

Transatlantic Romance and the Deconstruction of Gender Norms: Rhoda Broughton and Elizabeth Bisland's *A Widower Indeed* (1891)

Mariaconcetta Costantini

Abstract

This article focuses on *A Widower Indeed* (1891), a novel written by Rhoda Broughton in collaboration with American journalist Elizabeth Bisland. Drawing upon gender and cultural theories, the article examines the provocative discourse woven by Broughton and Bisland, revealing the contribution they made to late-century debates on evolving models of femininity and masculinity. Besides caricaturing dominant views of True Womanhood, *A Widower Indeed* offers a thought-provoking characterisation of a New Woman combined with transatlantic views of femininity. Reverberations of the late-century rethinking of gender are also found in the novel's neurotic protagonist, who is almost a parody of modern masculinity. All frustrated by social pressures to conform, these characters bear evidence of late-Victorian discussions of what it meant to be a real man or a real woman within a highly normative society that thwarted individual aspirations to free choice. In giving voice to these limitations, Broughton and Bisland addressed pressing cultural concerns of their age, establishing meaningful relations with the popular literature composed on both sides of the Atlantic.

Keywords

gender politics; transatlanticism; New Woman fiction; American Girl; masculinity; Rhoda Broughton; Elizabeth Bisland.

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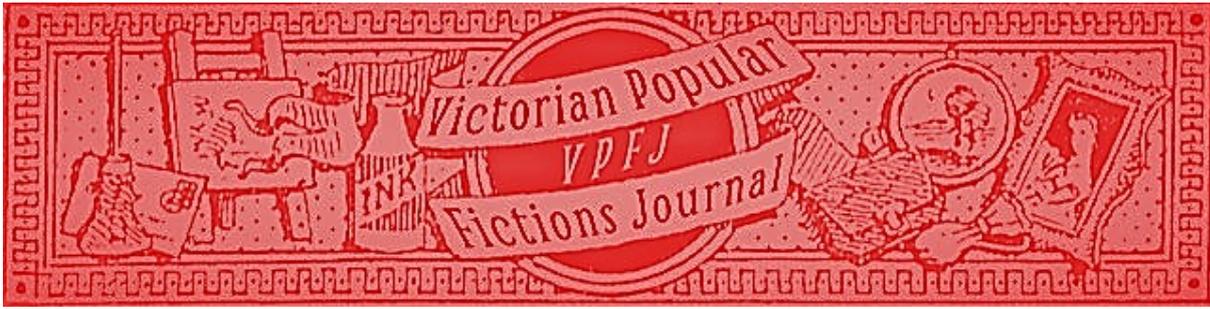
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Transatlantic Romance and the Deconstruction of Gender Norms: Rhoda Broughton and Elizabeth Bisland's *A Widower Indeed* (1891)

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Introduction

This article focuses on *A Widower Indeed*, a novel written by Rhoda Broughton in collaboration with American journalist Elizabeth Bisland. Published in 1891 in one-volume form,¹ the novel was neither a commercial nor a critical success: it did not sell well and received mixed reviews. Described as a “grim, pitiful tragicomedy” by the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1892), it was disparaged by critics for its alleged tediousness and its disappointing conclusion, even though some praised its humour and engaging plot (Cozzi 2020: 198). The list of editions provided by Marilyn Wood confirms the novel’s failure to attract readers: it shows that, after being released by three publishers within one year, *A Widower Indeed* had one reprint in 1892, with no subsequent editions except a Dutch translation.²

A work with limited circulation, *A Widower Indeed* is no ideal example of Victorian popular fiction. It exhibits no paraphernalia of such popular genres and modes as crime and detective fiction, or the Gothic. It also lacks the power to arouse a significant affective response in its readers. Unlike most of the age’s sentimental fiction, which used sympathy “to create and maintain customer loyalty” (King 2019: 1), Broughton and Bisland’s novel offers a hardly involving depiction of the misfortunes that befall the titular widower, whose grief is banalised by its obsessive manifestation. And yet there are melodramatic and sensational

¹ *A Widower Indeed* bears evidence of Broughton’s experimentation with an alternative to the bulky three-decker she had struggled to use earlier. As Michael Sadleir observes, “Rhoda Broughton was utterly unsuited to the writing of three-deckers, as became evident when from 1892 onwards she published one-volume stories – and short volumes at that. [...] Although, as was undoubtedly the case, she lost some of her public when she became a writer of short novels, she found *herself* – and that surely is an author’s prime achievement” (1944: 85-6). This new season of Broughton’s career was actually inaugurated one year earlier by *A Widower Indeed* which Sadleir fails to consider, probably because it was the work of a literary collaboration with Bisland.

² First published by J. R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., which reprinted it the following year, *A Widower Indeed* was also released by Appleton (including a paperback variant) and Tauchnitz in 1891. In 1893, a Dutch translation was published by G. J. Slothouwer (Wood 1993: 185).

elements that help classify *A Widower Indeed* as popular fiction. Most evident in the novel's representation of gender identity and relations, these elements evoke an idea of excess typical of the sensation genre of the 1860s-70s and the New Woman fiction of the 1890s, and, in so doing, they are instrumental in subverting dominant concepts of femininity and masculinity.

My aim is to examine the provocative discourse on gender woven by Broughton and Bisland, revealing the contribution they made to late-century debates on evolving models of femininity and masculinity. More specifically, I intend to demonstrate that *A Widower Indeed* deals with issues that took centre stage in the British popular press at the *fin de siècle*, as it provides a thought-provoking combination of the New Woman figure with transatlantic views of womanhood. As will be shown, the novel offers three noteworthy portrayals of women – one embodying disorder and rebellion, the other two conceived as caricatures of conventional femininity. All portrayals suggest the idea of women's lives “as inherently problematic, and unhappiness [as] the norm” (Pykett 1992: 148), even though the rebellious American heroine manages to escape the strictures of British parochialism and is supposed to achieve some contentment off-stage. Reverberations of the late-century rethinking of gender are also found in the characterisation of the novel's male protagonist – a neurotic New Man who, in ways similar to other male figures featured in British novels at the time, is “almost a parody of a feminised version of modern masculinity” and does not seem to know “what he wants of either life or women” (Pykett 1992: 149-50). All frustrated by social pressures to conform, these characters bear evidence of late-Victorian discussions of what it meant to be a real man or a real woman within a highly normative society that thwarted individual aspirations to free choice. In giving voice to these limitations, Broughton and Bisland addressed pressing cultural concerns of their age, establishing meaningful relations with the popular literature composed on both sides of the Atlantic.

