Introduction

# Femininity through the Looking-Glass

**Once Upon a Time…**

It is not always easy for readers of Victorian literature to find their way among the literary genres which fuelled the period. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the development of print technology and the expansion of the reading public opened a huge market for fiction. Literary works abounded, and their diversity can sometimes seem overwhelming. And yet, securing clear-cut boundaries between genres was essential for the Victorians who classified, ordered, and ranked compulsively. If Anthony Trollope claimed that '[a]mong English novels of the present day, and among English novelists … [t]here are sensational novels and anti-sensational, sensational novelists and anti-sensational',[1] this study intends to add Victorian experimental fairy tales and fantasies as further foils to Victorian realism. Like sensation novels, Victorian fairy tales and fantasies strongly diverged from mainstream realism, thereby giving a new perspective on everyday reality. Through their distortions of the real, fairy tales, fantasies, and sensation novels illuminated modes of representation particularly significant to the construction of femininity which this book investigates.

　　This book analyzes Victorian fairy tales and fantasies alongside sensation novels because sensation fiction shares a lot more with fairy tales than meets the eye. As a matter of fact, when I first sought to get a taste of Victorian popular literature by opening a sensation novel, I was not simply surprised by the modernity of the criminal plots compared to more canonical works of domestic realism. Though thrilled by the daring female protagonists asserting their independence (or at least, trying to), what struck me most was rather the extent to which the writers of sensation novels seemed to revise old plot-patterns where traces of fairy tales peppered the modern scenarios. Of course, the use of fairy tales was widespread in Victorian fiction. From William Makepeace Thackeray to Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope, from the Brontë sisters to George Eliot, nearly all Victorian novelists alluded to fairy worlds. Fairy-tale motifs enabled writers to enhance their heroines' beauty, and above all to encode a patriarchal ideology: as in fairy tales, the conventional happy endings of mainstream literature demanded that the heroines be married and securely locked up in their homes. Yet sensation novelists, precisely like Victorian fairy-tale writers and fantasists, seemed to debunk traditional tales and to rework narrative archetypes to launch their plots. Appearing at the height of the trend towards realism, sensation novels upset literary expectations with modern criminal plots featuring improper

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1　　Anthony Trollope, *Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1883), vol. 2, 41.

heroines, as we shall see.[2] But because their plots most often focus on female protagonists trying to rise in society through advantageous marriages, sensation novels again and again rehearse versions of *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, or *Sleeping Beauty*, thoroughly revised for the sake of frisson. Indeed, if—for the heroines, at least—the closures of the stories are inevitably bleaker than the 'happily-ever-after' motto of fairy tales, sensation novels, nonetheless, hinge upon the idea that finding the right suitor is the aim of the quest, and they, therefore, foreground marriage in the same way as fairy tales do. As significant instances, the seminal sensation novels, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–1860), Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–1862), or Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), all contain a fairy story beneath their criminal plots.

Collins's *The Woman in White* recounts the story of Anne Catherick, who escapes from a lunatic asylum where she has been incarcerated by Sir Percival Glyde for fear she might reveal his illegitimacy and prevent his marriage to the heiress Laura Fairlie—in fact, Anne's half-sister. When Anne dies, Laura is confined in the asylum under Anne's name, and the hero, Walter Hartright, must solve the mystery of the woman in white to save Laura, that is, to prove her identity before he marries her. Though typically sensational, the plot, seen from another perspective, is saturated with the language of fairy tales. When Hartright first meets the woman in white, the realistic text shifts into romance: as he helps her flee the men who are trying to bring her back to the asylum, the dream-like atmosphere fashions the woman into a strange, distressed damsel and turns Hartright into a golden-hearted knight. Cinderella-like, the mysterious Anne Catherick, dressed in white by some godmother whose tombstone she keeps cleaning, haunts the text, making the narrative hover between fairy tale and Gothic romance. Is Anne Catherick a Victorian Cinderella, disinherited and cruelly abused by Glyde, or is she simply another fallen woman driven insane by her wanderings in the streets? Interestingly, after Anne Catherick's death, the text continues to play upon fairy-tale motifs. The amnesia and long slumber of Laura Fairlie (with Anne Catherick's name) while she is incarcerated in a lunatic asylum also seem to tell a sort of Sleeping Beauty tale, orchestrated by Count Fosco, the Gothic villain, who, like a modern Merlin, knows how to petrify the body after death so as to preserve it, as hard as marble, to the end of time.

