

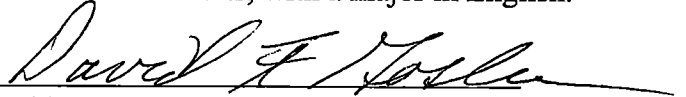
**THEOLOGICAL RECUPERATION:
MASCULINITY IN THE POEMS OF FRANCIS THOMPSON**

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Devon Ray Fisher
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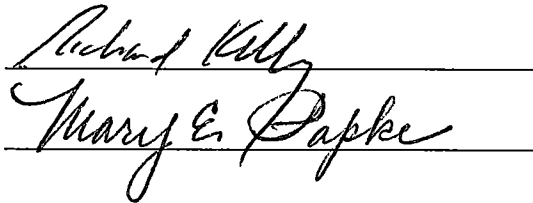
To the Graduate Council

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Devon Fisher entitled "Theological Recuperation. Masculinity in the Poems of Francis Thompson." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.



David F. Goslee, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of The Graduate School

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife

Karoline Fisher

whose love and support have made this possible

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The number of debts that I have incurred as I have pursued my degree is tremendous, regrettably, many of them must go unmentioned here. However, there are a few people who I would like to thank for their part in this project. The faculty and staff at the University of Tennessee have been kind and helpful. The teaching that I received prepared me for the undertaking of this thesis. In particular, I would like to thank the members of my committee. Dr. David Goslee, who introduced me to the poetry of Francis Thompson, has been supportive and helpful in directing this project. I am indebted as well to Dr. Mary Papke and to Dr. Richard Kelly, both of whom have contributed in numerous ways to my thesis.

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ABSTRACT

Since his death in 1907, Francis Thompson's poetry has faded into relative obscurity. In this thesis, I will demonstrate that Thompson should occupy a place of importance for scholars of the Victorian period. In particular, I hope to show that his construction of gender identity establishes his significance in relation to other Catholic poets of the time period. Thompson employs traditional methods of representing the female in his poetry, presenting the different women that he loved as either heavenly beings who take on characteristics of the Virgin Mary or as fallen women who commit the great sin of failing to love him. These different representations of women are inextricably bound to Thompson's presentation of himself in his poetry. I will show that he relies on imagery drawn from both Catholic theology and Romantic idealism to project into his poetry a gender identity that both conforms to and deviates from normative versions of Victorian masculinity. Finally, I will demonstrate that understanding the way in which Thompson presents himself in his poetry is essential to a larger understanding of how Catholicism impacts gender constructions in the Victorian period.

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Chapter One

Introduction

In a letter to friend and editor Wilfrid Meynell dated 19 July 1900, poet Francis Thompson laments “Oh that I were a *man* again” (210). In the context of the letter, Thompson’s words refer to his state of constant financial dependence upon the Meynell family. They also serve, though, as a fitting epigraph to his troubled history of failed relationships with several different women. From his days wandering the streets of London until his death in 1907 from complications related to consumption and opium addiction, Thompson showed an incapacity for maintaining any sort of romantic relationship. With one notable exception, he was to live a life in which he was, in the words of Mrs. Hamilton King, “most fitted to live and die solitary” (qtd. in Alice Meynell 96).

Thompson’s misfortunes with love began in 1887 during the years he spent living on the London streets. Unable to find permanent jobs due to his opium addiction, he survived in a fashion typical for the homeless of his time; he earned a few pennies at a time doing odd jobs such as selling matches, calling cabs, and selling bootlaces (Boardman 58). In the winter of 1886, he increasingly relied on opium to dull the misery of his existence. As a result of the harsh London winter and his abject poverty,

Thompson became so weak that he was unable to care for himself. In the summer of 1887, a young prostitute found the ill and penniless poet in the streets and took him in. She cared for him for almost a year but quickly disappeared from his life when she realized that his contact with the Meynell family was a means for him to escape the life of the streets.

In 1888, Thompson appeared on the Meynells' doorstep after seeing his poem "The Passion of Mary" appear in *Merry England*, a Catholic journal edited by Wilfrid Meynell. Meynell had received the manuscript of the poem, and unable to locate Thompson, he published it in the hopes that the poet would read it and contact him. Thompson did just that, and the Meynells took him in almost as one of their family. Certainly from these earliest meetings through the rest of his life, Thompson felt a strong affection for Wilfrid Meynell's wife Alice. This affection reached a peak in the early 1890's, a time period during which Thompson wrote the sequence of poems entitled "Love in Dian's Lap" which was dedicated to Alice Meynell. There was, of course, never a physical component to this relationship; Thompson maintained his love for Meynell from a distance until 1897 when he wrote "Ultima," a second series of poems to Alice Meynell. In these poems, he resolved to end once and for all his love for Alice Meynell (Boardman 234). Part of this resolution, too, appears to have been the

cessation of correspondence with Alice Meynell. Between 1890 and 1896, the two wrote regularly; after 1896, correspondence was minimal.

Thompson's love for Alice Meynell extended over a period of seven or eight years. At intervals during these years, though, he became involved with two other women in romances that were equally problematic. The first of these occurred in 1893 during the time that Thompson spent at a monastery in Pantasaph, a small town in Wales, as part of an attempt to free himself from his opium addiction. At the monastery, he was lodged at Bishop's House, a guest-house run by Michael Brien and his family. While there, he was cared for by Michael Brien's daughter Maggie, with whom he quickly developed a close friendship. Their friendship blossomed into a romantic love which lasted for several months after which, for reasons that are not entirely clear, the two drifted back into a friendship that would last for the remainder of Thompson's stay at Pantasaph. After his departure, he wrote the series of poems entitled "A Narrow Vessel" in which he details his emotional involvement with Maggie Brien.

Shortly after the relationship with Maggie Brien regressed into friendship, Thompson met Katherine Douglas King, a young woman with whom he was immediately fascinated. As with Maggie Brien, Thompson's relationship with Katie King quickly developed into something that went beyond casual friendship. In this case, though, we are rather more certain of the events that precipitated the end of the romantic

relationship. Mrs. Hamilton King, Katie's mother, disapproved of Thompson's interest in her daughter. Enlisting the help of the Meynells, she took steps to ensure that the two were separated. The Meynells abruptly ended Thompson's visit in London and hustled him back to Pantasaph. Judging from her letter to Thompson, Mrs. King placed her daughter in a convent for a time; in the same letter, she assures Thompson that "It is not in her [Katie's] destiny to love you" (qtd. in Alice Meynell 96). Thompson and Katie King corresponded only infrequently after this forced separation. In 1900, Katie was married to Godfrey Burr; she died the following April from complications related to childbirth. As one might expect, Thompson wrote several poems about his involvement with Katie; unfortunately, after their separation, many of these were destroyed.

Quite naturally, Thompson's poems focusing on these four relationships constitute a significant portion of his work. As critics and biographers have studied Thompson and his poetry, though, his romantic interests have occupied a relatively minor place in critical discussion. Typically, interpretations of these relationships have taken one of two courses. Many critics have read Thompson's poems as expressions of the very real emotions and feelings that resulted from the failure of his various love interests. Others, though, have chosen to read the poems allegorically, focusing on the ways in which he finds situations in his own life and uses them to demonstrate the nature of God. These two different approaches are typical of the work that has been done on the larger

picture of Thompson's life; critics seem to be sharply divided as to whether Thompson's poetry is the expression of a man whose life was in many ways a painful, tortured existence or whether it is the profound insights of a Catholic mystic in the tradition of St. Augustine and St. Bernard.

Most of the critical work available on Thompson comes to us in the form of biography. Everard Meynell's is the first of many to take the approach that Thompson's poetry is primarily the product of the relationships and events that shaped his life. The son of Wilfrid and Alice Meynell and close friend of Thompson in his later years, Everard Meynell published *The Life of Francis Thompson* in 1913. As his first biographer, Everard had the rather unique advantage of having known Thompson well; Thompson frequented his bookstore, finding in Everard a friend who shared his interest in books as well as in cricket. While this proximity allowed Meynell to write a biography based on personal knowledge of the man, it may also have caused him to obscure certain aspects of Thompson's life, for he seems to gloss over several significant parts of the poet's personal life. Instead, Meynell focuses on Thompson's public life as a poet. Perhaps the most glaring omission in the biography is Meynell's failure to address fully the relationship between Alice Meynell and Thompson. He characterizes the relationship between the two as being professional and entirely appropriate for two fellow poets. Whether Meynell obscures Thompson's love for his mother in an effort to protect his family (his

parents were both living at the time of the book's publication) or because Thompson's letters to Alice Meynell were unavailable to him is unclear. This approach of looking at the events in Thompson's life only as they relate to his professional life as a poet is consistent throughout Meynell's biography; regardless, *The Life of Francis Thompson* provides much of the groundwork for any study of Thompson's poetry.

Almost coinciding with Meynell's biography is K. Rooker's study of Thompson's poetry. Rooker includes a brief, anecdotal account of Thompson's life, choosing to focus instead on his poetry. In terms of the entire body of scholarship on Thompson, Rooker's study is unique for two reasons. It is the first to explore the connection between Thompson's poetry and that of Coventry Patmore. While numerous critics have since made note of this connection, Rooker is the only one to examine in detail the possible connections between "Love in Dian's Lap" and Patmore's "The Angel in the House." More importantly, though, Rooker's study begins the tradition of criticism that exists in opposition to the approach offered by Everard Meynell. Rooker, unlike Meynell, interprets Thompson's poetry as the product of his Catholic mysticism. His approach largely divorces Thompson's poems from any contact with other people. We see this most clearly in his conclusion, where he states that "Il s'est agi dans cette étude d'un poète qui est avant tout un mystique, et un mystique catholique. Mort il y a quatre

ans, ce grand rêveur, on l'a vu, se tient toujours un peu à l'écart de son siècle" (236).¹

Rooker's work, then, is significant primarily for its place as one of the earliest studies of Thompson as a Catholic mystic.

After the publication of Everard Meynell's and K. Rooker's studies, criticism on Thompson and his poetry largely took the form of essays by friends and acquaintances who tried to claim him as the most accomplished Catholic poet of the Victorian period. The notable exception to this is R. L. Megroz's *Francis Thompson: the Poet of Earth in Heaven*. Megroz, rather than providing a biography of the poet, examines numerous literary and religious influences on Thompson's poetry. He claims that "If one begins the adventurous exploration of the poetry of Christian love, very soon in one's mental travels, the focus shifts from English literature to Latin civilization" (viii). Megroz uses this understanding of Thompson's Christianity to trace his poetry back to these Latin roots by way of Shelley, Crashaw, Donne, and others. By his own admission, Megroz's work is predicated upon an understanding of Thompson's poetry primarily as the religious expression of a Catholic mystic; his effort to understand Thompson in terms of literary influences, though, makes his work stand out among the other articles and biographies of the same time period.

¹"In this study, we have been concerned with a poet who is above all a mystic, a Catholic mystic. Four years after his death, we can see, the poet always stands apart from the rest of his century."

Forty years after *The Life of Francis Thompson*, Everard Meynell's sister Viola published *Francis Thompson and Wilfrid Meynell*. Viola Meynell's account touches briefly on Thompson's early life but is primarily concerned with the relationship that developed between her father and the poet. As she writes of the lives of the two men, Viola Meynell offers very little in the way of criticism or interpretation of Thompson's poetry. In the few instances where she actually discusses the poems, it is only as commentary on their critical reception at the time of publication or as illustration of some aspect of Thompson's life. Instead, she is primarily interested in looking at the actual life of the poet, drawing on letters both to and from Thompson. As she constructs her vision of the poet's life and relationship to the Meynell family, she contributes a few pieces of information that are essential to a full understanding of the poetry written by Thompson about Alice Meynell. Perhaps because of the distancing effect of time or perhaps because Thompson, Alice Meynell, and Wilfred Meynell had all died by the time the book was written, Viola Meynell comments on the relationship between Thompson and Alice Meynell in a way that her brother was unable to forty years earlier. She is one of the first to discuss the possibility that what Thompson felt for Alice Meynell was something more than close friendship; it is in her book, in fact, that we find recorded one of the most significant letters written by Thompson to Alice Meynell. This letter specifically and, more generally, Viola Meynell's memories of the relationship enable later

scholars to comment on the significance of the relationship between Francis Thompson and Alice Meynell.

