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# *Erasing Sexuality from the Blackboard*

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## **Sex Matters**

Shortly before her suicide and in moments of existential despair Sylvia Plath was wondering whether it would be possible or worthwhile for her to live her life 'chastely as a schoolteacher'.<sup>1</sup> The life of a woman teacher was for her synonymous with the renunciation of desires and sexual life. In *That's Funny, You Don't Look Like a Teacher*, Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell trace contemporary identities of schoolteachers in popular culture.<sup>2</sup> The female images in the texts of popular culture are often portrayed as puzzling and highly contradictory, particularly in connection to their sexuality. Sometimes, they may appear sexless, or trapped. More often, however, they are depicted as sexually inviting, perverse and even dangerous, like Blanche, Tennessee Williams' sex-maniac heroine. How far—or how close—do these images of female teachers seem to be from the perceptions of the Victorians? One thing is for certain. No matter how much things have changed, female teachers continue to create contradictory images and perceptions.

People hold different ideas of the persona of the woman teacher. But so do women teachers of themselves. In this article I am looking at certain images and perceptions that weave around women teachers' ambiguous sexualities at the turn of the nineteenth century. More specifically, I read autobiographical writings of women teachers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and particularly from 1860 to 1914, a period that has signalled major changes in the education of women.<sup>3</sup> Feminist scholars have produced influential socio-historical analyses relating to these changes.<sup>4</sup> Abandoning, however, the 'gaze of the other', I am focusing on the teacher's gaze upon herself. Therefore what did women teachers, those 'other Victorians', think about sexuality? Did they recognise themselves as desiring subjects? What did love, sex, marriage mean to them? Did they imagine themselves in loving and/or sexual relationships? Where and how did they position themselves in the newly emerging discourses of sexuality? These are some of the questions I want to address in this article. In agreement with Lee Quinby that 'sex matters',<sup>5</sup> I want to reflect on matters of sex in the constitution of the female self in education.

The Victorian era, which is the historical context of my enquiries, was saturated by a multiplicity of discourses, many times juxtaposing or contradicting each other. It was amidst this war of discourses that the female self sought to forge a place for herself, to negotiate subject positions, make life investments, create new patterns of existence. These attempts were neither linear nor fast moving. There were frequent interruptions, backward movements, rapid shifts and unexpected backlashes. These cultural shifts did not happen in a spatial or temporal vacuum. They were framed by wider changes in the power structures of the social milieu. In the context of social, political economical, and ideological upheavals that marked the end of the nineteenth century, different individuals were affected by different discourses and in different ways.<sup>6</sup> Social class and gender were critical categories for such differentiations. In this article I am looking at the ways women teachers formed their own versions of sexuality in the public spheres of life that they had begun to enter. My point is that the discursive transformations and the specific technologies of power that constructed the sexual models of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have left their inscriptions on the female bodies of today and have influenced contemporary perceptions about sexuality and subjectivity and the dangerous liaisons between the two in current post-modern identities. Thus, the historical and cultural voyage that began in the late nineteenth century and has led women to the threshold of a new millennium still encumbers them with a baggage of dilemmas. They continue to juggle with conjugal variations of their sexuality and, as Alison Mackinnon has commented, they are unable to succeed in loving, having desires and being free.<sup>7</sup> In exploring women teachers' sexualities, I am relying upon the tactics and methodology of the

Foucauldian genealogy, and from among the various theoretical and interpretative possibilities available for discussion of sexualities I shall also draw on Foucault.<sup>8</sup>

### **Women Teachers, the 'Other Victorians'**

'For a long time, ...we supported a Victorian regime, and we continue to be dominated by it even today. Thus the image of the imperial prude is emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality.'<sup>9</sup> Foucault is painting the picture of the imperial prude that lives until our own days, in the opening sentence of his *History of Sexuality*. This *Victorian prudery* has created a whole web of discourses about sexuality that have been read, interpreted and contested from quite contradictory perspectives. A critical debate has woven around the question of whether this condition of sexual puritanism ever existed and of what really happened with the so-called 'sexual revolution' of the twentieth century that is supposed to have waved away Puritanism and sexual hypocrisy. Within the discursive area of this debate, Sheila Jeffreys has argued that traditional historians have distorted the struggles of the first wave of feminism, against the oppression of male sexuality, having presented them as puritan and retrogressive activities that obstructed the supposed progress to sexual liberation.<sup>10</sup> Although the Victorian feminists were considered to open up new paths in women's lives, they were characterised as prudish, frigid and passionless in relation to their positions about sexuality. Seen from a Foucauldian perspective, women's 'frigidity' and 'passionlessness', framed by the discursive context of the imperial prude, were characteristics that were invented, named and categorised by the medical experts, the sexologists of the turn of the last century, in what Foucault has identified as the medicalisation of sexuality.<sup>11</sup>

Influential socio-historical analyses of the late Victorian era have pointed to the discourses of medical experts in the context of a general social concern, against the decline of the empire and the widespread concerns about the 'efficiency' of the nation.<sup>12</sup> Women, especially in their roles as mothers, were the targets of such concerns, in the sense that they were considered responsible for the undermining of the primary institution of social life, the family.<sup>13</sup> Although these reactionary discourses had been strenuously fought against by feminists, women's appearance in the public spheres of life, education and/or work had been established as 'a problem'.<sup>14</sup> Within such procedures of normalisation, unmarried women teachers were by definition excluded from the milieu of what 'normal' sexuality was thought to encompass. The image of the unmarried woman teacher was framed by the evidence as hysterical, emotionless and sexually frustrated.<sup>15</sup>

