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ELUSIVE LAUGHTER

THE IMPACT OF HUMOUR ON GENDER RELATIONS IN DIXON'S *THE STORY OF A MODERN WOMAN*

Five years after publishing her only novel, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894), Ella Hepworth Dixon contributed a short article to *The Humanitarian* entitled "Why Women Are Ceasing to Marry." Writing with appropriately acerbic wit, she attributed the waning attraction of the "old masculine idols" to a growing female propensity for the ultimate display of one's "breadth of mind"—a sense of humour (260–261). This once dormant quality, Dixon declared, was now being levelled with critical alacrity at England's mass of eligible bachelors (260–266). Her assertion was certainly accurate in regards to "New Women" writers; they did deftly wield the "cudgel of humour," though they were well aware of its capricious nature (Stetz 219). Indeed, New Women were the frequent targets of vicious periodical caricatures, which, ironically, often depicted them as humourless (219–221). At first glance, *The Story of a Modern Woman* seems to demonstrate the accuracy of such accusations. As Amanda T. Smith comments, the novel's "ration of comedy to tragedy" tends towards the latter (113). But, humour is neither absent nor marginal in *The Story of a Modern Woman*; rather, it runs like a bright thread through the gloomy tapestry of melancholia that Dixon weaves, with both Mary Erle asserting poignancy, autonomy, and intellectual power. Mary's character is shaped implicitly by the wry commentary of the narrator, even as it is moulded directly by the sardonic and wise wit of Alison. Fittingly, during the climax of the novel, it is Mary's grim yet fully developed sense of humour that pulls her back from the edge of the moral abyss on which she teeters. She thus evolves into the kind of discerning New Woman her creator would describe five years later.

Mary's education in humour begins early in the novel, as the narrator recounts her protagonist's burgeoning, revelatory awareness of the ironies inherent to late-Victorian gender relations. With gentle wit, the narrator allows the reader a panoptic view of Mary's psychological progression, recounting how her innocent hope that she could be both a bride and an angel (the halo, she decides, will likely be available to her

even after matrimony) was subsumed by her adult awareness of the "fine irony" of female subjugation (Dixon 53; 56). It is men, Mary realizes, who refuse to illuminate the "vain shadows" of intellectual understanding, and who then act surprised when women find it difficult to navigate realities that they have never experienced (56). Her symbolic struggle towards this understanding, while poignant, is somewhat couched in the quick narrative trip through her childhood. Her narrative expression makes sense when contextualized, though; as Kristin Ross and Smith separately point out, the ambiguous figure of the New Woman (whose identity ranged from that of a female writer like Mary to a woman who engaged in illicit sexual relations) was under increasing cultural fire by the mid-1890s (Ross 76; Smith 113). In this atmosphere of periodical satire, it is little wonder that Dixon attempted to make her heroine "palatable" to audiences by downplaying her feminism (Ross 80). Though, it is also clear that Dixon was unwilling to sacrifice her character's ability to detect irony; Mary Erle's fledgling sense of grim humour is established immediately, and she will carry it with her as she ventures into the strange realities of late-Victorian society.

Despite the supposed rigid boundaries of gender demarcations in this society, the New Woman had a "multiple identity" that defied easy categorization (Ledger 1). Thus it is unsurprising that Dixon emblematizes this multifaceted figure not only through Mary but also through Alison (Ross 80–83). Indeed, it is the latter who first fully demonstrates humour's ability to foster an intellectual awareness of feminist opportunities. We are introduced to Alison by the narrator's comparison of her to a "classic" book (Dixon 70); in the literary world of *The Story of a Modern Woman*, there is no greater compliment Alison possesses a precocious wit that is both incisive and didactic. When Mary remarks that she has allowed her brother, Jimmie, to visit a friend immediately after their father's death, Alison instantly deduces the truth of the matter. Sarcastically, she comments that she can imagine Jimmie exclaiming that "he shouldn't dream" of leaving his sister and then manipulatively convincing her that it would be "rather rude," after all, if he refused a polite invitation (73). Mary smiles in response, and Alison concludes by wryly noting "So much [. . .] for brothers" (73). Her comment prompts Mary to announce that "we've got [. . .] to depend upon ourselves in the crises of life" (73). The "we" of this sentence represents women as a collective; and thus, this small interlude of humour forces Mary to realize her need for both personal autonomy and female solidarity. Alison, then, and by extension Dixon, has furthered Mary's understanding of the emancipatory—though daunting— potential of feminism. This burgeoning awareness of feminist thought is tested just a few pages later, when

