1890" in *The Victorian Freak Show*: *The Significance of Disability and Physical Difference in 19th-Century Fiction* (2009).

feminine, the male characters' attempt to locate her oddity in her physical aspect by reading male qualities into her body. Freak-show representations of female freaks enhanced gender hybridity by attributing them with distinctly male features. As Bogdan points out "freakishness was often created from gender transgression" ("The Social Construction of Freaks" 31), and this is something Faber incorporates into the novel. At one point, Henry starts doubting over her female body: "Henry has never noticed before, and a red flush on her Adam's apple – if women have Adam's apples, which he's not sure they do" (*The Crimson Petal* 124). Faber's description of Emmeline Fox as unadorned, uncorseted, maintaining a strong upright posture or even having an Adam's apple, is reminiscent of the vindication of independent unmarried women as being masculine, particularly in sensation fiction.

Craton confirms that the social unease provoked by the emancipated woman found its way into the Victorian novel, highlighting that authors often invoked freak-show imagery of gender confusion to portray unconventional women. The critic remarks that nineteenth-century writers' use of masculine women was "to challenge the moral, cultural and political restrictions facing women by demanding the rights of men. Many of them share the unusual physicality of Collins's masculine women" (126). As Craton success-fully demonstrates, Collins portrays the ugly and uncorseted spinster Marian Holcombe in a freakish-like manner in *The Woman in White* (1860) emphasising her hybrid features:

> The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck of the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude... her waist... occupied its natural place, it filled in out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully unformed by stays... She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail to express), the lady was ugly! ... [N]ever was the fair promise of such a lovely figure more strangely and startlingly belied by the face and head that crowned it. The lady's complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. (36-37)

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I find that a parallel can be drawn between Collins's and Faber's characterisations of Marian Holcombe and Emmeline Fox as both reveal a "shocking gender hybridity to build a case for non-traditional femininity" (Craton 126). Arguably, the characters have features that situate them in-between femininity and masculinity. Whereas their "naturally shaped bodies" reveal female corporeality, their apparent female features are combined with a dark complexion and "a coarse face" with distinctive male traits, as for example, Marian Holcombe's "moustache" or Emmeline Fox's "Adam's apple". Moreover, in the same vein as Walter Hartright feels sexually attracted to Marian Holcombe, Henry Rackham is infatuated with Emmeline Fox. Moreover, his fascination with her apparently androgynous gender identity is a replication of his brother William's obsession with the prostitute Sugar who "has an Adam's apple, like a man", albeit being "the most beautiful thing he has ever seen" (*The Crimson Petal* 109).

Finally, Faber links Emmeline Fox's agency to sexuality and depicts a mocking inversion of the Victorian male and female sex roles. Henry is not only seduced, but also deflowered by the mature and sexually experienced Emmeline Fox. Writings

by sexologists such as Acton, Krafft-Ebing and Havelock, steeped women as sexual passive through the notion of sexual anaesthesia. As previously argued, Emmeline Fox is characterised as having agency, yet Faber determines to settle her authority in the context of sexuality and stages a comic reversal of male and female roles as sexually active and passive. On the contrary, Emmeline Fox is libidinous, desiring and actively pleasure seeking, i.e. she is improperly feminine. While Barbara Braid stresses how sexual desire not regulated by marriage was monstrous (2-3), Pykett labels it as "the proper feminine's other" (16). In this context, Faber describes the upper-class wife Agnes Rackham in terms of a disembodied Angel of the House. Conversely, the prostitute Sugar embodies a Fallen Angel who is socially threatening as she possesses a carnal and monstrous sexual appetite. In comparison, Emmeline Fox fits into none of these categories and her otherness is more politicized as she seduces Henry with the words "there is no marriage in Heaven, Henry" (*The Crimson Petal* 503). In sum, she is an Odd Woman, literally for being a single and self-sufficient woman and metaphorically for her perceived masculinity and challenge to gender discrimination. Consequently, she is perceived as a freak, which is made explicit as the philanthropist ponders: "By the next century, predicts Mrs Fox, buttering a slice of bread, women like me will no longer be regarded as freaks" (Faber, *The Crimson Petal* 223).

