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## Negotiating Victorian Feminism: Anne Thackeray Ritchie's Short Fiction

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She read the review of a novel, of a new book of poetry, and then she turned to an essay. It was something about women and marrying, about feebleness, and inaptitude, and missing their vocation. . . .

Anne Thackeray Ritchie, *The Village on the Cliff*<sup>1</sup>

Best known for her autobiographical introductions to the collected works of her father, William Makepeace Thackeray, and for her biographical essays on several famous writers, Anne Thackeray Ritchie has repeatedly been considered most important as a source of inside information regarding her famous contemporaries. From Dickens to the Brownings, from Tennyson to James, she counted many of the canonical British nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers as her friends and often wrote to and about them.<sup>2</sup> The scope of her work, however, is much wider and deserves closer scrutiny than it has so far received.

Throughout her long writing career, Ritchie often focused on analyzing the social condition of Victorian women. A number of her essays strive to represent women as capable, indeed as potentially the intellectual equals of men, and they carefully depict the social position of

unmarried women in a positive light, challenging the traditional view of the spinster as pitiful.<sup>3</sup> Her fiction is also centrally concerned with this theme, and her novels question Victorian ideologies of marriage and domesticity, offering subtly subversive interrogations of the Victorian female Bildungsroman.<sup>4</sup>

But Ritchie never openly embraced a feminist identity. As I have argued before, her writing consistently exhibits the tensions and ambivalences typical of Victorian women writers who sought to denounce Victorian gender ideologies but who felt constrained by social pressure to conform. A survey of the entire corpus of her work reveals how ambivalent Ritchie remained not only about creating unquestionably strong-willed, independent women characters, but also about suggesting that women should embrace exclusively traditional female roles and necessarily seek a husband and raise a family. Most of Ritchie's work offers compelling evidence of her struggle to create representations that, without being too radical, undermined, among other things, the ideological assumptions of Victorian notions about marriage. Several of the strategies that allowed her to test the boundaries of Victorian convention have already been discussed;<sup>5</sup> still, much work remains to be done to explore those strategies more fully and to evaluate their importance within the scope of both Ritchie's writings and the feminine writing tradition that she so valued.<sup>6</sup>

Critics have noted that one of the most characteristic and effective elements of her prose is an impressionistic quality that anticipates the modernist prose of Virginia Woolf and Henry James. Most recently, Esther Schwartz-McKinzie has commented on how critics "credited Ritchie during her lifetime with an interesting and pleasing style—a combination of precision and 'diffuseness,' of realism and impressionism—that was uniquely her own."<sup>7</sup> In her essay "The Thackeray Connection: Virginia Woolf's Aunt Anny," Carol Hanbery MacKay points out that Ritchie "looked ahead to Modernist modes of narrating consciousness," and emphasizes that Ritchie and Woolf "shared [an] impressionistic style," which, she argues, was a "conscious choice."<sup>8</sup> In her introduction to *The Two Thackerays* MacKay explains that "circularity characterizes Ritchie's approach to narrative and biography because she aims for

mood or feeling—something that cannot be pinned down or listed chronologically but must be evoked impressionistically."<sup>9</sup>

In addition to a "pleasing" effect or a "mood," it should be stressed, Ritchie's style provides her prose with an indirection essential for her to negotiate her dual position within Victorian culture. Such indirection is further emphasized by the slightness of most of her plots. This gesture, which certainly anticipates modernism, demonstrates that, deliberately or not, Ritchie was exploring alternatives to traditional Victorian realism so as to diffuse her indictment of Victorian ideologies of marriage and thus avoid the appearance of strong opposition. A thorough analysis of her short fiction is particularly useful in this context since the tensions and ambivalences that are consistently present in all her work are highly manifest in these texts, especially in specific features of her narrative technique and in different treatments of the same recurring theme.<sup>10</sup>

"To Esther," "Sola," and "Out of the World," collected in *To Esther and Other Sketches* (1869), and "Da Capo," "A Postscript from a Stage Box," and "Fina's Aunt," collected in *Miss Williamson's Divagations* (1881), are stories concerned with women's choices and/or marriage.<sup>11</sup> Both thematically and formally, they are especially revealing of Ritchie's ambivalence regarding Victorian gender ideologies in general and the culture's tendency to idealize marriage and domesticity in particular. Specifically, the stories in the earlier collection introduce characters and situations that Ritchie revisits in the later collection, and, when juxtaposed, they reveal the extent to which reprising the same themes is part of Ritchie's attempt to come to terms with her own ideological position. Moreover, in revisiting the same material Ritchie experiments with different ways to narrate it. The earlier stories reveal some innovative narrative strategies but ultimately fit into Victorian realist conventions and adopt omniscience. The later stories rewrite the earlier ones by narrating them from the first person point of view of Miss Williamson, a narrator whose "divagations" anticipate modernist perspectivism.

Ultimately, then, Ritchie's short stories are not only effective venues for negotiating her ambivalence, but also a sort of microcosm of the shift from Victorian realism to modernist perspectivism and its attendant ideological implications. This study analyzes the short stories that best illustrate this process and explores the extent to which Ritchie's role as a transitional figure between literary movements was partly necessitated by the attempt to negotiate between feminist principles and Victorian ideologies.

### *Ambiguous Narratives*

"To Esther"<sup>12</sup> introduces the central theme of Ritchie's fiction—Victorian women and their choices regarding marriage.<sup>13</sup> Having rejected Smith, a man who cares for her deeply, Esther marries a man she loves but who proves unfaithful and cruel. Seven years later, a widow with two children, Esther meets Smith again. He still cares for her, and she realizes she loves him. After a few misunderstandings, they speak their feelings for each other, and the story ends with the promise of happiness.

