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INCORPOREAL AND INSPECTED: ARISTOCRATIC FEMALE BODIES AND THE GAZE IN THE WORKS OF MRS HENRY WOOD

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ABSTRACT

This article posits that sensation novelist Mrs Henry Wood, despite her complex representations of gender and class, articulated a proto-feminist stance through many of her works through the trope of the disembodied aristocratic female. Wood represents the impossible, contradictory spaces that women in general are supposed to occupy by using the high visibility of aristocratic female characters as a magnifying glass for gender norms. Wood sees aristocratic women as doubly trapped by patriarchal structures as these women attempt the paradoxical “public vs. private” and “viewed vs. intangible” demands placed on them by their gender and class statuses. By representing all women, but especially upper-class women, as constantly seen but lacking corporeal forms (especially in comparison to the highly embodied male characters in her texts), Wood stresses the tension between conflicting ideologies of conventional femininity in the Victorian period.

KEYWORDS Sensation fiction; class; gender; the gaze; Mrs Henry Wood; Victorian literature

Introduction

The works of the sensation novelist Mrs Henry Wood are ambiguous and often contradictory in their treatment of gender and class. In spite of her hundreds of texts, many which centre around aristocratic female characters and conflicts arising from class mobility, Wood’s textual intersections of gender and class remain just as unsurely understood as Wood is herself: little is known about her personal life, she wrote few letters or diaries, and her heavily constructed public persona as the submissive invalid lady-writer, “Mrs Henry Wood”, is often at odds with her assertive and energetic professional actions.¹ Whether espousing proto-feminism or the reifying

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patriarchal hegemony, whether the epitome of aristocratic toadying or the champion of middle-class mobility, whether deeply conservative or subversively radical, Wood's works articulate an unease with the shifting intersectionality of class and gender.² As will be explored below, this intersectionality finds its staging ground most strongly in her representations of female aristocratic bodies as highly visible but physically absent objects.

Wood highlights the expectations and paradoxes placed by society upon women as a whole – although those expectations and paradoxes are best analysed through *aristocratic* women, who, according to Wood, are doubly bound by the pressures placed on their gender and class group. These limitations and contradictions that Wood highlights, with her aristocratic women characters standing in as hyperbolic, magnified representatives for all womankind, largely revolve around the role of women's bodies and their place in both the visual/public and private/domestic spheres. Wood traps aristocratic female characters in a space where they are constantly viewed, and are yet represented as somehow bodiless, indicating the incompatibility of the public and private ideologies to which society indicates they should conform.

In *The Maniac in the Cellar* (1980), Winifred Hughes states that, “Whether heroine or villainess, it is always a woman who demands the spotlight in the typical sensation novel”.³ In Wood's novels, female characters rarely *demand* the spotlight, but receive it anyway as a structural manifestation of societal norms and expectations surrounding gender and class. Notions of privacy, domesticity, and surveillance in the Victorian era have also historically been considered by critics to fall on gender lines, in which men are associated with the public spheres of work and politics, and women with the private spheres of domesticity and morality.⁴ In her 2008 work on Victorian visual culture, Kimberly Rhodes argues that women's bodies were so heavily regulated through often opposing institutions and viewpoints that women had little chance of shaping their own bodily image, effectively neutering identity and agency.⁵ Although some of these definitions of Victorian femininity have been challenged by critics, one of the pervading elements of both Victorian and modern understandings of nineteenth-century femininities seems to be the overarching issue of contrariness, of competing ideologies which created narrow or impossible spaces for performing gender.

These impossible spaces become even more fraught when compounded with performing class under surveillance; this has been amply explored by critics, with the upper-class women in particular being scrutinised – largely by their servants.⁶ Sophie Gilmartin argues that the Victorians were very conscious of the dual positions of high-born women, writing of their “genealogical dilemma” that “they inhabited both the public and private spheres, and their blood relations were both dynastic and familial”.⁷ The paradoxes of competing ideals show not only the problems in determining a woman's role, especially in relation to class, but also the difficulties faced by contemporary

critics in attempting to understand and unpack this role. Despite her often opaque treatment of class systems in general, an analysis of the gender and class dynamics in Wood's works shows one very clear pattern: while aristocratic women are not necessarily more severely trapped by patriarchal systems than their middle- and lower-class counterparts, their elevated class position at least highlights the social contradictions that *all* women are expected to navigate. Their suffering is manifested through one specific trope: the lack of a body. Wood's aristocratic women lack corporeality – a trait she reserves for her middle- and lower-class women, or for male characters of any class. Despite being constantly gazed upon, her female aristocrats are denied the reality of physical needs; they are repeatedly referred to as objects or in terms of intangible ideas; and plots are structured around their lack of physical presence.