Vincent Hemming expresses his passion for Mary. This scene of Hemming's initial proposal establishes the trend for the rest of their interactions, which are largely defined by Mary's intellectual frustration at the inability to share humour with her lover. As he prepares to declare his feelings, Hemming comments that Mary possesses the "modern craze" for work, to which Mary jokingly responds that "it probably saves some of us from the madhouse" (80). She gently and humorously hints at her desire to partake in at least some aspect of the New Woman movement, but Hemming merely smiles a "little fatuously" and questions where her work will be after she is married (80). This failed attempt at jocularity hinders Mary's control over the situation; she turns away "abruptly" and the scene begins to spiral towards her submission to his desires (80). As Tara MacDonald comments, this acquiescence is at least partially due to Mary's physical attraction to Hemming, and thus she emblematizes "the New Woman's struggle between feminist politics and heterosexual passion" (52). This submission is also the result of her shaken confidence. Mary's endeavour to communicate her sense of humour—and thus, her intellectual aspirations—to Hemming proves futile, and she is left bereft, commenting incredulously that "only a minute ago she had been ready to face the world alone" (Dixon 82). A few minutes earlier she had shared a witty, even feminist understanding with Alison, in which she had reached the conclusion that such independence was even possible. Yet all is now lost, and Mary is left with the knowledge that her lover cannot satisfy her intellectual desires on any level, not even that of humour.

Mary's intellectual desires are fulfilled, however, by Alison, and their witty exchanges mark some of the brightest moments of the novel. Using Alison as her mouthpiece during these conversations, Dixon intimates that women may use humour to avoid the gendered landmines of Victorian society. This lesson is exemplified by Alison's attempts to instill "a keen sense of the ridiculous" into her servant Evelina, who is the mother of an illegitimate child (74). Although Alison eventually facilitates a marriage between Evelina and the child's father, she jokingly hints to Mary that if humour had been allowed to perform its "reformative function," as Smith calls it, then her servant would have possessed the discernment necessary to avoid the scandal in the first place (111). Mary is cheered by Alison's "whimsical" personality, teasingly asking her if she has discussed her philanthropic endeavours within higher social circles, even as the reader is reminded of the social ills which plagued "fallen" women like Evelina (Dixon 75).

Alison not only speaks of humour's intellectual powers, she exercises them.

When Mary is agonizing over Hemming's imminent arrival, it is Alison who diffuses the tension, commenting sarcastically that it would surely be a "calamity" if Mary were to miss her lover's visit; after all, they are only planning on spending the "rest of [their] natural existence[s]" together (114). Emerging from her anxious languor, Mary responds pertly that Alison is an "unsympathetic demon," and the two continue a sprightly conversation (114). All thoughts of Hemming are dispelled by their exchange, and Mary is momentarily freed from the intellectual stagnation of her endless "waiting" (121). Indeed, it is not so much Evelina but Mary whom Alison trains in the art of humour, and in the discernment necessary for navigation within the gendered inequalities of the Victorian world.

As the novel progresses, this incisive sense of discernment manifests itself unconsciously through Mary's increasing dissatisfaction with Hemming. As a "predominantly realist" writer, Dixon does not allow the already dubious attraction between Mary and Hemming to come to fruition (Ledger 97). Rather, she incrementally erodes their relationship by revealing Hemming's shortcomings in humour and intellect. For example, Mary can only scarcely peruse one of her lover's letters from India in its entirety before she experiences frustration: his "old-fashioned phrases and copybook platitudes," which are unintentionally laughable, contradict her remembrance of his passionate farewell (Dixon 100). Mary's brewing discontent, which is only superficially leavened by her idealized daydreams of the future, comes to a boil when her lover returns tardily to her from his travels (100; 115–119). Already frustrated, she cannot help but find his strange, overly serious comparison between the inevitable dissipation of Niagara Falls and the ruin of London to be a little ridiculous. "What an unpleasant idea," Mary laughs, adding, "what dreadful things you always think of!" (120). As was the case during Hemming's proposal, her gentle wit goes unnoticed, but her subsequent "pretty, frank outburst" at his lateness, as well as her "childish, charming mouth," are given more attention (120). Their physical affection is only momentary, and Mary is soon provoked to sarcasm regarding his tardy appearance (121). Hemming, obliviously solicitous, merely attributes her sharpness to the "sultry weather" (121). Though it is still largely unconscious at this stage in the novel, Mary seems to be exercising the penetrating sense of discernment that Alison advocates, and is clearly finding her lover wanting by its measure.

