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“READER, I DID NOT MARRY HIM”: NOTES ON A VICTORIAN ANTI-BILDUNGSROMAN

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The Bildungsroman is arguably the quintessential Victorian novel form, both embodying and moulding central aspects of the Victorian worldview. No less important than this form, however, are the forms that counter and challenge its conventions and ideologies, such as the female Bildungsroman and the Anti-Bildungsroman. This paper discusses the ways in which *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, subverts the conventions both of the Victorian Bildungsroman in general and of the female Victorian Bildungsroman in particular, and functions as a didactic Anti-Bildungsroman.

Key words: Henry and Augustus Mayhew, Victorian Bildungsroman, female Bildungsroman, Anti-Bildungsroman

This paper offers a reading of the Mayhew brothers’ *Whom to Marry and How to Get Married: Or, The Adventures of a Lady in Search of a Good Husband* (1848) as a female Anti-Bildungsroman. In the theory and history of the novel, the concepts of the Bildungsroman, the female Bildungsroman, and the Anti-Bildungsroman have all been the subject of vigorous debate. The idea of the Bildungsroman, to begin with, seems extremely elastic and elusive, with only a “permeable membrane between Bildung proper and improper” (Frow et al. 2020: 1908). Even the founding form of the genre, the late-18th and early/mid-19th century German Bildungsroman, may be something of a “phantom”, since it appears to consist only of *Wilhelm Meister* and possibly “two and a half other examples” (Sammons 1981: 239, 237). The status of the female version of the genre is also controversial, since the Bildungsroman has often seemed fundamentally male. Susan Fraiman is just one of many critics who have asked “Is There a Female Bildungsroman?” (Fraiman 1993: chapter title). At the close of her essay “The Female

'Bildungsroman': Calling It into Question", Carol Lazzaro-Weis reiterates the question "Is there such a thing as a female *Bildungsroman*?", and offers the following answer: "Probably not, which is why it has been necessary […] for […] women writers and critics to invent one" (Lazzaro-Weis 1990: 34). Finally, the dividing line between the Bildungsroman and the Anti-Bildungsroman is notoriously blurry – an indeterminacy reflecting the indeterminate nature of the Bildung itself, which may be interpreted either as a "necessary and beneficial compromise between the private and the public" or as the individual's "subjugation [and] defeat" by society (Kociatkiewicz 2008: 22). Some notion of the Anti-Bildungsroman may well be "inscribed in texts that, at first glance, do not appear to subvert ideas of successful self-formation" (Rüggemeier 2023: 7); even within the small set of German novels considered to form the canonical Bildungsroman on the model of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, several may in fact be "anti-*Meisters*" (Sammons 1981: 234, 236).

Still, despite the range of critical opinion, there is a broad consensus that the concept of the Bildungsroman remains a useful analytical tool, just as it is widely acknowledged that the elusive Bildungsroman itself, having undergone "[a] myriad transformations and diversifications", remains a "key narrative form" (Frow et al. 2020: 1905). There is general agreement, too, that the Bildungsroman is central to Victorian culture, as more than any other literary form, it gave "full […] expression to the concerns, desires, and ideals of the new middle class" (Levine 2008: 81), becoming "the new standard for the poetics of the novel" in the 19th century (Rüggemeier 2023: 5). As regards the female version of the genre, it has been suggested that in the English tradition the Bildungsroman was "almost equally about women, whose development in the newly emerging bourgeois society was similarly problematic [to men's development]", though "in different ways" (Levine 2008: 89). In the early decades of the 19th century, "bourgeois womanhood was under especially intense construction", and the novel, along with the increasingly popular form of the conduct book, "attempt[ed] to articulate and manage this new icon" (Fraiman 1993: 14).

At the same time, there is an affinity between the female Bildungsroman and the Anti-Bildungsroman – the former may necessarily contain within itself the latter "insofar as it portrays the incompatibility of striving for intellectual independence and of claiming the social role of the (subordinate) wife and mother" (Rüggemeier 2023: 7). Certainly, there are fundamental differences between the life journey of the male and the female protagonist in a 19th-century Bildungsroman. The male protagonist's development typically involves his leaving home and travelling, and the

