

# Pox, Prose, and Prostitution: Masculine Anxiety, the Myth of the Male Author, and the Late-Victorian ‘Exchange Economy’ in George Gissing’s *New Grub Street*

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## ABSTRACT

George Gissing’s friend and fellow novelist, H. G. Wells, would remember the ‘last decade of the nineteenth century’ as ‘an extraordinarily favourable time for new writers’ (H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries of a Very Ordinary Brain, Volume II (Since 1866)* (London: Gollancz, 1934), p. 506). His experience fits neatly with the myths of the successful Victorian male author that were in circulation throughout the century. For the vast majority of writers, however, the reality was quite different. As many scholars have recognized, George Gissing’s 1891 novel, *New Grub Street*, presents a realistic portrayal of the travails of the average writer trying to live by their pen at the turn of the century. Nonetheless, little work has examined these economic travails against the backdrop of nineteenth-century images of male authorship. Bringing together work on Victorian masculinities, research on cultural depictions of syphilis, and work on the nineteenth-century marketplace alongside current Gissing scholarship and primary sources, this article will argue that Gissing’s novel foregrounds the shared ‘exchange economy’ of prostitution and the literary market to explore specifically masculine anxieties around the male author at the *fin de siècle* (Monika Pietrzak-Franger, *Syphilis in Victorian Literature and Culture: Medicine, Knowledge and the Spectacle of Victorian Invisibility* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 131.). In tracing the interconnections of pox, prose, and prostitution, this article re-negotiates the novel’s relationship with other images of Victorian authorship, as well as using work on cultural depictions of syphilis to position the text in a new field.

**KEYWORDS:** masculinities, authorship, George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, syphilis

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE MALE AUTHOR AND THE ‘EXCHANGE ECONOMY’

Novel-writing was a ‘trade of the damned,’ claimed a rather agitated George Gissing to his tutee, Austin Harrison, sometime in the 1880s.<sup>1</sup> His quotation is suggestive, capturing not only a general feeling of despondency but tacitly alluding to the novelist’s plummeting professional status and feeling of social ostracism at the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the increased

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in George Gissing, *London and the Life of Literature in Late Victorian England: The Diary of George Gissing, Novelist*, ed. by Pierre Coustillas (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), p. 1. As John Spiers and other collaborators have also recently explored, through his economic precarity, his relationship with readers and publishers, and his position in the global literary city of London, Gissing was at the centre of these *fin-de-siècle* negotiations between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. See John Spiers (ed.), *Gissing and the City: Cultural Crisis and the Making of Books in Late Victorian England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Bowlby claims that the literary mass market had transformed the novel into an ‘object of immediate consumption, to be devoured and thrown away’. Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (New York, NY: Methuen, 1985), p. 100.

opportunity to live by one's pen, it was not always 'a golden time for authors', as one anonymous letter-writer to *The Author* would lament.<sup>3</sup>

As scholars have recognized, Gissing's oeuvre, perhaps more than any other Victorian author, explores the effect of macrocosmic economic systems on the individual.<sup>4</sup> Work by Simon J. James and Sue McPherson in particular has examined the overarching economy through its everyday symbols (notably, money and clothing).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in recent years, a number of important articles and chapters have also analysed women's empowerment in a number of different micro-economies in Gissing's work, from the shop-girl to the literary New Woman.<sup>6</sup> There has been little work, however, that explores the economies of masculinity.<sup>7</sup> Bringing into dialogue work on Victorian masculinities, burgeoning research on cultural depictions of syphilis at the *fin de siècle*, and established work on the nineteenth-century literary marketplace, this article will argue that George Gissing's 1891 novel, *New Grub Street*, expresses specifically masculine anxieties around the status of the male author in the *fin-de-siècle* literary world.<sup>8</sup> In particular, I explore how the novel's sexual-literary economies undermine a wider masculine mythology of authorship, and situate the novel within a new branch of interdisciplinary epidemiological scholarship that examines the symbolism of syphilis resonating throughout the literature of the era.

For Monika Pietrzak-Franger and Thomas Laqueur, the expansion of the mass market heralded the beginning of an 'exchange economy' that conflated the sexual coveting of (often diseased) bodies with the craving for goods through a cultivation of desire.<sup>9</sup> Within this

<sup>3</sup> Lunette, 'IV. Literary Grab-Alls', *Correspondence, The Author*, VIII, 1 September 1896 (p. 96), in *The History of the Society of Authors, 1884–1914* < <https://historysoa.com/The-Author-Issues/1896-09-01-The-Author-7-4> > [accessed 25 November 2021].

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, John Halperin, *Gissing: A Life in Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> See Simon J. James, *Unsettled Accounts: Money and Narrative in the Novels of George Gissing* (London: Anthem Press, 2003) and Sue McPherson, 'Gissing's *New Grub Street* and the Wider Concerns of Impoverishment', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 60 (2017), 490–505.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Marisa Palacios Knox, "'The Valley of the Shadow of Books': George Gissing, New Woman, and Morbid Literary Detachment", *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 69 (2014), 92–122, and Emma Liggins, *George Gissing, the Working Woman, and Urban Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006). There are also a number of articles in John Spiers' edited collection, including Meaghan Clarke on female art journalists, Elizabeth F. Evans on the shop girl, and Laura Yorachek on the New Woman musician. See Spiers (ed.), *Gissing and the City*.

<sup>7</sup> One notable exception is Andrew Dowling's *Manliness and the Male Novelist in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2001). Liz Hedgecock also examines the Darwinian mechanics of masculinity in Gissing's novel. See Liz Hedgecock, "'A Man of His Day": Literary Evolution and Masculinity in George Gissing's *New Grub Street*', in *Signs of Masculinity: Men in Literature 1700 to the Present*, ed. by Antony Rowland, Emma Liggins and Eriks Uskalis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 117–38. A number of other works on masculinities in Victorian literature have also provided an important intellectual backdrop to this article. See Martin A. Danahay, *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), Phillip Mallett (ed.), *The Victorian Novel and Masculinity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and Scott McCracken, *Masculinities, Modernist Fiction and the Urban Public Sphere* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). All further references to this edition will be made within the text. There are a number of useful works covering the Victorian literary marketplace. Peter Keating and Philip Waller in particular both provide encyclopaedic works on the late-Victorian literary world. See Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875–1914* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989) and Philip Waller, *Writers, Readers, and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain, 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Pietrzak-Franger, *Syphilis in Victorian Literature and Culture*, p. 131, pp. 137–38. It is Pietrzak-Franger that coins the term 'exchange economy', adding the notion of infection to Laqueur's work on the 'imaginative connections between the worlds of the body and the worlds of the market'. See Thomas W. Laqueur, 'Sexual Desire and the Market Economy During the Industrial Revolution', in *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS*, ed. by Domna C. Stanton (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 187.

commodified market space, the inherently 'procreative' nature of the writer's position led to the 'metaphor of the author as whore' becoming increasingly 'commonplace'.<sup>10</sup> Although such a perception attached to all writers, it had a profound effect on male authors in particular, who had carefully cultivated the mythology of a transcendental figure untainted by the squalid market. Firmly integrated into this 'exchange economy', it now became 'impossible' for writers, no matter how devoted to art for art's sake, to remain outside of the public sphere.<sup>11</sup> This connection between the sexual and economic became even more pronounced and problematic towards the end of the century when it was co-opted by the social purity movement. Against the backdrop of the Contagious Diseases Acts and fears around syphilis-spreading prostitutes, this overlapped sexual-economic desire became both immoral and infectious. With its examination of the travails of a group of predominantly male authors at the *fin de siècle*, George Gissing's *New Grub Street* is a novel that sits at the centre of these interconnected discourses of masculine mythology, economy, and infection.

