

PERNICIOUS FEMALE ROLE MODELS AND MID-VICTORIAN LONDON'S STAGE*

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ABSTRACT

Hutcheon identifies as 'historiographic metafiction' those pieces of fiction that expose that our cultural perception of past events is changing and malleable (129). Even though Hutcheon's theory of historiographic metafiction has been mainly applied to fiction from the post-modern era, certain elements of historical inspiration can be traced back to fiction from the Victorian period. In this article, I propose to turn to the popular theatre of the mid-Victorian period to scrutinize the manipulation of historical female figures, paying close attention to the representation of Lucrezia Borgia as *a strong-minded woman*. To do so, I analyse the mid-nineteenth century as a moment for asking questions about feminine identity, feminist movements, and alternative representations of female history. By turning to lesser-known mid-Victorian popular plays by H.J. Byron, Charles Matthews, and Leicester Buckingham I will further contribute to an ongoing *archaeological* task of recovering lost female voices and interpretations from our recent past.

KEYWORDS: Victorian theatre, women's history, Lucrezia Borgia, strong-minded women.

FIGURAS FEMENINAS PERNICIOSAS Y EL TEATRO VICTORIANO INGLÉS DE MEDIADOS DEL SIGLO XIX

RESUMEN

Linda Hutcheon hace referencia a la 'metaficción historiográfica', es decir, ejemplos de ficción que evidencian que nuestra percepción del pasado es cambiante y manipulable (129). A pesar de que la teoría de Hutcheon ha sido relacionada principalmente con ficción postmodernista, ciertos elementos de inspiración histórica ya habían sido utilizados durante la época victoriana. En este artículo propongo lanzar una mirada al teatro inglés de mediados del siglo XIX para identificar los elementos que manipulan la realidad de figuras femeninas de la historia, en concreto, la de Lucrecia Borgia, reconvertida en *strong-minded woman*. Para ello, propongo la década de los 50-60 del siglo XIX como momento propicio para hacer preguntas sobre la identidad femenina, los insurgentes movimientos feministas de la época y las representaciones alternativas de la historia femenina. Poniendo el foco en tres obras poco estudiadas de mediados de siglo escritas por H.J. Byron, Charles Matthews y Leicester Buckingham, continuaremos la labor de recuperación de ciertas voces y figuras femeninas olvidadas o tergiversadas por la historia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: teatro victoriano, historia de la mujer, Lucrecia Borgia, *strong-minded women*.



0. INTRODUCTION

In *The Politics of Post-Modernism* (1989), Hutcheon identifies as ‘historiographic metafiction’ those pieces of fiction that expose that our cultural perception of past events is changing and malleable. In other words, the receptor, be it a reader, an spectator sitting in a theatre’s gallery, or an art enthusiast, is likely to assimilate whatever he or she is witnessing as contrasted, true, historical events. That is why some examples of historical fiction often seep into the popular conscience and remain in the collective consciousness as true historical facts. Even though Hutcheon’s theory of historiographic metafiction has been mainly applied to fiction from the post-modern era, certain elements of historical inspiration can be traced back to fiction from the Victorian period, perhaps influenced by the growing popularity of edited narrative histories.

Elsewhere, Olverson has scrutinized the popular ‘use and abuse’ of certain historical female figures (162). As she contends, male writers and historians have preferred to carry on with female stereotypes adhered to certain female figures, consistently reproducing their sins and faults throughout time. As we strive to recover lost female figures from our past by peeking into historical anthologies that render them invisible and make us question the actual place of women in history, perhaps we also ought to pay attention to what has already been said: the existing female iconography in fiction. By revising these icons in literature and popular culture, we will be able to connect history and fiction, and more importantly, we will be able to revisit said figures from a wider, richer viewpoint. To do so, I propose to scrutinize London’s popular drama from the mid-nineteenth century as a multidimensional space in which female identities and histories can be both manipulated and perpetuated. In this article I focus on the revisionary portraits of Lucrezia Borgia during the mid-Victorian period, paying especial attention to her representation in Victorian popular theatre.

First, I analyse the interrelationship between history and fiction during the nineteenth-century in Britain, scrutinizing the educational purposes of leisure and entertainment in the city of London. Second, I propose the mid-century as a decisive period for asking questions about femininity and gender politics, especially with the debates over strong-minded women and the urgent ‘woman question’. As this section attests, despite the mid-century being classified as the ‘age of equipoise’ (Burn), Victorian women fought for their civil and educational rights at first, shaping up the prototype of the fin-de-siècle New Woman after. Finally, I offer three lesser known examples of mid-Victorian representations of the historical figure of Lucrezia Borgia, written for the popular stage by H.J. Byron, Leicester Buckingham, and Charles Matthews. By means of these plays, I attempt to stray away from the canonical drama of the period and to unearth alternative scenarios in

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which Lucrezia Borgia's memory was manipulated according to the contemporary political and gender ideology agenda. These plays, I believe, will make us recognise current stereotypical images of pernicious female figures that find a place both in fiction and in the collective consciousness.