The happy ending notwithstanding, "To Esther" does not endorse marriage unproblematically. In this narrative, Ritchie juxtaposes Esther's choice to marry with a representation of the dangers of her conformity to stereotypical Victorian ideals of femininity and thus problematizes both. In choosing a two-part structure and two different narrators for this early fictional effort, Ritchie further signals her discomfort with the marriage plot and foreshadows the strategic importance that narrative technique (and especially point of view) would come to have in her later fictional attempts to clarify her stance and to negotiate her ambivalence. From the beginning of the story, Esther is represented as helpless, dependent, and undecided. In the first part, started in 1862 and narrated in the first person from the perspective of Smith, when he first confesses his love for her he quotes her as unable to refuse him unequivocally, though she is in love with Halbert: "Oh, what can I say? Oh, I am so lonely. Oh, I have not one friend in the world; and now, suddenly, a helping hand is held out, and I can't—I can't push it away. Oh, don't despise. Oh, forgive me" (p. 12). In her

helplessness, Esther is extremely appealing to Smith: "Despise! scorn! . . . Poor child! I only liked you the more for your plaintive appeal" (p. 12). From his perspective, her seductiveness lies precisely in her reliance on the patriarchal dynamic of feminine submission and masculine patronage. Given his ideological position within Victorian patriarchy, he is unable to represent this reliance as anything but desirable and charming. Nor is he able, given his good faith, to imagine a scenario where it could lead Esther to unhappiness.

But after allowing the first part of her story to explore patriarchy's romanticized tale of male dominance, Ritchie, in the second part, is careful to debunk the ideology that underpins it. Indeed, the painful results of Esther's helplessness are highlighted when she attempts to leave her husband, Halbert, and turns to her father for help:

No one ever knew the life that Esther Halbert led for the six years after she married. Once in an agony of grief and humiliation she escaped to her stepmother with her little girl. Lady Fanny pitied her, gave her some luncheon, talked good sense. Old Colonel Olliver sneered, as was his way, and told his daughter to go home in a cab. He could not advise her remaining with him. . . . "I am not going to have a scandal in the family, and a daughter without a husband constantly about the house." (pp. 46-47)

This scene of "grief and humiliation" takes place in part 2, which was started years later and concluded in 1866 and which employs what J. Hillis Miller has called "that standard convention of Victorian fiction: the omniscient narrator."<sup>14</sup> Here Esther has to confront both the fact that patriarchy's implicit promises of protection have doubly failed her and the fact that she would be even more helpless if she were to attempt to reject them outright.

Inevitably, she returns to her husband.

When, at the end, she looks to a future with Smith by her side, the very tenor of Esther's happy expectations reveals how undecided, weak, and in need of protection she still is:

Here was the faithful friend once more ready to do battle for her with the difficulties of life: ready to shield, and to serve, and encourage to decide,—to tell her what was right; and poor Esther had long felt that to her decision was like a great pain and impossibility.

But here was Smith to advise, and it seemed to her as if troubles and difficulties became like strong places now that he was there. (pp. 85-86)

Undoubtedly, there is a positive tone to this passage, an implicit expectation that patriarchy's promise will be fulfilled this time. Yet Ritchie's ambiguity is ultimately revealed by the contrast between the two scenes, both narrated from an omniscient perspective and thus having equal authority. The closing picture of the happy, hopeful Esther implicitly recalls the picture of a weak woman relieved of the necessity of decision.

The narrative choice of the first part of the story, as any reader acquainted with Ritchie's fiction knows, is atypical, as is the narrative cross-dressing and the epistolary format. Thus it might be tempting to conclude that when, for part 2, written seven years later, she adopted the more typical omniscient point of view, she had simply found a more comfortable perspective. But the use of the two different points of view offers Ritchie a vehicle for rehearsing her doubts and handling her ambivalences. From the first-person perspective of Smith she can explore the implicit appeal of female dependence; from the omniscient perspective she can ironically question that picture. Above all, the two points of view do not require that she make an unequivocal oppositional statement; rather, they permit her to suggest that the complexity of the ideologies that determine women's choices regarding marriage necessitates further consideration.<sup>15</sup>

"Out of the World," a story first published in the Cornhill Magazine in 1863 and collected in the 1869 volume of stories, is another early fictional endeavor that reveals Ritchie's sustained exploration of, and ambivalent perspective on, marriage. At the center of the story is an interrogation of the reasons why women marry and of the ideologies that shape their expectations. Horatia, the protagonist, is a fashionable woman whose life is full of trivial occupations. She is a patient of Dr. Rich, who suggests that her cure lies in regular occupation: "Most women," he tells her, are "like prisoners locked up between four walls, with all sorts of wretched make-shift employments, to pass away time" (p. 93). Ritchie's view of the triviality of the typical occupations of gentlewomen surfaces in the words of Horatia's reply:

I never have a moment to myself. I have to keep up, correspond, make appointments, dine, drive, drink tea, with three or four hundred people all as busy and over-tired as I am. I go out to dinner, to a party, to a ball almost every night in the season. All the morning I shop and write letters; all the afternoon I drive about here and there, and drink five-o'clock tea. I am never alone; I must for ever be talking, doing, attending, coming, going. . . . I am utterly jaded, battered, wearied out. I owe everything to my aunt. I must go her ways and lead her life; there is no help for me. (pp. 93-94)

These words sum up the triviality of Victorian middle-class women's lives and diagnose it as a key problem in their existence. Subsequently, Ritchie addresses the other central, problematic issue: marriage. When the doctor, hesitantly, is about to suggest a solution, Horatia guesses that it is marriage. She answers with vehemence: "I shall never marry! if that is what you mean. Ten or fifteen years ago it might have been; but now—now I am ashamed to look people in the face when she [her aunt] tries. . . ." She finished her sentence by bursting out crying" (p. 94). The emotional charge of this scene stresses the extent to which remaining single, for a woman in Horatia's position (thirty-two years old and without personal means), can, given the cultural expectations, be a particularly painful issue.