3. THE OLD WOMAN AND FEMALE MASCULINITY IN EMMA DONOGHUE'S *THE SEALED LETTER*

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Emma Donoghue's *The Sealed Letter* (2008) is a fictional reimagination of a scandalous divorce case that took place in 1864, known as the Codrington divorce. At the time the Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) stipulated that men could file for divorce on the grounds of adultery whereas women had to prove their husband's adultery in combination with incest, bigamy, cruelty, neglect or abandonment (Shanley 138). The Codrington divorce caused great stir in society and was followed closely by the media. On the surface the divorce trial seemed to rest on a love triangle involving Admiral Codrington, his adulterous wife Helen and her lover Colonel Anderson. Yet, as Martha Vicinus has demonstrated, the implicit polemic behind the trial was the lesbian relationship between Helen and her friend, the philanthropist Emily Faithfull. This reveals the patriarchal anxieties and tension embedded in the ideology of gender roles, and as Vicinus claims:

> the widely publicized Codrington divorce trial exemplifies many of the mid-century public debates about the responsibilities of marriage, circumstances of divorce, and the role of single women. But more controversially, it exposes unease about women's friendships and about the possibility of lesbian sex. ("Lesbian Perversity and Victorian Marriage" 75)

Vicinus's case study illustrates how same-sex desire was condoned as long as it was kept in the margins and did not interfere with heteronormative marriage.

In *The Sealed Letter*, Donoghue brings lesbian identity to bear on the shifting attitudes towards women in the mid-Victorian era. This work focuses on the philanthropist, feminist and social activist Emily Faithfull (1835-95), or Fido, as she is called in the novel, and the consequences of her implication in a scandalous separation between the Codringtons. The narrative accounts for the consequences of divorce for women in the Victorian era and, rather than being a commemoration of Emily Faithfull's life and achievements, Donoghue retrieves her story to explore the circumstances that conditioned lesbian identity in the nineteenth century. Up to this moment little or no evidence has been found to prove that Faithfull was lesbian although there are several facts that point towards this. For instance, Vicinus has convincingly argued for Faithfull's lesbian identity in her revision of the Codrington divorce ("Lesbian Perversity and Victorian Marriage" 74). Her study has been an important background source for Donoghue when writing *The Sealed Letter* and testifies to the author's prolonged interest in queer history.[9] In this regard, the novel manifests Donoghue's concern for the ideological and gendered complexities that hampered lesbian identities in the past as well as in the present.

The title makes reference to a letter that supposedly contains information that gives away Fido's lesbian involvement with Helen while living with the Codringtons. Fido's lesbian identity is flaunted in the press without explicitly naming it: "Miss Faithfull's poisonous role, ... his wife's passionate feelings for this person were causing her to shrink away from her husband. He entrusted to paper his thoughts on Miss Faithfull's role in the crisis, and his reasons for banishing her" (315-16). Thus, in light of Vicinus's argument, I find that Donoghue portrays how female bonding and affection were perceived as harmless, as long as it did not interfere with heterosexual marriage and men's conjugal rights.

Donoghue has a personal interest in alternative formations of family units, which often comes through in her writing. Whereas parenthood is a central theme in her acclaimed novel *Room* (2010), substitute parenthood and motherhood are in focus in *Frog Music* (2014),[10] which is set in nineteenth-century San Francisco. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben draw attention to how "neo-Victorian writers have seized on the nineteenth-century family as a ready-made means of cultural critique, particularly from feminist, gender and post-colonial perspectives" (5). The definition of family has changed radically in the twenty-first century, yet the equation of a normal family to a nucleus, heterosexual and bi-parental family still persists in the contemporary mindset. This is explored by Yates through

[9] Donoghue has written extensively on lesbian history. For lesbians as double-sexed women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries see "Imagined More than Women: Lesbians as Hermaphrodites, 1671-1766" *Women's History Review* 2.2 (2006): 199-216. For in-depth analyses of lesbian culture in the past see *Passions Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668* (Scarlet Press, 1993), and *Inseparable: Desire Between Women in Literature* (Cleiss, 2010). For further bibliographical references, visit Emma Donoghue's official webpage at www.emmadonoghue.com.

[10] Family is also a central theme in Donoghue's most recent novel, *The Wonder* (2016), which is set in nineteenth-century Ireland.

an analysis of the family unit in *The Crimson Petal and the White* and *Tipping the Velvet* in which the critic illustrates how "the family's centrality is used to highlight the flaws in equating heterosexual reproduction with 'the right to be parents' and thus the ability to be good parents" (107). Donoghue points at the possibility of an alternative family configuration in *The Sealed Letter* by setting the example of the fully functional and female-centred caretaking of the Codrington children by Helen and Fido against the dysfunctional heterosexual parenthood of traditional marriage. Setting the topic of queer families aside for others to explore, my analysis focuses on Donoghue's representation of the female philanthropist in the context of female masculinity by evoking the Odd Woman.