But let us reconsider 'the monotonous nights of the Victorian bourgeoisie', when 'sexuality was carefully confined', and 'moved into the home' where 'the conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction' and 'on the subject of sex, silence became the rule'.<sup>16</sup> But 'was the nineteenth-century family really a monogamic and conjugal cell?' asks Foucault.<sup>17</sup> Then what about those voices coming from the brothel? They were there to remind that the 'silenced' and 'unspoken' had been transferred somewhere else, into another 'order of things'. The silent bedroom and the noisy brothel were interwoven in a 'network of pleasures and powers linked together at multiple points and according to transformable relationships'.<sup>18</sup> However, it was against the hypocrisy of the brothel that the silence surrounding sex broke and women spoke, either in the strand of silent strikers, or as followers of 'free love'.<sup>19</sup> One focus for women's speaking and thinking was the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s that allowed compulsory examination of women suspected of working as prostitutes in garrison towns and ports. The campaign for the abolition of the Contagious Diseases Acts concentrated critical feminist standpoints evolving around the economical and sexual exploitation of women:<sup>20</sup>

The building up of a false social system on the basis of class (for be it remembered, it is practically only poor women whom this wicked system assails) and sex injustice is the endeavour, here openly avowed, of the men who deny to women the right to help govern themselves.<sup>21</sup>

This is how Wolstenholme Elmy accused the supporters of the Contagious Diseases Acts in a campaign for women's rights, that had begun in 1861 when she had formed an association of schoolmistresses and a society for furthering the higher education of women. Thus by focusing on the thought of a feminist opposing the Contagious Diseases legislation, who was at the same time

a foremost campaigner for women's rights in education, in a way the story has come full circle back to the focal point of this article: women in education as speaking subjects of 'a sexuality of their own'. Elmy was not the only feminist writer who began her struggle from the Movement for the Higher Education of Women. In her autobiography, Cicely Hamilton, an active feminist and author of *Marriage as a Trade*, recounts how she started her career as a teacher, although she left it very soon, because she found it very difficult to compromise with the conservative lifestyle of a school teacher and became an actress and an author.<sup>22</sup> *Marriage as a Trade*, however, became an influential book in the literature of the first wave of feminism and articulated what Hamilton thought to be the political necessity of spinsters to the women's revolution. Sex and marriage are inextricably linked in Hamilton's theorisation, in the sense that marriage has provided women the means and locus to exchange their bodies for subsistence. Hamilton's perceptions of marriage reflect a wider discomfort among educated women towards what appeared to be the inevitable fate of their lives as women: getting married and bearing children. For women, the glimpse of freedom through education and work faded away in the subservience of marriage and motherhood.<sup>23</sup>

### The Trade of Marriage

As it turned out, the radical stances promoted by Hamilton and other feminists became deeply influential for the life decisions and choices of women teachers, as their personal narratives often reveal. We therefore read in Mary Smith's autobiography that, at the age of 30, she rejected a proposal from a wealthy businessman as she thought it to be humiliating: 'It was a *pure business transaction* that was proposed. It was known I was poor ...and a good business was of itself thought a fair prize for an intellectual woman who was struggling with poverty. What an alliance! What presumption!' (my emphasis).<sup>24</sup> The trade of marriage does not seem to interest Mary Smith. She came from Oxfordshire but, at the age of 18, she left her father's home and went to the north of the country, following the Osborns, a family with whom she developed a strange love/hate relationship. It was in the north that she became a self-taught teacher, sometimes working on her own and other times with the Osborns or as a governess. She finally established her own school in Carlisle where she lived on the brink of poverty till the end of her life. She was also involved in journalism and wrote poetry. Her autobiography documents the harshness of life and work of rural school teachers, but in a remarkable way it depicts her passion for an intellectual life, beyond conformist patterns of behaviour and rigid class constraints. Mary Smith never married. The prospect of marriage was offering her an opportunity to escape from poverty, but she rejected it outright as she considered it despicable to get married for 'earthly advantages'.<sup>25</sup> She felt that her poverty was, in a way, protecting her from meaningless relationships as well as the danger of following her fate as a woman: getting married and having children: 'Had I been a Duke's daughter, I could not have been more careful of keeping clear of any matrimonial liaison than I was. I often thought that my plainness and poverty were my best safe-guard.'<sup>26</sup>

Plainness and poverty are two 'safe-guard' factors working against marriage for a working-class woman teacher. I want to look more closely, first, at the theme of poverty, but I keep plainness for discussion later.

In women teachers' view, poverty and marriage were interrelated in a paradoxical relationship. However, there were differences in the ways that women teachers perceived the relation between marriage and poverty and these differences were deployed along class distinctions. For a working-class teacher like Mary Smith, poverty prevented her from being considered 'marriageable', since she was too poor to get married in dignity. Paradoxically as it might seem, poverty left her space for professional and personal development. However, things were perceived differently by Helen Corke, a London elementary teacher from a lower middle-class background. What characterised the life aspirations of women teachers of the lower urban strata was to 'go up into the next class'<sup>27</sup> and they saw this social climbing happening through their work, through retaining their economic independence. Marriage, in the view of these women teachers, perpetuated poverty and destroyed any hope or expectation for change: 'Girls expect to be married, says my mother. Do they? Who could choose conditions of married life such as hers? ... Poverty is a prison, but its doors can open unless marriage locks them.'<sup>28</sup> For Corke this applied not only to women, but to men as well. She despised poverty and referred to her violin teacher and future romantic lover whose 'art and thought, are both subordinate to the business of earning a living'.<sup>29</sup> Many of Corke's

contemporaries, and especially women, faced the same dilemma: marriage and children on the one hand and personal extension and economic independence on the other. For Mary Smith, what appeared as unbearable was the thought of turning herself into a commodity in what she considered to be a crude trade of human relationships. Under this light, poverty, for her, was a kind of sanctuary. Corke could not bear the compulsory intimacy of lives and the subjection of her thoughts to 'the business of earning a living', that marriage in poverty could bring. Marriage for her is a threat to success, to her being able to establish the sort of unconventional, free relationships she dreamed of: 'I know that if David<sup>30</sup> and I were locked within the inescapable intimacy that characterises the married state of the poor, we should kill in each other the very essential of creative living—we should become like dry sticks compelled by friction to smoulder until reduced to ash.'<sup>31</sup>

