

ENCOUNTERING THE BLOOMSBURY BARRISTER'S WIFE: A PHENOMENON OF LOCAL LITERARY HISTORY

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To begin this paper I'd like to offer a short but perfectly formed story from the margins of Bloomsbury history, the witness statement of a certain barrister named William Belt in a police misconduct trial in November 1873, as recorded by the *Pall Mall Gazette*:

I live at 102, Gower-street, Bedford-square, and have also an estate near York. On the 27th October I was living at my house in town, having come up from the country. My wife was there. At that day I had my luncheon at home, at about half-past one, and left at about two o'clock for the purpose of going to my chambers in Stone's-buildings, Chancery Lane. I was perfectly sober. When I got to Lamb's-conduit-street I went to a grocer's named Goate, and ordered some sauce, for which I paid. I had some conversation with him. I continued my journey, and going down Hand-court I came to a skipping-rope with a little child at each end. They had their backs turned to me, and when they stopped, I passed, and they followed me behind. I said, "I suppose you want something to buy sweets." I gave one 2d; but the other stayed away. I took out the smallest silver coin I had, 6d., and tempted her to come with me; but her heart failed her after approaching me a little way. They then ran away; but I found them again at Jockey's Gate, and the little girl who was timid came up and took the sixpence. I said to them, "I hope you may always be as happy as you are to-day." As I was walking on and near the steps of Warwick-place, two young gentlemen, arm-in-arm, pushed me and laughed out. I saw it was done on purpose, and walked through the gate and told them to behave themselves. The stout one said, "I will thrash you." Not accustomed to this behaviour, I raised my umbrella with the intention of striking him; but I thought better of it. I asked him for his name and address, which he refused to give. I then offered my card in exchange. He still refused, and said I was drunk and had better go home. I looked for the police, and in Bedford-row saw a policeman and walked towards him. When I reached him I told him to be good enough to take the names of the young gentlemen. The defendant is the policeman. The young men were in sight when I spoke to the constable. He told me I was drunk and causing an obstruction. I told the defendant he had no right to say that as I was a barrister. I walked slowly on my way and the constable walked behind me. Some twenty or thirty boys followed me, and echoed the cry that I was drunk. The constable said, "You know you are drunk." I said he had no right to turn me out of my way. At the corner of Bedford-row he made a stand and said, "Will you or will you not go?" I said I would not. He then seized me by my right wrist and placed it under his arm.

Living on the doorstep of his professional work in Bloomsbury was for the nineteenth-century lawyer commonplace and (for many) desirable, for, as John Cordy Jeaffreson writes in 1867, the area had for a long time been very much associated with the law, and was from the 18th century on, indeed, the paradigmatic place for lawyers to live (though, significantly for this paper, he claims that this paradigm was on the wane by the mid 1860s.)² The garden squares of Bloomsbury had been built to resemble very closely their cousins nearer the fashionable parks, in Belgravia, Kensington and suchlike, and so they had afforded a compromise by which the upper middle-class lawyer and his family could live in something approaching the more-celebrated luxury of aristocratic West London proper, whilst still being within walking distance of the Inns of Court. The mediating

period under threat of extinction. What role the novel and the periodical press had in the normalisation of this ironing-out of (one of) nineteenth century London's socio-spatial idiosyncrasies is the chief question of this paper, and is part of one of the fundamental queries of my larger project.

But enough for now of the work-life balance of the Bloomsbury barrister. What of his wife back home in Gower Street? What on earth did she think of her husband's embarrassingly interrupted commute to work and his public humiliation in that escorted march to the nearest police station? This Bloomsbury wife would have more cause for complaint of her husband than most – though an article that appeared in *Punch* a decade back depicting the general disgruntlement of Bloomsbury wives suggests the possibility of an earlier more chronic grievance - about his choice to take a house in Bloomsbury in the first place, an area of London that for all its workable convenience, was in the minds of so many commentators, no longer inhabitable for the fashionable classes:

Now, capitalists, now is your time to buy houses. There is the most awful commotion in what used to be thought the Genteel District all round the British Museum. All the inhabitants are moving. Half a dozen earthquakes couldn't have done it... On Wednesday last, the *Times* explained that the district in question: -

“Is now the economical quarter for Trading Respectability, as it was formerly the splendid quarter of legal eminence and mercantile wealth.”

