

## Woman Against Woman - Geraldine Jewsbury vs Florence Marryat

Victorian Popular Culture: Prose, Stage and Screen

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In 1863, Florence Marryat started writing her first novel, *Love's Conflict*, at a time when the sensation school of fiction was already outraging and thrilling readers in equal measure. While critics objected to the genre's sometimes shocking themes, they were usually mollified by moral conclusions in which erring heroines appeared to be punished for their transgressions. Two of the most famous heroines of the genre, Lady Audley and *East Lynne's* Isobel Vane, were also reassuringly non-sexual, their protests motivated by a lack of autonomy, or of love, rather than sexual desire. It was into this climate that *Love's Conflict* emerged, with its themes of prostitution, alcoholism, murder and extra-marital sex. Most controversial for some critics was its ostensibly good heroine who almost elopes with her husband's cousin. Although the themes and frenetic pace of the narrative placed the novel firmly in the sensation school, its setting was thoroughly domestic, and its style realistic. Arguably, this made Marryat's work more shocking.

However, Elaine Showalter argues that Marryat's work is within the "framework of feminine conventions", classing her as a "feminine" novelist, that is, one who doesn't challenge the established order. Patrick Brantlinger contends that, like other women writers of the period, Marryat was merely exploiting public interest in issues such as divorce law reform and greater sexual freedom, rather than what he calls "striking forthright blows". A superficial reading of the published text of *Love's Conflict* would seem to confirm their arguments. However, it overlooks the novel's curious publishing history and the afterlife of its heroine. Far from being conventional or merely trying to profit from a popular genre, I argue that *Love's Conflict* represented a landmark in women's writing.

In this paper I examine how Marryat's novel was extensively revised by the publisher's reader, Geraldine Jewsbury. I consider the nature of this revision, much of which concerned the regulation of the heroine's behaviour. I argue that had Marryat been able to publish her original manuscript, critics such as Showalter and Brantlinger might have credited her with the radicalism attributed to later writers such as Sarah Grand and Mary Cholmondeley. I also show how Marryat resisted subsequent attempts to control her writing, and how she regretted and retracted her initial concessions to morality in *Love's Conflict*.

Briefly, *Love's Conflict* is the story of Elfrida Treherne, an unhappily-married woman who falls in love with her brutish husband's cousin, George. She resists her lover's urge to elope, and subsequently gives birth to a deformed baby. George, in a fit of pique, marries a lower-class woman who is later murdered by a jealous ex-lover. Elfrida's husband instigates a formal separation, but they are eventually

reunited after a serious accident inspires uncharacteristic forgiveness on his part. I should add that these are the main strands of a labyrinthine plot.

Marryat originally submitted her manuscript to the publisher Richard Bentley under the title 'The Struggle for Life' in November 1864. As was customary, Bentley sent it out to his Reader, Geraldine Jewsbury, whose role was to advise on its suitability for publication. Richard Horne described the publisher's reader as "the author's unknown, unsuspected enemy". Their role was to ensure that manuscripts met with the moral and literary standards of both the publishing house and the highly-influential circulating libraries. Jewsbury wrote over 600 reports for Bentley between 1858 and 1880, and saw herself as a moral sentinel who protected the reading public's delicate sensibilities. She was also a prolific reviewer for the *Athenaeum*, giving her a powerful dual role in moderating literary tastes. Her enthusiasm in rooting out vulgarity sometimes resulted in the publisher losing highly-remunerative novelists, such as Rhoda Broughton and Ouida.

Some of Jewsbury's reports in the Bentley Archives simply comprise brief letters condemning a manuscript as "dull"; others include detailed summaries of the sections she felt needed rewriting. In one extreme example, she revised a Captain Smart novel "line by line", leaving virtually none of the original material. A three decker by Charles Beach ended up a single volume after Jewsbury had expunged all the content which she thought was "bosh" (her word, not mine). Her verdict on Wilkie Collins' *No Name* was more succinct: "It is utter rubbish & unworthy of your consideration. It is a thorough young lady's novel." Jewsbury's approach was largely gendered – male writers were condemned on grounds of quality, whereas women novelists were judged on morality.