However, there were certain points of convergence in the perceptions of both women. In rejecting marriage, they were defending their right to live in dignity and to be themselves: 'I thought then, as I have taught ever since, that a woman can be a lady without money ...'.<sup>32</sup> Marriage, which for the ethics of the era represented for women one of the few, nearly the only, verbal means to talk about their sexuality, was rejected, on grounds of human dignity, as a collective revolt against the commercialisation of women's bodies and souls, as a condition of bodily and spiritual slavery: '... women, in reality, being bought and sold in the marriage market as in any other'.<sup>33</sup>

The unbearable heaviness of intimacy was, however, a concern for women teachers of the middle classes and in their case was not connected to poverty. It emerged as an unavoidable consequence of marriage as a human relationship. In their autobiographical writings, there appears the problem of having to sacrifice one's need for retreat and solitary contemplation. It was the need for privacy that women teachers have long felt for, that they see annihilated by marriage and the burdens of family life. As Anne Jemima Clough has put it:

Surely married life too often becomes dull and hard. People enter into close intercourse too suddenly. We all know well enough that we are too often disgusted with ourselves and in this light must appear to others; therefore it is a great relief sometimes to hide ourselves, so that we may wash off the stains and again look bright, that we may think over our weaknesses, and try to strengthen ourselves.<sup>34</sup>

Anne Jemima Clough was a daughter of the middle classes. Since her youth, however, she had to work as a teacher to compensate for the loss of the family fortune after her father's death. As a secretary of the North of England Council, she put forward the argument that women needed a different type of examination as a result of their separate and different education. In 1871 she took charge of what was to become Newnham College in Cambridge and it was from that position she developed her own strategies with regard to the Higher Education of Women. Clough's disgust about intimacies, however, cut across class lines. Coming from the lower social strata, Corke defended her right to be independent minded: 'Perhaps I claim a single-mindedness that marriage would preclude. I have glimpsed the possibility of spiritual adventure... there are thoughts to capture. Thoughts which should be exchanged with those of H.B.M.'<sup>35</sup>

Mary Smith had also referred to her 'plainness' as a stumbling block to a respectable marriage. In the discourses of the nineteenth century the beauty of the female body can become a channel leading to marriage and it is so important that it can even compensate for the lack of some fortune. As Charlotte Bronte had put it, 'it is an imbecility, which I reject with contempt, for women, who have neither fortune nor beauty, to make marriage the principal object of their wishes and hopes'.<sup>36</sup>

Plainness, however, did not relate only to the beauty of the body. It also restricted feelings and emotions and dictated certain behavioural styles and attitudes that plain and poor women had to keep, if they did not want to make fools of themselves and appear as attempting to trap a husband. As Bronte wrote to a friend, in 1845: 'if women wish to escape the stigma of husband-seeking, they must *act and look like marble or clay*—cold, expressionless, bloodless' (my emphasis).<sup>37</sup> What we have here is an open suggestion for women to discipline their bodies, to 'act and look like marble', so as to hide and even erase any trace of passionate feelings or sexual desire, making their bodies plain, unattractive, lifeless, asexual, 'clay-cold'. Plainness imposed restrictions on the

expression of female sexuality. As Foucault had commented, 'in the nineteenth century sexuality was sought out in the smallest details of individual existences; it was tracked down in behaviour ...it became the stamp of individuality'.<sup>38</sup>

Although the threat of poverty would not apply to the women teachers of the middle classes, marriage was also regarded as a trade for them, but for different reasons. What women of the middle classes 'bought' in marriage was a respectable social status, a safety from the degradation and social failure of spinsterhood. Radical minds would therefore have their own reasons to deny conventional marriage. This is how Clara Collet responded to a persistent marriage proposal: '20-10-1884: E.W. asked me to marry him; I had to refuse him twice and practically to do it a third time'.<sup>39</sup> Collet was a student of the North London Collegiate School. At the age of 17 she left London to become an Assistant School mistress in a girls' high school in Leicester. While teaching there, she studied both for an external London BA and a teaching qualification. She later left teaching to study for an MA in Moral and Political Philosophy at University College London, and became a social researcher. Collet's reasons for rejecting marriage were that, since love was lacking, she could not see any point in getting married simply in order to be looked after by a man. She was also afraid of getting bored and of losing her independence and her right to change her mind and/or partner. The option to marry for security was rejected by many well-educated women, but this was obviously a brave decision and they had to fight to stick to it: 'It is much better to live an old maid and get a little honey from the short real friendships I can have with men for whom I care myself than to be bound for life to a man just because he thinks he cares for me.'<sup>40</sup> Collet seemed able to discern subtle emotional variations between having a strong attraction, liking and/or loving somebody: 'I danced with S.G.; I liked him better that night than I had ever done before ...I like him very much ...and prefer him to A.H. though I have quite a sisterly regard for him too.'<sup>41</sup> The theme of romantic love seems to be extremely important, almost the only reason women teachers would find strong enough to make them marry: 'I have thought I must say, a good deal of love and marriage ...I feel indeed that I could love most intensely, most fervently and never will I marry unless I do',<sup>42</sup> wrote Clough as a young girl in her diary, long before she became the first principal of Newnham College. Love and marriage were themes that had concerned and troubled her: 'My heart felt quite soft. That it would be pleasant to be in love and marrying and all that sort of thing, came into my head and unsteadied me.'<sup>43</sup> Such thoughts and possibilities were obviously a threat to the sense of self as an intellect, that some women had anticipated for themselves. Romantic as it was—and still is—the theme of love is not only a concern of the women of the middle classes. Love seemed to cut through social classes and in a spirit of utopian egalitarianism it was sometimes thought to surpass or even dissolve them. As Mary Smith was writing: '...the thought of having been loved, always gives a woman new strength ...I was now spoken to as an equal, and in some degree allowed to take the liberties of one.'<sup>44</sup>