Although Donoghue treats Fido's sexual identity covertly in the narrative, the core of the plot builds on the lesbian affection between the philanthropist and the divorcee Helen Codrington. In this regard, the title stands as a metaphor for the silence that circumscribed lesbian affection in the Victorian era, which moreover, invites for interpretations of contemporary exclusion of lesbians in the public sphere as I have examined elsewhere.[11] Furthermore, as Claire O'Callaghan has demonstrated, the narrative is overtly informed by post-feminist views concerned with the cultural construction of gender and sexual norms (65). Thus, Donoghue brings the embedded societal misogyny, both then and now, to the forefront by drawing a parallel between the Victorians and us. This is clearly seen in the juxtaposition between Fido, the emancipated philanthropist, and Helen, the adulterous and promiscuous wife. The ensued analysis adds to previous work on *The Sealed Letter* by identifying it as one of the few neo-Victorian novels that incorporates the figure of the female philanthropist into the narrative. I suggest that Donoghue engages with the mid-Victorian discourse on female oddity and steeps the character of Fido in terms of female masculinity to pose a challenge to patriarchal-inflected gender roles as well as female sexuality.

According to the Victorian mind-set, Odd Women possessed characteristics that were regarded as male qualities. As a result, these women destabilised the societal balance (or rather imbalance) that framed gender roles as natural and relegated the proper feminine to male subordination. Judith Halberstam emphasises how

> far from being an imitation of maleness, female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity. In other words, female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity appear to be the real thing. (1)

Hence, masculinity's social construction becomes legible in female masculinity, which subsequently remonstrates against the equation of maleness to power and domination. The lesbian woman was seen as a masculine woman who was sexually

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[11] See "'Not the Kind of Thing Anyone Wants to Spell Out': Lesbian Silence in Emma Donoghue's Neo-Victorian Representation of the Codrington Divorce". *Lambda Nordica* 2.18 (2013): 13-43.

inverted. As Halberstam asserts, one of the major mistakes committed by sexologists as Krafft-Ebing and Ellis in defining lesbian women has been to define lesbianism according to a heterosexual model, and subsequently, it has overseen "the different levels of sexualisation and gendering in intimate relationships between women" (77).

Donoghue alludes to the idea of gender inversion as well as Halberstam's critique of lesbian identity through three different characters. On the one hand, Fido is portrayed as a masculine woman, who according to Admiral Codrington's lawyer, Mr Bovill, "[has] become a strong-minded reformeress, [who] disapproves of out sex on principle" (292). On the other hand, Donoghue hints at possibility of a same-sex relationship between Helen and Mrs. Watson as a swift thought crosses Helen's mind: "I am the most exciting thing that has happened to her" (292). This is made clearer the moment Mrs Watson draws the lawyers' attention to the lesbian affair between Helen and Fido stating "'none knows better than I, after all,' says Mrs. Watson, eyes cast on the carpet, 'how Helen can take advantage of the strongest sentiments of female friendship'" (293). By insinuating that the true nature of the relationship between Fido and Helen is based on lesbian desire, Mrs Watson gives away her own personal experience in her remark. Thus, Donoghue's representation of the three different women involved as respectively a masculine woman, a passionate adulteress and an ideal wife, infers that lesbianism does not fit into the heterosexual model. Instead, lesbianism is portrayed as far more multifarious than binary frameworks of hetero- and homosexuality suggest. In this context, I will focus on the representation of Fido as an Odd Woman to examine how her digressive identity illustrates how emancipated women generated social unease. In addition, the characterisation of the female philanthropist is invested with nineteenth-century inquisitiveness regarding female identity and lesbian sexuality.