While marriage is the fulcrum of Collins's plot and the aim of Hartright's quest, it is also the focus of the opening of *Lady Audley's Secret*. Abandoned by her husband, George Talboys, who has gone to Australia to seek his fortune, Lady Audley—or rather, Helen Talboys—starts afresh as a junior teacher by pasting a new name ('Lucy Graham') on her bonnet-box. She is soon hired as a governess and meets Sir Michael Audley, who falls in love with the pretty young woman and marries her. When the new Lady Audley hears about her first husband's return to England, she publishes the news of her death in the *Times* and buries a consumptive working-class girl under

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2    For a definition of the sensation novel, see Patrick Brantlinger, 'What is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 37 (1982): 1–28; Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), and *The Sensation Novel: from* The Woman in White *to* The Moonstone (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994).

her own name. But as fate will have it, George Talboys happens to see the portrait of the new Lady Audley and realizes he has been deceived. To get rid of her annoying first husband, Lady Audley pushes him down a well, and his friend, Robert Audley (Lady Audley's nephew), decides to play the part of the detective and sort out the mystery of George Talboys's disappearance. Lady Audley next attempts to murder Robert Audley by setting fire to the inn in which he is sleeping. Ironically, he escapes unscathed and reveals her bigamy—not her attempted murders—to her husband. In conclusion, Robert Audley takes Lady Audley to a Belgian sanatorium and locks her up under a false name amongst madwomen, while her first husband miraculously reappears. All is well that ends well, it seems, as Robert and his bride can now enjoy the company of George, and the narrator informs us of Lady Audley's death.

However, Braddon's prototypical sensation novel also bears traces of the fairy tale right from the beginning, which does not square with Lady Audley's nephew's idea of social order. The novel opens on the story of the mysterious governess, 'admired of all who come within the reach of her spells',[3] as E.S. Dallas, the *Times* literary critic, put it. With her unknown past, her innocent beauty, and her modesty, Lucy Graham does resemble Cinderella: by marrying Sir Michael Audley, she goes from poverty to riches and enjoys the luxuries of her fairy palace. In addition, instead of depicting her heroine as a doll playing her part in a doll's house, Braddon fashions the stereotype of the Victorian angel as a domestic fairy, and the novel's constant hammering of the heroine's fairy beauty in her enchanted castle gives a touch of magic to the narrative—the better to reveal the heroine's criminality.

Though Braddon seems to use a fairy-tale backdrop ironically in order to illuminate her heroine's transgressions, in Wood's *East Lynne* the use of fairy-tale motifs is more melodramatic. At the beginning of the novel, the heroine, Isabel Vane, goes from riches to poverty after her father's death. She is nearly compelled to marry Archibald Carlyle while enamoured of Sir Francis Levison. Eventually, she deserts her husband to go abroad with her lover who soon abandons her. After being disfigured in a train crash, she returns to England and works unrecognized as governess to her own children, while Archibald Carlyle marries again. Once again, beneath its sensational trimmings, the story also recounts the fate of a beautiful princess. From the beginning, Isabel is persecuted not by her stepmother but by her aunt, who is jealous of her beauty and beats her before petrifying her through marriage. Isabel is forced to marry a bourgeois and, hence, to lead the boring life of a proper middle-class wife and mother. She is then brought to a castle, excluded from the world, and once again subjected to another wicked queen—her husband's sister, Cornelia. Tied to her property, endlessly walking around her garden while her husband works outside, Isabel suffers from the restraining atmosphere of her crystal casket and is soon tempted by a glimmering and aristocratic lover—which launches the novel's adultery plot.

In these three archetypical sensation novels, the fairy-tale motifs act as a haunting presence behind tales of murder, bigamy, or adultery. Even Wilkie Collins's detective story *The Moonstone* (1868) is subtitled 'A Romance', and features a minor character, Rosanna Spearman, a deformed maid in love with her master,

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3    E.S. Dallas, 'Lady Audley's Secret', *The Times* (18 November 1862): 8.

who dreams of climbing the social ladder and marrying the hero. Her magic dress, however, is but a poor stained nightdress which belongs to the hero and symbolically suggests that the latter has spent the night with a far most beautiful princess. Often ironic, sometimes tragic, touches of the marvellous, in fact, not merely point to the mystery of the female protagonists; they also foreground the discrepancy between the fairy-tale universe and the harsh reality of Victorian society, thereby frequently conveying the issue of women's lack of identity and their fragile economic position in society. The use of fairy-tale motifs in sensation novels is, hence, poles apart from the allusions to fairy tales generally encountered in mainstream Victorian literature. Collins's, Braddon's, and Wood's heroines all illustrate women's difficult position in a patriarchal society and their social and financial dependence on men. Therefore, the search for the appropriate husband becomes, as in fairy tales, the one and only solution for women in search of security—turning the fairy-tale scenario into a literary short-cut.

