

‘Some Fashions in Love’: Victoria Cross and the Contestation of Compulsory Monogamy

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Abstract: This article examines how the Anglo-Indian author “Victoria Cross” (Annie-Sophie Cory) challenges mononormativity – the normalised idea that monogamy is the “right” or even “natural” form of romantic love – within the framework of popular romance fiction. Cross not only describes or recreates contemporaneous constructions of romantic love but deploys her fictional writing to render romantic love visible in its constructedness and its entanglements with gendered and, in some cases, racial power structures. In doing so, she takes account of the ways in which love operates in the service of white heteropatriarchy, but also explores love’s potential for liberation. While Cross’s narrative challenges to gendered, and to a certain extent also racial, constraints on love in middle-class Victorian morality have received considerable scholarly attention, the degree to which Cross defamiliarises and contests compulsory monogamy has, as of yet, remained unexplored. In many ways, as this article demonstrates, Cross anticipates current debates in critical love studies.

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In 1924, Aldous Huxley contributed an article to British *Vogue* entitled “A History of Some Fashions in Love”, which he opened with the following words:

La Rochefoucauld [...] remarked of love: that there are people who would never have been in love if they had never heard love talked about. [...] We may

extend the scope of the maxim and say that even the people capable of spontaneously falling in love would not fall in love in the peculiar ways they do if they had never heard talk, or never read, of these particular ways of loving. For the fact is that *there are fashions in love; fashions that last a little longer, it is true, than the modes in dress, but quite as tyrannous as these* (49; emphasis added).

From a feminist perspective, “fashions in love” have long been demonstrated as particularly “tyrannous” for women. They have frequently been read as an ideological tool in the oppression of women (e.g. de Beauvoir; Ferguson; Coltrane and Collins; Illouz), and compulsory monogamy has been unmasked as instrumental in this respect. Mimi Schippers, for instance, argues that “the discursive conflation of the *pure relationship* (Giddens 1992) with the monogamous couple supports, legitimizes, and naturalizes a hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity” (6; emphasis in original). More specifically, Schippers theorises “the monogamous couple as central to white heteromale privilege and superiority and to social and cultural *regimes of normalcy* implicated in power relations and sexual stratification” (6; emphasis in original; see also Sempruch).

Changing such fashions in their entanglement with oppressive structures, first of all, necessitates a distancing move that renders these structures visible, that denaturalises them and thus enables their deconstruction. Writing in 1970, feminist critic Shulamith Firestone claimed that this had not yet taken place – especially not in literature. She argued: “Yes, [love] is portrayed in novels, even metaphysics, but in them it is described, or better, recreated, not analysed. Love has never been *understood*, though it may have been fully *experienced*, and that experience communicated” (126; emphases in original). Contesting this assertion, my article sets out to demonstrate how “Victoria Cross” (Annie Sophie Cory, 1868-1952), an Anglo-Indian writer of sensational romance fiction, does not merely describe or recreate, but in fact analyses love in her fiction – and does so at the turn of the nineteenth century. Cross frequently deploys her fiction in order to *understand* love and to unmask it as a double-edged sword: as both an oppressive construct in the service of white heteropatriarchy and in its potential for liberation, both in its intelligibility within normative frameworks and as what Michael Gratzke terms “love acts” of deviation that could at least potentially “achieve ‘critical mass’ and have a transformative effect on their social world” (1). In doing so, as this article aims to show, Cross anticipates central concerns of present-day critical love studies.

Prior to the advent of new modernist studies and middlebrow studies, it was only the (masculine connoted) avant-garde that was associated with the potential to defamiliarise, to “make new”, whereas the (feminine connoted) “middlebrow” and especially romance fiction was regarded as inherently conservative and was thus often subject to summative judgments of complicity with the hegemonic status quo, not least as far as sex and gender and narrative containment in marriage were concerned. Cross provides a particularly interesting example in that she denaturalises love and its entanglements with imperialism, heterosexism and patriarchy *within* romance frameworks. Significant critical attention has been given to the transgressions of race and gender in Cross’s fiction, and love features strongly in these analyses (e.g. Brittain; Hipsky; Paxton; Purdue); but so far her exploration of love itself has remained virtually unnoticed.[1] This article demonstrates that Cross was very much aware that how we fall in love is determined by “fashions,” and like many other writers of her time,

she uses Orientalist settings and ancient Greece as a reference point in order to highlight that what Victorian morality had constructed as “normal” and “natural” in love was in fact neither. I am going to focus on the ways in which Cross exposes gendered double standards in love, as well as the deleterious corollaries of compulsory monogamy.

