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DISCIPLINE AND CARNIVAL: A LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF THE VICTORIAN FINISHING SCHOOL

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The paper discusses the fictional finishing school in *Whom to Marry and How to Get Married* (1848) by the Mayhew brothers, placing the novel in a broader literary and cultural context. A distinctive all-female space that both reflects and creates the values of the wider social world, the finishing school teaches its pupils about the realities of the marriage market and promotes attitudes such as snobbishness and skills such as dissemblance to ensure the girls' success in the matrimonial race. Instruction is rigorous and rules are rigid; despite this fact, or precisely because of it, the girls contrive a small rebellion – a clandestine midnight feast that flouts the school's most treasured precepts.

Key words: Henry and Augustus Mayhew, the Victorian marriage market, the Victorian finishing school, women's education

This paper is concerned with the representation of the Victorian finishing school in *Whom to Marry and How to Get Married: Or, The Adventures of a Lady in Search of a Good Husband* (1848) by Henry and Augustus Mayhew. The novel, narrated by a young middle-class woman called Lotty, is divided into "offers" rather than chapters – Offer the First, Offer the Second, and so on. Very few of those actually involve marriage proposals – most trace awkward entanglements, with Lotty being courted by (or more typically courting) yet another man but falling spectacularly short of the matrimonial end. The authors' intention is clearly didactic: along with an eventful narrative full of complicated maneuvering, ironic conversations in which the parties talk at cross purposes, violent confrontations and dramatic reversals, the novel serves as a guide to moral conduct for young women – more specifically, as a guide to conduct on the marriage market. Rather than by example, it teaches by the inadequacy of the protagonist's

choices and their disastrous consequences; it teaches, in fact, whom *not* to marry and how *not* to get married. Far from learning from experience, Lotty makes decisions that become progressively wrong-headed and perverse, driven as they are by vanity, jealousy, pride, and spite.

The novel can thus be described as an anti-Bildungsroman that offers a grim, vivid negative of what to be and what to strive for as a young middle-class Victorian woman. It also exposes the difficult balancing act that, once she enters the marriage market, a woman has to perform: in the course of the narrative, Lotty is chastised both for yielding too easily to the affections of the heart and for being too calculating. The novel exposes, too, the brutality of the market in which a mother will be reduced to a pimp (Lotty's mother, like Mrs Skewton in *Dombey and Son*, sees her daughter's marriage as an opportunity for her own social advancement, and readily answers an elderly lord's prurient questions about Lotty's appearance), and a man will frequent spa towns in the hope of "pick[ing] up" some nice, "tidy consumption" (Mayhew brothers 1848: 164) – that is, of meeting and marrying a rich consumptive woman who is unlikely to live long.

The novel opens with Lotty's parents making the dismayed discovery that she has been carrying on a flirtation and exchanging love tokens with her drawing master – a nice but penniless young man. The relationship is nipped in the bud, and Lotty's father uses all his powers of persuasion to wean the sixteen-year-old girl off any silly notions about love in a cottage. Because Lotty keeps moping and moaning about the lost love of her life, he sends her off to a finishing school, hoping that her studies there will distract her from her romantic obsession. The studies typically offered at a Victorian finishing school – or at any expensive school targeted specifically at middle-class girls[1] – were not, of course, predominantly of the academic variety. The aims of this institution, the Victorians themselves recognized, were social rather than scholarly – "[t]he more select or exclusive the school, the better" (Dyhouse 1981: 41). For the majority of middle-class parents the purpose of their daughters' education was to make them into "ladylike, marriageable young women" (ibid.: 59); above anything else, such schools were meant to give girls social polish and provide them with the kind of "ornamental knowledge" that would attract suitors (Purvis 1991: 64). In other words, the education provided by a finishing school was firmly premised on the realities of the marriage market, to which it took a very pragmatic approach; and the pragmatism was instilled in the girls

[1] On the difficulties of a neat categorization of middle-class girls' schools throughout the 19th century, see Purvis 1991: 68, 76; Dyhouse 1981: 56 – 57.

themselves, who would be made "fully aware both of their own privileged class position and also of the fact that their social status throughout life would depend on that of their […] future husbands" (Dyhouse 1981: 55).