However, the aim of this study is not *stricto sensu* to underline the extent to which the sensation novel borrows from fairy tales. If the study of later sensation novels, such as Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely But Too Well* (1862), Wilkie Collins's *No Name* (1862), *Armadale* (1864), or *The Law and the Lady* (1875) will enable me to trace the tales of *Little Red Ridinghood*, *Snow White*, or *Bluebeard*, this book intends rather to show how similar sensation novels and Victorian fantasies and fairy tales were in the way they foregrounded and often reworked cultural and social issues. Indeed, in the same way as sensation novels upset the literary establishment by the modernity of their plots, featuring as heroines, as Henry James put it, 'English [gentlewomen] of the current year, familiar with the use of the railway and the telegraph',[4] Victorian experimental fairy tales and fantasies also revamped traditional fairy tales to offer new reflections on their fast-changing society. While Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a case in point, many other fairy-tales and fantasies were brand new stories made from old ones, with narratives which absorbed modernity in a sensational way. As Nancy Armstrong argues, for instance, Lewis Carroll's Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole is a significant 'moment in the history of desire',[5] reflecting female consumerism in ways novels had never done before. In the fairy tales and fantasies I shall focus on, Jean Ingelow's, George MacDonald's, Juliana Horatia Ewing's, or Christina Rossetti's heroines all seem to be fairly rooted in their society, and the authors play upon the links between the real and the fantastic to revise the dusty tales which wise Mother Goose used to tell. As we shall see, both genres work from within their culture to expose sharply current practices and modern fashions. Woman's social and economic position in society is reworked through heroines who provide us with powerful images of the construction of femininity, placing particular emphasis on the female body, its shape and meaning, especially when viewed through the lens of consumer culture.

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4      Henry James, 'Miss Braddon', *The Nation* (9–11–1865), reprinted in *Notes and Reviews* (Cambridge, MA: Dunster House, 1921), 112–13.

5      Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography* (London; Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, [1999] 2002), 223.

**Consumer Culture in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels**

'Pretty things to sell, very cheap, very cheap . . . stay-laces of all colours'.
'Little Snow White', the Brothers Grimm.

As Snow White's wicked stepmother's irresistible offer illustrates, what we generally learn as children through fairy tales is that all princesses are beautiful and may even try to improve their beauty. In fact, their beauty is their wealth—quite literally, since being beautiful enables them to win a prince and a fortune. Hence, what fairy tales foreground is the idea that femininity is closely linked to aestheticization, and that beauty is a feminine virtue which needs to be cultivated. Whether it be Psyche enticed by Proserpine's beauty cream or Snow White lured by the wicked Queen's gaudy stay-laces, these female characters all exemplify how much their own fate depends on their physical appearance, on their power to construct a self which matches male expectations.

Similarly, ideal femininity in the Victorian period was often gauged by its relationship to the world of beauty and fashion. When I first came across Lewis Carroll's photograph of Irene MacDonald, 'It won't come smooth' (July 1863), I was fascinated by the picture of this little girl refusing to brush her hair and to hold the mirror up to her face to check her appearance (see cover illustration). Is she not blaming us for the moment of physical torture which awaits her as she attempts to unmat her tangled and wavy hair? The picture hovers in uncertainty—poised between revolt and suffering—with the female body placed at the heart of the photograph's concerns. As she seemingly frowns on the onlooker, the little girl asserts her refusal to be moulded to the pattern of docile femininity, just as her matted mane refuses to be plaited and tamed. This ideal little girl whom Victorian gentlemen idolized and who refuses here to sit still and learn her lesson in 'beautification', tells us a lot about the notion of femininity in the Victorian period. In particular, the photograph questions femininity, hovering here between assertion and objectification. The brush and the mirror frame the little girl's femininity as a body which must be moulded and smoothed, which probably demands training and suffering, and which, once perfected, will perhaps give this little girl the keys to conquest.

What Carroll's photograph reveals, in essence, is that—far removed from Coventry Patmore's notion of the 'natural' Angel in the House and yet simultaneously growing out of and nurtured by it—the Victorian feminine ideal was poised over contradictory discourses which the rise of capitalism brought to climactic excess. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain's population nearly doubled, growing from 20.8 million in 1851 to 26.1 million in 1871. The trade figures revealed its economic growth, with imports worth £100 million in 1851 and £370 million in 1874 and exports increasing from £197 million to £297 million in the same period. For over twenty years, free trade prevailed and the market soared. Competition being scarce until the 1870s, British goods sold over the world, and Britain's gross national income expanded from £523.3 million in 1851 to £916.6 million in 1871. Undeniably, Britain was the richest country in the world; everybody was getting richer, although the economic boom obviously benefited the rising middle-class mostly. As Britain was changing into an industrial urban economy, drapers' shops metamorphosed into

multistoried department stores: the first London department store, Whiteley's, opened in Bayswater in 1863, just a few months after the opening of the London underground. While the East End housed thousands of workers in unsanitary conditions, the West End became a place for female pleasure, and shopping became a feminine activity. The development of the metropolis, therefore, rewrote gender constructions. The Angel gradually left her safe haven, stepped outside the house unchaperoned, and travelled to the urban centre, her shopping excursions upsetting traditional gendered spheres. No longer solely seen as a child-rearing figure, the ideal wife was reshaped into a perfect lady, 'ornamental, leisured, and expensive.'[6] As a result, constantly reified, extolled as an art curio connoting the wealth of its owner, the fashionably corseted Victorian woman was also girdled by discourses at pains to define her. In the streets or in women's magazines, advertisements aimed at women and constructed women as desiring and consuming subjects. In so doing, they simultaneously led them to become merchandise themselves—thereby confining them within a role as reflectors of male power, exhibiting their fathers' or husbands' economic success.