Cross’s narrative critique of compulsory monogamy commences – albeit obliquely – with her very first publication, “Theodora, a Fragment” (1895), in which she critically engages with possession as a central feature of normalised romantic love. Up to the present day, “[w]e are taught to possess our significant other, to mark our ownership, to suspect and even feel hostile towards others because of the fear that they could take our ‘possession’ away from us” (Barker et al.). Scott Coltrane and Randall Collins therefore describe “love as a ritual symbolizing emotional possession” (245). In “Theodora”, the narrator, Cecil Ray, who, as far as can be gathered from his depiction, might be described as pansexual in present-day conceptualisations of sexuality, falls in love with the androgynous Theodora. When she first enters his home, he finds himself feeling “a certainty of possession of Theodora”, but immediately reflects that “this instinct and its answer are exactly that which we should not feel within us for any beloved object. It is this that tends inevitably to degrade the loved one, and to debase our own passion” (“Theodora” 75).

While the short story ends with the couple’s first kiss, the theme of possession and particularly the tension between the desire to possess and the conviction that this is morally wrong are further developed in *Six Chapters of a Man’s Life* (1903),^[2] in which Theodora becomes Cecil’s lover and companion and, cross-dressed as Theodore, accompanies him to the ‘Orient’. Cecil explicitly states complete freedom for both lovers as his ideal: “Intolerant myself of the least interference with my own will, I avoid, from a sort of fellow-feeling, trying to control, even where I have the power, the wills of others” (*Six Chapters* 233). Despite this ideal, however, Cecil is plagued by repeated stabs of jealousy and the desire to possess Theodora entirely.

What renders these depictions noteworthy is the degree to which the tension between Cecil’s convictions and his affects are explored (cf. Macdonald and Wächter). A case in point is Cecil’s aghast reaction when Theodora complains about his desire to possess her, to which Theodora responds: “No, Cecil, I daresay you are not conscious of it yourself [...]. But, like all men, in these relations you are confoundedly dictatorial at times, and I don’t like it” (*Six Chapters* 168). Soon, however, Cecil begins to become aware of these tendencies in himself. In one instance, he realises:

What I should practically like would be to leave her shut up alone in that dull, third-floor room with the key turned in the door till I came back. The unworthy selfishness of my phase of feeling came home to me so suddenly it staggered me. I saw for an instant into the heart of my egoism. I felt thoroughly ashamed of the impulse, and glad I had not spoken (*Six Chapters* 174-75).

Theodora, by contrast, rejects compulsory monogamy unambiguously, and as Cecil has to admit, leaves him “perfectly unfettered as if she had been another fellow travelling with me” (*Six Chapters* 207).

The novel takes a disastrous turn when Cecil and Theodora/Theodore kiss after an erotic dance in an all-male Egyptian night club. It quickly becomes apparent that they have only two options: to leave Theodora to be raped or for both of them to lose their lives. Cecil

is immediately seized by the desire to kill Theodora – by an “impulse to accept death for us both rather than another should touch my *property*” (*Six Chapters* 249; emphasis added). Even though Theodora challenges the notions of honour and possession that drive Cecil successfully enough for him to leave her there, she finally commits suicide because, in a fever delirium, she is overcome by what Cecil describes as “the instinctive knowledge of what men are” (*Six Chapters* 295). Cecil closes the novel with an impassioned plea to abolish the patriarchal possessiveness that drove Theodora to death: “This [egoism] is an amorphous cancerous growth, and this consumes and eats away the whole constitution of our love. Let us cut this out. This had killed Theodora, as it has killed, directly and indirectly, its millions” (*Six Chapters* 297).

