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**SUBVERTING TRADITIONAL MODELS, WHILE  
EXPLORING WOMEN’S SEXUALITY, IN *NOT WISELY BUT TOO  
WELL* (1867) BY RHODA BROUGHTON**

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*Abstract:* By focusing on Rhoda Broughton’s debut novel, entitled *Not Wisely but Too Well* (1867), this paper sets out to explore the way the author succeeded in challenging conventional narrative models, besides subverting the customary depiction of “the Angel in the House”, the untarnished, submissive, cherub-like Victorian icon of womanhood so frequently portrayed in contemporary literature.

*Keywords:* *Not Wisely but Too Well*, Rhoda Broughton, Sensation Novel, “The angel in the house”, Women’s Sexuality

**1. Introduction: the Victorian “Angel in the House”**

Victorian literature often contributed to consolidating gender roles and prerogatives, as well as promoting the validation of ‘separate spheres’ assumptions. For example, in “The Angel in the House” (his renowned narrative poem, first published in 1854), Coventry Patmore (1863:50) sketched a clear-cut picture of feminine perfection, drawing inspiration from the domestic virtues and the flawless propriety of his wife Emily who, in her spouse’s laudatory words, was “pure dignity, composure, ease”. Moreover, in his 1864 lecture entitled “Lilies. Of Queen’s Garden”, John Ruskin (1865:90) offered an explicit and uncompromising definition of the

“separate [albeit complementary] characters” of gentlemen and ladies, besides establishing the boundaries of their respective domains: while the powerful mind of the former was created “for speculation and invention; [their] energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest” (Ruskin 1865:90), “enduringly, incorruptively good” (Ruskin 1865:92) women were turned into the consecrated Vestals of the “temple of the hearth” (Ruskin 1865:91) and therefore prevented from exploring the world beyond their gilded cages, filled with commodities. Dutiful daughters, reliable and caring nurturers, honourable and submissive wives, the heroines of the domestic novels all displayed the same angel-like traits that were much admired in the highest circles of society: a pale complexion, fair and perfectly tamed hair, and childlike, blue eyes. Furthermore, their delicate and ephemeral bodies (unnaturally squeezed into tightly laced, unyielding corsets) seemed to be completely exempt from physical needs and immune to carnal impulses.

## 2. The Sensation Novel

Starting from the 1860s, however, what came to be known as the *sensation novel* (a mass-produced and mass-consumed kind of narrative that fascinated readers across the classes by tickling their senses, as the literary label suggests) began to question gender expectations as well as challenging well-established conventions. Despite their popular appeal especially among women (Queen Victoria herself was an avid reader of sensation novels), they were regarded as particularly disquieting and potentially threatening for social stability, since they were set in contemporary Britain and placed the most horrendous and savage crimes (bigamy, murder, forgery, arson, adultery) in the apparently untouchable and sacred upper-class domestic environment. What is more, the vicious offenders featured in their lurid plots were cherub-like ladies, whose innocent looks appeared to be disturbingly dissociated from their evil nature, thus insinuating that the countless qualities of the “angel in the house” (mirrored in her immaculate façade) might be counterfeit or artificially fabricated products.

In a famous article on contemporary novels published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1867, Margaret Oliphant (1867:275)

thundered against “the feverish productions” of “the school called sensational” (Oliphant 1867:258), holding them responsible for poisoning their readers with addictive stories that were capable of corrupting their imagination and, in consequence, liable to undermine the welfare of the nation. In the writer’s opinion, in fact, women were entrusted with “a duty of invaluable importance to [their] country and [their] race [...] that is the duty of being pure” (Oliphant 1867:275). Consequently, the blatant exhibition of female depravity and unrestrained sexual appetite typical of sensation novels was perceived as a disgraceful abomination, something which needed to be expunged and replaced with more wholesome paradigms of womanhood before it could seriously affect Great Britain.

