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"Death might, in fact, be looked upon as the great Emancipator": Suicide and Female Agency in Mona Caird's *The Wing of Azrael* (1889)

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This article seeks to analyse the treatment of the literary theme of female suicide in Mona Caird's novel, *The Wing of Azrael.* My aim is to propose a feminist interpretation of the protagonist's suicide. By referring to determinist philosophical concepts, challenging cultural stereotypes about female madness, and reworking literary devices from Gothic and sensation fiction, Caird creates an empathetic tale that portrays suicide as a voluntary and rational choice. The novel counters prevalent cultural pathologisation and feminisation of suicide. Additionally, this emancipatory reading—which engages in dialogue with other female exegeses of suicide—is strengthened through the symbolic resignification of aquatic spaces as feminine and empowering realms. This reinterpretation contributes to the reconstruction of the myths of Azrael and Andromeda, fostering critical discourse on the unequal position of women within the institution of marriage and their struggle to develop independent identities in a patriarchal context that stifles debate and critical thinking. Ultimately, it prompts reflection on willpower, the influence of the environment on individuals and their capacity for decision-making.

Keywords: feminist literary criticism; literary representations of suicide; New Woman fiction; Mona Caird; symbolism

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"Death might, in fact, be looked upon as the great Emancipator": suicidio y agencia femenina en *The Wing of Azrael* (1889) de Mona Caird

Este artículo trata de analizar cómo el tema de la mujer suicida es reformulado en *The Wing of Azrael*, de Mona Caird, para favorecer una lectura feminista del suicidio de la protagonista. Haciendo referencia a ideas filosóficas deterministas, a estereotipos culturales sobre la locura femenina y reelaborando algunos recursos literarios de la narrativa gótica y sensacionalista, Caird desarrolla una narrativa empática en la que el suicidio se presenta como una decisión voluntaria y racional, contrarrestando así la patologización cultural hegemónica y la feminización del suicidio. Asimismo, esta lectura emancipadora—que dialoga con otras exégesis femeninas del suicidio en el periodo—se potencia por medio de la resignificación simbólica de los espacios acuáticos en clave femenina y liberadora, que contribuyen a la reconstrucción de los mitos de Azrael y Andrómeda, de modo que se construye un discurso crítico en torno a la posición desigual de la mujer en la institución matrimonial y la imposibilidad de desarrollar una identidad propia en un contexto social patriarcal que reprime el debate y el pensamiento crítico. De este modo, se establece una reflexión sobre la voluntad, el efecto del entorno y la educación y la capacidad de decisión.

Palabras clave: crítica literaria feminista; representaciones literarias del suicidio; ficciones de la nueva mujer; Mona Caird; simbolismo.

1. Suicide: a Masculine Obsession for Female Oppression

As Edgar Allan Poe revealed in *The Raven,* dead women became a recurring trope in the artistic imagination of nineteenth century writers: "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (1901, 27). The response to these words is found in women's writings such as those of George Eliot, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Mona Caird. They addressed female suicide from a perspective that evinces an interest in neglecting a set of truths constructed around the irrationality of women and their propensity to madness and suicide, as well as in obscuring their material conditions in life. This current was not exclusive to the British context: it ran internationally as French novelists such George Sand and Marie d'Algout and Spanish ones such as Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, Carolina Coronado and Rosalía de Castro shared the same stance when dealing with this theme in their novels (Martín Villarreal 2023).

The cultural obsession with female suicide in nineteenth-century Europe promoted the notion that women were inherently weak, lovelorn, insane, and prone to suicide. Whether in the form of ghosts, corpses, or suicidal or ill-looking women, a scopophilic tradition was established in the way that women were portrayed as objects of pleasure by "the male gaze" (Mulvey 1975). Authors dealing with female suicide actively participated in a patriarchal discourse that reinforced an image of femininity

that considered madness and suicide as feminine issues, hence locating suicide and femininity as part of otherness (Bronfen 1992). For Barbara Gates, this obsession was a kind of necrophilia aimed at creating a fiction about women and suicide "that seemed more credible than facts" (1988, 125).[1] Although it can be considered a European trend, the fascination this subject aroused in Victorian England suggests a particular interest within the British nation to challenge the negative portrayal presented in Edward Young's verse "O Britain, infamous for suicide" (1858, 90).[2] As Kushner points out, "suicide among women was portrayed as an individual emotional act, and thus inconsequential, while male suicide was seen as a barometer of national economic and social well-being" (1995, 29).

Medical discourse validated a regime of truth (Foucault 1980, 93) that helped to understand suicide as a medical issue: a consequence of irrationality and madness especially linked to femininity.[3] Suicide started to be seen as the result of a weak character and its interpretation was reorientated toward love, passive self-surrender, and illness. These assumptions were spread throughout nineteenth-century medical discourse, especially when it concerned the diagnosis of the causes for madness (Showalter 1987, 7). As Margaret Higonnet suggests, "since much of the scientific literature perceived woman as an abnormal man, the link between her genetic defect and suicidal illness was readily made" (1986, 70). Doctors such as George Man Burrows assumed that women were more prone to madness and suicide since "the functions of the brain are so intimately connected with the uterine system, that the interruption of any process which the latter has to perform in the human economy may implicate the former" (1828, 146). Similarly, John William Horsley did not hesitate to assert that suicide was "a specifically female crime" (1887, 241). Besides, the rise of Darwinism naturalised gender difference and saw the underpinning of madness and suicide as essentially feminine. For instance, Morselli (1881) considered suicide proof of the natural process of Darwinian selection that ensured the decline of the unfit.