As the author-husband to a prostitute wife, Gissing and his work allegorize a multidimensional space within this wider cultural imagination.<sup>12</sup> Through such an intersection, both personal and artistic, *New Grub Street* draws attention to the anxious gender space of the male author in the late-Victorian period. The novel foregrounds this overlap between the prostitute and the author in its setting; at once combining the Grub Street of Dr Johnson's day, an impoverished district of hack-writers, unsuccessful artists and part-time poets, and the London underworld of late-Victorian Granby Street.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the author's own experiences as a young man on the 'cusp of gentility and squalor', a formidable scholarship student at Owens College who would spend his formative adult years moving between disreputable locations with his alcoholic prostitute wife, Nell, provided a privileged perspective of this British bohemia.<sup>14</sup> It also evoked something of nineteenth-century Parisian Bohemia, particularly the areas of ill repute Gissing, and his fictional authors, find themselves inhabiting. It was while living in one of his earlier garrets that Gissing came across Henri Murger's *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*, constructing from its pages a romanticized conception of Parisian bohemia. Unlike his own dank room, garrets in the French capital were full of 'wine, song, poetry, friends, and beautiful girls of easy virtue'.<sup>15</sup> It was an image of bohemian subculture that would remain an important reference point in his literature. Much like *New Grub Street* it was a place bordered by 'poverty and hope, art and illusion, love and shame', though, as the novel painfully comes to realize, the cold, dark and depressing British bohemia of the novel is very different from the warm descriptions of Murger.<sup>16</sup>

Irrevocably twinned with this Parisian ideal, however, was another image from outcast London: the cold, dead body of his estranged wife, Nell. She was the other side of bohemia;

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Gallagher, 'George Eliot and *Daniel Deronda*: The Prostitute and the Jewish Question', in *Sex, Politics, and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, ed. by Ruth Bernard Yeazell (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 39–62 (p. 39 and p. 41).

<sup>11</sup> Gallagher, 'George Eliot and *Daniel Deronda*: The Prostitute and the Jewish Question', p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, an early exchange of letters between Gissing and his friend, John George Black (which go into great detail regarding their mutual experience of venereal disease), suggests Gissing's experience went beyond the imaginary. George Gissing, 'Letter from John George Black (26 March 1876)', *The Collected Letters of George Gissing, Vol. 1, 1863–1880*, ed. by Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young and Pierre Coustillas (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1990), p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century: 'A Human Awful Wonder of God'* (London: Random House, 2008), p. 295.

<sup>14</sup> Dowling, *Manliness and the Male Novelist in Victorian Literature*, p. 97. See also Paul Delany, *George Gissing: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Delany, *George Gissing: A Life*, p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930* (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 3.

the destitute, the diseased, the forgotten and, most importantly for Gissing in *New Grub Street*, the commoditized. As Jerrold Seigel makes plain, on either side of bohemian art was the bourgeois marketplace or poverty; in Nell there was both.<sup>17</sup> So powerful was this scene, claims Paul Delany, it would come to define the author's 'entire life'.<sup>18</sup> Yet 'this memory of wretchedness' not only provided the 'impulse' to write as an act of filial redemption; in Nell's combination of infectious prostitute and fallen woman, of fear and pity, he was bequeathed a powerful allegory for his own place in the literary mass market.

That the broader comparison between the author and the prostitute became more prevalent at the *fin de siècle*, when the connections between literary and sexual economies were rendered visible through the social purity movement, is no coincidence. Through a discourse in which the lens of [im]morality conflated the medical, sexual and cultural, this relationship became ever closer as the 'potentially corruptive exchange economy' of syphilitic bodies was mapped onto infectious literature.<sup>19</sup> Works ranging from Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1881) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) to H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) not only depicted syphilis in content but symbolically foregrounded the 'poisonous book' as infectious vector.<sup>20</sup> As this article will examine, Gissing found in the bohemian network of prostitution, literature and syphilis a 'potent cultural metaphor . . . of *fin-de-siècle* unease' for the late-Victorian literary mass market.<sup>21</sup>

## 2. THE MYTH OF THE MALE AUTHOR AND THE LATE-VICTORIAN LITERARY MARKET

The iconography of the male author underwent a number of literary re-imaginings during the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> In works by Carlyle, Thackeray and others, he was alternately figured as a Romantic genius beholden only to inner vision, a 'Man of Letters' awkwardly poised between the spiritual and the workaday world, and a pragmatic professional channelling inspiration to turn a profit.<sup>23</sup> Each iteration served a dual purpose: to ostracize female writers from the literary canon whilst asserting a vigorous artistic masculinity against a feminized mass market.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Seigel, *Bohemian Paris*, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Delany, *George Gissing: A Life*, p. 135.

<sup>19</sup> Pietrzak-Franger, *Syphilis in Victorian Literature and Culture*, p. 131.

<sup>20</sup> Pietrzak-Franger, *Syphilis in Victorian Literature and Culture*, pp. 9–11. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1891]), p. 107. In Ibsen, I am thinking here of the unnamed books that Mrs Alving reads whose presence in the home evokes the same moral response from Pastor Manders as the later revelations of Oswald's hereditary syphilis. Moreover, Wells' Eloi and Stoker's eponymous character have similarly been seen in light of the effete and syphilitic *fin-de-siècle* decadent. See Henrik Ibsen, *Four Major Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (London: Penguin, 2005 [1895]); Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1897]).

<sup>21</sup> Roger Davidson and Lesley A. Hall (eds), *Sex, Sin and Suffering: Venereal Disease and European Society since 1870* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> For further work on different myths and 'styles' of masculinity across the nineteenth century, see Herbert Sussman's *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and James Eli Adams' *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> See Richard Salmon, *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> For excellent feminist work on male authors ostracizing women from the canon, see Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 1989); Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).