This inverse relationship between body and gaze becomes clear through a comparative analysis of female characters from lower classes. When Wood's aristocratic women fall in society, there is often a reclamation of identity and body-hood, since a lower social status means, to Wood, one tether fewer to patriarchal institutions. The aristocratic characters that descend the social ladder are (for the first time, and in a confused space where punishment mingles with liberation) allowed to acknowledge hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and physical pain. This is not to say that Wood implies any benefit in belonging to one class or another; most of her depictions of social change, whether up or down, are bittersweet and it is therefore difficult to determine any authorial consistency regarding class preference, privilege, or suffering.

What follows is a brief introduction to Wood's recurring tropes of female disembodiment and woman-magnified-by-aristocracy, as explored through three case studies in which these tropes are heightened more than in Wood's other texts. It would be impossible to discuss Wood's use of class, gender, and the body without analysing *East Lynne* (1861), easily her most popular work. *East Lynne* is followed by an analysis of lesser-known 1867 novel, *Lady Adelaide's Oath*. The final text is Wood's novella, *The Surgeon's Daughters*, which was part of her 1887 collection of short stories *Lady Grace and Other Stories*. These three texts form a trajectory in which Wood's aristocratic heroines become more and more disembodied and removed from their own narratives as class mobility and coding shifts around them.

East Lynne

East Lynne's protagonist is Lady Isabel Vane, whose aristocratic father's early death threatens her socioeconomic security. Isabel takes shelter in a marriage to an upstanding middle-class lawyer, Archibald Carlyle, away from whom she is seduced by a dissolute nobleman. After being severely disfigured in a

railway accident, Isabel returns home and becomes governess to her own children under an assumed name and suffers witnessing Archibald's happy remarriage to her middle-class rival, Barbara, before dying at the novel's conclusion.

Body, class, and gender are so entwined in the very premise of the novel that it is difficult to discuss one without others. The novel's opening sentences, about Isabel's father, typify this tightly linked relationship:

His hair was grey, the smoothness of his expansive brow was defaced by premature wrinkles, and his once attractive face bore the pale, unmistakable look of dissipation. One of his feet was cased in folds of linen, as it rested on a soft velvet ottoman; speaking of gout as plainly as any foot ever spoke yet.⁸

The choice to open the novel with its highest ranking male character, instead of with its female protagonist, replicates the reality of the social order: upper-class men come first. The second character seen is Archibald Carlyle, pushing Isabel's presence even further down the scale of importance behind middle-class men. Isabel's name serves as the title for this first chapter and she is referenced by her father throughout, and yet she is not introduced to the reader until several pages later, her presence hovering over the chapter with little to substantiate it. Lady Isabel is introduced as all surface and no substance, visible but without physical form. When she finally appears, Archibald Carlyle's thoughts precede the narrator's, "Who – what – was it? Mr Carlyle looked, not quite sure whether it was a human being: he almost thought it more like an angel".⁹ Isabel is a "what" and an "it", and this is ostensibly complimentary – as far as Carlyle intends, if not necessarily Wood.

Isabel's ethereal nature juxtaposes her father's earthy portraiture, reifying his possession of a body and her lack of one. His pain speaks not only of his palpable physical presence, but also of his physical history, with gout often stemming from eating and drinking to excess. His body is so present that even single body parts have voices: one of his feet speaks "of gout as plainly as any foot ever spoke yet". Isabel is described vaguely as beautiful – hardly sufficient description for a protagonist, especially when compared with the richness of the description of her father, a secondary character who dies early in the novel. The inverse relationship continues: "Lord Mount Severn raised his swollen eyelids and drew the clothes from his flushed face. A shining vision was standing before him, a beauteous queen, a gleaming fairy; he hardly knew what she looked like".¹⁰ His physicality is real, and is given the right to privacy: he is in a private room in his own home and is gazed upon only by the reader; Isabel is viewed by both the reader and the characters in the text. In this scene, she is leaving for a concert and has dressed with purposeful exquisiteness because her presence will raise more charitable funds. She serves as the real attraction at the event. Despite the social and financial value given to her presence, she is

denied a body in her father's assessment and is again qualified as a "what" instead of a "whom". Ideals of femininity are at odds in this scene, in which her class role as a purveyor of care and support to her father's tenants conforms to ideals of aristocratic femininity and Christian charity, and yet is simultaneously undercut by her departure from the home with the overt intention to put her body on display in a public forum.