However strong the discourse of love might have been, it was also subject to interrogation. Women teachers have commented on the strange phenomenon of 'the little intuitive "spring-forward" element that makes a girl so rash as to give herself away to a half-known, a quarter-known man'.<sup>45</sup> 'Giving themselves to an unknown person', however, would often cause love disappointment, often leading them to reject marriage for good. Miss Beale was 50 years old when she rejected the last of several proposals of marriage she had received. According to her biographer, Elizabeth Raikes, 'Dorothea Beale knew what it was to be admired, loved ...'.<sup>46</sup> However, in her youth she had an unhappy engagement which was ended by her, most probably because she lost confidence in her fiancé. She is reported as saying at times that she regarded it as one of the greatest disappointments in life to be let down by someone you thought you loved and respected: 'no sorrow could be greater than the discovery that someone we loved was unworthy'.<sup>47</sup> In terms of personal expansion, however, even such disappointments would strengthen the sense of self of women teachers and teach them to use any sense of personal loss in a creative way. Marriage as the culmination of a romantic love-relationship was the ultimate ideal image of any (hetero)sexual relationship for those Victorian women, and they were prepared to take no less than what they thought should be a spiritual and loving relationship, 'the union first of soul with soul, each dying to self and rising to a nobler life ...'.<sup>48</sup> Here, marriage seems to be rendered in intellectual terms, almost an extension of intellectual terms. As Jeffreys has argued, some feminists of the late Victorian period promoted the notion of psychic love and saw it as a replacement of sexual intercourse in their relationships with men.<sup>49</sup> In the minds of the first-wave

feminists, sexual intercourse was regarded as a threat to the female body, carrying dangerous diseases or causing unwanted pregnancies, as well as undermining their independence and self-respect, limiting their possibilities and exposing them to abuse. Psychic love on the other hand was invested with spiritual and almost mystical images. Being framed by tenderness and affection, it offered women spiritual satisfaction by elevating them beyond 'fleshly concerns' and providing them with dignity and self-respect in their relationships with men. The notion of psychic love was therefore related to the need for intellectual communication which was often transcribed in women teachers' autobiographical writings. In her autobiography, Mary Smith made frequent references to the ideal type of heterosexual relationship, which for her was framed both by deep, real love and/or intellectual communication. This was why she rejected several proposals: '...I could see all my intellectual castles falling with a crash, to rise no more ... No, it's impossible! He's not intellectual. What is marriage without happiness! The bare idea of it is dreadful to contemplate.'<sup>50</sup>

In their struggle to make sense of their sex, acknowledge their desires and make life choices, women teachers sought to imagine themselves as equal partners in (hetero)sexual relationships framed by the institution of marriage. Although they did not interrogate the very essence and necessity of marriage as a social institution, they did, however, react to the gendered structure of power relations within marriage and sought to re-create their sexual role. Marriage was criticised on many levels: as a crude commercialisation of women's bodies, as a pretext to a double standard of sexual morality, as an institution constraining intellectual independence and freedom; even the idealised image of marriage in a romantic love context was problematised as a human relationship inevitably leading to emotional stagnancy and boredom.

As Lucy Bland has pointed out, feminists campaigning around marriage in this period pointed to the injustices of the institution while constructing a new ideal based upon the liberal principles of freedom, liberty and bodily autonomy.<sup>51</sup> In this context, women teachers did not hold totally negative positions towards marriage. Their idealised image of marriage and (hetero)sexual relationships was framed by love and intellectual communication and they seemed to be ready to accept their personal commitment to such cherished relationships. However, they were also determined to accept no less than at least one of these conditions, love and/or spiritual unity, and in many cases they strove against rigid social conventions in their attempt to retain their right to human dignity and/or happiness. Escaping from the discourses of sexual subjection through marriage, these Victorian women teachers opened themselves to other discourses, those of love, care, and personal sacrifice to sometimes unreal, idealised, spiritual relationships, raising walls between bodily and spiritual needs, and thus perpetuating the constraining mind/body dichotomy. Circulating among the polyvalent discourses of marriage, love and sexuality, what those women teachers attempted to do was to negate their fate and try to imagine a different sexuality. This imagination of the new or improbable was, I suggest, the radical point of their revolt.

Was it only through marriage, however, that women teachers spoke of their sexuality? The genealogy of their autobiographical writings has traced other trails, which I now want to follow.

## Passions<sup>52</sup>

### *The Stranger*

*His stay was a brief and a swift one,  
And he scarcely said a word;  
But he left me a wandering spirit,*

.....  
*My aching heart within.*

.....  
*Yet he comes not; oh! he comes not!  
And my heart I chide and scold,*

.....  
*And I try to be gay and cheerful,  
And to keep a smile in my eye;  
But my heart within is tearful,  
And I know the reason why.*

.....

*The Stranger* is a poem written by Mary Smith, depicting her feelings for an unfulfilled love, which is also recounted in the prose of her autobiography.<sup>53</sup> What struck me in reading the textual lives of women teachers is the fact that I encountered more than one unhappy, desperate and mostly unspoken platonic love-relationship, often with married men, or men who rejected them to marry some other woman, as was the case with Collet, almost all of them having a particularly intellectual influence on the lives of those women teachers. For Maynard it was her cousin Lewis Campbell that had signalled the alarm of 'electric spark'. He was the one who had encouraged her to enter Girton and later on to work as a teacher at Saint Andrews school. He and his wife Fanny were omnipresent in Maynard's life, often causing her contradictory love/hate feelings. In the beginning she was struggling against her feelings and college life seemed to help her to surpass her love for him: 'Any responsive affection I had felt for him was swamped and overborne and carried away by the food of interests brought in by College life.'<sup>54</sup> However, she still felt uncomfortable and embarrassed when she had to meet them during the college holidays: 'On 23rd July among the stream of visitors came two who I had a little bit dreaded, Lewis and Fanny Campbell ... I knew of course that he would want me to talk about Hitchin and felt shy.'<sup>55</sup> This strange relationship with her cousin hovered over her life for a long time, although after the initiation of Westfield College in 1892 she saw practically no more of him.