The arts played a significant role in spreading this patriarchal interpretation of suicide. The conspicuous pictorial representations of Ophelia by artists like Millais, Waterhouse, Hughes, Redgrave and Delacroix, coupled with the persistent coverage of suicide stories in newspapers, and the evocative literary narratives featuring women contemplating suicide by Hood, Collins, Meredith, Hardy and Henry James contributed to the creation of a distorted and pathological perception of suicide as symbolically feminine, particularly in the case of drowned women. References to

[1] The mythic perception of suicide as predominantly feminine contradicts statistical evidence, revealing a conflict: "suicide happens to be an essentially male phenomenon. To every woman there are on the average four male suicides" (Durkheim [1897] 2002, 18).

[2] This dangerous association was reflected in Thomas Warton's "Ode on Suicide" (1777) and Alexander Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" (1717).

[3] Examples can be found in medical treatises such as *A Treatise of Female, Nervous, Hysterical, Hypochondriacal, Bilious, Convulsive Disease with Thoughts on Madness and Suicide* (1788) by William Rowley and *A Full Inquiry into the Subject of Suicide* (1790) by Charles Moore.

Ophelia rapidly transformed this figure into a mythic archetype. She became the epitome of the delusional object of male admiration, sublimated by her invalidism. Indeed, this pervasive cultural narrative engendered a semantic shift that contributed to a gradual softening of punitive attitudes towards suicide and a move away from solely viewing voluntary death as an act of individual agency.

The portrayal of female suicide found in texts authored by women, however, underlines a keenness to diminish the stereotypical view on hysteria and madness as causing female suicide. Women authors approached suicide from a dissident position that moves away from the hegemonical truths around suicide prevalence and its reasons.[4] In women's writings, *mal d'amour* is not a reason for their female characters to kill themselves, but the situation of oppression and entrapment they are forced to live under is. While in the conventional patriarchal tale women kill themselves after their identity is fragmented due to the disintegration of their affective links to men (Higonnet 1986, 71), in women's fictions, the latent violence inherent in the sexual politics of their time is underscored and, either subtly or in a more straightforward way, the social oppression that led women to commit suicide is put on display. Similarly, the link between femininity and madness is deconstructed to subvert the poetical convention of the suicidal woman and make it into a political trope.[5]

I will argue in what follows that *The Wing of Azrael* reverses the aesthetic tradition of the drowned woman in order to disrupt set notions on femininity, madness, and suicide, and reflects on the limits of female agency and freedom for women within naturalised patriarchal institutions. From a feminist viewpoint, Caird demonstrates the artificiality of the Victorian notion of femininity and explores strategies for counterarguing patriarchal myths of female oppression. Specifically, the biased image of the suicidal woman is questioned through the literary exegesis of Viola Sedley, whose suicide cannot be understood through a pathological lens. In doing this, Caird not only contributes to an ongoing feminist discourse that draws on the philosophical influence of Stuart Mill, but is also imbricated in a broader, transnational women's discourse that denounces the oppression of women through the literary representation of female suicide.

[4] Although not every woman writer participates in this dissident discourse, the sociohistorical patriarchal oppression they faced when creating their own literary work allows some tropes to be considered as particularly pervasive. This is made especially clear when a feminist purpose can be felt throughout the text, as in the case of Mona Caird.

[5] Paradoxically, suicidal ideation was enough for the canonisation of male poets, especially after the spread of W. B. Yeats's concept of the "tragic generation". However, female poets suffered a double oblivion: Amy Levy, Laurence Hope and Charlotte Mew were systematically elided from the literary canon "through their displacement as poets by their male contemporaries and through the displacement of their literal suicides by their male compeers' figurative ones" (Laird 2005, 70).

2. Mona Caird: a Feminist Myth-Maker

Despite the contemporary lack of knowledge of Mona Caird (1854-1932), she was one of the most famous journalists and writers at the *fin de siècle*. Her literary presence was first obliterated—her works were not reprinted until the end of the twentieth century—and later labelled as part of the not so homogeneous group of New Woman writers, an umbrella term that united women writers whose opinions are sometimes difficult to reconcile.[6] It is only recently that Britain's most famous feminist of the last decade of the nineteenth century has received greater attention. Her first novels, *Whom Nature Leadeth* (1883) and *One That Wins* (1887), published under the pseudonym of G. Noel Hatton, did not arouse much interest. However, her career as a novelist took off after the nationwide debate that followed the publication of her article "Marriage" (1888) in the *Westminster Review* and was further boosted after the publication of *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894). *The Wing of Azrael* (1889), her third novel, did achieve greater impact than her earlier works. However, its reception as a novel with a purpose was largely shaped by her prior controversial essay on women's "moral starvation" in marriage (1888, 194). This fact led her to write a preface in which she stated that her narrative aimed to represent reality in order to move readers towards independent thinking. Therefore, the novel sets out from the very beginning to engage in a liberating conversation that unleashed the "power to transform individual lives, and the wider public, for the better" (Hookway 2012, 173).