Inevitably, the doctor proposes: "I think I could help you, if you would let me. Instead of being a straw in a whirlpool, how would you like to come and stagnate in a pond? How would you like to be a country doctor's wife?" (p. 95). In representing the doctor's proposal as a result of being moved by pity and admiration, Ritchie underscores the power of the ideologies at work in Victorian notions of marriage: a beautiful, helpless woman "needs" to be protected, and a good man feels compelled to do so. Not surprisingly, and despite the difference in class, the marriage appears as a salvation to her, and she makes up her mind to accept him:

Horatia found, to her great surprise, that she had almost made up her mind—that what had seemed at first so impossible, and so little to be thought of; that what had appeared to her only a day ago unattainable, and far beyond her reach, was hers now, if she had but the resolution to open her hand and to take it—to accept that tranquil existence, that



calm happiness, which she had told herself a thousand times was never to be hers.

Suddenly the poor battered barque had drifted into a calm little haven: the ocean was roaring still; the winds and the waves beating and tossing all about; but here, sheltered, protected, safely anchored, she might stay if she would. And yes, she would stay. (pp. 98-99)

As helpless as Esther, Horatia considers marriage for protection. Predictably, the relationship is a failure, mostly because Horatia cannot adjust to living "out of the world." When the doctor later dies, Horatia realizes that she failed to appreciate him and becomes hopeless, desperate, and remorseful (pp. 169, 171).

The story most overtly criticizes Horatia's attitude in valuing her relations and her fashionable friends over her kind, prosaic husband. Yet in exploring how Horatia's and Dr. Rich's expectations for marriage differ radically, Ritchie also calls attention to the role Victorian ideologies of domesticity play in forming those expectations, and she thus undercuts the notion that Horatia is entirely to blame: "When George and Horatia married, they both pictured to themselves the lives they were going to lead; and the two pictures were not in the least like one another, or like the reality even" (p. 138).

Still, this story remains ambiguous and indicates that Ritchie is far from unequivocally suggesting that the decision to stay single is the preferable alternative. In the scenes that problematize marriage, either Horatia's directly quoted words do so, or the narrative is focalized through her. As a result, the omniscient narrator does not necessarily endorse the doubts and objections of the protagonist. In the subplot of the relationship of Roberta, the doctor's sister, with Mr. Caton, his partner, the omniscient narrator offers a positive reinterpretation of the "spinster's" decision to marry. At the close of the story, Roberta changes her mind about not wanting to marry him: "And so at last he was made happy, and the woman he had loved so well had learnt to care for him, touched by his faithful friendship for her brother, his faithful devotion to herself" (p. 174). Thus, even though Roberta's personal situation is, at this point, similar to what Horatia's was at the beginning, her decision

to accept Caton's proposal is represented unproblematically. Despite the fact that Roberta has no personal means of support, despite the fact that after her brother's marriage (and subsequent death) she loses her place as his housekeeper, and despite the fact that she can no longer live with her mother who has remarried and started a new family, Roberta's choice is represented as unproblematic since she has "learned" to love the man who loved her. Consequently, a story that for the most part interrogates the ideological imperative of marriage ends by diluting that interrogation, stopping short of an explicit condemnation of the social determinations that drive women to marry.<sup>16</sup>

The 1869 story "Sola" is among the most ambivalent and ambiguous of Ritchie's analyses of the cultural pressure that constructs marriage as the ideal destiny for women. It is the story of Felicia, a young woman who has lived most of her life at Harpington Hall in the country with her grandparents and her cousin James. An omniscient narrator sums up her situation at the beginning of the story:

When Felicia was fifteen she was told by her grandparents that she was engaged to her cousin, James Marlow, a gentle, good-humored little fellow, who was to be master after the old Squire's death. The old Squire made some broad jokes on the occasion; Mrs. Marlow treated the business in a very dry, off-hand way. James took it as a matter of course, and went back to college, and Felicia remained at the Hall. (p. 201)

Yet Felicia, who is strong, healthy, and willful, is a particularly atypical Victorian heroine: "wayward and impetuous, [she] sometimes revolted against the discipline in which she was kept" (p. 206). As the narrator stresses, "To be her own self, that was what Felicia longed for" (p. 250). She is not in love with James, who is sweet, but meek and of frail health and who "submitted to the tyrannical rule of the old people" (p. 205).

In drawing these two antithetical characters, the narrator points out Jim's kindness and disinterestedness and stresses his love for Felicia to an extreme (pp. 209-10). At the same time, s/he dwells on Felicia's moodiness: the young woman is often harsh and insensitive about her cousin's feelings (pp. 218, 245, 247), but she sometimes defends him fiercely or

assists him (pp. 214, 220), and she even apologizes for her coldness and indifference (p. 226). As a result, Felicia emerges from this characterization as very ambiguous. If the omniscient narrator repeatedly criticizes her lack of feeling, s/he also wins the reader's sympathy for the character by dwelling on the unfairness of the girl's situation. At one point, for example, the grandmother looks at the two cousins together and "half pities the girl linked to poor little Jim for life" (p. 220).

