“More like a woman stuck into boy’s clothes”: Sexual deviance in Florence Marryat’s *Her Father’s Name*

Presented by Catherine Pope on 15th July 2015 at Victorian Authenticity and Artifice, Senate House, London.

For centuries, the diagnosis of ‘hysteria’ was conveniently applied to any woman who exhibited transgressive behaviour, whether through sexual promiscuity or simply by expressing strong opinions. Little progress had been made from Hippocratic medicine, which believed the womb wandered about in search of moisture, thereby causing its owner to behave erratically. For a growing nineteenth-century medical profession keen to assert its authority, hysteria – a disease with no distinguishing symptoms – became a useful diagnosis both to limit women and to pathologise their sexuality.

While William Acton’s belief that “women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling” is widely quoted, Lucy Bland has done important work in explaining that there were many other doctors who viewed women as naturally sexual beings. Indeed, there were some who warned of the dangers of women being able to express their sexuality and the implications this might have for future generations. Acton himself did reluctantly admit that “there are some few women who have sexual desires so strong that they surpass those of men and shock public feeling by their exhibition”. Manifestations of an unhealthily strong sex drive included masturbation, which, it was feared, would lead to sterility and a loss of desire for “normal” sexual intercourse. Lesbianism and masturbation excluded men and were divorced from reproduction. Worse still, women might be enjoying themselves.

It is these attitudes that have subsequently come to obscure our 21st-century perceptions of Victorian women’s sexuality. The spectrum of sexual experience has been reduced to oversimplified gender binaries. While these conservative voices were certainly amplified, they were not necessarily heeded.

In this paper, I shall argue that Florence Marryat in her 1876 novel *Her Father’s Name* reveals how in the late nineteenth century, hysteria was clearly linked with masturbation and lesbianism and used to pathologise sexual deviance. As I explain, Marryat uses the character of the family doctor to expose
the ways in which the medical profession operated to regulate gender, expose artifice, and restore patients to supposedly ‘normative’ sexuality. I challenge conservative readings of this novel, demonstrating that *Her Father's Name* is one of the most radical texts of the mid-Victorian period.

As very few of you will have read the novel, I’ll briefly set the scene. The action opens in Brazil, with heroine Leona Lacoste dressed as Joan of Arc, no less. Flanked by a toucan and a goat, she nonchalantly rolls a cigarette, pausing briefly to deflect a sex pest with her pistol. The reader is immediately alerted to the fact that this is no ordinary Victorian heroine. Following an accusation of murder, Leona’s father commits suicide, prompting her to embark upon an international quest to clear his name. Of course, a young lady couldn’t just go gadding about in the nineteenth century, so Leona dresses as a man and steals the identity of Christobal, a childhood friend who is desperate to marry her.

During her sea voyage to London, fellow passengers are intrigued by the handsome, yet feminine, youth. Notwithstanding her attempts to keep a low profile, Leona manages to get involved in a duel when a fellow passenger impugns her masculinity. The taunts that she’s a weakling fade as she shoots her opponent straight in the chest. With Leona, there is no faffing about.

On arrival in London, Leona sneaks into her uncle’s house, posing as a merchant by the name of Don Valera. His adopted daughter Lucilla, an hysteric who has been confined to her couch since the onset of puberty, is overcome with lust, refusing to have any truck with the handsome doctor her parents want her to marry. Her ailment is non-specific, and is described only as a “weak spine”. Isaac Baker Brown in his famous work *On the Curability of Certain Forms of Insanity, Epilepsy, Catalepsy, and Hysteria in Females* claims that patients like Lucilla display classic signs of hysteria and masturbation: “The patient becomes restless and excited, or melancholy and retiring, listless, and indifferent to the social influences of domestic life.” By which he means, of course, indifferent to the social influences of men. Brown believed that “peripheral excitement of the branches of the pudic nerve” - masturbation to you and me - caused a disease with eight stages, progressing from hysteria, through to mania, and ultimately death. As we shall see, his model explains Lucilla’s subsequent erratic behaviour as motivated by sexual deviance.
Lucilla’s parents are particularly keen for her to marry Dr Hastings, believing only he is capable of managing her delicate health. But she is repulsed by him, resisting his repeated attempts to control her. The narrator explains that Lucilla’s aversion is not specific to him: “she would be as happy in the future with [him] as she would have been with anybody else”. The reason for her antipathy is revealed when the disguised Leona makes her entrance:

“Lucilla Evans raised her eyes to the stranger’s countenance and withdrew them instantly, blushing deeply. There was something in the face of the newcomer that attracted her at once.”