Victorian fairy tales and sensation novels explore this insolubly paradoxical terrain, where women oscillate between subject and object. Heroines—seemingly confined under glass like so many sleeping princesses—radiate with artificiality, whether they have pricked their fingers on spindles, applied cream to their faces, or tried on corsets. In the fairy tales and fantasies of the period, the tropes of female beauty metamorphose into a variety of images advertising the female body. Feminine representation, caught within a commodity culture saturated with advertisements and dominated by representation, transforms feminine identity into a literary exhibit where the woman's body is only figured in sets of similes. Traditional fairy tales most often play with language; they literalize metaphors and metonymies and change words into objects and creatures. Through their reworking of traditional tales, Victorian experimental fairy tales and fantasies play with words in order to stress the instability of signs. No longer fixed and becoming ambiguous, signs seem to float free, culminating in nonsense: as Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty tells Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass*, 'When *I* use a word, … it means just what I choose it to mean … [t]he question is … which is to be master—that's all.' In addition, as Victorian fairy tales and fantasies question the links between words and images, they make explicit how representation changed with the rise of a material culture. In particular, they show the extent to which representation reveals Victorian ideology, signposting how, I contend, female representation and the construction of femininity is *master*ed by a patriarchal rhetoric which confines and changes the female bodies.

Because this study of fairy tales and fantasies will deal with language, relevant to my discussion will be Thomas Richards's approach to commodity culture and his contention that the capitalist system generated 'a dominant form of representation … consolidating its hold over England not only economically but semiotically.'[7] As I argue, through their play with words and their nonsense, the fairy tales and fantasies

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6     Lori Anne Loeb, *Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 20.

7     Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 3.

recall the world of Victorian advertising and the way in which advertisements used language to transform the real into 'a fantastic realm in which things think, act, speak, fall, fly, evolve'.[8] In this way, as the metaphors the narratives debunk convey ideologies of femininity and sexual politics, they form a bridge between the literary world and Victorian consumer culture.

In the sensation novels, on the other hand, the clichés of the feminine ideal which Victorian fairy-tale writers and fantasists deconstruct become visual signs aimed at captivating the beholder. While fairy-tale writers and fantasists merely place shopping malls in the background of their narratives as in Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa the Fairy*, or play with commodities which come alive, as in Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses*, sensation novels are fully anchored in commercial culture, and the construction of prescriptive femininity appears as a series of accessories, of goods available at the counter and displayed behind shop windows. The novels, featuring female customers, highlight femininity as a creation, and 'woman' becomes a living representation. Like commodities, characterized by their 'plasticity',[9] the sensational female characters are duplicitous and treacherous, and suggest the discrepancy between appearance and reality.

Moreover, whether subtly or more pointedly challenging gender constructions, Victorian fairy tales and sensation fiction alike do not just enhance woman's artificiality. They also feature fallen or criminal femininity, and their heroines not only defy the commandments of decorum but question as well the set of conventions which frames femininity. On the one hand, children's literature often plays upon innocent-looking heroines wandering off the tracks of propriety, bringing to light how easily adorable little girls can fall down wells. On the other hand, sensation novels feature blue-eyed and light-haired female protagonists as some of the most dangerous sensational female villainesses and show their readers how women may use beauty as a mask—thereby revising stereotypical representations of feminine evil as defined by criminal anthropology. In fact, sensationalism's own specific literary trait is precisely its focus on unblemished criminal female bodies which must be traced and tracked down. Hence, both genres particularly fashion the Victorian woman as always simultaneously angel and demon, beauty and beast, undercutting feminine stereotypes traditionally associated with passivity and victimization.

From its origins, the sensation novel has always been seen as deeply anchored in commodity culture. Its publication in instalments led the literary establishment to fear that literature was becoming, as the contemporary critic Henry Mansel put it, 'so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern to be ready by the beginning of the season' seeking to match 'the fashions of the current season'.[10] More disquieting still was the fear that sensation fiction might metamorphose women into addicts and endanger the nation with waves of female readers unable to check their bodies and to restrain their desires. Creating uncontrollable consumers from all social classes, the sensation novel was constructed from the beginning as merchandise likely to spread sensation mania everywhere about the country. In addition, as I have just

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8    Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England*, 11.
9    Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England*, 3.
10   Henry Mansel, 'Sensation Novels,' *Quarterly Review* 113 (1863): 481–514, 483.

suggested, material culture seeps into these novels. Like the unbound picture-quarto which Wilkie Collins depicted when he attempted to define how popular literature attracted its readers, 'set[ting] itself up obtrusively in the window, and insist[ing] on being looked at by everybody',[11] sensational heroines dexterously manipulate commodities and deliberately turn themselves into objects so as to appear the most appealing goods on the marriage market.