Before focusing on these aspects, let me briefly elaborate on the novel's plot and characters, which might not be widely known. *A Widower Indeed* tells the story of Edward Lygon, a bursar of an Oxford college, who has just lost his idolised wife Anne and raises their two children on his own. Dejected and obsessed by his memories of Anne, Edward constantly looks for female support and affection. Besides seeking approval and protection from his mother- and sister-in-law, he is temporarily healed from depression by the enthusiasm and vitality of Georgia Wrenn, a young American woman who settles in his neighbourhood and spends time with him and his children. When rumours about their alleged liaison spread in Oxford, Edward is overcome by guilt and cuts all relations with her. Soon afterwards, however, he falls into a matrimonial trap set by an ambitious cousin of his, Mrs Louisa Crichton, and her superficial daughter, Albertina. Frustrated by Edward's lack of interest, Albertina stages a highly melodramatic, hysterical scene which is cunningly used by her mother to accuse him of ruining the girl's reputation. Disoriented but unable to defend himself, Edward is forced to marry Albertina. The novel ends, quite abruptly, in tragedy. On his wedding night, Edward visits Anne's grave, overwhelmed with grief and guilt. He subsequently falls prey to hysterics and, after turning “raving mad” (Broughton and Bisland 1891: 228), he dies three days later in a tragic demise, merely announced by the novel's authors in the five concluding lines.

This hasty ending is certainly one of the novel's weaknesses, which also include the sketchy and often parodic characterisation, the abortion of the potential love story, the frequent hyperboles, the alternation of melodramatic excess with long dull passages, the incongruous mixing of acerbic wit and sentimentality, and the many literary allusions that break the narrative flow.³ Yet, if the literary qualities of *A Widower Indeed* are questionable,

³ Examples of the novel's overflowing intertextuality include literary quotations from Shakespeare, the Romantics, Germany poetry and the Tractarians (Broughton and Bisland 1891: 39-40, 154-5, 186).

its cultural value is worthy of investigation. What this article aims to demonstrate is that the novel's imperfect characterisation fulfils a relevant function: it reveals human fragility, proving people's inability to match dominant gender stereotypes. Georgia and Edward, in particular, are two pale versions of modern femininity and masculinity that raise doubts on ideals of domesticity and muscularity, proving at the same time inadequate to embody convincing, fully-fledged alternatives. A similar subversive function is fulfilled by the novel's fretful closure which, in trivialising Edward's death, adds further caricatural traits to his portrayal.

It is important to consider that the novel's weak plotting and uncertain gender politics are not only indicative of wider questionings of the time; they also reflect the authors' personal experiences and aspirations. Written by two women professionals – an established novelist and an ambitious young journalist – *A Widower Indeed* bears witness to their daring negotiations to succeed in male-dominated fields. Both authors had created a sensation before they met in London in 1890. Bisland had caused a great stir in 1889-90, when she took part in an adventurous race around the world competing with another American journalist, Nellie Bly.⁴ Though defeated by Bly, Bisland had become immensely popular in the US and had travelled to Britain to escape the limelight (Cozzi 2020: 193-4). For her part, Broughton was the author of sensational bestsellers read by a large audience, but often criticised for their moral transgressions. By 1890, she had acquired fame and financial independence by publishing a dozen novels and several short stories. She had also gained a reputation for audacity with her early works, which “horrified the censorious mid-Victorians and provoked anonymous reviewers to abuse,” even though they were “eagerly devoured by those whom the moralists claimed to protect and the reviewers to influence” (Sadleir 1944: 84). Broughton's contribution to the sensation genre was evident to contemporary reviewers, who especially objected to her “frank, controversial representation of female desire” – a representation “so frank that it [even] delayed publication of her first novel” (Heller 2011: 282).

Broughton was introduced to Bisland by a common friend in London. She had just moved to the capital from Oxford, where she had lived eleven years facing the ostracism of conformist Oxonians, whose pretensions are derided in *A Widower Indeed* and other novels. Later in the year, the two women met again in Oxford, where Bisland took lodgings at the close of the London season, settling in Broughton's neighbourhood. “Notwithstanding their twenty-one years difference, [they] became friends and set out to coauthor a novel” (Cozzi 2020: 196). Broughton was an experienced fiction writer, while Bisland had only authored articles for the magazine *Cosmopolitan*. Their short-term literary collaboration was, thus, the output of a mentoring relationship between a senior and a junior woman, a sisterly alliance that, like other bonds established among women in the 1890s, was based on ideals of female support promoted by the New Woman phenomenon.⁵ Although it differed from models of co-authorship

⁴ Their race, made by train and ship, was probably inspired by Jules Verne's novel *Around the World in 80 Days* (1872). Bly completed her travel in seventy-two days, while Bisland took four days longer. Bisland reported her travel experiences in a series of articles appeared in the magazine *Cosmopolitan*, which were later collected in the volume *A Flying Trip Around the World* (1891).

⁵ The New Woman is “closely associated with the new women's colleges that emerged in the late nineteenth century” and with a pursuit of education based on women's mentoring of other women: “In an effort to gain emotional support as she pursued education, the New Woman turned to other female students. A ‘sisterhood’ was established in which junior and senior women adopted freshmen and sophomore women as ‘sisters’” (Cruea 2005: 199).

based on long-standing partnership, their casual collaborative venture confirms that “the propensity for writers of the late nineteenth century to write together was a distinct phenomenon” (Ashton 2003: 8), a phenomenon strictly interwoven with the demands of the popular literary market, which, “open to experiment,” encouraged writers to form alliances and try their hands at “the trendiest subgenres of the period” (Cozzi 2011: 34).

Drawing upon their professional and personal experiences, Broughton and Bisland managed to produce a peculiar narrative that raises crucial gender issues, laying the premises for a rethinking of both feminine and masculine stereotypes. Especially noteworthy is their portrayal of the female protagonist, which challenges dominant models of womanhood. As Wood argues, we can suppose that Bisland “contributed the appropriate attitude and language of the American character Georgia Wrenn, for there is a definite touch of the pioneer spirit,” even though Broughton “would have found such a bold character totally sympathetic and a kindred spirit to her own English heroines” (1993: 77). This supposition suggests the difficulty of ascertaining the extent of Broughton’s and Bisland’s contributions to the novel, and particularly to the characterisation of the American protagonist. Critical studies do not seem to offer clear indications in this regard. Analysed only in a few articles, *A Widower Indeed* is given a page-and-a-half in Wood’s study, which defines it as the output of a collaborative effort and, thus, not fully classifiable among Broughton’s works (77-8).

Wood is probably right in suggesting that the female protagonist was inspired by Bisland’s ebullient personality and experiences. Yet we should also consider the literary context within which the two authors composed their novel – a context characterised by long-established “bidirectional literary exchanges” that were further developing across the Atlantic (Hughes and Robbins 2015: 1), by books and ideas “criss-crossing the ocean” and transatlantic encounters in which “the modern” was generated “somewhere in between” (Pettitt 2009: 236, 247). Variations of transatlantic romance are offered, among others, by Henry James’s *Daisy Miller* (1878) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1891), which were serialised and published both in Britain and the US (1878, 1879, 1880-1a, 1880-1b). Transatlantic exchanges are also evidenced by the invention of the American Girl, a literary figure that comes to play a central role in British fiction in the 1890s and also influences *A Widower Indeed*. As Kate Flint observes, the American Girl offers “a critique of British parochialism and excessive moral caution” but also suggests the existence of “a new and potentially troubling type”: “a woman more ‘new,’ in her apparent rootlessness and lack of history, than most of the so-called ‘New Women’ in English novels, who are defined, almost invariably, in relation to their own immediate family and generational conflicts” (1996: 226-7). The intersection of transatlantic themes, and especially the combination of the New Woman and the American Girl models, is what makes the figure of Georgia Wrenn so interesting in *A Widower Indeed*. As we will see in the next section, her portrayal encourages reflection on the gender issues of the age, even though some limits of her characterisation ultimately prevent her from embodying a viable model of femininity in *fin-de-siècle* Britain.