The school Lotty is sent to, Chesterfield House, is fully representative of the mid-19th century finishing school. To begin with, it is a small family business – it is run by two middle-aged sisters, the Misses Thimblebee (and the French mistress, the supposed *native de Paris* Angelique de Nemours, is in reality their cousin Sally Cockle). Secondly, it advertises its exclusiveness: as the Misses Thimblebee point out, no "young plebeian 'mushrooms'" are admitted to the school – not even if the most tempting offer on the mutual advantage system is made – while any "budding ducal 'strawberry-leaves'" would, of course, be particularly welcome (Mayhew brothers 1848: 16). Finally and most importantly, the school's curriculum is – as we will see – perfectly typical in its emphasis on social graces, personal presentation, and feminine accomplishments meant to guarantee marriageability.

Although Chesterfield House provides the setting only for the second of the "offers" in the novel, this is one of the longest chapters. More importantly, though Lotty does not change overnight and still clings to some of her romantic notions, it is at the school that the process of her pragmatization begins – a process that, actively assisted by her mother, will determine the entire course of her subsequent life. In this sense, the finishing-school chapter is as central to the novel as the opening chapters about Miss Pinkerton's academy are to *Vanity Fair* – in each case, patterns of personality and interpersonal relations are established that affect the course of the characters' life. (The same is also true of the chapter about George Osborne's and Dobbin's school years.) The Mayhew brothers' novel thus belongs to the Victorian literary tradition of the (satiric) portrayal and critique of the school system, represented by the work of authors such as Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, and most famously Dickens, who placed the problem at the very centre of *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Hard Times*, and who depicted schools in a great many of his other novels as well (for example, the woefully inadequate village school attended by Pip in *Great Expectations*, or the oppressive and equally inadequate school attended by Charlie Hexam in *Our Mutual Friend*).

Dickens addressed girls' finishing schools in particular, too – "Sentiment", one of the tales in *Sketches by Boz*, is a satiric comment on just such an establishment: the pretentiously named Minerva House that provides girls with "a smattering of everything, and a knowledge of nothing" (Dickens 1989: 323). Dickens pokes fun at the school's curriculum, with its

emphasis on fashionable foreign languages, dancing, "and other necessaries of life", and at the expensive display of maps and books in the school's parlour – maps and books which, though never used by the pupils, impress visiting parents "with the very deep appearance of the place" (ibid.). Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, too, is critical of "the little course of study which was considered necessary for ladies in those days" (Thackeray 2015: 19) and of a curriculum dominated by superficial accomplishments and dictated by fashion. A skewed hierarchy of values is also revealed through the letter which Miss Pinkerton writes to Amelia's parents and in which her comments on deportment and the use of the backboard precede, and are far more specific than, her comments on Amelia's religious and moral qualities. Thackeray exposes, too, Miss Pinkerton's own hollow pretensions to learning – the ancient "Minerva", as he repeatedly refers to her, the "Semiramis of Hammersmith" (ibid.: 3) who prides herself on her friendship with Doctor Johnson, does not, for instance, understand French (a deficiency that Becky Sharp, herself perfectly proficient in the language, readily exploits). Both Dickens and Thackeray also reveal the snobbishness of finishing schools and their elaborate social hierarchies. In Dickens's "Sentiment", the proprietresses of Minerva House are transported with ecstasy when an M. P. approaches them about placing his daughter at their school, and the illustrious parent himself insists that the girl be admitted as a parlour boarder. In Thackeray's novel, the heiress Miss Swartz, a parlour boarder that "pa[ys] double" (ibid.: 7), is naturally resented by Becky, who, as an articled pupil, is at the opposite end of the school's social scale.[2]

These fictional representations of schools were part of a larger Victorian debate on the nature and purpose of education. The numerous concerns that were being raised specifically about the nature and purpose of the education of middle-class girls resulted in a reform movement which emerged in the 1840s and, gaining considerable strength over the next two decades, eventually led to a series of changes towards a more academic education for girls.[3] A similar discontent – in particular with the ornamental

[2] Dickens also attacks such hierarchies in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, where an articled pupil at Miss Monflathers's school is abused by the proprietress and despised by students, teachers, and servants alike. Significantly, the articled pupil is both much brighter and much better-looking than the baronet's daughter – "the real live daughter of a real live baronet" – whom Miss Monflathers cherishes as her school's greatest asset (Dickens 2008: 242).

