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Placement and Displacement:

The Fallen Woman in Discourse

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Abstract

This thesis is an invitation to reconsider the process of reading and representing the fallen woman. It combines an eclectic theoretical approach, drawing on works by Foucault, Derrida and Kristeva, with the metaphor of colonisation and the palimpsest.

Using this construction, the thesis examines the placement of the fallen woman in discourse. The first section discusses how she falls in discourse, and uses textual and visual examples (predominantly Esther Barton from Gaskell's Mary Barton, Monica Widdowson and Rhoda Nunn from Gissing's The Odd Women). The reading of these figures uncovers three characteristic issues in the fallen woman's representation: her construction as murderer, the 'justice' of her death, and her pornographic interaction with the reader.

This examination of the placement of the fallen woman continues in the second section. Here, the thesis explores how representations of her placement in discourse also suggest a displacement--that is, how her fall *in* discourse is a fall *from* discourse. Reading her site as a palimpsest of colonising representations uncovers the placement and displacement of the fallen woman in discourse.

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P.S. Would you like your head back now? ☺

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Introduction:

Colonising Her Fall

The nineteenth century obsession with public morality and female sexuality expressed itself in an outpouring of literal and visual representations of both the saintly and the sinning woman. Medical, legal and religious discourses first defined different forms of deviancy and then sought to contain, explain and expunge these 'aberrations' of the 'natural' order¹. In this ongoing process of organising sexuality and constituting categories, 'the fallen woman' is an arbitrary and constructed term. The continuing reconstruction of this category signifies a social struggle for possession of the term's meaning and currency. Thus, the fallen woman is the site of a cultural war fought through representation.

These representations work to delineate a shape, and so shape a space in discourse. In an almost cartographical project,

¹These discourses operate as Foucauldian 'apparatuses of sexuality' (Merquior, 123); they work to erect a code, or norm, of sexuality which is "always a construct devised for the benefit of those in power, entailing the creation of 'laws' which both determine what is true and false, good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable, and justify the punishment of those who deviate from or challenge this norm" (Sellers, 5). A fuller discussion of Foucault's related concepts of discourse, sexuality and power is found in Merquior, Sellers and Vicinus.

representations form and reform the image of the fallen woman--producing a densely populated and colonised space. The processes of *inscription*, *description* and *ascription* are colonisations that invade and occupy this space². The fallen woman is invaded by a male seducer who *inscribes* his mark upon her body. Diverse representations take over this body and text, naming and *describing* it fallen. Readings of these representations are seized and promoted by advocates of different causes who *ascribe* them meaning and signification. Through these processes of representation, the body, space and text of the fallen woman are colonised.

These continual reinscriptions function as a palimpsest--a parchment manuscript in which the first writing is erased so that the material may be reused by overlaying further textualisations. Each reinscription (or colonisation) of the fallen woman is then an overlay in this palimpsest, overwriting prior inscriptions. Implicit in this process of overwriting is the principle of value. The act of valuation occurs when one textuality is considered redundant and is superseded by the writing of an overlay. This constitutes censored erasure, but the erasing dynamics are never absolute--traces of another writing remain visible through the overlay. Thus, the

²The use of a spatial model to describe the processes of representing the fallen woman led naturally to the metaphor of colonisation. This image was strengthened by readings of Nancy Hartsock, who refers to the coloniser's process of constructing women as the colonised other. While Hartsock uses this metaphor in a critique of Foucault, she quotes extensively from Albert Memmi's The Colonizer and the Colonized. This text provided a general model of colonisation, which was extrapolated to describe the outpouring of representations that occupy the site of the fallen woman.

colonising overlay is similar to a transparency, which may be read in conjunction with the text that it uncovers and covers up.

Once the site of the fallen woman is recognised as a palimpsest, her representations may be read as traces of successive colonisations. Reading these traces reveals the interaction between the intention of different textual overlays, and the tension that exists between them. Thus, rather than consisting of accumulative additions, the shaping and mapping of the figure of the fallen woman is a cumulative system formed by repeated overwritings of her site.