The lover’s desire to possess and narrative criticism thereof pervades Cross’s entire oeuvre. Thus, for instance, the narrator of Cross’s *Self and the Other* (1911) reflects upon the fatality of possessiveness: “This strongest instinct in us, this desire to pick the rose, to catch the butterfly, to make our own that which we should enjoy with impersonal contemplation only, how fatal it is to us!” (Cross, *Self* 15). Cross’s best-known and most notorious novel, *Anna Lombard* (1901), not only addresses naturalised notions of possession in love but goes further in actually depicting a polygamous relationship. Cross prefaces the novel with the following words:

I have been challenged by certain papers to state my intentions in writing ‘Anna Lombard.’ This is my reply: I endeavored [sic] to draw in Gerald Ethridge a character whose actions should be in accordance with the principle laid down by Christ, one that would display, not in words but in his actual life, that gentleness, humility, patience, charity, and self-sacrifice that our Redeemer himself enjoined. [...] Fearlessly, and with the Gospel of Christ in my hand, I offer this example of his teaching to the great Christian public for its verdict, confident that I shall be justified by it.

This preface is almost diametrically opposed to the implied author’s stance and actually satirises contemporaneous sensibilities. There is no indication whatsoever that the implied author considers the titular Anna Lombard to be a lost soul – nor is there any indication of a Christian moral framework. Martin Hipsky reads the reference to Christian values as a ploy to distract from the more obvious and – to a fin-de-siècle audience, more relevant – racial transgression, “for it focuses on the upright conduct of Gerald and thereby avoids mentioning directly the obvious scandal of Anna’s sexual misconduct” (123). This argument, however, is too narrow insofar as it reduces the novel’s transgression to race, whereas the challenge is simultaneously to patriarchal injustice and the deleterious corollaries of compulsory monogamy.

The novel’s opening clearly evokes the tradition of the station romance, which had dominated the literary landscape of British India throughout the second half of the nineteenth century (Sen 72-73). The standard plot of the station romance is comprised of the arrival of the *ingènue*, her ensuing friendship with the staple figure of the “station flirt” and her own adventures of flirtation, reminiscent of the Renaissance “courtly love tradition” (Sen 84), and ends in her safe containment within monogamous marriage. *Anna Lombard* invites the activation of this expectational framework only to subvert it (cf. Hipsky 124). Immediately upon their first encounter, Anna’s love interest (Gerald, the English narrator)

is called away to a remote station in Burma without having declared his love. During his absence, Anna secretly marries Gaida, a Pathan employee of her father's, and nevertheless accepts Gerald's marriage proposal upon his return, thus effectively entering into a polygamous relationship. In Alexandra Gray's words, "[r]eversing the traditional roles played in courtly romance, Anna represents the knight who in adherence to the rules of courtly love finds himself in love with more than one lady" (70). The greatest part of the novel delineates the conflict deriving from Gerald's jealousy and desire to possess and Anna's futile attempts at overcoming her love for Gaida. The struggle is finally resolved by Gaida's death of cholera and Anna's subsequent infanticide, which forcefully erases all traces of her first marriage and leaves Gerald as her only partner.

Especially in light of the novel's ending, *Anna Lombard* can certainly be called complicit with mononormative[3] and especially racist ideologies (cf. Purdue 131), and I by no means aim to contest the latter. To simply read the ending as a reaffirmation of compulsory monogamy, however, would be an oversimplification. I argue that the novel also allows for – and that the implied author's stance corresponds to – a different reading: namely, that it was British Indian society and its expectations that rendered this the only final option. Had Gaida remained alive, this ending would not have been Anna's choice and readers are not asked to condemn her for that.

The first crucial aspect in appreciating the full extent of Cross's critique of Victorian "fashions in love" in *Anna Lombard* lies in the dissonance between Anna's words as depicted and interpreted by Gerald, Gerald's own musings on his fiancée's polyamory, and the implied author's stance that emerges between the lines. Thus, for instance, wondering why Anna is postponing the wedding, Gerald asks: "And no one has come between us in the interval?", to which Anna replies: "Could I love two men at the same time?" (*Anna* 69). Here it is readily apparent that Anna says what is expected of her – but phrases it as a question neither she nor Gerald answer at the time. Gerald consoles himself:

She really loved me; no man, I think, could mistake those thousand little evidences she gave me in every tone and action; and, therefore, loving me, she could certainly love no other. Would not any man have reasoned as I did last night?" (*Anna* 71).