[3] For succinct but informative accounts of this complex process, see Purvis 1991: 73 – 92 and Dyhouse 1981: 55 – 78. The changes were not primarily motivated by an awareness of the value of scholarly accomplishments for women but, rather, were meant

knowledge commonly considered valuable for middle-class girls – was voiced from very different quarters. Discussing modern girls' education in *The Women of England, Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1839), the conservative Sarah Stickney Ellis condemned "that speechless, inanimate, ignorant, and useless being called 'a young lady just come from school'" (Ellis 1839: 107). The illustration preceding this passage reinforces the message: the girl in the picture is represented as an object of curiosity to her friends and younger siblings, but above all as simply an object – listless and passive, good for little more than sitting pretty in a parlour. To Ellis, this is a "truly melancholy spectacle" (ibid.: 112). The problem, she suggests, is that schools cultivate accomplishments "for which [the girls] never find any use in after life" – such as music, drawing, and foreign languages – rather than the practical skills they really need (ibid.: 97). As Ellis bluntly puts it, "[t]here is but a very small proportion of the daughters of farmers, manufacturers, and tradespeople, in England, who are ever called upon for their Latin, their Italian, or even for their French; but all women in this sphere of life are liable to be called upon to visit and care for the sick" (ibid.: 103).

Though she considers the problem of girls' schooling from a very different vantage point, the champion of women's suffrage and women's access to university education Emily Davies presents the end product of the Victorian schooling system in very similar terms. Middle-class women, she suggests in her report "On Secondary Instruction as Relating to Girls" (1864), are kept "in a state of wholesome rust" and an "almost complete mental blankness" – the result of a "doctrine of vicarious rest" devised by hard-working men (qtd. in Purvis 1991: 73). And in her autobiography the leading suffragist Frances Power Cobbe describes the exclusive boarding school she attended in the 1830s in the following terms:

> [A]ll this fine human material [of capable pupils] was deplorably wasted. Nobody dreamed that any one of us could in later life be more or less than an 'Ornament of Society.' […] Not that which was good in itself or useful to the community, or even that which would be delightful to ourselves, but that which would make us admired in society, was the *raison d'être* of each acquirement. Everything was taught us in the inverse ratio of its true importance. At the bottom of the scale were Morals and Religion, and at the top were Music and Dancing … (Cobbe 1894: 63 – 64)

to produce a somewhat more cultivated version of conventional femininity. Marriageability continued to be regarded as the most desirable outcome of girls' education.

All these verdicts are echoed in the verdict which the Mayhew brothers' Lotty passes on her own inadequate education: "when I was finished, and had left [Chesterfield House], I was totally ignorant of all that was really useful, or truly admirable" (Mayhew brothers 1848: 29). But what is it that Lotty does learn at school? Her very first experience is that of being subjected to a grilling by the other girls, who want to know who Lotty's father is, what kind of carriage the family have, and how many servants they keep. This grilling – a test in social status – though insistent, is friendly and, in a way, honest in its bluntness. Still, it is a version of the grandiose snobbishness of the Misses Thimblebee, who take pride in the fact that "no vulgar tradesman's daughter ha[s] ever polluted the exquisitely refined atmosphere" of their school (ibid.: 16). Being clearly satisfied with Lotty's answers about the family's standing, the girls proceed to obtain further vital information – they want to know whether Lotty has a brother, what he looks like, how old he is, and what career he is intended for. Finally, Lotty is subjected to an equally friendly and casual, but also persistent, test of possessions – she is made to show the contents of her box, with every item carefully scrutinized and eliciting envious admiration. Not only do the girls swoon over Lotty's clothes and accessories, but they want to know how much her ribbons cost, whether her silks were bought from a particular posh shop, and whether her crinoline was made in Paris. The proof of Lotty's status is in her box: the gloss of her clothes and the scent of her cosmetics are the most tangible and most reliable evidence of her standing. Having reassured themselves that her family is one that can afford "delightful extravagance", the girls can safely befriend her – "and there we walked up and down with our arms round each other's waists" (ibid.: 19).