Isabel's visual presence and bodily absence are further accentuated when middle class women enter the text and the reader is able to see how female bodies respond to patriarchal structures in different class groups. Although both Isabel and Barbara Hare, her middle-class foil, live in oppressive male environments, Barbara is far more active and independent than Isabel and the differences between the households are class-based. Firstly, the duties of the Hare women are more individualised and private to suit a small, untitled family. Secondly, the Hare women are not as isolated by their class and gender as Isabel is, since their household contains a female network of equals instead of a lone mistress and her servants; even were Isabel's home to be filled with female relatives, the subject of precedence would infiltrate her relationships, maintaining a level of prestige-based segregation. The Hare household, however despotic, contains fewer contradictions than Isabel's.¹¹

Barbara's description, though fairly bland, is purely physical, unlike Isabel's indefinable luminescence: she is "a pretty girl, very fair, with blue eyes, light hair, a bright complexion, and small aquiline features".¹² Her slight irregularity of aquiline features is a masculine descriptor uncommon for beautiful heroines, and Wood writes that Justice Hare bore "a resemblance to his daughter", casting Barbara in an unusual role of narrative superiority to him.¹³ Logistically, Barbara must bear a resemblance to her father, instead of the other way around, since her very existence relies upon his. Further, Barbara was initially described in relation to Justice Hare before he appeared on stage, with a patriarchal presence looming over her before he is even a textual reality, establishing him as an authority over her body almost subliminally. Barbara is presented as an individual at a surface level, though ultimately defined by her nearest male relation. She enjoys the possession of a body and a strong sense of self due to her class status, though her gender keeps her from being entirely independent.

The middle-class Hare women do not invoke society's prurient gaze, like the aristocratic Isabel, and they get to enjoy the mixed blessing of bodily awareness and sensation. Barbara's mother is a chronically cold and thirsty invalid who refuses to have fires lighted or tea served without her husband's permission, his total control over her body remaining even when he is not present. The victimisation of Mrs Hare is distressing to the reader, especially considering Wood's own invalid status.¹⁴ In her biographical work on Wood, Lucy Sussex posits that this invalidism was a motivating force in Wood's career, saying, "This was perhaps the one thing Wood could not control:

her body”.¹⁵ The parallels between Wood and the Hare women are prominent: Mrs Hare is submissive, gentle, and feminine, just as Wood portrayed herself publicly; Barbara is an unyielding force of action and production, just as Wood was professionally. When both characters are taken together as a stand-in for the middle-class Wood, the idea of the body takes on a new significance as an item of intense private worth, serving as the foundation for selfhood. An individual body may be controlled by others, but its base sensory level cannot be stopped, restricted, or lived by anyone else.

As Barbara and Isabel swap positions, so does the portrayal of their bodies. After Barbara’s marriage to the divorced, socially-ascendant Archibald Carlyle, she joins him at the top of the town hierarchy, stepping into Isabel’s vacant position. Barbara’s body reacts accordingly to her status as new bourgeois nobility: she is shunted to the back of the narrative. Just like Isabel, Barbara quietly produces children offstage and exhibits little bodily intimacy in her love-match – at least compared her middle-class mother’s marriage, which gives the audience a view of Justice and Mrs Hare in bed together.¹⁶ The difficulty with reading Barbara as she ascends to a new style of aristocracy is that there is little there to read: what must be read is absence, her newfound publicity having rendered her neutral.

In her introduction to *East Lynne*, Elisabeth Jay reads Barbara and Isabel’s inverse transitions in a feminist light, arguing that Barbara was an engaging character in the first half of the book, but in the second, after her marriage, “she becomes little more than a complacent wife and mother [...] Isabel, by contrast, ceases to be the passive object of discussion that she is in the first part, becomes a narrative focalizer, and achieves a degree of agency”.¹⁷ What Jay does not list in this series of contrasts is Isabel’s drastic physical metamorphosis which, while operating as narrative punishment for Isabel’s promiscuity, also liberates the character from typical conventions. The combination of Isabel’s injuries and poverty not only strip her of her identity as the beautiful Lady Isabel, but they send her bodily portrayals ricocheting from total aristocratic disembodiment, far beyond the obedient-but-present bodies of the middle-class women, and into the individualist realm of men. The shedding of all residual aristocratic codifiers takes Isabel only a matter of pages, a process which coincides with her physical recuperation. “She [Isabel] was not travelling under her own name; she left that behind her when she left Grenoble”.¹⁸ Wood, in an obvious pun, has Isabel depart both from Grenoble and her noble identity in tandem. Though her wounds are gruesome and she wears odd clothing to obscure her looks further, she has the anonymity of an individual not held in the public gaze, freed from feminine *and* aristocratic ideals. For the first time, she is conspicuous, but not looked at. The catharsis is clear in Wood’s writing:

She [Isabel] longed, none knew with what intense longing, to be unknown, obscure, totally unrecognized by all [...] Thus the unhappy Lady Isabel's career was looked upon as run [...] It was over. Lady Isabel Vane was as one forgotten.¹⁹

With Isabel's identity revelation and death at the end of the novel comes the final coding of gender and class signifiers. Elisabeth Jay sees Archibald's decree to bury his first wife anonymously, along with his decree that her name is never to be spoken in his home again, as the final patriarchal denial of female identity.²⁰ However, this may be read as a redemptive act on Archibald's part, granting his wife the privacy and bodily focus in death that he never allowed her in life. Judith Schneid Lewis writes of aristocratic funerals that "women of the aristocracy continued to have an important public role can be seen by a brief glimpse at the funerals given them, which emphasized their rank above all other considerations".²¹ Isabel's funeral emphasises her body above her rank. While her body is, indeed, separated from her name on her headstone, her initials remain, preserving enough of her identity while liberating her from the burden of her title. Further, Archibald buries her near her father, receiving the benefit of familial proximity without being branded an earl's daughter. However, Wood's final contradiction remains: though Isabel is liberated from certain patriarchal constraints, her final liberation still requires patriarchal consent. Ultimately her body again becomes an object for Archibald to interpret and control, rendering Wood's structuring of female agency and position purposefully mixed.

Lady Adelaide's Oath

Wood's 1867 sensation novel *Lady Adelaide's Oath* (republished in 1879 as *Lady Adelaide*) continues *East Lynne's* tropes of class mobility and its effects on female bodily absence. It centres on the aristocratic Dane family and the mystery that unfolds when the heir to the barony, Harry Dane, is pushed off a cliff by an unknown assailant and his body swept out to sea. Harry's fiancée, Lady Adelaide, witnesses the attack and makes a false oath to the authorities to protect Herbert Dane, the assailant, her secret lover, and the next in line to the barony. Disgusted by the role she played in Herbert's inheritance, she ends their secret relationship, mercenarily marries a wealthy middle-class man, and becomes a leading figure in high society. She is largely absent from the novel's second half, during which the mystery is unravelled and Harry is discovered to be alive. Adelaide reappears briefly to regret her past and see Harry reclaim his inheritance.

Like Lady Isabel, when Lady Adelaide is low on the social scale, she enjoys a physical body and a relatively high level of agency; both disappear as she ascends that scale and conforms to the duties and expectations of public visibility. However, the formula established around bodies and class in *East Lynne*

is here problematised through Wood's redefinition of what constitutes "upper-class". In this text, the aristocracy and the wealthy middle classes swap socioeconomic positions: Lady Adelaide, who begins the story as the daughter of an earl and the fiancée of an aristocrat, is low on the social ladder that she will eventually climb with her lucrative bourgeois marriage. This untraditionally humble starting position is due to her poverty as "the daughter of [...] a very poor Scotch peer" and the niece of modest and private Lord Dane.²² It is this combination of a lack of money and a surplus of privacy that keeps Adelaide relatively autonomous and away from the visual expectations of high society. Even her uncle's tenants refer to her in terms starkly different from the way Isabel Vane's father's tenants referred to her. Two tenants of Danesheld say of Adelaide, "Is there not a young lady staying at the castle? [...] I forget her name." "Adelaide Errol [...] A wild Scotch lassie is what Danesheld styles her".²³ That her presence is introduced informally, by her first and last name instead of by her title and as a "young lady" instead of a "young Lady", purposefully misleads the reader into classifying Adelaide as middle class. This misrepresentation is allowed to solidify in the reader's mind for several pages while Adelaide is discussed and even appears in text at length; it is only once the entire family is introduced and their collective relationships revealed that Wood mentions Adelaide is an aristocrat.