1. VICTORIANS, THE PAST, AND POPULAR PERFORMANCE

The popular appeal of light, dramatic genres like burlesque and pantomime –widespread genres during the Victorian period in Britain– has made academics underestimate their socio-historical relevance until recently, thus suffocating a plurality of voices and interpretations that were being shown on the stages of London every night. Marcus suggests that

the conjunction of an impoverished dramatic literature and a thriving theatrical culture is only an apparent paradox: Victorian plays are unrewarding to read precisely because they were designed to come alive when acted, heard, and seen. (442)

Precisely, it is that 'unrewarding' experience of reading Victorian plays what perhaps constitutes one of the main reasons for the original lack of academic attention to Victorian theatre. After decades of serious spoken drama being restricted to the patent theatres of Drury Lane and Covent Garden, the passing of the 1843 Theatres Act caused a refreshing revision of censorship in London's theatres. From then on, and in consonance with the times, the metropolis grew to be filled with newly created venues whose main objective was that of entertaining the crowds. The Lord Chamberlain's office was in charge of assuring the plays' decorum and manners, whilst catering for the diverse demands of all social classes and looking over the venues' 'repertoires' at the same time (Davis, *Broadview* 13). The so-called legitimate drama, consisting in drama, farce, tragedy, and comedy, gave way to the illegitimate: light comedies, melodramas, burlesques, and pantomimes. That, as well as the cheap seats made available to the public, enticed audiences from diverse backgrounds and soon transformed the Victorian stage into an accessible medium to both reflect and inflect people's daily lives (Waters 7). Previously unknown playwrights became quick favourites among the crowds, with now-forgotten names like Tom Taylor, Henry James Byron, Leicester Buckingham, or the Brough brothers. Women found a place in mid-Victorian theatre as well, usually working as actresses or succeeding as theatre managers, like Ellen Terry or Priscilla Horton, who were regarded as celebrities and attracted the public's interest both inside and outside the theatre (Davis, *Actresses; Women*).

Perhaps due to the 'lower status' of the mid-century's illegitimate drama, thousands of understudied Victorian plays are stored in important libraries and archives in manuscript form, patiently waiting to be scrutinised by a literature scholar of 'archaeological' aspirations (Newey). However, recovering these plays is not just a responsibility of literary scholars; as research suggests, we should not approach Victorian popular theatre as just literature, but as a complex web of elements that



come at play with each performance (Bratton; Davis). Since the 1990s, Victorian popular theatre has found its place in literary academia and has proven that studying Victorian popular drama can bring us closer to the Victorians' way of seeing and understanding the world. Scholars have previously argued that the performance culture of the nineteenth century is inherently linked to history (Booth; Melman); therefore, understanding Victorian popular theatre and its multiple conventions will offer us the chance to revisit and revise our own way of understanding history and the world. As we study these plays, we will be able to work through the traditional gender politics and conventions of the Victorian era; in the end, learning to read and understand the 'catholicity of experience' of Victorian theatre-going will make us go past the simplistic private and public division of spheres (Davis, *Broadview* 20). As these plays attest, saving the genres' conventionalities, the Victorian stage will show us alternative feminine identities and transgressive female role models.

Hadley suggests that the Victorian period was 'intensely interested in history, both in terms of its valuation of the past and its consciousness of its own position within history' (19). With the proliferation of historical romances and novels authored by revered authors like Sir Walter Scott, history and biography soon were seen as an essential aspect of the cultural life of the Victorians. Additionally, the multiple and diverse revisions of the past that were produced during the nineteenth-century in England went on to mix fiction with history and further blurred the line between fact and fantasy. Overall, it would seem like experimenting with the past and witnessing manipulated pieces of history worked as a mirror to the Victorians' personal situation. As Culler contends, 'Victorians agreed that the mirror of history provided a perspective glass which enabled [them] to see through [the] contemporary controversy to more lasting truth' (3). In such a way, history in general and specific historical figures in particular gained a renewed purpose of self-evaluation and self-experimentation, and were even classified as 'the hidden influences that sustain[ed] the nation' (Atkinson 13).

Biographies became 'the literary emblem par excellence of Victorianism', catering for the era's attraction to 'exaggerated hero-worship' (Altick 289). On stage, valiant historical men were transformed into stereotypical heroes who fought for their country, travelled the globe, and saved ladies in distress. The ongoing patriotic sentiment motivated biographers to write about celebrated men both from their time and from the past, encouraging the (male) reader to emulate his heroes and to improve himself while doing so. In turn, a great number of female collective biographies were published, but these had an alternative definition of heroism: essentially, they were an attempt to continue with the traditional education of women. Even though some scholars believe that the usual approach to these women's lives was that of the sensational, prioritizing scandalous or extraordinary female lives (Atkinson 11), gender indoctrination soon took over with exemplary women; as Vicinus attests, biographies of important women were a moralising alternative to traditional domestic girls' stories:

Indeed, biographies served to validate adolescent dreams of doing good in a wider sphere than the home. The heroic plot both evoked a stereotyped emotional



response and gave a vehicle for the reader's personal dreams. The factual narrative of a specific life history combined easily with personal fantasy; the reader did not so much identify with the heroine as with the heroic possibilities she represented. (52)

For instance, Henry Gardiner Adams' *A Cyclopedic of Female Biography* (1866), which featured important female names such as Queen Victoria herself, was advertised as an anthology featuring the stories of important women 'remarkable for mental gifts or acquirements, moral virtues, or Christian graces' (III). While manipulating anthologies and perspectives, it was relatively easy for the biographer and historian to construct women's place in history according to the period's gender norms. In this way, a number of female historical figures were adapted and utilized according to the period's sentiments and societal objectives.

The Victorians lived through an era of steady and drastic change practically in every area relevant to the development of civilization: transport, science, medicine, humanities, industry, and communication. From the mid-century, middle-class Victorians experienced an improvement in their daily life, which simultaneously brought more leisure time and encouraged pastimes such as theatre-going, railway travel, and visiting museums and exhibitions. For instance, the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London's Hyde Park attracted over six million visitors during May and October. The memory of the Exhibition remained throughout the latter half of the century, as many of the original objects were relocated to the South Kensington Museum in 1857. Shortly afterwards, a second International Exhibition was celebrated in 1862 attempting to follow up the Great Exhibition's success. By the 1860s, London was opening its doors to international visitors, offering a diverse cultural program filled with historical voices and figures, male and female alike.