Likewise, in Victorian fairy tales and fantasies, the emphasis is upon moulding, shaping, or framing the female body. Most of the fairy narratives of the period register fears concerning the management of female appetites and feature heroines eager to consume goods. In George MacDonald's 'The Light Princess' and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the idea of thinness prevails in the construction of the feminine ideal the tales deflate. While the light princess is too light, Alice learns to control her body shape through eating the proper amount of food. She discovers that sweetness has less to do with eating treacle than with abiding by the laws of a literary cliché. Similarly, in Juliana Horatia Ewing's 'Amelia and the Dwarfs', Amelia brings to light what being 'dear' for a woman means and learns how to use her body to achieve freedom. In these three examples, the little girls are educated into femininity while the tales simultaneously underline the extent to which femininity is artificial. From mere figures of speech, the woman's body is turned into a fiction, a tale promoted by society which little girls learn by rote from the moment they listen to fairy tales.

For this reason, this study will start with an exploration of some Victorian fairy tales and fantasies as a springboard into sensation fiction. The way in which the fairy tales and the fantasies undermine the literary clichés which are meant to frame prescriptive femininity will be regarded as a first stage in the construction, deconstruction, or reconstruction of femininity this book examines. Each of the following chapters will take the female body as its point of departure. Analyzing the construction of femininity at mid-century, they will bring to light how the mid-Victorian woman's body registered the tensions of the period and revealed woman's position in society. The first chapters will deal with stories—stories which seem to bind the female body and which, by implication, foreground the extent to which 'woman' is bound to representational processes.

Chapter 1, concerning Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa the Fairy* (1869), deals with women's writing and the fairy-tale tradition of the female storyteller. The chapter traces how this female tradition was recuperated by male writers in the nineteenth century, leading women to be confined in male-defined scenarios. The story in which Mopsa is incarcerated—the fairy queen she is doomed to become—typifies the ways in which signs and letters construct femininity. Feminine construction appears to be literally woven into the text, as the narrative spins tales that demonstrate the extent to which woman is bound to textual representation. As Ingelow sets apart the male and female realms, she revealingly associates masculinity with a capitalist system and femininity with language: in the masculine world, consumption enslaves women; in the feminine universe, female stories enchant men. Thus, Ingelow seemingly offers

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11 Wilkie Collins, 'The Unknown Public', *My Miscellanies* (London: Samson & Low, 1863), 170–71.

women a voice of their own away from the alienating power of consumer culture. This power, however, is soon undercut when Mopsa realizes that she can but repeat old stories and cannot alter her fate. Freedom is illusory, and Mopsa remains the creation of a male character who quickly dismisses her from his thoughts.

The image of woman as a male literary creation or as a reflection of male power will then be investigated further in chapters 2, 3, and 4, which focus on representational processes and study how figures of speech give shape to the ideal female body promoted by patriarchal society. George MacDonald's 'The Light Princess' (1864), Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Juliana Horatia Ewing's 'Amelia and the Dwarfs' (1870), and Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses* (1874) will follow chronologically, all offering their readers and their characters stories dealing with the construction of femininity. They will address alternatively what being 'light', being 'sweet' or being 'dear' meant for a woman—that is, literally. Indeed, in these fairy tales and fantasies, the tropes which define femininity bind or chastise the female body until the heroines fit the feminine ideal. With commercial culture and threatening commodities—which may be poisoned or changed into cruel boys pricking and scratching the female body—always lurking in the background of the narratives, the tales underline how women's appetites must be controlled, and teach the little girls how to mould themselves in conformity with dominant representations of ideal femininity. The hints at contemporary medical issues and practices which inform the tales, moreover, will provide significant examples of the links between woman's biological and social constructions, thereby revealing the extent to which science acted as a means to figure woman in discourse.

Fashioned as a modern adaptation of *Sleeping Beauty* or *Snow White*, George MacDonald's 'The Light Princess' reveals how figures of speech frame women. The Victorian cult of the angel-woman conceived ideal femininity as comprising qualities above all of lightness, but also of passivity and even saintliness. As the title of MacDonald's tale suggests, feminine lightness conjures up the cliché of the disembodied, ethereal Victorian ideal which haunts nineteenth-century fiction as an illusory model to which women were taught to aspire. Yet, MacDonald's princess hardly tames her appetite and gradually stands as a rebellious representation of female desire. Moreover, because MacDonald's weightless princess defies the laws of nature, she engages debate with the idea of woman as essentially governed by nature, as well as the discourses this idea generates. As the narrative punningly unveils the various interpretations of the word 'light', MacDonald's princess is constantly aligned with duplicitous images: whether light-haired or light-heired, standing for gold and preciousness like most princesses, or for their opposite, the princess dramatizes the paradox of Victorian gender definitions and becomes a living image physically staging the danger of emulating a fleshly trope. Thus, chapter 2 looks at the way MacDonald re-uses Victorian tropes and gives flesh to a rhetorical image. In this way, I attempt to demonstrate how MacDonald's tale tames the fleshly sign which disrupts the fairy tale and prevents conventional closure: the experiments—ranging from physical torture to scholarly education—the light princess undergoes—which all aim to subdue her unruly body so that the princess may regain her gravity and marry—offer a relevant perspective on the construction of the feminine body, merging physiological and representational concerns.