And it’s not just Lucilla who is aroused. Lizzie Vereker, described as “a fine handsome girl of two or three and twenty, a perfect specimen of the fast young lady of the nineteenth century” is instantly drawn to Leona and flirts outrageously with her. When they find themselves performing together in amateur theatricals, the attraction becomes palpable:

“[Lizzie] lifted up a very bright face so close to Leona’s that it only seemed natural to my heroine to kiss it. The minute she had done it though, she saw by the blush that dyed her companion’s cheek, how imprudent she had been, but it was impossible to explain the action away again. She must let Miss Vereker [and the reader] think what she chose.”

Leona is subsequently frightened by her sexuality, fearing the consequences. The narrator tells us:

“Leona had no idea she intended going so far as she did that night. Even for two women personating lovers, the action was very strong, but under the supposed circumstances of sex, it almost passed the limits of decorum.”

When one of the men questions their behaviour, Lizzie pertly responds: “Oh! not half what I did when we were alone. You should have seen us together in the close carriage[]” Marryat cleverly leaves this scene to our imagination, which for some of us is far more lurid. It’s significant that Lizzie refers to what she herself did, but Leona — the woman who shot an opponent in the chest — apparently finds herself unable to resist. A reviewer for *The Athenaeum*, who found a great deal to dislike in the novel, complained bitterly that there was “too much promiscuous kissing”.
Lucilla, who witnesses these events, is overcome by jealousy and has to be carried shrieking to her bed. Her behaviour is a textbook example of the masturbating hysteric described by Isaac Baker Brown. He predicted that the stage following spinal irritation was hysterical epilepsy, or sexual insatiability. His infamous cure was to perform a clitoridectomy - a procedure that seems unlikely to have a calming influence; mind you, it would certainly take your mind off the spinal irritation. In Lucilla’s case, her masturbation indicates a rejection of heterosexuality and a desire for lesbian sex.

The disruption caused by the disguised Leona has not gone unnoticed by Dr Hastings, who makes frequent disparaging comments about ‘his’ appearance, such as “He looks more like a woman stuck into boy’s clothes to me.” Hastings is apparently threatened by this person who exerts such a powerful influence over women, and particularly over the woman he wishes to be his wife. His repeated references to Leona’s womanly shape reveal that he sees through her disguise. Realising what is happening, he admonishes his patient:

“Now, Lucilla,” he said, sternly, “I cannot have any more of this nonsense, or I shall speak to your father about it … I know far more than you have any idea of. But I have been watching you closely for some time past, and the absurd fancies you have got into your head are no secret to me.”

Here the man of science establishes himself as a moral arbiter, regulating gender and exposing artifice. These “absurd fancies” are abnormal desires and must be denounced. His recognition of Leona’s sex reminds the reader of her subversion and reinforces it. If she had simply passed as a man without comment, her behaviour would have been less subversive.

Leona is understandably fearful of exposure, so subsequent events prove rather surprising. Everyone apart from Lucilla comments on Leona’s womanliness, yet all — except Dr Hastings — are prepared to collude in her artifice. They accept both her transvestism and her often reciprocal attraction to women.

When Dr Hastings asks Lucilla’s father to send her to the country, beyond harm’s reach, he refuses. Acknowledging that only the disguised Leona makes his daughter happy and calm, he encourages them to spend time together, even telling Leona that a marriage proposal would be welcome. There
is no suggestion that Lucilla’s parents are convinced by this unfeasibly handsome youth who suddenly pops up in their lives, yet they are prepared for him to ‘marry’ their daughter. The narrator says of Lucilla:

“[She], who in her weakness and timidity shrunk from the generality of the sterner sex, as something too rough and loud-spoken to give her any pleasure, considered Leona Lacoste, in her male attire, to be the very perfection of all she had ever dreamed of as amiable, and gentle, and winning in a man[.]”