In London, from the mid-century the average citizen or the tourist spending time in the metropolis were able to roam through South Kensington and marvel at the art, antiquities, and diverse souvenirs from distant lands; to visit exhibitions of panoramas depicting both familiar and unknown sceneries; to enjoy nightly performances in the theatres, and to read printed magazines with a plethora of images feeding the Victorians' appetite for knowledge, discovery, and amazement. It was, after all, a century of progress for the British Empire, whose colonial enterprises and variety of *heroes* and *heroines* provoked in the British a heightened sensation of power and at the same time, manipulated the national cultural production. Popular entertainment, and especially the diversity of performances celebrated in London during the mid-century, fit into what Melman identifies as the four dimensions of the 'diffusion' of history and the past during the nineteenth-century:

The first is the dramatic growth of the accessibility of the past to groups that had previously had been largely excluded from it. [...] Second, and related to diffusion and democratization, is the transnational character of the mass-production of images of the past. A third dimension is the change in the sense of temporality, most apparent in an expansion of the definition of the past and of history. [...] A fourth dimension is the increasingly visual nature of presentations of the past and its materialization. (468)



As I have previously contended, the creation of non-patent theatres and the proliferation of venues in the city marked the beginning of a democratisation of culture and made knowledge of the past accessible. Popular theatre had the power to both inflect and reflect the citizens' preoccupations. Critics like E.W. Godwin claimed that Victorians went to the theatre 'to witness such a performance as will place [them] as nearly as possible as spectators of the original scene or of the thing represented' (*Western Daily Press* 11 October 1864). Godwin, well known for being one of the main leaders of the Aesthetic movement, defended a theatrical stage where everything was meticulously planned, researched, and accurate. For this reason, scenographers were supposed to document themselves when setting a play somewhere of historical relevance or a geographic point of interest. This scenography research was mainly done in churches, libraries, museums, art galleries, and through displacement to the actual site represented in an historical play (Booth 96).

Moreover, successful popular plays were revised, reprised, and exported countless times, thus spreading its influence and iconography outside of London and, sometimes, outside the country. For instance, when a play was successful enough, it could be adapted for performance in the British colonies, or brought to America by a British acting company –or vice versa. Playwrights exploited the latest historical episodes and brought the 'sensation' closer to the public. Such is the case of Dion Boucicault's *Jessie Brown; or, The Relief of Lucknow*, which was first performed in New York in 1858 and later brought into the reputable Drury Lane Theatre of London in 1862. The melodramatic heroine, Jessie Brown, survives the controversial Indian Mutiny of May 1857, a real gruesome event that had been much commented in London. During 'the Mutiny', Indian soldiers revolted against British officials and were said to have massacred thousands of British wives and children (Ghose 6). Evidently, Jessie Brown –and the numerous theatrical responses that followed her footsteps shortly after– became icons of endangered femininity, showing a rare intrepidity justified by their patriotic impulses, and were practically perceived as real historical heroines. Ultimately, Jessie Brown and the other transgressive, valiant female characters were transformed into positive feminine role-models. At the same time, sensational travel stories written in first person were being published in periodicals and newspapers; in certain aspects, the proliferation of female stories both on the printed page and the stage allowed for a revision of female identities, in a way that Wagner has classified as 'proto-feminist' and 'transgressive' (175).

Melman's fourth dimension, the visual nature of the presentations of the past, is clearly represented in certain elements of the popular drama of the period. For instance, the tableaux vivants, also known as 'living pictures' or 'poses plastiques', were a performing form that qualified both as entertainment and instruction, usually featuring an essential historical aspect. Fundamentally, a tableau vivant consisted in staged scenes where still, costumed actors –actresses, more often than not– represented an historical event, a masterpiece painting, or a literary passage, most of the times of classical inspiration. As Tracy Davis has suggested, the neoclassical influence of some tableaux vivants legitimized a kind of voyeurism towards the female figure by the pretence of instruction (*Actresses* 125); elsewhere, Monró-Gaspar has emphasized the influence of classical Greece and Rome in Victorian



culture and entertainment, especially in matters of gender idealization and imperial anxieties (Victorian 1-16). Indeed, even though most *tableaux vivants* were publicly exhibited in the music halls of London or were part of longer theatrical representations like pantomimes on the East and West Ends, some were catered for private to small audiences. To achieve a 'honourable' entertainment and to avoid the censure of the most conservative critics, the *tableaux vivant* required a complex interplay of mechanical arrangements, costumes, make-up, and in the end, a combination of 'elevated taste' and visual appeal.

In a way, *tableaux vivants* symbolize the duality of entertainment that was present in the city, especially in London's West End: as Donohue explains, behind an aura of respectability, moral and social transgression hid (4-7). If *tableaux vivants* were heightened representations of somewhat scandalous female bodies for the sake of culture, the city of London was also camouflaging (intentionally or not) a growing revisionist, revolutionary sentiment of leisure and instruction practices. Debates over the 'propriety' of *tableaux vivants* intensified by the end of the century with the rise of 'the New Woman'. As Assael contends, the mechanics surrounding these 'living pictures' evolved as the century went by, but the opinions that classified such spectacles as undisciplined remained. In some ways, the popularization of the *tableaux* conveyed a vulgarization of such, due to the onlooker's uncultured background and their lack of historical appreciation.