Caird was, above all, a polemicist who proved herself able to open up public debates on issues that had hitherto been scarcely discussed, such as women's rights in birth control, sex within marriage, unwanted pregnancy, and the right of women to have sex after separation, as well as animal rights (Heilmann 1996, 67).[7] Her critique of the institutionalisation of violence against women through marriage and prostitution could not have been published at a better time, having been preceded by a public discussion following the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, which brought the double standards on female sexuality to the centre stage in public debate, and coinciding with the first news of the Jack the Ripper murders. Within a month of its publication, the *Daily Telegraph* had received around 27,000 letters responding to her article (1996, 71). Besides, the widespread concern about the "Woman Question" and the polarisation that followed helped to light the fuse of the discussion (Pykett 1992, 12).

Her shrewd and unorthodox position critiqued the historical oppression of women and the fallacious biological discourse on sexual difference that facilitated it. She considered, therefore, not only marriage, but also prostitution, patriarchy's tool for women's exploitation through their acquisition as a market commodity, either publicly

[6] The efforts of scholars such as Showalter (1979), Ardis (1990), Pykett (1992), Heilmann (2000; 2004), and Murphy (2001) made possible the reprinting of New Woman fiction and the scholarly debate on their interests, aesthetics and ideological differences.

[7] Elizabeth A. Sharp considered Caird able to alter "the attitude of the public mind in its approach to and examination of such questions, in making private discussion possible" (1910, 142).

or privately. Despite her radical political position, it is worth noting that she spoke from the privileged and sanctioned social space of bourgeois marriage. Although little is known about her personal life, she usually travelled without her husband and her relationship with her son, Alison James, was considered emotionally detached (Heilmann 1996, 79). *The Pall Mall Gazette* described her as "a young lady happily married to the son of Sir James Caird: she, with her husband and one son, is living a conventionally respectable life in the midst of all the fashionable proprieties of the aristocratic neighbourhood within a few miles of a cathedral city" (1888, 1-2). Marriage would be, in her opinion, a form of slavery until women could possess their own bodies and enter into this union with a man as equals. Motherhood, on the other hand, rather than being a woman's natural instinct and a biological obligation—as other New Woman writers such as Olive Schreiner and Sarah Grand believed—constituted yet another patriarchal strategy to imprison women in their role as devoted wives and mothers who, in turn, imposed this behaviour on the following generation.[8]

Her literary work delves into her radical feminist ideology and tests the patriarchal roots of many of the legal, scientific, religious, and artistic definitions of women so as to prove how historically determined they were (Richardson 2001, 185). In *The Wing of Azrael*, Caird is devoted to revising the medical and scientific discourse on women, as well as to assessing the social conditions that thwart the development of female identity, and she does this by pointing out how silence is imposed on women through family, societal obligations and marriage. Her challenge of the models of scientific interpretation and her exposure of new forms of femininity is made through the rewriting of the classical and modern myths that underpin an understanding of women as market objects. The importance of liberty of discussion in her fiction should also be noted. As Hookway suggests, Caird's interest in discussion as a liberating and empowering form of knowledge affects the form of her novels and short stories, which "consist largely of dialogue: it drives her plot and through it her characters are created" (2012, 873). Indeed, dialogue is the motor of *The Wing of Azrael* and its prohibition triggers the denouement of the novel (Heilmann 2004, 158).

Set in contemporary Britain, the novel focuses on the tortuous life of Viola Sedley from her unfortunate childhood within the walls of Manor House, where she receives the meagre education suitable for her sex, to her unhappy marriage to Philip Dendraith. Despite her rebellious and unbending character, Viola is taught to fulfill her duties as a woman. In Millian terms, she is one of those "'promising characters' who is prevented by familial and societal demands from fulfilling her potential" (2008, 36). Her instincts

[8] Heilmann (1996, 70) pointed out Mona Caird's influences on the mercantilist understanding of marriage. Mary Wollstonecraft had already linked marriage and prostitution. The radical socialist William Thompson established a similar critique of marriage in *Appeal of One Half of the Human Race* (1825). Likewise, the legal reform of marriage had been one of the principal struggles of women's organisations from 1850 onwards, and texts such as Harriet Taylor's *Enfranchisement of Women* (1851) and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) had contended that marriage was a form of oppression for women. This latter influence is perhaps the most obvious, since Caird quotes Stuart Mill profusely in both her novels and her journalistic works.

are constricted and she only finds happiness and freedom beyond civilization: either playing in the garden, where she hides in her temple of flowers, "sacred to Life and Liberty" ([1889] 2010, 36), or at the seaside, where she dreams that "if only she could reach the sea she would not be lonely any more. She would throw herself down beside it, and it would know everything" ([1889] 2010, 7).[9]

Viola's deeply-rooted notion of duty is mixed with a feeling of guilt that conditions all her actions. When she is eight years old, a fateful event happens: on a trip to the coast with her dog Bill, she meets Philip Dendraith, a young family acquaintance whom she ends up pushing out of the window of his home, Upton Castle, in a fit of rage after he tortures her pet. Although Philip recovers, this rage/guilt relationship becomes cyclical when years later, driven principally by culpability and family and financial pressures, she agrees to marry him despite his sadistic nature. Harassed and controlled by her heartless husband, she is bound to endure her own ordeal at the old and dilapidated Upton Castle, where her only solace consists of losing herself in the derelict west wing or conversing with the philosopher Caleb Foster or with Harry Lancaster; the latter, a young man who adores her but lacks Philip's fortune and with whom she plots to escape. Philip ostracises her and becomes suspicious of her close relationship with Harry. When they are about to escape, Philip discovers them and Viola ends up stabbing her husband to death with a paper-knife after he sexually harasses her. This image frightens Harry and she realises she cannot be saved by anyone, so she runs away to the cliffs and, presumably, commits suicide by drowning.