To complicate this ambiguous representation, Felicia is not drawn simply through her words and actions and the omniscient narrator's statements. Indeed, a great part of our initial impression of her character is formed as we see her through another character, Captain Aurelius Baxter, who is a friend of James. A widower with a young daughter, Baxter is older and much more worldly than James. During an early scene, he visits Harpington Hall and is shocked by Felicia's apparent unconcern for her cousin's physical indisposition:

As Aurelius rode off he thanked heaven that all women were not like those two. He had found it very sweet to have come back after years of hard work and loneliness to the tender solicitude of a gentle old aunt, and Lucy his little daughter. . . .

Baxter had often heard James Marlow speak of Felicia; this was only the second time he had ever seen her. His first impression was of something that he never forgot—a wild, bright, sudden gleam. In later days he sometimes thought of the beautiful angry face that had flashed out upon them from the darkness. . . . Just now, however, it was Felicia's indifference and not her beauty that was paramount in Baxter's mind: her indifference shocked him. . . .

. . . Sometimes the Captain relented a little, and then he thought of Felicia as a thoughtless child; but again he would tell himself that she was at best but a hard-hearted little siren playing jigs in her beautiful golden hair, while her victims drowned round about her. (pp. 221-22).

In this passage, Baxter's representation of Felicia is ambivalent and even negative. But undermining his final judgment is its implicitly ideological charge: she shocks him because

she does not conform to his (Victorian) notions of ideal femininity, because she is not like his old aunt or his daughter.

The irresolvable ambiguity of Felicia's character is symptomatic of Ritchie's troubled attempt to reconcile Victorian ideals of docile femininity and patriarchal chivalry with a critique of the unjust and even unacceptable position in which they necessarily placed women. Felicia is torn between awareness that she does not wish to marry James and guilt at not wanting to do what is expected of her, that is, to place other people's desires above hers and obey. When she is offered a trip to London to shop for wedding clothes, she throws herself wholeheartedly into the pursuit of new things and pleasures and for awhile she is happy; however, she can hardly stand to talk of her upcoming marriage. When Captain Baxter mentions it, she replies: "You must never talk of our wedding again. . . . we don't like it. We mean to be happy while we can, without troubling ourselves about the future; don't we Jim?" (p. 247).

Her despair increases as the wedding date approaches: "sometimes, with a start, she asked herself what was this new terrible thing hanging over her—this close-at-hand horrible fate—made for her, such as no one before had ever experienced" (p. 256). Everyone she turns to for help merely shows discomfort at her doubts and protests. In the end it is James himself who understands that he must give her up: after their grandfather dies, he inherits most of the Squire's fortune and leaves in search of treatment for his poor health, while Felicia remains at Harpington Hall to care for her grandmother.

The bonds between them broken, the narrator stresses, Felicia is free: "Was it Felicia's wish to be the only one? It was granted, and she did not care for it. She was alone now, but free" (pp. 305-06). To be "the only one" alludes to the central symbol in the story, an old Italian clay dish depicting "two clasped right hands and a scroll upon which 'sola' was written" (p. 200). As the narrator explains, "neither time, nor cracks, nor infidelity could unclasp the two hands in the centre, firmly grasping each other through the long ages. Strangers . . . guessed that 'Sola' meant the only one—a life's fidelity" (p. 200). Since throughout the story Jim's love

for Felicia is implicitly compared to the kind of faithful, enduring love depicted in the Sola dish, in rejecting it, Felicia is, by implication, giving up something precious. In the closing scene when she stands alone watching him leave, there is a suggestion that she is, nonetheless, justified in doing so: her heart "was beating with passionate gratitude, with anger against herself, with a dim new hope for the future, and, at the same time, with a great new love and regret for the past, for the tie that was now broken for ever" (p. 306).

At this point it would seem that Ritchie, while refusing to oversimplify Felicia's choice, unequivocally endorses it. But this mix of joyful expectation and regret is challenged by the final image in the story: noticing the old Sola plate later in the same day, Felicia "flung it to the ground, where it lay broken in many pieces at her feet" (p. 306). This gesture creates ambiguity around the earlier statement "alone but free" and might mean that she already regrets giving up being "the only one," worried perhaps that freedom will mean loneliness. Suggestively, in the proofs Ritchie revised before the story's publication, a sentence cut from the final version explicitly stated: "Still the same voice was saying 'Sola, Sola'; only now Felicia asked herself if Sola did not mean alone, perhaps?"<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, the story remains ambiguous because Ritchie takes pains to validate Felicia's rebellion, while at the same time endorsing part of the ideology that stifles her. The poignancy of the last image touches on a core preoccupation in Ritchie's work: the unpalatable fact that for women the choice of freedom is also a choice of loneliness.

### *Ambiguity Revisited*

Three of the stories collected in the volume *Miss Williamson's Divagations* ("Da Capo," "A Postscript from a Stage Box," and "Fina's Aunt") can be read as reconsiderations of the themes explored in the texts just analyzed. They are narrated by Miss Williamson, a spinster who lives with her sister-in-law "H," and who supports herself through work as a governess.<sup>18</sup> As narrator, she is of undeniable importance in Ritchie's work.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, with the creation of this personified narrator, Ritchie positions her narratives between the first- and the third-person address, achieving something similar to what Audrey Jaffe has called "semi-

omniscience."<sup>20</sup> Given the fact that these later stories are either continuations of the earlier ones or reprises of their themes, the adoption of the peculiarly modified omniscience of a personified narrator results in a reconsideration of the earlier representations from a subjective perspective. Necessarily, in adopting subjectivism over the ideologically charged "objective distance" typical of more traditional Victorian realist representations, Ritchie opens up the possibility for indeterminacy. As Jaffe has pointed out, omniscience "not only dominates nineteenth-century narrative but takes a particularly contradictory and complex form there because it expresses both structurally and thematically tensions present within Victorian culture" (p. 6). In the case of Miss Williamson, both her semi-omniscience and her "divagations" mark Ritchie's effort to work through those tensions: on the one hand, Miss Williamson's presence in the texts weaves the narrating act into the fiction and compromises omniscience; on the other hand, her divagations make no ostensible claim to authority. Thus, it would seem that Ritchie, after the ambiguity of so many of her earlier "objective" narratives, is finally comfortable embracing indeterminacy and inscribing this preference in the narrative structures of her texts.