Corke fell in love with her violin teacher, H.B. Macartney, with whom she had a merely intellectual relationship in the beginning: 'Presently H.B.M is writing me brief letters—letters that are simple postscripts to our too short talks after my lessons ... we exchange books and I am introduced to Emerson and Thoreau.'<sup>56</sup> This relationship 'fitted into the pattern' of her life and created feelings of contentment and stability, illusionary, however, since 'before this year 1905 is over, H.B.M.'s feelings for me begin to move urgently to the physical plane ... we are entering another phase of intimacy'.<sup>57</sup> Despite her struggle against this situation, 'mind must control bodily instincts, or human beings sink to animal level'<sup>58</sup> and her determination to resist getting more closely involved, 'It is not for me to be either wife or mistress—and for H.B.M. to become my lover would be a denial and repudiation of H.B.M. as I have imagined him', they did spend five days together in the Isle of Wight where, however, Corke refused to come to sexual intercourse with him. At the end of this joint holiday and on his return to London, H.B.M. 'dies by his own hand'.<sup>59</sup> In her attempt to fashion her own lifestyle, Corke obviously had great difficulties in acknowledging her desires and deciding upon her relationships with men. Her will to go beyond conventions was seriously hampered by strict moral codes, perhaps fears of being socially rejected or even degraded, deeply rooted sexual attitudes, and/or idealised perceptions of (hetero)sexual relationships. As Copelman has commented, her story should be read in the light of the tensions experienced by a young woman attempting to mould her sexuality, in the urban context of *Fin de siècle* London, framed by the conditions of her life, which included working as an elementary teacher and living with her parents.<sup>61</sup>

For Mary Smith it was her 'fatal' relationship with Mr Osborn and his family. She left her father's home in southern England to follow them through very difficult conditions in the north of England. She looked after their children, she taught at their school for pennies, she lent them her savings, she left a comfortable governess position to help them run a new school, she was sent away in a most cruel way, 'so with a very low purse and a sad heart—leaving the furniture of my bedroom behind me, not asking for my salary due, nor the balance borrowed from me in Westmoreland—I left Carlisle...'<sup>62</sup> to go back and serve them again, when asked to do so: 'Mr. Osborn's sending me a letter full of an outward show of kindness, and then receiving me so coldly and showing me so much harshness.'<sup>63</sup> According to the editor of her autobiography, 'The story which she tells of her connection with the Osborn family, is one of almost incredible nature ...',<sup>64</sup> commenting that 'he run ceasing craving for intellectual intercourse and her intense love for the higher class of literature, no doubt, had something to do with it',<sup>65</sup> and especially with Mr Osborn, I would add, with whom she reported having all the intellectual discussions.

What the above fragmented autobiographical writings tell is a different story about women teachers' 'asexuality'. Strangely enough, these stories follow literary paradigms of influential intellectual relationships interwoven with unspoken passions, in which Brontë's spiritual and



emotional attachment to her teacher, Monsieur Heger in Brussels, seems to be a hallmark. As Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall have pointed out, women novelists in the early nineteenth century wrote about sexuality in spite of the rigid social conventions and their limited knowledge and experience in 'matters of sex'.<sup>66</sup> They particularly refer to the theme of female passion in Brontë's *Villette*,<sup>67</sup> where Lucy oscillates between Reason and Feeling, grappling with 'what was wild and intense, dangerous, sudden and fuming'.<sup>68</sup> However marginalised they might have been, some women teachers' experiences of passionate relationships, both real and fictional, can serve as anti-paradigms of the discourses of frigidity and passionlessness, constructed by the sexologists in the context of medicalisation of sexuality and the hysterisation of the female body, as described and analysed by Foucault.<sup>69</sup>

### **Silenced Bodies?**

Women teachers often present themselves as having naive attitudes in relation to love, eros, their sexuality, which they rarely address directly. As Bland has commented, 'feminists had for a long time perceived that one of the difficulties in talking about sex, indeed in understanding sex, was the lack of an adequate language'.<sup>70</sup> In acknowledging these difficulties, women teachers often tried to explain their ignorance and give some sound reasons for their embarrassment and lack of confidence in matters 'related to love'. Lack of education, or any type of formal or informal information, was particularly pointed out. Thus Maynard interrogated the silence her strict Evangelical family kept, upon sexual life: '...but surely Love and Marriage were great things, must they be for ever hidden away and never touched on by speech or writing?'<sup>71</sup> Maynard recounted that while at home, living with her family, she was not allowed to read anything other than strictly religious books, with the exception of poetry: 'As for me, the quite ordinary tutelage in the approaches of love that is given by novels was absent and I was left in a whirl of ignorance and even resentment. I did not understand my own instincts.'<sup>72</sup> Younger than Maynard, from a lower social stratum and without the strict Evangelical principles of the former, Corke still deplored her lack of knowledge about sex. Although she did not write openly about sex, she talked of 'passion', extending thus the concepts of 'Love and Marriage' to 'bodily functions': 'Physical passion, ... had never been starkly presented to me...My early religious training had divided soul and body ...The literary patterns of the period mostly ... tended to exhibit physical passion as a gross manifestation ... Love was either divine or human.'<sup>73</sup>

Corke simply and clearly described the body/mind split, a discursive separation that constitutes the bedrock of her 'sex education'. While, however, women teachers lacked the vocabularies and the concepts to make sense of their own sexuality, they sometimes were quite efficient in pointing to the misery of heterosexual relationships and openly, albeit not consciously, let aspects of homoerotic love appear in their writings.<sup>74</sup> In 1879, this was how the strict Evangelical Maynard lets her body speak, while she compares her feelings for a man she has just rejected with those she had for Louisa Lumsden, her old fellow student at Girton, who was at the time Headmistress at Saint Leonard's, the school in which Maynard worked for three years, at the beginning of her career in education:

Louisa caught me one day by the shoulders and said half in play, but shaking her head safely, 'I wish I were that poor man for an hour! I believe I could win you yet'. Win me? Of course she could and long before the hour had run out too!... Oh dear, let him speak with the musical voice she does, let him look at me with her eyes, let his manner be compact of noble confidence and the most endearing, reverent attention as hers at times can be and every possible disadvantage is outweighed and I am his forever. Yet who am I that should let not the feeling, but nearly the expression of it, thus turn the scale? I can only suppose that the want of the electric spark on my side is the symptom of some real hindrance to unity, however fine and firm the spiritual foundations of such unity may be.<sup>75</sup>

In Maynard's view, 'the want of the electric spark' could even overcome 'the fine and firm spiritual foundations of a unity'. Maynard's reference to the need to feel the electric spark in her body is a rare verbal reference to bodily needs and feelings and it was persistent in her writings about love and eros:

I really wished I could love him, but that would have been a mockery. My hands I remember were lying on my knees and when he spoke of the honour and deference and faithful affection that awaited me, if only I could trust myself to his keeping, he very gently laid one of his hands over mine. I drew mine hastily away and put them both behind my back.<sup>76</sup>

Hands moving, even if they did so to touch or avoid contact, painted rare pictures of body language in women teachers' autobiographical writings. Bodies were usually absent from the classrooms as well as from women's lives, erased from the blackboard. It was only through relevant, but not directly 'bodily', occasions that women teachers referred to their bodies. This happened, for example, when they described dances, some rare occasions they had to get dressed, make themselves attractive and involve themselves in 'bodily intercourse' with men through dancing.<sup>77</sup> Angela McRobbie has commented that dance retains a special place in the female memory,<sup>77</sup> and this can sometimes mean remembering precisely minute details of dress and appearance: 'Dr. Clarke, looking exceedingly handsome in evening dress, came to ask me ...Dr. Cartmell...a most impressive looking man, quite young for his snow-white hair, danced with Miss Lumsden, who was in her thick soft white silk ...'.<sup>78</sup> Maynard gave here detailed descriptions of embodied people, both men and women. Their dresses, their hairstyle, their movements, all were important in the erotic climate of the dance that was clearly depicted in this autobiographical extract. As McRobbie has noted, dance has always offered girls and women channels for bodily self-expression and has been a source of pleasure and sensuality, although it has constantly been taking on various cultural meanings, in relation to the social and historical context within which it is examined.<sup>79</sup> Thus, Maynard was absolutely enthralled by this new experience of dancing, an excitement that was transcribed in her diary. Dance as memory becomes a theme of contemplation: 'to me it was an absolute new pleasure ...I seemed to expand in a kind of glow of giving and receiving admiration. Life seemed fuller, happier, far less stern and exciting than usual and by no effort at all.'<sup>80</sup>

McRobbie has described dance as a set of images, imbricated with sexual desires, feelings and drives. She has suggested, however, that apart from the status of dance as a prime vehicle for sexual expression for women, there is a range of often contradictory strands within it. There are the social pressures which direct girls and women towards dance as a respectable form of (hetero)sexual invitation. But as McRobbie notes: 'this conformist role does not deny the way dance carries enormously pleasurable qualities for girls and women which frequently seem to suggest a displaced, shared and nebulous eroticism rather than a straightforwardly romantic, heavily heterosexual, "goal-oriented" drive'.<sup>81</sup> In McRobbie's view, dance has created for women a kind of utopian space, where they feel, or at least dream that they feel, away from forces of domination and control. In this view, Maynard's autobiographical narrative lay here inside and at the same time beyond dominant cultural norms surrounding dance. On the one hand there is the strand which directs women teachers towards dance as a conformist lady-like form of leisure linked with being pretty, graceful, an object of admiration. However, on the other hand, such social conventions which define and monitor women's bodily expressions are resisted by the sexual fantasies carried by dance. Continually conscious of how they should look, feel and behave, women find in dance an escape: 'Dance evokes fantasy because it sets in motion a dual relationship projecting both internally towards the self and externally towards the "other".'<sup>82</sup> In Maynard's narrative, the body was sharply in focus. It is through the body that dance is related to female sexuality and thus Maynard's descriptions of bodies, bodily gestures and bodily appearances, negated the image of the frigid, passionless, hysteric and asexual spinsters. Other autobiographical narratives of women teachers offered a series of perfect examples of passionate female sexuality. Collet often referred to the exciting times she had in Leicester, in relation to the dances she went to in the company of other men and women.<sup>83</sup> Louisa Lumsden recounted the joyful nights and the many dances of her life in Aberdeen.<sup>84</sup> 'The Furies Amuse Themselves' is the title of a whole chapter of her autobiography, which Molly Hughes, former pupil of Miss Buss, dedicated to their dances and outdoors entertainment, while she was a student at Homerton College, Cambridge.<sup>85</sup>

Women teachers' silence in bodily matters was occasionally broken, as the dance narratives have revealed. However, silence itself is of significant importance in the genealogical analysis and

can sometimes reveal more 'truths' than certain distorted voices. A system of silent moments makes its own contribution to women's attempts at rewriting the script of their lives.

### Sexuality as a Passage to the Self

A point that has been highlighted in the discussion of this article is that sexuality has created an arena of conflicting and often contradictory discourses that have influenced past and contemporary perceptions related to the persona of the woman teacher. One of the most powerful images has been that of the frigid, asexual woman teacher, which has continued to the present day. However, the autobiographical writings of the women teachers at the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth spoke differently. They revealed women who were deeply concerned with defining their sexuality but, in doing so, were seriously hindered by the discursive restraints of wifedom and motherhood, the only recognisable female sexual roles of their era. However, in their attempt to find other spaces and different vocabularies to express their sexuality some women teachers challenged those restraining sexual roles. Although they did not create fixed alternative sexual roles, they refused to submit to their sexual exploitation and by choosing to 'live it rough', they used the 'battle of sex' to work upon new and often improbable identities. Far from being the key to unlock the secret of their existence, sexuality became a passage to explore themselves and it is from this basis that the explorations of this article contribute to our understandings of the constitution of the female self.