### **3. Rhoda Broughton: One of the Queens of the Circulating Libraries**

Rhoda Broughton (1840-1920) was listed by Oliphant as one of the degenerate queens of the circulating libraries (Liggins and Maunder 2004:3), along with Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ouida. A refined and highly cultivated young woman (the daughter of a clergyman, she was also Sheridan Le Fanu’s niece), an independent and self-supporting artist who never opted for marriage, Broughton published twenty-six novels and numerous short stories in her over fifty years of fertile literary activity. By focusing on her debut volume, entitled *Not Wisely but Too Well*, this paper sets out to explore the way the author succeeded in challenging conventional narrative models, besides subverting the customary depiction of untarnished, angelic heroines so frequent in Victorian literature. Indeed, Broughton chose to assign the leading role in her story to Catherine Chester, a more than earthly creature, whose unconcealed (and therefore contemptible) sensuality, whose outrageous impropriety and open violation of class and gender boundaries seem to be ironically turned by the writer into a much feared contagious disease, transmitted to the body of a society on the verge of collapse and regression. Some preliminary information regarding the editorial vicissitudes of the narrative will help cast light on its subtler meanings; as will be shown in the following pages, while pretending

to attenuate the most transgressive aspects of her plot in order to satisfy her publisher, Broughton was actually widening the gap between her female protagonist and the fictitious *portrait of a lady* she was expected to produce.

#### **4. *Not Wisely but Too Well***

Supposedly written in just six weeks, in 1863 (Terry 1983:104), *Not Wisely but Too Well* was serialised two years later in *The Dublin University Magazine*, a periodical edited by Rhoda Broughton's uncle (Wood 1993:12). Sheridan Le Fanu was firmly convinced that his niece's first literary endeavour would prove extremely successful as a three-decker; hence, he brought the manuscript to the attention of Richard Bentley, who immediately agreed to issue it, lured by the prospect of easy gain. Nonetheless, when Geraldine Jewsbury, one of the official readers for the publishing house, received the draft, she dismissed it as a "bad story", "an improper book as bad as any French novel" (Heller 2013b:379), thus prompting Bentley to refrain from "bringing out a work so ill calculated for the reading of decent people" (Heller 2013b:379). Le Fanu persuaded Broughton to withdraw her text and replace it with *Cometh up as a Flower*, her second and less scandalous novel, published anonymously early in 1867. Even though the writer readily complied with her uncle's suggestion, she also began to act more autonomously by initiating a personal correspondence with Richard Bentley and his son (and business partner) George. She hoped to convince them to release a new version of *Not Wisely but Too Well*, "modified to a very considerable extent" (Heller 2013b:381) and thoroughly "expunge[d.] of coarseness & slanginess" (Heller 2013b:381). Rather surprisingly for a lady, she also discussed financial matters with the publisher; when she realised that the remuneration would not be entirely satisfactory, she swiftly offered the revised manuscript to the more generous William Tinsley, Bentley's main competitor, who brought it out later in 1867. Further letters exchanged with Bentley bear witness to her intention (which, however, remained unfulfilled) to completely rewrite the story and submit it to him, thus profiting once again from the same idea.

The initial section of *Not Wisely but Too Well* is set on the Welsh coast. The narrative is centred on the character of Catherine, a financially independent orphan who is a guest at her boring uncle's house, together with her brother and her elder sister Maggie. Kate falls ardently in love with Colonel Dare Stamer, a dangerous but fascinating man whom she meets at a party. Blinded by her passion, she is on the brink of eloping with him when he confesses he has already tied the knot with a coarse woman below his station, "a giantess" (Broughton 2013:160) he married by mistake in a moment of weakness. Profoundly disappointed, the young lady moves with Maggie to Queenstown, a small town not far from London. Repenting of her light conduct, Kate becomes a *district visitor*, a volunteer charity worker in the run-down peripheral areas of the town. She deepens her friendship with two men who both end up fancying her: a long-time acquaintance, James Stanley (a clergyman and a volunteer himself), and her cousin George. During a visit to the Crystal Palace she runs into Dare Stamer, who finally persuades her to flee with him the following day. Alarmed by her odd behaviour, James Stanley foresees what is about to happen and talks Kate out of her self-destructive scheme. After recovering from an attack of brain fever (caused by her severe emotional distress), Kate becomes a nurse, enthusiastically helping James to fight a malaria epidemic that has rapidly spread throughout the area and that eventually causes his own death. Maggie moves to a safer neighbourhood and, after a short courtship, announces her engagement to George. The day before their wedding, during a party hosted by the couple, Dare Stamer is injured in a carriage accident and dies in Kate's arms. At the end of the novel, Kate decides to become an Anglican nun, and a few decades later she serenely passes away.