It is apparent that Lucilla, at least unconsciously, perceives that Leona is really a woman, and her classically hysterical behaviour is explicitly linked with lesbian desire, or “absurd fancies”. The implication is that Leona makes an unconvincing, if extremely attractive, man. Furthermore, the “cure” for Lucilla’s hysteria is the realisation of her non-normative sexual desires, not Mr Baker Brown’s surgical interventions.

Conscious of the influence she holds over Lucilla, Leona encourages her to respond to Hastings’s advances. Frightened of the events that are unfolding, she believes their marriage to be the safest outcome. Lucilla acquiesces, desperate to agree to whatever Leona suggests. Leona is initially relieved, but then has second thoughts. Marryat writes: “Only as she passed the drawing-room door on her way downstairs the smile faded from her features, and gave place to a wild look of longing that was much more like pain.” This solitary and easily overlooked sentence is the only hint of Leona’s true feelings. Leona’s “wild look of longing” confirms that Lucilla’s attraction is reciprocated. But Leona is either unconvinced that her artifice can be sustained, or is perhaps unsure what the consequences of success might be. Either way, this scene shows that Leona isn’t simply enjoying the attention she receives as a man.

Any opportunity for a reunion is neatly avoided by a plot twist in which Lucilla is revealed to be Leona’s half-sister. As Leona divests herself of the male disguise, Lucilla realises that her ideal man was a chimera, and accepts her fate as the doctor’s wife. Meanwhile, Leona reluctantly agrees to marry her long-suffering childhood friend, whose identity she stole. While some might argue that this is a highly conservative plot resolution, we should not ignore the disruptive middle of the narrative. As a sensation novel, *Her Father’s Name* relies heavily on coincidence and other
improbabilities, such as trains running on time. However, these standard plot devices conceal a rich and subversive text that offers a provocative perspective on Victorian women’s sexuality.

In her thesis on Marryat, Jean Gano Neisius detects potential lesbian readings of her novels, but concludes that this “probably would have horrified the Victorian Florence Marryat”. This is a prime example of what Terry Castle calls the “no-lesbians-before-1900” myth. As Sharon Marcus observes with exasperation, “if it were true that no women had sex with women in the nineteenth century, that era would turn out to be the only lesbian-free zone in recorded history”. Indeed, anyone who has read the diaries of Anne Lister could be forgiven for thinking that Yorkshire was teeming with lesbians.

Greta Depledge reads Leona’s disguised interactions with women as featuring “lesbian undertones”, providing homoerotic interpretations “not envisaged by Marryat”. She concludes that “Leona is simply using male dress … to escape the restrictive role assigned to her as a woman. The romantic trysts she becomes involved in are mere interludes.” But I argue for a reading of the scenes between Leona and Lizzie Vereker, and Lucilla’s obvious sexual attraction to Leona, as beyond mere expedience. Although the lesbianism is not overt (this isn’t Sarah Waters), I argue that the subtext would have been clear to an enlightened reader, while remaining suitably opaque to those ignorant of its existence. As Emma Donoghue writes: “anyone wanting to know how to interpret passion between women could have had access to stories about it, even if many other readers averted their gaze”. So, Marryat’s novel, I believe, was constructed to be superficially conservative, while providing a racier reading for those who were open to it. For male readers, Leona’s disguise might offer mild titillation, similar to the principal boy roles in pantomime. For female readers, though, she presented a tantalising alternative to heteronormativity, even if it remained firmly in the realm of fantasy for most of them.

Sharon Marcus, in her brilliant book Between Women, writes that “nineteenth-century authors openly represented relationships between women that involved friendship, desire, and marriage. It is only twentieth-century critics who made those bonds unspeakable, either by ignoring what Victorian texts transparently represented, or by projecting contemporary sexual structures onto the past.” For example, Matilda Betham-Edwards’s The White House by the Sea (1857) and Mrs. Alexander’s Which Shall it Be? (1866) both show female marriages, but only as a part of a transition towards a
heterosexual union. Interestingly, both occur at the mid-point of the narrative, thereby offering intriguing alternative conclusions. Towards the end of the century, when the lesbian was a more visible figure, such characters become less subtle. Eliza Lynn Linton’s Bell Blount in *The Rebel of the Family* (1880) and Rhoda Broughton’s Faustina Bateson in *Dear Faustina* (1897) are both mannish, almost monstrous creatures who lead young women astray. These unsympathetic portrayals serve to dissuade the female reader from identifying with them, instead reinforcing ideas of normative sexuality and pathologising deviance.