### NOTES

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1. Cited in Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Papermac) London, 1994, p. 94.
2. Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Like a Teacher* (Falmer Press) London, 1995.
3. There were various reasons for these changes, particularly the evolution of a state system of mass elementary schooling, which resulted in women's participation in the teaching profession.
4. See Sara Delamont and Lora Duffin (eds), *The 19th Century Woman: Her Culture and Physical World* (Croom Helm) London, 1978; Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (Routledge and Kegan Paul) London, 1981; Dina Copelman, *London's Women Teachers: Gender, Class, and Feminism, 1870–1930* (Routledge) London, 1996; June Purvis, *A History of Women's Education in England* (Open University Press) Milton Keynes, 1991, p. 157.
5. Lee Quinby (ed.), 'Sex Matters' in *Genealogy and Literature* (University of Minnesota Press) Minneapolis, 1995.
6. See, amongst others, Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century* (Routledge) London, 1989; Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast, English Feminism and Sexual Morality, 1885–1914* (Penguin) Harmondsworth, 1995; Jill Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester University Press) Manchester, 1995; Alison Mackinnon, *Love and Freedom: Professional Women and the Reshaping of Personal Life* (Cambridge University Press) Cambridge, 1997.
7. Mackinnon, *Love and Freedom*.
8. Foucault's encounter with feminist theories has created tensions and contradictions. See, amongst others, Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Macmillan) Basingstoke, 1987; Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Basil Blackwell) New York, 1987; Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (eds), *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (North eastern University Press) Boston, 1988; Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (University of California Press) Oxford, 1990; Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism* (Polity Press) Cambridge, 1992; Linda Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (Routledge) London, 1990; Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance* (Polity Press) Cambridge, 1991 and *Nomadic Subjects* (Columbia University Press) New York, 1994; Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault* (Routledge) London, 1991; Elspeth Probyn, *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies* (Routledge) London, 1993; Caroline Ramazanoglou (ed.), *Up Against Foucault* (Routledge) London, 1993. However, I will agree with Braidotti's argument that the theories of Foucault and Deleuze in contemporary philosophy have been the least harmful to women. See Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance*, p.124. In this light, the Foucauldian genealogy is taken as a tool for analysis, 'trails to be followed' rather than a type of closed methodology.
9. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction*, vol. I (1976) (Penguin) Harmondsworth, 1990, p.3.
10. Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies, Feminism and Sexuality 1880–1930* (Pandora) London, 1985.

11. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, I*, p.26.
12. See Carol Dyhouse, 'Good Wives and Little Mothers: Social Anxieties and the Schoolgirl's Curriculum, 1890–1920', *Oxford Review of Education*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1977, pp. 21–35 and 'Towards a "Feminine Curriculum" for English Schoolgirls: the Demands of Ideology 1870–1963', *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, vol.1, 1978, pp.291–311;Mackinnon, *Love and Freedom*, pp. 150–152;Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, especially the chapter 'Women Defined', pp. 48–91.
13. Carol Dyhouse has pointed out, in 1904,thereportoftheFitzroyCommittee, investigating the 'physical deterioration' of the population, found women guilty of neglecting their households and being ignorant in matters of hygiene, nutrition and infant care. See Dyhouse, 'Towards a "Feminine Curriculum"', p.303.In the same year, the Royal Commissioners in New South Wales, Australia, produced a lengthy report as a result of one particular government inquiry into the Decline of the Birth-rate and the Mortality of Infants, in which women were depicted as selfish and immoral. See Mackinnon, *Love and Freedom*, p.23.
14. Carol Dyhouse refers, for example, to the angry responses of the Fabian Society Women's Group. See Dyhouse, 'Good Wives and Little Mothers',p.27. Lucy Bland, on the other hand, points to the fact that many feminists uncritically used the idea of woman 'as mother of the nation' and of 'the race' as a discourse supporting women's superiority. See Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 68–70.
15. See Jeffreys, *The Spinster*, pp. 112, 143, 144, 167; Mackinnon, *Love and Freedom*, pp. 95, 148, 149, 174–5; Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp.64–5, 180.
16. Foucault, *History of Sexuality, I*, p. 3.
17. Foucault, *History of Sexuality, I*, p. 3.
18. Foucault, *History of Sexuality, I*, p. 46.
19. Sheila Jeffreys has suggested that at that particular historical moment feminists were divided. On the one hand, there were the 'separatists', the celibate spinsters who made a positive choice not to submit themselves to what they saw as the humiliating slavery of married life, but on the other hand there were also the followers of 'free love', who strove to claim their right to have desires, express their passions and become subjects and not objects of sexual relationships. See Jeffreys, *The Spinster*. However, the 'frontiers' between the two strands were unstable and often blurring. Lucy Bland has criticised Jeffreys 'position and has underlined the fact that feminist ideas on sexuality at the turn of the century were often complex, contradictory and fluid and it is thus not possible to define the limits of the opposing camps. See Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, p. xix.
20. Compulsory examination was, according to the feminist campaigners, an infringement on women's civil rights, since practically any woman could be rendered suspect and forced to undergo examination. The campaign insisted on the humiliation of the female body under examination, and saw it as an 'instrumental rape, a continuation of the abuse of women's bodies by men' as cited in Maynard, 'Privilege and Patriarchy: Feminist Thought in the Nineteenth Century' in Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, p. 233.
21. Wolstenholme Elmy, cited in Jeffreys, *The Spinster*, p. 34.
22. Cicely Hamilton, *Life Errant* (Dent) London, 1935.
23. Cicely Hamilton, *Marriage as a Trade* (1909)(Women's Press) London, 1981.
24. Mary Smith, *Schoolmistress and Nonconformist, Vol. 1, Autobiography* (Benrose) Londonand Carlisle, 1892, p.196.
25. Smith, *Schoolmistress and Nonconformist, Vol.1*, p.136.
26. Smith, *Schoolmistress and Nonconformist, Vol.1*, p.123.
27. See, Francis Widdowson, *Going Up into the Next Class: Women and Elementary Teacher Training 1840–1914* (Women's Resource and Resources Centre Publication) London, 1980; Copelman, *London's Women Teachers*.
28. Helen Corke, *In Our Infancy* (Cambridge University Press) Cambridge, 1975, p. 96.
29. Corke, *In Our Infancy*, p. 148.
30. David Herbert Lawrence, who was a friend of Corke's.
31. Corke, *In Our Infancy*, p. 204.
32. Smith, *Schoolmistress and Nonconformist, Vol.1*, p.56.
33. Smith, *Schoolmistress and Nonconformist, Vol.1*, p.100.
34. Blanche Athena Clough, *Memoir of Anne Jemima Clough* (Edward Arnold) London, 1897, p.75.
35. Corke, *In Our Infancy*, p. 148.