At the same time, the insurgent educational movements rising in the country provoked a renewed attraction to culture and objects in display. In 1861, the Royal Commission on the State of Popular Education in England set the basis of the forthcoming 1870 Elementary Education Act, which recommended provision of minimal elementary education for nearly all children, including those from the lowest social classes, in order to have a responsible citizenship in consonance with the times. Behind this goal also laid the country's motivation to compete globally as a skilled, advanced industrial workforce; therefore, the nation's progress depended partially on the help of its educated working-class. In the end, panoramic shows emphasized the global ambitions of nineteenth-century's England, as they made possible the reproduction of detailed landscapes that contributed to their mapping of the world and of history. In addition, by configuring the city as a place for education and leisure, a profitable market of exploitation of the human body and mind was opened up; the quest for knowledge and anthropological debate, especially influenced by the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), left its mark in the city's leisure preferences. Breaking boundaries, the visual forms of entertainment and culture brought together the viewer with the viewed, finally creating a renewed experience of knowledge and personal edification. Through the examination of leisure and culture in the city, it is possible to become aware of the duality of London's society, which continued to challenge the boundaries between respectable and improper and, in the end, opened its doors to renovation.



2. THE WOMAN QUESTION AND STRONG-MINDED WOMEN

From the mid-century, a growing concern for the Victorians was that of the so-called 'the woman question'. Taking advantage of their perceived moral superiority and their task as pure, nurturing figures, some women of the Victorian era sought to break the boundaries that had them confined at restrictive homes, demanding education at first, and going for the female suffrage later in the century (Levine 13). Up until then, womanhood had been linked to a domestic environment –what Hall identifies as a 'domestic ideology' (181). That ideology had been questioned some decades before the insurgent women right's movements of the 1860s; during the 1790s, texts like Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) re-evaluated the differences between sexes and argued that the inferior status of women was a result of their situation and environment, and demanded a better education for her female contemporaries to be prepared for the 'real' world. Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries were part of what we now identify as the first wave of feminism, during which the gendered spatial division began to be destabilized and questioned by women, expanding women's horizons and rethinking their possibilities as socio-political beings outside the constraining ideals of the past (Shands). Then, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, extensive anthologies of biographies of 'illustrious' women were being published, which highlights the importance of the role-model in the formation of feminine identity at the time. In the preface of *Female Biography; or, Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women, of all Ages and Countries* (1803), Mary Hays remarks her attempts to educate women of all classes with both facts and pleasure:

Women, unsophisticated by the pedantry of the schools, read not for dry information, to load their memories with uninteresting facts, or to make a display of a vain erudition. A skeleton biography would afford to them but little gratification: they require pleasure to be mingled with instruction, lively images, the graces of sentiment, and the polish of language. Their understandings are principally accessible through their affections: they delight in minute delineation of character; nor must the truths which impress them be either cold or unadorned. (v)

Despite the early attempts to give voice to women's variety of aspirations, by the mid-nineteenth-century the printed press was still attempting to disdain the 'woman question' and to underestimate its reach: in June of 1862, the *Illustrated Times* went on to affirm that the national movement for women's rights was a mere disconnected attempt to discuss female matters, insisting that 'no one, except one or two female enthusiasts who have found no followers, says that women are qualified by Nature to fill all such positions as hitherto have been reserved exclusively for men' (102). That is to say, the newspaper claims, mid-Victorian women should not step outside their boundaries unless they want to fail in their entrepreneurships. *The Illustrated Times* goes further and condemns women as 'the weaker' men, remarking women's inability to excel at areas such as religion, politics, science, literature, and art. This, the article defends, is due to women's lack of imagination and women's inability to be consistent in their goals and education.



What the Illustrated Times named as ‘one or two female enthusiasts’ was, in fact, a rising trend leading numerous groups of middle-class women to gather and foster a sense of community, culminating in the formation of women’s clubs, female-led campaigns for women’s rights, and the organization of lectures around the city of London. As early as the 1850s, the Langham Place circle of feminists was created by Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, whose contribution to the woman’s question proved invaluable. Bodichon collaborated with her friend Bessie Rayner Parkes (later Belloc) and both set off to become two of the most prominent female figures fighting for the amendments of laws regarding women. Additionally, both would go on to write and publish their feminist propaganda and memories in magazines such as the *Englishwoman’s Review* (which they also edited). It was, after all, the moment and place for interrogating unstable gender ideologies.

Among the problems addressed by the female movements of the mid-century, one is the narrowness of a prefixed ideal of femininity in the Victorian era. As Victorian feminist scholars have shown, it is important to scrutinise the challenges a woman had to face to follow the ideal path set for her sex, in order to comprehend the nineteenth century’s political and social climate. Since the 1970s, feminist scholars involved in the study of women in the Victorian era have also sought to debunk the simplistic dichotomy of ‘Angel’ or ‘True’ and ‘Fallen’, striving to uncover a wide range of female identities and exposing the complex interrelations between the female body and Victorian society. To continue the uncovering of other female realities, it is necessary to reflect on the mid-Victorian female stereotypes and their socio-political implications, identifying their cultural and historical impact both in their contemporaries and in future generations. These stereotypical identities, like other stereotypes, attempted to establish order in a chaotic, rapidly changing atmosphere where women were stepping outside their ‘boxes’ and challenging pre-established feminine identities.

The concerns over a new de-generate group of women started to catch the attention of the Victorians. In 1859, Mrs. Emilius Holcroft had given a lecture on ‘The Strong-Minded Woman, one of the great Misnomers of the Day’. Celebrated in the Pimlico Literary Institute of London, the lecture questioned the nature of the strong-minded woman and identified in her an embodiment of avarice, craft, and cruelty. Nonetheless, the lecturer praised the strong-minded woman’s ability of exhibiting ‘the attributes of the other sex, when circumstances demand’ as long as these did not forsake the claims and duties proper to daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers (*West Middlesex Advertiser And Family Journal*). In other words: *True* women needed to remember their nurturing nature as their first and foremost duty to society, while being selective about complementary, ‘masculine’ attributes when circumstances so require it.