By the late-Victorian period, however, this demarcation was becoming harder to maintain. The huge growth in popular readership towards the end of the nineteenth century, facilitated by the 1870 Education Act, led to the number of writers increasing ‘fifteenfold’ between 1871 and 1891.<sup>25</sup> Such was the level of demand for everything, from serial fiction to periodical essays and one-volume novels, that a writer could now live comfortably from labour alone. This change was captured by Anthony Trollope who, in his posthumously published autobiography of 1883, would abandon those earlier images of pre-eminence and artistic inspiration by infamously comparing the author to a ‘shoemaker’ and a ‘tallow-chandler.’<sup>26</sup> The Victorian male author, first plummeting (in his own estimation) from genius to professional, had now fallen into the lower class of the labourer. By the 1890s, the late-Victorian phenomena of interviews and literary agents seeking ‘to sell the authors first and their books second’ established a situation in which not only the fruits of the author’s imagination but the very man himself was for sale.<sup>27</sup> As Gissing’s novel recognizes, the male writer was no longer simply alienated from his work; he was himself a purchasable commodity. *New Grub Street* can be seen not only as the apogee of these conflicting conceptions, uncomfortably spanning the successful Philistine writer and the penurious Romantic author, but as a textual expression of gendered authorial angst. Its anti-idealism goes one step further than Trollope by plunging the male author into the same metaphysical space as the prostitute. Unlike its literary precursors, *New Grub Street* does not attempt to maintain the distinction between a feminized mass market and masculine artistry, instead registering a palpable literary pessimism as the former overwhelms the latter. Where earlier authors created a mythology of self-importance through their figures – of men of letters, of professionals, even of respectable tradesmen – such a conception could not hold in the *fin-de-siècle* market where the ‘mystified aura’ of the author finally gave way to the ‘marketable commodity.’<sup>28</sup> Gissing’s *New Grub Street* continues this Victorian tradition through the anti-idealistic image of the prostitute, de-mythologizing the place of the male author in the late-Victorian literary milieu.

### 3. SOCIAL PURITY AND THE CONTAGIOUS DISEASES ACTS

The Contagious Diseases Acts were passed in the 1860s (first in 1864 with amendments made in 1866 and 1869) in response to rising cases of venereal disease in the armed forces. Under the Acts, a woman suspected of being a prostitute could be taken to a hospital for medical examination and detained for treatment and moral reform.<sup>29</sup> Arguments for and against the Acts raged over the next two decades until they were eventually repealed in 1886.

Out of these discussions came two ‘master images of the prostitute’ that populated the late-Victorian cultural landscape: the one ‘ruined’ and ‘victimized’ by wider economic forces; the other a diseased antagonist that ‘rot[ted] the body politic.’<sup>30</sup> Ongoing contestations surrounding the Acts all iterated a conception of the ‘fallen woman’; one that moved from a

<sup>25</sup> Nigel Cross, *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth-Century Grub Street* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1883]), p. 121.

<sup>27</sup> Marysa Demoor (ed.), *Marketing the Author: Authorial Personae, Narrative Selves and Self-Fashioning, 1880–1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> John Goode, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction* (London: Vision Press, 1978), p. 129, p. 130.

<sup>29</sup> Lucy Bland, ‘“Cleansing the portals of life”: The Venereal Disease Campaign in the Early Twentieth Century’, in *Crises in the British State, 1880–1930*, ed. by Mary Langan and Bill Schwarz (London: Hutchinson, 1985), pp. 192–208 (pp. 192–93).

<sup>30</sup> Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 44, p. 45.

libidinous harlot driven by ‘pleasure and vanity’ to a figure of pity, forced through desperation and ‘economic necessity’ to sell her body to diseased and vice-ridden men.<sup>31</sup> Articles vacillated wildly: whether decrying the ‘great increase in the number of women who infested’ the streets of London or lamenting the ‘male votaries of impurity’, images of prostitution, of innocence, and infection pervaded the Victorian cultural consciousness.<sup>32</sup>

These anxieties regarding male infection were expressed in the same periodicals and cultural spaces as fears around the author and the deleteriousness of *fin-de-siècle* reading. Most importantly, the language of infection and prostitution moved fluidly between both. Literature of all kinds ‘came under attack for rotting the minds of . . . readers, promoting vice, and subverting cultural standards.’<sup>33</sup> Books were no longer envisaged as morally and culturally enriching; they were now perceived as intellectually harmful. Concerned critics increasingly depicted literature at the end of the Victorian period in rather erotic terms, as alluring and pleasurable yet inherently diseased, surreptitiously locating the author and their work as a tempting yet infected Magdalena. Writing in the *Contemporary Review*, Thomas Wright would lament the ‘want of culture’ among readers who, with a ‘depravity of taste’, have developed an ‘addiction to low and vitiating forms of reading.’<sup>34</sup> ‘Never before’, he exclaims, ‘did the ranker forms of reading flourish so abundantly.’<sup>35</sup> Gissing’s friend, Frederic Harrison, would appropriate such terminology, decrying the noxious effects of the ‘poisonous inhalation of mere literary garbage.’<sup>36</sup> References to pollution such as those above proliferated during a time when social purity texts were proselytizing the interconnection of the medical, the moral, and the cultural, as the categories of “health/ill health” overlaid those of “virtue/vice”.<sup>37</sup> Within such a schema, the banning of dirty books and the saving of infected prostitutes became not just an issue of personal morality but one of public health, as concerns around the individual body percolated into fears around the social body more widely.

Warning against the polluting literary menace, ‘hundreds of articles on the subject of reading and readers were published in the monthlies and quarterlies.’<sup>38</sup> As Kelly J. Mays argues, taken together, ‘these writers and speakers . . . constructed and mediated upon a reading problem’, which was ‘a disease of the individual and social system.’<sup>39</sup> Moreover, as Mary Hammond has argued, anxieties attached to new public centres of consumption such as libraries and bookshops that permitted infections of class to be ‘carried like a disease from book to reader’, creating new cultural spaces in which ‘[r]eading and vice were inextricably linked.’<sup>40</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 81.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Disorderly State of the Streets in the West End of London’, *The Sentinel* (November 1882), 162–65 (p. 162); ‘Not a Question of Disease, But of Morals’, *The Sentinel* (September 1883), p. 234.

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Wright, ‘On a Possible Popular Culture’, *Contemporary Review*, 40 (July 1881), 25–44 (p. 27).

<sup>35</sup> Wright, ‘On a Possible Popular Culture’, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> Frederic Harrison, *The Choice of Books and Other Literary Pieces* (London: Macmillan, 1886), p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Lucy Bland, ‘Cleansing the portals of life’, p. 195.

<sup>38</sup> Kelly J. Mays, ‘The Diseases of Reading and Victorian Periodicals’, in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices*, ed. by John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 165–94 (p. 165).

<sup>39</sup> Mays, ‘The Diseases of Reading and Victorian Periodicals’, pp. 165–66.