In the late 1950's and early 1960's, perhaps the most productive period in terms of criticism on Thompson and his work, the split between the two responses to Thompson's poetry seen in Rooker's and Everard Meynell's biographies becomes even more apparent. Leading the school of thought that interprets Thompson's work almost entirely in terms of his Catholic mysticism was Pierre Danchin. Danchin's stated purpose is to expand upon Everard Meynell's *The Life of Francis Thompson*. However, there is a subtext at work in Danchin's book; in his introduction, he is explicit in his desire to recanonize Thompson as a Christian poet. In his lesser known poems, Danchin claims, "le public de 1958, et notamment un public chrétien, devrait trouver ses principales raisons d'admirer notre poète" (11).² As he writes of Thompson's life and work, this subtext comes to the foreground. Danchin has a tendency to overspiritualize the poems, overlooking obvious biographical context in exchange for Christian overtones that he sometimes seems too eager to create. This approach is certainly feasible when considering a poem such as "The Hound of Heaven" with its obvious religious connections. Danchin's methods, though, become more problematic with some of

²In the lesser known poems, Danchin claims, "the readers of 1958, notably Christian readers, should be able to find reason to admire our poet."

Thompson's lesser known poems which seem to be more about the poet's life than they are about his religious beliefs.

In contrast to Danchin's monumental work on Thompson, two other biographies of the poet from the same time period are worth examining. J. C. Reid's *Francis Thompson, Man and Poet*, in its refusal to spiritualize Thompson's poetry, counters Danchin's work. Reid interprets Thompson's poetry almost entirely through the events of his life. Such an approach demands an interpretive act on Reid's part as he determines which of the events in Thompson's life are the most significant to the poems. While Reid sees some of the poems as being obviously related to Thompson's experiences with the Catholic church, his interpretation of the poems generally foregrounds Thompson's opium addiction. "The Hound of Heaven," for instance, is interpreted as an opium nightmare rather than the spiritual awakening which Danchin sees in the poem.

Similar to Reid's biography is John Evangeline Walsh's *Strange Harp, Strange Symphony*. Like Reid, Walsh attempts to use the events of the poet's life as a means of understanding his poems. Unlike Reid, though, Walsh reads Thompson's poems not through his opium addiction but through the different relationships in his life. One of the most significant aspects of Walsh's book is his insistence on the importance of Thompson's relationships with Maggie Brien and Katie King. While these had been

briefly mentioned in Everard Meynell's work and in the other biographies, Walsh presents them as being one of the driving motivations behind Thompson's poetry. It is Walsh's scholarship that makes this approach so effective; his extensive work on Thompson's letters and manuscripts may justify his privileging of these relationships as significant to the poetry.

From the publication of Danchin's and Walsh's biographies, significant contributions to the study of Thompson's work were almost non-existent until Brigid Boardman's *Between Heaven and Charing Cross: The Life of Francis Thompson*. Boardman's biography follows the same methods of interpreting Thompson's life and poetry as Everard Meynell's. Through her extensive study of Thompson's manuscripts and papers, Boardman is able to come to what is probably the most complete picture of the poet's life. As she charts his life and career, Boardman examines his poetry primarily as an indication of his material situation in life at a given time. Also like Everard Meynell's biography, Boardman's tends to minimize Thompson's romantic interest in Katie King and Maggie Brien; it is her presentation of Thompson's relationships with the young prostitute and with Alice Meynell which are particularly helpful. Boardman includes in the text a number of previously unpublished fragments and letters, and uses them to explain the dynamics of these two relationships.

Most recently, Pushpa Naidu Parekh's 1998 study of Thompson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Lionel Johnson, and Dylan Thomas attempts to address issues of loss and identity in Thompson's poetry. In *Responses to Failure*, Parekh claims that she will explore his effort to find identity in the Other, an Other conflated of a Divine being and the humans with whom Thompson came into contact on a daily basis. Parekh's work is, in this sense, the first attempt to join these two seemingly disparate qualities of Thompson's poetry. As she addresses his human relationships, Parekh presents the poems written to Alice Meynell, Katie King, and Maggie Brien as holding a paradoxical stance in which the male figure in the poems desires to be both "immune to human love" and to be possessed of "a love that transcends human limitations" (85). Parekh's conclusions are ultimately unsatisfying in their divergence from her stated purpose; her claim to read Thompson's daily life and his spirituality on equal terms is quickly pushed to the side. In her final analysis, Parekh sees the daily happenings of Thompson's life as the support for a larger, mystical view of the world, placing his poetry into a similar hierarchy as that posited by Danchin and Rooker. She concludes her chapter on Thompson by noting that "out of the city of earthquakes . . . the poet builds his own new empire, imparting 'the grandeurs of his Babylonian heart,' even as the self discovers its renewed relationship with God" (93). Thompson's failed romances, then, become for Parekh simply the building blocks from which he creates images of his relationship with God.

Parekh's initial claim, that the mundane and the spiritual must be treated equally, though, provides a necessary critical framework for understanding Thompson's poetry. There is a symbiotic relationship in Thompson's work between his perception of everyday existence and his understanding of God and religion; the world of common experience offers the poet ways to express an understanding of a spiritual reality which, in turn, helps him to make sense of everyday experience. My intent is to use this framework to focus specifically on the interaction between Thompson's failed romances and his perception of the world in terms of his Christian theology.

Clearly critics have to a large extent explored the ways in which Thompson's life experiences provided the material for the poetic expression of the bond between God and humanity. My purpose is to look at the other side of the equation, to examine how Thompson's theology affects his interpretation of human relationships. As he writes about his various romantic failures, two dominant modes of looking at the female emerge, both of which are drawn from his Catholic theology. Perhaps the best starting point is the sonnet "Sad Semele," a poem only recently published in Man Has Wings, Terence Connolly's collection of Thompson's previously unpublished work. In this poem are the seeds of the two different postures which Thompson will assume in relation to the females of his later poetry.

The conceit of the poem is relatively straightforward; the prostitute is presented as Semele, the mother of Dionysus. The obvious parallel is that the prostitute is the mother of Thompson's poetry just as Semele is the mother of the god of poetic inspiration. In this mother figure, though, may be the beginnings of the Mariology that becomes such an important part of the "Love in Dian's Lap" series. The poem creates the image of a mortal female giving birth to immortality; she is the mother of a "deathless progeny of pain" (6).³ At the same time, Semele's death is compared to the "half of [Zeus's] cup" (3) that she has drunk, the grief without the immortality. While it lies undeveloped in the poem, the idea of a mortal female who bears the progeny of a god and suffers tremendous grief are hints that the prostitute may in some way be associated with the Mater Dolorosa, one of the numerous functions of the Virgin with which Thompson would have been familiar. In "Love in Dian's Lap," the poems written about Alice Meynell, Thompson will return to this use of the Virgin Mary; in this sequence, though, the language and imagery of nineteenth-century Mariology are fully developed as Thompson uses them to frame his relationship with Meynell.

At the same time, though, "Sad Semele" suggests another way of relating to the female that will resurface in Thompson's later poetry. In terms of the mythology of the

³All citations of Thompson's poems will be, unless otherwise noted, taken from the 1937 Oxford edition of his poems, an addition that, while not the most recent, is the most accessible for readers.

poem, the female is destroyed by the glory of the male divinity. Semele's desire was to look upon the full glory of her lover Zeus; when she did, she was destroyed by what she saw. Paradoxically, then, while the Semele of the poem exists as the mother of Thompson's poetic inspiration, she is also unable to comprehend the fullness of the poetic experience. J. E. Walsh notes that "the 'glory' of his success has torn them apart and sent the girl to her obscure doom" (75). The implication is that Thompson perceives that it is the prostitute's inability to come to terms with his divine-like qualities as a poet which forces the separation and ends the relationship. This paradigm recurs throughout Thompson's poetry, both in the poems about Maggie Brien and Katie King and in his religious poems. Thus, embedded in "Sad Semele" may be the groundwork for many of Thompson's later poems. As he develops as a poet, the two different positionings hinted at in "Sad Semele" dichotomize, splitting into two different approaches to the feminine. Both, though, become a means for Thompson to create a masculinity that resists dominant discourses that define gender in terms of physical sexuality.

Exploring the ways in which the daily and the divine converge in Thompson's poetry to aid him in recuperating a shattered masculinity may enable a fuller understanding of the part of Victorian society occupied by the Catholic poets.

Historically, critics have looked to Coventry Patmore as the poetic voice of late Victorian Catholicism; more recently, attention has been focused on Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Critics have explored how both of these poets have used Catholic theology in the construction of masculinity. It is my contention that Thompson draws from the same theological base yet works toward a very different version of masculinity than either Hopkins or Patmore. His poetry, then, must be considered as one of the possible ways in which the Catholic symbolism and theology is translated into the creation of gender identity.

Chapter Two

“I Fled Him”: Flight, Pursuit, and Masculinity

Historically, critics have read “The Hound of Heaven” as the central poem in the Thompson canon. Both its soaring vision and its endurance over time mark this poem as one of Thompson’s greatest. In his 1961 biography of the poet, Paul van Kuykendall Thomson echoes the ideas of Pierre Danchin in commenting that

Had he written nothing else but “The Hound of Heaven” and “The Kingdom of God,” Francis Joseph Thompson would probably still be the most well known representative of the late Victorian revival of creative literary activity among English Catholics. (7)

John Evangeline Walsh, although his critical approach to Thompson’s poetry is in stark contrast to that of Van K. Thomson, reads the poem similarly, calling it “the foremost religious poem of modern times” (101). As these two comments suggest, “The Hound of Heaven” is certainly Thompson’s first great religious poem; however, it is also a crucial poem in terms of his construction of masculinity.

Several of Thompson’s biographers, beginning with Everard Meynell, have suggested that the impetus for “The Hound of Heaven” comes from his relationship with

the prostitute. While we know very little about this relationship, several things are clear. In 1888, she cared for Thompson during the time that he was homeless on the London streets. The two stayed together for a number of months; however, when Thompson learned of the publication of "The Passion of Mary" in *Merry England*, she abruptly left him. Her reason, according to Everard Meynell, was that the literary world would be incapable of understanding her relationship with the poet (83). After she left, Thompson spent several months searching for her in the London streets, but failing to locate her, he resigned himself to the fact that she was gone. It was during these months, suggests J. E. Walsh, that

The montage of pursuit and flight in Thompson's mind found answering echoes among the great traditions of a pursuing God--traditions expressed in such documents as *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, the Psalms, especially Psalm 138, and the medieval verses, *Quia Amore Languet*, perhaps also the *Dio Amore* of Silvio Pellico. It was in this welter of disparate but converging thoughts that the first idea for *The Hound of Heaven* was generated. (76)

What Walsh and others have failed to consider, though, is the possibility that there is a deeper connection between Thompson's relationship with the prostitute and the relationship described in "The Hound of Heaven." During the same time period that he

pursued the prostitute through the London streets, Thompson penned "Sad Semele," a poem explicitly about the young prostitute. In the classical myth, the mortal Semele is destroyed by seeing the full glory of Zeus. Thompson appropriates this relationship, placing himself in the position of Zeus and the prostitute in the place of Semele. While the prostitute is not, of course, destroyed by him, it is the publication of his verse, his moment of poetic glory, that drives her away and ends the relationship. This same structure of an immortal male Being pursuing a mortal female is, in many ways, repeated in "The Hound of Heaven."

Critics have almost universally agreed that "The Hound of Heaven" is a description of Christ's pursuit of the human soul. As the poem develops, the soul flees from him, afraid that it will be overwhelmed by his love. At one point, the soul speaks, saying "Though I knew His love Who followèd / Yet was I sore adread / Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside" (19-21). The parallel here between Christ's relationship to the human soul and Thompson's perception of his own relationship with the prostitute as expressed in "Sad Semele" is striking. Semele is destroyed by the overwhelming glory of Zeus; similarly, the human soul flees from Divine Love from fear that its independent selfhood will be destroyed. Given that Everard Meynell, one of Thompson's close friends, and other critics have suggested that "The Hound of Heaven" finds its imagery of flight and pursuit in Thompson's following of the prostitute through the

London streets, I believe we must consider the possibility that the structure of the relationship between Christ and the human soul is also drawn from Thompson's perception of his relationship with the prostitute. Christ is placed in relation to the human soul in the same structure given in "Sad Semele"; he is presented as an overpowering love who figuratively destroys the human soul by demanding that it deny all selfhood, finding identity only in him.