And, indeed, the novel confirms in various instances that Anna does love Gerald. The conclusion that this excludes the possibility of her loving someone else as well is soon questioned, though. As Gratzke observes, following Lynne Pearce, "love relates to a set of rules which define the validity of love in a given socio-historic context" (2). In the framework of *fin-de-siècle* Anglo-India, loving two men at the same time clearly violates these rules. But, as the narrative illustrates, it is only within a mononormative framework that the display of love for one person serves to the exclusion of love for anyone else.

When Gerald first finds out about Anna's secret husband, he asks: "Do you mean you are in love with two men at the same time?", and she replies: "I suppose it must be so, unless you recognise that what I feel for him is only passion, not love – not love at all. I would not breathe its name with that of love" (*Anna* 93). Attribution theory is of benefit here, since Anna's utterance is likely to provoke a fundamental attribution error or a correspondent inference, i.e. attributing her behaviour to her disposition rather than to circumstantial factors (cf. Ross 184). If we make a correspondent inference, Anna's words can be read as a

disavowal of her love for Gaida. As Edward E. Jones and Keith E. Davis point out, however, “correspondence of inferences declines as the action to be accounted for appears to be constrained by the setting in which it occurs” (223). Anna addresses her fiancé, who threatens to end their relationship. Gerald is driven by jealousy and the desire to possess and, in line with the framework of compulsory monogamy, feels that he has been shamed by Anna’s marriage to another man. The reader has, moreover, already learned that Anna’s claim that she “would not breathe its name with that of love” is a lie, since Gerald overheard Anna passionately breathing “I love you” in Hindustani to Gaida (*Anna* 88). In light of this, Anna’s utterance can rather be read as an attempt to save her relationship with Gerald by at least ostensibly degrading her feelings for Gaida to “mere passion”. To quote Diane Elam, “[t]hinking romance is a questioning of how it is that one may say ‘I love you’ [...]” (27). It is equally a question of to whom one may say those words and to how many. As Lisa Fletcher points out, the speech act “‘I love you’ is the narrative and ontological turning-point of heterosexual romance fictions” (1), and she goes on to aver that romance fictions tend to “use speech acts – and performatives in their broadest sense – to produce and reproduce hegemonic ideas about romance, history and heterosexuality” (1). By contrast, in the case of *Anna Lombard*, this speech act is used to *undermine* compulsory monogamy.

For Gerald, the worst aspect of his fiancé’s relationship with his rival is that Anna and Gaida are married. Anna equally reproduces hegemonic notions of the significance of marriage – but to a different end:

Yes, [...] I am married to Gaida, and for that mere reason I love him, I cling to him, I know. My feelings cling round him simply because of that, and in that way he has a stronger hold on me than you. Oh, Gerald, take me too in that way! Let us marry; then nothing could touch or break the love I have for you (*Anna* 96).

Upon this, Gerald hopefully says “You will give him up [...]” (*Anna* 96). What he fails to understand is that, having been unsuccessful in drawing upon one familiar framework of explanation, Anna draws upon the next: the sanctity of marriage. Contrary to Gerald’s hope, though, she does not mean to leave one man for the other but to give both men an equally strong hold on herself. To this proposal, Gerald reacts with severe repulsion: “You must be mad or I am. Englishmen do not share their wives” (*Anna* 96). What readers had been told from the very onset, however, is that *Englishwomen* are frequently expected to (at least unofficially) share their husbands, and Cross has by this time established enough of an emphasis on hypocritical double standards in British gender relations for this to be reverberating in the background.

Cross is much more explicit as to the hypocrisy inherent in Western derision of polygamy in a later work: *Life of My Heart* (1915), a novel Nancy Paxton calls “one of the most ideologically radical novels of this decade” (215). When the English heroine fights with her father over her intended marriage to a “native” Indian man of lower class, her father uses the Pathans’ alleged polygamy as a rhetorical weapon: “All their instincts are polygamous: you would probably be deserted in a few weeks” (*Life* 63). His daughter merely laughs at this and points out: “Of course I take my chance, but no more than in any other marriage. How many English marriages are happy? How many Englishmen keep other women beside their wives? How many divorces are there?” (*Life* 63). At least to a certain extent, Cross thus

proposes that it is not non-monogamy which poses a problem but rather the hypocrisy surrounding it. As the heroine of *Life of My Heart* points out and the implied author in *Anna Lombard* suggests, polygamy and polyamory[4] do exist in England; they are simply not acknowledged.