<sup>40</sup> Mary Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England, 1880–1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 10, p. 31. Mary Hammond, Kate Flint, and Patrick Brantlinger’s scholarship on the ‘reading public’ and ‘literary taste’ offers an invigorating new direction with their examinations of the differing spaces (both physical and metaphysical) of readership, the identities of those reading, and, as in Brantlinger, what is at stake in both. See Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) and Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson*.

These fears were not only allied to a *general* dread of degeneration, as has been explored elsewhere, but overlapped significantly with more *specific* contemporaneous anxieties regarding syphilitic contamination and infected progeny.<sup>41</sup>

#### 4. 'THE YOUNG LADY'S FAVOURITE': SYKES, ADDICTION, AND PROSTITUTED PROSE

Sykes, the protean figure of Grub Street, embodies a discernible overlap between this pleasure and pollution of writing.<sup>42</sup> Blustering down Oxford Street, 'drunk and disorderly . . . in the grip of two policemen' (p. 331), the text locates him within a stereotypically 'low' social space. Fellow Grub Street sufferer, Harold Biffen, had earlier claimed that Sykes 'must be dead', declaring with sad expectation that he 'would die either in the hospital or the work-house' (p. 325) with his alcoholism and his association with these penurious locations surreptitiously aligning him in the same social strata as the 'fallen woman'. And yet, much to his disbelief, Biffen discovers that Sykes is not only alive but still employed in the literary trade, 'writing a London Letter' for a 'provincial daily' (p. 331).

The drunkard's presence amidst the civilizing culture of the library is particularly ironic given that such establishments were formed under the auspices of keeping their occupants *away* from the 'gin-palace' and the tavern.<sup>43</sup> Despite these philanthropic intentions, however, concerns soon grew that these institutions not only attracted 'loafers' and alcoholics, but that they simply exchanged one vice for another.<sup>44</sup> Journal sketches from the time depicted the damaging effects of the reading-room in narcotic terms. A story from *Fun* describes how one addicted patron comes perilously close to 'drying up' during one of the few closed days.<sup>45</sup> The connotations of such a phrase are apt: the reading-room was no longer a place of solace from alcohol; it had become a provider of its own addictive substance. As a vagrant alcoholic, Sykes undermines the pretensions of subscription reading-rooms as places of 'moral improvement, and rational recreation.'<sup>46</sup> Far from channelling the 'subversive urges of an underclass', communal literary establishments had created a home for them.<sup>47</sup>

In Sykes' reading-room, these wider cultural anxieties are reflected in the very building itself, which has seemingly shed any civilizing pretext. The building is a juxtaposition of culture and grime, described as a 'haunt' and mirroring the 'indiscoverable hole' (p. 334) Sykes himself lives in. The 'magazines', 'daily newspapers', and chessboards are situated amidst 'ragged and dirty' advertisements (p. 334); the 'splashing and spluttering' of the 'lavatory' alongside the 'confused noises' from the 'busy street' below (p. 335). The separation of the rooms catering to different tastes speaks to an unsavoury comparison between the library and brothel, especially the reference to the linguistically ambiguous 'chamber' that serves 'those

<sup>41</sup> For work on degeneration theory, see Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848–c. 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). For secondary work on the connection between literature and 'degeneration' anxieties, see Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson* and Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>42</sup> As Patrick Brantlinger recognizes, Sykes is loosely based on Dickens' own Bill Sikes from *Oliver Twist*. Gissing's Sykes takes advantage of writing for the new lower-class readership; a readership no doubt envisaged as being composed of his Dickensian namesake. Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson*, p. 187.

<sup>43</sup> 'Clubs, Reading-Rooms, and Lecture Halls', *The Athenaeum*, 2318 (30 March 1872), 400–402 (p. 401).

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Kelly, *A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain, 1845–1965* (London: The Library Association, 1973), p. 113.

<sup>45</sup> 'The Reading-Room Outrage', *Fun*, 38 (17 October 1883), 172.

<sup>46</sup> 'Clubs, Reading-Rooms, and Lecture Halls', p. 401.

<sup>47</sup> Matthew Battles, *Library: An Unquiet History* (London: Heinemann, 2003), p. 137.

who desired to write' and, two floors below, the 'exposed' newspapers (p. 334); a depiction that foregrounds the precarious position mass-market fiction was seen to occupy, bringing together concerns around empty pleasure and addiction.

The figure of Sykes himself unites these wider cultural concerns – both corporeal and intellectual. His gift for 'making very little go a very long way', coupled with his own prostitution to the market, leads the destitute writer to churn out light, frothy material with questionable literary value.<sup>48</sup> They are literary rejects, mistakes of the writing process; 'abortive essays' (p. 335) like those produced by the scribbling clerk he writes beside. Driven by economic necessity, Sykes is trapped in a cycle of delayed payment and instant gratification, prostituting himself through his work to feed his own addiction, whilst, ironically, providing fulfilment to the addict of the circulating library. Using alcohol as a convenient euphemism, the text depicts the overlap of reading, writing and corruption. As early as 1874, the poet Alfred Austin would lament the 'downright vice' of novel-reading: 'a vulgar, detrimental habit, like dram-drinking'.<sup>49</sup> Reading habits were increasingly linked with the 'most primitively sensual urges' whilst being tacitly associated with physical or psychological debilitation: 'Whenever a man loses the balance of his reason', one article remarked, 'he turns his attention to literature'.<sup>50</sup> Sykes foregrounds these wider cultural concerns around literature by inserting himself into an 'exchange economy' that embodies the circular dynamic of prostitution, pleasure, and pollution: one in which the metaphysical space of the male author more generally is inscribed throughout the novel.

It is this economy, the text suggests, that has allowed writers like Jasper Milvain, the self-declared 'literary man of 1882', to flourish. Setting out his position, Milvain declares that the new 'successful man of letters . . . thinks first and foremost of the markets' (p. 8). He goes further, stating that he 'knows perfectly all the possible sources of income' and that whatever the writer 'has to sell he'll get payment for it from all sorts of various quarters' (p. 8). The vagueness of his claim is allusive, bordering on the euphemistic. And this notion that he can receive payment from 'various quarters' is similarly oblique, suggesting a place in the metaphysical 'market' through a topographical rendering of the more nefarious alleyways of Grub Street. Milvain adds credence to this interpretation when he proclaims that the 'Grub Street of to-day is quite a different place', which not only 'knows what literary fare is in demand in every part of the world', but is populated by 'men of business, however seedy' (pp. 8–9). The word 'seedy' brings together the grimy and the erotic, simultaneously inferring a more generic squalor alongside a specifically sexual sleaziness and functions as a meta-literary code that evokes the social-literary underworld Sykes operates in.

Alfred Yule similarly identifies this mercenary aspect of Milvain, stating that the young writer 'will do anything that's asked of him, provided he's well enough paid' (p. 152), before adding that he is 'guilty of base things . . . just to make his way' (p. 153). Of his obsession with money there can be no doubt; Milvain himself would admit as much. But the sordid intentions implied by Yule go further than simply implicating Milvain as a philistine 'tradesman' (p. 8): the notion that Milvain is 'guilty' of 'base things' shows an especially seamy side of the writing process. In the divide between art and the market, Milvain is ostentatiously on the

<sup>48</sup> Sir John William Watson, 'The Fall of Fiction', *Fortnightly Review*, 44 (1888), 324–36 (p. 324).