Rather than a political pamphlet or a biased representation of femininity, *The Wing of Azrael* portrays a sympathetic although still plural depiction of women and their particular problems. While also depicting other models of femininity that do not question the *status quo,* such as Adrienne's or Mrs. Sedley's—Viola's mother—Caird does still highlight the limited extent of their education, oriented towards the fulfillment of their duties as daughters, wives and mothers. The perils of the cult of abnegation and sacrifice through their seclusion in the domestic space are evinced, as is the need for sorority and an open debate on women's happiness. Viola Sedley exemplifies how gender identity is socially imposed on women, forcing them to redirect the development of their identity through established channels, and how this education shapes and conditions a woman forever. Caird's aim is, as Marino notes, "to demonstrate that the meek and self-effacing attitude exhibited by proper ladies is far from innate" (2022, 104). *The Wing of Azrael* also questions social Darwinist theories of suicide. Viola's suicide is not due to a biological incapability to withstand the rigors of the kind of life linked to her sex, but due to her own will and the impact her circumstances

[9] The novel codifies urban, domestic and closed spaces as masculine—as places for the confinement and surveillance of women—while natural spaces such as the cliffs, the ocean and the garden are seen as feminine, given that they are places in which women can be free.

have had on her.[10] As Richardson suggests, "environment, or circumstance, rather than heredity or breeding, are fundamental to social progress" (2005, 204).

3. "Darkness Everywhere": Freedom and Agency in Viola Sedley's Death

The deconstruction of the literary motif of the drowned woman is a central element for the interpretation of the novel as a symbolically optimistic feminist tale in which women prove their agency through death. Her disappearance in the "impenetrable darkness" over the cliffs not only shows Viola's awakening in terms of the limitations imposed on her, but it also illustrates how this liminal space functions as a site for challenging conventions, and how the seascape is interpreted as a feminine space (Hookway 2010, 146).[11] This portrayal of suicide, however, collides with stereotypical images of the fragile, hysterical and lovelorn madwomen. Caird challenges the hegemonical truths around the prevalence and causes of suicide among women and connects with subversive uses of the motif such as those of Mary Ann Evans, Rosalía de Castro and Kate Chopin. Voluntary death serves to highlight the precarious physical, psychological and social situation of women within marriage, at the same time as it is resignified as a form of agency that aims for freedom by strengthening the connection between women and the natural world. In doing this, Caird makes use of literary strategies for mocking the stereotypical image of suicidal women and participates in a feminine literary tradition that can be labelled as part of Cixous's *écriture feminine* (Cano 2019).

Her authorial strategy consists of using Gothic motifs and sensation fiction plot techniques to elaborate a critique on the aestheticisation of the female corpse. While the domestic setting and the protagonism of mad and criminal women is an influence from the sensation novel, the Gothic imagery contributes to the creation of a feminist narrative. For instance, the description of the home as a terrifying and imprisoning space, the "Death Chamber" in which Viola kills Philip, the blood-stained letter opener, the housekeeper who effectively serves as a jailer, and Upton Castle itself can be considered Gothic motifs (*Žabicka 2005, 7)*. Philip's physical perfection, epitomised in his "set of miraculously white teeth, even and perfect as if they had been artificial" (Caird [1889] 2010, 43), shows the clash between appearances and reality as it conceals his depravation and sadistic nature, which can be explained in degenerationist terms.[12]

[10] In *Whom Nature Leadeth* (1883), Caird problematised the idea of nature having determining power by showing Crawford's will to kill himself. In the same vein, Hadria's suicide attempt in *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) evinces the New Woman ability to survive the social norms that entrapped Viola. It is interesting to recall Caird's satirical response to the fear some critics expressed about the rise of new models of femininity, in which she dialogues with the theory of the unfit: if new women "are really insurgents against evolutionary human nature, instead of being the indications of a new social development, then their fatal error will assuredly prove itself in a very short time" ([1892] 1998, 169).

[11] Water was seen, in the nineteenth century cultural imaginary, as a feminine force, and, symbolically, it remains a feminine element as it is considered "maternal" and life-giving (Bachelard 1999).