The row at the breakfast tables that morning, when these lines were incautiously read out, was something appalling. If the writer of that paragraph values his life, and does not wish to encounter the fate of Orpheus, let him keep outside the radius of a mile from MR. PANIZZIS bust over the reading-room door. “Trading Responsibility.” Many a wretched husband got, that day, a stormy breakfast and a frigid dinner. Many a domestic tragedy was enacted, the principal part by an enraged matron who “never thought” to have been struck down as a respectable tradesman's wife. Many a street door was slammed – many –³

There is a connection between the *generic* row at the breakfast table gleefully

³ *Punch* October 17th 1863.

imagined in *Punch* and the row that may or may not have ensued between our embarrassed barrister Belt and the wife he had lunched with and then left at home in Gower Street – class instability. For Belt’s indignant rebuke to the policeman that he ‘is a barrister’ and should not then suffer such public ignominy stems from an *anxiety* that he has not been recognised properly as belonging to the class to which most people (including, or rather, especially, the police) are expected to defer. Living in unfashionable Bloomsbury, on the fringes of respectably upper-middle-class London, the butt of jokes from those who represent the solid core of social exclusivity, Belt’s wife may have long worried about their class credentials. The street scene, which through the police misconduct trial became an even more public affair, may well have added insult to injury.

All this, is of course, hypothesis and extrapolation: there are, as far as I know, no records of what Belt’s wife thought about her husband’s conduct or thought to say to him when he got home, for that matter. Until the volcano of the divorce court, the juicy complexities of conjugal difficulties of the life of barristers in the Victorian period did not routinely enter the public domain. Novels, by contrast, tend to be rather good at fleshing out typical relationships and their dynamics – and the Bloomsbury barrister’s wife has an active role in a number of them.

Though she makes one appearance in Victorian fiction right at the outset of the period, in Thackeray’s ‘The Bedford Row Conspiracy’ (1840), I want to scrutinise her presence in three novels that were published within less than a decade by three

different authors that knew each others' work, from the mid 1850s to the 1860s, to compare and think through the different treatment she receives. Firstly, she makes an appearance in a novel by Bulwer Lytton whose depictions of urban space we explored at last year's conference, *What will he do with it?* (1857-9), that multi-plot novel for whose somewhat contrived title we have Dickens to blame. Last year, we mapped the walk of the novel's main character, the lawyer Guy Darrell, as he makes his way back from Bloomsbury to his current home in the fashionable West End - when he wanders into the dangerous slum-land of St. Giles, that source of much public anxiety about criminality, poverty and disease that continued stubbornly to exist on Bloomsbury's porous southern border despite the strenuous efforts of metropolitan improvers. Darrell had been lingering in a reverie outside the Bloomsbury houses he used to live in, and from which he climbed, by dint of his merit alone, through the ranks of the law to become perhaps the most distinguished barrister in the land, and then to enter parliament. The Bloomsbury barrister's wife, in this first case, is a ghost in the text, one that haunts the widower's imagination, for these houses that he haunts are for him themselves haunted by the memory of his dead wife. Dead, then, the shape of her presence in the novel is entirely mediated through her husband's current prejudices, interests, feelings.

Darrell's wife, according to his own recollection, always conceived of her life in Bloomsbury as a kind of exile from that more fashionable part of town, St. James.