If the relationship between Christ and the human soul is structured in the same way that Thompson presents himself in relation to the prostitute, then it could potentially be gendered in the same way. Clearly, such a leap would be entirely speculative if it were made solely on the basis of the similarities between the structures of the relationships in "The Hound of Heaven" and "Sad Semele." After all, one poem is about a specific human relationship while the other is a more general picture of the love of Christ for humanity. Supporting this perspective, though, is a letter that Thompson wrote to Alice Meynell just a few months after the writing of "The Hound of Heaven." In this letter, dated from the fall of 1890, he writes that "in what concerns their veritable spirit, all mortals are feminine" (54). In the same letter, he defines the "veritable spirit" by placing it in opposition to all that relates to the material existence of the human being; the "spirit" here corresponds to the soul, the essence of the person which is not part of the fleshly, temporally bound body.

This understanding of the feminized soul, when put together with the biographical context of "The Hound of Heaven," points to a cosmology in which a masculine deity pursues the feminized soul. Even the poem's dominant metaphor, the hunt, leads to this conclusion. In "The Hound of Heaven," the issue of the hunt is complex; for all the certainty of critics that the hunt is Christ's hunt for the human soul, it must be admitted that neither Christ nor the hound of the poem's title is ever mentioned in the text of the poem. Where Thompson finds this rather unorthodox image of Christ as a dog is uncertain; the most likely source, as Brigid Boardman points out, seems to be from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* which refers to "Heaven's winged Hound" in its opening act. Boardman continues to comment on the significance of the hound, saying that it "pursues its prey with a purposeful unswerving sense of direction whatever course its victim takes" (135).

Regardless of where Thompson finds the source for the poem, the elaborate images of flight and pursuit clearly seem to indicate a hunt of some sort. While there is certainly room for debate, the timeless nature of the pursuing figure's love as well as its purity all lend credence to the traditional reading that the hunt in "The Hound of Heaven" is a metaphor for Christ's love of the human soul. In reading the poem this way, critics place the poem in a long tradition which presents the relationship between God and humanity as a pursuit, a tradition which is rooted in a medieval concept of mysticism. R.

L. Megroz traces "The Hound of Heaven" back through the poetry of John Donne to a common source in Augustine, writing that

Donne's lively sense of sin and of death is part of his mediaevalism, though his mediaeval sympathies are traceable to his temperament. It is fitting therefore to remark that St. Augustine anticipates the feeling in 'The Hound of Heaven,' and that this feeling of pursuit, of being hunted by the Divine love is peculiarly a development of mediaeval Christianity. (153)

Similarly, J. E. Walsh has suggested medieval verse as being essential to the creation of "The Hound of Heaven" (76). Both place Thompson's ode in a tradition that uses the hunt as metaphor for Christ's searching for the human soul; both mention Augustine and the medieval poem "*Quia Amore Langueo*" in which "true love" pursues the human soul to take her to "a palace precious." This understanding of the hunt metaphor, then, fits into what medieval scholar Anne Rooney describes as a small tradition in which Christ is presented as the "hunter of souls" (43).

What Walsh and Megroz, though, have overlooked and at times pushed to the side is the erotic nature of the hunt. Also in the tradition of the hunt narrative with which Thompson would have been familiar is Wyatt's "Who So List to Hunt," a poem in which the hunt is used as a metaphor for sexual desire. Wyatt's poem does not have the

religious connotations of "The Hound of Heaven"; however, Donne's poetry, as evidenced in "Sonnet 10--Batter My Heart," often turns to a language of sexuality in an attempt to penetrate the mystery of the relationship between God and the human soul. Even "*Quia Amore Languet*," which Megroz cites specifically as evidence that "Thompson is not erotic in this way" (154), at times presents the bond between Christ and the Soul as being a marital relationship in which Christ is the husband and the soul is his spouse. It is my contention that in addition to using the hunt as a metaphor for Christ's pursuit of the soul, "The Hound of Heaven" does, in fact, take on an erotic tone, a tone brought about by Thompson's understanding of the human soul as being distinctly feminine in nature.

Understanding "The Hound of Heaven" as being an extension of both of these traditional uses of the hunt helps to explain several problematic passages in the poem wherein Thompson's characterization of the relationship between Christ and the human soul seems to deviate from the dominant imagery of the poem. The first of these passages occurs early in the poem. As the soul flees from the Divine, its first place of refuge lies with Dawn and Eve. The soul appeals to them: "with thy young skiey blossoms heap me over / From this tremendous lover / Float thy vague veil about me, lest He see" (31-33). Here, the soul identifies the pursuer as a "tremendous lover," an appellation which gives the poem an erotic tone that critics have traditionally ignored.

The implication is that the pursuer, already identified in the first lines of the poem as masculine, aggressively pursues a feminine figure who resists his advances.

The second and more problematic passage occurs just as the pursuer overtakes the object of his pursuit. Just before the union of the two, the pursued figure cries out

Naked I wait thy love's uplifted stroke!

My harness piece by piece Thou hast hewn from me

And smitten me to my knee;

I am defenceless utterly. (111-114)

When removed from the context of the poem, the image created is that of a warrior defeating a foe rather than a hunter overtaking his prey. Given, though, that the pursuer is characterized as a "tremendous lover," another possibility presents itself. Here, the hunt metaphor is used precisely to eroticize the poem; that is, the use of the metaphor is overtly sexual in nature, feminizing the soul and masculinizing the Divine Love. As Christ overtakes the feminized soul and the object of the "hunt" is achieved, the imagery shifts from that of pursuit to that of conquest. The union of the two is a violent imposition of the male upon the female; her clothes are ripped from her, and she awaits the phallic "uplifted stroke" of his love.

In the conclusion of "The Hound of Heaven," however, Thompson breaks from the dominant metaphor of the poem. Once the object of the chase is captured, there

must be a reconciliation between the lover and his mistress Thompson accomplishes this in the final lines of the poem by allowing the Divine Love to skirt responsibility for the threatened violence by recreating the conquest of the soul, presenting it not as brutal aggression but as a self-sacrificing act that *exalts* the soul. Speaking to her, the Divine Love says

How hast thou merited--

Of all man's clotted clay the dingiest clot.

How little worthy of any love thou art!

Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble Thee,

Save me, save only Me? (165-170)

The soul is no longer pictured as fleeing from a violent, unwanted pursuer; rather, she is chastised for her failure to recognize that the hunter is actually Christ, the only being who can validate her existence. He presents himself as risking his own nobility and perfection for the sake of exalting a depraved, sinful being, the "dingiest clot," who flees from his sacrificial efforts. He demands that the feminized soul deny all the other ties that she has had throughout her flight and tells her that she must define her existence only in relationship to him. Only by finding identity in him, he claims, can the soul find meaning; this is implicit in the final lines of the poem when he claims that "I am He whom thou seekest" (181). These words remove all brutality from the pursuit of the soul, implying

that her efforts to escape the pursuing Love have been nothing more than a subconscious desire for her own capture.

This renegotiation of the relationship between the masculinized Deity and the feminized soul is of utmost importance when considering how "The Hound of Heaven" plays into Thompson's poems about Maggie Brien and Katie King. Having overtaken and demonstrated the fullness of his love, the Deity allows for the final determination of the relationship, the choice of whether or not to be converted to Christianity, to lie with the soul. As the poem closes, the Divine Love reaches out to the soul and asks her to "Rise, clasp my hand and come" (176). Her response is critical to my understanding of Thompson's perception of the relationship; she asks herself "Is my gloom, after all, Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?" (178-179). Implicit in the poem is that the soul willingly returns the love of the Divine. However, her questioning at the end suggests that even after the pursuit, she is still given the option of refusal. Thompson clearly expects us to recognize that if the relationship ultimately ends in failure, it is a failure brought about by the soul's choice and not a reflection of any lack in the Divine Love. In his later poetry, Thompson will return to this, using the possibility that successful fulfillment of the masculine role in the hunt metaphor is not dependent on a final consummation of the relationship. Instead, with this twist at the end of "The Hound of Heaven," a masculine figure in the metaphor can pursue the female, overtake her in a

demonstration of all-encompassing love, and have her fail to recognize that love for what it is; such a rejection implies no failure on the part of the pursuer in the relationship.

I give so much time and attention to "The Hound of Heaven" because its structure recurs in Thompson's later love poetry. By understanding that Thompson writes within a tradition of Catholic mysticism which allows him to use the hunt metaphor to eroticize Christ's hunt for the human soul, we can see how this metaphor is easily applied to the human relationships about which Thompson writes. In charting the development of the use of the hunt in English literature, Marcelle Thiébaux has written that

In expressing a lover's rapacious longing for a coy mistress, the chase may appear an all too obvious image. Its situation contains the antithetical and complementary acts of flight and pursuit; the completed chase includes the hunter's sense of conquest and pleasure when he wounds the body of his quarry, sheds its blood, uses its flesh for food. Whether the metaphorical pursuer is animal or human, the hunt's climax and dénouement may be seen as adaptable by any moderately imaginative poet to an amatory purpose. In such a rudimentary form, the chase as a premeditated and violent sexual pursuit will continue to recur (92)

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The affair [between the two] is very fully recorded in the
sequence *A Narrow Vessel*" (129); similarly, Pierre Danchin comments that "Toute une

partie des *New Poems* de 1897 est directement inspirée par cet épisode; il s'agit de la série de poèmes intitulée *A Narrow Vessel*" (83).¹

As Thompson writes of his relationship with Maggie Brien, he returns to the same set of images used in "The Hound of Heaven"; once again, he uses the chase to describe the relationship between male and female. This first becomes evident in the subtitle of the poem, "Being a Little Dramatic Sequence on the Aspect of Primitive Girl-Nature Towards a Love Beyond Its Capacities." Critics have read in his subtitle the girlish, child-like nature of Maggie Brien; Danchin characterizes their love as being little more than a game for the childlike "she" of the poem (84). Here, Thompson places the male in the position of having a powerful, encompassing love for the girl who is, as suggested by the subtitle, unable to return his love. This inability to return love is translated into "A Girl's Sin," the title of the first poem of the sequence. The language of fallenness, particularly the fact that it is a *girl's* sin, immediately places the relationship that is the subject of "A Narrow Vessel" into the same structure as that of Christ's love for the fallen soul in "The Hound of Heaven."

The sequence begins in "A Girl's Sin—In Her Eyes" with a conversation between the female and an unnamed third party after the relationship has begun to deteriorate. As

¹"An entire part of the *New Poems* of 1897 is directly inspired by this episode; this is especially true of the series of poems entitled *A Narrow Vessel*."

he records the conversation between the two, Thompson evokes Alexander Pope in the poem, allowing the break between them to be created by the giving of a lock of hair.

Unlike Pope's mock epic, though, the exchange of the lock in "A Narrow Vessel" is an event of great seriousness and significance. The female gives a single lock of her hair to the male; this is not, however, an entirely voluntary act, for she notes that "He gazed it [the lock] from my head" (24). She feels his desire for a part of her as an imposition of his will upon her, for later in the poem, she remarks that

with him, each favor that I do
Is bold suit's hallowing text;
Each gift a bastion levelled to
The next one and the next. (45-48)

Her descriptions of the relationship suggest that it takes the form of a conquest, a pursuit in which the male hopes to capture and possess all. Willful in her refusal to be consumed by his love, she flees from him, noting that

Behind me piecemeal gifts I cast,
My fleeing self to save;
And that's the thing must go at last,
For that's the thing he'd have. (53-56)

Thus the female, whose “sin” has caused a tremendous rift in the relationship flees from the male whose desire requires that she sacrifice her own selfhood in return for his love.

In the companion poem “A Girl’s Sin--In His Eyes,” Thompson gives the male’s version of the relationship and the events leading to its failure. In this poem, the male speaker adopts a paradoxical stance, using the traditional language of the lover humbled before his lady which at the same time works to place him in the position of Christ. Throughout the poem, he idolizes and elevates the female to the level of a lady to be worshiped. In the closing lines of the poem, for instance, he “worshipped [*sic*] with tears, on happy knee/Her doubt, her trust, her shyness free/Her timorous audacity” (41-43). Undercutting this elevation, though, is the speaker’s tendency to use this self-humbling adoration to picture himself as the embodiment of Christ-like love sacrificed to win her back from the sin of the poem’s title, a sin that is not clearly defined until the final poems of the sequence. Midway through the poem, for instance, he claims that “with what pitilessness was I after/Slain, to pacify/the uneasy *manes* of her shame” (25-27). He is killed, figuratively speaking, like Christ, saving the female from her inability to love.