To return to *Anna Lombard*, another crucial aspect is the inconsistency of Anna's statements regarding her emotions. Anna's utterances tellingly oscillate between denials of love and acknowledgements of love for Gaida, depending on situation and degree of desperation. Gerald himself overhears Anna saying "I love you" to Gaida and later asks: "But how can it be? You love me and him at the same time. I can not understand it; it does not seem possible. I never heard – never could have conceived it – can not now" (*Anna* 95). Love is an experience that is culturally mediated and rendered intelligible; to Gerald, (a woman's) non-monogamous love remains unintelligible. It is thus unsurprising that Anna draws upon conceptions of love that are intelligible within their socio-historical context. Men cheating on their wives in particular was a form of non-monogamy that was intelligible, especially in terms of the constructed split 'love-versus-passion'. All of this suggests that Anna does love both men and that her denials of love are simply indicative of, to appropriate Lord Alfred Douglas's famous words, a "love that dare not speak its name" (qtd. in Moran 244).

Gerald is consumed by the desire to possess Anna alone. He conceives of love as a limited resource in line with the common understanding that, to quote Lee Comer: "Like so much butter, romantic love must be spread thickly on one slice of bread; to spread it over several is to spread it 'thinly'" (219). Tellingly, the narrative belies this commonly held belief and Gerald's corresponding fear that love is a resource that is diminished when shared. Gerald himself repeatedly acknowledges that Anna gives him all the love and attention he can wish for. He does not lack anything, Gaida does not actually deprive him of anything – and yet the desire to fully possess remains.

Here, Cross's pervasive references to Ancient Greece and Plato in particular are of relevance since we find an echo of the twofold aspect of the desire to possess as both an inherent feature of love and an inherently problematic one. Diotima explains (as reported by Sophocles) that "[l]ove [...] is the love of possessing the good forever" (Plato 206a). This, however, is contrasted with the representation of the lover in *Phaedrus*, whose jealousy and its consequences are depicted "in terms of an almost pathological desire for domination and possession" (Waterfield xviii). Contemplating the situation on his own, Gerald is in fact reminded of his teachings in and passion for Plato, and he even casts his feelings for Anna in those terms:

It was as if the spirit of the Greek Agathon had come back to earth in another form; and, like Plato, I too seemed to feel my soul slipping through my lips and being drunk in by hers when I kissed her (*Anna* 99).

The strong emphasis on (predominantly male) beauty in Plato's discussions of the nature of love in the *Symposium* and in *Phaedrus* sheds an interesting light on the moment Gerald first encounters Gaida – a moment that is strongly charged with homoerotic overtones (Dierkes-Thrun). Following Joseph A. Boone, this exemplifies that "Western fantasies of the 'Orient' [hold] the potential for unexpected eruptions of sex between men that, however temporarily, disrupt European norms of masculinity and heterosexual priority" (xviii). Boone speaks of "[t]he fetish-like aspect of such stagings of male homoeroticism within the *mise-en-scène* of

Orientalist fantasy – here one moment, gone the next [...]” (xviii). In *Anna Lombard*, this glimpse serves to emphasise that, for all his devotion and possessiveness, Gerald too might be capable of desiring – or even loving – beyond Anna. Plato, after all, ultimately speaks of love rather than (only) passion.

The different speeches on the nature of love in Plato’s *Symposium* famously culminate in Diotima’s model of the five ascending steps of love. These include the move from the love of one person of beauty to the love of many persons of beauty to the culminating love that consists in the recognition of the Good. Following Gratzke and others, we can also read the *Symposium* non-hierarchically in that “[n]o single contribution to the debate can exhaustively explain ‘love’; collectively, they throw lights on the unified yet shattered fullness of love” (12). This understanding would appear to inform Gerald’s meditations, in which – at least in theory – different forms and experiences of love can coexist.