[12] Marino considers the description of Philip to be similar to that of vampires, as well as a reversion of the angelical image of criminal women in sensation fiction (2019, 107). Besides, the link to degenerationism would have been evident to the Victorian readership: Philip's resemblance to his ancestor Andrew Dendraith, "one of

What is more, Upton Castle can be seen as a phallic symbol in its portrayal as a place for male power and surveillance, although it also offers secret rooms for female rebellion such as the abandoned west wing and the "Death Chamber", the room where all the Dendraiths had died. If the gender interpretation of natural and architectural spaces is to be taken into account, the ruined castle—a symbol of patriarchy or the institution of marriage—is threatened by the feminine force of the waves: "[Although] the hungry sea had gnawed at the cliff till it crept up close to the castle, which now stood defiant to the last, refusing to yield to the besieger" ([1889] 2010, 39).

However, as Oulton notes, Caird "deploys metanarrative less to signal her place in a literary tradition than to question the conventions of the marriage plot as traditionally depicted in fiction" (2013, 3). Accordingly, the hackneyed plot structures of sensation or Gothic novels—consisting of a narrative in which a morally blameless young heroine is stalked by a powerful and corrupt male figure and imprisoned in a castle or mansion only to be saved by another man—are problematised by offering, if not an alternative ending, at least the possibility of one. At the same time, the oppressive situation of marriage is rendered visible within the nation's liminal spaces, such as the isolated setting of Upton Castle. Whilst some Gothic elements are demystified—the ghostly apparition turns out to be Philip, and the bloodstain on the letter opener is probably just rust—the narrative places female anxiety and the frustrations associated to a female identity at its core.

The cliff upon which Upton Castle stands becomes a place for philosophical reflection and to claim liberty, since this is where humans are "made aware of their smallness, vulnerability and mortality" (Hookway 2010, 135). In this sense, Viola's suicide can be interpreted as a rational decision, and not as the consequence of a fit of rage or a deranged psyche. As Oulton suggests, "Caird is able to examine the tensions behind late century gender ideology in minute detail, self-consciously setting the responses of the heroine Viola against mid-century literary models of the sacrificial or rebellious protagonist" (2013, 2). Her suicide can thus be seen as a way out of her abusive marriage and the restrictive social construct of femininity that entrapped her. Paradoxically, this voluntary death affirms her will to live under different circumstances, suggesting the influence of Schopenhauer's ideas. Caird thus avoids merely reproducing a Darwinist theory of the "unfit," instead she questions it. Arthur Schopenhauer, in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (1818), argued that suicide could affirm will and be acceptable in certain situations. Choosing death, in his view, would confirm the will to live away from unavoidable dissatisfaction.[13]

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the bad characters that seem to crop up in the family now and again, as if there were some evil strain in it not to be overcome" (Caird 2010, 25), explains his sadistic nature (Godfrey 2012, 43). His portrait hangs in the castle, and he is remembered for killing his wife and smoking opium. However, Caird also questions the biological explanation of Philip's evil and suggests that his education and environment are in fact as restrictive as Viola's: "It never occurred to her that a man like Philip could be wounded as well as angry; and that she was inflexibly rejecting the only overtures of peace which he knew how to make" (Caird 2010, 195).

[13] For Schopenhauer, suicide is futile since suffering is universal, and therefore dissatisfaction cannot be understood as particular. He took a deterministic stance, asserting that human actions are ultimately determined

The heroine's death neither exonerates her from her responsibility for her husband's murder nor serves as punishment for her actions but rather elevates her liberation to a symbolic plane in which she frees herself from all social bonds in order to embrace a nature that had hitherto been denied to her, and which is metaphorised in her mortal fusion with the sea. While her childhood was marked by guilt, self-mortification and the rejection of her "unladylike" impulses—such as rage or assertiveness—the murder of her husband is a moment of epiphany and liberation. Her reaction is not triggered by guilt, but by the realisation that freedom is not possible (Caird [1889] 2010, 66).

Caird's critique of the sacrificial character of women is made through the rewriting of the myths of Andromeda and Azrael, which, according to Heilmann, shows her interest in "making readers aware of the continuity of oppression, reinforcing the message that it was not enough to address existing shortcomings in the system" (2004, 159). Both these myths pinpoint the impossibility of developing a female identity as the main sacrifice women are forced to make. Viola's wedding is symbolically described as a sacrificial rite in which she is compelled to renounce her individuality. The sunbeams are reflected in her gown as "a deep blood-red stain [...] like the symbol of some master-passion in her heart, or perhaps a death-wound" (Caird [1889] 2010, 153).

From the novel's outset, a concern with the protagonist's individual existence is evident, culminating in her final assertion through suicide. The narrative's exploration of Viola's childhood offers crucial insights into the origins of her behaviour, revealing the profound impact of a restrictive and stifling upbringing on her awakened personality.

Marriage is by no means the sole defining factor of her identity (Rosenberg 2010, xv). Women are socially perceived as relational subjects dependent on affective bonds with men—connections that Caird views as transactional, mercenary and market-based. Thus, the first philosophical reflection on Viola's existence—she is described as a "little metaphysician" ([1889] 2010, 6)—anticipates a narrative dedicated to exploring to what extent a woman's individuality actually exists in a society such as the one she inhabits:

> Yet if there were no reality, whence these thoughts? The child touched herself tentatively. Yes, she was, she must be real; a separate being called Viola Sedley, –with thoughts of her own, entirely her own, whom nobody in all this big world quite knew. Viola Sedley; –she repeated the name over and over to herself, as if to gain some clearer conception of her position in relation to the universe, but the arbitrary name only deepened the sense of mystery ([1889] 2010, 6).

by a combination of internal drives and external influences. These philosophical ideas were spread in the British media from 1853 onwards. Despite his misogyny, his success was possible thanks to women writers and translators such as Mary Ann Evans, Mrs. Ernst Linder and Jessie Laussot, who facilitated Schopenhauer's rise to fame by disseminating his ideas in their fiction. New Woman novelists incorporated his philosophical ideas to naturalise women's desire in non-teleological ways (Brilmyer 2018, 398-02). In the case of Mona Caird, while his influence can be noted in *The Wing of Azrael*, it becomes more explicit in later novels such as *Stones of Sacrifice* (1915) and *The Great Wave* (1931).