Sketching the New Woman with an American Twist: Georgia Wrenn

As hinted above, the novel’s characterisation of women evidences the authors’ challenge of traditional gender binaries and their attempt to sketch alternative models of femininity in line with the New Woman writing of the 1890s. A literary expression of women’s rebellion against the strictures of gender normativity, this genre was also rife with ambiguities. As Lyn Pykett observes, “The New Woman was the embodiment of a complex of social tendencies” often conflicting with one another (1992: 139). Viewed by its supporters and detractors either as “a beacon of progress” or a “beast of regression” (139), this new type of

woman incarnated contradictory ideals even for those who aspired to a rethinking of gender categories, as the threat it posed to the code of proper femininity generated fears of social disintegration. These contradictions were reproduced in varying degrees by New Woman writers who “engaged in a complex negotiation of the available discourses on woman” (142). In addition to generating heated debates on the essence and the boundaries of femininity, their portrayals of rebellious, masculine heroines acquired on occasion caricatural traits, as they were representations of a femininity in crisis rather than images of mature, fully autonomous women. Bisland herself had mixed feelings about some bids for emancipation made by New Woman novelists. In the article “The Cry of the Women” published in *The North American Review*, she exposes some inconsistencies of works by Mona Caird and Sarah Grand, criticising the “confused voices of [feminine] discontent,” which are imputed to the novelty of women’s “free speech and free thought” (Bisland 1894: 757). What Bisland contends is that, although women are right in lamenting centuries of subjection, they should avoid “such outbursts of restless passion and discontent as have of late defaced their writing” (759) and, instead of striving to imitate men, fulfil with renewed pride established feminine tasks like child-rearing.

A Widower Indeed bears evidence of the contradictory conceptualisation of the New Woman which, as evidenced by the aforementioned article, was widely discussed on both sides of the Atlantic. The portrayal of Georgia Wrenn, in particular, is proof of Broughton and Bisland’s attempt to conceptualise a fresh model of femininity that could give voice to women’s desires for independence and new experiences. In the course of the narration, Georgia repeatedly violates the code of proper femininity with her freedom of thought and action. Yet the model of womanhood she offers is only *potentially* innovative. Some comic traits of her behaviour, her limited presence on the scene and the narrator’s use of distancing strategies deprive her figure of roundness, making her characterisation incomplete and not wholly convincing. As will be shown, Georgia’s American identity further complicates her image as it adds an element of intersectionality that reduces the impact of her rebellious attitude against her hosts’ normative system.

A young foreigner coming from the American South, financially independent, mobile and free from family relationships, Georgia Wrenn is the typical American Girl featured in 1890s novels. As Bob Nicholson observes, this figure became increasingly popular in Britain and was “the most-talked-of-creature in the world” in the late-Victorian period when she “inspired a wide range of responses within British print culture” (2019: 178). A cultural symbol that “sat at the intersection of two particularly pressing questions,” the American Girl not only embodied British anxieties about the growing economic, political and cultural power of the US; she also invited reflection on “the changing nature and roles of women [...] shortly before the term ‘New Woman’ came into vogue,” offering a “less threatening alternative” as she “usually escaped the charges of unwomanliness” levelled at more radical female activists (179). Feared by conformist Victorians for her independence and mocked for some character traits, such as her rough Yankee slang and manners, this highly stylised figure was nonetheless admired by some British observers, who praised her “beauty, modern ideas, and freedom from traditional codes of respectability” (194).

Besides reflecting the authors’ cultural specificities and experiences, the characterisation of Georgia Wrenn draws inspiration from the two models of womanhood mentioned above and the conflicting responses they generated. Pretty, self-confident and autonomous in thought and movement, Georgia is perceived as “disrespectful and patronizing” (Broughton and Bisland 1891: 56) by Edward who, nonetheless, yields to her exuberance and accepts her bold invitations to have tea and walk together. Her vitality and frankness, and the deep sympathy she has for the melancholy widower, configure her as a particular New Woman, capable of combining (masculine) self-assurance with a (feminine) feeling disposition

more often found in American feminine models. Her freedom from social strictures, manifested in many passages, is the means through which the authors level their criticism at British conventionality. In an early scene, for instance, Georgia upsets Edward by candidly asserting that she spied on two lovers in her garden, making a statement that “shocks the hearer almost more than the young lady’s announcement of her adoption of a bachelor life” (57). When Edward announces his intention to cut all relations with her, she uses strong words to manifest her disdain for his parochialism and the silly conventionality of Oxonians:

“And you *mind*? You care what a lot of old *chumps* say? You mind about an old cat like Pennington Bruce, who probably does not know enough to come in when it rains! Why, you’re perfectly silly,” cries she, with as fighting a light flashing in her eyes as ever shone in those of her countrymen when they gripped each other’s throats in that most murderous of all recorded wars of theirs.

(129)

Her unorthodoxy of speech is coupled with her performance of unladylike actions, such as her consumption of sweets in public: “The woman, who is foremost, is eating chocolate bon-bons out of a bag” (163). This quotation, which describes Georgia’s feasting on bon-bons in the street, is strongly ironic as it suggests a combined deviation from class and gender norms. Her relish for sweets has much in common with the “impulsive candy consumption” associated with the “American Girl of the Period” in a story republished in “dozens of British newspapers” which, from 1869 onwards, deployed this alimentary transgression to highlight the supposed “childishness and lack of self-discipline” of transatlantic women (Nicholson 2019: 186).

A middle- or upper-class woman enjoying sweets in public was still perceived as deviant in *fin-de-siècle* Britain. During the nineteenth century, the nonappetitive lady, who embodied an ideal of bourgeois moderation, had been opposed to the voraciousness of the lower classes freighted with class and sexual fears, producing gender stereotypes that survived into the late century and even beyond (Cozzi 2010: 60, 72, 79). This opposition was also rife with racial undertones, as white women’s supposed self-containment was often contrasted with black women’s ravenousness to highlight the superiority of the former’s conduct. Even though she is a white woman, Georgia is a foreigner and, as such, more likely to become the target of British ethnic prejudices. Her diversity is further emphasised by her being an American Southerner – someone associated with the slave culture from which and whom she might have acquired unrefined habits and attitudes.