Gerald, and behind him the implied author, are only too aware of the historical contingency of love, especially its gendered nature. In trying to cope with Anna’s inability to choose between her lovers, Gerald again resorts to cultural relativism. In this case, he evokes the Middle Ages:

And I looked at her, sitting not far from me, pale, calm, composed as a statue; and my eyes seemed to see, only through a mist of pain, a shade from those times of blood and lust and passion and crime; times when swift poisons were made by white fingers, and *when women loved as men*, as strongly, and often as briefly; *when they laughed at the idea of one lover*, yet were ready to die with, for, or by the hand of any one of the many; times when the very air they breathed seemed charged with treachery, cunning, and danger (*Anna* 108-09; emphases added).

The most obvious comment the implied author makes regarding the effects of compulsory monogamy lies in the pain it causes Anna and the empathy Gerald feels for her suffering, notwithstanding his own pain. Anna, for instance, wails: “I have suffered intensely all day, since you left me. I have fought with myself and been defeated. I can not give him up. I feel now that I must lose one of you, and to lose either will kill me” (*Anna* 106). It is for this reason that Gerald keeps postponing his enforcement of a decision and even helps to nurse Gaida when his rival falls ill. In fact, as Hipsky points out, in spite of all Gerald’s ostensible criticism and shock and pain, Anna becomes more, rather than less, attractive to Gerald with every one of her transgressions, and she is precisely not discarded nor rejected (123). The narrative may ultimately erase both the first husband and the child but we are not asked to condemn the heroine.

Cross returns to the question of compulsory monogamy five years later in one of the stories in *Six Women* (1906). Dilama, a Syrian Druze girl, is raised in the harem of an extremely rich Turkish landowner and merchant in Damascus. The heterodiegetic narrator stresses that “in the palace of Ahmed there was joy and peace and love and pleasure in abundance” and all wives were happy wives (*Six Women* 144). Just as in *Anna Lombard*, the central conflict is provoked by waiting – and waiting opens up the space for polyamory. When Dilama approaches womanhood, Ahmed notices her growing beauty but does not want to disturb the mind of his heavily pregnant favourite wife by calling Dilama to him. One night in the walled garden, Dilama encounters Murad, a young fellow Druze who had been

watching her for a while, and she promptly falls in love. When Ahmed's favourite wife dies in childbirth, Murad realises that he has to elope with Dilama as quickly as possible so as to pre-empt Ahmed's laying claim to her, but they have to wait for the arrival of the Druze camel train to take them away. Before they can leave, Ahmed calls Dilama into his chambers in order for her to console him. Having waited for his summons all her life, Dilama now dreads the encounter. Her dismay is mixed with regret in the knowledge of "the great happiness that same smile would have brought her had there been no Murad. [...] had she, in a word, waited!" (*Six Women* 149). As in *Anna Lombard*, the absence or reluctance of the man whom the female characters would readily have given their love to opens up the space for another man to enter the scene. Since, however, in both cases the basis for loving the first man had already been set firmly in place, the establishment of parallel devotion is enabled.

In *Six Women*, Cross performs a twofold move in her critique of gendered double standards and compulsory monogamy. First of all, the Orientalist setting serves to demonstrate that polygamy and happiness are not irreconcilable, as is commonly believed in the West. The narrator reiterates just how happy the women in the harem are. Her second move is then to draw attention to gendered double standards and hypocrisies. When Ahmed begins to woo Dilama, the girl does not take long to react to his charms, and soon "Murad began to seem like a robber depriving her of all these things" (*Six Women* 149). Accordingly, robbery here does not lie in polygamy but in enforced monogamy. The narrator moreover proclaims: "Fidelity is a thing of the mind, always at war with and striving to coerce those instincts of the senses that are ever clamouring after the new and the unknown. Nature is ever driving us to seek new mates" (*Six Women* 156-57). This is an argument that had long been readily adopted by men in the Western world, but here it is a female character who feels deprived by cultural constraints on mating. Similarly, when the girl is invited to the patriarch's inner chambers, the narrator reports that "the insidious charm of Ahmed's personality worked on all the pulses of her body; pulses that know not fidelity, though her brain kept telling her that Murad would be waiting for her in the garden" (*Six Women* 157-58). This is a case of psycho-narration in which, to quote Dorrit Cohn, "the inner life of an individual character becomes a sounding-board for general truths about human nature" (14). The narrator thus not only observes that Dilama's pulses know not fidelity, but that *people's* pulses know not fidelity. Unlike a Freudian framing of a necessary suppression of instinct for civilisation to function, the frame of the "happy harem" encourages the vision of a culture that acknowledges and caters to "those instincts of the senses" – not, however, for women.

