



## Antagonistic boundaries: the professional New Woman's retro-progress in *The Odd Women*

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### Introduction

In *Feminine Singularity*, Ronjaunee Chatterjee theorizes a female subjectivity that cannot be reproduced, but “can and should exist in relation,” invoking Black feminist writer Audre Lorde’s “theory of the erotic as an internal ‘measure’ of excellence and an ‘electric charge’ that lives outside the exchange value of a capitalist system of labor” (2022, 2).<sup>1</sup> Chatterjee envisions “new horizons of subjectivity” by situating nineteenth-century literary works both in their historical context and in relation to critical foci that have been excluded from white/neoliberal/capitalist/western critical traditions (2022, 6). In the same vein, my aim in this article is to situate late nineteenth-century British literature simultaneously in the historical context of the New Woman movement and beyond the analytical trajectories influenced by western, third-wave feminist criticism. Examining George Gissing’s novel, *The Odd Women* (1893), and the fin-de-siècle New Woman movement, I will analyze how politically-motivated solidarity is necessarily fractured by social class and moral positioning. As Gissing’s novel suggests, a reformist movement paradoxically requires antagonism and indifference to advance actors specifically self-selected as proponents of the movement.

Twenty-first century gender and literary studies have overwhelmingly focused on female solidarity. In *Between Women* (2007), Sharon Marcus demonstrated the productive role of female friendship in the Victorian marriage plot. More recent critical works, such as *The Circuit of Apollo* (Runge and Cook 2019), have continued to focus on female bonds. Works specifically based on fin-de-siècle literature have addressed larger socio-political and economic structures such as eugenics (Richardson 2003), masculinity and the marriage plot (MacDonald 2015), empire and citizenship (Aslami 2012; Jusová 2005), technology (Wånggren 2017), agriculture and ecology (Carroll 2019), and consumer culture and the print industry (Menke 2019; Sanders 2006; Youngkin 2007). Two vital critical frameworks have been largely overlooked in these studies.

First, given multiple intersecting twenty-first century movements based on gender rights, the strategic presentist necessity to examine the New Woman movement beyond the critical presumption of feminine *esprit de corps*. David Sweeney Coombs and Danielle Coriale define strategic presentism as a way to “think of the past as something other than an object of knowledge that is sealed off, separated from the present by

the onrush of sequential time” (2016, 87). Thus, strategic presentism, in the context of Victorian studies, aims “to explain the importance of the nineteenth century for the twenty-first” and

help[s] us better understand and address the ways the past is at work in the exigencies of the present, from the recursive afterlives of British imperialism in our own era of war to the long arc of ongoing processes of dispossession under capitalism. (Coombs and Coriale 2016, 87–88)

Elaine Freedgood and Michael Sanders have expressed concern about presentism’s potential to retain structures of oppression through repackaging them as new (2016, 120–121). However, I contend that presentism, as an interpretive strategy that re-evaluates contextual/critical givens – such as that of female friendship in the Victorian novel – helps identify overlooked elements that connect with and nuance twenty-first century social structures. By identifying the exclusionary progressivism of late nineteenth-century feminist politics, this article reveals the potential for similarly unexplored oppositional factors at the heart of current racialized and gendered social movements.

Second, the need to reexamine the New Woman movement in relation to not only its contextual situation amid late nineteenth-century British socialist reform but also in relation to London-based urban elite feminism. Gissing’s *The Odd Women*, akin to fin-de-siècle novels that followed, such as Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), offers the opportunity to examine the New Woman movement simultaneously under these historical and presentist lenses, revealing the potent role of antagonism and indifference in fashioning progress for specific reformist cliques.

In *Forms* (2015), Caroline Levine considers the affordances of a structural “whole,” representing the coherent completeness of both social structures, such as gender norms, and spatial structures, such as an individual home/domestic space.<sup>2</sup> In the context of Victorian England, the social and spatial implications of gender norms collided as they were refracted by an imperial conceptualization of domesticity – British imperialism “suffused the Victorian cult of domesticity” (McClintock 1995, 36). In other words, “home” simultaneously referred to both feminine domestic spaces and the masculine/patriarchal space within the political boundaries of the nation. This double ideal of home appears even in early nineteenth-century works such as Felicia Hemans’ poem, “The Homes of England” (1828), which begins as a paean to idyllic English cottages and culminates in an invocation of “country.”<sup>3</sup> Both of these bounded spaces, the personal and the political homes, were organized with exclusionary politics, “containing the internal contradictions of the social while reinforcing the racism of imperial expansion” (Levine 2015, 43).

While acknowledging the discriminatory power of bounded unities, such as the concept of home, to imprison or expel, Levine postulates a progressive political affordance of bounded wholes: “we cannot do without bounded wholes: their power to hold things together is what makes some of the most valuable kinds of political action possible at all” (2015, 26–27). Interestingly, Levine uses *The Odd Women* to demonstrate this, pointing out that both repressive husbands, like Edmund Widdowson in Gissing’s novel, and progressive New Women comprised the readership of the British philosopher John Ruskin (2015, 45). In his widely-popular treatise, *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), Ruskin posited distinct gendered spaces, asserting women’s duty to organize “home” – a concept that can be interpreted regressively as a call to cloister women in domesticity, or

progressively as an appeal to involve women in the service of the nation. Others have also identified this interpretive flexibility of Ruskin's philosophy in Gissing's novel. The Ruskinian ideal of femininity persists in the backdrop of women's progress especially with the characterization of Mary Barfoot, who runs a reformist professional institution, "but remains quiet, self-effacing, and feminine – which is better," because, even in the late nineteenth century, it is hard to portray feminine demureness as undesirable (Ingham 2000, xvi).