Although Jewsbury felt that Marryat's manuscript contained "great cleverness in some portions," she was horrified by what she called "shocking violations of good taste". She was particularly concerned that "Elfrida is offered to the reader as a woman struggling with an illicit affection." To Jewsbury's mind, behaving decently should not be a struggle. Her report includes ten pages of detailed notes, and the instruction that two chapters would have to be completely revised. Jewsbury also asked that her report be copied in case Marryat recognised her handwriting. Jewsbury's overall agenda can be deduced from her judgement on the novel's title: she thought 'The Struggle for Life' unsuitable, with its suggestion that doing the "right thing" was difficult. Her letter to Bentley concludes with a peremptory direction that the novel must be renamed 'Enduring to the End'. This title is representative of Elfrida's need to repress her emotions, perform her wifely duty, and subjugate her own needs to those of others. Jewsbury writes: "the author must show her sympathy with what is right in the treatment of the wife's conduct." In other words, the story should be moralistic rather than realistic.

These recommendations suggest that Jewsbury saw little difference between the role of fiction

and that of contemporary conduct manuals. The selflessness demanded of Elfrida by Jewsbury is straight out of the pages of Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Women of England*. In particular, Jewsbury is most emphatic that the conclusion to *Love's Conflict* should be moral, declaring: "Let the stern moral of the story remain – that the consequences of our actions remain and must be endured to the end."

Jewsbury's motives are worth considering here: in her earlier career as a novelist, she had criticised what she called "Mrs Ellis" women, that is self-sacrificing women, and sought to subvert the type in her second novel, *The Half Sisters*. But in her role as publisher's reader, she instigates a backlash against both her own work and against changing literary tastes. Defending this apparent volte face, she expressed the belief that women were more pure and more self-controlled than men and therefore ought to set a better example. The rhetoric is also disturbingly similar to that employed by politicians who sought to enshrine the sexual double standard in law during parliamentary debates on the legal position of women. Jewsbury has a political, as well as a literary, agenda, acting as a mouthpiece for moral conservatism.

Marryat, clearly eager to be published, includes Jewsbury's "stern moral" almost verbatim in her concluding paragraph. She did, however, refuse to accept the revised title. There is evidence throughout the novel that Marryat either agreed with Jewsbury, or, more likely, thought it expedient to accede to her requests. In the scene where Elfrida tells George that they must not see each other again, there are signs of extensive revision. In contrast with the emotional fluency elsewhere in the novel, Elfrida appears mechanical. She makes appropriately pious statements, rather than indulging in what Jewsbury referred to as "romantic nonsense". Elfrida is stern, resolute and moralistic, which is incongruous with the meek ingénue of the earlier chapters.

One of the chapters rewritten at Jewsbury's instigation shows Elfrida telling her lover that she had been hit by her husband. She initially throws herself on George's protection and he insists on taking her away with him. There is a change of tone and pace at the end, where she suddenly stresses her wifely duty and refuses to leave her husband. It is an act of ventriloquism, with Jewsbury speaking through Elfrida. The other substantially revised chapter is a moving description of Elfrida's deformed baby. When asked by the doctor whether Elfrida had suffered any trauma, her husband remains silent, although he knows the blow she received from him might have been the cause. Instead, there are outpourings of contrition from Elfrida, who blames herself. Here Marryat is forced to suggest that adulterous thoughts, rather than marital violence, could cause deformity in a baby. A wife must bear the consequences of her husband's actions, in addition to her own.

Marryat's most significant concession concerned a murder which forms part of the sub-plot. In the original manuscript, George is shot dead; in the published version his wife Helene is the victim. Although George had visited prostitutes and coveted another man's wife, Jewsbury felt he should be

given the opportunity to redeem himself through hard work. He experiences a sudden Damascene conversion in his armchair and resolves henceforth to be a decent chap. The clunkiness of this episode almost suggests that Marryat wanted to draw attention to the revision, and George actually speaks the exact words Jewsbury provides for him. Marryat dutifully packs him off to India to win a Victoria Cross, while his wife is fatally punished for having had sex outside marriage (and also for the unforgivable sin of being common). For the transgressive female there is no option but to become a fallen woman; literally, in this case: in her final scene Helene is stretched out on the grass as if in supplication. Jewsbury comments sadistically that Helene should be made to feel frightened before she is killed. The revisions to this episode emphasise that women should be punished disproportionately for what Jewsbury calls “unlawful love”, and Helene's story is made salutary.