36. Charlotte Brontë, cited in Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) (Penguin) Harmondsworth, 1987, p. 254.
37. Brontë, cited in Gaskell, *Charlotte Brontë*, p. 277.
38. Foucault, *History of Sexuality, I*, p. 146.
39. Clara E. Collet, 'The Diary of a Young Assistant Mistress' in The Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, unpublished, p.81.
40. Collet, 'The Diary', p. 81.
41. Collet, 'The Diary', p. 19.
42. Clough, *A Memoir*, p.37.
43. Clough, *A Memoir*, p.30.
44. Smith, *Schoolmistress and Nonconformist, Vol. 1*, p.104.
45. Constance Maynard, 'Unpublished Autobiography', chapter33, Queen Mary and Westfield College Archives, p. 301.
46. Cited in Josephine Kamm, *How Different from Us: a Biography of Miss Buss and Miss Beale* (Bodley Head) London, 1958, p. 35.
47. Cited in Kamm, *How Different*, p. 35.
48. Dorothea Beale, cited in Kamm, *How Different*, p.36.
49. See Jeffreys, *The Spinster*, especially the chapter 'Continence and Psychic Love'.
50. Smith, *Schoolmistress and Nonconformist, Vol. 1*, p.137.
51. Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp.124,125, 129.
52. Passion is indeed a problematic notion, especially in the context of the difficulties and language problems that nineteenth-century women had in speaking about sex. In addressing this problem, Lucy Bland has pointed out the different meanings of the word passion, but has underlined the spiritual dimension of the concept, as it was developed in the feminist discourses at the turn of the century. See Bland, *The Beast*, especially the section 'Constructing a language', pp. 273–7.
53. Mary Smith, *School mistress and Nonconformist, Vol.2, Miscellaneous Poems* (Benrose) London and Carlisle, 1892.
54. Maynard, *Unpublished Autobiography*, chapter 12, p.387.
55. Maynard, *Unpublished Autobiography*, chapter 12, p.454.
56. Corke, *In Our Infancy*, pp.147, 148.
57. Corke, *In Our Infancy*, p. 149.
58. Corke, *In Our Infancy*, p. 150.
59. Corke, *In Our Infancy*, p. 150.
60. Corke, *In Our Infancy*, p. 170. Helen Corke told this story to her friend and teacher at that time, D.H. Lawrence. The story became the theme of D.H. Lawrence's novel *The Trespasser*, published in 1912 (Duckworth) London, three years after the real incident took place. The story has also been narrated by Helen Corke, herself, in her novel *Neutral Ground* (Arthur Barker) London, 1933.
61. Copelman, *London Women Teachers*, p. 171.
62. Smith, *Schoolmistress and Nonconformist, Vol. 1*, p.166.
63. Smith, *Schoolmistress and Nonconformist, Vol. 1*, p.188.
64. Smith, *Schoolmistress and Nonconformist, Vol. 1*, p.301.
65. Smith, *Schoolmistress and Nonconformist, Vol. 1*, p.301.
66. Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*.
67. Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853)(Everyman) London, 1994.

68. Cited in Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, p. 14.
69. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, I.
70. Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, p. 273.
71. Maynard, *Unpublished Autobiography*, chapter 6, p. 128.
72. Maynard, *Unpublished Autobiography*, chapter 6, p. 175.
73. Corke, *In Our Infancy*, pp.162–3.
74. Although many women, teachers among them, were involved in sometimes passionate love-relationships with other women at the turn of the century, they did not identify themselves as lesbian at the time. Lesbianism was in fact rarely mentioned in the nineteenth century, until the emergence of sexology at the end of the century. See Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850–1920* (Virago) London, 1989, pp.158–62, 187–210, 289; and Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, pp. 55, 168–70, 262–4, 288–90.
75. Maynard, *Unpublished Autobiography*, chapter 33, p.308.
76. Maynard, *Unpublished Autobiography*, chapter 33, p.299.
77. Angela McRobbie, 'Dance and Social Fantasy' in Angela McRobbie and Mica Nava (eds), *Gender and Generation* (Macmillan) Basingstoke, 1982.
78. Maynard, *Unpublished Autobiography*, chapter 20, p.489.
79. McRobbie, 'Dance and Social Fantasy', p. 132.
80. Maynard, *Unpublished Autobiography*, chapter 20, p.507.
81. McRobbie, 'Dance and Social Fantasy', p. 132.
82. McRobbie, 'Dance and Social Fantasy', p. 144.
83. Collet, 'The Diary', p. 19.
84. Louisa Lumsden, *Yellow Leaves: Memories of a Long Life* (William Blackwood) Edinburgh, p.28.
85. Mary Vivian Hughes, *A London Girl of the 1880s* (Oxford University Press) Oxford, 1936, p.140.