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Fido is figured as a masculine woman according to Victorian stereotyped images of the lesbian as a sexual invert in her different roles as a spinster, philanthropist, feminist and lesbian. Moreover, the slipperiness of her gender identity undermines the ideological notions of femininity as well as heterosexuality in the mid-Victorian era. As the nineteenth century evolved, the established gender roles and the public/private dichotomy were increasingly being interrogated, challenged and destabilised by supporters of women's cause who struggled for a more equal social position between the sexes. This caused great social unease as it not merely questioned the assumption that gender roles were natural, but also posed a threat to the patriarchal social order. This resulted in a growing concern for maintaining a solid dichotomy, and in Halberstam words: "there was a larger cultural imperative at work, namely, the desire to reduce sexuality to binary systems of gender difference" (76). Women who did not fit into heteronormative models of gender were regarded as Odd Women belonging to a third sex, and in this context, Krafft-Ebing's and Ellis's views came to dominate the clinical discourse on female sexuality at length and more specifically on lesbianism.

Being an independent a self-sufficient woman, Fido represents the improper feminine. Women who demanded female independence were labelled as "unsexed" or "semiwomen" as early as the 1830s (Faderman 140), and these notions were intensified by the mid-Victorian era. Craton highlights how nineteenth-century

media used nature and gender interchangeably and "characterized a woman who abandoned the domestic role as unnatural and unsexed" (130). Donoghue pores over gender identity by refiguring the philanthropist as a masculine woman to explore lesbianism in the past.

Women's emancipation was disquieting partly because it testified to the changing role of women in society, but more importantly, it probed values of masculinity not to be exclusively male. As established by now, the current critical perspective on female philanthropy casts this woman as someone who gained spatial mobility and authority within the male-dominated public sphere. In this vein, Halberstam draws attention to the prevailing notion of male supremacy as "[m] asculinity in this society inevitable conjures up notions of power, legitimacy and privilege" (2). The female deviant who declined to pursue women's domestic role was not really a woman and her transgression was perceived as social rather than sexual. As Faderman asserts,

> a lesbian, by the sexologists' definition, was one who rejected what had long been women's role. She found that role distasteful because she was not really a woman—she was member of a third sex. Therefore, she did not really represent women. All her emotions were inverted, turned upside down: Instead of being passive she was active, instead of loving domesticity, she sought success in the world outside, instead of making men prime in her life, she made first herself than other women her prime... such love became increasingly threatening to the social order. (104)

The patriarchal anxiety caused by divergent women is at heart of the novel, and conveys the social fear of negative effects of sexual inversion on heterosexual marriage.

Fido is characterised in terms of a masculine woman and her gender inversion stands as a signifier of lesbianism. Donoghue hints at Fido's sexuality, which echoes the nineteenth-century clinical discourse on lesbianism, by making reference to dress. This becomes evident as the author contrasts reactions to women wearing male apparel with the emblematic but liberating effect of going uncorseted—literally for health reasons and symbolically for emancipation. Helen's solicitor, Mr Few, informs his client:

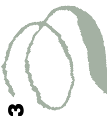
> 'A solicitor of my acquaintance has heard a rumour that Miss Faithfull's still in London'. [Helen] blinks at him. 'In male disguise, if you can believe it.' 'I can't,' says Helen with disdain. That's just the kind of thing they like to invent about *strong-minded women.* Going uncorseted is one thing, but trousers? 'For all her strong views on certain subjects, Mr Few, she's an utterly conventional woman'. (238)

The unsexing effect of wearing male apparel hinges on Victorian notions of male and female dress codes that supposedly signal out the biological difference between men and women. Accordingly, Halberstam remarks that: "when the idea of sexual identities did come to dominate people's thinking about sex and gender, it was not some idea of the autonomous lesbian desire between women or a notion of outward hermaphrodism that provided the basis of those notions of identity; it

was gender inversion" (77). The tension between cross-dressing and gender inversion is clearly at work in the fragment from the novel. On the one hand, wearing trousers signals out a distinctive masculine feature and, in the light of her lesbian identity, this invites for interpretations of sexual inversion. On the other hand, Fido's unwillingness to wear corset represents an act of rebellion against the social control of gender as it sets the female body free. Nonetheless, wearing trousers is a more vexed issue because it stands as a reversal of male and female dress codes. Therefore, the excerpt illustrates how Fido's gender transgression is located on the axis of sexuality: she is a sexual invert.