In the remainder of the sequence in which the poems alternate between details of the break-up and musings on the entire relationship, the dichotomy between the two different modes of identifying with the female seen in “A Girl’s Sin--In His Eyes” lessens,

and images of the male as Christ come to dominate. Thus, by the end of the sequence in "Penelope," he can describe the female's initial response to his love as being such that "Like to a box of spikenard did you break/Your heart about my feet" (7-8). This direct reference to Mary's anointing Christ's feet serves two purposes. It reinforces that the male functions as the salvific figure in the relationship and that it is his love that will save the woman from herself; at the same time, these lines strengthen the image of the female as base and degraded, kneeling at the feet of one whose perfection she cannot hope to achieve on her own. In the remainder of the poem the male speaker employs language that is reminiscent of that of the Divine Love in "The Hound of Heaven"; he chastises the female for her failure to recognize that it is his love that gives her meaning to her existence. She is compared to Penelope, weaving her web yet constantly unweaving it, offering the possibility of love while ever denying it. Unlike Ulysses' wife, though, the female figure in Thompson's "Penelope" does not wait faithfully for her true lover. Instead, she scorns her true love, fleeing from him and refusing to recognize that "life fell to dust without [him]" (10).

In her flight from the unwanted lover, the female figure in "A Narrow Vessel" follows many of the same patterns as the feminized soul in "The Hound of Heaven." In the first poem of the sequence, for instance, she finds solace in relationships with someone besides her lover. It is in the poem "Beginning of End," though, that the

similarities between her flight from her lover and the soul's flight from God become most striking. In this poem, Thompson elaborates upon a single moment at which the relationship turns towards its end. The narrator watches as his love approaches, sees him, and walks past giving no sign of recognition. The reason given in the first two lines of the poem is that "She was aweary of the hovering / Of Love's incessant and tumultuous wing" (1-2). The incessant, pounding footsteps of the Divine Love in "The Hound of Heaven" have been translated into the constant presence of a bird of prey. In the face of this presence, "appointed tryst she defiantly balked, / And with her lightest comrade lightly walked" (7-8). Her first identification outside of her lover is a human companion. As the female walks away, the narrator sees her leave him and move into Nature; he last sees her as she walks on the hills. With this response, the female figure of "A Narrow Vessel imitates the soul's initial response to the pursuing Lover in "The Hound of Heaven."

As in "The Hound of Heaven," then, the male figure assumes the role of Christ and the female that of the sinner fleeing from the Divine Love. Having forced the relationship into this structure, Thompson is left to account for the fact that there is no consummation. He addresses this issue in the final two poems of the sequence, "The End of It" and "Epilogue." In "The End of It," Thompson sets forth the contradictory nature of the female, who at once desires to be possessed and to retain autonomy, saying

She did not love to love, but hated him
 For making her to love; and so her whim
 From passion taught misprision to begin.
 And all this sin
 Was because love to cast out had no skill
 Self, which was regent still.

Her own self-will made void her own self's will. (1-7)

He concludes with a scenario in which the female figure is given at least some level of choice. Within her, the possibly subconscious desire to be possessed by the male and, consequently, to become devoid of self rages against the desire for self-autonomy. The final lines of the poem suggest that in "A Narrow Vessel," the desire for an independent self wins out to the detriment of the female figure. Faced with two choices, the denying of selfhood and embracing of the all-consuming love of the male who stoops to her level or the denying of the male love, the female makes a willful choice to live without the love of the male.

The implications of her choice to reject this Christ-like love become clear in the "Epilogue." Here Thompson attempts to allegorize the entire sequence by turning the female into the soul and the male into Divine Love. He writes that

She, that but giving part, not whole,

Took even the part back, is the Soul:

And that so disdainèd Lover—

Best unthought, since Love is over. (5-8)

In the final poem, the female's "sin" is revealed; as he allegorizes the relationship, Thompson explains that it is her refusal to give entirely to the male figure that makes the female figure a type of the fallen human soul. Predictably, her choice to flee the love of her Lover leads to damnation. She "treads the way of Heaven, to Hell" (24). In her incapability to return the love of her lover, the female becomes the soul who rejects Christ.

Critics have debated the success of the allegory of the sequence and have, for the most part, concluded that it is a failure. J. C. Reid notes that "the epilogue . . . appears an attempt to lend extra significance to a record of a frustrated love affair . . . [it] reads like the moral to a fable without which the story is already complete" (155). Regardless of its success, the attempt to allegorize the sequence reflects Thompson's effort to redefine the relationship. Speaking of his own poetry, he writes that

the narrow vessel dreads to crack under the overflowing love which
surges into it. She shrinks with terror; she turns to the lover whose
shallow love has nought to frighten her. . . Now this is but the image and

explanation of the soul's attitude towards only God. (qtd. in Everard Meynell 231)

His words reflect the effort to turn the relationship into an allegory of the soul; at the same time, they underscore the connections between "A Narrow Vessel," "The Hound of Heaven," and "Sad Semele," presenting the female as the soul but also as a woman who fears being destroyed by the sheer power of a male love.

Thompson's claim that the relationship in "A Narrow Vessel" is written to reflect the soul's response to God, however, may be too easy an explanation. Brigid Boardman, commenting on the relationship between Thompson and Maggie Brien, notes that "although the 'Narrow Vessel' sequence elaborates their relationship beyond the facts, the main theme depends on it [the relationship] as it existed at the time" (192). Her emphasis lies on the extent to which the sequence accurately presents the relationship; she cautions us about reading too deeply into the sequence hoping to find a "true" picture of the relationship. The overwhelming agreement among other critics that the sequence *is* about Thompson's interest in Maggie Brien, though, indicates that in order to understand the way in which masculinity takes shape for the poet, our focus needs to be on the alterations themselves. The picture of Thompson aggressively pursuing Maggie Brien, condemning her for her failure to return his love, is quite distant from what we know of the relationship as others perceived it. J. C. Reid describes it as "shy,

adolescent, unsatisfactory, and end[ing] with evasion on both sides" (138). Even Thompson's own description of the relationship is far removed from his presentation of it in "A Narrow Vessel"; in a letter to Wilfrid Meynell, he describes Maggie as "the most daintily supernatural of faeries" (Letters 51) and expresses his fear that she will not return his love. In this letter we see none of the posturing that is so pervasive in the sequence of poems. The elaborate pose set up in "A Narrow Vessel" allows Thompson to fulfill the expectations of masculinity created in "The Hound of Heaven" and, to an extent, in "Sad Semele." By positioning himself as a godlike figure in relation to a female who is incapable of returning love, he is able to shift the full weight of the failure of the relationship onto the female; masculinity is thus preserved even in the chaos of the failure of the relationship.

In the summer of 1896, shortly after the end of his relationship with Maggie Brien, Thompson traveled to London from Pantasaph where he first met Katie King. After the two met, their friendship quickly grew, and Katie's mother worked with the Meynells to be certain that nothing more came of the relationship. Thompson was hurried back to Pantasaph; Katie soon wrote to him, though, and the two took up a regular correspondence. The relationship soon became a subject for Thompson's verse as he frequently wrote poetry to send to her. This poetry may have been the undoing of the relationship, for, as Brigid Boardman notes,

towards the end of October [of 1896], he received a letter from Mrs. King which seemed to confirm the fear [of the loss of Katie] into a reality. She had come to know of the poems and something of the correspondence with Katie. At the same time she found their relationship was known and discussed in terms that compelled her to ask him to cease all communication with her daughter (261)

Whether or not Boardman is correct in her conjecture that the discovery of the poetry occasioned Mrs. King's letter to Thompson, we do know that in this letter, she was aware of the poems and that she assured Thompson that Katie would never love him. That Katie continued writing to Thompson for some months afterward suggests that her mother may have misspoken; regardless, the separation of the two enforced by the Meynells and Mrs. King effectively ended the relationship. The poems that were exchanged between Thompson and Katie King were, unfortunately, largely destroyed in the aftermath of their discovery by Mrs. King. Those that remain, most notably the "*Ad Amicam*" sequence, provide a fascinating contrast to Thompson's other love poetry, a contrast to which I will return in my conclusion.

As Thompson became more certain that he could have no future with Katie King and the relationship gradually eased back into a friendship that would last for several years, he returned to the same strategies as in "A Narrow Vessel" for reclaiming his own

sense of masculinity. At some point after the writing of "*Ad Amicam*," he penned "Arab Love Song." In the poem, Thompson imagines an Arab standing in the desert at night. As he looks into the camp of his lover's family, he laments that she cannot leave them to join him. Most critics have read the poem in purely religious terms. Pierre Danchin, for instance, finds that

dans un poème qui semble une pure fantaisie de l'imagination . . . on s'aperçoit soudain que l'évocation toute simple de cet amour maure est surtout un symbole, celui des exigences et de la paix indicible de l'Amour divin. (265)²

This examination of the poem, by lifting it to an entirely religious level, ignores the powerful tension that exists between the two human lovers of the poem. Brigid Boardman's more recent comments on the poem go to the other extreme, suggesting that Thompson's emphasis here is almost exclusively on human love and human relationships. She places the poem historically within Thompson's life, claiming that it was "unmistakably, if very privately, addressed to Katie [King]" (287). Only through a synthesis that accounts for both the spiritual and the erotic, though, can we come to the fullest possible understanding of "Arab Love Song." In the wake of the failure of this

²"In a poem that seems a pure fantasy of the imagination, we suddenly notice that the evocation of this Moorish love is actually a symbol, a symbol of the exigencies and the unspeakable peace of the Divine Love."

relationship to develop into anything beyond a casual friendship, Thompson must find a way to salvage both the relationship and his own masculinity. By positioning Katie and himself within the theological structure laid out in "The Hound of Heaven," he is able to give a sense of meaning to the relationship that transcends the failure of temporal love.

In "Arab Love Song," Thompson inverts the situation of "The Hound of Heaven"; that is, rather than using the structure of human love to define the relationship between the Divine and humanity, he appropriates the relationship between God and the soul to give structure to the relationship between the Arab and his lover. As the Arab watches his lover from a distance, he assumes the role of Christ. He sets forth several conditions necessary for the success of the relationship, conditions which are remarkably like those set by the Divine in "The Hound of Heaven." The female must leave all that has been her existence to this point in her life, finding in the male lover all of the necessary conditions for existence. As the Arab sets forth these conditions, he employs the very language of Christ. "Leave thy Father; leave thy mother/And thy brother" (10-11), the speaker in the poem calls out. In these words are a very conscious echo of Christ's words to his disciples when he tells them that "I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother . . . Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10.35-37). The role of the male in the human relationship of the poem, then, corresponds to that of Christ or the Divine Love. It is his

place to call his female lover away from family, friends, or whatever else obstructs the relationship, a role that is remarkably like that of the pursuing lover in "The Hound of Heaven."

Implicit in "An Arab Love Song" is the role of the voiceless female in the relationship. Like the soul in "The Hound of Heaven," she is to deny any identifications except those found in the presence of the male lover. Her identity is to be reformed, removed from all familial bonds and recast in terms of the sexual relationship with the male partner. The lover asks of her rhetorically "What needest with thy tribe's black tents/Who has the red pavilion of my heart?" (15-16), a question that echoes the words of the Divine Love in "The Hound of Heaven" and his insistence that the only way for the soul to find her true meaning and purpose is to be swallowed up by Himself. Presumably, there will be no sense of loss at the severing of these familial bonds; implicit in the Arab's words is the idea that the move from father's tents to the object of male sexual love assumes the appearance of exaltation, a move from a lower state to a higher state. Thus, in "Arab Love Song," as in "A Narrow Vessel," Thompson relies upon the same set of images of pursuit and flight seen in Christ's pursuit of the soul in "The Hound of Heaven."