Here, it is worthwhile to remember that progressive, independent New Women, depicted by characters such as Mary Barfoot and Rhoda Nunn in Gissing's novel, were not merely grappling with the apparent flexibility of Ruskin's philosophy or the more decidedly liberal ideals of John Stuart Mill,<sup>4</sup> but also rigidly traditional mid-century gender structures propagated by works such as Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1863). The New Woman's conceptualization of femininity, therefore, is informed by both traditional and progressive ideals that she selectively implements in the process of building her feminist community. Uninterested in dismantling the institution of marriage, and viewing professional independence as an avenue for only the educated middle-class, the New Woman's politics risks pushing other women into spheres exclusive to her own. A minor instance of this exclusion is depicted in Mary Barfoot's organic response to Monica Madden, the young female protagonist of Gissing's novel whose father's untimely death transforms her from middle-class, domestic girl child to working shopgirl. Mary readily pronounces Monica "a dear little girl" who "must find a husband" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 60). Mary predicts Monica's unsuitability for the New Woman's sphere – a prediction that unfortunately comes true – and sets the stage for the harsher exclusions that structure her and Rhoda's professional narratives.

Scholars disagree on the extent to which New Woman novels offer a definitive model for social reform, with varying skeptical and optimistic views of the figure's contribution to women's progress.<sup>5</sup> Victorian society similarly had trouble defining the fin-de-siècle New Woman as easily as it had drawn the mid-century binary between good/angelic and bad/monstrous femininities. Instead, the New Woman fought for "the right to define herself" (Ayres 2012, 180). In her quest for self-definition, the proto-professional New Woman fashioned what I term retro-progress – a gradual, backward-looking but forward-thinking brand of progress for middle-class, educated women like herself. As Gissing's novel suggests, the New Woman's feminism often relied on indifference and antagonism aimed toward those beyond her retro-progressive tenets.

### **Hospitality, class, and retro-progress**

The New Woman movement was contemporaneous with the late nineteenth-century settlement movement in Britain, which engendered a shift in the mode of philanthropic work from visitation to hospitality. Social reform through visiting the poor gave way to allowing the poor access to the life of the cultured, privileged class – young, male university graduates settled amid the working class in urban spaces in order to "devise solutions" for the dire economic impoverishment they could now see firsthand (Kohlmann 2021). The New Woman movement similarly adopted hospitality as a tool for reform, but, as Gissing's novel suggests, her sophisticated, feminine efforts at reform could be advanced without the immersive modality of the settlement movement.

The Ruskinian propensity to safeguard women from the harsh realities of the outside world manifests itself in this way in the progressive women's movement. Gissing's novel depicts a vivid example of the educated feminist clique that markedly distanced itself from the immiseration of the laboring class, instead extending hospitality to disadvantaged women originally belonging in the middle-class. These female professionals made financial independence a possibility for women who were circumstantially part of the working class despite not belonging to the urban proletariat by birth.

The chronotopes of *The Odd Women* portray this class-bound hospitality from the very outset. In the introductory chapter, Dr. Madden and his six daughters host a young Rhoda in their respectable, middle-class household. Rhoda is characterized as an assertive young girl clearly desirous of emancipation. The narrative then fast-forwards into a future where financial fortunes, but not the initially-established proximity in social class, have altered for the female protagonists, making hospitality, once again, possible. Readers learn that after Dr. Madden's premature death, the Madden household has descended into poverty. The three surviving Madden sisters, Alice, Virginia, and Monica, raised by their father with traditional values, have been compelled to work as governesses and shopgirls. In contrast, the death of Rhoda's long-ailing mother leaves her free to acquire new technical skills and find stable employment in Mary's professional institution for women.

Unlike a male participant in the settler movement, Rhoda does not require first-hand immersive knowledge about the women she mentors. Instead, she hosts the Madden sisters at her residence, which is also her professional domain, and seeks a second-hand depiction of their struggles. Monica Madden confirms Rhoda's classist imagination of the laboring female population in London shops:

"Are many of the girls ladies?"

"None, at Scotcher's. They nearly all come from the country. Several are daughters of small farmers, and those are dreadfully ignorant. One of them asked me the other day in what country Africa was."

"You don't find them very pleasant company?"

"One or two are nice, quiet girls."

Rhoda drew a deep sigh, and moved with impatience. "Well, don't you think you've had about enough of it – experience and all?" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 42)

Rhoda's interest in rescuing middle-class women from the throes of physical labor – a progressive Ruskinian effort in protecting women from harsh, worldly reality and employing them in the service of the nation – prompts her initial question. Her helping hand would readily extend to female employees of the draper's shop, Scotcher's, if they were "ladies" facing hard times. Reality, however, is cruder, as Monica decries the appalling ignorance of the daughters of small farmers. Rhoda, in turn, pointedly offers Monica an escape route with her rhetorical question: "don't you think you've had about enough of it – experience and all?"

This particular exchange shows that Rhoda's reformist philosophy is bounded by her distant perception of the working class. Just as Monica's unfavorable account of her coworkers helps Rhoda formulate her limited perception of working-class women, the

narrative helps readers formulate a bleak conception of shops such as Scotchers' through limited detail. As Adrienne Munich argues, "the Walworth Street location of Scotchers & Co locates a utilitarian, no-nonsense kind of shop. Gissing's very refusal of description, even of the textures of ugliness in Scotchers' has the effect of totalizing its dismal atmosphere" (2013, 148). Maria Su Wang similarly points out that "Gissing's narrators espouse a "constrained omniscience" that performs and points to their characters' social and material limitations" (2021, 98).

