

## Florence Marryat, Theatricality and Performativity

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This article seeks to explore Victorian and modern ideas of theatricality and performativity by examining the work of the novelist, actor, singer, lecturer and magazine-editor Florence Marryat (1833–1899). Unlike her fellow sensation novelists, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood, Marryat's work has only recently begun to be recovered for critical attention. As an under read but prolific writer who balanced several careers at once, Marryat might stand for dozens of women working in nineteenth-century popular culture; however, her fiction specifically and repeatedly connects with issues of theatricality and performance – issues in which she was thoroughly invested. I argue that Marryat's fiction and her self-constructions offer us ways of realising the complexity of ideas about authenticity, theatricality and performance operating within the realm of popular culture and sensational fiction in the nineteenth century.

Florence Marryat negotiated her career through various circuits of production in nineteenth-century culture. Kate Newey writes that Marryat 'typifies the woman writer as entrepreneur' and tells us that at one time nine of her novels were being adapted and staged simultaneously in the provincial theatres.<sup>1</sup> She was prolific, tireless in creating and maintaining her celebrity, and financially astute.<sup>2</sup> She turned many of her experiences and interests to literary account, writing about her early life as an officer's wife in colonial India in *Gup* (1868) and her interest in spiritualism in texts such as *The Spirit World* (1894). Modulating between the most current topics and fashionable genres she wrote on subjects ranging from high society to vampires, usually in a sensationally compelling mode. Most of her obituaries diminish her reputation by citing what they see as the financial rather than artistic motives for her prolific work. The *Academy's* obituary concludes 'she was a brave and busy woman, as became her father's daughter.'<sup>3</sup> Her father was Captain Frederick Marryat, the novelist of *Peter Simple* (1834) and other popular nautical tales, and Florence Marryat was unafraid to trade on his fame. As with many women writers of the Victorian period her work was often read through her personal life and the fact that she was a divorcee, an actor and a spiritualist offered some critics reductive preconceptions about her writing. This article concentrates on Marryat's theatricality and performativity not through her plays, her acting or

her singing but rather through her early career as a self-promoting novelist. Her early career is marked by repeated and various self-constructions and her early fiction negotiates with gendered ideas of selfhood and the ways in which it might be constructed or performed.

Before discussing Marryat's work in detail I need to briefly foreground Judith Butler's conceptions of performativity and the ways in which Butler's work relates to nineteenth-century ideas about theatricality. Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) have provided some of the most controversial and provocative formulations of the feminist challenge to the concept of a stable 'female' subject. Her work follows Foucault in examining the formation of the subject within its specific historical and discursive context but Butler's interest travels further to analyse the ways in which the subject is formed within gendered power structures.<sup>4</sup> In 1988 she writes, 'gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*'.<sup>5</sup> This gendered self is not prior to its acts and no performer exists before the performance. For Butler, acts constitute the actor and constitute the compulsion to believe in him or her. It is this absence of a pre-existing or essential self in Butler's work, particularly *Gender Trouble*, which leaves room for the possibility that identities might be reconstructed or proliferated in subversive ways. She writes, '*woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing and discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification'.<sup>6</sup> She goes on to expand this idea in *Bodies That Matter*, where she writes,

The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideals s/he is compelled to approximate.<sup>7</sup>

The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the possibility of subversive repetition. Butler offers drag as one example of how this might be achieved: aberrant identities make clear the instability of the categories into which they will not fit and hint at the way in which all gender can be perceived as parodic.

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For Butler, the body itself is never fixed or stable; it is constructed by discourse and can therefore be performative. It is understood as ‘an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities’.<sup>8</sup> As Sarah Salih explains, the body in Butler’s theory is ‘the effect of desire rather than its cause’.<sup>9</sup> However, as she shows, it is impossible to exist outside of gender and outside of discourse. To appreciate the constructed nature of the subject and if possible re-do that construction is what Butler thinks can be done. This article uses Butler to understand performativity as defining a self-conscious kind of acting or performance (often, but not always, of gender) that is not limited to the stage but operates in all cultural and literary settings. In this definition, performative texts also seek to foster a conscious awareness of the state of performance from a readership or audience. In this article, theatricality, on the other hand, denotes a kind of performance or writing that may achieve the questioning of gendered identity by its staginess, artificiality or exaggerations, but does not necessarily refute the idea of a ‘true’ identity behind that performance. This version of theatricality need not conflict with the nineteenth-century notion put forward by G. H. Lewes in *Actors and Acting* (1875) that behaving artificially actually gives actors access to inner emotions or a truer self. Indeed, despite Lewes’s insistence on an authentic self behind the actor’s mask he too, as in the construction of performativity mapped above, stresses self-consciousness.<sup>10</sup> Victorian and postmodern conceptions of performance and theatricality might be seen in relational rather than binary terms. Nina Auerbach’s thesis that ‘Reverent Victorians shunned theatricality as the ultimate, deceitful mobility’ might be seen as relevant to cultural elites like those represented by Lewes, Eliot or Carlyle, but in need of complication when considering Marryat’s multiple self-constructions.<sup>11</sup>