Francis Thompson himself once remarked that "all human love to me was a symbol of divine love . . . human love was in my eyes a piteous failure unless as an image

of the supreme Love which gave meaning and reality to its seeming insanity" (qtd. in Meynell 230-231). Clearly, both the poems of "A Narrow Vessel" and "Arab Love Song" fit into this paradigm. Just as clearly, though, the relationships upon which these poems are based would have been perceived as failures in a nineteenth-century culture in which heterosexual marriage was the rule for all but those of the priesthood. Rejected first by Maggie Brien and later by Katie King, Thompson's ability to maintain a sense of masculinity in *fin-de-siècle* culture was certainly in question. In order to recuperate some sense of masculinity, he turned to a model of male-female relationships in which a potent masculinity can exist in the absence of sexuality. First in "Sad Semele," then in "The Hound of Heaven," masculinity is defined not in terms of sexuality but by the ability to pursue the female, offering her an overpowering love. By placing the relationships with Katie King and Maggie Brien into this same structure, Thompson can hold onto a sense of masculinity precisely because sexual fulfillment is unnecessary for them to fit into the model of Divine Love established in "The Hound of Heaven."

Chapter Three

“The Man in me calls ‘Love,’ the child calls ‘Mother’”: Competing Voices

The structure and imagery of “The Hound of Heaven,” drawn as they are from Thompson’s relationship with the prostitute, provide the framework for the presentation of his relationships with Maggie Brien and Katie King. The Semele who cannot love a god, who is driven from him and ultimately destroyed by his glory, becomes the soul who fails to love the Divine and, finally, the woman who fails to love the poet. There is another side to “Sad Semele,” though, for she is the mother to “the deathless progeny of pain” (6) that is Thompson’s poetry; she is the one who bears “the mortal grief, without the immortal gain” (8). She is the Mother who understands pain and sorrow, the mortal who couples with a god to produce immortal poetry. She is the other side of Thompson’s understanding of the female, the side not present in “Arab Love Song” and “A Narrow Vessel.” This mother imagery of “Sad Semele” becomes the basis for “Love in Dian’s Lap,” the series of poems written about Thompson’s relationship with Alice Meynell.

Throughout the early 1890’s, the years during which he experienced the failure of relationships with both Maggie Brien and Katie King, Thompson felt a constant attraction

to Alice Meynell, the wife of his friend and mentor. A poet herself, Meynell was one of the significant literary figures of the time. She worked closely with her husband on his various literary journals, often including her own work for publication. Her beauty, both intellectual and physical, naturally became the subject of discussion in the literary world. She had admirers in many places, particularly within the circle of Catholic poets.

Coventry Patmore and Francis Thompson, for instance, were both enamored of her, and the subject of their correspondence was, as often as not, what they should do in response to what Thompson at one point rather ineloquently labeled the "A.M.-malady" (Letters 135). Generally, their responses seem to have been similar; both admired Meynell from a distance, but only rarely was voice given to their love outside of their correspondence.

The rare exceptions to this general silence occur in Thompson's poetry. As with many of the events in his life, his relationship with Alice Meynell quickly found its way into his poetry, particularly in the two sequences "Love in Dian's Lap" and "Ultima." In my conclusion, I will look briefly at "Ultima," a sequence written as Thompson tried to stifle his feelings for Meynell; however, my primary interest is with "Love in Dian's Lap." Our understanding that the sequence was written to Alice Meynell rests on two sources. Internal references in the poem, particularly in the "Proemion," refer to the Meynell family. In addition, the Meynell family clearly understood that the poems were addressed to Alice; Everard Meynell goes to the extent of adding to one of Thompson's letters the

statement that "Her Portrait," one of the poems in the sequence, is a description of his mother (*Letters* 47).

Critics have largely interpreted "Love in Dian's Lap" as a tribute to Alice Meynell inspired by intellectual and spiritual attraction. Those who have commented on the use of Marian imagery in the poem have largely glossed over the sequence as a whole. Paul Van K. Thomson, for instance, mentions the connection to Mary but fails to offer any discussion of the relationship between Meynell and Thompson aside from suggesting that Francis Thompson felt some sort of "almost religious devotion" (95) for Alice Meynell. Other critics have commented briefly on the fact that there are three poems inspired by portraits of Alice Meynell but have failed to note their function in the sequence as a whole. I hope to show that the spiritual attraction expressed in the poem is merely an effect used by the poet to create a vehicle through which he can express the full extent of his love for Meynell.

As Thompson writes of his relationship with Alice Meynell in "Love in Dian's Lap," he attempts to negotiate the boundaries between what is acceptable behavior and what is impermissible for him in his relationship with a married woman. Brigid Boardman has commented that the entire sequence is little more than "the sublimation of [Thompson's] physical attraction [for Meynell] into an 'affinity of souls'" (155). Her discussion of the sequence, while it is an appropriate starting point, ultimately is lacking in

two respects. It fails to trace adequately the development of Thompson's creation of this joining of souls. More importantly, though, it examines the sequence only at a local level; Boardman makes little attempt to discuss the poems to Alice Meynell in the larger framework of Thompson's efforts to recuperate a masculinity that is threatened by the impossibility of sexuality within the relationship. I hope to demonstrate that the sequence develops out of the combination of Thompson's Catholicism and his fascination with Percy Bysshe Shelley; I will also try to show that the sequence of poems is integral to an understanding of sexuality and gender in Thompson's poetry.

As he writes "Love in Dian's Lap," the trope of pursuit and flight to which he turns in "A Narrow Vessel" and "Arab Love Song" would clearly be inappropriate given the situation; it is an altogether too sexually overt mode for the expression of his love for the wife of his mentor. Instead, Thompson turns to images of the mother to express his love, images that may well find their roots in "Sad Semele." Throughout the sequence, there is an incredible tension as, in his own words, "The man in me calls 'Love,' the child calls 'Mother'" ("In Her Paths 23). The impossible sexuality between the two is transferred to the love of a child for a mother, a love that would allow for adoration without the threat of sexuality.¹ The process by which Alice Meynell becomes a Mother

¹That Thompson's "mother-love" appears only a few years before the emergence of Freud on the Victorian landscape is fascinating. His entire body of poetry is certainly open to a strict psychoanalytical reading; however, that is not within the scope of this project.

figure, however, is quite complex. Thompson begins the sequence with an understanding of love that is based heavily on the thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley. He then takes this Romantic concept of the transcendental union of souls and applies it to classical mythology. As the sequence progresses, though, this classical mythology shifts to Christian mythology, and the Mother figure takes on the guise of the Christian Madonna. The result is a final picture of Alice Meynell in which Christian thought and Shelleyan Romanticism merge in such a way that Thompson can safely express his love for her.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Shelley on Francis Thompson. His greatest prose work is his essay on Shelley, an essay that is successful not so much for its insight as for the beauty of the author's impassioned praise of the poet. In it, Thompson establishes a hierarchy in which poets and saints exist as brothers, children of the Church who oversees all. He goes on to clarify the degree of Shelley's importance in particular, saying that

We have among us at the present day no lineal descendant, in the poetical order, of Shelley; and any such offspring of the abounding spontaneity of Shelley is hardly possible, still less likely, on the account of the defect by which (we think) contemporary poetry, in general, as compared with the poetry of the early nineteenth century, is mildewed. (4)

In the remainder of the essay, Thompson attempts to reconcile the apparent godlessness of Shelley with a Catholic world-view; the essay in its entirety is a justification of the reading of Shelley to a Church that, in his opinion, had denied the value of poetry.

Clearly, then, Shelley occupies a place of tremendous importance for Thompson. It is important to remember, though, that the Victorian understanding of Shelley and, more specifically, of issues of gender and sexuality in Shelley was quite different from our own, a point that Nathaniel Brown makes in his *Sexuality and Feminism in Shelley*. Largely a rewriting of our understanding of Shelley, Brown's study is an attempt to "rescue" him from the atrocities wrought upon his work by the Victorian imagination. In defining exactly how the Victorians altered Shelley, though, Brown gives a poignant description of how they perceived his poetry. He writes that

For the poet's [Shelley's] work to survive into the Victorian period, a very different portrait had to emerge. With the untiring efforts of his admirers, this is precisely what happened. Far from glorifying sensual indulgences, it was argued, Shelley scorned the fleshly. Soulmates, not bedmates, were love's goal. (46)

For the Victorians, Shelley offered a vision of platonic love; the connection between two souls constituted love. Physical sexuality, then, was unnecessary in the toned down version of Shelley that worked its way into the late nineteenth century.

As Thompson writes "Love in Dian's Lap," this Shelleyan model of sexuality serves as a way for him to mitigate the impossibility of any sort of involvement with Meynell. That Thompson held to a similar understanding of Shelley as that offered by Brown becomes clear as "Shelley" develops. Addressing the issue of his personal life, Thompson claims that "he [Shelley] left a woman not because he was tired of her arms, but because he was tired of her soul" (12). He develops this idea further in a letter written to Canon John Carroll which was mailed in August of 1892. In a postscript to the letter, Thompson comments on Shelley's love for women other than Mary Shelley:

It was of course wrong for Shelley to entertain even an ideal and platonic passion for another woman while he was himself married, and married to a woman who truly loved him. Had Shelley been unmarried, I should have considered the thing absolutely innocent. When a poet writes love-verses to a lady, and gives them to her husband for her, it is surely evident that neither pistols nor divorce courts are necessary. Now that is what Shelley did. (46)

In this passage, Thompson clearly sees the love that he describes as being a platonic love, a search for a joining of souls. The relationship he describes mirrors the relationships between male and female that spring up in "Alastor" and "Epipsychidion," works from which Thompson draws heavily.

From these poems, perhaps the most significant thing that Thompson takes from Shelley is the process of imaging the female. As the Victorians would likely have understood these poems, the highest form of the feminine for Shelley is that which stems from the masculine mind. The perfected femininity is then projected into some type of vision or dream; it is through this vision that the masculine mind is able to come closest to experiencing true femininity. In Shelley, we see the effort to objectify the feminine in this particular way primarily through the dream sequences of "Alastor" and "Epipsychidion." It is in "Alastor," though, that he defines this process. He presents a young hero who attempts to create an idealized vision of woman which will satisfy his needs and desires. In the preface to the poem, Shelley tells us that

His mind at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with
an intelligence similar to itself. He images to Himself the Being whom he
loves. Conversant with the vision in which he embodies his own
imagination unites all of wonderful, or beautiful, which the poet, the
philosopher, or the lover could depicture. (14)

Unsatisfied with his lot in life, then, Alastor images in his own mind the picture of She whom he desires; that is, he projects into a vision the qualities that he would most desire in a woman. The standard interpretation of these lines is given by Evan K. Gibson who comments that "As a consequence of his thirst, 'he images to himself the Being whom he

loves.' It is important to note that this is a creation of his own mind and not, as some writers have stated, a vision sent to him by an outside agency" (1024). Since Gibson's work, critics have argued over *why* Shelley's Poet creates this vision, but there seems to be general agreement that the maid is a projection of the masculine mind. It is this process of imaging the female that becomes the basis of Thompson's poetic sequence to Alice Meynell.²

As Thompson writes "Love in Dian's Lap," this process of imaging becomes progressively clearer; however, unlike the Poet in "Alastor," the male figure in "Love in Dian's Lap" images the female not through a dream sequence but through the use of portraits. Three of the poems in the sequence are written about or inspired by portraits of Alice Meynell. The speaker sits in front of them, using them as stimulus for imaging Alice Meynell as the perfection of femininity. In the first of the portrait poems, "Before Her Portrait in Youth," Thompson writes that

As lovers, banished from their lady's face,

And hopeless of her grace,

Fashion a ghostly sweetness in its place . . .

²In the years since Gibson's article, critics have discussed the possibility that Shelley uses the process of imaging as a reflexive technique for projecting an idealized self into the poem. While there may be some legitimacy to this claim, I hope to demonstrate that as Thompson appropriates this process, it is in the sense of projecting an other, an idealized vision of a woman.

So I, in the very lowlihood of love . . .

Treasure there thy cast youth. (1-15)

The speaker recognizes that the portrait itself is a false representation of Meynell. Later in the poem, he claims that “with show and semblance of fear / Of the Past Her / Who once the beautiful, discarded raiment bare, / It [her portrait] cheateth me” (18-21). If the portrait of her in her youth is false, though, so is the speaker’s imagined picture of her. It is the lover’s nature to “Fashion a ghostly sweetness” in place of the reality of the beloved object. This recalls “Alastor”; what the speaker is doing is “imag[ing] to Himself the Being whom he loves.” This process becomes more apparent in the remainder of the sequence as the speaker projects into his poetry the picture of what he desires the female to be.