A prophetic event occurs when Viola flatly refuses to kiss Philip Dendraith (both father and son, who share a first name) despite her mother's insistence that she must behave appropriately. Viola's response is evidence of her natural rebelliousness—for which she is disciplined throughout her life—as she points out that she does not want "to be like a little lady!" ([1889] 2010, 28) or "to kiss anybody" ([1889] 2010, 29). Her opposition is to no avail: Philip, the son, ends up kissing her against her will and with the connivance of all those present. This aggression is the first attack, of many, on her individuality, which is considered an obstacle to the fulfilment of her womanly obligations: "[S]he could only feel over and over again, with all a child's intensity, that she had been treated with insolence, as a being whose will was of no moment, whose very person was not her own; who might be kissed or struck or played with exactly as people pleased, as if she were a thing without life or personality" ([1889] 2010, 29-30). Indeed, her fate is a cyclical and fateful one, since she is condemned to repeat a doom that has accompanied her sex ever since. The cyclical nature of patriarchal oppression is emphasised through an entirely predictable plot, meaning that Viola's death comes as no surprise to any reader (Oulton 2013, 5). Marriage and its preparations predestine women to repeat their past, whether that of Viola's mother, Mrs. Sedley, or that of the woman murdered by Philip's ancestor (Murphy 2001, 185).[14] Thus, little Viola's sadness seems to foretell her unhappy adult existence.

Although Mrs. Sedley can anticipate her daughter's ill-fated future, she is not able to break the dynamic that anchors Viola to repeat her mother's mistakes. On the contrary, she rather encourages it by imposing her expectations on Viola: "What had a woman to look for -a dutiful woman such as Viola must be- but sorrow and pain, increasing as her life's shadow lengthened on the dial? If not quite so heart-breaking as her mother's life had been, Viola's could not escape the doom that lurks in the air of this world for all women of her type" (Caird [1889] 2010, 10). Caird's accusation pertaining to the role mothers play in the reproduction of oppression on their daughters is scathing. She notes that it is this self-sacrificing behaviour which encourages the brutal and selfish behaviour of men, while she also underlines how hypocritical their concerns for the welfare of their daughters are, as the girls/women are compelled to sacrifice everything in order to fulfill their prescribed roles as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. This contradiction exposes the underlying societal expectations imposed on women, which demand their submission and selflessness while simultaneously disregarding their individual needs and aspirations.

Caird was deeply concerned with the validity of unequal marriages, a point clearly made in her *Westminster Review* essay. Viola's plight precisely illustrates this concern. Moments before her marriage ceremony, she declares: "I come here against my own wish, and can have no response in my heart for such speeches, [...] what I

[14] Mrs. Sedley is characterised as a woman that spends her life in the performance of her wifely duty: a submissive and saint-like endurance that turns her husband into a selfish and brutal creature.

say today is said with my lips only" ([1889] 2010, 153). This statement strips the union of legitimacy, revealing it as a mere trading contract where she is a "branded" object. The novel's title, alluding to Azrael, the angel of death to whom an innocent victim is offered (in Jewish and Islamic cultures), finds its meaning in the sacrifice of women inherent in these infamous transactions. These mercenary marriages, which Caird likens to prostitution due to their pecuniary nature, represented a common social practice that underscored the perception of women as market commodities. The commercial essence of this union is so apparent that Philip himself complains to Viola about its unprofitability, citing the large sum paid to her family. Viola's sardonic reply highlights her position: "I, being not the seller but the thing sold, can scarcely be held responsible" ([1889] 2010, 279).

Viola's upbringing, coupled with her limited exposure to the outside world and the conviction that wifely duty was paramount, rendered her incapable of contemplating alternative choices or perceiving her actions as acts of self-defense. She is defenceless against her husband's sexual aggression, euphemistically termed as a "tender punishment" ([1889] 2010, 313), and cannot accept the escape routes offered by Harry and Sibella. The example portrayed by the latter—a symbol of wisdom and independence, a true sibyl representing a new model of woman making her way in *fin-de-siècle* British society—is not enough for Viola to consider an alternative model of female identity, for "a woman brought up in such a manner as to make her at once intensely sensitive and intensely conscientious is a ready-made martyr; nothing can save her. She is predestined" ([1889] 2010, 200). Indeed, Sibella stands alone among the female characters in her breach of social decorum through divorce. By offering assistance to both Adrienne and Viola, she presents a path to liberation for women rooted in sisterhood and critical thought: "Don't be frightened to open your eyes and to use your reason. […] We have both been taught, as we imagined, to worship God. I fear that we have really been taught to worship the devil! We were trained to submission, to accept things as they are, to serve God by resignation" ([1889] 2010, 228).