Juxtaposed with this narrative acknowledgement of (male) polyamory is the fact that the same would not under any circumstances be allowed to women: "Death for herself and Murad was the best she could expect" (*Six Women* 153), since Ahmed's honour, contingent upon the possession and control of "his" women, would be at stake. In the end, not having heard from Murad for a week, Dilama comes to long for Ahmed's summons, and soon preparations are made for her to be the next bride. Here, the narrator is very explicit as to the fact that it is only the feeling rules of compulsory monogamy for women and Dilama's corresponding emotion work that restrain her[5]:

A great tide of pleasure was really just outside her heart, and would have rushed in and overwhelmed it in waves of joy had she but opened her heart's

doors to it; but the shadow of Murad was on the bolts and locks, and she felt afraid (*Six Women* 163).

Dilama has good reason to be afraid since, as it turns out, Murad has already murdered Ahmed and has come to claim his “property”, which he seizes and “like a tiger with his prey, crept away stealthily [...]” (*Six Women* 166). While Dilama had accepted the patriarch’s polygyny and polyamory without question, her own life – a woman’s life – is finally destroyed by both male characters’ inability (or unwillingness) to accept that a woman might love two people at the same time as well. This narrative might of course invite the criticism that what is at play here is the stereotypical Western preoccupation with the implications of harem life and thus simply a case of Orientalism (which of course it is). Nevertheless, Cross’s accomplishment here is to defamiliarise compulsory monogamy by drawing attention to the cultural relativism and the gendered inequality inherent in contemporary Western conceptions of love and the feeling rules surrounding it.

Two years after the publication of *Six Women*, Cross again turns to the issue of compulsory monogamy – this time focusing on an English couple in England – in *Five Nights* (1908), a novel that most likely plays on the title of Elinor Glyn’s immensely popular erotic romance novel *Three Weeks* (1907). Like many of Cross’s characters (and like many New Woman characters in general), Viola, the female protagonist, is of independent financial means which allow her to distance herself from the ideological traps of love and marriage. Equally importantly, the aunt who raised her “had given her niece an elaborate education, believing that a girl’s mental training should be as severe as a boy’s,” and again, as with many of Cross’s characters (both male and female), this education laid particular emphasis on Greek and Latin, with the implications I have discussed earlier (*Five* 73).

Viola’s education and her work as an extremely talented musician have led her to the conviction that “fidelity to one person is madness [sic] an impossibility to an artist if he is to reach his highest development” (*Five* 84). Viola therefore refuses to marry. In fact, she presents marriage as unnatural: “One can’t go against Nature, and Nature has not arranged things that way. Marriage is a pleasure perhaps; but Nature never arranged marriage, and a man should not allow himself unnatural pleasures” (*Five* 109). Trevor, the narrator, retorts: “If it’s so much better for the man to change, [...] it must be the same for the woman”, to which Viola replies:

So it is, [...] the more men a woman has the more developed she is, the better for her morally, if there is no conventional disgrace attaching to it. Amongst the Greeks, Aspasia and all those women of her class [i.e. high-class courtesans] were far more intellectual, more developed than the wives who were kept at home to spin and rear children (*Five* 111).

What Cross alludes to here is that, to quote Plutarch,

[s]ome sources claim that Aspasia was highly esteemed by Pericles on account of her political wisdom. Socrates occasionally visited her with his pupils and his close friends brought their wives to listen to her, despite the fact that she presided over a business that was neither respectable nor honourable, but one

in which she trained young girls to become prostitutes (qtd. in Johnson & Ryan 90).

Significantly, Viola emphasises that the issue is not whether one is in a monogamous or non-monogamous relationship, but rather whether one is forced into either: "All these things ought to be optional" (*Five* 111).

From the very onset of her writing career, Cross was not just concerned with rendering visible the artificial structures constraining the performance of gender and the experience of love and sexuality; her narratives also explore the difficult relations between structure and agency in this respect. Many of her novels display a high degree of alertness to the power of internalisation and complicity in the perpetuation of hegemonic structures – the realisation that even if we see through structures that are harmful to ourselves and others, this does not mean it is easy to shed them. In particular, she is concerned with the difficulty of allaying anxieties generated by these structures even if one has unmasked them as deleterious (cf. Macdonald and Wächter).