Here, I suggest that this constrained narrative omniscience and Gissing's well-noted ambivalence about social reform are part of the same issue. Critics have attributed Gissing's ambivalence to both his personal socio-economic struggles and his dilemma about the realistic limitations of socialist idealism (Kohlmann 2021, 77). This cautiousness or "strategic pessimism" is Gissing's way to acknowledge gradualism as a necessary feature of reform (Durnan 2020, 707–715). Gissing's perception of fin-de-siècle female professionalism is necessarily inflected with idealism, where the selfless ideal of service/vocation is penetrated by the self-interested, materialistic aspect of career/profession (Colón 2001, 442). But what emerges as a result of the collision between the novel's ambivalent depiction of social reform and its constrained view of working-class life is, paradoxically, clarity on the part of the woman reformer. Based on their perceptions of the working class, Rhoda and Mary are certain that their feminist agenda should focus on "daughters of educated people" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 28).

Gissing's novel suggests that this certainty offers a solid exclusionary premise for the elite New Woman to establish her retro-progressive feminist ideology. By giving unapologetic precedence to paternal identity, the narrative legitimizes the patriarchal education received by women in genteel, middle-class households. Consequently, Monica prioritizes superficial feminine refinement. Farmers' daughters, whose financial hardships turned them into shopgirls like herself, elicit her contempt rather than empathy. The coworkers she finds pleasant are "nice" and "quiet," meaning they are lower-class women who do not engage her in crass conversation. In this way, the specter of Monica's middle-class background follows her, which in itself is peculiar. She was barely five years old when her father died, and has experienced financial hardship for almost all of her life. Yet, raised by older sisters who adhere to memories of their past social positioning, she identifies with middle-class femininity. The Madden sisters' claim to Rhoda's attention, as "daughters of educated people," also remains unaffected by their financial situation, making it even more difficult for them to accept their reality. In dire poverty, they desperately adhere to the norms of refined femininity, which is the common currency recognized by both mid-Victorian patriarchal and fin-de-siècle feminist ideologies. Class identity draws a border between female coworkers at Scotchers' – Monica, the daughter of a doctor, and the superfluous daughters of farmers.

Paradoxically, the New Woman's regressive focus on class progressively disrupts the notion of female self-abnegation, a vital tenet of traditional Victorian femininity. A new consciousness about women's health widens the gap between female professionals and working-class women. Cautious about keeping physical illness at bay, the professional woman seeks physical activity, nutritious diet, and intellectual company. Early in the novel, Rhoda prefers the refreshing company of her neighbors instead of that of her ailing mother:

Mrs. Nunn was not well enough to leave the house today; but, said Rhoda, the invalid preferred being left alone at such times.

“Are you sure she prefers it?” Alice ventured to ask. The girl gave her a look of surprise.

“Why should mother say what she doesn’t mean?” (Gissing [1893] 2000, 9)

Rhoda curtails her association with a physically degenerating feminine presence and seeks healthier company and robust intellectual discourse in the Madden household.

The “rise of physical fitness in the nineteenth-century school curriculum for women and the resulting engagement in physical exercise and athletics,” Tracy J. R. Collins claims, marks the beginning of the New Woman as a feminist ideal rather than her discursive construction “in the library or at the suffrage meeting” (2012, 204). The emphasis on physical fitness, a departure from feminine self-sacrifice, further suggests that belonging to a privileged class is a prerequisite for the pursuit of professionalism in elite New Woman circles. Only the privileged would send their daughters to schools equipped with gyms, an unattainable luxury for the laboring poor.

Furthermore, Gissing’s novel comments on how the physical activities of middle-class, educated woman are distinct from the physical labor of working-class women:

Young people, especially young women, who are laboriously engaged in a shop for thirteen hours and a half every week day, and on Saturday for an average of sixteen, may be supposed to need a Sabbath of open air. Messrs Scotcher & Co. acted like conscientious men in driving them forth immediately after breakfast and enjoining upon them not to return until bedtime. By way of well-meaning constraint, it was directed that only the very scantiest meals (plain bread and cheese, in fact) should be supplied to those who did not take advantage of the holiday. Messrs Scotcher & Co. were large-minded men. Not only did they insist that the Sunday ought to be used for bodily recreation, but they had no objection whatever to their young friends taking a stroll after closing-time each evening. ([1893] 2000, 31)

Working-class women, subject to extensive hours of labor, relinquish control of both their physical and temporal existences. Time beyond their stipulated work hours is also governed by their capitalist male employers. Laboring women’s quality of nutrition, and, consequently, physical health, are dependent on their compliance with mandated recreational activities. This starkly contrasts with professional New Women’s active pursuit of physical fitness in the narrative. Walking is a refreshing activity that supplements their professional work: “[Mary’s] dinner-hour was seven o’clock; she and Rhoda, when alone, rarely sat for more than half an hour at table, and in this summer season they often went out together at sunset to enjoy a walk along the river” (Gissing [1893] 2000, 110). In contrast, for the Madden sisters, walking is a necessary mode of transport. To buy a present for Monica’s birthday, Virginia walks five miles from her residence to the Strand bookshops, which takes her two hours (22). Monica, compelled to walk after her long hours of labor in Scotchers’, is always “too tired to walk after ten o’clock” (31).

Gissing’s novel notes that neither working-class women’s male employers nor their socially superior female counterparts are concerned about alleviating their distress. At the same time, the novel also demonstrates that the prospects for middle-class, unmarried women are brighter in the fin de siècle than in earlier decades, when superfluous spinsterhood was an issue for “ladies rather than for lower-class women, whose lives

had always revolved around work” (Liggins 2014, 29). But the fin-de-siècle ideal of the New Woman opens up the possibility of professional work, distinct from working-class labor, for single middle-class women.