In the first half of the article I will discuss Marryat’s theatrical self-constructions, where she repeatedly seeks to show and convince readers of a true self, and in the second half I will discuss her performative sensation fiction which consciously performs gendered selfhood and asks the reader to question their conceptions of identity. I do not want to suggest that Marryat was aware of, or working with, postmodern Butlerian ideas about gender. I will, though, seek to probe the boundaries between these two definitions and formulate questions as to how useful postmodern theories can be for the reading of nineteenth-century texts.

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## I

Marryat, in her early career, was certainly attuned to the various identities that she would need to perform in order to gain a name in the literary marketplace and the ways in which she would need to make these identities seem authentic or true. As we see below, Marryat was a loving daughter, colonial authority, *ingénue* and sensation novelist and these self-constructions were theatrical, even though, as yet, she had not begun to think of working in the theatre.

Her correspondence with Richard Bentley (her sole publisher until 1874) shows her occupying a very different role from that of risqué sensation novelist with which she established her career. Several letters represent her meek acceptance of Bentley's orchestration of her literary production. For example, Bentley tells Marryat that:

An offer has been made me of £40 for Love's Conflict in which you still retain half copyright which will therefore give you £20 and which is to be repaid to me in three months time. At the same time I disposed of the Copyrights of your other novels which I possess so that you will shortly see yourself before the public in the gay uniform of the 1 or 2/- volume.<sup>12</sup>

Bentley not only removes all decisions regarding publication from Marryat's power, but he also objectifies her, transforming her into an object for display and consumption. His possession of her 'Copyrights' seems tantamount to a possession of her self. It is not just her novels that she will see in 'gay uniform' (meaning the bright covers of the cheap editions) but her own body is coerced into Bentley's blithe metaphor. The rhetoric of jovial dominion by the male publisher does not necessarily mean that she was manipulated. At this point in her career, playing the role of the literary *ingénue* was helpful to her. It may even have made the risqué nature of her sensation fiction seem less worrying to Bentley if she convinced him that her true and feminine self was innocent regarding the commercial publishing world. As a fledgling novelist Marryat was not in an ideal position for asserting her authorial autonomy or her economic expectations. But by performing the role of the amenable young writer Marryat could work through it, analyse it and later even fictionalise it (in 1883 she published a short story called *The Ghost of Charlotte Cray* that dramatised the dangers of the calculating male publisher to the female writer).<sup>13</sup> In the early stages of her career, however, Marryat, at least

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outwardly, respected her publisher's advice. She seems to have played the role of literary *ingénue* willingly and fostered the idea of its authenticity; the Bentley correspondence implies a friendly relation between the two.

Outside of private correspondence Marryat found it opportune to vary the act of literary humility. '*Gup*': *Sketches of Anglo-Indian Life and Character* (serialised in *Temple Bar* and published in one volume in 1868) was a first person reconstruction of her experiences in India. '*Gup*' was the Victorian translation of 'gossip' into Hindustani and Marryat places herself as an experienced intermediary of colonial tittle-tattle. She claims to controvert the most outrageous presumptions about colonial life through her own authentic impressions. In fact though, Marryat relishes telling the most sensational and outrageous parts of the life she led. The exaggerated and exotic incidents she recounts, often of a violent or vaguely erotic nature (her husband is attacked by a cheetah, and she is touched and leered at by a group of 'thrusting [...] grinning and jabbering' men) construct her as an experienced and knowledgeable woman admirable for the self-control she displays in an environment painted as highly corrosive to Westerners.<sup>14</sup> Here, as in her correspondence with Bentley, she adopts and even exaggerates particular versions of her self, but simultaneously encourages her reader to see that self as authentic.

Her introduction to her bigamy novel *Véronique*, published in 1869, embroiders the self-confidence of the narrator of *Gup* into her previous literary modesty to construct another Marryat again. She diffidently thanks her 'true critics' – 'The Reading Public' – for

the cordial hand-grasp which from the first you have stretched out to me, and which, (though doubtless in a great measure given for my father's sake), has had more than the power to counterbalance such small disagreeables as a woman placed in my position must inevitably incur.<sup>15</sup>

Performing the role of an innocently victimised woman gives her a position from which to attack the canting critics who have 'twisted [her work] from its original meaning' and therein wilfully misunderstood her status as a 'delineator of human passions'. Here, as in her correspondence with Bentley, it suits Marryat to construct herself in an almost passive position – she has been 'placed' as a novelist rather than worked to attain her reputation. Marryat's language emphasises an active audience and gives her readers the lead role in