"Da Capo" is a sequel to "Sola" and, I would argue, not only performs a revision of Felicia's character, but in revisiting the theme of two erstwhile lovers, also rewrites "To Esther."<sup>21</sup> At the beginning of the story, the narrator sums up the events in Felicia's life and reiterates one of the aspects of her character represented in "Sola": "The story was simple enough, one which has been told before, of a foolish little creature who had scarcely been beyond the iron scrolls of the gates of Harpington Court" (p. 4). But in this instance, Ritchie is particularly careful to acknowledge the subjective position of her narrator: "I wrote this little story down many years ago. The people interested me at the time, for they were all well-meaning folks, moving in a somewhat morbid atmosphere, but doing the best they could under difficult circumstances" (p. 7).

Constructed as "a presence but not an objectifiable participant," Ritchie's narrator manages to exceed the boundaries of character, to become a non-character, even as she is not quite

immaterial or invisible.<sup>22</sup> In this semi-omniscient position, her authority is partly compromised, though not entirely so, and her analysis of the characters as well as her inferences regarding their motivations necessarily have different effects from those of the narrators in "To Esther" and "Sola."

Yet the thematic ambivalence towards marriage—represented in "To Esther" as a critique of female dependence and in "Sola" as an indictment of arranged marriages—is here toned down. As had been repeatedly hinted in "Sola," Baxter loves Felicia; she has come to realize she loves him as well. The parallel with "To Esther" is obvious from the beginning: James has died and Baxter and Felicia have no impediment between them. Nevertheless, remorse and misunderstanding keep them apart. Baxter has scruples about his feelings: "In the old days of her forlorn negligence and trouble Felicia had seemed nearer, far nearer than now. When he had come back after James's death, he had thought it wrong to obtrude his personal feelings" (p. 5). Felicia is too proud to take the first step:

Felicia knew there was one person who would gladly, at a sign from her, respond to the faintest call; but, as I have said, some not unnatural scruple withheld her from sending for him. She hoped he would come to her, but she would move no finger, say no word, to bring him. She kept the thought of him as she had done all these years, shyly in the secret recesses of her heart. (p. 15)

In chapter three, "On the Terrace at Berne," the parallels between the two stories are intensified: just like Smith in search of Esther, Baxter travels abroad to meet Felicia again, even though he thinks she cares nothing for him. Similar tensions lead to misunderstandings between them, and, exasperated, Baxter leaves. Felicia's fear for his life, as she thinks him involved in a climbing accident, finally assures him of her feelings, and he proposes.

Unlike "To Esther," "Da Capo" does not problematize marriage through the exploration of the dangers of the heroine's acceptance of Victorian notions of female dependence. Instead, it considers the marriage plot from a simultaneously romantic and realistic perspective. Felicia's decision to accept Baxter is represented as being exclusively based on love. But her

character has matured from the young, rebellious girl of "Sola," and, unlike Esther, Felicia exhibits no insecurity or fear of a life alone. As she confronts her feelings for Baxter, for example, she is far from rejoicing, as Esther did, at the prospect of his becoming her guide and shield. Instead, she reflects on the limits love will place on her freedom: "Was this love, this sudden unaccustomed rule?—was she in future to be at another person's call?" (p. 39). In thus acknowledging the potential limitations of the life of the heroine of the romance/marriage plot, this story questions Victorian ideologies of feminine passivity and dependence more overtly than "To Esther."

Ultimately, "Da Capo" rewrites the character of the weak, dependent woman in "To Esther" into a stronger, more self-assured one, even as it tones down the rebellious nature of the younger Felicia in "Sola." This compromise rethinks the earlier representations and resolves the ambivalence of Felicia's character as it had been drawn in "Sola." Yet in doing so, it also dilutes the tone of its critique of Victorian ideologies of marriage and suggests Ritchie's continuing attempt to strike the desired balance between subtle social critique and overt opposition.

"A Post-Script from a Stage Box," the epilogue to the story of Felicia's life, is particularly suggestive in that it redirects attention to the ideological problems of the romantic/marriage plot even though it ends by resolving the conflict with a romantic twist. At the beginning of this final story about Felicia, the reader learns that disagreements between the couple had begun early in their married life and that they have parted. Reporting what she has been told by Mrs. Willoughby, a friend of Felicia's, the narrator hints at the disappointment that often lies beyond marriage:

Mrs. Willoughby had been at Felicia's wedding, and admired—as who would not admire—the lovely young bride and the stately bridegroom, little thinking of the dismal result of all this white satin, organ-straining, promising, vowing, bridecake, and congratulations. (p. 109)



The irony of this paragraph is particularly important because it underscores the fact that despite the story's setting (the brief episode takes place at the theater, during a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*) and despite its ending (Felicia and Baxter are reconciled), the story does not idealize marriage.