In ways similar to other popular novelists at the time, Broughton and Bisland use alimentary deviance to create a New Woman type that transgresses class, gender and ethnic boundaries. It is no coincidence that, six years after *A Widower Indeed*, Florence Marryat published *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897), a sensational-gothic novel featuring the beautiful Harriet Brandt, a bulimic young woman of Creole origins who is later discovered to be a psychic vampire. In addition to feeding on people’s (including children’s) vital energies, Harriet gorges herself on huge meals and sweets, showing – like Georgia – a marked preference for chocolate bon-bons.⁶

⁶ “Miss Brandt had a large box of chocolates beside her into which she continually dipped her hand. Her mouth, too, was stained with the delicate sweet meat – she was always eating either fruit or bonbons”; “She is gorging them [chocolates or caramels] all day long herself!” (Marryat [1897] 2010: 33, 41) More tragic than *A Widower Indeed* as the protagonist commits suicide, *The Blood of the Vampire* makes a similar use of transgressive appetites to problematise the role traditionally assigned to women, raising the problem of their entrapment within ideals that stifle their secret yearnings. For a close reading of female appetites in Marryat’s novel, see Costantini (2013).

Harriet Brandt's crossing of multiple boundaries (of gender, class, ethnicity) is anticipated, on a lower scale, by Georgia Wrenn's characterisation as a fascinating foreigner of wealthy means, who is accused of behaving coarsely and unfeminine by her British hosts. On a symbolic plane, moreover, the two protagonists symbolically betray their nurturing function, as they both endanger the health of young people in their care. In *A Widower Indeed*, this betrayal is suggested by Georgia's inclination to offer chocolate to Edward's children. On her first appearance on the scene, she gives "a bag of chocolate creams" to the little orphans, whose total engrossment in the tasty present alarms their father:

They are sitting opposite to each other on the floor, with their solid pink legs stretched out straight before them, and their four immense blue eyes fixed upon the contents of a bag of chocolate creams, which, outpoured on Nanny's baby lap, are being slowly and laboriously divided into two equal portions by Billy, his sister closely watching him to insure that there is no imposition. [...]

"No, thank you, darling! Daddy is not hungry! Where did you get them from? Who gave them to you?" [...]

"A lady."

(Broughton and Bisland 1891: 36-7)

Georgia's wish to encourage the Lygon siblings to consume chocolate is also expressed in a later episode: "I'd give a dime and a half to see those cute little pickaninnies again; there's a box of chocolate here that needs their help in finishing up, just the worst way in the world" (167).⁷ By indulging the two children's tastes for junk food, Georgia deviates from norms of female nurturing with which Victorian women were taught to comply. A number of guides and manuals published during the century invited mothers to serve regular meals to their offspring, warning them against the dangers of allowing their children's ingestion of too much sugar. Such warnings were still popular at the turn of the century, as evidenced by some later additions to the widely-read *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*, first published in 1861. If compared with the first edition, for example, the 1906 edition of Beeton's guide reveals the presence of more explicit dietary prescriptions for children. Suffice it to consider the instruction that "[children's] meals should be served regularly at the same hour daily, and irregular eating of sweets, cake, biscuits, fruit, etc. between meals should not be permitted," followed by the clarification that sugar "taken in excess" should be avoided as it produces "catarrh of the stomach" (Beeton [1861] 1906: 1898).

By violating such prescriptions, Georgia symbolically betrays the normative function she should fulfil as a prospective stepmother of the Lygon children. The implications of such an act are however more complex and unconventional than they might appear at first glance. Even though Georgia never comes to marry Edward and perform a traditional maternal role, she brings joy to the little Lygons by spending time with them, giving them presents even if 'the wrong' ones. Their devourment of chocolate is the only moment of gratification they enjoy after the loss of their mother. When Edward puts an end to his (still platonic) relationship with Georgia, the siblings enter a new dark stage of their life: deprived of her pleasant company, they soon come to experience two calamitous events, as they become the stepchildren of the unaffectionate Albertina and tragically also lose their father. Unfit though she might appear to become a regular Victorian mother, Georgia is nonetheless the best friend to the little orphans who, without her, have few other chances to enjoy happiness and affection. The novel closes with no hint at the siblings' future; yet, the gloomy life they are supposed to live after

⁷ It is worth noting Georgia's affectionate use of the term "pickaninnies" with reference to the Lygon children, who are white and British. Commonly employed in the US and the Caribbean to define black children, its occurrence here confirms the intersectionality of the American girl's character, adding a positive valence to the cultural mixing she represents.

Edward's death raises doubts on a conventional interpretation of their interaction with Georgia. Despite its potential unhealthiness, the taste for sweets the two children develop under the woman's influence alleviates their sufferings, giving them a chance to experience, albeit temporarily, the feeling of being loved and cared for again by a symbolic maternal figure.

Coupled with her own deviant appetites, the anomalous nurturing role performed by Georgia challenges Victorian stereotypes of womanhood. Despite her incompleteness and her early departure from the scene, the American woman sketched by Broughton and Bisland evidences the authors' attempt to develop an alternative feminine figure – one that does not match British models of ladylikeness and motherhood but is, nonetheless, perceived as a warm-hearted and benign person. Besides suggesting that eating habits significantly shape socio-normative models,⁸ this unorthodox modelling foreshadows twentieth-century feminist theories that debunk myths of femininity, such as Simone De Beauvoir's. In anticipation of De Beauvoir's idea that "woman" is not an essence but a construct within patriarchal culture ([1949] 2011: 283), Georgia's swerving from the alimentary norm asserts her positive individuality, revealing the vagueness and artificiality of two unrealisable ideals within which Victorian women were trapped, namely, the ideals of woman as nurturer and nonappetitive lady.

Another example of Georgia's unladylike conduct is her practice of calisthenics or "Swedish Slojd":

She is apparently going through some sanitary gymnastics known by the name of the "Swedish Slojd." At the moment of his entrance, she is in an attitude such as is not generally adopted for the reception of visitors. Her supple body, which it seems unnecessary to make yet suppler by the employment of any calisthenics, is bent into the shape of a sort of arch, leaning over as far as she can go, with her finger-tips touching the floor.

(Broughton and Bisland 1891: 122)

Deeply imbued with irony, as she receives Edward in "an attitude such as is not generally adopted for the reception of visitors," the description of her calisthenics employment contributes to her characterisation as a sensational New Woman who performs athletic activities traditionally considered unsuitable for gentlewomen. Victorian conduct books generally dissuaded women from pursuing such activities, which contrasted with dominant ideals of feminine weakness associated with delicacy and refinement. Still, there emerged during the century different views of the physical activities a woman should do in order to become strong and healthy. In the wake of earlier attempts to "persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body" (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1833: 8), some Victorian intellectuals declared that women should perform physical exercise in order to achieve vigour and healthiness, and that such occupations did not decrease their refinement. Herbert Spencer, among others, stigmatised the age's encouragement of female feebleness, questioning the association of physical exercise with vulgarity:

We have a vague suspicion that to produce a robust *physique* is thought undesirable; that rude health and abundant vigor are considered somewhat plebeian; that a certain delicacy, a strength not competent to more than a mile or two's walk, an appetite fastidious and easily satisfied, joined with that timidity which commonly accompanies feebleness are held more lady-like.