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corroborating and believing her authentic experiences. By dedicating the novel to Charles Dickens, one of ‘my dead father’s nearest friends’, Marryat also co-opts the ‘greatest living novelist of the age’ into authenticating her self-construction (despite the fact that only the previous year Dickens had criticised her latest novel).<sup>16</sup>

*The Life and Letters of Captain Marryat* (1872) is an assemblage of letters written by and to Frederick Marryat and interspersed with his daughter’s commentary. It plays a vital role in Marryat’s early self-constructions and offers another true self to her readers; here sacred bonds of daughterly affection authenticate that self. For many critics, Captain Marryat seemed to have represented a halcyon age of desexualised and robust fiction, among which, *Macmillan’s* tells us, the young reader ‘may range at her virgin will’.<sup>17</sup> His novels were reprinted and re-read throughout the century and the fact that Captain Marryat had died twenty years before Florence Marryat became famous did not stop critics comparing father and daughter.<sup>18</sup> By arranging *The Life and Letters* herself, Marryat not only performs the role of dutiful daughter and literary executor, she also regains some control over the ways in which people would construct her in the light of her father’s career. The tone of the *Life* is one of unwavering eulogy but its emphatic narratorial interjections remind the reader of the presence of the biographer and of her personal relation with her subject. As Marryat presents her father as a ‘leading’ man of literature, she simultaneously asserts the importance of his biography and his biographer – herself.

As well as performing the role of literary acolyte in the *Life*, Marryat also ventriloquises her father’s voice to endorse her own literary opinions. Most pertinently, she quotes a letter in which Captain Marryat asserts that ‘the liberty of the press is so sacred that, rather than any interference should restrict it, it has been considered better that a little licentiousness should be passed over.’<sup>19</sup> This seemingly innocuous point offers a subtle riposte to the critics who had gloated over the contrast between her father’s healthy morality and what they saw as his daughter’s coarseness. Marryat’s *Life and Letters*, while eulogising her father’s life and work, also exploited the familial connection to confirm her own celebrity status. It publicised her name and raised her literary profile. It is clear that Marryat did not want her career to be an addendum to her father’s and that by the 1870s she was well

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practised in the manipulation of her public identities and the strategies by which she might make those identities seem authentic.

The multiple self-performances making up Marryat's early career seem to lend themselves to a theorisation of the self, in Joseph Litvak's words, as 'a contingent cluster of theatrical roles'. In examining the trope of theatricality in self-representation, Litvak argues, 'it becomes possible to make a spectacle of the imperious domestic, sexual, and aesthetic ideologies for which, and in which, it is bound.'<sup>20</sup> This deconstructionist paradigm is useful for considering the ramifications, conscious and unconscious, of Marryat's self-constructions. It allows us to realise these roles as constructed and also as interwoven with and contingent upon each other. However, as Lynn Voskuil has argued, this deconstruction does not adequately account for contemporary Victorian theories of an essential self. Neither does it explicate Marryat's apparent emphasis on the authentic amidst her theatrical and often exaggerated self-performances. Voskuil turns to Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) to argue that 'somatic fidelity' (the idea that the body indisputably displays its inner truths) was declining in value as cultural capital by the 1860s. She shows how Lady Audley's performances pushed the logic of 'somatic fidelity' to breaking-point to expose the idea of innate goodness in women (or in the middle class) as at best a paradox and at worst a fallacy. Of course, Braddon's novel did not destroy the Victorian notion of the essential self but it does illustrate the way in which authenticity and theatricality could be considered in relational terms rather than as binary opposites. As Voskuil asserts, 'authenticity accommodates a range of shifting, sometimes rival meanings' in the nineteenth century as it does now.<sup>21</sup> Marryat's various early career self-constructions, then, need not be understood as contradictory. In each, she promotes a version of her writerly self as authentic, readable and trustworthy. She repeats her self-constructions with variations but (unlike the Butlerian model of performativity) this repetition does not undo ideas of an authentic self as that is precisely what Marryat wants to promote in order to garner a loyal and ongoing readership.

Voskuil's work alerts us to the fact that not just Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novels, but popular sensation fiction in general, and particularly its heroines, activated contemporary anxieties regarding theatricality and authenticity, although these anxieties were primarily

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located within the cultural and critical elites that felt threatened by sensation fiction's cross-class appeal. Sensation also, as Voskuil demonstrates, elicited reactions that were felt to be simultaneously authentic (in that a community of readers would share the same sensations on reading the same sensational texts) and yet also exaggerated or staged (in that readers knew what reactions might be expected of them and could perform the 'authentic' reaction as the text directed). Marryat, as a sensation writer, was alert to the potential her genre held for bringing the performed and the authentic into tense relation and this was played out in her sensational fiction in terms of theatricality and performativity.