The medical discourse which informs MacDonald's fairy tale will be explored further in chapters 3 and 4, which also feature female ill-health and medical surveillance. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* contains a 'secret kept from all the rest', which the final trial attempts to investigate and which chapter 3 reveals. Alice, as a representation of the mid-Victorian female consumer, struggles against her appetite. Moreover, as has long been emphasized by feminist criticism, one of the most significant features of Carroll's narrative is the way Carroll's little girl changes physically. However, I contend that Alice's body changing is no evidence of her gaining empowerment. Alice's voyage into womanhood is rather a journey into powerlessness. All through the tale, medical control prevails: the more Alice grows, shrinks, is deformed, the more the exhibition of her body phrases her own self-effacement. The codes, texts, and lessons Alice recites gradually suppress her corporeality. As she drinks and eats, grows and shrinks, Alice discovers a series of codes which partakes of the construction of proper femininity. Worse, the food she finds in Wonderland systematically seems to punish her acts of self-assertion, as if the luring treats which peppered her adventures were devised to tame her appetite from within. In fact, throughout her journey underground, the little girl's fantasy reveals a disciplinary regime which administers and turns the female body into a text, fragmenting it into parts that match Victorian propriety. Carroll's play with words and images—his blurring of the boundaries between female biology and feminine propriety with 'sweet' little girls, his probing of the instability of gender identities through a little girl's ramblings in a wonderland teeming with commodities become alive—thus figures as a significant instance of the changes in representation which marked the period and transformed women into a series of signs which could be bought and consumed. Hence the ultimate trial, which stages the masquerade of the signs that Alice deciphers, the very signs which, she has learnt, construct her identity and her self.

Chapter 4 then turns to fairy tales and fantasies written by Victorian women writers in the 1870s, such as Juliana Horatia Ewing and Christina Rossetti. By tapping into female folklore and reworking the figure of the female teller, both Ewing and Rossetti foreground the maiming aspects of language, thereby bringing into play the tensions involved in feminine representation. Like Carroll's fantasy, Ewing's 'Amelia and the Dwarfs' presents another little girl who falls down into the earth and experiences a journey through femininity underground, while her double falls ill above ground. But Amelia interestingly knows more about femininity than her elders, and her acute sense of taste—as she can tell a fake from an original—positions her as an interesting female figure likely to rewrite the construction of femininity which fairy tales are meant to promote. For Ewing's heroine is literally a very 'dear' little girl who turns woman's objectification on its head: as the stereoscopic construction of the fairy tale lays bare the links between the social and biological constructions of woman, Amelia's journey underground teaches her that being 'dear' for a woman consists in manipulating one's body to one's own ends and never revealing one's own nature. Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses*, on the other hand, like Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa the Fairy*, both echoes and inverts some of the issues of Carroll's *Alice*, proposing female characters violently handled and wounded by merciless boys. Rossetti's heroines can hardly taste the treats which Alice indulges in. On the

contrary, the world they discover through the looking-glass is a nightmarish universe where little girls must curb their appetites and let the cruel inhabitants of such fairy worlds crystallize them beneath plate-glass windows. Affiliated with jewels, they become 'precious' little things that can be exhibited and praised.

From the study of representational processes in Ingelow's, MacDonald's, and Carroll's narratives, chapter 4, therefore, gradually moves towards more visual motifs, which I shall analyze further in the second part of this study, focusing on sensation novels. No longer constructed solely from tropes, femininity in sensation fiction becomes linked to the production of images, and clichés are, in a way, visualized. The glimpses of commodity culture, which inform the Victorian fairy tales and fantasies analyzed in the first part of this study, become vital to the plots of sensation novels in which most of the female characters fabricate new identities. The chapters dealing with the sensation novel will be roughly chronological. The study will start with Rhoda Broughton's *Not Wisely But Too Well* (1862) because Broughton situates her plot in 1851. In Broughton's novel, the glass coffins which generally frame fairy-tale princesses become a series of glasshouses, culminating with the use of the Crystal Palace. As the epitome of consumer culture, Paxton's Crystal Palace is a good example of the relationship between femininity and modern culture. Moreover, Broughton's novel provides a significant bridge between the worlds of Victorian fairy tales and that of the sensation novel, as the heroine, associated with flowers and showcased in glasshouses, is also presented as a Victorian Little Red Ridinghood. Featuring a female character who can hardly contain her desire, Broughton's novel explores discourses on femininity which Dickens, Braddon, and Collins investigate further through female characters turning themselves into fashionable images and art curios. As chapter 5 underlines, Broughton metamorphoses the Crystal Palace into an image of incontinent desire and organic disease. She constructs her heroine both as an avid consumer and as a commodity. While Broughton thus confuses woman's biological and social constructions, like Victorian fairy tales and fantasies, her consumer backdrop proposes an interesting survey of feminine construction, thoroughly revising the cultural signposts of her age.