This distinction between healthy physical activity and toilsome physical labor interestingly fractures the Victorian conception of male physical strength and female frailty, revealing that this binary construct only holds true for privileged social classes. Unsurprisingly, while emphasizing physical fitness, Gissing’s elite New Woman discounts physical exertion in her evaluation of female ability. Mary Barfoot believes that “whatever man could do, woman could do equally well – those tasks only excepted which demand great physical strength” (Gissing [1893] 2000, 63). In her passionate speech about gender equality, Mary refrains from acknowledging working-class women’s physical exertion. Working-class women do not belong in the paradigm of professional femininity, which matches masculinity in its intellectual capacity alone. Mary refers to the poor when envisioning a future altruistic project: “When I grow old and melancholy, I think I shall devote myself to poor hopeless and purposeless women, – try to warm their hearts a little before they go hence.” But Rhoda sharply reminds her of their current feminist agenda: “Admirable ... But in the meantime *they cumber us; we have to fight*” (61; emphasis added). The professional woman strategically postpones assistance for the poor to an indefinite future.

Although Rhoda is a comically rigid portrayal of the elite New Woman, her insistence on excluding the poor is implied or similarly articulated in other New Woman novels. The white colonial New Woman heroine Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm* asserts her desire to help the poor, but, like Rhoda, conveniently postpones it: “[w]hen that day comes, and I am strong, I will hate everything that has power, and help everything that is weak” (Schreiner 1883, 59–60). The London-based novel *The Story of a Modern Woman* (Dixon 1894) concerns the young journalist Mary Erle’s life. Mary’s financial struggles, as the daughter of a deceased professor like the Madden sisters, play out in upper-class soirées and artistic and intellectual dilemmas.

In this context, it is worthwhile to consider the genders of the authors of seminal New Woman novels. Male authors often displayed seemingly contradictory notions about women’s equality. For example, Gissing abhorred feminine stupidity, which he phrased as “the crass imbecility of the typical woman” (1994, 113). However, he also acknowledged and admired female intellectual prowess:

[a]mong our English emancipated women there is a majority of admirable persons; they have lost no single good quality of their sex, & they have gained enormously on the intellectual (& even on the moral) side by the process of enlightenment. (Gissing 1994, 113)

Thus, for Gissing, education represented the path from feminine idiocy to intellectualism. Grant Allen, author of the controversial New Woman novel *The Woman Who Did* (1895), held similarly complex and contradictory views on women’s equality.<sup>6</sup>

It may seem as if female authors of the period practiced a more compassionate feminist politics. But their vision of progress was also firmly rooted in feminine moral elevation steeped in genteel upper- and middle-class values. Even in female-authored narratives, upper-class women who rehabilitate fallen women do so at a careful moral distance as reformers doing charitable work. This apparent cross-class sisterhood extended by privileged women is also aimed at maintaining their own moral elevation

and protecting themselves against harmful men, and, in consequence, injudicious motherhoods. Alison Ives in Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* is devoted to rescue work and dissolves her engagement when she learns that her fiancé seduced and abandoned another woman, who is dying a fallen woman's pitiful death in a hospital. Here, an unlikely parallel between Alison and *The Odd Women's* Rhoda is revealed – both dissolve their engagements with unsuitable men to maintain their moral standing as social reformers, and both practice a feminist politics galvanized by their socio-economic stations. Alison's upper-class privilege enables her to volunteer her time to tend to lower-class fallen women and Rhoda's middle-class professional ambition leads her to help educated women pursue financial freedom, and their respective feminist endeavors help both women avoid toxic male partners. Unsurprisingly, at the conclusion of Dixon's novel, Mary Erle also avoids a harmful partnership by rejecting the unhappily married Vincent Hemming. Here, it is vital to note that Mary's decision also protects her from an immoral man before swiftly interpreting her rejection as a show of solidarity toward Vincent's wife, whom she never meets and previously dismisses as an "underbred young woman" (Dixon 1894, 174).

Similarly, Mona Caird's feminist novel *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) presents in its heroine Hadria Fullerton the dangers of educated, upper-class women selecting the wrong male partner. Disillusioned with domesticity, Hadria abandons her husband and biological children to pursue music, adopt a daughter, and set up an alternative household in Paris. But she is compelled to return to her traditional duties as wife and mother in the end. Notably, the novel contrasts Hadria's unfortunate predicament with the narrative of her sister Algitha, who devotes herself to charitable work symptomatic of late Victorian social reform and pragmatically postpones marriage and motherhood. Consequently, Algitha's narrative concludes with success in both vocational and domestic spheres – as a social worker, she is a professional woman with a political purpose, and she eventually marries a suitable man who supports her career, signaling the success of her future domestic life as wife and mother.

In fact, the relationship between Victorian feminist reform, moral elevation, and privilege has long been established by critics. The activism-centered occupations of late-Victorian feminists, such as Elizabeth Blackwell, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Sophia Jex-Blake, Frances Power Cobbe, Josephine Butler, Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, and Frances Swiney, were similarly bolstered by education, affluence, and lucrative social connections:

Almost all of them came from respectable, middle-class, Dissenting or Evangelical families. For women of their time, they were unusually well educated, though not necessarily formally so, and they tended to espouse a Liberal or Radical philosophy. Members of their family were very often politically active and were even political and social "insiders." (Kent 1987, 17–18)

Thus, the New Woman's strategic separation from women of lower social status does not stem from a lack of resources. Rather, it helps in maintaining the progressive pace of her professional network. Inclusion of lower-class women would stymie this elite feminist project. However, the New Woman's indifference transforms into antagonism when unconventional morals threaten to invade her professional community.