I have argued earlier that Donoghue aligns the Odd Woman with philanthropy evoking gender transgression and lesbianism in terms of sexual inversion. Reminiscent of Faber's characterisation of Emmeline Fox in *The Crimson Petal and the White*, Fido's social position as an Odd Woman becomes evident as the male characters stress her coarse physical appearance. According to them, the philanthropist remains unmarried because she cannot attract a husband, and moreover, her unfeminine appearance is an external sign the evidences her masculinity. In short, she is a masculine woman and, hence, a sexual invert. In Ellis Havelock's view, a lesbian was, on the one hand, intellectually superior to her sex since "[i]nversion is as likely to be accompanied by high intellectual ability in a woman as in a man" (196); on the other hand, gender inversion was visible: "their faces may be plain or ill-made, but seldom they possess good figures... the actively inverted woman... in one fairly essential character: a more or less distinct trace of masculinity" (222). In the novel, Fido is repeatedly described as ugly, and one example of this is when the court rapports in media read "the admiral's barrister mocks the very idea of his client's molesting a young woman *not reputed to be of conspicuous beauty*" (315), to discredit her statement of an attempted rape. Regardless of hurting Fido's feelings, the admiral bluntly states "[t]he fact is, not in my wildest dreams, not even if delirious or demented would I ever consider having carnal relations with you" (325).

Moreover, feminists were equally situated on the axis of Odd Women due to their non-normative behaviour and disallowance of gender roles. Whether being perceived as semi-women, sexual inverts or assumed to belong to a third sex, women who did not comply with the ideological image of the proper feminine were viewed as freaks mainly because they challenged the roles that were believed to be natural to their gender. As Tromp and Valerius note, we tend to think about 'freakery' as a self-evident physical anomaly with which somebody is born when, in fact, "freakishness is made, not just with biology, but with a social function in a social context" (4). Interestingly, nineteenth-century sexologists' definitions of female sexuality wielded same-sex desire between women as sexual inversion, and consequently, situated the lesbian woman on the same periphery as freaks. Faderman argues that sexologists attempted to daunt women from joining the cause by evincing a continuum of abnormality between lesbianism and feminism asserting that "[l]ove between women was metamorphosed into a freakishness, and it was claimed that such an abnormality would want to change their subordinate status in any way" (240).



The domain of feminist activism lent lesbians a woman-centred social environment where they could express same-sex affection. Yet, it was an ambiguous social realm, as lesbianism was perceived as a threat to the organisation. Faderman stresses how the fear that the public's suspicion of the existence of lesbianism could destroy feminism prevailed (240). In real life, Emily Faithfull was excluded from the feminist movement the moment she was drawn into the divorce scandal. When reported in the media, her colleagues in the Victoria Press and fellow philanthropists turned their backs on her. Yet, Vicinus pinpoints that Faithfull became socially stigmatized due to her lesbian identity and not exclusively on the grounds of her involvement in the Codrington divorce ("Lesbian Perversity and Victorian Marriage" 94). In this regard, social homophobia was embedded in feminist culture.

This is something Donoghue takes up in the novel. When discussing whether to include an article on the current divorce debate in society or not in their journal Bessie Parkes argues that "[d]ivorce is a dangerous subject. We could seem to be associating ourselves with women of doubtful reputation" (113), which Fido objects to by putting forwards "we're veteran journalists, we can raise these questions without verbal impropriety; there's always a way to refer to something without naming it" (114). Here, Donoghue brings the hegemonic discourse of heteronormativity that surrounds lesbianism to the forefront.

The two standpoints reveal the necessity of breaking down the system from the inside, but also emphasise the enforced ubiquity of lesbianism to silence. What is more, Donoghue draws attention to the troublesome relationship between feminism and lesbianism as Bessie Parkes manifests her disapproval of Fido's sexuality:

> There's an unsoundness in Emily Faithfull; a coarseness in the grain that I hoped might disappear, as she matured, but quite on the contrary,' she says, gazing into the middle distance. 'May I speak frankly? [...] 'In some few cases, especially if the individual lacks any real religious faith, something... goes awry,' says Bessie Parkes, her mouth twisting. 'Spinsterhood is a sort of armour that such women as Fido Faithfull wear with relish. What's been revealed in court about the lengths to which she's gone in thralldom to your wife—' She shivers. (223-24)

The embedded issue at hand in the excerpt focuses on the fact that while feminists struggle for equality between the sexes, the hegemonic discourse on heteronormativity still persists within the feminist movement. Lesbianism is relegated to the margins because it is perceived as a threat when, ironically, there actually is none.