([1861] n.d.: 276)

⁸ This idea was later systematised by Roland Barthes, who defines food as "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" ([1961] 1997: 21).

Later in the century, debates on female physical exercise increased. Sport became a focal point for feminist aspirations and the variety of physical activities performed by women widened. Represented in New Woman fiction and practiced by women writers like Sarah Grand, who publicised her love for cycling, female athleticism was, however, ridiculed in the British popular press, which denounced the supposed physical damages produced by such activities, as well as their lack of taste and unsexing potentialities (Wånggren 2017: 66-7). As suggested above, the description of Georgia's gymnastics reflects some ironies of the on-going popular controversy; yet, it also presents the protagonist's training in a favourable way, by laying emphasis on her "supple" and elastic body. The positive effects of her training are confirmed in other textual passages that highlight her agility and fast walk,⁹ including an episode discussed later which opposes her physical skills to Albertina's disabling weakness.

The relevance Broughton and Bisland gave to Georgia's athleticism suggests that, though partly influenced by British debates on the topic, they also drew inspiration from American society which, in the second half of the century, witnessed a rising interest in female physical exercise. This interest then also emerges in American popular fiction published after the mid-century. It may suffice to reference the tomboyish characterisation of Jo March who, despite her athletic body and her love for boys' games, is the undisputed heroine of Mary Louise Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-9). Half-ironic, half-challenging, the description of Georgia's physical training confirms Broughton and Bisland's attempt to sketch a particular New Woman type by combining female models developed on both sides of the Atlantic. This combination is also evident in other features exhibited by the novel's protagonist who, though endowed with some distinctive traits of the British New Woman, reveals relevant differences from this type. Her beauty is a telling example. Although she may appear unwomanly in her masculine pursuits, Georgia is also hyperfeminised by her pretty face and her attractive bodily shape, which Edward notices in one of their early meetings:

She looks so very young, as if she had stepped such a little way into the twenties. And so exceedingly pretty – not in her country's ordinary fragile, hot-house style, but with a wholesome, vigorous and yet sufficiently slender comeliness.

(Broughton and Bisland 1891: 57)

What lacks in this and other depictions, however, is a tendency to eroticise her figure. Associated with youth and healthiness, Georgia's beauty is given a connotation of freshness that is at odds with the sensuality of many transgressive heroines featured in sensation fiction and New Woman novels. Another significant difference is her fondness for Edward's children. Unlike many bluestockings, the American protagonist of *A Widower Indeed* manifests a domestic inclination, even though her pleasure in nurturing and entertaining children is not at odds with her nonconformist behaviour. Her particular combination of autonomy and domesticity is in line with the American ideal of Real Womanhood. As Susan Cruca observes in a study of transatlantic female models, in the US specific socioeconomic conditions favoured the development of a new ideal of womanhood in the course of the nineteenth century – an ideal that, unlike the British angel-in-the-house (which is referred to as True Womanhood), was founded on "healthy exercise and activity," some "independence," "economic self-sufficiency" and "work" "usually of a domestic nature":

⁹ When she meets Edward again after their break up, Georgia is walking in the open air with a male friend. The narrator highlights the fact that she advances effortlessly at quick pace, preceding her walking companion: "two figures – a woman's first, followed by a man's come stepping" (Broughton and Bisland 1891: 163).

Real Womanhood encouraged healthy exercise and activity, permitted women a minor degree of independence, and stressed economic self-sufficiency as a means of survival. [...] a woman able to work could support herself and her family when illness, death, or financial disaster struck. Yet, while Real Womanhood required women to work, this work was usually of a domestic nature and involved traditional housekeeping, gardening, canning and baking, and taking care of children.

(2005: 191-3)

While still encouraging marriage and childcare, Real Womanhood laid emphasis on women's self-development, suggesting that they should reject those norms that limited their liberty of action and movement. This feminine ideal is in line with what Bisland suggests in "The Cry of the Women," in which she invites women to develop all their talents while "let[ting] married love and motherhood be made noble and important to [them]" (1894: 759).

If read from this perspective, Georgia's portrayal confirms the authors' attempt to develop a new figure resulting from the coalescence of British and American feminine ideals. There are, however, two elements that prevent her embodiment of a fully-fledged model. First of all, she is not immune from sarcastic remarks on her strong American accent, her boldness and lack of refinement.¹⁰ Deeply imbued with irony is also her lack of self-restraint, well evidenced by the simile that renders all her anger at Edward in their farewell scene: "as fighting a light flashing in her eyes as ever shone in *those of her countrymen when they gripped each other's throats in that most murderous of all recorded wars of theirs*" (Broughton and Bisland 1891: 129, my emphasis). A comic foil in some episodes, Georgia is weakened by the presence of anti-American prejudices, even though she poses an ideological challenge to British readers, encouraging them to reflect on different gender models. The conflicting roles she plays are effectively rendered by Kate Flint's description of "the American Girl" featured in British fiction of the age, a figure used "both to reinforce the sense of insularity surrounding expectations about correctness and decency at the level of women's behaviour, and to suggest that effective challenges may come from without, as well as from within" (1996: 218).

Innovative and unconventional, Georgia mostly fulfils a provocative function, as she is too distant from British normativity to provide a fully imitable model. The prejudice many characters feel against her suggests that, as an American woman, she is expected to be unable to comply with her hosts' normative system which, though ironised for its flaws, is not really threatened by the agency of an outsider. The limits of her power to impact on British society are confirmed by the failure of her transatlantic romance. Unlike the typical American Girl aiming to land a European husband who caused so much alarm in the press (Nicholson 2019: 188-90), Georgia is prevented from 'invading' the British marriage market by local conformists, who join forces to put an end to her budding relationship with Edward before it might bloom.

¹⁰ The novel abounds with British objections to Georgia's American ways. In an early conversation with Susan, his sister-in-law, Edward agrees with her view that American people "have hideous voices" and "are so irreverent" (Broughton and Bisland 1891: 30). In a later scene, Susan manifests her dislike for Georgia's strong accent (85) which is similarly derided by the Crichtons (101). Prejudices against transatlantic manners are also expressed by the narrator who, speaking in the plural "we" that identifies him or her as British, refers to the "oddnesses that have the sanction of the Stars and Stripes" (79).

Caricatures of True Womanhood: Louisa and Albertina Crichton

If the Victorians are not yet ready for the change embodied by Georgia, they are certainly discouraged from imitating the British women featured in the novel, who are all represented as inadequate and deeply flawed. Alongside a few secondary figures, such as the malevolent Mrs Pennington Bruce and Edward's selfish in-laws, Broughton and Bisland portray two characters who epitomise the mercenary attitude of many British women: Mrs Louisa Crichton and her daughter Albertina. Both sly in planning a matrimonial trap for Edward, the two women possess manipulative skills that wreck the widower's life.