<sup>49</sup> Alfred Austin, 'The Vice of Reading', *Temple Bar Magazine*, 42 (September 1874), 251–57 (p. 251).

<sup>50</sup> Mays, 'The Diseases of Reading and Victorian Periodicals', p. 173; 'Library Lunatics', *Book-Lore* (November 1887), 115–17 (p. 115).



side of the latter. At various junctures he can be heard affirming that ‘writing is a business’, and the sole purpose of the writer is to ‘hit upon new attractions’ in order to propagate ‘good, coarse, marketable stuff for the world’s vulgar’ (p. 12). It is through proclamations such as this that Milvain ‘unmistakably’ embodies the ‘modern young man’ of authorship (p. 231). He may be a ‘dreamy, literary fellow’, but he is fundamentally a ‘man of business’ (p. 414), who early in his career ‘made up [his] mind to be considerably better off than most literary men’ (p. 373). He cultivates the ‘art of success’ (p. 231), a euphemism that jettisons grandiloquent conceptions of art for a material model that irrevocably ties writing to income generation. Throughout the text Milvain champions this mercantile talent. His dialogues invariably become homilies to ‘trade’ as he articulates the principles of this philosophy: ‘I shall never write for writing’s sake, only to make money. All my plans and efforts will have money in view – all. I shan’t allow *anything* to come in the way of my material advancement’ (p. 107). This contrasts starkly with romanticized depictions of the artist above the humdrum quotidian. As if to highlight the new materiality of the artist, he stresses the importance of luxuries, announcing that he ‘had rather not live’ (p. 370) than go without them. Ironically, for Milvain, this production of lesser art is simultaneously the royal road towards higher culture: a throwaway article for ‘a box at the theatre’ or a ‘run over to the Riviera’ (p. 370).

This notion of Milvain’s ‘low’, prostituted writing making its way onto the coffee tables of the ‘upper middle-class’ (p. 13) suggests a troublingly infectious intellectual mixing. Though the degenerate alcoholic Sykes writing for the innocent readers of ‘The Young Lady’s Favourite’ is a potentially concerning cultural image, his contaminative capacity is narratively quarantined within the reading-room. Milvain, on the other hand, demonstrates a disquieting freedom in his body’s and his writing’s movement between the infectious, vulgar locations of Grub Street (those ‘various quarters’ he speaks of) and well-to-do households. In particular, the image of Milvain in the respectable milieu of Mrs Yule’s Kensington home speaks to the middle-class anxiety of the prostitute as ‘the conduit of infection to respectable society’, bringing up ‘filth and contagion’ from the ‘Victorian underworld’ below.<sup>51</sup>

At a time when the vast influx of readers created by the Elementary Education Act had expanded the marketplace, it had simultaneously opened up the possibility that, through sheer literary surfeit, some of these works would find their way into the hands of the middle- and upper-class reader, settling atop the ‘flood of literature that pours forth week after week’ (p. 404). If Milvain represents the philistine writer of the late-Victorian period, he simultaneously characterizes an infected class interloper, both as a professional writer muscling his way to the top of his field and as a contaminated supplier to the perceived vulgar predilections of a mass-market readership.

##### 5. THE ‘DEBILITATING DESK’: THE MALE AUTHOR AND THE POX

Milvain’s writerly infectiousness becomes even more allusive when re-located amidst contemporaneous fears of syphilis, the ‘symbolic disease of the *fin de siècle*’ and the occupational hazard of the prostitute.<sup>52</sup> As we have seen, metonymically connected to these seedier locations of Grub Street were concerns around physical and mental pollution which, in the shared idiolect of contemporary periodicals, would conflate the syphilitic prostitute with the infectious book. Alongside this public health scare surrounding literary infection were fears around the diseased transaction between *fin-de-siècle* prostitute and male patron, exacerbated

<sup>51</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 4, p. 37.

<sup>52</sup> Elaine Showalter, ‘Syphilis, Sexuality, and the Fiction of the *Fin de Siècle*’, in *Sex, Politics, and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, p. 88.

by an increasing horror of venereal disease as a 'dreaded social contagion'.<sup>53</sup> If the prostitute became a 'social leper', corrupted both corporeally and morally, the writer, too, was unavoidably tarnished, given this overlap of prostitution, authorship, and disease within the cultural imagination.<sup>54</sup> This diseased connection was so prevalent that anxieties seeped into the 'iconography' of 'English fiction at the turn of the century', particularly the work of New Woman writers, which frequently foregrounded the infectious male body.<sup>55</sup> Histrionic language of treatises from earlier in the century would acquire cultural purchase once again with the work of syphilologists (predominantly Jonathan Hutchinson in Great Britain and Alfred Fournier in France) connecting syphilis not only to bodily degeneration and congenital infection but to paralysis and insanity.<sup>56</sup>

Descriptions of the diseased prostitute and her male patron in these medical works of the time percolated into the cultural imagination, and strongly parallel Gissing's own male authors; all of whom are, as David Grylls describes, a 'mournful anthology of ailments'.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, despite Milvain's confident façade, he is not impervious to the effects of this writerly prostitution. In the first scene of the novel, he is described as a 'trifle meagre' and 'of pale complexion'; his physique delineated as the 'bureaucratic type' (p. 5). Such a description is not only somewhat deflating for Milvain's careerist ambitions but adds an extra layer of irony to John Yule's exegesis on the detrimental effects of literature on the clerky body (p. 22). His economic success at the end of the novel cannot conceal this physical degeneration. He is 'in his twenty-ninth year' yet would have passed for 'five-and-thirty' (p. 453). His hair is 'noticeably thinning' and a 'wrinkle or two showed beneath his eyes' (p. 453). The deleterious effects of the writing process are written on Milvain's features, speaking not only to wider fears of degeneration but also, given the specific cultural overlap depicted between the writer and the prostitute, foregrounding the entropic occupational hazard of the late-Victorian male author inserted within the transactional dynamic of the *fin-de-siècle* literary world.

Like Milvain (and, indeed, Yule and Biffen), Reardon is all too aware of these struggles of the modern-day market. He spends his early years on the edge of 'semi-starvation' (p. 55) whilst trying to ply his trade as an author. Working mechanically, 'ticking off his stipulated quantum of manuscript' (p. 107), he labours with the peals of Marylebone church and the 'adjoining workhouse' (p. 108) ringing in his ears. The proximity of the workhouse, a location associated with the 'confinement' of prostitutes and other 'social deviant[s]', not only metaphorizes the drudgery of Reardon's work but depicts the unfortunate remainder of the contemporary marketplace.<sup>58</sup> The 'thin, querulous voice' and 'the community it represented' (p. 108) is a perpetual portent for those like Reardon who cannot sell their wares.