Wood installs Adelaide as a semi-middle-class character and Adelaide's physicality corresponds accordingly: she is a less physical character than the men of the novel, but far more physical than the only upper-class woman in the text, Lady Dane. Wood writes of Lord and Lady Dane,

[There was] an invalid chair, in which was reclined a fine-looking old man, whose grey hair was fast turning to white. It was pushed forward by a manservant in the Dane livery – purple velvet waistcoat and breeches, and a white coat laced with silver. A tall, fine, very handsome old lady accompanied the chair. Behind came a man of noble features, who might be approaching his fortieth year, upright and stately, slender still, and far above the middle height.²⁴

Lord Dane's introduction as an invalid recalls Lady Isabel's ailing and visceral father in *East Lynne* and gives his presence an extension through his conspicuous chair. This patriarchal procession is reinforced by the male servant in his bright livery that announces the Dane status, and the procession ends on the physical features of another man. Amidst this parade of masculine embodiment is a short sentence introducing Lady Dane. Her sentence so brief that it is easily missed, and is less vivid than the description of her servant's uniform. She is said to have "accompanied the chair" instead of "accompanied her husband", making Lady Dane so unequal to his presence that she is an accessory to *an accessory* of his body.

Adelaide's introduction immediately afterward makes an astonishing contrast:

A fair girl of nineteen walked by his side – danced, rather; for now she was before him, now behind him, chattering to him, and putting forth all her attractions, as it was in her nature to do. She had a very brilliant complexion, blue eyes, and a mass of fair hair – a lovely vision undeniably, taken altogether; but the features were not especially good, and the eyes roved about too much for true ones.²⁵

Adelaide receives more description than all the other characters combined and Wood describes Adelaide's looks, actions, and personality – *and* conveys Adelaide's good traits and flaws in each of those categories. More significantly, Adelaide's physical presence is crucial to the plot. She relishes long solitary walks, saying, "I don't know what it is that makes me like this freedom of running out alone, all independent", although her loveless engagement likely plays a role in her assertion of personal agency.²⁶ Although financially dependent on her uncle, Lord Dane, she is not fully part of his aristocratic institution, and thus revels in action not restricted by public gaze. Adelaide's ubiquitous bodily presence is really only one half of the structure set up by Wood: the narrative just as significantly hinges on Lady Dane's *absence*. Adelaide fears being stopped from the walk where she ultimately witnesses the crime: "She turned and looked at Lady Dane. Yes, there was no impediment there; for her Ladyship was fast asleep in her easy chair"; Lady Dane is both passive and looked upon, which is crucial for the continuation of the plot.²⁷ Shortly after the crime, both women disappear from the text through their adherence to patriarchal systems. Lady Dane – already heavily embedded in aristocratic structures when the text opens – fades into an almost bodiless death, while Adelaide – so shaken by her physical presence at the crime scene – neutralises her once-adored body and agency through social elevation.

The ostensible cause of the simultaneous deaths of Lord and Lady Dane is shock over the assumed death of their son, shock which only enhances the established gendered patterns of bodily presence. Lord Dane opens the text disabled after a "dreadful fall with his horse last autumn, when out hunting, and has become paralyzed in the lower limbs".²⁸ Despite Lord Dane's serious ailments and Lady Dane's seemingly perfect health, she is the one upon whom the gaze is directed after their bereavement. Wood writes,

Lord and Lady Dane were bowed to the very earth with grief [...] and whispers went abroad that neither would long survive [...] Upon Lady Dane, especially, the tidings seemed to tell: the servants gazed at her in fear, and said they could see the "changes for death" in her face.²⁹

Lady Dane is marked for death in a visual way, though these visual markings lack any specific bodily analysis and deal more with public expectation than

with any physical reality – an expectation that she fulfils by dying before her seriously ill husband.

Adelaide goes through a similar, but more extreme, transition imitated by a hyper-physical farewell to her own body: “You have seen that movement of the body which we call ‘writhing;’ the head bent and hidden in grief, the body swaying itself backwards and forwards in utter pain. Just so was Adelaide Errol affected”.³⁰ Adelaide’s pain is significant, since it serves as a bittersweet admission of the ability to feel, especially compared to Lady Dane’s acute but discarnate grief: “Better, Lady Dane was not; easier, she was: but it was in the relief from pain that mercifully precedes death”.³¹ Where the reader is conscious of Adelaide’s pain, the only connection between Lady Dane and pain is to inform the reader that she is free from it.

Aware that she can no longer sustain romantic feelings for the murderer she protected, Adelaide makes the same paradoxical, mercenary decision as Lady Isabel: she must marry below her station in order to maintain – and in this text, *increase* – her station. Adelaide gives up rustic aristocracy for moneyed, urban high society, and relinquishes her body by becoming a visual object.