Returning to their humble first home stirs up his memory of wifely negligence:

Down that street had he come, I trow, with a livelier, quicker step the day when, by the strange good-luck which had uniformly attended his worldly career of honours, he had been suddenly called upon to supply the place of an absent senior, and, in almost his earliest brief, the Courts of Westminster had recognised a master; -come, I trow, with a livelier step, knocked at that very

door whereat he is halting now; entered the room where the young wife sat, and at sight of her querulous peevish face, and at sound of her unsympathetic languid voice, fled into his cupboard-like back parlour – and muttered “courage-courage” to endure the home he had entered longing for a voice which should invite and respond to a cry of joy.⁴

After they have moved to another, much grander place in a square nearby, still in Bloomsbury – we might guess it to be Bedford, Russell, or Bloomsbury Square, all of which had notable, successful lawyers in them – their conjugal relations do not improve. Here, Darrell’s memories conjure the Bloomsbury barrister’s wife sitting alone ‘in that great barren drawing-room’:

Well, but the wife’s face is not querulous now. Look again – anxious, fearful, secret, sly. Oh! that fine lady, a Vipont Crooke, is not contented to be wife to the wealthy, great Mr. Darrell. What wants she? that *he* should be spouse to the fashionable fine Mrs. Darrell? Pride in him! not a jot of it; such pride were unchristian. Were he proud of her, as a Christian husband ought to be of so elegant a wife, would he still be in Bloomsbury?

The wife falls for some ‘Lothario’ in the more fashionable circles of St. James she feels so far away from living in Bloomsbury, and while her husband is studying briefs, ‘being parchment’, as the novel puts it, she pursues some kind of affair with him, which is prevented from becoming an absolute public disgrace only by the good fortune of her falling into a fever and dying, after catching a cold at one of the many balls she attends husbandless.

When in *Orley Farm* (1862) Trollope employs the figure of the complaining barrister’s wife, she is very much alive and vocal in the character of Mrs. Furnival. Her situation is, in fact, something of a revision, and I think it likely, a conscious

⁴ Vol 1 p385

Mrs. Furnival's 'aints' reveal her relative lack of gentrification since the days before she married when she was the pretty but uncultivated Kitty Blacker, native of 'the region of Great Ormond-street and the neighbourhood of Southampton Buildings' – but they also reveal Trollope's desire to paint Mrs. Furnival's complaint in comic hue. How, to paraphrase the narrator's musings, could the wife's desire to regress to Bloomsbury be anything but rose-tinted contrariness? The paradigm continues through the wife's absurd inversion of it, against the common-sense of writer, implied reader and husband. A wife we should take seriously would have been glad to leave Bloomsbury behind.

When Mary Elizabeth Braddon turns a few years later to this semi-established character type in *The Lady's Mile* (1866) she depicts not merely the wife's complaint, but instead takes time to trace

verdant vistas of Kensington Gardens'⁸ – the implication has to be that his work-obsessed Bloomsbury-ness, which began in bachelordom and is unsuited to marriage, can be held in some part responsible for his wife's moral wavering.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon knew well the sound of those clocks of St. Pancras and the Foundling, for she was living in 26 Mecklenburgh Square when she wrote this novel, close to that Toad's lair of the literary world, the British Museum reading room (the equivalent of chambers). As both a *de facto* though not *de jure* Bloomsbury wife, and a work-pressed Bloomsbury bread-winner, she might be seen to have the most personal knowledge of the paradigm she writes about, and of its insufficiencies.

Her version uniquely attends to the wife's needs rather than simply satirising her complaint, and as such at first seems to stand out from the others. But, for all their differences, Bulwer-Lytton, Trollope and Braddon, in their depictions of the Bloomsbury barrister's wife from 1857-66, differ little in their essential implicit assumption (or proposition) – that Bloomsbury is no longer the sort of place that any classy lady would like to live in for long, and that any married barrister worth his salt should leave its squares behind ASAP. As such, in hindsight, they look very much as though, along with Jeaffreson and *Punch*, they are all participating in one contemporary cultural task – to clarify and classify where certain classes and professions should live or aspire to live, to enforce the work/home split divide, and so to try to iron out the socio-spatial incongruities of London that posed challenges to its comprehensible stratification.

⁸ *The Lady's Mile* p364.