In ways similar to several mothers caricatured by Jane Austen, Louisa Crichton is a parent obsessed with the idea of marrying off her daughter. Her dissembling attitude is evident upon her first appearance on the scene in which she and Albertina pay a visit to Edward, introducing themselves as cousins of his. While Edward makes efforts to remember them – and only manages to have a pale memory of the elder one's face surging up "Out of the night of time" (Broughton and Bisland 1891: 93) – Mrs Crichton speaks to him with an affection that disorients the widower. Ignoring the "hopelessly puzzled expression" of the latter's face (93), the two women remind him of past episodes and feelings of which he has no memory but which he feigns to remember, convinced of his own "tardiness" and eager to avoid being rude (94). The whole scene is charged with narrative irony. While Edward struggles to retrieve false memories, the reader becomes aware of the Crichton ladies' pretence and wonders about their secret objectives.

These objectives are revealed later in the narration when mother and daughter meet Edward again, apparently by chance, in a mountain village in which he is spending his summer holidays. Hardly interpretable as a coincidence, as the elder lady suggests in a teasing comment ("What a pleasant surprise!" cries Mrs. Crichton. 'Are you coming over to us, or must we go over to you?'" [145]), their new encounter reveals itself to be part of an ingenious plot hatched by the two women, who take advantage of the widower's sad and lonely state. In a subsequent scene of disclosure, mother and daughter betray all their cunning and self-interest. Both seem capable of reading Edward's thoughts, which are paraphrased by the narrator as follows: "Perhaps these kindly creatures have been sent to help him in the fight with his devils!" (145). Aware of his wish to be comforted, they plan to make a profit by easing his grief. Their conversation reveals the cynicism of Mrs Crichton who, less interested than her daughter in his ability to become a good partner, views him in purely materialistic terms:

"Poor fellow!" replies Mrs. Crichton, "I dare say he is a little tired of being broken-hearted!"

This cynic utterance draws no rejoinder from the daughter, whose mind is occupied by the nice problem as to whether a broken heart or a chipped reputation be the more desirable property.

"He really will be a boon to us," pursues the mother presently.

"Do you think so?" (rather dubiously).

"Yes, I do! Of course he is not a man of the world, but I am sure that something might be made of him."

(149)

The economic jargon used in this scene – "property," "boon" – connotes the dejected man as a form of investment from which the Crichtons, and the mother in particular, aim to benefit. The novel's characterisation of mother and daughter reverses the American Girl plot typical of late-Victorian fiction, in which a foreign woman usually comes from the colonial

territories with money but wanting a title and social standing. In contrast with this plot, Broughton and Bisland portray two British women who trap the widower into a loveless marriage, and they reinforce their critique of British socio-cultural relations by turning Edward into a paradigm of weak masculinity.

After using irony to disclose Mrs Crichton's aims, the authors resort to sarcasm and grotesqueness to describe the final moves she makes to secure a husband for her daughter. First of all, the woman finds excuses to leave Edward and Albertina alone in their walks:

But by little and little the older lady oftener drops behind on some slight pretext of weariness, [...]. The change is so gradual, and broken by such frequent returns to the trio, that Edward never notices it.

(154)

Secondly, she comes to play a decisive role in the highly melodramatic episode in which Albertina creates a hysterical nightly scene in front of Edward, after learning of his decision to return to Oxford. Embraced by the young woman in *déshabillé* ("a woman in a white dressing-gown, and with her long blonde hair hanging over her shoulders" [176]), Edward first strives to disentangle himself, but later stretches his arms to prevent her from falling. At that very moment, as in a coup de théâtre, Mrs Crichton enters the room followed by the butler and utters two comments that prevent Edward from offering a plausible explanation:

"What am I to understand by this?" asks Mrs. Crichton, in a low, concentrated voice. "But why do I ask? Of course it can mean but one thing!"

(179)

"You can not explain away the evidence of my own eyes," rejoins she, with stern gentleness.

(180)

Her sudden appearance and her misinterpretation of the "evidence of [her] own eyes" suggest that, in ways similar to many female plotters featured in sensation fiction, she might have masterminded the event. This impression is confirmed by her third move, which succeeds in catching Edward into the cobweb of intrigue she has patiently spun. In a grotesque confrontation with her future son-in-law, Mrs Crichton gives an erotic interpretation to his and Albertina's embrace, accuses him of seducing her daughter, disdainfully rejects any different interpretation he strives to offer ("Is it the old shabby story of 'the woman beguiled me'?" [203]) and plants doubt into his weak mind ("Is it possible that in some sleep-walking state he may have committed the atrocities of which the pale woman before him is with so perfect an air of good faith and conviction accusing him?" [204-5]). The woman's employment of rhetorical strategies is followed by a skilful performance: she passes some eau-de-Cologne "over her white lips" (207) and firmly declares that Edward has "blackened Albertina's character" (207-8), thereby paving the way to his final acceptance of a shotgun marriage. The melodramatic crescendo of her statements and actions is interspersed with sarcastic references to the surreptitious glances she steals at Edward and to her cleverness in continuously changing her tone, shifting from tragedy to softness, from distress to gentleness.

With bitter irony, however, the "boon" she secures by resorting to these tricks is soon lost by her daughter who is widowed three days after her wedding. Despite her skills in manipulating Edward, Mrs Crichton proves to be a flawed woman who ultimately fails to achieve her objective and hurts her daughter. Unscrupulous, deceitful and self-interested, she is a grotesque embodiment of the maternal icon celebrated by Victorians and, as such, casts a dark shadow on dominant views of femininity and marriage.

In comparison with her mother, who reveals all the cynicism of mature age, Albertina appears even more objectionable. Unable to feel true love, she is drawn to Edward by ambition and, when she fears that her prey might escape, she resorts to hysterics. “‘Oh, do not speak to me in that tone,’ cries she hysterically, and clasping her hands” before “throw[ing] her arms about her cousin’s neck” (176-7). The wild embrace into which she forces Edward is most likely part of a cunning plan of which she is either appraised or even co-author. This impression is reinforced by her last act before the novel’s closure. Frustrated by having been left alone after the wedding ceremony, she waits for Edward’s return from the cemetery and angrily reproaches him for her “bitter humiliation” (224). Her wounded pride makes her use strong words against her spouse and admit that she willingly entered a loveless union: “‘I knew that you did not love me, but I did not think it was in you to insult me so grossly on the very day you had married me!’” (223-4). The grotesqueness of their situation as two newly married spouses who despise each other reaches its sensational climax when Edward loses his mind: driven by “the furious fire of insanity,” he grasps Albertina’s shoulder, “‘thrusts her out [of his house] with violence into the muddy street, and flings the door to behind her,’” bursting into “an echoing peal of laughter” (226-8). Her cold scheming and lack of warmth are thus fittingly punished by the symbolic loss of the domestic realm in which she aimed to play the role of wife in accordance with the age’s ideal of True Womanhood.

A caricature of women’s readiness to enter mercenary unions that should grant them social respectability, Albertina is also a foil for the myth of the Victorian “female malady” theorised by Elaine Showalter (1985). Her hysterical behaviour in the night in which she forces Edward into their fatal embrace is a manifestation of vulnerability that validates Victorian social assumptions of female emotionality, as well as the medical discourse that supported them. Half-cunning, half-unrestrained in her conduct, Albertina incarnates a doubly negative model of femininity which is patently ridiculed and deconstructed by Broughton and Bisland.