Among the mid-century’s debates on female education, one of the prevailing questions was how well educated a wife and mother should be. Levine explains how a great number of women fighting for a better education insisted on academic formation as an essential ingredient of a successful marriage. Women, they insisted, needed to be educated in order to ‘maintain intelligent conversations with their husbands’ (Levine 30). However, female education became a controversial topic,



especially after the flourishing reformist initiatives. In this context appeared 'the strong-minded woman', an alternative woman who dared to pursue an academic education or journey outside the familial home. The 'strong-minded woman' was inevitably set against the model-wife 'Angel in the House', whose meek, innocent character positioned her at the top of the moral hierarchy but at the bottom of public life. For some defendants of female suffrage like Mr. Fawcett, the term 'strong-minded woman' was unnecessary: would anyone use the same term to describe a man of intellect? The *Globe* discussed Mr. Fawcett's words by insisting on the intellectual inferiority of women, yet remarked women's supremacy over their own realm, the home (*Globe* 2).

In November 1863, the *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* published an article on strong-minded women once again questioning the role of women in and outside society. The man, the article insists, is the noblest and true monarch of a family, whereas the woman wins over the domestic duties and mishaps, reassuring an optimal home. The author attributes men's rejection of 'female trespassing' in male areas as an undoubtable sign of men's insecurities:

However sincerely man may admire the qualities of courage, endurance, bodily address, or mental proficiency in woman, his approbation seems tempered with an uneasy feeling of inferiority, where inferiority reflects shame; of awe, where awe seems both humiliating and misplaced. (*Fraser's Magazine* 668)

Men's rejection of the 'strong-minded woman' goes hand in hand with the general perception of such a group of women: stern, unattractive women with no particular becoming quality in the eyes of their counterparts. Ideally, the article continues, women should 'reflect' the qualities admired in men, but only in a 'more subdued' manner (IBID).

According to the era's response to opinionated women, the females had to be discreet in their aspirations and knowledge, lest they overshadowed men. In the end, the stereotyped strong-minded woman was yet another example of attempting to ridicule or diminish a threatening wave of women overstepping boundaries and concealment. To subdue the feminist current, the trend was to give prominence to women who adhered to traditional ideals of femininity, by means of the publication of biographies of devoted female missionaries and, most importantly, by warning against the wrong, modern attempts to redefine femininity. These *good* or *True* women, venerated role-models of appropriate feminine behaviour, were far from being like their strong-minded coetaneous. In consequence, a quiet war between *True* and *False* female role-models began. On paper and on stage, their examples were transformed into conduct rules, in the case of the True Woman, or into a cautionary tale, in the case of the strong-minded. Foreshadowing the fin-de-siècle's New Women, strong-minded women paved the way for further socio-political changes by metaphorically giving up their 'celestial' wings and stepping on previously banned grounds. These women's journey outside society's expectations for the female sex would continue throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and would culminate with the female suffrage in 1918. Learning about other women's 'knowledge and



fortitude', as Hays had mentioned at the beginning of the century, would transform modern women into 'the most perfect combination of human excellence' (Hays vi). Ultimately, strong-minded women proved that women could be much more than what society and morality imposed over them.

The popular entertainment of the period soon picked up the trend and transformed the socially-constructed attributes of the strong-minded woman into recurrent stock characters (Monrós-Gaspar, *Devil* 126). Emerging sensation novels with strong-minded protagonists were soon adapted on stage, adapting its salacious plots in the most visual and realistic manner. Among the most well-known strong-minded heroines are Lady Audley, from Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). Sensation drama shocked audiences with controversial plots and complex female protagonists, and attracted women especially, who were growing to be amazed by real-life cases of adultery, murder, and divorce. As Diamond contends, mid-Victorian women flocked the courts when important trials were being held and outstood for their eager consumption (and production) of sensation fiction (4). In fiction, the sensation heroine was soon compared to the strong-minded woman in real life, mainly due to her unnatural impulses and desires. The critics went on to oppose superficial qualities of the True woman like 'pretty, genuine, loving, and good girl' to the sensation heroine's capability of 'bigamy, murder [...] complicated deception or concentrated revenge' (*Morning Post* 3). As Cox suggests, the sensation heroine is presented as an 'anti-heroine', mainly due to her transgressive representation of Victorian femininity and her symbolic challenging of traditional female ideologies (60). The examples of these female characters raised questions of female propriety and the stage was the perfect loudspeaker for them; but it was also a complicated, dangerous task. The wide reach of the drama of the period required an attempt to subdue or tame these female characters, a metaphorical silencing of their encouraging, revolutionary approach to femininity. Therefore, the anti-heroine on stage was often ridiculed, mocked, or even executed as a consequence to her perfidious behaviour.

On the popular stage, the strong-minded woman borrows from renowned female figures, adopting the controversial manners and actions of 'evil' historical women. In this way, playwrights get inspiration from existing images of femininity and exploit them according to their will. As the trend suggests, these playwrights opted for the 'recovery' of questioned historical women to mirror on stage the ongoing political debates (Gardner). Transformed into stock-characters, the strong-minded female character usually represented an 'independent, self-assured' woman, and found inspiration in 'emerging professional women' (Monrós-Gaspar, *Victorian* 35). As I have previously contended, the stage had a unique way to mirror contemporary situations, episodes, and socio-political debates; therefore, manipulating the characters' stories was relatively easy to make them relevant, and recognised figures from the past were transformed into loudspeakers for 'bigger' issues of modern concern.