Driven to the brink of madness, Viola suffers intensely from her inability to reconcile conflicting desires and obligations, a torment compounded by Philip's continuous surveillance. Her marriage becomes a death trap, since she is unable to divorce or escape because she lacks the tools and the support to do so, but she also cannot accept losing her own individuality as the price for being contented as a wife, a defiance she articulates powerfully to Philip: "Will you not leave me even a little remnant of individuality? Am I always to be your wife, never myself?" ([1889] 2010, 155). Her madness and its effective link to suicidal ideation is suggested at several moments. The Victorian stereotype of the hysterical and suicidal woman is mixed with a discourse that reveals the causes of an anguish that is sufficient to provoke her madness. Indeed, her nervousness is pointed to as a sufficient cause for committing her to an asylum by drawing on the medical discourse of the time and literary examples such as Bertha Mason or other sensation fiction characters. At the same time, there is

a concern about the legal power husbands have over wives that is not to be found in sensation novels that deal with supposed madness (Oulton 2010, 23). Therefore, the discourse on madness as a feminine disease is reshaped to show the material reality that triggers mental health issues, which are not presented as naturally feminine, but instigated by the sociohistorical oppression women suffer.

Viola's desperate act is to be exculpated if we consider certain clues that may help to understand it as a rational and premeditated decision that allows her to put an end to her painful existence: "[…] to die, to be unconscious! The longing was like a hunger that gnaws at the soul. To be mercifully snatched away into a great silence" (Caird [1889] 2010, 241). Likewise, Viola empathises with and acknowledges the reasons that have led other women in the past to end their lives, considering them "her true sisters" ([1889] 2010, 306). All of them are Andromedas who have been chained through marriage to patriarchal violence and who have been unable to unleash themselves from their husbands: "Viola felt as if she had known the woman who had slept and dreamt and, alas! wept in this old room; who had woven her sorrow into silken devices, and died with the grief still in her soul, the embroidered flowers of Paradise still uncompleted" ([1889] 2010, 198).

Stabbing her husband to death not only freed her from the yoke of her marriage, it also turned her into a fugitive and a criminal. Escaping the clutches of patriarchy becomes an insurmountable task. Suicide emerges as the sole rational escape route for Viola, as it becomes impossible to evade the dire consequences that await her: social ostracism, potential imprisonment or even committal to an asylum. Despite what she had been taught by her mother, she yearns for death: "The blackness of her solitude made these wounded feelings doubly hard to bear, and the sense of humiliation became so terrible that even suicide –which her mother had taught her to place on the same level as murder– grew less heinous to her imagination, as the impulse to fling away the horrors and the indignities of life became more and more frantically importunate" ([1889] 2010, 177).

Harry's plans to "play the part of Perseus to this Andromeda" ([1889] 2010, 99) by freeing Viola from her marriage and absconding with her to Europe are unfeasible. His reaction to the murder proves he is not so different to Philip, since he believes she is insane. Despite his love, he is unable to understand and justify this murder as a form of self-defence and indeed "a flicker of repulsion passed across his face" (2010, 317). This is a moment of awakening as Viola realises no one can save her. As Marino suggests, Viola recovers her agency, willpower and subjectivity when she kills Philip, and as a result, she does not repent (2022, 110). As she says to Harry: "you think me mad, but I understand better than you do how things are. We stand facing one another tonight; but there is a deep gulf between us, and it will widen and widen, so that your voice cannot reach me" (Caird [1889] 2010, 318). Viola's outcome is not to be understood as a punishment, but rather as a way of breaking the established mythical dynamics by offering an alternative in which the woman has agency in her own death and does

not depend on a Perseus to save her. Despite Harry's attempts right up until the last moment to save her, her silhouette on the clifftop is lost in the darkness as the clouds cover the moon, so her suicide can only be presumed.

From this perspective, Caleb's philosophical reflections become central to interpreting the end of the novel. Caleb Foster is a rather secondary character whose function is not clear on a simple reading of the novel. He is a scholar and philosopher who has been rescued from poverty by Harry. He is the "custodian of the castle" and the only figure on whom Viola can rely (Hookway 2010, 145). Their walks along the coast—later prohibited by Philip—are a time for philosophical reflection. The ideas they share impinge upon Viola and permit her to liberate herself by jumping off the cliff. While she does not follow the literal route down the cliffs that Caleb had pointed out to her for her escape with Harry, she does apply his deterministic ideas on free will to emancipate herself from all forms of patriarchal oppression. As Hookway suggests, *The Wing of Azrael* explores the outcomes of the suppression of discussion and language (2012, 173). Caleb and Viola's platonic friendship encapsulates Caird's ideal of equality and free discussion, which was highly influenced by John Stuart Mill's ideas. The power of dialogue for self-development and critical thought is evinced in this male-female friendship, as well as in the plot as a whole, which is dependent on such liberating conversations to advance. As Caird asserted in *The Morality of Marriage*: "it is certain that we shall never have a world really worth living in, until men and women can show interest in one another without being driven either to marry, or to forego altogether the pleasure and the profit of frequent meeting" (1876, 103).