Another defect she exhibits is her physical weakness that becomes evident when she falls into a stream during a walk with Edward:

The noise of her prodigious splash brings back her companion’s straying gaze to her, and in a second he has plunged in, and, half lifting her out, sets her dank and dilapidated on the bank.

“Are you hurt?” he asks, solicitously, stooping over her.

“What does it matter if I am?” she answers in a half-crying voice; and to his astonishment and consternation, he sees that the eyes into which he is looking are full of large bona-fide tears.

“At least there is nothing broken, I trust?”

“I do not know; my bones are so small, that I dare say my ankle is smashed.”

(Broughton and Bisland 1891: 162)

Her plaintive tone and her self-perception as a frail person (“my bones are so small”) are mercilessly ridiculed in this scene, which confirms the vulnerability of her figure exposed in descriptions like the following:

Albertina is *by no means one of those athletic Englishwomen* whose frames and whose clothes are built to contend with and enjoy the horse-play of the elements. Her favourite form of outdoor exercise being a drive in a brougham down Bond Street [...].

(159, my emphasis)

By establishing an ironic link between Albertina’s physical weakness and her lack of exercise, the authors highlight the problems created by Victorian norms that prescribed female inactivity, associating feebleness with refinement. It is no coincidence therefore that, soon after Albertina’s inglorious plunge into the stream, Georgia appears on the scene and generously offers to help her and Edward. When the two leave, the young American “skips lightly across the stepping-stones that had caused Albertina’s disaster” (170) confirming

with her athleticism her distance from the questionable model incarnated by the idle Miss Crichton. The juxtaposition of the two women's physical strength and frailty proves that, despite her sketchy representation, Georgia is endowed with skills and a personality that make her incarnate a new idea of femininity – one that, though still incomplete, visibly contrasts with the old-fashioned type embodied by the clumsy Albertina. As suggested above, one point of strength of Georgia's characterisation is exactly her athleticism which, in line with the New Woman phenomenon and the American promotion of sports for women, becomes a symbol of her potentiality to develop into a modern, self-assured woman.

Unlike the vital Georgia, Albertina and her mother are parodies of True Womanhood, receptacles of all the negative traits of femininity that readers are encouraged to discard. If Mrs Crichton epitomises the deceit and mercenariness of many Victorian women who comply with dominant rules, her daughter provides an equally negative counter-model. In addition to her mother's flaws, Albertina exhibits a hysterical and idle disposition that are overtly derided in the text and that, in comparison with Georgia's endowments, make her appear defective and unfit for the new times.

A Pale Masculine Figure: Edward Lygon

If the characterisation of women offers glimpses into a would-be refashioning of gender roles, the portrayal of men is even less convincing, as shown by the numerous flaws exhibited by Edward Lygon. The only key figure in a novel that portrays most men as background characters, Edward is not only the protagonist of *A Widower Indeed*; he also appears as a main object of interest for the narrator, who describes his secret sufferings and aspirations in detail. What is more, he fulfils an important function with regard to the novel's focalisation, as it is through his eyes that the main female figures are generally perceived and represented. Despite this centrality, however, Edward is consistently satirised in the text. His emaciation makes him a parodic version of the bloodless aesthete featured in late-Victorian fiction. In a similar way, his conformism and concern about people's judgment might appear in line with orthodox *fin-de-siècle* figures, but he lacks the muscularity of Christian masculinity as evidenced by his physical and mental weakness. Through a skilful use of irony and occasional touches of sarcasm, Broughton and Bisland turn their protagonist into a foil for the New Man – a pale projection of an alternative idea of masculinity that some writers were striving to develop at the end of the nineteenth century.

Edward's caricatural role is anticipated by the novel's title which, without mentioning his name, emphasises his lamentable state of widowhood. Introduced as a bereaved man who has lost female love and support, Edward becomes a target of bitter irony in the course of the narration. His inconsolability is mentioned in manifold pathetic passages in which the narrator, intruding within his consciousness, offers details of his profound grief:

He has a wretched feeling that he ought to cry too. [...] But Susan [his sister-in-law] does not seem to notice his apathy.

(Broughton and Bisland 1891: 10)

The realization of this fact has come to him in hideous rushes of red-hot agony in the watches of the night; when he has crammed the sheets of his bed into his mouth, to prevent his cries and groans from piercing the walls of the old house – happily thicker than those of the spick-and-span villas in the Parks – and waking the sleeping children. It has come to him also in icy waves of desperation as he bent over his big ledgers.

(15)

Another aspect that deserves notice is his physical vulnerability, which attaches unwonted feminine connotations to his figure. Unable to live without the support of women, Edward is said to have a frail constitution that, since childhood, has seriously weakened his mind. “How concerned Anne would have been to see him fronting the icy blast that blew across St. Mary’s Cemetery, thinly clad, and with unprotected head” (5), we read in an early passage, before learning that his “sickly boyhood” had made “a public school impossible” and “rendered him shy of his fellows” (75).

Shielded from the world by his wife Anne, Edward feels utterly disoriented when she dies. His lack of stamina and his constant craving for female attention make him a foil for Victorian masculinity, as confirmed by his vain attempts to get protection from his female in-laws. In many passages, he is depicted as a desperate man striving for his mother-in-law’s consolation:

Again – nay, not again, since the passionate desire has had no moment’s intermission – that ardent longing for the opportunity to unbosom himself, to pour out his terrible new trouble into the perfectly understanding ears of her whose delicate hand he is gripping with so unconscious a ferocity, assails him.

(193)

Mrs. Lambart little knows how much her son-in-law needs that blessing which she gives him with so unsuspecting and easy a lightness.

(195)

By creating a man who is woman’s appendage, the authors reverse stereotypes of female dependence upon their spouses or other men capable of supporting them both practically and emotionally. It is worth noticing moreover that Edward’s failure to embody traditional masculine roles seems to anticipate Bisland’s depiction of embourgeoised men in an 1898 article titled “The Abdication of Man.” In half-ironic, half-critical tones, Bisland laments here the loss of grandeur of the modern man who, while still keeping women subjected, has lost the old “masterfulness” and “splendour” that made him “woman’s hero and cheerfully accepted master” (1898: 196, 199).

In *A Widower Indeed*, Edward’s craving for women’s attention becomes almost ridiculous when he is assailed by jealousy at learning about his sister-in-law’s engagement: “The thought brings a pang with it. He is going to lose Susan too!” (Broughton and Bisland 1891: 46). Quite ironically, in such a little sentimental novel, the only references to strong passions (“passionate desire,” “ardent longing” and jealousy) denote Edward’s pathological fixation with his female in-laws’ attentions without which he seems unable to survive. And it is exactly this fixation that paves the way to his ruin. After breaking with Georgia, he seeks solitude by retreating to the countryside. Yet, he cannot overcome his desperate longing for new female care:

If there were any one, any pitiful human creature to whose hand he could cling to help him up out of these awful shadows back into the common daylight!