## II

By the time Marryat's first novel *Love's Conflict* was published in 1865, the sensation genre had taken strong hold of popular and critical consciousnesses. The continued popularity of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* continued to give rise to dozens of imitators. *Love's Conflict* certainly contains a variety of the tropes (lost inheritances, loveless marriages, and murders) that would lead readers and reviewers to perceive it as part of the sensation genre. However, *Love's Conflict* eroticises the sensational tropes it enacts more explicitly than previous sensationalists had done and makes the performed nature of female sexuality more explicit than in previous sensational texts.<sup>22</sup> This would go some way to explaining why, despite her careful dedication of the book to her father and the publisher's insistence on the respectable family connection, many reviews, like the *Spectator's*, manifested anxiety towards Marryat's first work.<sup>23</sup>

The self-performing and theatrical nature of female sexuality is key to *Love's Conflict*. The narrator introduces us to the anti-heroine Nell, who, having been brought up in a simple fisherman's family, 'thinks of nothing but running after the men folks'. Left with the family as a baby, she is actually the daughter of a runaway marriage between a young lady and her dancing master. Marryat describes Nell as an 'arrant coquette' and when two men appear on the beach the narrator tells us that she

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twitched off the handkerchief she wore about her neck and throat, leaving them and part of her bosom – firm and plump, though tanned by exposure to the sun – bare. Then she took off her clumsy shoes, stockings she never wore [...] untied the coarse black string which confined her thick hair in a rude knot at the back of her head, and shook it down luxuriantly over her shoulders; and as she stepped upon the sands, still wet and glistening from the late receding tide, she caught up a bunch of seaweeds, common stuff enough, red, and green, and white, but uncommonly becoming, as she wreathed it about her dark tresses.<sup>24</sup>

Marryat makes clear the specific steps Nell takes to transform from village girl into a fantasy of erotic mystery: disrobing, loosening and adorning. She constructs herself, not just as a desirable female object, but very knowingly as a romanticised version of the mysterious rustic (she is described as a ‘mermaid’ or a ‘sea-nymph’) which she knows would be appealing to refined city men (*LC* 11, 10).<sup>25</sup> The narrator tells us that Nell usually wears a handkerchief over her bosom, but also, contradictorily, that her chest is tanned by the sun. The contradiction suggests that this act may be one in an ongoing series of erotic performances by Nell.

Nell sells her kisses to William Treherne, one of the men on the beach, for two half-crowns, and he makes it clear that he will return in the evening when he ‘shall have some more’; the implication of ‘more’ being not only kisses but further sexual acts. The narrator unblinkingly tells us: ‘She would have sold herself for money’ (*LC* 11). This sexual trafficking is only prevented by the realisation that Nell is the lost heiress for whom William Treherne and the family lawyer have been looking. The *Spectator* wrote of this passage in wry understatement, ‘No excellence of drawing can quite ennoble a novel in which the great scenes are a girl selling kisses for silver’.<sup>26</sup> It is not Marryat’s depiction of Nell as sexually attractive that contemporaries found shocking. Rather, it is Nell’s self-conscious and theatrical staging of her body to display her own sexual desire and elicit that of male strangers that, for some, represented new depths to which sensation could sink.

A more disturbing and unconscious acting out of sexual desire on the body comes when Marryat allows her heroine, Elfrida, to fall for her husband’s cousin. Elfrida refuses his offer to elope, but the bodily effect of her struggle to stay with her abusive husband results in the premature birth of her baby, ‘bent and twisted by some cruel accident of mind or body’. Elfrida’s illicit desire, as she imagines, has been acted out on her baby’s body in the ‘curved

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spine, the injured chest' and 'the tiny lungs [...] unable to perform their work' (LC 288). Elfrida knows, she says, 'my child was killed and crippled by my own wicked indulgence of feelings I ought never to have had' (LC 294). This part of the story deserves mention, not just because it enacts in shockingly emotive form the ways in which Marryat shows sexual desire to operate in exaggerated terms on the minds and bodies of her characters, but also because it re-enacts part of Marryat's own biography. On her return to England from India (and consequent split from her first husband), Marryat gave birth to a daughter whose severe physical disabilities meant she only lived for ten days. She later recalled the time as the 'greatest trouble of my life'.<sup>27</sup> As we saw in the prefaces and correspondence above, Marryat from her earliest writings acts out versions of her self, repackaging and re-presenting the most personal experiences in her fiction.