If Hemming is emblematic of the dandy who is convinced that he is an "expert on women," and who was often unfortunately associated with the New Woman in the popular press, then Perry is the novel's closest approximation to a "New Man" who will

complement—not restrain—his female counterpart (MacDonald 50; 43; 44). Though he is one of the few men in the novel who can make Mary smile and laugh, he is still unable to satisfy her intellectually. Nonetheless, one must give Perry credit for proving far more receptive to Mary's true desires than Hemming; he even prompts her journalistic endeavours by suggesting she write a caption for one of his sketches (Dixon 103). At first he is met by "blank astonishment," but after a glance at the contrast between his own frumpy image and the picture of the beautifully dressed woman that he is holding, Mary cannot help but smile and agree to help (103). Indeed, their relationship is marked by gentle condescension on her part and oblivious cheeriness on his. When Mary assures Perry with mock sternness that no amount of "sherry and Bath buns" will distract her from a "highly critical" appraisal of his art studio, her humour sails over his head (131). Yet, he does catch the spark of her vivacity in a way that Hemming cannot—responding excitedly that she looks just as she did when they first met, "with a funny little tinkle in the tail of [her] eye" (131). Perry may not understand Mary's humour, but he does appreciate it. Similarly, when interviewing him for *Illustrations*, Mary asks him with a "slight smile" if his art has a "message" (135). Her question teases both him and the pompous idea that any art has a cohesive 'message,' but Perry is nonplussed. Once she has prompted him with a potential answer, he simply accommodates her by remarking, "I don't mind what you say about me" (135). Again, their relationship—marked by humour—proves companionable while slightly out of sync. Thus it is unsurprising that a few pages later Mary turns down his marriage proposal; after all, she is not looking for intellectual power over her partner, but simply intellectual fulfillment from him.

Alison is in some ways the opposite. She comments that "power, to put it plainly, was what the modern woman craved," and that to gain it she would inevitably have to marry (92). Ironically (but fittingly, considering the feminist context of the novel), her moment of true but fleeting power comes only when she parts with her lover Doctor Dunlop Strange, learning the value of female solidarity. As MacDonald comments, Dunlop is by his very occupation a sinister figure, for male doctors in the late-Victorian era provoked "feminist concerns with the institutions of both medicine and marriage" (43). The New Woman movement was interested in facilitating female control over female bodies, and doctors like Dunlop often presented a direct threat to this autonomy (43). He proves a dastardly figure when his suicidal mistress, the mysterious patient number twenty-seven, is discovered by Alison (Dixon 152). Unsurprisingly, she chooses to reveal this knowledge to her lover drip by acrimonious drip. When the Doctor uneasily remarks that he does not wish to discuss patient number twenty-seven

with "young ladies," Alison bitingly retorts that she is not a young lady but "a woman, taking a great deal of interest in others of my own sex" (160). Clearly, Alison is viewing Dunlop's betrayal from the pedestal of united womanhood: the Doctor's mistress is a victimized sister, not a promiscuous rival. She goes on to level his blithe defenses with alacrity, revealing abruptly that his mistress is dead, and then asking with just "a shade of irony" if he would prefer to take care of the burial himself (160). This scene represents the apex of Alison's ironic prowess and intellectual power, and also of her grief; heart-broken, she is left with only a confirmation of the need for female solidarity.