<sup>53</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 59.

<sup>54</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 59.

<sup>55</sup> Showalter, 'Syphilis, Sexuality, and the Fiction of the *Fin de Siècle*', p. 88. As Tara MacDonald writes, New Woman novels with their references to 'male figures as "specimens"' drew on the discourse of the Contagious Diseases Acts that figured the body of the male customer as a 'site for examination' – and infection – as much as their opponents did that of the prostitute. Tara MacDonald, *The New Man, Masculinity and Marriage in the Victorian Novel* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2015), p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> Showalter, 'Syphilis, Sexuality, and the Fiction of the *Fin de Siècle*', pp. 88–89.

<sup>57</sup> David Grylls, *The Paradox of Gissing* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 93.

<sup>58</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 198. In his own anxious moments Gissing would express similar fears, remarking to his brother Algernon a year before the publication of *New Grub Street* that '[t]he workhouse is before me'. George Gissing, 'Letter to Algernon Gissing (22 January 1890)'; in *The Collected Letters of George Gissing, Vol. 4, 1889–1891*, edited by Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young and Pierre Coustillas (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1993), p. 190.

Unfortunately for Reardon, the literary world has changed irreversibly. While he harks back to the patronage of Coleridge (p. 180), his wife, Amy, reminds him that '[a]rt must be practised as a trade' (p. 46). The market has revolutionized epistemological and ontological paradigms: there is now only a continuum of more or less economically successful books. Reardon's writing pays enough to keep the family temporarily afloat but not enough to sustain them, and he is forced to return to his old job at the hospital. Unable to bear the ignominy of living in poverty with a clerk, Amy separates from her husband and returns to her mother's home. Living alone in a garret in Islington, it is here that Reardon's failure becomes indelibly marked on him as his attire begins to reflect his growing penury. Visiting Amy at her mother's lodgings in respectable Westbourne Park, Reardon's vestments mark him out as now patently of a lower class:

He had made himself as decent as possible in appearance, but he must necessarily seem an odd Sunday visitor to a house such as Mrs Yule's. His soft felt hat, never brushed for months, was a greyish green, and stained round the band with perspiration. His necktie was discoloured and worn. Coat and waistcoat might pass muster, but of the trousers the less said the better. One of his boots was patched, and both were all but heelless. (p. 305)

Though prostitutes were more likely to be known for their 'gaudy finery', both the impoverished writer and the prostitute are marked by a recognizable 'uniform' as part of a Bohemian underclass.<sup>59</sup> Their respective regalia is a degeneration of clothing that, once respectable, has since become lurid and tawdry. Reardon's condition bespeaks a shabby gentility as the 'soft felt hat', the 'necktie', and the 'waistcoat' of his middle-class days are now 'stained', 'discoloured', and 'worn'. As Simon James contends, Gissing, like Dickens, uses clothes as an 'economic register' of his characters' social status, and *New Grub Street* is no exception.<sup>60</sup> Yet, here, it serves the function of highlighting both Reardon's drop in class and a more metaphysical 'fall'. Indeed, similar to Milvain, the image of Reardon in the respectable milieu of Mrs Yule's Kensington home speaks to the middle-class anxiety of the prostitute as an infectious vector, and Reardon's dwindling literary success and fall into poverty is similarly plotted alongside a concomitant physical decay as he sits down to write, his face stamped with 'the pallor of mental suffering' (p. 42). Ailments early in the novel worsen over the course of the text until:

The past twelve months had added several years to Edwin Reardon's seeming age; at thirty-three he would generally have been taken for forty. His bearing, his personal habits, were no longer those of a young man; he walked with a stoop and pressed noticeably on the stick he carried; . . . Ceaseless perplexity and dread gave a wandering, sometimes a wild, expression to his eyes. (p. 168)

The passage conveys the enervating effect of writing on Reardon both physically and mentally. His body is decrepit, walking with a 'stoop' and a 'stick' for support. His 'countenance' is drained of 'present cheerfulness or glad onward-looking', and he speaks in a 'lower key'

<sup>59</sup> Nina Attwood, *The Prostitute's Body: Rewriting Prostitution in Victorian Britain* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), p. 5; Mariana Valverde, 'The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse', *Victorian Studies*, 32 (1989), 168–88 (p. 175).

<sup>60</sup> James, *Unsettled Accounts*, p. 31.

(p. 168). His eyes convey the 'dread' and 'perplexity' of his condition in their 'wild' expression (p. 168). His sleep is haunted by the 'intolerable task' (p. 168) he must wake to. In the throes of his 'unsoothing slumber' he talks aloud, protesting the 'injustice' demanded of him and 'begging for money' (p. 168).

Such a description parallels the fears of 'moral contagion' prevalent in contemporary works on the syphilitic male.<sup>61</sup> The psychiatrist, Henry Maudsley, observed that:

He is deeply dejected, destitute of energy, incapable of undertaking his work, in a state of great alarm about himself, and extremely sensitive to noises and to sudden impressions of any kind. The nights bring no refreshing rest, but rather an aggravation of his sufferings; he is sleepless, not from pain in the head only, but even when he has not pain enough to prevent sleep; or if he does sleep, it is in short snatches from which he awakes sometimes in a state of trembling alarm, hardly knowing whether he has slept, or even where or what he is, so that he almost dreads to fall into such unconsciousness again.<sup>62</sup>

The Victorian physician George Savage's work on the neurological effects of syphilis also strongly resembles Reardon's own symptoms. Vulnerable to the 'March winds', he is left 'invalid' and perpetually 'threatened' by the onset of 'bronchitis' (pp. 168–9). The text goes on, describing how 'mental illness seemed to have enfeebled his body' (p. 169). Such a connection echoes Savage's observations that 'constitutional syphilis may give rise to various shades of melancholia', inevitably 'ending in some lung disease if not cured'.<sup>63</sup> This constellation of illnesses also underscores the emulative capacity of syphilis that earned it the moniker, 'the Great Imitator'.<sup>64</sup> The 'congestion of the lungs' (p. 395) Reardon perishes of is thus not only reminiscent of consumption, that quintessential garret death of the starving artist: it also appears to mirror almost exactly Savage's observations on syphilis, the occupational hazard of the 'fallen woman'. Like the prostitute of social purity discourse, the novel correlates Reardon's worsening condition with his profession, his symptoms the writerly 'effects of study too closely pursued' (p. 51). Towards the end of his life, the text recalls how the 'sufferer's mind' was perpetually 'occupied with revival of the distress he had undergone whilst making those last efforts to write', repeatedly invoking the writing process alongside words like 'distress' (p. 399), 'torment' (p. 178), and 'suffering' (p. 300). Left a 'haggard creature' (p. 116), he is sunk into 'degradation' (p. 400). In his death throes his ignominious career is registered on the surface of his body; his eyes 'sunken' from reading, his writing hand 'shrunken' (p. 401).