As Tamar Heller (2013a:21) has elucidated, Broughton's revisions to the serialised version of *Not Wisely but Too Well* did not "involve defensive additions so much as deletions and substitutions". Some of the most explicit descriptions of Catherine's sexual arousal were sensibly removed, and her language became more polished and refined; many Victorians, in fact, associated the use of slang with promiscuity and immorality (Heller 2011:283). The melodramatic conclusion of the narrative (in the original

manuscript Dare Stamer brutally killed Catherine before committing suicide) was replaced with a seemingly more conservative ending, with the temptress transformed into a Christian penitent. This pronounced and sudden change, however, may be interpreted as one of the numerous transgressions embedded in Broughton's text. As Pamela Gilbert (1997:65) has underlined, focusing on what she terms a "carnavalesque reconciliation of opposites", traditionally the sex novel and the religious novel were regarded as separate and conflicting genres. *Not Wisely but Too Well* cannot even be assigned to the category of *sensation novel* since, as Helen Debenham (1996:12) has argued, some of the distinctive traits of that genre are missing (namely the criminal plots concocted by the female protagonist, a woman with dark secrets), even though the writer unequivocally endorses "its most profoundly transgressive feature, the detailed 'representation of physical sensation and sexual feeling'". Rhoda Broughton also manages to blur the boundaries between popular and highbrow fiction, poetry and prose, edifying and entertaining literature, by making ample use of interpolated quotations and allusions to acclaimed masterpieces such as *Jane Eyre*, with which her novel shares many incidents. Keats – whose *Endymion* is cited on the very first page (Broughton 2013:41, 123), Shakespeare (the title *Not Wisely but Too Well* comes from a line in *Othello*), Tennyson (Broughton 2013:44, 50, 64, 69, 98, 102, 133, 137, 234), Bunyan (Broughton 2013:83, 127), Shelley (Broughton 2013:70, 82), Byron (Broughton 2013:97, 104), Milton (Broughton 2013:85, 88, 100, 105, 223) and even Homer (Broughton 2013:81) all appear, but so do equally praised and respected female writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning (Broughton 2013:82, 91), Madame de Staël (Broughton 2013:71), and Emily Brontë (Broughton 2013:147) – and these are just a few of the countless authors she alludes to. Some quotations appear inexact (as if Broughton was recalling passages she had learned by heart), others are still unidentified (see, for example, Broughton 2013:81), or maybe even invented, signifying her bold intention, as a woman and an artist, to claim ownership of the very literary tradition she was challenging.

Her confrontational stance against gender inequalities and biased perceptions may also be detected in the adoption (or, better, the

appropriation) of a male persona as the anonymous (and unreliable) narrator of the story. Resembling in this way Robert Browning's evil protagonist in "My Last Duchess", the narrator keeps "a secret picture-gallery" "in the inner chamber of [his] spirit" (Broughton 2013:45), where he collects the images of those he has loved, like cherished possessions. Nevertheless, provocatively enough, he has to admit he "was less than nothing" (Broughton 2013:45) to his beloved Catherine; moreover, he is deprived by Broughton of his name, identity, and faculty of action: in an ironic role reversal between men and women. The only, marginal, part he is allowed to play in the novel is to preserve the memory of Kate's eventful life from the same oblivion that has swallowed up his own.

Kate Chester's looks are far from angelic or outstanding: she is "not a beauty" (Broughton 2013:49), her fuzzy hair is "neither wholly red, nor wholly brown" (Broughton 2013:49), her green eyes are only lit up with "the torch of passion" (Broughton 2013:49), and, unlike her proper and refined sister Maggie, with her "exaggerated slenderness" (Broughton 2013:55) and perfect hourglass figure, she is quite plump and endowed with a voracious appetite. Furthermore, her waist is "naturally healthily firm and shapely" (Broughton 2013:50), which implies she does not wear a corset, something considered *unhealthy* and *unnatural* by the writer. "The soft luxuriance of Kate's irregular style of beauty" (Broughton 2013:68) is paralleled with her unconventional and transgressive passion for Colonel Stamer, "a dissipated, self-indulgent man" (Broughton 2013:67) whose first name, obsessively repeated by Kate - "Dare, Dare, Dare" (Broughton 2013:84) -, turns into a spur to action. Dare Stamer is portrayed as "a bad man" and "an ugly man", with his "thick-growing, deep-brown locks [...], dark eyes [... and] black-brown moustache" (Broughton 2013:67). What seems to truly enthrall the young woman, however, is certainly *not* the Colonel's personality, but his muscular body "much developed in many a boxing-match" (Broughton 2013:67), his "iron-thewed, gladiator form" (Broughton 2013:89), his "herculean shoulders" (Broughton 2013:92), elsewhere in the novel described as "Atlas-like, [so as to] support the burden of the world" (Broughton 2013:269). Physically excited, dazed at her own