The action is slight. Felicia is at the theater with some friends. Unbeknownst to her, Baxter is there, too, in a box opposite hers. The narrator sums up the minimal events in a few paragraphs, emphasizing how Felicia's youth and willfulness might have led to her disappointment (p. 109). Even though she implies that both Felicia and Baxter are to blame for being too proud to take steps to clear the misunderstanding, she stresses Felicia's "foolish passionate soul" (p. 110) as well as the bad influence of a female friend who was with Felicia at the time (p. 111). By contrast, she underplays the fact that the Colonel "went away without seeing his wife again" (p. 112). The couple is reconciled when they see each other in the middle of the intensely emotional last scene of the play and the Colonel rushes to Felicia's box: "She gave a cry, a spring, and clung to him, close to his heart" (p. 115).

While it offers no radical commentary, this story still refuses to idealize marriage and suggests Ritchie's commitment to exploring, at least in part, women's lives after marriage—something that many Victorian narratives typically (and problematically) repress. As I have stressed before, she never commits herself to a straightforward stance against Victorian culture's pressure to idealize marriage, but her compulsion to revisit the same theme ultimately produced a substantial number of representations that testify to her determination to grapple with this ideological difficulty and that show how much experiments with narrative perspective and circularity are key to that grappling.

"Fina's Aunt," subtitled "Some Passages from Miss Williamson's Diary," revisits the issue of the cultural devaluation of the single woman central to "Out of the World." In this last story of the volume Ritchie offers a particularly effective critique of that devaluation by shifting the terms of the discussion from whether or not women must marry to be happy to what kinds of women can or cannot be happy remaining single. In juxtaposing the life of Josephine Ellis, a

woman who exhibits the typical cultural anxieties about remaining single after thirty and who finally marries, with the life of the narrator, Miss Williamson, who is happy with the opposite choice, "Fina's Aunt" contests the cultural devaluation of the single woman even as it refrains from a blatant celebration of the figure.

In this story, the voice of Miss Williamson, the narrator, is particularly candid and introspective because she is writing in her diary. Reflecting on her daily existence, she stresses the connection between individual temperament and degree of personal contentment:

I confess that, with the best good will in the world, there are times when a clean ruled page is not much comfort . . . when what you want is a voice—a hand, rough or clumsy though it be—something alive that is not the eternal reflection of your own self in the glass or on the paper before you. In many ways, however, I am well contented with my lot. It seemed a hard one at first, and perhaps things don't change; but one suits oneself to the circumstances round about one. In comparing one life with another people often forget to take states of mind into consideration, and do not realise how habit and natural adaptability often make a sort of artificial happiness when none other might seem possible. . . . In many ways I like the monotonousness of my existence, my early walks, my return home. I have friends without a name who look a kind greeting; I have a correspondent to whom I owe many a happy half-hour; I live a great deal outside my quiet room as well as in it. (pp. 269-70)

These are modest claims for single life, but they openly problematize the notion that women's happiness necessarily depends on marriage. Another, more explicit commentary on marriage and single life further challenges the notion:

It is true that there are married people and unmarried ones in the world, and some of the married live utterly alone, and some of the unmarried have their hearts full and overflowing, and live married to the lives and interests of others. But Josephine Ellis was

not one of these. She had not energy of character or force of will enough to compel circumstances. She was going home to a lonely life, and she knew it. (p. 277)

Josephine Ellis's unhappiness, Miss Williamson learns, is due to breaking her engagement to a doctor whose social position her family believed inferior to hers. Unlike Horatia in "Out of the World," Josephine loves her "shabby middle-aged doctor of humble extraction" (p. 275); again unlike Horatia, she chose not to marry him so as not to displease her family. But Josephine's temperament is not such that she can be happy with the choice not to marry:

Josephine Ellis at thirty might have been a handsome happy woman, with a home and more to do than she could find time for, with many cares and anxieties, and a thousand things to occupy her, with a child or two to tend, or with small means perhaps to eke out to the uttermost (which is in itself a profession), with cheerful noise and bustle in her life, and plenty of coming and going, of healthy fatigue and peaceful rest—all this might have been hers, and besides and beyond it all a blessing of faithful love and companionship; but unfortunately for herself, she was of good family. (pp. 274-75)

Typically, Ritchie's social critique hinges on depicting an unhappy female protagonist who illustrates the degree to which women's culturally determined subjectivities impose limitations on their choices. With Josephine Ellis she does much the same. But the earlier introduction of Miss Williamson's alternative subjectivity into the story, her change from noncharacter to character, is a further complicating movement that helps Ritchie solve her eternal problem of avoiding voicing strong opposition. Here Ritchie uses the persona of her narrator to full effect, as an example of a woman who has resisted the cultural imperative of marriage and who does not have an empty life, but is rather an example of what strong women can see as viable alternatives to demeaning marriages of convenience.

Ultimately, Josephine does marry her doctor. Fate intervenes, and, as in "To Esther" and "Da Capo," the estranged lovers meet abroad and come to an understanding. "Fina's Aunt" thus crystalizes several of Ritchie's recurring themes: the painful position of unmarried women past their prime, missed opportunities, class prejudice, and the reunion of old lovers. Yet it

goes further than her previous stories, for if the narratives I have analyzed have all dramatized problems with Victorian ideologies of marriage, they have all also stopped short of articulating a viable alternative life style. With the progressive development of Miss Williamson from marginally participating narrator to narrator/character, an alternative begins to emerge. In this last story, cast as "some passages from Miss Williamson's diary," Ritchie comes as close as she ever does to explicitly offering Miss Williamson's life choice as the more desirable one. For while Miss Williamson tells the stories of the tensions, dilemmas, and fears of the protagonists, she herself emerges as a strong, independent woman who has succeeded in building a productive, uncompromising life outside marriage.