experience of formative romantic and sexual relationships; it may involve an intense period of his being educated at the school of the streets; it often also involves the pursuit of an artistic vocation and stresses individual genius. For a respectable 19th-century woman, of course, independent travel, premarital sex, and the school of the streets were off limits, and artistic aspiration and excellence were viewed with suspicion.[1] In the Victorian female Bildungsroman, the teleology of the protagonist's growth and achievement is inextricably linked to marriage; the most conspicuous feature of the genre is that the Bildung "takes place in or on the periphery of marriage" (Baruch 1981: 335). Though both the male and the female versions of the Victorian Bildungsroman are concerned with upward mobility, for women marriage was the most important means of mobility – women were "not so much liberated by the new social and economic systems as reconstrained" (Levine 2008: 89). While for a male protagonist fulfilment is to be obtained in the public sphere, for a female protagonist "the most consequential choice is invariably who, or whether, to marry" (Adams 2012: 124).

Whom to Marry and How to Get Married: Or, The Adventures of a Lady in Search of a Good Husband – this satirical novel's title, reminiscent of that of a conduct book, is not to be considered trivial. As Fraiman points out, conduct books in the late 18th and the 19th century were quite frank about the difficulties a woman faced in trying to find a good husband; about the likelihood of her being deliberately deceived; and, even in a happy marriage, about the certainty that the husband's affection for his wife will eventually fade and the near-certainty that he will then be unfaithful to her (Fraiman 1993: 16 – 18). In the words of Lady Pennington, whose conduct book for young women was addressed to her daughters, "So great is the hazard, so disproportioned the chances, that I could almost wish the dangerous die was never to be thrown for any of you!" (qtd. in Fraiman 1993: 18).

[1] For a concise summary of these and other central parameters of the male Bildungsroman that are emphatically irrelevant to the 19th-century female version of the genre, see Rüggemeier 2023: 9, who draws on Jerome Buckley (including his formulation that Bildung requires "at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting"), and Fraiman 1993: 5 – 8, who draws on Susanne Howe (including her formulation that "Going somewhere is the thing") as well as on Buckley. (Howe and Buckley provide convenient starting points for an exploration of the female Bildungsroman as they define the self's development in essentially masculine terms.) The motif of the protagonist's temporary "immersion in the worldly school of the streets" is mentioned in Slaughter 2011: 94. A concise summary of the major differences between the male and the female versions of the Bildungsroman can be found in Abel et al. 1983: 7 – 9.

The Mayhews' novel focuses on a young middle-class woman called Lotty, and traces her quest for a husband; rather than into chapters, it is divided into offers – Offer the First, Offer the Second, and so on until Offer the Last. The novel's plot, then, aligns perfectly with the Bildungsroman plot, which is fundamentally "a version of the quest story" (Hirsch 1979: 297). Its neat linearity, too, like the linear chronological plot typical of the Bildungsroman, places the protagonist in the narrative foreground (ibid.). That privileged position is consolidated by the fact that, as in *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, or *Great Expectations*, the protagonist is also the narrator of her own life. And if the Bildungsroman in general focuses on the protagonist's confrontation with "a world of possibility at once exhilarating and fearful" (Adams 2012: 124), what appears both exhilarating and fearful in this novel is, more specifically, the world of the marriage market. The Mayhews' Lotty sees marriage as a challenge which she is game to take on; she is willing to try a variety of strategies and stratagems, and is mostly undaunted by her repeated failure to secure a husband.

In the process, however, she also reveals how difficult it is for a woman to function on the marriage market and strike just the right balance between various motivations – at the beginning of the novel, Lotty is all heart, later she becomes all head. (She is chastised for both.) The Bildungsroman, because it explores the interactions between the protagonist and the social order, inevitably exposes the limitations of that order. The same is true of the Anti-Bildungsroman. Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* – to take the best known Victorian example of the genre – suggests not so much that Jude is unsuited to modern society as that modern society "with its rigid, depersonalizing, and exclusive forms and institutions, is becoming unsuited for sustaining sensitive human beings" (Giordano 1972: 588). The Mayhews' novel focuses on one particular institution – the marriage market – to expose the ruthless competition, the deceit, and the commodification of people by which it is marked. If money is an overwhelming presence in the genre of the Bildungsroman, and if the suggestion that the self is "but an object to be bought and sold" undermines the very idea of the fulfilment of the self (Hirsch 1979: 309), then in a novel specifically concerned with the marriage market money does not merely talk: money screams. In the Mayhews' novel, both female and male characters in search of a wealthy spouse will objectify the other party. Lotty herself metonymically reduces men to their property or their house of business – she tells us that she has had an offer from "a very nice Swiss cottage", another from "a young firm in the city", etc. (Mayhew brothers 1848: 267). In her turn, she almost falls victim to a man who invests sizeable sums of money in bribing legal clerks