(143-4)

Exposed in a pathos-ridden scene preceding his encounter with Mrs Crichton and Albertina in the mountain village, this longing enables his ambitious cousins to perceive, and take advantage of, his emotional vulnerability.

Unable to control his emotionality, Edward also betrays a mental weakness that gradually comes to the fore. Initially manifested as absent-mindedness and indecision, his lack of mental balance turns into confusion, panic and anger when he is faced by difficulties, until it evolves into manifest pathology. The madness by which he is seized in the conclusion, when he violently thrusts Albertina out and dies “raving mad,” is a symptom of insanity

that contributes to making his figure defective and unheroic. Furthermore, by associating him with a “female malady” configured as “metaphorically and symbolically [...] feminine” “even when experienced by men” (Showalter 1985: 4),¹¹ the authors pose an additional challenge to Victorian gender categories, suggesting that social roles can be questioned and even reversed in particular circumstances.

The fluidification of Edward’s identity is confirmed by the role he comes to play in the mercenary plot hatched by the Crichtons. Instead of portraying women as fetish-objects exchanged in homosocial relationships – as later theorised by Luce Irigaray ([1977] 1985: 183) – the novel depicts a man who, without having particular endowments or riches, becomes an object of desire pursued by greedy women within a competitive matrimonial market. The commodification of Edward increases his social vulnerability. Frail, irresolute and incapable of rebelling against deceitful women, he becomes an emblem of weakened masculinity in the course of the narration. For this very reason, he meets a tragic death in the novel’s conclusion while the women survive – a fate reserved to other male characters portrayed by Broughton, as evidenced by the plot of *Not Wisely But Too Well* (1867).¹² Edward’s shadowy nature is also evocative of the association of spectrality with masculinity in a Broughton short story like “The Man with the Nose” (1873). As Joellen Masters suggests, this gothic tale “dramatically reverses its gender dynamics to scoff at the rational control that the culture assigns to masculinity” (2015: 224). The tale also parodies Victorian representations of “marriage as entombing for women” as it shows a husband perceiving his wedding ritual as an “ordeal” – a situation literally reproduced in *A Widower Indeed*, where a man is killed by his enforced wedding (240).

By portraying Edward Lygon as a neurotic man cocooned in the Oxford milieu, craving female protection and unable to stand on his own two feet, Broughton and Bisland offer a pungent critique of traditional male roles. A target of multiple ironies, almost implausible in his too many flaws which are melodramatically brought to the fore, Edward fulfils a mainly deconstructive function in the text. The strength and confidence he is denied, which are instead endowed to Georgia, pose the problem of “marginalized masculinities” (Edley 2017: 45) which would gain theoretical prominence in the next two centuries. In anticipation of today’s masculinity studies, Broughton and Bisland deflate traditional views of aggressive androcentrism paving the way to new approaches to gender. Shadowy and defective though it is, their characterisation of a suffering and marginalised man like Edward suggests, in Nigel Edley’s words, that “the hegemonic ideal is not one that many men can attain” (45). It demonstrates that this ideal “stands in contradiction to” “a range of different masculinities,” that “there are cases where men are in some way barred from attaining the hegemonic state” (45).

Conclusion

Despite its structural weaknesses, *A Widower Indeed* is a critically interesting novel which deserves more attention than it has so far received. What makes it noteworthy is its deconstruction of dominant gender models which, as demonstrated above, emerges through a close analysis of the main characters portrayed by Broughton and Bisland. In line with the New Woman fiction of the time, the authors ridicule conventional womanhood through the

¹¹ It is important to underline that the novel was composed in a period in which male hysteria was being conceptualised, as evidenced by studies by Jean-Martin Charcot and Sigmund Freud.

¹² In this early Broughton novel, the sensual heroine, Kate Chester, survives two men with whom she has established a triangular relationship: her dark lover Dare Stamer and her virtuous admirer James Stanley, who are respectively killed in a violent accident and by disease.

characterisation of Louisa and Albertina Crichton, two British women who associate feminine success with the ability to secure a husband within a competitive matrimonial market. Cynical and deceitful, mother and daughter ensnare the protagonist in an unhappy marriage which ultimately fails to bring any reward for them. The grotesqueness of the situation turns the Crichtons into caricatures of two typical female figures idealised in Victorian novels, namely, the shy, innocent daughter and her socially aware mother anxious to secure a good social standing for her offspring. Together with other minor characters, Miss and Mrs Crichton unveil the hypocrisy and avidity of Victorian paradigms of True Womanhood, enabling the authors to level their criticism at British conventionality.

The pitiless exposure of the Crichtons' flaws is coupled with the attempt to sketch an alternative model of femininity that is interestingly incarnated by a foreigner: Georgia Wrenn. Unconventional and daring in her behaviour, attractive but never dangerously eroticised, Georgia is the result of an interesting combination of British and American models of womanhood which the authors put together to debunk traditional gender myths and foreshadow a new feminine type. Her characterisation sheds a positive light onto the collaboration of Broughton and Bisland, who pursue an interesting deconstructive project by drawing on their distinct cultural backgrounds and personal experiences, also as women belonging to different generations.¹³ Partly a New Woman, partly an American Girl drawing on transatlantic views of womanhood, Georgia has foreign habits and endowments that give her autonomy of thought and movement but also make her the target of anti-American prejudices. The comic traits of her characterisation prevent her from evolving into an unblemished model of femininity. Yet, the provocative function she fulfils with her unorthodox behaviour raises the problem of a femininity in crisis that is no longer definable through gender stereotyping.

A similar function is fulfilled by the portrayal of Edward Lygon. A mediocre man who combines mental, emotional and physical fragility together, Edward not only questions patriarchal models but is also a foil for alternative masculine roles explored by *fin-de-siècle* writers. Ridiculed for his pathetic behaviour and his helpless dependence on women, he is further lowered in status by his sudden death which fails to arouse the reader's sympathy, questioning the centrality of his role as the novel's protagonist. As shown above, however, his characterisation makes sense if read as the emblem of a gender normativity stretched to breaking point. Instead of setting an imitable alternative model of masculinity, Edward unveils the problems faced by marginalised men who are unable or unwilling to conform to traditional norms. This deconstructive function suggests that some of the weaknesses of the novel's plotting might actually be read as strengths, as they invite readers to rethink gender politics.

If Edward's embodiment of a masculinity in crisis intimates that late-Victorian men in search of alternatives still needed to develop convincing roles, the ironies and inconsistencies of the women's characterisation reveal the utopian quality of a new femininity that was not yet attainable at the time. The reconceptualisation of gender dynamics triggered by Broughton and Bisland also accounts for some ruptures in the novel's marriage plot, confirming that the main achievement of *A Widower Indeed* is to stage the dilemmas and relational conflicts of an age of crisis and transition.

¹³ I am grateful to Julia Kuehn for this observation and some other comments included in the article.

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