3. LUCREZIA BORGIA AND THE VICTORIANS

Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519), daughter of Pope Alexander VI, has been historically recognized for her role in the political intrigues of the Italian Renaissance, and has often been classified under the archetype of the femme fatale. History has compared her to infamous polemical female figures such as Cleopatra, Bianca Cappello, or the Duchess of Malfi. In literature, Borgia has been utilized to remind of women's 'evil nature', and the texts have given prominence to her 'promiscuousness' and treacherous nature. Borgia has been compared to great classical female characters such as Medea, Clytemnestra, or Circe (Pal-Lapinski 43). Thus, in historical fiction we often see Lucrezia as a perverse and manipulative woman with a predisposal to poisoning, cheating, and sexual transgression. This can be traced back to Victorian gendered iconography and a tradition of theatrical adaptations that exploited both her memory and her past.

We ought to question the reasons for the reigniting of the debate over Lucrezia's life in the first place. The Victorians were simultaneously fascinated and disgusted by the historical figure of Lucrezia Borgia, revisiting and readapting her story in the contemporary art, plays, and general popular culture. According to the period's historiography, Lucrezia was just an evil poisoner and a perverse woman, a murderer whose only redeeming quality was manifested in her tenderness to her son, Gennaro (*The Athenaeum* 220). This 'tenderness' was starting to be visible on stage, but her deviousness was inevitably still there. Scholars affirm that interest in Lucrezia's story revived at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with Victor Hugo's French drama *Lucrèce Borgia* (1833). Hugo's choice to revisit the Renaissance and to re-evaluate the life of the anti-heroine Lucrezia has been linked to his own preoccupation with the insurgent gender debates of the beginning of the century; at the same time, Lucrezia's fabricated bad reputation in literature has been attributed to the effects of systemic 'misogyny and paternalism on women', as well as to 'longstanding male fears about female power' (Ghirardo 60-61). In turn, fiction would go on to influence other cultural representations of Lucrezia.

Hugo's drama is filled with assassinations, adultery, and incest, but most importantly, it constructs one of Lucrezia's most remembered 'faults' thereafter: her vengeful nature and her inclination to using poison. Hugo was pioneer in remarking Lucrezia's poisonous nature, and painted her up as a villain; as Ghirardo contends, Hugo

wove an entirely fictional account using a real historical woman as his anti-heroine. A serial killer whose favoured tool was poison, in Hugo's account Lucrezia used it to assassinate dozens of people. (60)

Indeed, poison is the most repeated element in the reconstruction of Lucrezia's model during the nineteenth-century. Additionally, the art of the century found in her a perfect subject, perhaps due to the many uncertain aspects of her past; as if she were 'a sphinx-like riddle' (*The Edinburgh Review* 233). Dante Gabriel Rossetti became especially interested in the story of the Borgias and decided to paint



Lucrezia in close proximity to poison. In Rossetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* (1860-1861), her figure takes up most of the canvas, gazing directly into the eyes of the onlooker while she washes her hands. She has just poisoned her first husband, Alfonso, who we can see at the back of the scene supported by crutches and Lucrezia's father, Pope Alexander VI. Some years later, Rossetti painted the whole Borgia family in *The Borgia Family* (1863), with Lucrezia still as the focal point, reclining in an indolent posture, staring defiantly past the limits of the frame, and with the family's poisonous wine nearby. With all these signs in circulation, separating truth from fiction in the life of Lucrezia was starting to be a difficult task. She had become an icon of perversity.

Shortly after Hugo's play, Gaetano Donizetti produced a homonymous opera, which premiered at Italy's La Scala on December 26, 1833. In London, the opera was so successful that numerous productions were performed between 1839 and 1888. Then again, the opera presents a dichotomous Lucrezia: a candid mother yet a perfidious woman. Adhering to Victorian feminine ideals and gender roles, Donizetti's opera sought to 'normalize Lucrezia' by offering a candid representation of her mother-son relationship with Gennaro, yet filling the story with complicated erotic overtones (Pal-Lapinski 43). This erotic and dichotomous representation of Lucrezia would endure in the following popular adaptations on the stages of London. The underlying elements of incest and maliciousness will pervade and Lucrezia's fatal destiny in Donizetti's opera would remind of her incorrigible depravity; as one reviewer of *The Athenaeum* put it, 'the cold malignity of the woman and the tenderness to her son which is her one redeeming feature, and as such the means of her punishment' (221). In Donizetti's opera, we see a dying Lucrezia who has been finally punished for her sexual and moral crimes.

Despite the aura of disrespectability that surrounded Lucrezia throughout the nineteenth-century, some scholars affirm that during the nineteenth century, there was 'historical rehabilitation' of Lucrezia's reputation, transforming her memory from a murderer and a whore into a witless victim of the males in her family (Bradford; Crosby 5). Precisely, this rehabilitation of Lucrezia could fit into what Spivak identifies as an hospitable revision, or how the way we represent or reproduce a certain event, person or space might influence the final historical record we remember (271-272). Regardless, Victorian biographers and critics alike found in Lucrezia a confusing persona: was she the victim or the executioner?

We have no Shakespeare, we have no help even from Carlyle, to assist us in solving that problem of Lucrezia's guilt or innocence which is a problem only in consequence of the higher morality of later and of better times. We are left to our own imaginative insight or constructive imagination, and these, I think, condemn her, and judge Lucrezia as she was judged by those who, living with her in her own day, knew alike the day and knew her. [...]. We give her up to dramatist and librettist. We feel that they can use her name and fame as a representative of charm and crime. At once so foul [...] that history contains no woman's name at once so famous and so infamous. We remain conscious that record, and that story, will brand for ever as a name of scorn that of the dark and fair, the lovely and yet desperately wicked Lucrezia Borgia. (Schütz 684)



Thus, the mystery of Lucrezia's real nature was left in the hands of the 'dramatist' and the 'librettist'; in the end, it seemed like she was a riddle that could only be solved through fiction and dramatization.