The introduction to *Véronique* confirms that Marryat sees her primary genre, sensation, as reliant on reconstructions of personal experience. The most sensational incidents in *Véronique*, 'the adventures on the Neilgherry Hills, and the wreck in the Chinese seas, have happened, and are drawn from [my] life', she affirms. Their 'appeal to your feelings' is interdependent with the readers' perception of these incidents as authentic experiences.<sup>28</sup> The authentic and the performed are frequently pressed together in Marryat's early works. Paradoxically, as in the preface to *Véronique*, she uses each one to justify the presence of the other. With Nell, Marryat makes gender and sexuality theatrical and allows us to see them as constructed; though she also links various aspects of her sensation novels to authentic moments of her own life and links their authenticity to the power they have over her readership. We might read *Love's Conflict* as performative because it stages sexuality and gender as contingent on dress and performance. Keeping Butler in mind, Marryat's novel might also lead us to think of childbirth and the body itself as contingent and in process, even while Marryat seems to be presenting a version of her authentic experience at these moments.

The sensation genre was an ideal format for Marryat's performative strategies as it could be said to define its value in part through its repeated moments of tension and its continual deferral of the definite. Indeed, looking back at Marryat's earliest reviews we can see that sensation provided her with the potential for doubleness or deferral of a single static identity. The *Athenaeum* discusses her 'twofold character of a lady and a novice' in its review

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of *Love's Conflict* while *Tinsley's Magazine* was confounded by what it saw as the absurd combination of a female author writing in the male first person in her 1868 novel *The Confessions of Gerald Estcourt*.<sup>29</sup> The rhythm of the serial, in which form many of Marryat's sensation novels were published, exacerbated this alternation between the concession and withdrawal of identities.

Serialised in her own magazine *London Society, Open! Sesame!* (March 1874 – June 1875) interestingly deals with issues of performance and the potentially empowering or authenticating nature of sensational or erotic pretence. Marryat adumbrates the theatrical nature of femininity through two series of performances by the women in the novel. The heroine, Everil, transforms herself into an adulterer and the anti-heroine, Agatha, pretends to be a spirit from the afterlife. Marryat gives her characters the two roles between which the Victorian woman often found herself caught: the spiritual guide and the dangerously sexual *femme fatale*.

Everil West-Norman is a prototypical sensation heroine. Reminiscent of Braddon's Aurora Floyd, she is 'very impulsive and very strong willed', but in the words of her guardian 'large-hearted, large-handed, [and] large-souled'.<sup>30</sup> She is honest to the point of being tactless, and is both loved and berated for the disarming candour that marks her out from those around her. When she says 'I should like to take the exigencies of society, and smash them against a wall!' she makes a startlingly rebellious case for personal authenticity as against performative social conventions (25 June 1874, 479). When Everil comes of age she must follow the dictates of her father's will that stipulates marriage with her cousin, Valence, or forfeit her property. She again demonstrates her frankness by freely admitting that 'All my object is to keep my money [...] I should marry you, under the circumstances, if you were a Chimpanzee' (26 August 1874, 174). Everil, it would seem, embodies authentic womanhood unforced by society's expectations of femininity. This assumption though comes under pressure before the novel's serialisation has reached its halfway point.

Everil marries Valence, but only realises she loves him when she is disgusted at the suggestion of her previous lover, Maurice Staunton, that they enact the plot of a French novel to poison her husband. The potential for a happy marriage, however, is already undermined. Lord Valence is a spiritualist who has been heavily influenced by the visitations of a

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foreboding female spirit, Isola. Isola warns Valence that his life will end at a certain date in the near future and her prescience brings out psychosomatic symptoms that threaten to kill him. This spirit is actually Valence's sister-in-law, Agatha, disguised in 'diaphanous drapery – and a veil of flowing golden hair', who wants Valence's property and title for her son (26 December 1874, 537). Her ethereal performance, Agatha hopes, will bring tangible benefits. Marryat, through Agatha, highlights the pervasive cultural alignment of femininity with the spiritual realm and allows us to see, literally, that identity as specious and constructed.

Spiritualism, as Marryat was finding throughout the 1870s when her interest in it was growing, made transgressions between the spiritual and the material world possible.<sup>31</sup> It therein questioned what Marlene Tromp calls 'the stability of the categories spiritual and material, proprietous and decorous – particularly as gender and sexuality were concerned'.<sup>32</sup> The medium, or in the case of *Open! Sesame!* the performing spirit, could shake off their own personality and take on others at will, and in doing so offered the possibility of re-conceptualising identity. Sarah Wilburn goes as far as to assert that such mystical experiences 'changed the category of subjectivity' for some Victorian women. 'Not only', she writes, 'did they make a single identity impossible and replace it with a plural one, they also turned a person from an "is" to a "does" [...]. A person became a *process* of exploring different identities within the one body'.<sup>33</sup> Again, we are reminded of Butler's ideas of gender as a project always in process. Agatha, the staid widow reliant on male relations in her everyday life, transfigures herself into a powerful and influential incarnation of womanhood in the (pretended) spiritual realm. In *Open! Sesame!* those two roles are not necessarily or simply mutually exclusive. What is more, Marryat makes it clear that the repetitions of this performance, had Agatha's plan worked, would have transformed her into a wealthy and powerful woman in her everyday existence.