## Antagonism, morality, and retro-progress

For a female protagonist, sexual desire is the initial condition of subjecthood (Harsh 2013, 31). Following this provocation, I argue that the political extension of gender solidarity is tethered to established norms regarding the regulation and expression of gendered sexual desire. And indeed, *The Odd Women* depicts intense sexual desire in its most severe female protagonist, the pragmatic and fiercely independent Rhoda. Harsh argues that Rhoda's passion for Mary's cousin Everard Barfoot results in the enlargement of her sympathy with other women including Monica (2013, 32). In contrast, I contend that Rhoda's sympathies were already with Monica, as a result of class solidarity. In fact, Rhoda's eventual regulation of sexual desire – Everard Barfoot is revealed to be an unsuitable partner for the professional woman and she dissolves their engagement – further solidifies the New Woman's demand for female sexual morality.

If lower-class women face the New Woman's indifference, fallen or sexualized women elicit her antagonism. The novel clearly demonstrates that Rhoda's sympathies do not extend to unfettered female sexuality with the brief story of Bella Royston. Bella, a young woman who had left Mary's professional institution to be the mistress of a married man, wishes to return. For Rhoda, fallen women are contagious, if not irredeemable, and she vehemently refuses:

I am not a puritan, and I don't judge her as the ordinary woman would. But I think she has put herself altogether beyond our sympathy ... Let it once become known ... that a girl of that character came here, and your usefulness is at an end. In a year's time you will have to choose between giving up the school altogether, and making it a refuge for outcasts. (Gissing [1893] 2000, 65–67)

Rhoda makes the political choice to withhold female solidarity when it comes to rehabilitating a fallen woman. Asserting the New Woman's self-fashioned elitism, she claims that her judgment is different from that of an "ordinary woman." And yet, Rhoda expresses the traditional Victorian fear of unregulated female sexuality and dreads that Bella's presence will contaminate her feminist establishment.

Historically, this strategic feminist dissociation from issues of sexuality was not uncommon. For example, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, one of the foremost proponents of women's suffrage, distanced herself from the Contagious Diseases Acts repeal campaign, "perhaps fearing that any association with prostitution would besmirch the suffrage cause" (Sanders 2015, 390).<sup>7</sup> Garrett Fawcett "subsequently became a prominent figure in the late Victorian social purity movement, and in numerous contexts elaborated her conviction of women's special moral qualities alongside an analysis of women's oppression" (Sanders 2015, 391). Others, like the feminist reformer Sarah Grand, who coined the term "New Woman,"<sup>8</sup> vehemently opposed the Contagious Diseases Acts with the hope of holding male solicitors of prostitution accountable as they brought venereal diseases home to their pure and healthy wives. Incidentally, Grand, also a believer of eugenics, espoused a feminism opposed to the male decadent movement and homosexuality, in addition to heterosexual male immorality.<sup>9</sup>

Gissing's novel suggests that the New Woman's retro-progressive vision operates within the gendered and classed boundaries set by a combination of old and new normativity. In fact, Rhoda shockingly declares that "many women deserve to be beaten, and ought to be beaten" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 211). Here, Rhoda sanctions gendered violence

in agreement with Everard's ignoble prescription that his recently widowed sister-in-law, Muriel Barfoot, should be disciplined with a caning. Mrs. Barfoot is previously described as suffering from hysteria due to her "evil nurture" and "originally base" dispositions (18). Her late husband Thomas Barfoot leaves a quarter of his wealth to Everard, who "could now count upon an income of not much less than fifteen hundred a year" (210).

Mrs. Barfoot resorts to theatrical defiance at having her financial situation reduced as a consequence:

The widow charged [Everard], wherever she happened to be, with deliberate fratricide; she vilified his reputation, by word of mouth or by letter, to all who knew him, and protested that his furious wrath at not having profited more largely by the will put her in fear of her life (Gissing [1893] 2000, 210)

Such theatrics are not a novel feminine device for acquiring materials women rightfully consider theirs. In George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Lydia Glasher, also a sexualized woman, abandons her characteristic dignity for a theatrical tantrum to retain the diamonds gifted by her lover Grandcourt, who now demands them back for his betrothed. Perceiving her reaction as "something like madness," Grandcourt relents, allowing Lydia to keep and deploy the jewels in her larger plan to secure financial stability for herself and her illegitimate children (Eliot 1876, 293–294). In contrast, Mrs. Barfoot's false accusations and theatrical defiance against social mores that frustrate her physically and financially – which, instead of hurting Everard's social standing further denigrates her own reputation – is scornfully dismissed by the novel's feminists. While Rhoda assents to corporal punishment, Mary chastises Mrs. Barfoot for her "imaginary phthisis" and describes Mrs. Barfoot's marriage as "absurd" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 89). In this way, the novel indicates that sexualized women are unsuitable for both domesticity and professionalism, besmirching them with the taboo of mental illness. This, in turn, prolongs the social ostracism of fin-de-siècle women beyond the pale of traditional sexual morality, conjuring the traditional Victorian notion of woman as weak, diseased, and prone to "fall" if not cloistered.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, Gissing's novel posits that the New Woman's retro-progressive niche is established by conflating lower social class and inferior morality. Mary declares that "[t]he girls of our class are not like the uneducated, who, for one reason or another, will marry almost any man rather than remain single ... they are absorbed in preoccupation with their animal nature" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 70–71). Mary's assertion, made by conflating poverty and sexual depravity without addressing the material predicament of the working class, is untrue as well as ironic. But it is remarkably in line with the feminist rhetoric of New Woman activists such as Sarah Grand, who equated the traditional form of domestic femininity – one that the less privileged often aspired to in order to escape difficult working conditions – with the monotonous existence of livestock. In Grand's words, the New Woman "is a little above" the immoral man and the imbecilic or the sexualized women – "the cow-woman and the scum-woman" (1894, 271). The professional New Woman does not offer assistance to poor and uneducated women, so their only avenues for survival are onerous physical labor, marriage, or prostitution. Their need for material sustenance, rather than their "animal nature," compels them to marry "almost any man." This reality is lucidly depicted in Gissing's novel through the plight

of Miss Eade, who is forced to move from thirteen-hour workdays, to dashed hopes of marriage, to prostitution.