On that first day at her new school, Lotty is annoyed with the "stupid girls" (ibid.: 16), with their questions, their pawing of her belongings, and their exclamations. Even so, only a few months later, when a new girl arrives at the school, Lotty asks her the very same questions about her brother that she was asked – and she is perfectly aware that she is behaving in the same way as she once considered stupid and annoying. And although Lotty's stay at the school is abruptly curtailed, by that point she has learned from the Misses Thimblebee "to look down upon even the wealthy tradesman with abhorrence" (ibid.: 42). The finishing-school environment in the novel is presented, then, as one in which attitudes and patterns of behavior are mutually amplified and perpetuated. This environment makes such an effective echo chamber in large part because it is so small and confined; at the same time, it is vitally connected with the wider social world, whose values it both feeds off and feeds into. In the parlours and assembly rooms

of that wider world, for instance, women would be subjected – and would subject other women – to the same tests of status and possession, even if there the appraisal would typically be performed with greater subtlety and artifice than the schoolgirls' direct questioning. In this respect, too, Chesterfield House is representative of the expensive Victorian school for middle-class girls, where "[s]ocial snobbery […] formed part of the 'hidden curriculum'" (Dyhouse 1981: 55).

If snobbishness is the most important attitude that Lotty learns, then the most important skill she learns is artifice:

> At Chesterfield House, young ladies rehearsed the parts they were intended to act at Almack's. There the rough block of the child of nature received its finishing touches, and was converted into the highly polished statue of fashionable society – fit for an ornament to any drawing-room. There the grave of departed nature was adorned with all kinds of artificial flowers; and there, Woman – tutored in all the fascinations of the ball-room – was taught to shine at night like the glow-worm; in order to attract her mate by the display of a brilliance that had no warmth in it. (Mayhew brothers 1848: 16 – 17)

To polish the many rough edges of the "child of nature", a gruelling regime of instruction is necessary. The school's pupils are subjected to a regimen of music and dancing; French and Italian; drawing; and a range of feminine skills like knitting, embroidery, Berlin-wool work, velvet-painting, japanning, and making wax flowers – handicrafts and "knick-knackeries" that Lotty considers "stupid" and dull (ibid.: 26, 27). Further, the girls are taught personal deportment and the correct way of stepping into a carriage, and are made to lie on a backboard for an hour each day, to "prevent any roundness in [the] shoulders" (ibid.: 24). They are instructed in elocution, too, and are expected to observe strict linguistic taboos – Lotty is reprimanded both for unladylike pronunciation and for using a crude word like "cabbage" (as opposed to the more delicate "greens" – ibid.). There are also culinary taboos – beer, for instance, is pronounced a "disgusting beverage", which "no lady of the least pretensions to breeding [is] supposed to know even the taste of" (ibid.: 23); and the girls are forced to become small, delicate eaters. When Lotty breaches decorum by accepting a second helping of soup, this "barbarism […]" prompts Miss Grace Thimblebee to ask her if she was "brought up in the back woods of America" (ibid.: 24 – 25). This rigorous course of instruction permeates the girls' entire day and the entire space and structure of the school. The so-called playground is, in fact, a place where the body of an old landau has been mounted so that the

girls can practise stepping in and out of a carriage; while misdemeanours are typically punished by making the offender learn by heart a relevant portion from one of a vast range of etiquette books.

The apparent restraining of the girls' healthy appetites and animal energy is, however, only possible through considerable artifice and dissemblance. Making their social selves acceptable requires a myriad small hypocrisies; if they are to succeed in the wider social world and on the marriage market, the girls need to learn the imitation game. Many of these artifices are actually institutionalized – in order to appear delicate eaters at dinner, the girls are required to take a substantial meal in the early afternoon. A further hypocrisy is that, although at that afternoon meal the girls are, in fact, allowed to drink beer, this is supposed to be "a profound secret" (ibid.: 23); and although decorum demands that at dinner they do not accept second helpings, decorum likewise demands that they should make the offer to each other. But the most important trick of all that the girls must learn to pull off is, perhaps, that of appearing to be better off financially than they really are. To that end, Miss Grace Thimblebee herself has written an instructive book entitled *How to Live upon Two Hundred A-Year, so as to Make it Appear a Thousand*. This, of course, is the art that Thackeray's Becky Sharp masters to perfection, entering the most illustrious social circles while "liv[ing] well on nothing a year" (Thackeray 2015: 452); and at Chesterfield House, Miss Thimblebee's book is treated as a textbook that must be learnt by heart.