Despite the eventual revelation of the spirit's artificiality, Marryat emphasises the efficacy of Agatha's performance, and the strength of her hold over the male character who embodies landed wealth and its concomitant political powers. Of course, as Tromp and others such as Diana Barsham and Alex Owen argue, ideas about women's special spirituality fed into a society-wide rethinking of women's roles in late Victorian culture in which Marryat would go on to participate much more directly.<sup>34</sup> Marryat's construction of Agatha

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performing Isola, I think, enacts an early fictionalising of the constellation of ideas regarding women and spiritualism and the attendant anxiety over *faux* spirituality. Marryat's performative novel refuses to allow the spiritual and the fake, or the performed and the authentic to relax in simple opposition.

When Everil consults a doctor about her husband's condition, he eschews responsibility saying his duty extends no further than the body: "It is you alone, who are one with him, who have the privilege to search his soul" (27 January 1875, 67). The onus is on Everil to save her husband through her interpretation of his authentic inner soul, to which only she, as his wife, has access. The role of wife here allows Marryat to endow her female protagonist with heroic agency. However, in order to become her husband's saviour and defend Valence from what threatens to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, Everil decides to relinquish her principles of honesty and pretend to have an affair with her former lover. Seeing her flirt with Maurice Staunton, she thinks, will arouse Valence's 'natural' jealousy and free him from the 'unnatural' conviction that he is dying. She performs to save her husband's life.

As the day of Isola's fatal prophecy approaches, Everil increases the erotic intensity of her performance. Her guardian calls it 'positively romping' (27 April 1875, 363). Everil's flirtatious performances are all the more shocking in the contrast they offer to her previous behaviour, but as a married woman she cannot now be reprimanded. She whispers and giggles in the hope of rousing a distracting jealousy in her husband. But while outwardly performing an enactment of superficial, girlish flirtation she feels that 'she has been raised up for the salvation of her husband. A mighty faith takes possession of her soul; her eyes kindle [...] feeling as though she had the strength of a lion to accomplish his deliverance' (27 February 1875, 176–77). Marryat here remodels stereotypical conceptions of chivalry to transform Everil into her husband's redeemer. Knowingly performing, rather than being constructed by, the flirtatious and feminine role that she had always previously eschewed empowers Everil. With her eyes kindled and spirit uplifted, she also finds a form of pleasure in this performance. As Valence succumbs to his psychosomatic illness Everil takes on strength and agency and Marryat shows us a female saviour for a male form of hysteria, reversing the trope played out between Walter Hartright and Laura Fairlie in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in*

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*White* that would have been familiar to sensation readers. Resigning her subordinate position as wife, and revisiting the freedom of her earlier life as heiress, she acts out the part of the chivalrous male precisely by acting out the part of the faithless adulterer. The roles collapse into one another. Eventually Everil performs the sensational act of eloping with Maurice in order that Valence will chase after them and miss the time of his 'pre-ordained' death.

The narrative basically teaches Everil to dissemble but at the serial's denouement she explains the trick and returns to her honest self: "I will try and make things plain to you. Maurice Staunton, I have had my revenge! In leaving Castle Valence with you I have but carried out a project by which we shall be separated for evermore" (27 June 1875, 554). Even here, though, Everil performs the most convenient version of the truth to briefly become the agent of her own personal vengeance rather than her husband's saviour. Everil's performances open her up to misinterpretation. This, however, is exactly what she wants, and it gives her power over both Maurice and Valence. The novel looks towards the empowering potential of ambiguity in the interpretation of seemingly unambiguous or conventional performances of feminine behaviour.

Much has been written about Victorian anxieties (usually the anxieties of cultural elites) surrounding the figure of the female performer. Valerie Sanders emphasises what she calls the 'deep seated fear of artificially invoked female passion' and Sarah Bilston argues that female acting was often justified in the 1870s by conceptualising it as self-abnegation to a role rather than as emancipatory performance.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, Lynn Voskuil, as we have seen, relies on Victorian elisions of the authentic and the theatrical in her rethinking of Judith Butler's notion of performativity. In *Open! Sesame!* female performance produces a thrilling kind of pleasurable and erotic excess, rather than anxiety, seen in the agency and confidence both women take on with their roles. Despite Everil's return to domesticity and Agatha's downfall seeming to contain excess and reinstate normative notions of wifedom, Marryat's novel remains performative in that it consciously stages conceptions of female identity, and, simultaneously, seeks to awaken in its readers a consciousness of the staged and contingent nature of those identities.