Both Monica and Miss Eade, shopgirls from largely disparate backgrounds, aspire to be free of the commercial establishment that holds ownership of their physical and temporal existence. Monica, having the privileges of youthful beauty and middle-class education, attracts the attention of both male suitors and New Woman mentors. Miss Eade, with neither advantage, desperately wishes to marry prior to being driven to prostitution. She suffers from intense worry after seeing Mr. Bullivant, whom she hopes to marry, talking to Monica. Unbeknownst to Miss Eade is Monica's discreet relationship with the elderly and financially secure Mr. Widdowson. In a striking display of limited female solidarity across social classes, Monica refuses to appease Miss Eade's concerns. On Monica's blatant refusal to engage in conversation, Miss Eade exasperatedly notes that "[i]f it had been the other way about," she would have treated Monica better (Gissing [1893] 2000, 56).

The poor working-class woman's pleas for female solidarity are ignored by her social superior. Not only is romance an improper subject of conversation for Monica's sensibilities, but Miss Eade's inferior social class also makes discussing romance with her a doubly repellent prospect. Instead of simply reassuring Miss Eade that her worries are unfounded, Monica offers a sanctimonious response: "If I were you, I wouldn't be so silly" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 56). Later in the narrative, Monica, now Mrs. Widdowson, encounters Miss Eade, now a prostitute. Still wondering about Mr. Bullivant, Miss Eade wishes to know Monica's married name and receives another terse rebuff: "That really doesn't concern you" (330). Monica had previously feared "contemptuous dismissal" from Rhoda due to the latter's intellectual elevation (43). Yet, her aversion to a lower-class woman's open interest in a man leads Monica to employ the intolerant rhetoric of the New Woman.

Notably, the other young shopgirls also treat Miss Eade "with frank contempt because of her ill-disguised pursuit of a mere counter-man" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 57). The young working-class women, many of whom would potentially face Miss Eade's predicament, mercilessly denounce a desperate older woman. Monica pretends to be asleep as they discuss Miss Eade's questionable morals in the dormitory. This scene reveals the multi-faceted boundaries of late-Victorian female solidarity. Rhoda and Mary are wary of women who have a propensity toward silly romance and unpragmatic sexuality as they potentially threaten their feminist project. The young shopgirls, despite no such political motivation, also find an older woman pursuing romance pitiful. Monica, who also abhors Miss Eade, refrains from participating in her coworkers' mean-spirited gossip due to her own distaste for the lower class. Neither social class sympathizes with Miss Eade's desperate display of sexuality, and both demand moral elevation. For Miss Eade, physical strain in the shop is unsustainable long term, both middle-class professionals and her working-class coworkers offer contempt instead of sympathy, and the working-class man she loves pursues a prettier, younger woman. Miss Eade's life demonstrates that vending sexuality is ultimately the only mode of survival some poor women have at their disposal.<sup>11</sup>

The New Woman's solidarity is reserved only for educated women who can bolster their professional network. The New Woman's morality signals that she is not a threat to domesticity, and her dutiful work ethic signals her capacity to contribute to the

institutional structures of the British Empire (Jusová 2005, 179). Consequently, her feminist network's intellectual labor aids both renderings of the Victorian home.

Gissing's novel shows that a poor woman who commits a moral slip does not cut a sympathetic figure in the elite New Woman's retro-progressive narrative. Inferior social class forever dooms a fallen woman into the realm of immorality, and sometimes thrusts her into it. Just as Miss Eade is driven to prostitution, fallen woman Bella Royston's failed struggle to rehabilitate her social position after being denied her plea to re-enter the professional woman's care eventually leads her to suicide (Gissing [1893] 2000, 142). Talia Schaffer recently invited readers to think of care not as affect but as a practice that is "difficult, often unpleasant, almost always underpaid, sometimes ineffective ... but nonetheless an activity" that defined the lives of nineteenth-century female subjects (2021, 1). Interestingly, offering care as activity rather than affect is another way that the professional woman maintains the strategic boundaries between herself and the lower-class, fallen other. Denying Bella re-entry into her professional establishment, Mary supplies her with money and finds her "a situation in a house of business" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 142). In a reversal of Schaffer's description, active care in secret for the ostracized other becomes the easier choice than open platitudes of solidarity. The material care Bella receives from Mary temporarily prolongs her life instead of saving it, but saves the professional women's network from moral degradation. In her pursuit of independence for herself and her protégées, the New Woman safeguards her feminist project from both the poor and the immoral. As I will now discuss, this retro-progressive stance counterintuitively prolongs the effect of patriarchal gender structures for some nineteenth-century women.

### **The New Woman and the failed others**

The New Woman movement leaves in its wake not only the poor and the immoral/sexual, but also those unable to transcend mid-Victorian patriarchal norms and adopt its retro-progressive ideals. Here, as a revision to Levine's postulate that totalities depend on violent acts of expulsion and abjection but also facilitate political action (2015, 26–27), Gissing's novel suggests that rapid political action by constructed unities essentially depends on indifference and antagonism against those outside its boundaries. The Madden sisters' adherence to feminine refinement, which their New Woman acquaintances also endorse, plays a significant role in their inability to pursue professional careers. The conflation of the poor and the immoral impedes the Madden sisters' ability to acknowledge their economically fallen status. Educated by their father in the sexist genteel snobbery that no woman should ever have to worry about finances, they are thrust into a perplexingly paradoxical life after he suddenly dies without a life insurance. They exist in limbo between their current social equals such as Miss Eade and past social equals such as Rhoda Nunn, "eccentric to both patriarchal and feminist ideological circles" (David 1984, 123). Due to their middle-class upbringing, the Madden sisters imagine proximity with the New Woman rather than the illiterate poor. However, also due to their traditional education, they identify only with the traditional aspects of their professional acquaintance's retro-progressive feminism.