How changed she was since the night that had brought her to such terror, even strangers were beginning to see. Her brilliant colour had faded to paleness, her rounded form had grown thin; her spirits were unequal, her step was languid, her manner subdued.³²

The phrase “even strangers were beginning to see” serves as a microcosm of the process of upward mobility for women, and the relationship between the viewed and the viewer: her body is reducing but she is now *seen*. Upon accepting the proposal of the middle-class Mr Lester, Wood writes that Adelaide “had become the angel of his hopes, the day-star of his existence”, her once earthy characterisation now celestial and intangible almost to the point of parody.³³ After this point, she is largely absent from the text, and has little to do with the eventual exposure of the crime at the novel’s end; she appears briefly to confirm her role in it and beg forgiveness.

Though Adelaide is defined by the novel’s title as its protagonist, Wood skips over the ten years of Adelaide’s life that contained the most personal bodily, claiming that these years contained “no particular change” despite listing those very changes immediately afterward. Adelaide becomes a prominent (and narratively distant) socialite:

for the next nine or ten years no particular change occurred that we need to stop to notice [...] Danesheld Hall [Mr Lester’s home] was alive with bustling little feet, and merry voices, six children having been born to Lady Adelaide Lester and her husband.³⁴

Adelaide cares only for material status symbols, with her personal growth stunted, emotions deadened, and the demands of her body ignored:

The children, coming on so fast, were no hindrance to the restlessness, the extravagance, of their mother: there was a temporary seclusion as each little being appeared, and then it was turned over to a hired nurse, and the Lady Adelaide was herself again.³⁵

Much as with Lady Isabel's early marriage and childbearing, sexual activity and childbirth are mere inconvenience that require "temporary seclusion" from the world's gaze. More significant is the phrase "the Lady Adelaide was herself again" which reads as wry on several levels: Lady Adelaide is nothing like the version of herself introduced to the reader. She is referred to by a definite article and thus objectified by her status, incongruous with the idea of selfhood; she is not a "herself" but an "itself", not "Lady Adelaide" but "*the* Lady Adelaide". Her identity is so realigned that the only time she is not "herself" is when she is forced into privacy and the bodily distress of childbirth.

Jon Stralton writes in his *The Desirable Body* (1996) that a woman in the nineteenth-century

was always experienced by the observer in relation to men: through it, for example, she expressed her husband's social position [...]. In this sense an aristocratic woman's display was of limited power "in its own right" and could never express general power in society, only her power as a fashion arbiter for women.³⁶

This theoretical intersection of class, gender, and the body is exactly what is exemplified through Adelaide's narrative. Adelaide was always, to some extent, presented in relation to men, but the most power she expressed, and the only power she expressed "in its own right", was as a poor but independent individual. By giving up her claim to individuality for the dual patriarchal structures of marriage and social position, her only recourse is to operate inside those structures and become a woman of high fashion, dedicating her body to serving as a public standard of her husband's wealth. Adelaide exemplifies not only the differences in lifestyle and rhetoric surrounding women from different class backgrounds, but her social climb also depicts the changing landscape of class power and influence.

The Surgeon's Daughters

Wood's 1887 novella, *The Surgeon's Daughters*, continues her portrayal of female bodily absence in the aristocracy, though her definition of aristocracy is vastly different than those in *East Lynne* or *Lady Adelaide's Oath*. Tamara S. Wagner views Wood's representations of the aristocracy as "increasingly complex [tracing] shifts in the social construction of gentility as a central

cultural enterprise in the nineteenth century”; therefore Wood’s restructuring of class in *The Surgeon’s Daughters* is not an intertextual discrepancy but rather a logical end-point of the class trajectory begun in *East Lynne*.³⁷ Here aristocracy is no longer reliant upon title, power, or even wealth, but upon lineage: its reality is located somewhere in the past, making it a relic whose structures are nevertheless still felt. *The Surgeon’s Daughters* completes Wood’s triptych on class mobility and gendered expectations, where the transition of hegemonic power merely signifies the adaptability of systems of oppression. Wood shows how, despite radical socioeconomic shifts, systems around gender and class maintain and feed into each other, creating a continuing double despotism over upper-class women and their sense of identity and embodiment.