While Gerald in *Anna Lombard* could only grudgingly acknowledge his own ideologically driven desire to gain sole "possession" of Anna, Viola fully embraces non-monogamy as a concept and yet struggles painfully with her own jealousy when Trevor is actually attracted to someone else and becomes involved with her. Nevertheless, after the detour of reverting to a monogamous relationship, Viola finally asks Trevor to take a lover when she mysteriously suspends their relationship for one year without telling him why. Upon their reunion at the end of the novel it turns out that she had given birth to their child and, as Trevor realises, "had fled to bear the burden of it alone" (*Five* 278). The couple had already agreed that procreation must be avoided at all costs, since "genius is not handed down [and] [t]herefore the child of a genius is rarely a genius itself" (*Five* 279). Again, what reverberates in the background here is Diotima's conception of love in Plato's *Symposium*. According to her (via Socrates' report), a young man pregnant in soul ideally finds someone with whom to bring up a progeny of the mind, and "such lovers have a far stronger intimacy than ordinary parents because the children they share are more beautiful and also immortal. Everyone would prefer such offspring to human children [...]" (Plato 209b-d). These children of the mind in Plato are those born to two men; in several of her novels, Cross's innovation is to appropriate this conception of male-male love relationships for a reconfiguration of male-female love relationships. In virtually all of her writing, "Cross holds love (an emotional and very physical connection for her) as the highest pinnacle in life. Though her characters sometimes bear children, they never fully embrace motherhood" (Purdue 127). She, moreover, is not the only New Woman writer of her time to go so far as to narratively kill off children impeding women's fulfilment. In *Five Nights* it remains open whether the child died of a natural death or whether its own mother murdered it, but in any case, this and other similar cases in Cross's oeuvre demonstrate that reading the infanticide in *Anna Lombard* as an instance of racism only would be reductive.

In spite of the unambiguous instances of racism in Cross's fiction, a few things can be said without doubt: that her novels defamiliarise and criticise the social conventions via which we make sense of, and the emotion work we invest in, the feeling called love; that her work highlights and explicitly reflects upon the fact that love is intricately entwined with power structures which have historically operated (and often still operate) to the disadvantage of women; and that she specifically probes and contests the hypocrisies

surrounding compulsory monogamy, as well its potentially detrimental corollaries. At the same time, Cross explores the conditions under which love may be a source of personal growth and fulfilment, also and especially for women. In considering the limitations of love and its relations to oppressive structures as well as its potential gains, Cross anticipates current discourses in critical love studies as exemplified, for instance, by Lena Gunnarsson et al.'s assertion "that although love is a crucial site of (in particular) gendered power asymmetries, it is also a vital source of human enhancement that we cannot, in its basic form, live without" (Gunnarsson et al. 3).

[1] It should be noted here that pointing out the challenges Cross's writing poses to the dominant ideologies of her time is not meant to disavow the clearly problematic aspects of her texts and the often close entanglements of contestations of dominant ideologies and complicities with the same. Despite these entanglements, the quality of Cross's narrative challenges remains noteworthy. I therefore follow Charlotte Mitchell in arguing that "Victoria Cross' belongs on the map of nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction, and if her career is ignored, our understanding of the whole landscape will be distorted" (2).

[2] The novel was completed before "Theodora, a Fragment" was published (Mitchell 17).

[3] *Mononormativity* denotes "the commonly held notion that monogamy is the good, natural, normal or right way of forming intimate relationships" or "the culturally normative understanding that romantic relationships should be monogamous" (Barker et al. 191, 204).

[4] I follow Meg Barker et al. in defining *polyamory* as "involv[ing] people openly having multiple romantic and sexual partners" (190). Polyamory "is often positioned as separate from other forms of non-monogamy such as swinging and open relationships" (ibid.).

[5] *Feeling rules* are the ideological norms determining what individuals are supposed to feel in certain situations and vis-à-vis certain others. *Emotion work* refers to the effort at managing one's own feelings in order to live up to these rules (Hochschild).

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