This lesson, so painfully learned, is soon passed on to Mary. Though Alison does seem to fade away after her lover's betrayal, one could argue that she retains her sense of feminist irony to the bitter end, and even uses her last words to convey it to her friend. Alison's death, in keeping with the larger realist ethos of the novel, negates any possibility of a truly happy ending. Galia Ofek points out that Dixon was one of many New Woman writers who refused to contort their novels into idealistically "neat marriage plots in the Cinderella format" (27–28). Instead, Dixon contorts the Cinderella format into her own more tragic rendering of the female experience (28). However, Ofek's contention that Alison's final words entrench her in "fixed standards" of feminine beauty as ordained by "patriarchal value systems" may be queried (29). On the surface, Alison's last anxious comment about the ugly state of her swollen feet does seem symptomatic of a socially-conditioned need to appear attractive to men (Dixon 167–168; Ofek 29). However, one must remember that only a few pages earlier Alison impassionedly extracted from Mary the promise that she would "never, never do anything to hurt another woman" (Dixon 164). In her last words, then, Alison may be seen as consciously pointing to another irony that reinforces her earlier dictum; if she is dying of grief, it is because another woman (albeit unwittingly) hurt her, and if her swelled foot is the result of her grief, it is because of the poisonous influence of the "fixed standards"—and larger patriarchal pressures—that Ofek speaks of. Far from losing her intellectual, ironical awareness, Alison is imparting it to Mary with her last breath.

It is thus unsurprising that Mary takes her friend's advice regarding female camaraderie—so poignantly affirmed by Alison's last, darkly humorous observation—to heart; indeed, this lesson provides Mary with the humorous fortitude she needs to resist Hemming's advances. Even before this great moral test, however, Mary demonstrates that her sense of irony has fully developed. When she receives a letter

from her former lover begging for her blessing of his impending marriage, she at first experiences a "curious tightening in her chest" and a "horrible feeling in her head" (169). She quickly rallies, however, and, with a "grim smile," realizes that "women [. . .] should accept their fate with a grateful acquiescence" (169). On the surface, this passage seems passive, even bitter, but it may also be read as a small triumph of irony: Mary may be swept along in a current of social inequities, but at least she is cognizant and critical of the inadequacies of its patriarchal fount She goes on to provide her blessing to Hemming, thus rising above the moral level of this man who has so carelessly played with her "fate" (170). She repeats this feat again when he presses her to live with him adulterously. In this pivotal scene, she is only too aware of the cruel "irony of [female] life"; however, more importantly, her awareness—which she specifically attributes to Alison—prevents her from betraying Hemming's wife and perpetuating this cruelty (184). As Ledger comments, an acceptance of "mutuality born of gender-based oppression" seems to prevail here (160–161). Mary wears a "faint smile" as she explains to Hemming that women "have a bad enough time as it is [. . .] surely we don't need to make it any worse by our own deliberate acts!" (Dixon 184). Considering the gravity of her situation, this observation is remarkably gentle and wise—and most importantly, humorous. Alison's legacy of wit has carried Mary safely across the moral chasm of male pressure.

Unfortunately, this moral (and ironic) staunchness is not met with any tangible reward; as Ross points out, Dixon chooses a "tragic denouement" for her novel, and (like many other New Woman heroines) her protagonist is "punished" (91; 77). However, even as a suicidal Mary incinerates her last picture of Hemming, one may glimpse just a glimmer of her beleaguered sense of humour: she is still capable of wondering whether "love-letters burn more ardently than other kinds of paper" (Dixon 190). With a small play on words and a gentle injection of sarcasm, then, we are reassured that Mary has not forgotten the lessons that Alison (and, of course, Dixon) has taught her. Her humorous resilience—less of a hero than that of a martyr—is as supremely real as it is tragic, and she sacrifices herself not for the sake of men but of women. Indeed, such resilience seems a necessary trait for the struggling New Woman. Not long after Dixon's article "Why Women are Ceasing to Marry" was published, a rebuttal appeared in *The Speaker* titled "The Alleged Decline of Marriage" (1899). After sarcastically referencing Dixon's claims about the discerning power of humour and its relation to dwindling marriage rates, the author of the article concluded that except for a "minority of independent temperaments," matrimony remained the "aspiration"

of most women (656). In this not-so-subtle criticism of the New Woman's desire for independence—or even the ability to discern a suitable partner—is cultural evidence for Dixon's choice not to end *The Story of a Modern Woman* in a happy manner. Yet, as Ledger points out, Mary's narrative concludes with the plodding not from but "towards" London and its potentials (162). We safely assume that she carries on her sense of humour with her.

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