These overwritings consist of representations of fallen women, *and* critical readings of these representations. Critical readings cover the representation with another colonising representation and, hence, add to the cumulative process of overwriting the site of the fallen woman. However most critics, when reading specific overlays, have not acknowledged this process or their participation in it. George Watt blindly engages in this type of critical colonisation during his discussion of the "great writers of the nineteenth century" (7) who studied the sexual fall. Watt refers to Gaskell, Hardy, Dickens, Eliot, Collins, Gissing and Moore, and discusses their representations of the fallen woman. His reading of their overlays is a hierarchical valuation according to contemporary constructions of women:

[these writers were] able to highlight the intense and complex problems of the Victorian women from all classes, expose the sham respectability which personifies the patriarchy, and give themselves the role of social reformer in the process. (7)

This ranking of representations is the reimposition of a principle of value on the overlay of the palimpsest. In his own overlay, that assigns value to other representations, Watt writes a narrative that "simultaneously presents and represents a world, that is, simultaneously creates or makes up a reality and asserts that it stands independent of that same reality" (Sarup, 142)³.

Watt's, and others', naming of writers as 'social reformers' is a similar imposition of value. Each representation of the fallen woman is already a reforming of her space. Those representations that have been declared social reformations are merely favourably viewed re-formings. In this manner, the fallen woman is possessed, inscribed and shaped to fulfil a contemporary political agenda.

Similarly, recent feminist critics have attempted to uncover, in presentations of the fallen woman, evidence of an aggressively repressive Victorian consciousness--to read her as "the neurosis of a culture" (Auerbach, 31). Françoise Basch sketches a figure of wretchedness and poverty who is exploited and outcast from society. In contrast, the fallen woman has been exalted by some contemporary critics who read her marginal construction as a symbolically central function of Victorian hegemony. Nina Auerbach provides some acknowledgement of this process of claiming and categorising the fallen woman when she speaks of her "not only as she was but as she was created" (51). However,

³ Watt's critical narrative seems similar to the concept Fredric Jameson names 'ideologemes' ("narrative unities of a socially symbolic type" [Jameson, p. 185]). See also Sarup's discussion of Jameson and 'narrative'.

rather than an act of creation, the construction of the fallen woman is a cumulative process of production. Acknowledging these overlays as colonisations returns the study of the product to an exploration of its means of production and its intended function.

The continual manipulation and colonisation of the space of the fallen woman is indication of her arbitrary naming. She is the shifting and cumulative function of literal, visual and symbolic representations. The palimpsest of the fallen woman is a layered, though not ranked, transcript of contradictory and repeating representations. The reading of the palimpsest is a reading of attempted erasure, visible traces, and imposed reinscriptions. It reads the fallen woman as continual process and production, and as a colonised space in language. In naming and shaping the fallen woman, each inscription seeks to colonise in an endless process of reformation and hence reclamation of body, space and text.

* * * *

This thesis does not set out to draw conclusions or put forward startling revelations concerning the nature of the fallen woman or of Victorian society. Neither is it an exhaustive study of representations of the fallen woman. Instead, it uses the metaphor of colonisation and the palimpsest to articulate the forming and reforming of her site. This thesis is then an invitation to reconsider the process of overlaying representations of the fallen woman. While this is itself yet another overlay, yet another occupation and colonisation of the space of the fallen woman, it is at least overt in its reinscription.

Using this construction of the fallen woman, the reinscription reads existing representations to examine the placement of the fallen woman. It uses an eclectic theoretical approach, drawing on works by Foucault, Derrida and Kristeva. The first section of the thesis discusses how the fallen woman falls in discourse, and uses textual and visual examples (predominantly Esther Barton from Gaskell's Mary Barton, Monica Widdowson and Rhoda Nunn from Gissing's The Odd Women). The reading and rereading of these figures uncovers three characteristic issues in her representation: the fallen woman's construction as murderer, the 'justice' of her death, and her pornographic interaction with the reader.

This examination of the placement of the fallen woman continues in the second section. Here, the thesis explores how representations of her placement in discourse also suggest a displacement--that is, how her fall *in* discourse is a fall *from* discourse. Thus, reading her site as a palimpsest of colonising overlays un-covers the placement and displacement of the fallen woman in discourse.