in order to gain access to the wills of the parents of the women he is courting, and according to whose friends the best investment to make is to frequent posh spa towns: if a man strikes lucky, he may "pick[…] up a very tidy consumption" there – that is, he may marry a rich consumptive woman who "will not remain long on [his] hands" (ibid.: 164). The marriage market, according to the novel, also comes dangerously close to prostitution – when, for example, the elderly lascivious Lord Fortiwinx angles for details about Lotty's physical attractions, her mother is happy to provide a description. She thus joins the circle of mothers in Victorian literature who act as pimps for their daughters – most notably Edith Dombey's mother but also, to some extent, Tess's.[2]

But what kind of protagonist does Lotty make? A remarkably active one. For most of the novel, she is the one courting the other party, and this marks her as not only indecorous but also different from such Bildungsroman protagonists as Pip, whose life is "the very antithesis of self-determination" (Adams 2012: 212), or David Copperfield, who for the most part "does not make anything happen" and whose moral problems are vicariously displaced onto other characters, so as to exempt him from action and responsibility (Levine 2008: 94, 93). Indeed, Hirsch has suggested that for the Bildungsroman protagonist passivity is the norm: despite the development he undergoes, he remains "a plaything of circumstance", "giv[ing] shape to events without actually causing them" (Hirsch 1979: 297). Hirsch, however, is primarily concerned with the male Bildungsroman, and it seems that female Bildungsroman protagonists can be very active indeed. Jane Eyre is much more active than either Pip or David, and her belief that women, just like men, "must have action" (Brontë 1993: 114) caused some contemporary readers to regard the novel as seditious and to compare the restless, discontented spirit it is informed by to the spirit of Chartism.[3] The Mayhews' Lotty, like Jane, makes a series of moral choices and initiates a series of actions, giving shape to her own life (though the choices are mostly wrongheaded and the actions mostly backfire). In her relentless pursuit of men, she challenges both social taboos and literary conventions. If the typical Bildungsroman hero experiences a minimum of two affairs, Lotty experiences many more entanglements; if in the typical Bildungsroman

[2] Tess's mother deliberately primps a passive Tess for a meeting with a wealthy man the family have never seen. When she is done, she surveys her handiwork "like a painter [stepping back] from his easel" (Hardy 2008: 55). She has made Tess look more physically developed and much older than she really is – a crucial factor in the attitude Alec will adopt towards her.

[3] See Elizabeth Rigby's review of the novel in *The Quarterly Review* (especially p. 174).

women serve to mark the male protagonist's moral growth, acting merely as "milestones" (Fraiman 1993: 7), then Lotty makes milestones out of her men. There is another difference, too. If David Copperfield experiences his two affairs and, ultimately subduing his famous "undisciplined heart", is allowed salvation, no such salvation is made available to Lotty. From her undisciplined heart she lurches into unrestrained greed and pride – and she thus remains unredeemed.

As the novel opens, Lotty is sixteen and in love with her drawing master, and she goes as far as to exchange tokens with him. When her parents discover the clandestine courtship and try to put an end to it, she clings to her romantic ideas of love in a cottage and refuses to be swayed. She literally falls ill and experiences hallucinations of being married to her beloved. She displays, then, the typical features of the Bildungsroman protagonist as she or he is at the beginning – a young person driven, and made vulnerable, by "misguided ambitions and idealism", with a mind "open and absorptive and impressionable" (Levine 2008: 81, 82). In Lotty's case, ambition takes the form of romantic aspiration; and her impressionable mind, like Jane Eyre's, is deeply affected by her reading – though while Jane's imagination is set soaring by the evocative landscapes in a book on birds, Lotty's passion is for popular romance, from which she draws many of her silly notions (for instance, the idea that all fathers are tyrants determined to make their children miserable). An imagination fostered by the clichés of popular fiction is, to be sure, a rather second-rate one; still, it fits perfectly the Bildungsroman template of the young protagonist's "powerful internal life that is imaginatively well beyond the constraining realities of actual life" (Levine 2008: 83). Like the typical Bildungsroman protagonist at the beginning of their development, too, Lotty is pure-hearted and spontaneous (though also somewhat vain). She impulsively confesses that the offending brooch – a gift from the drawing master – belongs to her, not to her younger sister, on whom suspicion falls; and she is full of charitable compassion for the impoverished aristocratic wife of an abusive working-class husband. (Lotty's father introduces her to the woman as a warning about the dangers of unequal marriage.)