In an attempt to adhere to their prosperous middle-class past, the Madden sisters assert their moral elevation over their fellow poor. In addition to Monica's dismissal

of Miss Eade, Gissing's novel subtly depicts the Madden sisters' denial of their poverty. Alice and Virginia eat meager meals of mashed potatoes with milk and plain rice with butter, and convince themselves that they have adequate nutrition. They refuse to acknowledge that their food insecurity is a consequence of their economic class, rather than their feminine propensity to eat less. For a Victorian woman, "denial of her will began on the plate ... their constant hunger and their ability to resist eating [was] a good work, a worthwhile pursuit" (De Soto 2016, para. 9). While they grapple with poverty by adhering to their past in this way, they envision a prosperous future through their relationship with Rhoda. With Rhoda's encouragement, they contemplate running a women's school, supervising subordinate teachers, and building an elite social circle for themselves. But their identity as daughters bred for domesticity results in their failure to ultimately identify as women who work for material sustenance.

In contrast, pragmatic choices mark a necessary characteristic of the elite New Woman's retro-progressive mission. She recycles the concept of Victorian female morality, turning it from passive domestic quality to active empowering trait. In Gissing's novel, Monica is educated and receives Rhoda's offer of a professional career. She is also young and beautiful and receives Mr. Widdowson's offer of marriage. Monica shares the New Woman's aversion to the lower class but ultimately lacks the courage to pursue secretarial work after a life of intense physical work. A transition from one kind of economic institution to another is intimidating and uncertain to her – "[t]o put herself in Miss Nunn's hands might possibly result in a worse form of bondage than she suffered at the shop" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 43) – and she chooses the traditional path of matrimony.

Critics have optimistically noted the relationship between fin-de-siècle professionalism and traditional, heterosexual gender structures. Indeed, Gissing's novel depicts working women's hope for mobility between the opposing domestic and professional spheres (Colón 2001, 441).<sup>12</sup> Monica hopes that her marital household will not be an impediment to worldly, intellectual fulfillment. And Rhoda, who is depicted as a strict professional, dreams of mobility between work and domesticity during her temporary engagement to Everard: "She herself was no longer one of the 'odd women'; fortune had – or seemed to have – been kind to her; none the less her sense of a mission remained" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 299). However, both women's hopes for emancipated domesticity remain unfulfilled, reaffirming the traditional binary of masculine and feminine spaces, albeit with a twist. Their vastly disparate outcomes – Monica's death in childbirth is irreversibly fatal compared to Rhoda's resumption of her professional career following a broken engagement – are a result of their partners' masculine incompatibility with the advent of professionalism.

The retro-progressive New Woman imagines a similarly retro-progressive man, who supports and facilitates her mobility between domesticity and professionalism. The fin de siècle was "torn between desires for conventional masculine and marriage models, on the one hand, and utopian models of equal and dynamic partnerships on the other" (MacDonald 2015, 110). This engendered the ideal of the New Man who "must be [the New Woman's] political ally in the public sphere," in addition to being her domestic partner (MacDonald 2015, 81–82). In Gissing's novel, both Edmund Widdowson and Everard Barfoot fail to meet this expectation, depicting indolent and harmful masculinities instead. Monica and Rhoda's disparate outcomes in romance show that the New

Woman's retro-progressive ideology teaches women to safeguard themselves from these harmful masculinities, and, echoing New Woman proponents such as Sarah Grand, encourages eugenic, rational mate-selection aimed at fostering civic motherhood (Richardson 1999; Lawrence 2019). After all, the New Woman's goal, in Mary's words, is to "prevent girls from marrying just for the sake of being supported, and from degrading themselves," even if "the vast majority of women would lead a wasted life if they did not marry" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 69).

Thus, the New Woman's vision of domesticity looks both inward and outward, dialectically prescribing traditional feminine morality for professional women and expelling traditional masculinities as harmful. Her advocacy for intellectual and physical fitness contradicts restrictive patriarchal values that cloister women in domesticity. Thus, Monica's death cannot be dismissed as the poetic justice commonly meted out to fallen women in Victorian narratives. Rather, her death is the result of committing both errors the New Woman cautions against – marrying for the sake of sustenance and unpragmatically pursuing sexual desire. Both of the men Monica forges relationships with, the elderly Widdowson, whom she marries to escape poverty, and the musician Bevis, with whom she wishes to elope as a married woman, represent harmful masculinities. Intensely insecure and suspicious, Widdowson, a layabout with old patriarchal values, hires a detective to follow Monica after his failed attempts to cloister her. Bevis, on the other hand, lacks courage to move beyond flirtatious conversation with Monica in the secrecy of his apartment.

In contrast, retro-progressive pragmatism allows Rhoda to avoid marriage to a harmful man. Her professional independence continues unscathed. Similar to Widdowson, Everard's indolent life is plainly portrayed in the novel. He abandons his profession as a civil engineer to pursue a life of travel and leisure. Both Widdowson and Everard, materially sustained by inheritances, have no distinct vocation to match the New Woman's retro-progressive ideal as New Men. Consequently, they revert to traditional modes of masculinity. With no actual work, Widdowson's sense of duty focuses on maintaining patriarchal gender structures within the confines of his household. On the other hand, the younger Everard indulges in leisurely travel and a theoretical interest in women's emancipation before marrying Agnes Brissenden, who, despite her intellectual and linguistic prowess, is "delightfully feminine," unlike the outspoken Rhoda (Gissing [1893] 2000, 317).