The femininity of the metropolis that Broughton's novel illustrates will be analyzed further in chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9, which will then follow chronologically, focusing on Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861–1862), Wilkie Collins's *No Name* (1862), *Armadale* (1864), and *The Law and the Lady* (1875). If Victorian fairy tales and fantasies do not always suggest that their female characters will experience bliss through marriage, Dickens's, Braddon's, and Collins's plots represent marriage as a market and foreground women who skilfully turn themselves into objects to be looked at, thereby showing women's subversive use of their own aestheticization. In all these novels, the female characters make up their own stories as they make up their own bodies, using the modern tools provided by consumer society. Thus, the detectives must learn to control the fashion-addicts and to read through the artifices of the feminine ideal. The heroines appear dangerously malleable, illusory figures whom modernity has transformed into 'phantasmagorias', in Walter Benjamin's words, pictures luring the onlooker with the promise of stability and yet constantly hinting at their potential duplicity as social fictions. Therefore, these chapters explore more thoroughly the impact

of consumer society on constructions of femininity as epitomized by the Crystal Palace exhibition and emphasize how the workings of feminine representation in sensation novels reflect a consumer society thriving on artificiality, on beauty aids, and miraculous cosmetics. The latter are used to fashion an illusory and malleable woman constructed by and through the signs she consumes and through the products she applies to her body.

In fact, the novels seek to discover whether feminine identity resides in an act of consumption which permits the construction of feminine autonomy and self-definition, or whether the female consumer enters a system in which she is inevitably subordinated to the male market—to the male appraising gaze—and which turns female representation into a series of empty signs. Investigating the liberating and indoctrinating power of consumption in a society based on male domination and feminine subordination, Victorian sensation novels envisage the double bind that inheres in feminine consumption.[12]

In chapter 6, femininity is seen as part of a modern visual culture where posters, photographs, and paintings act as investigative techniques which trace the female protagonists' journeys into crime. Dickens's *Bleak House*—sometimes seen as the first sensation novel—and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* both play upon heroines emulating the feminine ideal and enticing onlookers. But Lady Audley and Lady Dedlock are social fictions. In these novels the detectives must read and decipher the construction of the modern 'lady', the perfect face that outsmarts the codes of physiognomy. As I contend, the sensational body, when not overtly branded by sin, is, nonetheless, marked by the forces of modern life. Because the heroines appear as fashionable artefacts designed for visual stimulation, female aestheticization must be investigated. The detective plots examine the world of women's fashion, merging Victorian taxonomy with glossy representations of British Beauties. Associated with the motif of the fashion plate, reduced to a two-dimensional image, the sinful and shameful woman can no longer evade the policing gaze of Victorian authorities.

Chapter 6 offers comparative discussions of Dickens's and Braddon's use of fashion plates as visual instruments used to foreground modes of feminine representation. *Bleak House* features a female character who ostensibly exists only through the reports of the 'fashionable intelligence', which prints her whereabouts and records the traces of her body in black ink. As the novel tries to unveil the past of Lady Dedlock, the main clue becomes a copperplate in which Lady Dedlock appears as one of the British Beauties. Hence, chapter 6 investigates the rhetoric of Lady Dedlock's photographic portrait to study how Dickens conveys the construction of criminal femininity through modern techniques of mass-production. On the other hand, Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* plays upon the proliferation of copies of the fair domestic angel, ranging from the glowing Pre-Raphaelite portrait of Lady Audley to her emaciated, working-class replica buried in the churchyard. Yet this chapter especially investigates a specific clue central to the detective plot: in addition

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12    Hilary Radner brings to light this double bind in her study of the female shopper in *Shopping Around: Feminine Culture and the Pursuit of Pleasure* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).

to analyzing the series of visual doubles the narrative is hinged upon, I examine the faded photographs in a book of beauties which contains the incriminating clue for which the detective is looking. Therefore, I demonstrate how, far more subversively than in Dickens's *Bleak House*, Lady Audley's criminality is to be discovered among visual clues, paintings, and posters, which all signal how female aestheticization and commodification marked the literature of the second half of the nineteenth century and moulded a picture of femininity denied by mainstream realism.

Chapter 7 focuses on Wilkie Collins's *No Name*—perhaps one of the sensation novels which best depicts Victorian society at mid-century—and the way in which, with the expansion of the middle-class market, women were increasingly targeted by advertisements. Enticed into buying, the novel seems to claim, women were lured into revamping themselves to match the ideals promulgated by the market. If cosmetics were less overtly advertised than quack medicines and cure-alls, both were largely aimed at female consumers, suggesting that their own transformation into the perfect lady was possible with the acquisition of beauty creams, hair lotions, or fashionable corsets. Because they appeared to enable women to engage in self-definition, creams, tinctures, and pills inevitably seemed to breed female duplicity. As I argue, this idea forms the linchpin of Collins's novels. Chapter 7 particularly shows how the sensational narrative foregrounds and exposes the construction of the Victorian female consumer. While the heroine masquerades at all times, using cosmetics to dissimulate incriminating marks and indiscriminately playing parts on stage as in real life, a minor character, Mrs. Wragge, embodies the gullible female customer. But Collins's portrait of his shopping addict is ambivalent. From being a compulsive buyer, Mrs. Wragge eventually ends up on her husband's patent medicine's wrapping paper. Depicted in an advertisement for 'The Pill', and thus turned into a commodity herself, Mrs. Wragge unconsciously probes the extent to which cosmetics and pills really empowered women by enabling them to secure self-definition. As an ultimate form of containment, Captain Wragge's wondrous Pill seems to display the yoke of Victorian patriarchal aesthetics: by conflating the fields of cosmetics and (quack) medicine, Wragge's Pill reveals the moralizing and indoctrinating tales which Victorian society promoted. Hence, chapter 7 underlines the extent to which Collins's character's journey from consumer to commodity reveals Collins's viewpoint on modern constructions of femininity.