In the stories analyzed here, Ritchie's discomfort with traditional Victorian realism is subtly apparent, and her experimentation with different narrative techniques points to her search for alternatives. Ultimately Ritchie abandoned traditional Victorian omniscience and gestured towards a modernist concept of narrative; in Miss Williamson, she modified the typical authorial narrator, thereby achieving an indirection that problematized the conventions of Victorian fiction and the ideologies of gender it typically fomented. In revisiting the same themes through the perspective of Miss Williamson, Ritchie was able to come to terms with her own ambivalence. She stayed away from strong opposition by accepting ambiguity and by telling indirectly the story of Miss Williamson who, as a semi-omniscient, personified narrator, straddles first- and third-person address and is both inside and outside the narratives, teaching by example what strong women can see as viable, happy alternatives to the ideological imperative of marriage.

While the above argument makes, I trust, a persuasive case for Ritchie's distrust of the Victorian idealization of marriage and, ultimately, for the degree to which her feminist inclination necessitated an exploration of alternative narrative perspectives, I would like to end by presenting one more piece of evidence: the surviving manuscript fragments of an

unfinished work titled "The Janie Wilson Story."<sup>23</sup> Unlike the stories I have analyzed, this one shows no ambiguity as it depicts the courtship, marriage, and separation of the protagonists, Frances and Henry. The potential drawbacks of marriage are emphasized in an early scene when Mrs. Wilson tells Frances: "don't marry, don't marry, whatever you do." The two scenes following that of the engagement stress the complete failure of the marriage. One scene openly problematizes the domestic ideal as Henry and Frances fight over their child. Henry reads the paper while Frances plays the piano; when Binnie cries, Henry reproaches his wife for leaving him to the care of the nurse. Ignoring him, "Frances shrugged her shoulders and went on playing." Another scene dramatizes the couple's confrontation of the irresolvable difference in their expectations of each other:

"You poor woman," he said not without real pity, but with a half contemptuous impatience for her foolishness, "you poor woman, you should never had married me, if you expected so much!"

"You needn't tell me so," cried Frances, deeply wounded, "do you think I don't know?"

Given this strongly negative depiction of marriage, it is not surprising that "The Janie Wilson Story" was never completed, let alone published. The evidence of this and other unpublished fragments, as well as of some passages that were cut from the final, published versions of her novels and her short fiction, strengthens my contention that Ritchie's project was centrally concerned with a critique of the idealization of marriage. But the containment of overt opposition underlines the fact that she systematically chose subtler critiques that allowed her to negotiate between a strong feminist stance and Victorian gender ideologies. Since in the stories analyzed here this negotiation relies on narrative experiments that gesture towards modernism, Ritchie's short fiction is key to an understanding of her position as a transitional figure between literary movements.

#### NOTES

I would like to thank the University of London Library and, most especially, the staff of the Paleography Room for their assistance during my study of Ritchie's manuscripts.

<sup>1</sup> Anne Thackeray Ritchie, *The Village on the Cliff* (London: Smith, Elder, 1875), pp. 38-39.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Hanbery MacKay, the scholar who has paid the most attention to Ritchie, quotes Elizabeth Boyd in speaking of Ritchie as: "the familiar friend of practically everybody who was anybody in the literary and artistic world of the Victorian era" and says that "her list of correspondents reads like a Who's Who of literary figures, their parents, and descendants. It is again in her capacity as a link between generations that Anne makes her special contribution," in "'Only Connect': The Multiple Roles of Anne Thackeray Ritchie," *The Library Chronicle*, 30 (1985), 94.

<sup>3</sup> See my "Delicate Balances: Gender and Power in Anne Thackeray Ritchie's Non-Fiction," *Women's Writing*, 4, No. 1 (1997), 73-89.

<sup>4</sup> See Esther Schwartz-McKinzie, Introduction, *The Story of Elizabeth and Old Kensington* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1995); and my "Interrogating the Female *Bildungsroman*: Anne Thackeray Ritchie's Marriage Fictions," in *Nineteenth-Century Feminisms* (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, my articles, already cited. See also "Hate and Humor as Empathetic Whimsy in Anne Thackeray Ritchie," where MacKay stresses Ritchie's use of *espièglerie*, that is, her attempt "to transform anger into an aesthetic form that also communicates and serves others," in *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 15 (1988), 118. As MacKay points out, "throughout her canon, Ritchie uses self-deprecating humor to comment more broadly on confining structures or conventions that have been largely male-determined" (p. 119). Finally, see Schwartz-McKinzie's critical introduction to Ritchie's *The Story of Elizabeth and Old Kensington*, where she argues that Ritchie's representation of strong bonds between young and older single women "displace 'romance' as the emotional center of the narratives," thus subtly challenging Victorian ideologies of marriage (p. xxvii).

<sup>6</sup> Ritchie's essays on women writers collected in *A Book of Sybils: Mrs. Barbauld, Miss Edgeworth, Mrs. Opie, Miss Austen* (London: Smith, Elder, 1883) and in *Blackstick Papers* (London: Smith, Elder, 1908), her full-length work *Madame de Sévigné*, (London: Blackwood, 1881), her introductions to the reprints of several of Maria Edgeworth's novels as well as to

Gaskell's *Cranford* and Mary Russell Mitford's *Our Village*, and her essay on Elizabeth Barrett Browning for *The Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 3 (London: Smith, Elder, 1885), testify to her interest in chronicling a female literary tradition.

<sup>7</sup> Schwartz-McKinzie, p. xii.

<sup>8</sup> MacKay, "The Thackeray Connection: Virginia Woolf's Aunt Anny," in *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury: A Centenary Celebration*, ed. Jane Marcus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 84, 79, 75.

<sup>9</sup> MacKay, Introduction, *The Two Thackerays: Anne Thackeray Ritchie's Centenary Biographical Introductions to the Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, by Anne Thackeray Ritchie (New York: AMS Press, 1988), p. lii.