Within such a reading the 'man's wasting body' does not become a redemptive symbol of artistic stoicism, as some critics have argued, but an entropic disease inextricable from the act of writing for the late-Victorian mass market.<sup>65</sup> Given Reardon's intellectual credentials, such a reading also denies any solace premised in separating the consumers of serious literature from those of throwaway articles. Rather, the very act of male writing, inserted explicitly within a transactional space that intermingles the imagery of prostitution, pleasure, and disease, becomes inherently commodifying. The visionary transcendence of the Romantic

<sup>61</sup> George H. Savage, *Insanity and Allied Neuroses: Practical and Clinical* (Philadelphia, PA: Henry C. Lea's Son & Co., 1884), p. 392.

<sup>62</sup> Henry Maudsley, *The Pathology of Mind* (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1886), pp. 480–81.

<sup>63</sup> Savage, *Insanity and Allied Neuroses*, p. 393.

<sup>64</sup> Deborah Hayden, *Pox: Genius, Madness, and the Mysteries of Syphilis* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003), p. xvi.

<sup>65</sup> Andrew Dowling, *Manliness and the Male Novelist in Victorian Literature*, p. 96.

artist, as well as the reassuring material separation of Carlyle's 'man of letters' and even of Thackeray's professional writer from the market they supply, is here dismantled not only through the 'disenchantment' of its production but through the painful reality of the literary 'exchange economy'.<sup>66</sup>

#### 6. 'ABORTIVE ESSAYS': PROSTITUTION, POX, AND POLLUTED LITERARY PROGENY

The novel overtly foregrounds this intersection of pleasure and pollution through progeny. While bewailing his lot, Alfred Yule describes his metaphoric residence on Grub Street as a 'life of toil' (p. 278), lamenting: 'Alas! how much of my work has been mere drudgery, mere labouring for a livelihood' (p. 279). Here, Yule's notion of 'labouring for a livelihood' contains several mutually reinforcing inferences: the first most obviously underlines the 'drudgery' of the preceding clause with the second depicting the writer as 'labourer' rather than 'man of letters'. The final inference links his 'livelihood' with the sex trade through the multivalent meanings of the word 'labour'. If the writing process is in some sense a conception, an example of 'literary paternity' through an imaginative birthing of a work wholly of the author's creation, 'labour' is also the occupational hazard of the 'fallen woman'; the bastard child of the prostitute synonymized with the unwanted work of the mass-market writer.<sup>67</sup> Reardon himself refers to the 'shame' he felt at the 'conception' and the 'repugnant task' (p. 142) involved in the creation of his novels. Like the 'abortive' work of Sykes, Reardon's oeuvre surreptitiously questions the artistic legitimacy of the novel form when only the illegitimate progeny of the process will sell.

The text thus foregrounds the overlapping late-Victorian fears of degeneration – cultural, physical, and sexual. Indeed, it is his son Willie's death that allegorizes the worrying infection from writer to reader, in addition to a scathing eugenic-literary allegory for the contamination of authorial masculinity. Willie acts as a nodal point for issues of prostitution and progeny which permeate the novel. He not only seems to inherit Reardon's writerly ailments but, in his barely discernible presence within the story, mirrors the forgettable 'abortive essays' (p. 335) of Reardon and the other mass-market writers. Willie's death, almost directly alongside his father, becomes a proxy for cultural anxieties regarding the mass market mapped onto contemporaneous fears surrounding congenital syphilis. The year before the novel is set, the syphilologist, Alfred Fournier, would describe in detail an illness that was all the more terrifying for the way its hereditary nature allowed it to spread its infection through the family tree – *d'une malade pour l'avenir*.<sup>68</sup> The physician, Dr Alfred Carpenter, would similarly describe the 'syphilitic poison', with all its horrifying symptoms, that would spread 'serious deficiencies' from the 'tainted' patriarchal line.<sup>69</sup> He would warn that those who do not heed his warning could 'propagate a further supply of ill-nourished, mis-shapen, and deformed individuals' in a quotation that would not look out of place in cultural commentators' exegeses on reading.<sup>70</sup> In visiting his writerly ailments on his son, the novel allegorizes this pleasure and poison spreading throughout the literary market, even infecting writing itself. Like the

<sup>66</sup> Salmon, *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession*, p. 9; Pietrzak-Franger, *Syphilis in Victorian Literature and Culture*, p. 131.

<sup>67</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 6.

<sup>68</sup> Alfred Fournier, *Syphilis and Marriage* (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1881), p. 68.

<sup>69</sup> Alfred Carpenter, 'Hygiene', *The Practical Teacher*, 5 (January 1886), 481–83 (p. 481).

<sup>70</sup> Carpenter, 'Hygiene', p. 481.

'abortive essays' (p. 335) composed in Sykes' reading-room, the text combines this notion of the 'tainted' with the forgotten and the forgettable. Whether Reardon's novels, Milvain's 'Saturday causerie for the *Will o' the Wisp*' (p. 160), or Sykes' stories for 'The Young Lady's Favourite' (p. 336), these literary products embody the unfortunate remainder from the prostitute's trade, the unwanted birth from a diseased process borne of economic necessity.

These interconnections between writerly prostitution, readerly infection, and literary progeny reach their acme in Milvain and Reardon's Grub Street neighbour, Whelpdale; a writer whose occupations involve the propagation, the *communication*, of ever more reading material. His early attempt at producing an 'Author's Guide', boldly claiming to teach novel-writing in 'ten lessons' (p. 192), sets a worrying precedent. Ever on the lookout for the next literary service to provide, the entrepreneurial writer later hits on a new idea for a paper that would 'address itself to the quarter-educated' (p. 407). Specializing in the 'lightest and frothiest of chit-chatty information', it is aptly to be titled *Chit-Chat* (a sardonic allusion to the incredibly popular *Tit-Bits*, which offered similar literary fare: 'bits of stories, bits of description, bits of scandal, bits of jokes, bits of statistics, bits of foolery' (p. 408)). Milvain forthrightly supports Whelpdale's vision, proclaiming that one must 'supply a simpleton with the reading he craves, if it will put money in your pocket' (p. 408). The verb 'craves' depicts the act of reading as a kind of sordid addiction which the writer must 'supply' (or exploit). Such language is redolent of the prostitute mollifying the sexual cravings of a degenerate class. It is also reminiscent of John Yule's prognostications on the perniciously addictive book (p. 22), as indeed it is of Sykes' grotty reading-room.