Jewsbury insisted that Marryat should not reunite her lovers in the final chapter. She felt that Elfrida should devote herself to her lawful husband and not be distracted. Jewsbury decreed: “They may meet, the reader will hope, but not in the book.” This proved to be prophetic, as I shall discuss later.

After making these changes, Marryat resubmitted her manuscript. The Reader was still not happy. Although Jewsbury admitted that the author had certainly made improvements, she was “much disappointed”, commenting that it was “weak where it ought to be strong”. She was particularly offended by what she called the “indelicate prominence given to the heroine's confinement of her first & only Baby.” Jewsbury added that “no author, unless a medical man writing for *The Lancet*, ought to enter into so much detail as the lady does.” She presumably thought that childbirth should be portrayed as joyful; the childless Jewsbury resenting Marryat's suggestion that it might smart a bit.

Jewsbury concludes unequivocally, telling Mr Bentley: “[y]ou must refuse this absolutely.” The tone of the letter suggests that Jewsbury is as much annoyed with Marryat's failure to heed her advice, as with the novel's content. The publisher chose to ignore his Reader's further comments; perhaps a novel from a daughter of the celebrated Captain Marryat was too good to resist; perhaps Bentley simply decided that sufficient concessions to propriety had been made. Jewsbury's concerns regarding the supposedly graphic nature of the childbirth scene were noted ironically by the author. The heroine of Marryat's next novel is astonished to find a baby in her arms after suffering a slight headache.

Much of the periodical press shared Jewsbury's disgust at *Love's Conflict*, although some reviewers did praise its realism. *The Spectator* was particularly displeased with Marryat's portrayal of marital violence, believing such details should be confined to the Divorce Court. They detected an “odour of garlic”, insidiously aligning the novel with the scandalous *Madame Bovary*. Like Jewsbury, the *Spectator* thought Elfrida should “suffer and be still”, rather than contemplate an escape from the bonds of matrimony.

The *Saturday Review* also feared the potentially deleterious effects on Marryat's female readers. The reviewer was appalled by Marryat's implication that women shouldn't rush gratefully into the arms of the first potential husband who came along, arguing:

The moral effect of that view on the female mind, if it were generally entertained, would be deplorable. It would lead to a dangerous state of indolence and suppressed activity.

Like Jewsbury, the reviewer believes Marryat has a duty to instruct her female reader. Although the identity of this particular reviewer is unknown, it is probably the anti-feminist commentator Eliza Lynn Linton. The *Saturday Review* had a deliberate policy of what it called “setting woman against woman” in order to create controversy. Prominent female authors would be called upon to review the work of their rivals, and encouraged to be vituperative. Both Jewsbury and Lynn Linton had earlier published novels accused of immorality and in turn criticised other women writers in the same terms.

*Love's Conflict* earned the publisher a small profit and he published two further novels by Marryat in the same year. He did not solicit the opinion of Jewsbury on either of them, for which she admonished him in a letter. She took her revenge when asked by the *Athenaeum* to review Marryat's third novel, appropriately entitled *Woman Against Woman*. She condemned it utterly, claiming: “all principle of duty and perception of the difference between right and wrong are wanting throughout the book.” She castigated it as “morbid” and “unhealthy”, concluding: “we cannot call it harmless”. In contrast, reviewing Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* a few months earlier, she judged that “[t]he moral of the tale is sound; people reap the things they sow.” Like *Love's Conflict* it features an abortive elopement. Lady Glencora's behaviour in this regard is deemed more appropriate. She is shown happily married to Plantagenet Palliser, who she initially found repellent. Jewsbury comments admiringly that “[n]othing can be more delicate than Mr Trollope's handling.” His melodramatic division of characters into good and bad also made the moral abundantly clear. Marryat, conversely, portrayed essentially good women who had immoral thoughts, thereby introducing moral complexity where there should be unambiguous didacticism.