Thompson returns to the use of portraits midway through the sequence in “Her Portrait.” This poem recognizes its own artifice, for it is about the inability of language to adequately utter praises for the female; the poet begins with an elaborate tracing of the corruption of language from the time of the purity of Adam’s speech until the present, concluding that language is sufficiently vague to determine that “If I would praise her soul . . . / All must be mystery and hieroglyph” (25-26). As he continues, he is aware that he uses language to create an image of a feminine spirit. This image of the spirit, though, is channeled through the descriptions of the body. He suggests that in the absence of a

physical, tangible soul, the “mortal part [the physical body] suggests its [the soul’s] every trait” (98). The poet, then, is able to image the soul, to project his own vision of the perfect woman, through the descriptions of the body which are drawn from the portrait. Beverly Taylor has commented that through the strained language of the poem and through his own inability to describe adequately the physical or spiritual beauty of the lady, “the speaker makes us aware of the sensuousness submerged in his strenuously vocalized metaphysical devotion” (23). This devotion, though, is found not in the Being of Alice Meynell but in her portrait; the static picture serves as the place from which the poet can, like the Shelleyan hero, image Alice Meynell as he wants her to be. Gazing at the portrait he sees a representation of the body, a portrait which gives rise to ruminations on the spirit, the She, that the poet imagines is Alice Meynell.

Finally, Thompson closes the sequence with “Beneath a Photograph.” In this last poem of the sequence, he calls attention to the entire “Love in Dian’s Lap” sequence as being a picture of Alice Meynell created from his own imagination. The poem sets up a competition between the Poet and Phoebus, each of whom will try his hand at creating a portrait of Alice Meynell. Looking at the photograph, the poet sees the picture of Meynell etched onto film by the light of the sun. He feels the emotions, feels the passion inspired by the image; however, he concludes that

I, all-viewing though he [Phoebus] be,

Methinks I saw further than he;

And, Master gay, I swear I dream

Something the better of the two. (16-19)

The picture drawn by the poet is, we must presume, the entire sequence which is framed by portrait poems. Through this particular framing device, Thompson establishes the sequence as his own vision of Alice Meynell. Although inspired by reality, the poet's vision of perfected femininity is, like the Shelleyan hero's, ultimately the product of his own consciousness.

The effect of this use of portraiture is that Thompson can spiritualize the relationship between himself and Alice Meynell. By focusing on a representation of Meynell's physical body and using it as a conduit for the spiritual, Thompson is able to imagine a joining of souls that is removed from physical sexuality. Thus, in "Her Portrait," he puts forth the idea that

But for what men call

Beauty--the loveliness corporeal,

Its most just praise a thing improper were

To singer or to listener, me or her.

She wears that body but as one indues

A robe, half careless, for it is the use;

Although her soul and it so fair agree,

We sure may, unattaint of heresy,

Conceit it might the soul's begetter be. (88-96)

The visible body is merely the housing (albeit a physically beautiful housing) for the spirit with which the poet desires union; he may imagine that the body begets the soul, but this would merely be a conceit, a created image within the poem.

Ultimately, this use of poetry as a way of creating an image of the poet's own perfected vision of the female imitates the pattern set forth in "Alastor." Thompson's purpose in imaging Alice Meynell, though, might be better traced to "Epipsychidion," another of Shelley's poems which seems to have had a particularly deep impact on Thompson. Nathaniel Brown describes the relationship between the narrator and the female in "Epipsychidion" as a treatment of Shelley's own relationship with Emilia Viviani. Brown notes that Shelley could not break from his wife, but he could permit a platonic relationship with Emilia. Thus, in "Epipsychidion," fulfillment is achieved through an imagined vision. As Brown puts it,

Earthbound within the confines of marriage and family, Shelley

nevertheless asks that Emilia fly with him in imaginary elopement, a union

of ideal selves, which, since it transpires at the level of fantasy, no one

can prevent. (67)

As Thompson develops the sequence to Alice Meynell, it is precisely this type of imaginary elopement, the fantasy of the joining of souls, that he seeks. He images Alice Meynell as Spirit in the poems, then, for it is a joining of spirits that marks the type of love that he desires. That this is his intent in the sequence becomes even more clear in light of a letter to Alice Meynell dated August 1892, written during the time in which Thompson was composing the majority of the poems in "Love in Dian's Lap." He writes that

Even here on earth, my own instinct as to the typical union--given also the typical woman--would be a union like that of the Virgin and St. Joseph. Provided I were united with her spirit, I would be content to wait for her body till I could be united with it on the same terms--i.e., as a *spirit* when it was assumed to the dignity of its soul. (80).

In this bizarre, eroticized description of the relationship between Mary and Joseph, Thompson's frustration with his relationship with Meynell is foregrounded. Unable to achieve sexual intimacy, he turns to a spiritual joining, suggesting that the highest form of love is that between two spirits, for the body must be granted the same dignity as the soul.

The letter, though, also foregrounds Thompson's need to break from a purely Shelleyan response to his frustrated love for Alice Meynell. His greatest critique of Shelley was that he failed in religious matters. At the close of "Shelley," he writes that

We see clearly that he committed graves sins, and one cruel crime; but we remember also that he was an atheist from boyhood; so we reflect how gross must have been the moral neglect in the training of a child who *could* be an Atheist from his boyhood: and we decline to judge so unhappy a being by the rules which we should apply to a Catholic (32).

Shelley's greatest flaw was his lack of Christian faith, a flaw that Thompson can negotiate as he justifies the reading of Shelley. In his own poetry, though, he must find a way to fix this greatest of Shelley's flaws; he accomplishes this by blending Shelley's Romanticism with his own Catholicism. The ideal relationship which he describes to Meynell is that of the union between Mary and St. Joseph. This serves his purpose admirably; the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity ensures that her relationship with Joseph would have been the same sort of spiritual union described in Shelley's poetry. Through this, Thompson can give expression to the type of love described by Shelley while placing it specifically in Christian terms.

As Thompson writes "Love in Dian's Lap," it is this Christianized version of Shelley to which he turns, casting Alice Meynell as a type of Madonna. In the poetic

sequence, Thompson's own position in relation to this Madonna shifts away from being that of Joseph as his letter suggests. Instead, he occupies the place of the devotee to the Virgin, a place from which love and adoration can flow without the necessity of physical sexuality. As in "Sad Semele," though, the images of the Virgin are somewhat obscured by the mythological framing of the poem. Initially, the sequence claims to be about Diana, goddess of the moon and the hunt. Thus the poem begins as one would expect of a sequence written in praise of a goddess; it opens with the "Proemion," an invocation to the muses. Thompson, though, rapidly shifts to a Christian framework, blending it with pagan mythologies. Diana, the Virgin goddess of Greece, becomes Mary, perpetual Virgin of the Christian tradition. The third poem of the sequence, "To A Poet Breaking Silence," marks this important shift. Whereas the sequence has, to this point, been a series of pagan images, in "To A Poet Breaking Silence," Thompson uses the transition in world mythologies from the pagan to the Christian to describe the change he sees in the poetry of Alice Meynell. The occasion of the poem is, according to Pierre Danchin, Thompson's response to the publication of a volume of poems by Meynell after a number of years of silence (189). Thus, when Thompson writes in the poem

Ah! Let the sweet birds of the Lord

With earth's waters make accord;

Teach how the crucifix may be

Carven from the laurel tree,
 Fruit of the Hesperides
 Burnish take on Eden-trees,
 The muses sacred grove be wet
 With the red dew of Olivet,
 And Sappho lay her burning brows
 In white Cecilia's laps of sorrows! (21-30)

he is, at one level, simply contrasting Meynell's early poetry with that of the present. He makes this claim more explicitly in the next stanza in which he writes of Meynell's childhood, coming to the conclusion that in the space between the two volumes of poetry, "God [set] His poems in thy face" (55).

At a deeper level within the sequence, though, the imagery employed in "To a Poet Breaking Silence" marks a shift in paradigms, for the entire sequence mirrors the transition outlined in this single poem. While the laurel giving way to the crucifix and the garden of the Hesperides becoming Eden demonstrates the change in the poems of Alice Meynell, they also show a change in the larger sequence from a predominance of Greek mythological images to the predominance of Christian myth. More specifically, the poems preceding "To A Poet Breaking Silence" rely on Grecian myths to describe the person of Alice Meynell; it is after this poem that images of Mary come to dominate.

While there remains some mixing of the two, it is only after “To A Poet Breaking Silence” that Alice Meynell becomes, as Paul Van K. Thompson has noted, “almost indistinguishable from the Blessed Virgin in his [Thompson’s] imagination” (94-95).

To see how clear this shift in mythologies is, we need only to look at the next poem in the sequence, “*Manus Animam Pinxit*.” This poem is little more than a series of elaborate conceits expressing the poet’s spiritual dependence on Alice Meynell. She is, in the first stanza, the earth in which Thompson’s poetry is rooted; in the second, she is the summer in which he, pictured as a swallow, lives and breathes. These images hardly seem worth noting, yet as Terence Connolly has commented, “seldom do we find in it [Thompson’s poetry] an explicit reference to Mary. But she is ever present by inference and implication” (117). In the opening stanzas of “*Manus Animam Pinxit*,” explicit references to Mary are certainly absent; I hope to demonstrate, though, that the images used in the poem would have pointed Thompson’s readers to the Virgin. This is best understood by comparing the poem with works by Thompson’s contemporaries.

Two images dominate the first two stanzas of the poem. The first is that of the garden. The speaker claims that “Like to a wind-sown sapling grow I / From the clift, Sweet, of your skyward jetting soul” (9-10). He elaborates upon this metaphor, suggesting that she is the soil from which his poetry grows. In Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “*Rosa Mystica*,” the garden is much more explicitly a place reserved for the

Madonna. In this poem, she is compared to a rose, but, significantly, the speaker calls out to her “In the gardens of God, in the daylight divine / Find me a place by thee Mother of mine” (5-6). Similarly, in her exhaustive study *Legends of the Madonna*, Anna Jameson, another of Thompson’s contemporaries, catalogues several different uses of the garden as picture of the Virgin (38).

The metaphor in the second section of “*Manus Animam Pinxit*” operates in a similar way. Here, the relationship between the speaker and his love is compared to that of a bird drawn irresistibly to the warmth of summer, drawn “by secret instincts inappeasable” (19). He follows this metaphor to its conclusion, the idea that if summer were to fade, he would “drop, and lie with stiffened wings / Among your Soul’s forlornest things” (35-36). Isolated in this single poem, Thompson’s use of this metaphor seems contrived and excessive. Again, though, the metaphor corresponds to other verse from the time. Hopkins’ “May Magnificat” is filled with images of birds, recording the different species that flutter around the Madonna as she sings. Jameson suggests that birds become “ornamental accessories” to the Virgin (41). Birds, like the garden, seem to be stock images for the Virgin. While Thompson’s use of these two metaphors is not enough to establish clearly that Meynell is intended to be a type of the Virgin Mary, they would have resonated in specific ways for late nineteenth-century Catholic readers, suggesting to them the connection between the lover and Mary.

Thompson makes the connection between Meynell and Mary even more clear in the final stanza of the poem wherein Meynell is described as she “whose spirit sure is lineal to that / which sang *Magnificat*” (52-53). Having made this connection clear, he continues to write about how he will become like her so that the two souls can join. He asks her to

Take this curbed spirit of mine,
Which your own eyes invest with light divine . . .
Beholding how your own I have engraved
On it, and with what purging thoughts have laved
This love of mine from all mortality.
Indeed the copy is a painful one,
And with long labour done. (55-66)

He describes how he has actively sought to make himself like Alice Meynell, removing from his love “all mortality.” By engraving on his own soul a copy of hers, he hopes to transcend the physical body so that his spirit can rise to the level of hers. This becomes even more clear in the final lines of the poem where he shifts back into classical mythology, offering his soul as a pool which creates the mirror image of Diana. He asks the goddess to “Unveil this spirit . . . and fearless gaze there, you alone, / And if you love

the image--'tis your own!" (71-74). He offers himself to her; if she sees in him something that she loves, then he is willing to love her in return.

In these lines of the poem, Thompson subtly alters what theologian Jaroslav Pelikan has called "Marian mysticism." By this term, Pelikan refers to the way in which mystics saw the person of Mary as a vehicle through which one might reach the Divine. He elaborates upon this idea, noting that "The mystical vision of the Virgin is not intended merely for passive enjoyment but has been said to carry a transforming power, as those who have the privilege of beholding the Queen of Heaven have dedicated their lives to her service" (Pelikan 217). Through this service to Mary, then, they are able to reach a fuller and deeper understanding of the Divine. Clearly in "*Manus Animam Pinxit*," there is an element of dedicated service; similarly, there is, in the speaker's inscribing of the female's soul onto his own a transforming power. What Thompson alters, though, is the goal of that power. Rather than being the vehicle to God, it becomes the power to raise the soul out of the confines of the physical body. The two souls can merge, coming together in a Christianized version of Shelley's understanding of love.