The Surgeon’s Daughters is a tragic love story between the middle-class Louis De Courcy and Florence Erskine, a descendant of a minor aristocratic family (and friend to the eponymous surgeon’s daughters). Florence visits a fortune teller who predicts her death if she disobeys the Ten Commandments (specifically “honour thy father”). Florence’s father forbids her romance with De Courcy but, influenced by the freedom experienced by the middle-class surgeon’s daughters, she disobeys and dies in a lightning strike.

Wood undercuts Florence’s position as an aristocrat even more than Lady Adelaide’s: the Erskines are shabby-genteel, have no title, estate, or status in high society, and are in all respects portrayed as a lower- or lower-middle-class family. However, Florence’s father’s pride in his aristocratic lineage is far greater than any exhibited by the aristocrats of *East Lynne* or *Lady Adelaide’s Oath*:

his ancestors had been the highest of the high. They were descended originally from royalty [...] That he was of good descent appeared to be fact; but he boasted of it in so ridiculous a manner as to have acquired the name in town, derisively applied, of Gentleman Erskine.³⁸

Wood problematises the notion of “upper class”, pitting heredity more directly against power and wealth; she depicts the aristocracy to have fallen into a social trap in which they cannot escape, for there is no potential for mobility. Captain Erskine and Florence are too low in socioeconomic influence to fall much farther, but Captain Erskine’s pride will not allow him to rise: work is beneath him and demonstrating ambition would imply that he was not already at the pinnacle of society. Wood’s again uses the aristocracy to magnify women’s issues: Florence, trapped in the narrow sphere determined by her father’s identity, exhibits no mobility at all; unlike the shifting Isabel and Adelaide, Florence’s paradoxes keep her in a position of stasis. Captain Erskine is perhaps himself the best reader of the aristocratic system’s influence over women, since he consciously attempts to emulate what he believes to be aristocratic behaviour

and Florence is therefore more purposefully oppressed and disembodied than Wood's other protagonists.

Since Florence never experiences social mobility, she can only be compared to other women in the text: this in itself is crucial, as she does not exhibit enough bodily change or presence to be compared to *herself*, as the previous two female protagonists were. Further, she cannot even link her identity to the title of her own story; though Florence is undoubtedly the protagonist, the novella is named after the surgeon's daughters, the heavily embodied secondary and tertiary characters – more economically comfortable but with less prestigious ancestry – who make up Florence's circle of friends.

The surgeon's seven daughters open the story and overwhelm the reader with their physicality. Two of the daughters “were little, fair, slender young women, very near-sighted, with hair remarkably light; whilst [the others] were tall, buxom girls, with dark eyes and arched eyebrows”.³⁹ Even their mother is described as “stout now and pretty red, and she *would* dress in bright colours; but her face was comely still”, completing the general vivacity of appearance in a family that, while technically more prominent in their community than the Erskines, does not consider itself grander than its lower-class pedigree.⁴⁰ This paradox of higher-but-lower social position is borne out in the daughters' personal parlour, which is both private and corporeal, a place for the enjoyment of female embodiment, leisure, and self-fulfilling interests:

You never saw so untidy a place in your life [...] An old piano stood on one side, a key or two missing and a dozen of its wires – it had been the girls' practising piano when they were children [...] writing-desks lay about, some on the floor, some tumbling off chairs; sheets of music, in all stages of tearing and copying; work-boxes stood open, some without lids, other without bottoms, their contents all entangled together in one appalling mess: pens, pencils, paints, French crayons, palettes, chalks, work, thimbles, keys, notes, and scrap-books were scattered everywhere.⁴¹

Their messy room signifies the girls' physicality, privacy, personal histories, and class status: it is presented in a manner that both brings to mind depictions of lower-class squalor while reinforcing bourgeois wealth. That the girls even have their own private parlour indicates the size of their house and their middle-class spatial segregation from their parents and servants.⁴² Finally, the space is filled with objects for their entertainment and education, objects with which Florence's father is unable to provide her. These objects are treated haphazardly, signifying both that the surgeon's daughters (in accordance with their lower-class status) live practically and (in accordance with their new social elevation) are capable of affording replacements. The surgeon's daughters' home contrasts with Florence's, which the reader hardly sees. In fact, the reader hardly sees Florence for the first half of the novella (she first appears, about twenty pages in, as a background guest of the surgeon's

daughters). By the time the narrative indicates that the quiet guest is actually the protagonist, the reader has all but forgotten her brief introduction, lost among the overwhelming presence of the surgeon's daughters. The title of the novella has geared reader expectations in the other direction, with Florence ceding her own narrative to more embodied women.