Chapter 8, on Wilkie Collins's *Armadale*, continues the discussion of the preceding chapter. In *Armadale* the figure of the actress once again haunts the stage of Victorian domesticity. Yet the heroine's construction is even more grounded on a transgressive use of cosmetics. Lydia Gwilt bears a resemblance to Madeleine Smith, who was accused of murder and who claimed to have bought arsenic for cosmetic purposes. Moreover, Gwilt's closest adviser is Mrs. Oldershaw, a minor character modelled on Rachel Leverson, famous for her miraculous cosmetics and charged with fraud. While the novel uses *Snow White* and the figure of the vain Queen as a discreet subtext, the text also plays on contemporary allusions to real cases in which cosmetics were used both as a fatal weapon and as a typically feminine accessory to beautify the female complexion and to conceal disgraceful age marks. The boudoir functions as the wing of the Victorian stage and becomes the locus of murderous plots. However, Lydia Gwilt does not need make-up to charm males. Interestingly, the character seems to

denounce the artificiality of cosmetics. She simply uses the mirror as a technical adviser in her criminal plots, a tool designed to inspire her when she devises her new parts. The protagonist's ambiguous position, simultaneously very close to Madeleine Smith and seemingly very different in her refusal to use cosmetics, is fraught with meaning. Gwilt gradually appears as a reflecting surface exposing the abuses of a society which constructs women as dangerous fakes, while also demanding that they should appear what they are and be what they appear. Thus, chapter 8 uses Collins's novel as a good example of sensationalism's critique of a consumer society which bases female identity on disguise and artificiality. Analyzing the links between *Armadale* and nineteenth-century women's magazines, which advised their female customers on the new cosmetics available on the market, I demonstrate how Collins foregrounds Victorian ideology and voices female rebellion. This eventually leads me to question the validity of Wilkie Collins's perspective. Ostensibly denouncing a culture promoting women as dangerous artefacts and threatening copies of the feminine ideal, Collins makes cosmetics appear as a double-edged female weapon meant to fool men and entrap them into marriage, but also, paradoxically, as a deadly substance likely to imprison women in a vicious circle where they may eventually lose touch with their own identity.

Chapter 9 prolongs the conclusion of the preceding chapter regarding Collins's views on cosmetics and the issue of female commodification. However this time, Collins's sensationalism flirts even more with Gothic effects. In this late novel, Collins strongly relies on stereotypical Gothic imagery to cast light on the construction of the ideal complexion of the artificial angel cherished by Victorian patriarchal culture. In fact, *The Law and the Lady* overtly foregrounds the dangers of commodified femininity. As a typical detective novel—gradually departing from sensationalism to merge with detective fiction—the novel, nevertheless, assembles standard Gothic devices in order to build up the tension to a dramatic climax: Has the heroine married a criminal? Is he going to murder her as he murdered his first wife? Significantly, Collins's novel relies on Gothic clichés not merely to shortcut the mystery of the male protagonist as another murderous Gothic villain, but also to investigate the construction of feminine identity within patriarchal society. As a new version of *Bluebeard* and female curiosity, *The Law and the Lady* plays upon embedded secrets and texts which the heroine must decode to clear her husband of the crime and, thereby, to define her own identity. Gradually, the text leads us into a macabre world where cosmetics play the part of the villain. For the criminal weapon is no less than arsenic, the domestic poison Victorian women would absorb to improve their complexions. Hence, chapter 9 analyzes how sensationalism's representation of femininity relies on the Gothic as a narrative matrix. As I argue, feminine identity in Collins's novel is reflected through modernized Gothic devices: old trunks concealing manuscripts become toilet-cases with secret compartments which hide beauty products. Hence, Collins's modern Gothic, I contend, sheds new light on Victorian feminine practices the better to denounce them. Having examined Victorian women's practices with regard to arsenic consumption and the construction of the female complexion, chapter 9 thus explores how beauty accessories regulate and sculpt femininity and are used as vehicles through which to manage the female body.

From examples of little girls being literally and physically moulded to the pattern of ideal femininity in Victorian fairy tales and fantasies to sensational heroines turning themselves into attractive objects to seduce men, this study embarks on an expedition through the looking-glass, into a realm where women debunk definitions of femininity privileged by men, and illuminates the changes which the rise of consumer culture entailed in the construction of ideal femininity.