I need not give similarly detailed attention to the other poems in the sequence, for "*Manus Animam Pinxit*" offers evidence enough of Thompson's elevation of Alice Meynell to the position of Mary. Throughout the remainder of the sequence, images of Mary continue to surface. In "A Carrier Song," for instance, Alice Meynell is presented

as both "Heaven's Queen" and "*Mater dolorum*," the lady of sorrows. Similarly, in "Scela Jacobi Portaque Eburnea," Thompson writes that

Her soul from Earth to Heaven lies

Like the ladder of vision

Whereon go

To and fro

In ascension and demission

Star-flecked fleet of Paradise. (1-6)

Again, Thompson falls back on traditional Marian imagery, specifically the Virgin's function as the Mediatrix. About this particular function, Pelikan notes that

The title was a means of summarizing what had come to be seen as her twofold function: she was the way by which the Savior came to humanity in the incarnation and the redemption, and she was also the one 'through whom we ascend to him who descended through her to us . . . , through [whom] we have access to the Son . . . so that through [her] he who through [her] was given to us might take us up to himself.' The term Mediatrix referred to both of these aspects of Mary's mediatorial position. (131)

By claiming that her soul is a ladder between earth and heaven, Thompson is clearly drawing upon this tradition, presenting Meynell as one who is the vehicle for lifting the spirit beyond the bounds of the temporal body.

Clearly, then, all the elements in the poem serve to exalt Alice Meynell, to image her as something beyond the typical mortal woman. What critics, though, have seemingly missed is the sheer intensity of Thompson's love for Meynell. In a letter preserved by Viola Meynell dated September 1892, Thompson writes to Alice Meynell

It seems to me that the more I strive to please you and serve you, and to think always what may be your pleasure, not mine, the more I alienate you from me, so far as a lady so sweet can be alienated from anyone. If you understood one thing, I think, you would have judged me better in the past. It is this. I am unhappy when I am out of your sight, and would pass every hour, if I could, in your exquisite presence, only to feel the effluence of your spirit in contrast with mine. But *you* of course, can have no such feeling in reference to me; and would often gladly be without my presence when my love for you prompts it, and your good nature prompts you to bear it . . .

I know how it must tax you to endure me; for you are a friend, a mother; while I, over and above these, am a lover--spiritual as light, and unearthly as the love of one's angelic dreams, if you will--but yet a lover.

Ahi, soavissima Madonna Alice, avete pietà di me. (86)

His words here to Alice Meynell suggest that his relationship with her is not exactly as critics have presented it. Clearly from this letter we see that Thompson feels a tremendous love for Meynell and that his love for her is not returned. That he explicitly addresses her in the close of the letter as "Madonna," even though in the Italian this could be interpreted merely as "mother," merely serves to reinforce the imagery of "Love in Dian's Lap." The letter, though, clearly indicates that for Thompson, love for Alice Meynell was passionately intense, a desire that he felt on a daily basis. It is this tension between spiritual love and physical desire that is presented in "Love in Dian's Lap."

If, as Thompson claims in "In Her Paths," the man in him calls "Love" while the child calls "Mother," then there are two competing voices in the sequence. Over the course of "Love in Dian's Lap," the child seemingly becomes the dominant voice. Thompson begins with Diana, herself a prefiguring of the Madonna, and turns quickly to Mary as the best image of Alice Meynell. By placing her in the position of Christianity's most prominent Mother, he distances himself from her. Sexuality in this particular way of relating to Meynell would be unnecessary, even forbidden, while devotion and adoration

would be expected. Praising her in these terms, becomes a non-threatening act. The sanctity of the marriage between Wilfrid and Alice Meynell is never overtly called into question. At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, Thompson, by placing himself in this distanced position, creates a situation in which he need not fear the rejection that would inevitably result from any other expression of his love.

If the child's becomes the dominant voice in the sequence, the man's voice is never entirely silenced. This Marian adoration of Alice Meynell is naturally interspersed with the voice of the man, for they are two voices from the same source, both struggling to be heard. The fact that the child's relationship to the Mother is one in which sexuality is absent only makes it easier for the poet to lapse into a desperate longing for the joining of his soul with Alice Meynell's. Through the process of imaging, he projects into the poetry a perfected vision of her, one with whom the possibility of real, transcendent love exists.

Pierre Danchin has written that the relationship between Thompson and Meynell is such that Thompson cannot imagine portraying it other than he does in "Love in Dian's Lap"; he suggests that "on ne chante pas sensuellement une femme que l'on vénère come mère, l'amour spirituelle, l'amour <<platonique>> était ice seul possible" (192).³ I hold,

³ "One does not write in a sensual way about a woman that he admires as a mother, here, the only possible love is spiritual love, 'platonic' love."

though, that the competing voices of man and child suggest that Danchin's portrayal of the relationship might be better understood if it were reversed. The "spiritual love" of which Danchin writes *is* the only way in which Thompson can write of his love for Meynell; the reason for that, though, is not that he cannot imagine the relationship in any other terms. Instead, it is that the combination of the competing languages of Mariology and Shelleyan romanticism provides him with the best possible position from which to write of his love for her. Through the space created by these two different discourses, he is distanced from Meynell in terms of sexuality yet brought close to her spiritually.

In this way, "Love in Dian's Lap" completes the picture begun in Thompson's earliest poetry about the prostitute who cared for him. Wrapped up in "Sad Semele" are the beginnings of the imagery of flight and pursuit that extends into "The Hound of Heaven" and, finally, to "Arab Love Song" and "A Narrow Vessel." The other way of relating to Semele, though, is equally important; Thompson speaks of the prostitute as mother of his poems, noting that "yet are poems suckled by [her] woe" (14). At the same time that he is the overwhelming Lover with the potential to destroy Semele, he is, through his poetry, the child nursed by the mother. It is only when "Love in Dian's Lap" is set next to "Arab Love Song" and "A Narrow Vessel" that we can see the extent to which the two ways of relating to the female become the means for Thompson to

recuperate a masculinity that was, because of the absence of physical sexuality,
problematic for the poet.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

The two possible ways of relating to the prostitute in "Sad Semele," then, become the basis for much of Thompson's later love poetry. However, the dichotomy that exists between the treatment of his relationships with Katie King and Maggie Brien and that of his relationship with Alice Meynell is clearly not unique to Thompson. Nina Auerbach's *Woman and the Demon* provides a detailed study of the ways in which the female in the Victorian imagination is pictured as both angel and demon, virgin and whore. Her study is rather unconventional in its insistence that the female shifts easily and rapidly between these two extremes; I think the more commonly accepted perspective is that held by Angela Leighton who claims that the law of the land placed women as "angel or demon, virgin or whore, Mary or Magdalen" (343). While Leighton is describing the situation of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, her words offer a poignant description of the general portrayal of women in Victorian art. With the exception of "Sad Semele," Thompson's poetry follows this pattern of presenting woman as either/or rather than as shifting between the two extremes. Maggie Brien and Katie King are portrayed as fallen women, condemned for their failure to love the poet; Alice Meynell, exalted to the position of Mary, occupies the other half of the binary. Thompson's importance in our

understanding of late Victorian constructions of masculinities rests not on the fact that he uses this rather common trope but on the contrast between the reality of the relationships and his poetic treatment of them. Having demonstrated the extent to which Thompson's poetry is a means by which he can position himself in relation to the female, denying the importance of physical sexuality, we are left to account for two things—the reasons why Thompson turns to this strategy and how this relates to constructions of gender in Thompson's Catholic contemporaries.

In attempting to understand the tremendous gap between the reality of Thompson's relationships and his presentation of them in his poetry, Judith Butler's early work provides what is, I think, a useful framework. She writes that

compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of "man" and "woman," are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real. (723)

She continues to explore the ways in which the theatricality of homosexuality and of drag in particular subverts heterosexuality. "Drag," she writes, "constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of representation and approximation." (722). Butler's comments relate specifically to the play that exists between heterosexuality and homosexuality. I use them here not to address any tension between heterosexuality and homosexuality in

Thompson's work but as a concept that I think implies certain things about larger questions of gender identity.

Butler's ideas about the hetero/homosexual binary can be extended to other gender identities, a direction in which she leans in some of her more recent work. If we remove the heterosexual/homosexual binary from her comments, we are left with the statement that "identities . . . are theatrically produced effects that posture as . . . the normative measure of the real." This is precisely the function of masculinity in Thompson's poetry; it is, above all, a produced effect. As we have seen in "Love in Dian's Lap," "Arab Love Song," and "A Narrow Vessel," Thompson uses Shelley's Romantic idealism as well as the traditions of the Catholic Church to legitimate a masculinity that is distanced from sexuality. That these relationships are presented within the angel/whore dichotomy suggested by Auerbach, Leighton, and others merely reinforces that the masculinity seen in Thompson's poetry coincides with the normative version held by the larger Victorian society. The degree to which masculinity is a theatrically produced effect in Thompson's poetry can be seen in "Ultima," the poetic sequel to "Love in Dian's Lap."

Discussion of "Ultima" is somewhat difficult because the lines between it and "Love in Dian's Lap" are somewhat unclear. As Beverly Taylor points out, several of the poems that are now standard in "Love in Dian's Lap," including among others

"Before Her Photograph," were originally published as part of "Ultima" (46). In all subsequent editions, though, they are moved to "Love in Dian's Lap," and "Ultima" is presented as a small collection of five poems. I will follow the order of the shortened version of "Ultima" for several reasons. Both Wilfrid Meynell and Terrence Connolly, the two most significant editors of Thompson's poetry, clearly felt that "Beneath Her Photograph" and the other poems belonged in "Love in Dian's Lap." Additionally, "Beneath a Photograph" seems to be out of place in the overall structure of "Ultima" with its gradual recognition of failing love; at the same time, its function as a framing device for "Love in Dian's Lap" seems to me to be too well-structured to be inadvertent.

After the publication of "Love in Dian's Lap," Thompson seems to have gradually accepted the fact that his love for Alice Meynell was inevitably doomed to failure. In "Ultima," he records the development of this understanding. In the sequence, Thompson maintains the same posture of adoration for Meynell that is so pervasive in "Love in Dian's Lap." This structure, though, is used to gradually distance the poet from the object of his love; the entire sequence is, in effect, a crushing of the voice of the man in "Love in Dian's Lap." In "Love's Almsman Plaineth his Fare," the first of the poems in the sequence, Thompson begins with imagery of a mother and her child as he addresses Meynell claiming that

Your little languid hand in mine you slide,

Like to a child says-- "Kiss me and let me go!"

And night for this is fretted with my tears,

While I: "How soon this heavenly neck doth tire,

Bending to me from its transtellar spheres." (3-7)

The remainder of the poem is an elaborate conceit comparing this brief touch to the morsel of food that sustains a beggar in the streets. From the beginning of the sequence, then, Thompson places Meynell in the position of the perfect woman exalted to the level of heavenly being; he himself occupies the position of the unworthy admirer graced by a touch of his Lady's hand.

The gap between the poet and his Lady widens as the sequence progresses. By the middle of the group of poems, Meynell has become "My Lady the Tyranness." Here Thompson imagines various means of escaping the tyranny of love; in the end, all of these imagined escapes fail, and he offers himself as "all yours, my love, all yours" (32). In this poem, the distance between the two is so great that there is no imagined joining of souls, no potential for the two to achieve some transcendental union. The distance between them increases until the final poem of the sequence wherein Thompson proclaims that "Love dies, love dies, love dies--ah, Love is dead" ("Ultimum" 2). At the end of "Ultima," then, there is an admission that Thompson's love for Alice Meynell will never be returned, an admission that would have been impossible in "Love in Dian's Lap."