The most significant incident in the novella relating to class and its effect on women's bodies is when Florence and the surgeon's daughters have their fortunes told. The very act of having their bodies read by a stranger places all of them inside the aristocratic structures already established by Wood in her previous texts. For the surgeon's daughters, having their bodies read is a novel experience, but for the aristocratic Florence it is a tedious and sinister repetition:

when I was a child [...] a woman who pretended to the gift of reading the future, as this man now pretends, foretold that if ever I should have my "fate cast," I should be at the end of my life.⁴³

Florence implies this first reading was unsolicited, reinforcing that only unwilling, uncomfortable readings of Florence's body are permitted – her consent and interest in her own body will trigger a downfall of that body. Doubting the voracity of the fortune teller's skills, the three surgeon's daughters who attend the reading borrow clothing from their maids. Wood writes, "three figures, attired in cottons dresses, faded shawls, and plain straw bonnets [...] in short, looking like decent servant-girls, stole out of Surgeon Juniper's house".⁴⁴ Though Florence is with them, her presence is not mentioned until a few pages later, nor is her dress discussed at all, highlighting her lack of presence even when that presence is vital to the narrative arc. The fortune teller says,

Why did you come to me in disguise? [...] With me it avails not. Take off those clumsy gloves [...] You have adopted them that your lady-hands may be hidden from me: but, until I have examined those hands, I cannot answer you a single question [...] Now the wizard would carefully examine the hands, a microscope to his eye.⁴⁵

He can assess the surgeon's daughters' class at a glance, but no more: the embodied-but-unseen surgeon's daughters require "a microscope to his eye" in order to have their bodies read. One sister's hands are especially physical: "the inside of Georgiana's hands, even to the ends of the fingers, were completely covered with lines; small lines, crossed, and re-crossed again. The old man sat looking at them with his glass to his eye".⁴⁶ Florence, meanwhile, is so easy to read that her body is scarcely needed for the fortune teller to examine it. She repeatedly refuses to have her fortune told, and yet the fortune teller (much as with the first, who predicted her future) insists upon it, goading and manipulating her into asking for the results of her

palm reading. Her grudging consent to be cognisant of her body and future has fulfilled the original prophecy, and leads her to her death shortly thereafter.

She is told to follow the Ten Commandments to avoid an untimely death, her agency restricted by religion (another monolithic patriarchal structure that will brook no disobedience). She goes on another outing with the surgeon's daughters from which her father forbade her, is caught in a sudden storm, takes shelter in "Lady Harcourt's Tower" (which reinforces class issues to the very last), and is there struck by lightning. Despite her violent end, there "was no perceptible change in her countenance, except that it was white and still".⁴⁷ While ultimately reinforcing women's obedience, the novella also serves as a criticism of the patriarchy. The text shows how paradoxical and restrictive its decrees for women are, and how heavily engrained and far reaching systems of oppression can be: Florence's body is highly controlled by everyone but her, shifting class structures find new ways to utilise old forms of oppression, and even the weather seem to validate their domination. Wood's text shows a universe conspiring to keep women disembodied, disenfranchised, and obedient, with seemingly no end to class- and gender-based subjection.

The Wood's definition of "upper class" changes radically over these three texts; what links these aristocratic states together is that women have no direct participation in shaping that definition; whether it is title and estate in *East Lynne*, wealth in *Lady Adelaide's Oath*, or lineage in *The Surgeon's Daughters*, women are portrayed by Wood as perpetually disconnected, as placeholders for or extensions of men. Wood's texts highlight the contradictions and tyranny embedded in these class and gender systems through her representation of aristocratic women as bodiless yet unceasingly viewed, as private and yet public, as overwhelmed with familial and social identity and yet given no identity at all.

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Notes

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8. Mrs Henry (Ellen Price) Wood, *East Lynne* (1861), ed. by Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 5.
9. *Ibid.*, 11.
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14. It is likely that Wood developed scoliosis in her teens, leaving her largely bedridden. See Adeline Sergeant, "Mrs. Crowe. Mrs Archer Clive. Mrs. Henry Wood," *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign* (London: Ballantyne Press, 1897), pp. 149–92; Lucy Sussex, "Mrs. Henry Wood and her Memorials," *Women's Writing*, 15:2 (2008): 157–68 (163).
15. Sussex, 163.
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25. *Ibid.*
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29. *Ibid.*, 75.
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31. *Ibid.*, 81.
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47. Ibid., 157.

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