During the 1860s, her name and example appears repeatedly in female characters that exhibit a general dislike for gender norms and that stray from the feminine path set for them. The earliest example in the decade is that of Leicester Buckingham's *Lucretia Borgia, at Home and All Abroad*, a burlesque first performed at St. James's Theatre, London, on April 3rd, 1860. Buckingham's burlesque is set in Venice but it conflates British modern society with Renaissance Italy. The author is inspired by Donizetti's opera, reproducing settings and characters, but taking up Lucrezia's bad reputation and transforming her into a contemporary blue-stocking, more interested in investments and the stock market than in her matrimony. At the Ducal Palace of Ferrara, we will see a Lucrezia who questions gender ideology and laws, worrying about the economy and the market:

LUCRETIA: Wife beaters get six months by the new act,
But the law doesn't say husbands mayn't be whacked. (Buckingham
ff. 19)

To the coetaneous audience, her words would have been perceived as totally out of place, and as dangerous yet ridiculous attempts to break boundaries between female and male spaces. Like in other plays that transform Lucrezia into a professional, strong-minded woman, Buckingham's Lucrezia mocks the working opportunities available to women during the 1860s. For women stepping outside their private homes in search of a different occupation besides their domestic ones was still seen as a risky venture for their reputations and integrity. Likewise, Lucrezia's husband reprimands her conduct and reminds her of her duty as a wife:

ALPHONSO: Unless you change your conduct soon, you'll rue it
From morn 'til night you ought to hem and stitch.
If you're a wife, you should behave as such
Sew buttons on my shirts

LUCRETIA: Alas, I know so.

ALPHONSO: My collars hem.

LUCRETIA: The prospect's very *sew-le*.

ALPHONSO: Mend my old clothes 'til they're as good as new
And dam my hose

LUCRETIA: No, dam me if I do.

ALPHONSO: Besides, to more than that your fault amounts.
You ought to cook—

LUCRETIA: Me —don't I cook accounts?
But I'm a faithful spouse [...]
Well then, don't mind me —get another wife.
The new Divorce Court'll free you if you please
Yes, but the remedy's worst [sic] than the disease. (Buckingham
ff. 17-18)



Lucretia dismisses her husband's remarks about her 'poor performance' as a wife, and reminds him about the possibility of divorce thanks to the recent 1857 Divorce Act. Her 'deviousness' not only consists in her career-mindedness, but also in her fraudulent economic activities; in other words, her misbehaviour as both a wife and a career-woman, would set her apart from her female, well-behaved contemporaries. As an unscrupulous strong-minded woman who forgets her place, her meekness, and her 'femininity', Buckingham's Lucrezia warns the audience of the perils of unfemininity. Additionally, he takes advantage of Lucrezia's status of pernicious role-model and links her persona to that of the strong-minded working woman.

The iconography of Lucrezia Borgia was not just linked to historical adaptations of her persona; throughout the decade using the name of Lucrezia was enough to convey the incipient fears for strong-minded women, and her name became an identifiable sign for the audience. That is the case of Charles Matthews' comedy *The Soft Sex*, which was first performed at the Haymarket Theatre, London, in 1861. The purpose of the play, as the *Morning Post* asserts, was

to make game of Bloomerism, to hold up to ridicule strong-minded women, and to show that a graceful and gentle demeanor and a strict regard to domestic affairs are the qualities which men prize most highly in their wives, and which also conduce most effectively to the happiness of the married state. (*Morning Post* 5)

Indeed, the play partakes in the era's debates on femininity ideals and the 'exposure' of young women to modern, degenerate behaviour, immorality, and overall improper domestic conduct. Featuring a great number of strong-minded characters, Matthews' comedy is a good example of the Victorian gender ideologies represented on stage. The plot revolves around the education of two young girls, Harriet and Julia, who are badly influenced by the example of a modern American governess and by their strong-minded aunt, Mrs. Lucretia Mandwindle. Overall, the play raises questions about proper and improper femininity, and shows the importance of good female role-models in the education of the young.

In this occasion, the character of Lucretia Mandwindle, a strong-minded woman who worked 'not with her fingers', but 'with her head' (Matthews 10). Matthews' Lucretia is also at blame of neglecting her husband, ignoring his 'superior' position in the home and relegating all domestic duties to him; her political activities keep her occupied protesting against society's 'false views of woman's social position' and, in short, rejecting the imposed identity of 'woman' (Matthews ff. 51). Preferring to work at her laboratory, this Lucrezia reminds us of the century's poisonous Lucrezia; however, Matthew's Lucrezia does not poison with her hands, but with her words. On stage, this Lucrezia writes feminist pamphlets against the submission of women, corresponds with important authors, and collaborates with national magazines and newspapers writing about the woman question. Among her main discourses, Lucretia usually discards the imposed definition of 'being a woman'; when her brother, Mr. Biggins, demands that she goes to kitchen to prepare dinner, she is revolted:



MR. BIGGINS: [...] it is your department, what's a woman for but —

LUCRETIA: (*stopping him*) a woman! Don't talk to me in that way, brother. I disfavoured the name, from my very birth I have protested against that error of nature [...] to feel within one's self the energy, the force of man and to languish in submission, to feel oneself the slave, the property, the chattel of a Mr. Mandwindle [...] no, I never can reconcile myself to the idea that I am a woman.