In an odd way, however, even as he admits the failure of his love, Thompson turns to a different manifestation of masculinity, the one found in "A Narrow Vessel" and "Arab Love Song." In "A Holocaust," he describes his breaking heart using the gruesome picture of a dog being crushed beneath the wheel of a cart in the street. This image, though, quickly takes on a new significance when he claims that "Thou [Meynell] Knowest . . . if my soul cries the uncomprehended cry / When the red agony oozed on Olivet" (13-18). He concludes the poem by asking Meynell

How could you hope, loose dealer with my God,
That I should keep for you my fealty?
For still tis thus:--because I am so true,
My fair, to Heaven, I am so true to you! (23-26)

Even as he struggles to express a failed love, he reasserts himself as a Christ-like figure, bleeding in pain for one who ultimately rejects him; he proclaims his faithfulness to Meynell to be divine in nature.

Similarly, in "My Lady the Tyranness," the poet's imagined escapes echo the relationship between male and female seen in "A Narrow Vessel." He claims, for instance, that his independence can be found in his thoughts "Which never woman's reaching raught; / Being strong beyond a woman's might, / And high beyond a woman's height" (26-28). Contained in these lines are echoes of the subtitle of "A Narrow

Vessel.” Meynell, despite all of Thompson’s letters praising her intellect and poetic talent, is relegated to the position of “primitive girl-nature” when she rejects a “love beyond [her] capacities.” Admittedly, Thompson ultimately subjects himself to the Tyranness of the poem’s title. However, this seems to be merely demonstrative of the tension between the need to admit the failure of his love and the need to create another form of masculinity with which to create the meaning of his relationship with Meynell.

Contained within this odd return to the same sorts of images and structures used in “Arab Love Song” and “A Narrow Vessel” is evidence of the produced effect of gender and sexuality in Thompson’s poetry. Brigid Boardman tells us that “Ultima” is a poetic sequence written as Thompson resolved to end his love for Meynell, to “pluck away the last fibres of it, that [he] might be beyond treachery to [his] resolved duty” (qtd. in Boardman 234). By his own choice, then, “Ultima” is a denial of the love expressed in “Love in Dian’s Lap.” Even as he feels compelled to tear down the masculinity he constructed in “Love in Dian’s Lap,” though, Thompson turns to another way of identifying himself in relation to Alice Meynell. In this way, he can shift between ways of identifying with the female, producing a masculinity that fits the situation.

The production of gender is an essential part of Butler’s argument; equally important, though, is that the performance and creation of gender identity ultimately rests in the public sphere. She calls attention to the theatricality of gender and sexuality,

claiming that “the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts” (“Performative Acts . . . 403); clearly the implication is that for an act to be performative, it must be observed. For Thompson, identity is performed through poetry produced for a reading public; we see this most clearly by comparing the poems I have discussed to “*Ad Amicam*,” a sequence of poems written to Katie King. In the aftermath of the break-up of this relationship, many of the poems written to King were destroyed; those that remain extant, though, show a side of Thompson that is not present in any of his other love poems. The “*Ad Amicam*” sequence in particular stands out in contrast to the elements of pursuit and flight seen in “A Narrow Vessel.” Dating of the composition of these poems is somewhat uncertain. Brigid Boardman places their writing at a time between Thompson’s return to Pantasaph and Mrs. King’s final letter to Thompson quelling all hope of his loving Katie (259). Other critics are less clear in their discussion of the poems, noting only that they were written at some point during this period. Regardless, the subject matter and tone of the poems make it safe to speculate that the sonnets were written at some point before Thompson lost all hope of maintaining a relationship with Katie. In these poems, we see Thompson at perhaps his most honest moments, for in the “*Ad Amicam*” sequence, he makes no effort to reposition himself in relation to the female. The poems exhibit none of the pursuit and flight images of “The Hound of Heaven” or “A Narrow Vessel,” focusing instead on the tension that emerges

in the contrast between the joy found in the relationship and the fear that it will, like the relationship with Maggie Brien and the prostitute, fade into nothing.

As one would expect from Thompson, the sonnets in "*Ad Amicam*" are filled with religious imagery. These images, though, serve quite a different function than those of "The Hound of Heaven" or "A Narrow Vessel." In the first sonnet of the sequence, for instance, Thompson compares Katie to the dove which brought an olive branch to Noah. He sees her approaching, bringing hope and comfort; he also imagines the day on which she will fail to appear. Anticipating that day, he asks that she

now make the sad farewell

Which yet may be with not too-pained pain

Lest I again the acquainted tale should tell

of sharpest loss that pays for shortest gain. (9-12)

The dove flying to Noah with a symbol of hope and comfort is a point from which Thompson can muse on his relationship with Meynell. Instead of rewriting that relationship in terms of the theology of "The Hound of Heaven," he chooses a religious image that lets him focus on the coupled immediate joy and expected disappointment.

In the final sonnet of the sequence, Thompson does turn to the same sort of soaring language and imagery that marks "Love in Dian's Lap." When, for instance, he refers to King as "heavenliest of all-heavenly you" (1), there is an element of exaltation

which is reminiscent of the poems written to Alice Meynell. Here, though, the language of exaltation serves a different purpose than that of “Love in Dian’s Lap”; King is exalted, yet she is in no way distanced from the narrator. Instead, Thompson employs language that celebrates the joining of the two through a single breath. As she stands beside him, her drawing of a breath inspires him to imagine an “ambrosial effluence . . . and Comforts Paradisal” (4-5). Through something as simple as the act of breathing, the two rise beyond the boundaries of physical bodies as their spirits mingle. What Brigid Boardman describes as the “excessiveness” (260) of the sonnet expresses the desire for a joining of two spirits in a moment of closeness that is absent in Thompson’s other love poetry.

In their intense intimacy, the poems of “Ad Amicam” are vastly different from practically all of Thompson’s other love poetry. It must be remembered, though, that these are poems that remained unpublished in his lifetime; they are the only extended look that we have of Thompson’s writing of love without the pressure of presenting himself to a reading public. Katie King does comprise an audience, yet she is an audience who is predisposed to be sympathetic to the actor and his performance. In contrast to “*Ad Amicam*” are the rest of Thompson’s love poems, all of which were published works intended for public consumption. This public forum becomes the place in which

Thompson can present himself as possessing a certain type of masculinity, a masculinity that is acceptable within the boundaries of the normative standards of Victorian society.

A final picture of Thompson reveals a man who clearly felt the pressures of a society that demanded of its male members a certain way of living and acting. He lived in a culture in which heterosexuality had as its end goal physical sexuality and in which masculinity was inextricably linked to the sex act. Clearly in the Catholic subculture of which he was a member, there were exceptions to this; having been forced to give up the hopes of the priesthood at an early age, though, Thompson did not have access to this particular form of masculinity. Faced with the anxiety of the failure to achieve masculinity that performs itself in a way that is acceptable within the dominant culture, he writes into his poetry a version of himself in which he acts out a masculinity that obtains its authority from a number of different sources, including Shelley and, most importantly, the imagery that accompanies Roman Catholic theology. It is in this context that Thompson is an essential figure in the late Victorian period, for his construction of masculinity is necessary to understand as fully as possible the overall impact of Catholicism on the formation of gender identities in the period.

In recent years, as critical practices have changed and shifted focus, studies of gender and sexuality in the Victorians have become increasingly common. Within the smaller sphere of Catholic writers in the Victorian period, and, particularly in the latter

half of the 19th century, two poets specifically have been the subject of debate. Coventry Patmore and Gerard Manley Hopkins, both contemporaries of Thompson, have emerged as the two most significant Catholic poets of the 1880's and 1890's. Both present fascinating gender identities which have been explored in recent years.

Coventry Patmore, perhaps more than any of the other Victorian poets, has been scrutinized for the extremity of his views on gender. His "Angel in the House" has marked him as being an active participant in creating gender roles that operated to keep women in positions in which they were socially and politically oppressed. While critical attention has, in recent years, centered on Patmore's portrayal of women in the poem, Bina Freiwald has examined the poem precisely for the purpose of understanding the way in which Patmore constructs masculinity; she finds that

Man is indeed godlike in Patmore's vision of the gendered universe,
godlike not only in having exclusive access to knowledge and the truth,
but also in his capacity to invoke and to revoke, to call into and out of
existence. (554)

The notion of "The Angel in the House" leads to this; the poet writes a woman, writes her out of existence because her independence threatens his own identity, and then recreates her to be the "angel in the house," the female whose desire is to please the male. For Freiwald, then, Patmore's construction of masculinity is similar in many ways

to Thompson's. The male holds the status of a divinity while the female's purpose is to love him. For Patmore, though, this is intricately woven together with physical sexuality, a feature not seen in Thompson's poetry; Freiwald comments that "the center toward which all gravitates in the poem is the poet-narrator's desire, his search for the ultimate source of pleasure" (555).

Since Freiwald's study of masculinity in Patmore's work, critics have continued to focus on "The Angel in the House." Nina Auerbach writes that "Patmore's title [became] a convenient shorthand for the selfless paragon all women were exhorted to be, enveloped in family life and seeking no identity beyond the roles of daughter, wife, and mother" (69). So pervasive has this view of Patmore's poetry become that John Maynard can confidently assert some years after Auerbach that

We know Coventry Patmore now primarily as the Victorian poet feminist criticism loves to hate. And it is no good saying that *The Angel in the House* is really about the spirit of love in a marriage . . . The poem—soon notorious even in its day—does represent an idealized, normative view of the love between the sexes that leaves out most of the problems of personal relations and sex as well as those of social and legal equality. (129)

Whether centered on constructions of masculinity or on portrayals of women, study of Patmore's verse seems inevitably to come back to questions of gender roles and sexuality. This study, though, cannot be divorced from his Catholicism. Perhaps ironically, it is Alice Meynell who most clearly states this principle, for she notes that for Patmore, "love was . . . theology, and the key to the parable of life" (qtd. in Montabrut 155).

Gerard Manley Hopkins, the other major Catholic poet to emerge from the late Victorian era, offers another potential response to the intersection of Catholicism and gender identity. The exact nature of Hopkins' masculinity has been the subject of heated critical debate recently, a debate sparked by the publication of Hopkins' notebooks in the mid-1980's in which he seems to struggle with his own homosexual tendencies. Since then, critics have read his poetry to see how he negotiates the boundaries of a sexuality that is transgressive within the structure of the Catholic Church. Thaïs Morgan, for instance, finds that in the "Wreck of the Deutschland," Hopkins' masterpiece, the poet, through the description of the penetration of the nun by an almighty God, establishes a "male-to-male relationship based on erotic violence and power, in which the poet-priest seeks and God wields all the creative force" (89). For Morgan, Hopkins identifies with God through the act of watching the violation of the nun; this bond becomes a homoerotic one for the poet, the outlet for the homosexuality that he is not allowed to

practice. Aleta Cane has followed Morgan's work, describing "The Wreck of the Deutschland" as "religious poetry informed by the poet's own homoeroticism" (166); she suggests that the poem is written in a double voiced discourse that expresses Hopkins' love for God in language that is at once religious and erotic.

Hopkins draws from an understanding of God and Catholicism that is, we must suppose, similar to that of both Patmore and Thompson. The friendship between Patmore and Hopkins has been well-documented; similarly, Patmore was one of Thompson's closest friends. Brigid Boardman even speculates that Thompson may have been familiar with Hopkins' work through Patmore (230). Whether Hopkins exerted any poetic influence on Thompson through Patmore is ultimately an unanswerable question. We can be certain, though, by examining the correspondence between Hopkins and Patmore and between Patmore and Thompson that the three held to a similar understanding of the Catholic faith. From this commonly held faith, though, they arrive at very different understandings of masculinity and gender identity.

My intent here is not to comment on the validity of critical perspectives on either Coventry Patmore or Gerard Manley Hopkins. Instead, I merely point out that one of the central issues of debate with these poets is the way in which they construct gender and/or sexual identities and that these debates are, in the end, centered on the Catholicism that the three poets held in common. As we try to understand the ways in

which they construct masculinity, it is necessary to remember that gender identity is, in fact, a construction; it is, as Butler has pointed out, a theatrical production that in the case of this group of poets manifests itself in the text of poems. Each of the three poets creates himself differently; the common masks and costumes that they have in this production, though, derives from their Catholicism. As we seek to understand the ways in which Catholicism impacts the construction of gender identity for this group of late-Victorian poets, Thompson's voice provides an essential contrast to both Hopkins and Patmore. The poet who once declared that human love was worth nothing unless it resembled the love of God for humanity (Everard Meynell 230) blends autobiographical events and past influences with the symbolism and theology of Roman Catholicism to produce a unique masculine identity that makes him essential to an understanding of gender formation within this particular part of Victorian society.

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