This, then, is Lotty at the beginning of the novel, during her first two attachments – to the drawing master and then to a mere boy, the brother of a classmate. But if the progress of the typical Bildungsroman protagonist is from innocence to experience, Lotty's progress is from innocence to corruption. Starting out as a naively idealistic romantic, she soon hardens into an increasingly unscrupulous and ruthlessly calculating fortune-hunter. For most of the novel, she functions firmly within what Baruch has called

"the Pamela tradition" in the female Bildungsroman – a term referring to the protagonist's tendency to identify marriage with upward mobility, as opposed to "the Emma tradition", in which the protagonist identifies marriage with education and increased knowledge "in some wide experiential sense" (Baruch 1981: 335 – 36).[4] Lotty goes through a number of relationships driven by vanity, greed, pride, and spite, making her entire life "a snare, a trick, and a lie" (Mayhew brothers 1848: 50). Even though formally the novel consists of a series of "offers", there are only three proposals and two marriages. The first marriage leaves her penniless and dependent on her parents, as her profligate young husband is soon killed in a sporting accident – the result of his own fecklessness – without having made any provision for her. The marriage is also all wrong, from the perspective of Lotty's father, because Lotty is far too susceptible to her husband's rough habits and attitudes, and in her imitation of them "lay[s] aside the lovely gentleness of woman" and "all the homely and peaceful virtues of the wife" (ibid.: 182).

The second marriage, on which the novel ends, is an unmitigated disaster: by entering into this marriage, Lotty essentially cuts off her nose to spite her face. At this point in the narrative, she is reduced to earning her own income as a governess; when her elderly, miserly, foolishly self-satisfied employer proposes to her, she accepts the proposal despite her loathing and contempt for him, so that – as a wealthy lady – she can have her revenge on her mother, whose meanness has driven her out of her parents' home; on her younger sister, who is happily married to a man with a thriving business; and, above all, on the housekeeper in the establishment, with whom she has been involved in a continual battle for power. Lotty's plan backfires. The growing mutual dislike between her and her husband transforms their married life into a series of escalating hostilities, culminating when he tells the servants they are to obey the housekeeper, not their new mistress. Lotty and her husband separate, and once again she has to go back to her parents, with only a meagre allowance from her husband – the barest minimum that the law obliges him to pay.

The disastrous end of Lotty's long marital quest marks the novel as an Anti-Bildungsroman, but even more important than the novel's narrative arc is its moral arc. If in the classic Bildungsroman the growth process necessarily involves making errors, then Lotty's life is all errors. If the Bildungsroman protagonist achieves sobriety, then Lotty achieves cynicism. If, at the end of the transition from innocence to experience, a

[4] In *Jane Eyre*, the two traditions are fused (ibid.: 339).

Bildungsroman protagonist emerges as "a full, harmonious personality" (Giordano 1972: 582), in which the spiritual and the material are in balance, then Lotty only reaches an unalloyed materialism. None of this is to say that Lotty is unaware of what motivates her choices or of what she has become. On the contrary, she recognizes and articulates her own flaws with perfect clarity. Insofar as successful Bildung involves not just the protagonist's maturation and reconciliation with the world, but also his or her "insight" (Frow et al. 2020: 1905), and insofar as a crucial part of maturation itself is the "recognition of personal limitation" (Hirsch 1979: 301), Lotty approximates a Bildungsroman protagonist. But although she has insight into her motives and her limitations, and although she recognizes the perverse self-destructiveness of her behaviour, she ultimately lacks the courage and strength to change. Her story, then, is one of both progressive moral atrophy and arrested development. It is this, more than anything else, that in the final analysis makes her narrative an Anti-Bildung.