Despite all the rigid and oppressive rules that the girls are made to follow – or precisely because of them – they contrive a small act of rebellion, carving out a small space-and-time of their own as a challenge to the heavily regimented lifestyle imposed on them. The rebellion takes the form of a clandestine midnight feast, at which the usual hypocrisies are discarded and the usual proprieties are flouted. At the feast, these ladies in the making are free to be the playful, mischievous children that, to some extent, they still are. They pool together to buy as much as possible of the food they love, or to make it themselves in excitingly makeshift conditions – their stove is a slate over a fire lit with six candles – while trying to keep as quiet as possible. The girls have fritters, and mutton pies, and cakes, and tamarinds, and ginger-beer which they mix themselves from powder. Their natural appetite unrestrained, they "devour[…]" the food – they are, Lotty says, "as hungry as poets" (Mayhew brothers 1848: 21). At least some of these dishes or their names (like the fritters) would undoubtedly be pronounced crude by the Misses Thimblebee. In their table manners, too, the girls breach the rules that have been instilled in them – in the school's daytime world of decorum and propriety, one of them is fined for eating peas with a knife; at the

midnight feast the girls, sitting on the floor, use their scissors as knives and their tooth-glasses as tumblers. (The batter for the fritters has been beaten with a toothbrush, with a soap-dish serving as a bowl.) And when they raise a toast with their ginger beer, there is a most unladylike "Hip, hip, hurra! hurra! hurra-a-a-a-a!" (ibid.).

The stories the girls tell each other, too, are stories about the breaking of rules and the crossing of boundaries. Set against the books of etiquette taught at the school, these stories make up the girls' little private book of adventure. One girl shares her cross-dressing experience: putting on her brother's clothes, putting up her hair, and even making herself a moustache. Her disguise was so good, she suggests, that she was taken for a man, and roamed the streets of London on her own at dusk. The story concludes with "Oh! it was such a good bit of fun […] she wished she'd been born a boy" (ibid.). Even if the wish might be considered an exaggeration, the exclamation reveals a profound discontent with the constraints of the gender and social roles which the girls are expected to play, and which they perceive as unnatural and uncongenial. A similar discontent also underlies another pupil's story of playing practical jokes on her uncle. The delight with which the girl tells the others about stitching together the tops of her uncle's stockings, putting flour in his nightcap, making him an apple-pie bed, etc. suggests her frustration with the proprieties she is required to observe as a young woman. While this story may appear innocent compared to the cross-dressing story, the girl's enjoyment in telling it offends against two sets of rules at once – the practical jokes are both gender- and age-inappropriate.

The girls exchange stories well into the early morning. Not only does this go against the rules of the school's perfectly regulated daily round but, because they have no time to perform the mandatory grooming operations, it leads to the violation of further rules. As they emerge for morning prayers – one girl with her hair ungreased, another with her eyebrows unplucked, a third without a crinoline on – they look not merely slovenly but, in the eyes of the Misses Thimblebee, downright "heathen" (ibid.: 23). The stringent rules of personal grooming, like the rules for suppressing one's natural appetite, seem to form the boundary between civilization and savagery. The self-restraint and discipline necessary to maintain an immaculate appearance are, by implication, the same as the self-restraint and discipline which guarantee the uprightness of one's soul. It is for this reason that the Misses Thimblebee accuse the offending girls of being "wicked" and having fallen into "evil ways" (ibid.: 22, 23). In their world, keeping one's eyebrows plucked is next to godliness. This, then, is the last fundamental lesson Lotty has to learn at school: that the moral and the presentable are the same.

In summary, the finishing school which Lotty attends makes girls into ladies – and thus makes them marriageable – by instilling in them snobbishness, artifice, and a readiness to treat surface as substance. In this way, it both prepares the girls for the wider social world and perpetuates some of the most problematic aspects of that world; it acts as a microcosm of that world. The novel reflects, in particular, the most unpleasant sides of the Victorian marriage market, and echoes contemporary concerns about the mental and moral degradation resulting from conventional middle-class girls' education. Authors like Dickens and Thackeray, too, expose the venality and hypocrisy of the marriage market – *Dombey and Son* and *Vanity Fair* are among the most powerful Victorian novels on the subject; they also criticize, as we have seen, misguided conventional ideas about what middle-class girls' education should consist in. The Mayhew brothers' *Whom to Marry and How to Get Married* is, of course, far less known than any of the works of Dickens or Thackeray. Even so, it has just as much to tell us about the peculiar institution of the finishing school and, by extension, about the society that it was sustained by and that it helped to sustain.

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