The sensation genre, in its excess, its hyperbole, its theatricality, its obsession with marital relations and its proximity to the supernatural, provided a set of styles and tropes with

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which Marryat could ask questions about identity, femininity and selfhood. These elements of sensation, particularly Marryat's version wherein sensuality and emotion are foregrounded to elicit an engaged response from the reader, bring into tension notions of authenticity and performance. The negotiations between the felt and the performed acted out by her characters are echoed in the effect Marryat's sensation aimed to produce in its readers. Aware of its exaggerated constructedness but enjoying the emotions it produced, casual readers of Marryat's fiction, held together by this tension, might solidify into an ongoing audience connected by their shared (and mutually authenticating) reactions. Marryat's sensation targets conventionally feminine roles by performing them in ways that exaggerate and expose their artificiality. In this acting out of femininity her fiction can ask thoroughgoing questions about the possibilities open to women within fiction and within Victorian social and cultural constructions of womanhood.

### III

Marryat continued writing novels throughout her life but her career in drama, lecturing, public reading and opera allowed her to body forth performances of various personae in different ways to those achieved through her career as a sensation novelist. She performed sketches to music, such as *Entre Nous* composed by George Grossmith (which she toured in 1876), she co-authored *Miss Chester* (first performed in 1872), took the lead role in her own *Her World Against A Lie* (1881) and toured with the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company during the 1880s. These theatrical performances, as Newey writes, enabled Marryat 'to develop her self-representation through direct contact with her audience'.<sup>36</sup> Like Charles Dickens and actors such as Fanny Kemble and Sarah Siddons, Marryat also confirmed her own celebrity identity and supplemented her income with public readings and recitations. She also travelled in both Britain and America to take her share in 'these days of lecturings and readings'.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, her confidence in her abilities seems to have been unbounded when we read an advertisement informing us that

Her repertoire comprises

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selections from the works of  
 Shakespeare, Macaulay, Buchanan, Willis, Tennyson, Barrett-Browning,  
 Longfellow, Marryat, Dickens, Barham, Hood  
 And other Authors of Celebrity and Repute<sup>38</sup>

Unafraid to adopt and inhabit the identities of the most revered authors, poets and historians, she also frequently adapted them, often to include chunks of her own writing. One of her most popular performances though was her original piece entitled ‘The Woman of the Future’ in which Marryat, as ‘Electra Thucydides, *Senior Wrangler of St. Momus*’ delivers an address to women, now the ruling sex, on ‘What shall we do with our Men?’ She begins,

As I speak to you, my words are conveyed by means of electronic communication to above 200 female audiences all anxiously waiting to know what farther steps we intend to take for the emancipation of these feeble creatures, who are dependent upon us, for example, protection & support.

Precisely and comically inverting the rhetoric in which the ‘woman question’ was being posed throughout the press in the later decades of the century, Electra admits that some men have a talent for music and drama, but asks ‘How will the appearance of men on the boards or in the rehearsals of our theatres affect the natural modesty of these delicate minded creatures?’ She concludes, ‘Let our sex continue to do for them what it has done since the beginning of the world – sit on them!’<sup>39</sup> Here, and throughout her diverse career, performance gave Marryat opportunities to recognise, perform and parody gender hierarchies and the conventions associated with femininity. Many of her obituaries highlight her combination of various identities and careers.<sup>40</sup> Indeed Marryat’s whole career might then be viewed through the lens of her theatrical and performative negotiations with female identity – she was always engaged in a process of making herself up.

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Newey, *Women’s Theatre Writing in Victorian Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 181.

<sup>2</sup> For further biographical information on Marryat see, Andrew Maunder, 'Introduction', *Domestic Sensationalism, Florence Marryat, Love's Conflict* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> 'Memoirs of the Moment', *Academy* (4 November 1899), p. 519. See also, 'Florence Marryat', *The Times*, 28 October 1899, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. by Robert Hurley, 3 vols. (London: Allen Lane, 1979–1988).

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre History*, 40 (1988), 519–38. Repr. in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. by Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 270–82 (p. 270) (original emphasis).

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 33 (original emphasis).

<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 231.

<sup>8</sup> Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', p. 272.

<sup>9</sup> Sara Salih, *Judith Butler* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 57.

<sup>10</sup> See Lynn M. Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2004), p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Nina Auerbach, *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Letter to Mrs Ross Church from Richard Bentley, 20 May 1868. Bentley Archives, British Library, Reel 41, Volume 84–85.

<sup>13</sup> Vanessa Dickerson reads it as one of a number of women's ghost stories in which the avenging spectres 'clearly mirror their creators' own desires to avenge a keenly felt deprivation, especially when that deprivation is financial'. *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> Florence Marryat, 'Gup': *Sketches of Anglo-Indian Life and Character* (London: Richard Bentley, 1868), p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> Florence Marryat, 'Preface. To the Novel-Reading Public', in *Véronique* (London: Richard Bentley, 1869), p. iv.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Charles Dickens to Florence Marryat, 6 August 1867. Marryat Family Papers, MSS. 104 (GENM), Beinecke Library, Yale University. Uncat.