Other fin-de-siècle male characters, such as Vincent Hemming in Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman*, reaffirm the stereotype of the failed New Man. Vincent embarks on an international journey to British colonies "to collect materials for [his] book on the Woman Question" (Dixon 1894, 59). But he eventually breaks his engagement with the novel's New Woman protagonist, Mary Erle, to marry the more conventional Violet Higgins and gain access to her family's wealth and political connections. Frustrated in his political aspirations and acutely dissatisfied in his married life, he later returns to Mary Erle and proposes an adulterous affair, which she pragmatically rejects. Everard and Vincent portray the harmful masculinities the New Woman's retro-progressive feminism empowers her to reject. Both men are professional failures, both are financially secure through inheritances, both are theoretically but not practically invested in reformist ideals, and both threaten the New Woman's independence with moral degradation – Everard with his offer of a free union to Rhoda prior to their

broken engagement, and Vincent with his offer of an adulterous affair to Mary Erle following their broken engagement. Both New Women pragmatically choose their professional careers and refuse domesticity with harmful men to appease sexual desire.

In this way, the New Woman establishes control over her mind and body, safeguarding herself against moral and physical degeneration. Unable to adopt this retro-progressive stance and adhering to conventional feminine passivity, the Madden sisters fail to protect their bodies from harm. Monica's body is invaded by Widdowson's harmful masculinity and the birth of his child kills her. Virginia accepts hunger as a feminine trait and descends into alcoholism to sate physical desire. In contrast, while carefully regulating their sexual appetites, Rhoda and Mary do away with the notion of small female appetites for food. During her visit with Rhoda, Virginia "brighten[s] wonderfully" after having a substantial meal. The food has "much the same effect upon Virginia as her more dangerous indulgence" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 28). Departing from the notion of feminine self-sacrifice, the New Woman, as Gissing's novel shows, advocates middle-class women's holistic attention to their physical and intellectual health, embracing morality without self-abnegation.

## Conclusion

As a marked disconnect from contemporary movements for gender equality, late nineteenth-century feminism, despite disrupting conventional gender structures, wholeheartedly endorsed heterosexual partnerships and marriage (MacDonald 2015, 106). *The Odd Women* captures the lives of women who could not, rather than deliberately did not, find appropriate male partners, and those who settled for harmful ones. The New Women in the novel extend their solidarity to the reserve of unmarried, educated women who must learn a way of financial sustenance, which the novel makes clear in the aptly-titled chapter "A Camp of the Reserve" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 59-71). The goal of the elite New Woman's middle-class feminism – economic independence and social reform through professionalism – leaves little tolerance for other forms of unconventionality. Pursuing professionalism demands a middle-class education and conventionally feminine moral standards.

Gissing's novel suggests that the New Woman purposefully limited her political solidarity toward other women, and, in turn, throws the political limits of elite reformist movements into sharp relief. In her retro-progressive agenda, the urban, elite New Woman is openly indifferent and antagonistic toward lower-class and immoral women, and expels harmful men. This exclusionary politics is what enables her to dialectically bring middle-class Victorian women out of traditional domesticity and also beyond the domesticity-centered occupations of teacher and governess. Gissing's novel describes Monica as "a pretty, cheerful, engaging girl" with "no aptitude whatever for giving instruction" ([1893] 2000, 15). In fact, Monica's ineptitude for teaching parallels Rhoda's uninterest in it, revealing a similarity amid the vast disparities between the two women. Rhoda acknowledges that she is incapable of teaching and notes that learning shorthand and typing was lucrative for her career (Gissing [1893] 2000, 27). Combining both material and reformist goals in her professional capacity, Rhoda's character shows avenues of sustenance beyond traditionally feminine work.

Despite the limitations of late nineteenth-century secretarial careers (Gray 2015), the entry of women into office spaces beyond the domestic realm is a watershed moment in

the history of white, middle-class elite British women's intellectual labor. As *The Odd Women* shows, even as the elite faction of the New Woman movement maintains staunch class-consciousness, ostracizes the poor and the immoral, it leads a specific band of women in a gradualist, retro-progressive movement away from traditional Victorian femininity.

## Notes

1. Here, Chatterjee is referring to Lorde's (1978) essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power."
2. See Chap. 2, especially 43–45.
3. On British imperialism in Hemans's poems, see Lootens (1994).
4. Mill attempted to change the text of the 1867 Reform Bill "to read 'person' for 'man' so that women might have the vote on an equal basis with men" (Gissing [1893] 2000, 372, explanatory note 8).
5. See Kistler (2018, 245), Heilmann (2003, 56), Jusová (2005, 10), Ledger (1995, 23, 41).
6. See MacDonald (2015, 112).
7. The Contagious Diseases Acts were "a series of laws mandating the compulsory examination of prostitutes in British garrisons and port towns, passed in the 1860s and ultimately repealed in 1886" (Sanders 2015, 390)
8. See Grand (1894, 271).
9. See Heilmann (2004, 103).
10. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the female body was treated as a site of decay, disease, and death, and that the training of women to be passive effectively meant that they were also "trained in ill-health, since the human animal's first and strongest urge is to his/her own survival, pleasure, assertion" (2000, 31, 54).
11. On Gissing's personal relationship with and complicated view of prostitution, see Grylls (2013), Whiting (2022).
12. Critics have also argued that women utilized the increased significance of literary form, and availability of cheap, popular fiction to break convention. See Shand (2019, 53–54), Sanders (2006, 16). For a detailed analysis of fin-de-siècle print culture, the New Woman novel, and Gissing, see Menke (2019).

## Notes on contributor

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