Whereas in these later novels masculine women are feared and derided as vectors of lesbian contagion, Leona is portrayed as an entirely sympathetic (even aspirational) character. Through her, Marryat allows women a greater range of sexual expression, presenting lesbianism as an alternative to heterosexual marriage. For her, it isn’t simply an ugly subversion of the feminine ideal. Leona is intelligent, resourceful, and irresistible.

Furthermore, the female marriage that is almost realised in the plot had many precedents in the mid-Victorian period. Celebrity lesbians such as Frances Power Cobbe, Emily Faithfull, and Rosa Bonheur lived openly in same-sex relationships that were largely accepted by the circles in which they moved. Writing to her sister in 1852, Elizabeth Barrett Browning relates a meeting with the actress Charlotte Cushman and the author Matilda Hays, whom she describes a living together in a female marriage. Although surprised by this unconventional arrangement, Browning’s urbane friend Mrs Cockrane explains that “it is by no means uncommon”. As Sharon Marcus points out, in the 1860s and 70s, before the arrival of the sexologists and the idea of inversion, the female couple was often accepted as a variation on legal marriage, and not necessarily as a threat to its stability. Even supposed beacons of moral conservatism, such as William Gladstone, Samuel Smiles, and Anthony Trollope, counted lesbians among their friends. In *Her Father’s Name*, this permissiveness is represented by Lucilla’s parents urging Leona to propose marriage, and the tacit acceptance of the other characters. Dr Hastings’s lone attempt to enforce normative behaviour fails.

Charlotte Cushman died in January 1876, and *Her Father’s Name* was published later that year. The lack of personal papers relating to Marryat makes it impossible to prove, but it’s not beyond the realms of possibility that this novel is an homage to the unconventional, yet widely accepted, Cushman. Like Cushman, Leona ultimately enjoys a successful career playing male leads on the New
York stage. A cursory perusal of Cushman’s biography also suggests they were similarly successful with the ladies. Marryat certainly knew of Cushman. Her father, the novelist and mariner Captain Marryat, met Cushman and actually wrote approvingly of her refusal to marry a man.

Even if this is a coincidence, the suggestion that Marryat’s radicalism was inadvertent is countered by the prevalence of such themes in her other novels. Most famously, *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897) features a bisexual heroine called Harriet, with whom both men and women fall in love. And *A Beautiful Soul* (1894) tells the story of two women who adopt male pseudonyms and speculate about being each other’s husband. Marryat herself could be described as sexually omnivorous, too - a euphemism for what the Victorians might have called a strumpet. Some of her spiritualist writings reveal that she used the séance room as a means of exploring sexuality. In one account, the spirit guide encourages her to explore the naked form of the female medium; in another, she shares a bed with a woman whose hands are tied and finds herself menaced by a phantom hand. Marryat was writing *Her Father’s Name* when she first started attending séances, and the impact of her experiences is clear. Not least in the name of one of the spirits who later visited her: a certain Charlotte Cushman.

Leona’s protean nature, I propose, allows Marryat to explore radical ideas in what is, at least on the surface, a pantomimic text. But it is one that yields deeply subversive readings. In Leona she presents a heroine who comprehensively confronts dominant notions of Victorian women’s sexuality. Marryat both exposes the regulatory agenda of the medical profession and demolishes Acton’s idea that women weren’t very much troubled by sexual feeling. To conclude, I argue that this novel embodies a complex exploration of Marryat’s own sexuality and also a challenge to compulsory heteronormativity. Although Marryat conforms to convention by marrying off her heroine at the novel’s conclusion, it’s very clear who’s going to be wearing the trousers.

Florence Marryat’s *Her Father’s Name* is published by Victorian Secrets in print and Kindle editions.