<sup>17</sup> 'An Editor', 'Candour in English Fiction', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 61 (1889), 314–20 (p. 316).

<sup>18</sup> In 1893 Helen C. Black discusses Frederick Marryat for the first five pages of the chapter supposedly dedicated to his daughter. Black eventually leads into a description of Florence Marryat's career with 'Born of

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such a gifted father, it is small wonder that the child should have inherited brilliant talents.’ Helen C. Black, *Notable Women Authors Of the Day: Biographical Sketches* (Glasgow: David Bryce & Son, 1893), p. 85.

<sup>19</sup> Florence Marryat, *The Life and Letters of Captain Marryat*, 2 vols. (London: R. Bentley and Son), I, pp. 185–86.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), p. xii.

<sup>21</sup> Lynn M. Voskuil, ‘Acts of Madness: Lady Audley and the Meanings of Victorian Femininity’, *Feminist Studies*, 27:3 (2001), 611–39.

<sup>22</sup> Geraldine Jewsbury (the publisher’s reader) had advised that the novels’ ‘utter violations of good taste’ would need to be expunged. Marryat did take on some of Jewsbury’s amendments. Geraldine Jewsbury to Richard Bentley, 10 November 1864. Bentley Archives, British Library, Add. MSS. 46657.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Love’s Conflict’, *Spectator* (25 February 1865), 215–16.

<sup>24</sup> Florence Marryat, *Love’s Conflict* (1865; repr. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2004), p. 8. Further references to this text are given as *LC* after quotations in the text.

<sup>25</sup> Dennis Allen calls the mermaid a ‘potent emblem of the dangerous power of sexuality itself [...] alluring and repulsive, she evades categorization, representing the collapse of the distinction between human and animal, civilized and savage, that occurs when the individual is unable to restrain his or her biological urges.’ *Sexuality in Victorian Fiction* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), p. 20. See also T. F. Boyle, ‘Fishy Extremities: Subversion of Orthodoxy in the Victorian Sensation Novel’, *Literature and History*, 9 (1983), 92–96.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Love’s Conflict’, *Spectator*, p. 216.

<sup>27</sup> Florence Marryat, *There is No Death* (1891; repr. New York: Cosimo Classics, 2004), p. 73.

<sup>28</sup> Marryat, ‘Preface. To The Novel Reading Public’, p. vi.

<sup>29</sup> ‘New Novels. Love’s Conflict’, *Athenaeum*, 41 (11 February 1865), p. 196; ‘Aunt Anastasia on Modern Novels’, *Tinsley’s Magazine*, 1 (1867), 308–16.

<sup>30</sup> Florence Marryat, *Open! Sesame!*, *London Society*, 25 (March 1874), p. 192. Further references to this text as serialised in *London Society* are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>31</sup> Marryat’s interest in spiritualism has been recognised in critical studies on women and the occult. See Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989) and Vanessa D. Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> Marlene Tromp, ‘Spirited Sexuality: Sex, Marriage, and Victorian Spiritualism’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31 (2003), 67–81 (p. 67).

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<sup>33</sup> Sarah Wilburn, 'Victorian Women Theologians of the Mystical Fringe: Translation and Domesticity', in *Women's Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers*, ed. by Julie Melnyk (New York and London: Garland, 1998), pp. 189–207 (pp. 204–5) (original emphasis).

<sup>34</sup> Marryat records her many experiences at séances in *There Is No Death, The Spirit World* and from 1873 onwards she wrote for the *Spiritualist Newspaper* and contributed to several spiritualist magazines.

<sup>35</sup> Valerie Sanders, *The Private Lives of Victorian Women: Autobiography in Nineteenth-Century England* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 110; Sarah Bilston, 'Authentic Performance in Theatrical Women's Fiction of the Late 1870s', *Women's Writing*, 11 (2004), 39–53.

<sup>36</sup> Newey, p. 184.

<sup>37</sup> *Illustrated News*, 15 May 1858. Cited in Matthew Bevis, *The Art of Eloquence: Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 130.

<sup>38</sup> Marryat Family Papers. Uncat. Undated advertisement.

<sup>39</sup> Marryat Family Papers. Uncat. Privately Printed Public Recitations.

<sup>40</sup> For example, her daughter writes of her combination of masculine and feminine qualities and told readers that 'femininity was too narrow a platform' for her mother. 'The Real Florence Marryat, by her daughter', *St. Paul's Magazine* (1899). Collected in Marryat Family Papers. Uncat.

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