<sup>10</sup> In "Anne Thackeray," her 1961 University of London Ph. D. dissertation, Jennie Huie remarked on the difference between Ritchie's use of long and short fictional forms: "using the form of the short story, [Ritchie] expresses more of her attitudes and opinions on contemporary life than she permits herself in the novel (p. 873).

<sup>11</sup> Ritchie, "Esther," "Sola," and "Out of the World," in *To Esther and Other Sketches* (London: Smith, Elder, 1869); "DaCapo," "A Postscript from a Stage Box," and "Fina's Aunt," in *Miss Williamson's Divagations* (London: Smith, Elder, 1881). Subsequent references to these stories will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>12</sup> This story is one of Ritchie's first attempts at writing fiction for publication. As she notes, she had actually started writing much earlier:

I had written several novels and a tragedy by the age of fifteen, but then my father forbade me to waste my time any more scribbling, and desired me to read *other* people's books.

I never wrote any more except one short fairy tale, until one day my father said he had got a very nice subject for me, and that he thought I might now begin to write again.

In Ritchie, *Anne Thackeray Ritchie Journals and Letters*, ed. Abigail Burnham Bloom and John Maynard; biographical commentary and notes by Lillian F. Shankman (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994), p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> As is often the case with her heroines—for example, with Elizabeth in *The Story of Elizabeth* or with Catherine in *The Village on the Cliff*—the main issue for Esther is choice between two men. But just as often the issue is choice between marriage and single life. In this story—as in several other instances—Ritchie examines the reasons why Esther's original choice was the wrong one and uses the trope of second chance in order to explore alternatives.

<sup>14</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 63. In "Sola" and "Out of the World," also part of the collection *To Esther*, Ritchie continues to use this point of view, in Miller's terms, this "immanent omniscience" (p. 64). But in subsequent short fiction Ritchie shows a peculiar discomfort with standard omniscience. The fairy tales from the volume *Five Old Friends and a Young Prince* (1868) are all told from Miss Williamson's point of view, and the same is true of the stories in the volume *Miss Williamson's Divagations* (1881), which are all narrated by Miss Williamson. Although Miss Williamson is, on the surface, a traditional Victorian narrator who is close to Miller's notion of immanent omniscience, the fact that Ritchie gives her a personality, a biographical frame, a temporality within the stories, problematizes the very convention of omniscience.

<sup>15</sup> That she ultimately reprised the theme in "Da Capo" (1881), the sequel to "Sola" (1869), in the voice of Miss Williamson, indicates that she was still ambivalent about the treatment of the theme in "To Esther" and that she was still looking to point of view to help solve her doubts.

<sup>16</sup> As we will see, in a later story, "Fina's Aunt," Ritchie takes up a similar situation from a different point of view and articulates her ideological critique more explicitly.



<sup>17</sup> Ritchie, *The Literary Manuscripts of Lady (Anne Isabella) Ritchie*, University of London, London, MS. 508, Box 3, 2, iii (i), p. 14. The Ritchie archive deposited on permanent loan in the University of London library comprises five boxes of manuscripts in the form of exercise books, drafts, and fragments, as well as typeset materials and proofsheets. Besides much published material, there are a number of unfinished and unpublished pieces. The archive has been sorted and catalogued, and a seven-page handlist of these materials, complete with descriptions of the contents of each box, is available in the Paleography Room. This handlist was compiled in February 1981 by Joan Gibbs.

<sup>18</sup> In some stories, "Fina" and "Fina's Aunt," for example, Miss Williamson lives alone at a boarding house. In an unpublished story, "The House by the River," she works as financial secretary for a hospital. According to Huie, the characters of Miss Williamson and H. are based on Ritchie and her sister Minny. They "were suggested by Anny imagining Minny and herself to be in their late middle-age" (p. 183). This is not surprising since after Thackeray's death and before Minny's marriage to Leslie Stephen, the two sisters lived together, and Ritchie reportedly believed she would never marry.

<sup>19</sup> As Huie points out, "From an Island," which first appeared in the Cornhill Magazine between November 1868 and January 1869, "is the only story in the entire range, apart from those narrated from the omniscient point of view, in which Anne Thackeray adopts an authorial mask other than Miss Mary Williamson" (p. 868). Huie believes that this authorial figure gives readers the impression "of a dependable, sensible, practical, and observant person" (p. 869). While I would take issue with Huie's view that both Miss Williamson and H. "add much additional interest to the short stories" because "their participation contributes to the reality of the tales, for assuredly as we take them to be real human beings, we accept the veracity of their report and comments on the characters and events" (p. 871), I believe she rightly points out their importance in Ritchie's fiction.

<sup>20</sup> Audrey Jaffe, *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 15. Jaffe's brilliant discussion of Dickens's

personified narrators—she calls them "Asmodean participant-narrators" (p. 14) and equates them with what Genette calls "focalized" characters (p. 16)—identifies their hybrid nature, "hovering . . . between omniscience and character" (p. 16). Ritchie's Miss Williamson is one such semi-omniscient figure insofar as she, too, collapses the difference "between the supposed limitations of first-person narration and the unlimitedness of third-person narration" (p. 17).

<sup>21</sup> As Huie has noted, Ritchie explored this theme in five stories: "To Esther," "Two Hours," "Da Capo," "Miss Morrier's Visions," and "Fina's Aunt" (p. 872).

<sup>22</sup> Jaffe, pp. 12, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Ritchie, "The Janie Wilson Story," in *The Literary Manuscripts*, MS. 508. All subsequent quotations are from three unnumbered pages labeled Box I, 1.