“wild, mad, reckless fervour of passion” (Broughton 2013:66), Kate willingly surrenders to what the jealous narrator defines as “that muddy, polluted flood of earthly love” (Broughton 2013:66). Reminiscent of both Dr. Faustus (in his final monologue) and another Catherine, Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*, Kate would willingly exchange her soul for some time spent with her lover:

O, such a minute as that would overpay centuries in hell! I could make a bargain this minute that I should have Dare all to myself for just one month—to be with him always—that he should love me as I love him (ah, no, he could never do that!)—but that he should love me just a little, as I have so often fancied he did—that I might be everything to him, as he is everything to me, just for one month, only a month, and then to die and live in tortures for the countless ages of eternity (Broughton 2013:89-90).

The blasphemous passion of the fallen angel induces her to reject Heaven as a miserable place: “You are not going there, I don’t believe” - says Kate to Dare – “and it would be very dreary without you” (Broughton 2013:147).

The demands of her publisher compelled Rhoda Broughton to tone down the more graphic depictions of the two lovers’ encounters. Yet, as Helen Debenham (1996:14) has observed, in *Not Wisely but Too Well* nature becomes a mirror of the protagonist’s erotic impulses. The scene of their first kiss is set in a conservatory, an artificial Eden where “gorgeous, stately flowers” display their exotic graces with no restraint, “reveal[ing] their passionate hearts, fold after fold” (Broughton 2013:133), the way Kate herself would like to shed her clothes. The clash between the “crimsons and scarlets burned and flamed” typical of tropical flora and “our dear, pale-faced northern flowers” (Broughton 2013:133) reproduces the contrast between the female protagonist, “lovely, with the ripe womanly development of one of Titian’s Venuses” (Broughton 2013:134), and the “emaciated prettiness of modern young ladies” (134). Hence, smelling, touching and gazing at the lush blossoms may be interpreted as a figurative displacement onto nature of the girl’s undisclosed desires: “Kate was in ecstasies. She ran hither and thither, smelling first one, and then another.

‘Delicious!’ she cried. ‘wonderful! I wish I was gardener here. Flowers are one of the very few weak points in my character. O, o!’” (Broughton 2013:134). It is not surprising, therefore, that the lovers’ lips are first sealed together against the background of luxuriant blooms, “rustl[ing] their leaves, and wav[ing] their bright heads sympathetically. They had seen something of that kind before, when they lived in the tropics” (Broughton 2013:137).

Victorian anxieties concerning women’s sexual freedom are expressed (and subtly ridiculed) through the recurring association between Kate and the *Other*. Apart from her connection with exotic flowers, she invokes Allah (Broughton 2013:102) and *kismet* (the Turkish word for ‘fate’ - Broughton 2013:273); she is compared to one of the “hour[s]” (voluptuous virgins granted to Muslim men in paradise – Broughton 2013:131), and Dare Stamer assimilates her to a tantalising “Circassian slave at the market of Constantinople” (Broughton 2013:132), ready to be sold to a sultan’s harem. The Colonel obviously longs to be her new master, provided that she does not spoil her fair complexion to the point of resembling “a dear little negro” (Broughton 2013:133): “His Circassian must not have her white skin tanned” (Broughton 2013:132). And these are only some of the ways in which Rhoda Broughton explores and exposes the limits of contemporary courtship practices and marriage conventions, alarmingly close to legalised prostitution. Just to quote some remarkable instances, before finding out Dare is already married, Kate wonders why he wishes to “steal her for his wife instead of asking her as a costly gift from those who ha[ve] the keeping of her” (Broughton 2013:156); the lovers’ mutual protestations of eternal love are called a “bargain” (Broughton 2013:156) by the Colonel; when James Stanley begins to harbour romantic intentions towards Kate, he has “to see whether he might manage to afford the dear luxury of having this woman walking by his side through life” (Broughton 2013:249). Like commodities, women can be counterfeit, or the result of skilful marketing operations (many passages of the novel are devoted to fashion and to the use of cosmetics and beauty treatments). Moreover, when they are *cheap products*, they can even be bought on the street; this is the reason why, when acting as a *district visitor* in the slums