Two central features of the Bildungsroman in general are the theme of the inadequate or absent parents (the protagonist is often an orphan) and, closely related to this theme, the figure of the educator or mentor. In the female Bildungsroman in particular, the protagonist often "has trouble with mentors" and "mothers are usually either dead or deficient as models"; the protagonist's search for a positive mother figure typically proves futile (Fraiman 1993: 6). The theme of deficient parents also recurs in the Anti-Bildungsroman, where it may be even more pronounced – consider Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*. And while Hardy's Jude, an orphan, seems to find both a father figure and a mentor in Phillotson, the latter will eventually fail him as father and mentor alike (Giordano 1972: 583). In the Mayhews' novel, there is a neat opposition between the two parents, with Lotty herself commenting shrewdly on the difference in their pedagogical approach and suggesting that her father's gentle reproofs have much more weight than "all [her] mother's weak and intemperate scoldings" (Mayhew brothers 1848: 41). Lotty's father is wise and kind, and genuinely cares for his daughter's wellbeing; while her mother is immature, inconsistent, and irresponsible, often placing her own shallow social ambitions before her daughter's happiness. If the fate of a Bildung protagonist is determined in large part by their "intrinsic capacity to deal with the conflicting and potentially corrupting experiences with which they engage" (Levine 2008: 82), then Lotty's failure is the result of making the wrong choice when confronted with two conflicting moral influences. Her degradation is to an overwhelming extent the result of repeatedly rejecting her father's guidance, even though she is aware of its value, and yielding to her mother's corrupting

influence, even though she recognizes both her mother's own moral flaws and the fact that she encourages Lotty's worst propensities and stifles her best ones, making her "a foul […] creature" (Mayhew brothers 1848: 96). It is Lotty's failure to overcome this influence that transforms her potential Bildung into an Anti-Bildung.

Another influence that contributes to Lotty's downfall is the finishing school she is sent to in the hope that she will be distracted from her obsession with the drawing master. But what Lotty learns there is, above all, social pride, affectation, and duplicity – all the qualities regarded as necessary for a girl's success on the marriage market. The exclusive establishment teaches the girls "to look down upon even the wealthy tradesman with abhorrence", and encourages them to "rehearse[…] the parts they [a]re intended to act at Almack's" (Mayhew brothers 1848: 42, 16). If Lotty recognizes the moral wrongness of her mother's "artifices" and "machinations" in trying to secure the highest bidder for her (ibid.: 94), she is equally clear-sighted about the role played in her degradation by the school, where

> 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.
>
> (ibid.: 16 – 17)

Lotty's mother and the finishing school, then, are twin corrupting influences which reinforce each other – one working on the familial level, the other on the institutional. On the level of formal education, too, Lotty's Bildung is an Anti-Bildung.

One last aspect of the Mayhews' novel must be considered. Susan Fraiman has suggested that in the female Bildungsroman, the central narrative may be "blurr[ed] […] by alternative stories of female destiny" – for instance, through a narrative bifurcation between the fates of two characters – "so that each text is less the telling of one life than a struggle between rival life stories" (Fraiman 1993: 10, 12). In this novel, Lotty is pitted against her younger sister Fanny – an artless, affectionate girl who quietly refuses to treat love as a game and marriage as a race. (The reason why Fanny escapes their mother's influence is that the mother treats Lotty as a favourite and neglects her other daughter.) Fanny is rewarded for her virtues by ending up married to the one man that she loves – a man, moreover, whose business, though initially modest, gradually gathers

momentum, allowing the couple to live in increasing comfort and prosperity. The beginning of the couple's rise coincides with Lotty's plunge into poverty after the death of her first husband; this makes the downturn in her fortunes even more intolerable for Lotty, who used both to flaunt her glamorous lifestyle to Fanny and to shun her as her social inferior. And when Fanny offers Lotty help in her hour of need, her kindness only fuels Lotty's resentment and rage.

The stark, fairy-tale opposition between the good and the wicked sister highlights the novel's didactic purpose. If didacticism is an important aspect of the work performed by the Bildungsroman, which "educates the reader by portraying the education of the protagonist" (Hirsch 1979: 298), this can be extended to the Anti-Bildungsroman, too. In terms of narrative space, Fanny's humble success story remains very much in the background, while Lotty's "cascade of calamity" (Mayhew brothers 1848: 49) is firmly in the foreground – negative example, we know, can have much greater impact than positive example, and the story of Lotty's Anti-Bildung is a cautionary tale. Lotty's moral decline is also, and conspicuously, her decline as a woman – her forwardness in courting rather than being courted, her incapacity for truthfulness and constancy, her rejection of gentleness and grace all leave her unsexed. Ultimately, the Mayhews' novel acts as an anti-conduct book, teaching one whom *not* to marry and how *not* to get married – and, by extension, who *not* to be. Both as (anti)conduct book and as (anti)Bildung, it is thus engaged in the formation and consolidation of the Victorian middle-class ethos in the area of gender roles and the domestic ideal.

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