5. MATERIALISING SOCIAL DEVIANCE ON THE BODY

In the beginning of this article I have drawn attention to how albeit few authors have explored nineteenth-century feminist movements in contemporary fiction, the female philanthropist appears, to my knowledge, in at least four neo-Victorian novels up to the moment, namely, *Tipping the Velvet*, *The Crimson Petal and the White*, *The Journal of Dora Damage* and *The Sealed Letter*. In these novels, the female philanthropist gains access, freedom of mobility and agency within the

public realm. Arguably, this character represents unconventional femininity as she converts the ideological frame of gender into a strategy of appropriation of a female space within the public sphere. To this effect, contemporary authors portray the female philanthropist according to critical accounts of the porosity of the public/private divide. Significantly, a socio-historical background sustains contemporary fictional representations of the female philanthropist.

The neo-Victorian philanthropist is a woman who gains urban mobility and agency outside the home, and consequently, transforms the urban space into a site of self-fulfilment in the same vein as her nineteenth-century model did. Nonetheless, in literature female philanthropic endeavour and agency are related to sexuality. This is one of the possible reasons why the figure of the female philanthropist has remained in the blindspot in favour of other female figures, as for example the prostitute or the criminal, who belong to "the well-established neo-Victorian trope of an unconventional woman beating patriarchy at its own game" (Novak 116). While feminist movements and philanthropy offer a fruitful ground to explore feminist debates both in the past and the present, authors tend to situate the female philanthropist as a supportive character to the unconventional heroine. Nadine Mueller holds that "critics have for long discarded contemporary feminist theory as framework for their readings of neo-Victorian fiction" (22). Yet, a parallel socio-historical and literary revision of the philanthropist as a liminal figure who challenged the ideological frame of gender, opens up for feminist reinterpretations of gender both in the past and the present.

Faber and Donoghue write with different purposes in mind, and, consequently, depict the philanthropist in terms of the improper feminine and a masculine woman respectively. While Faber's Emmeline Fox is described as a freak, Donoghue's Fido embodies the Odd Woman, or, the sexual invert. On the one hand, I have analysed how Faber reiterates the Victorian freak-show discourse regarding gender anomaly echoing Wilkie Collins's description of Marion Halcombe in *The Woman in White*. On the other hand, I have examined how Donoghue characterises Fido's gender transgression in terms of female masculinity. Here, freakishness is related to non-normative sexuality. In both cases non-conformist femininity and gender confusion are predominantly associated with the body. Moreover, the body becomes the locus of social deviance as the male characters insist on finding physical evidence of gender transgression.

Contrary to Faber, Donoghue manages to further feminist debate by contextualising queer identity within a Victorian setting. By doing so, the author establishes a link between the Victorian period and the present regarding the situation of lesbians. As Mueller affirms,

> the desire to be "better" than previous feminist movements or the Victorians is thus also a desire sparked by the fear of being the same, or having failed to progress, of repeating the perceived mistakes by other feminists or living, still, in a society in which gender inequality is maintained and reinforced via social, cultural and political structures which is, potentially, uncomfortably, similar to the nineteenth century. (22)

In contrast to the progress in Irish law, which decriminalized homosexuality in 1993, social prejudices towards homosexuality persisted. As Emma Young notes, homosexuality was surrounded by taboo, and moreover, considered unspeakable and sinful in rural Ireland by the turn of the twentieth century. Moreover, Young argues that Donoghue uses the Victorian trope of the attic to symbolise deviant sexuality in an exploration of closeted lesbian identity in *Stir-Fry* (1994) and *Hood* (1995) (13). Along these lines, I suggest that Donoghue hints at the contemporary social intolerance towards lesbians in *The Sealed Letter*. In a recent interview, Donoghue has admitted that her non-normative sexuality identity has shaped her as a writer by drawing a parallel between the lesbian and the freak: "I realized I was a lesbian, and therefore, in my society's terms, a freak. This theme – not just homosexuality but the clash between individual and community, norm and 'other' – has marked many of my published works" (Fantaccini and Grassi 400). In this regard, the "othering" of lesbian women filters through in *The Sealed Letter* as Fido is described in terms of a freak.

By establishing links between the Odd Woman, the philanthropist and the sexual invert, authors echo the gender hybridity and transgression of the ontological status of the male/female body evoked in the freak show in order to represent the neo-Victorian philanthropist as member of a third sex. Similarly to Faber, Donoghue bespeaks non-normative femininity invoking gender hybridity, anomaly and transgression. Hence, the female philanthropist becomes a locus of neo-Victorian constructions and contestations of gender through a process of "oddering" women.

Reviews sent to author: 14 March 2017
Revised paper accepted for publication: 31 March 2017

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