Trollope reintroduces Lady Glencora in a later novel, *Phineas Finn*, to reiterate that she behaved correctly and to show her still happily married. His message to the female reader is that doing the right thing will be rewarded; Marryat's message is that doing the right thing can be a thoroughly miserable experience.

Marryat also resurrected Elfrida Treherne in her 1878 novel *A Harvest of Wild Oats*. Far from championing her earlier conformity, Elfrida is shown in a blissful marriage with her lover George. Her

violent and uncaring husband died not long after their reunion, having reverted to his old ways. Marryat effectively punishes him when Jewsbury's back is turned. Elfrida defends her earlier adulterous behaviour, stressing her husband's unpleasantness. She declares that her baby's death was due to extreme grief caused by an episode of marital violence. Clearly, Marryat wanted to stress that the baby's deformity was the somatic corollary of emotional trauma, rather than the moral judgement suggested by Jewsbury's revisions to *Love's Conflict*.

Jewsbury's grudge against Marryat endured, and she endeavoured to prevent her work from being published. She repeatedly implored Bentley not to publish Marryat's 1868 novel *Nelly Brooke*. She was appalled that the eponymous Nelly was as "merry as a cricket" after her abusive husband receives a fatal bite from a rabid dog. Although Jewsbury made the novel sound as unappealing as possible by including a dreary 3-page plot synopsis, Bentley published it without revision. In the novel, Marryat portrays a dutiful wife who obeys her rebarbative and sadistic husband. Even though Nelly is entirely subservient and clinically depressed, she is ostensibly an exemplar of feminine self-sacrifice, and her behaviour was praised by the critics. Through this character Marryat is parodying the selflessness expected of literary heroines, and also carefully avoiding censorship.

Marryat's use of irony was just one of the techniques she employed in order to circumvent censorship. Many of her novels feature unrealistic female ciphers as the focus. In the background, however, are unconventional and often transgressive women. It was this sort of trickery that ensured Marryat was never banned from the circulating libraries, unlike Broughton and Ouida.

Having initially conformed to the dictates of Geraldine Jewsbury, Marryat showed scant regard for the Grundyism of the critics throughout the remainder of her career. Many critics lamented her recidivism, expressing surprise that she had failed to heed their advice. To annoy them further, Marryat often used the authorial voice to engage with them directly. Although this is not an uncommon device in Victorian literature, Marryat was frequently using it to annoy the critics, rather than to guide her reader. This was denounced as "an absurd egotism" and a "gross sin against the rules of art." I instead argue that she was boldly resisting the control they were attempting to exert.

The outraged response of the critics suggests that they were presented with something challenging in Marryat's work. Her bold, although bowdlerised, portrayal of female sexuality in *Love's Conflict* was, I argue, a landmark in mid-Victorian writing. Jeanne Fahnestock refers to it as an "isolated forerunner in the history of the novel's change," and praises its "outspoken originality". Andrew Maunder cites the novel as a "polemic literary text which engages ... with the ongoing discourses of degeneration and unlawful sexuality." Whereas other authors were responsive to criticism, quietly becoming less sensational, Marryat retained her power to shock. Later novels dealt with elective single motherhood, lesbian desire, and graphic marital violence.

Geraldine Jewsbury was eventually sidelined into reviewing children's fiction. She had become an anachronism, and her grip on literary tastes was relaxed. She had become more conservative, whereas the reading public's tastes were more permissive. By the 1870s Bentley was employing five other women novelists as readers – he was obviously reluctant to rely so heavily on the opinions of just one critic. Jewsbury wrote to him several times to request more work, but was rebuffed. Marryat had already moved to rival publisher Tinsley, who was famously motivated more by profit than by morals.

We can only speculate as to the critical reception had Marryat not substantially revised *Love's Conflict* in response to Jewsbury's comments. The absence of the initial manuscript means the novel's original potency has been lost. However, I would reject Showalter's accusation of conventionality and Brantlinger's charge of conformity. There were many attempts to regulate Marryat's writing, particularly with regard to her female heroines. Consequently she had to adopt a number of techniques in order to get her work published. Her novels became a space in which she engaged with critics and defied them, thereby pushing literary boundaries. By considering such modes of editorial control and resistance, we can challenge our preconceptions of mid-Victorian women's writing.

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