MR. MANDW: But you are, I assure you, you are, Lucretia.

LUCRETIA: (*touching her forehead*) The sex is here, here. (Matthews ff. 57-58)

Lucretia's rejection of the female role and her incapability to see herself represented by the decade's conception of a woman, exemplify the ongoing discussion on women's work in the world; however, by setting her up against the idealized Ida, a True woman and a good role-model for Harriet and Julia, Lucretia's strong-mindedness does not allow for a positivist conception of the modern woman. Instead, these representations of the strong-minded as inherently wrong versions of femininity, or depraved femininity, provoke in the audience discomfort, rejection, and at most, laughter.

Shortly after, in 1868 the celebrated playwright Henry James Byron rescued Lucrezia Borgia's example to bring forward the ongoing battle for women's medical training, a topic of concern in England after Elizabeth Garret Anderson became the first licensed female medical practitioner in 1865. *The Era* had gone so far as to condemn the medical profession as 'defiling' for the country's 'delicate-minded' women (30 November 1862), and so, despite the educational advances of the decade, a female doctor was still seen as a dangerous role-model for women, and was associated to degeneration. Indeed, Byron's *Lucretia Borgia, M.D.; or, la Grande Doctresse* (1868) presents a liberal female physician whose useless prescriptions deem her—and her real-life colleagues—a fraud. In Byron's burlesque, Lucrezia experiments with her servant, Gubetta, who seems to be permanently scared of his mistress' prescriptions. Gubetta shares with the audience his preoccupations about Lucrezia's reputation:

GUBETTA: Whatever's said on him,

The meanest little worm turns if you tread on him.

The last straw breaks the camel's back. (Lucretia *smiles*) Don't smile;

I've taken too much of your camel-mile.

I'm weary of this life of drugs and drudgery;

I've taken every medicine in your *sudgnry*;

To revolution pitch my rage now reaches-----

LUCRETIA: (*writing, quietly*) A cooling mixture, and two dozen leeches,

That'll reduce this feverish state.

GUBETTA: (*collapsing*) I say,

I do not want reducing in this way.

Lucretia Borgia's slave —*when all well know her*— (Byron 8)

Gubetta shares with the audience a previous knowledge of Lucrezia's story and so, he is scared of her arts with prescriptions and poison. This is closely linked to what Jacky Bratton identifies as 'intertheatricality', a reliance on the spectators'



previous knowledge and awareness about the topic performed, and an exploitation of that shared images, icons, and symbols (37). For the updated Victorian, it would have been relatively easy to identify in this Lucrezia a hybrid of their contemporary Dr. Mary Walker, Donizetti's operatic Lucrezia, and the real historical Borgia family. Indeed, the *London City Press* soon identified in Byron's Lucrezia the real female doctor Mary Walker, an American physician who had been mocked and ridiculed in her public speeches in England, yet who gained the support of English feminists such as Dr. Elizabeth Garrett, Barbara Bodichon, and Emily Davies. Dr. Walker's confrontations with male medicine students had been previously echoed by British and American newspapers.

Evidently, a parodist like H.J. Byron would soon pick up the scent of such a controversial topic and would attempt to compare insurgent female physicians to poisoners, all the while commenting on the incapability of women to handle dangerous medicines. The myth of Lucrezia as poisoner gives Byron the perfect excuse to highlight the traditional perception of women as manipulators of public honour, sexuality, and poison (Castellanos de Zubiría 159). The real Lucrezia Borgia's historiographical background links the female poisoner with 'political power' and thus, with sexuality and appetite (Pal-Lapinski 43). Therefore, by refashioning Lucrezia into a female doctor, Byron is conflating the quest of strong-minded women to obtain medical educations to their search for political representation and higher education:

GENNARO: Oh, horrible discovery! Oh dear, what shall I do?
 Oh, terrible discovery! I didn't think 'twas you.
 There isn't in the universe,
 A party who is really worse,
 A party more atrocious than
 Lucretia Borgiah.

ORSINI: She is a wicked woman, and she calls herself M.D.,
 A feminine physician, which she didn't ought to be.
 She's pass'd the College *and* the Hall;
 At the examinations all
 The eminent professors thought her
 Worthy a degree. (Byron 14)

This Lucrezia offers a view of the feared modern 'degenerate' female physician, associating her figure to illicit relationships with young male medical students and to marital neglect. The audience is constantly reminded of the historical Lucrezia's bad reputation, with allusions to her wicked and atrocious past. On stage, her memory is manipulated and reshaped at the will of the popular playwright, who utilises both past and present elements to his own benefit.

The three Lucrezias –Buckingham's, Matthews' and Byron's– are proof of how facts can be 'subsumed' into wider fictional narratives (Olverson 162), but also of how history can be manipulated by literature. For many years thereafter, Lucrezia Borgia would be reminded as a poisoner, despite the attempts of biographers to rehabilitate her reputation. Her name had been twisted and was then used as synonymous of 'poisoner' (Crosby 3), both physically and intellectually. Transformed into



the mid-Victorian strong-minded woman, Lucrezia was a moralizing tale for the deviated female spectator or female reader. Contrary to the good role-models that were being paraded on stage and in printed literature, Lucrezia's life would have been enough to provoke fear of rejection, laughter, or even death in the confused modern woman of the period. As we have seen, there were enough elements to condemn Lucrezia as a pernicious influence to women, and so, she was expertly transformed into laughable, stock characters that attempted to disdain the growing new role of women in society. Under the patriarchal system of the period, not much had been said about Borgia's extraordinary education in languages, music, and politics, or about her intelligence to navigate the intricate Renaissance society. In the end, Victorians would remember her as just another example of female perversity.

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