(thus violating the domestic sphere any decent lady should be restricted to), the unchaperoned Catherine is immediately mistaken for a prostitute (“I’ll gi’e you a ha’penny for your crinoline, miss”, says a bargee – Broughton 2013:212).

As Laurence Taleirach-Vielmas (2007:100) has highlighted, after deserting Dare and moving to Queenstown, Catherine’s “improper urges appear to be displaced onto the degenerate females she encounters”: her *unclean* fantasies are projected onto the filthy environment and the dissolute women she visits, with their rotting and infected bodies. Echoing Margaret Oliphant’s heartfelt appeal against the dangers of the sensation novel, Pamela Gilbert (1997:116) has pointed out that Kate’s “sexual passion is figured forth as disease, and, as she works to cure herself, she actually spreads contagion wherever she goes” (be it noticed, incidentally, that the Contagious Diseases Acts were first passed by Parliament in 1864). It is not by chance that her second opportunity to be lured into sin is set at the Crystal Palace, the pride of the country, the showcase of Victorian grandeur, as well as being an unsettling space in which lower and upper classes mingled, exotic trees and flowers were displayed side by side with factory machinery, and boundaries were, therefore, confused, annihilated. The very moment Catherine recovers from a brain fever (triggered by her renewed resistance to temptation), the illness passes from her frame to the body of society and, strikingly enough, is compared by Rhoda Broughton to a tropical plant, a metaphor abundantly employed in *Not Wisely but Too Well* to indicate *improper* sexuality: “Fed by the fog, and the river mist, and the warm drizzle, the fever shot up like a tropical plant” (Broughton 2013:310). Herself immune, Catherine seems to indirectly cause the death of the men who loved her: Dare Stamer for one, and James Stanley, who looked at her as a dangerous distraction from his missionary work, and read her affectionate letters holding them “between his finger and thumb, as if cholera, typhus, and small-pox lurked in every fold of them” (Broughton 2013:247).

Even Catherine Chester’s final decision to “go and find some work in the world to do” (Broughton 2013:375) by joining the Sisters of Mercy is

far from innocent or conservative, as can be inferred from the widespread perception of the order, reported by Broughton, as a “band of holy devoted women whom Evangelical clergymen condemn as acolytes and handmaidens of the Scarlet Woman” (Broughton 2013:374-375). In Mariaconcetta Costantini’s view (2012:22), “her ‘social mission’ is a sublimated form of erotic desire”, since the “Sisters are explicitly associated with eroticism in the quotation”. What is more, according to Susan Mumm (1999:79), “if, in Victorian eyes, a woman alone appeared incomplete, communities provided opportunities for corporate completeness, without the utter deprivation of legal existence and ownership of property required by marriage”. Sisterhoods, therefore, offered a valuable alternative to married life (Heller 2006:97), besides granting an extraordinary capacity for action and a freedom of movement which were certainly unknown to “the angel in the house” and even to *district visitors*. “With the protection of the name and dress I shall have” – says Kate – “I may go anywhere unmolested; that is an undisputed fact” (Broughton 2013:350).

## 5. Conclusion

Pamela Gilbert has defined the protagonist of *Not Wisely but Too Well* as a woman “who has a passion for boundaries, borderlands” (1007:123). In this paper I have tried to demonstrate that the same phrase can rightly be employed to describe Rhoda Broughton, one of the acknowledged queens of the sensation novel. By uncovering female sensuality, by exposing the mechanisms and the traps of gender construction, by claiming dignity for women (including all the facets of their personality) and for women writers, she successfully managed to shake the tottering pillars of Victorian England and of patriarchal power.

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