Caleb not only suggests the idea of suicide as a rational way out when he tells Viola that "death could, in fact, be considered the great Emancipator" (Caird [1889] 2010, 271), but he also constructs a discourse that allows a deterministic understanding of suicide that exculpates it because of the social oppression that triggers it:

> "We must not forget," the philosopher pursued, "that only a limited responsibility can be attached to the human being in his present relations with the universe. Without plunging into the vexed question of Free Will, which has set so many thinkers by the ears, we must admit that our freedom can only exist, if at all, in a certain very modified degree. We are conscious of an ability to choose, but our choice is, after all, an affair of temperament, and our temperament a matter of inherited inclinations, and so forth, modified from infancy by outward conditions" ([1889] 2010, 42).

The whole narrative of Viola's suicide is impregnated with symbols that favour its reading as an emancipatory act. A key element in this interpretation is the Romantic communion with nature achieved through voluntary death. The sea is connoted as a space for healing and freedom that acts as a magnet to Viola, "acting upon the heart of the little pilgrim as a trumpet-call" ([1889] 2010, 31). Indeed, her feelings and the

natural elements are connected: the waves seem to weep at her suffering, the storms accompany her most tumultuous moments, and the wind seems to push her to prevent her wedding from taking place. This bond is so strong that, when Harry and she are in a boat and confess their love for each other, Harry describes her as a "sea-spirit -consolidated like a nebulous young world- out of sea-spray and ocean-winds", telling her that she is a "dark-eyed sea-queen, daughter of the Twilight; some mystic, imaginary figure, with all the loveliness of ocean and of evening in her eyes" ([1889] 2010, 131).

All this symbolic construction becomes crucial in the narrative of her suicide, where the negative meanings surrounding her death—the sea and darkness being understood as nocturnal and descending symbols (Durand [1960] 2016)—are positively signified as a jump towards freedom and communion. Her death implies the fulfilment of a childhood wish: "She had just the same wild longing to fling herself upon the bosom of the great sea, the same childish belief in the healing-power of that tameless giant in whom might and gentleness were so strangely blended" (Caird [1889] 2010, 295). The embrace of the waves is an incursion into a symbolically feminine space of freedom, where her power acquires a mythical transcendence. Indeed, the motion of the waves is compared to the scant and slow social progress of women against patriarchy. Caleb's words are again a breath of hope that make sense of the cyclical erosion of the waves, which are slowly gaining ground and endangering Upton Castle:

> Viola remained at the window watching the waves as they rolled over, melancholy, dreary, unceasing. Such were the movements of human destiny, the restless everlasting labour without aim or hope. What was this ceaseless turmoil of the ocean but a weary response to the perpetual stimulus of a blind necessity? What did these eternal waves achieve, as they rose and sank and rose again, expending their force merely upon their own birth-element, effecting nothing? Caleb Foster said that in the course of ages they wore away the land by their ceaseless fretting, and added thus a few miles to the dominion of the ocean. Perhaps the human waves were also wearing something away with their repeated onslaughts, adding thus to the dominion of –what? That was the awful question. And in any case was it worth while? ([1889] 2010, 199)

4. Conclusions

The Wing of Azrael retells the myth of women's oppression by rewriting the literary motif of the drowned woman, an artistic trope that was profusely cultivated as a patriarchal tool during the second half of the nineteenth century. In this case, Viola's suicide is devoid of any romanticisation, nor is her dead body aesthetised. On the contrary, the hidden reality of mental distress behind the beautiful tales and pictures of lovelorn and suicidal heroines replicating Ophelia is brought into the light and found to have little or nothing to do with the pre-Raphaelite image of the suicidal woman. Viola's sanity calls into question the account of the causal relationship between madness and suicide. The reflection on female agency and determinism allows Caird to evidence

a depathologised reading of suicide as being a consequence of the insufferable social oppression of women in and out of marriage.

Caird was a feminine myth-maker who reshaped the existing mythical patriarchal material to create a new tale for women to become aware of the historical oppression that had accompanied them since ancient times. She confronted a symbolic code that preferred women to be dead and beautiful rather than to have a voice of their own. By rewriting the Andromeda and Azrael myths, Caird denies a truth that had been validated by the cultural elites through medical, legal and artistic discourses: that of women's irrationality and weak mental health. Although Viola's story cannot be considered an example of a New Woman heroine, she is the last sacrifice that is made to evidence the need to break the chain of patriarchal oppression through marriage. In this regard, both her suicide and her husband's killing are justified by means of philosophical questioning that allows men to be blamed for the consequences their acts have on women. Rather than simply romanticising suicide, the literary motif shows the patriarchal violence that drives women towards it.

In conclusion, Caird creates a feminist Gothic novel in which the precarious situation of women is denounced through the case of Viola, who prefers her chosen death rather than imprisonment in a complicit society that condemns her to renounce her individuality. The literary theme of the suicidal woman is placed at the service of a committed and feminist writing. It not only denies the univocal relationship between female madness, irrationality and passionate suicide; it also deconstructs the established and eroticised image in favour of a cruder one in which the will and agency of suicidal women are recognised, pointing to the reasons that led them to the situation of despair for which they were not biologically predestined.

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