Testament to the time in which they are writing, and to *New Grub Street's* broader diatribe on the literary market, 'Whelpdale's noteworthy idea triumphed' (p. 424). The conceited writer turned business magnate sees his way to making the proprietor (and himself) a 'solid fortune' (p. 424). Even more than Milvain, it is Whelpdale who embodies the financially successful, though artistically and morally 'fallen', man. Of the latter's triumphant 'idea', a surfeit of 'imitative publications' follow, together allowing the 'quarter-educated' to be 'abundantly provided with literature to their taste' (p. 424). This last line is particularly caustic as it derides the vulgar predilections of the 'quarter-educated' whilst foregrounding the concerns around profligacy that concerned critics like Edmund Gosse would raise – the surfeit of writers adding more and more of their stock to the 'desert of print' (p. 95).<sup>71</sup> The act of writing has thus not only been transformed by its affiliation to the mass market from one of autonomy to dependence, from Romanticism to materialism, in its transition from artistic to monetary value the process of packaging and selling oneself by suffering for one's art not only monetizes this pain but renders the art itself tainted. The authorial role seems to come inscribed with a further occupational hazard in the form of the infectious act of writing. The demands to sell oneself to satisfy the desires of others inserts the novel's male authors within an economy that, Gissing contends, uncomfortably overlaps with the prostitute's black market.

Whelpdale's name – with its connotations of both emasculation and of over-breeding – becomes an apronym for the modern writer; one that subtly connects the 'man of letters' with the 'fallen woman' through the 'exchange economy'.<sup>72</sup> By sating the lascivious cravings of the masses with the polluting products of their writerly bodies, the novel suggests that the male writer's seed is spread for the growth of yet more bastard progeny: a cycle that keeps the

<sup>71</sup> See Edmund Gosse, 'The Tyranny of the Novel', *The National Review*, 19 (1892), 163–75.

<sup>72</sup> Pietrzak-Franger, *Syphilis in Victorian Literature and Culture*, p. 131.

‘quarter-educated’ (p. 408) plied with their favourite poison whilst reducing the writer to the emasculated and prostituted provider. From the failed ‘Author’s Guide’ to the successful *Chit-Chat*, Whelpdale’s motive becomes the proliferation, the whelping, of more authors, more readers, and more books. This, the novel suggests, is the state of the literary world at the end of the nineteenth century, and a fearful harbinger of what is to become of the male author in order to supply this ‘unwieldiness’ (p. 95). Appropriately it is Milvain who, in labelling Whelpdale’s idea ‘one of the most notable projects of modern times’ (p. 408), provides an *epigraph*, and, arguably, an *epitaph*, for the myth of the male artist in the brave new world of the *fin-de-siècle* literary market.

## 7. CONCLUSION

As a novel about novels, *New Grub Street* is a work with a metafictional awareness of the mechanisms operating behind it.<sup>73</sup> If Trollope’s conception of the male author as a ‘common labourer’<sup>74</sup> shocked his fellow neighbours on Grub Street as a lamentable fall from the reified ‘man of letters’ whose ‘transcendental insight’<sup>75</sup> detached him from the sordid market, Gissing understood that the nadir of such renegotiations could only be the male author’s complete absorption into the ‘exchange economy’ – with all its connotations of sexual and material desire.<sup>76</sup> *New Grub Street* presents an image of the male author that speaks to, whilst adapting, these earlier myths. Through its examination of the construction and exploitation of this mythology, the novel explores what it meant to live by the pen for the vast majority of authors in the *fin de siècle*. Moreover, as much as Gissing’s work intervenes in the ongoing re-imagining of the ‘male author’ by engaging with authors such as Carlyle and Thackeray, in the ‘symbolic power of syphilis’, his work can be located within a wider network of artists, ranging from the science fiction of H. G. Wells to the social realism of New Woman writers like Sarah Grand and Emma Frances Brooke.<sup>77</sup> As this article has explored, *New Grub Street* depicts an interconnecting network of writerly prostitution, masculine physical entropy and cultural anxiety. Specifically, Gissing’s novel foregrounds this ‘cultural production of syphilis’, intertwining its ‘visibility and invisibility’, through the nexus of the late-Victorian literary mass market.<sup>78</sup> In its ‘dynamic of supply and demand’, the novel reveals how a ‘larger social and economic framework’ is implicated in the creation of (literary) prostitution as well as its provision, providing a matrix in which the ‘fallen woman’ and the male author intersect within the cultural imagination, and reflecting wider authorial masculine anxieties.<sup>79</sup>

Gissing grounded this epidemiological metaphor through his enduring interest in the figure of the prostitute – both personal and artistic. Her centrality can be seen in an allusive quotation from Lecky’s *Morals* Gissing jotted down in his *Commonplace Book*: ‘She remains – the prostitute – while creeds & civilizations rise & fall, the eternal priestess of humanity, blasted for the sins of the people.’<sup>80</sup> Her presence can be seen most obviously in early novels

<sup>73</sup> For more on *New Grub Street* as metafiction, see Eitan Bar-Yosef, ‘“Let Me Die with the Philistines”: Gissing’s Suicidal Realism’, *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 14 (2003), 185–204.

<sup>74</sup> Trollope, *An Autobiography*, p. 365.

<sup>75</sup> Salmon, *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession*, p. 52.

<sup>76</sup> Pietrzak-Franger, *Syphilis in Victorian Literature and Culture*, p. 131. See also Laqueur, ‘Sexual Desire and the Market Economy During the Industrial Revolution’, pp. 186–87.

<sup>77</sup> Pietrzak-Franger, *Syphilis in Victorian Literature and Culture*, pp. 9–11.

<sup>78</sup> Pietrzak-Franger, *Syphilis in Victorian Literature and Culture*, p. 10.

<sup>79</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 21.

<sup>80</sup> George Gissing, *George Gissing’s Commonplace Book*, ed. Jacob Korg (New York, NY: New York Public Library, 1962), p. 50.

such as *Workers in the Dawn* and *The Unclassed* where she is portrayed as ‘the incarnation of the greatest good and the greatest evil, the highest and the lowest, that which is most pure associated with that which is most foul.’<sup>81</sup> Osmond Waymark goes on, asking ‘What has earth to show more rich in artistic suggestion than this?’<sup>82</sup> Though increasingly more peripheral, she also remains an important figure in his works from the late 1880s and early 1890s, *The Nether World* and *The Odd Women*.<sup>83</sup> By the time Gissing penned *New Grub Street* she may have retreated into allegory, but the prostituted author blasted for the cultural sins of the people certainly evokes her pariah status. Destitute, adorned in the ‘livery of poverty’ (p. 306) and invariably physically and mentally diseased by his occupation, Gissing’s work draws comparisons between the prostitute and the *fin-de-siècle* writer, selling themselves on the literary marketplace as Nell had done on the streets of London. In the transactional space of the prostitute and her customer, Gissing saw – at home and in society more widely – that these two positions, the creator of art and the producer of copy, were inseparable within the market dynamics of *fin-de-siècle* Britain. And in the debates of the 1880s surrounding the Contagious Diseases Acts and the later fears over degenerative syphilis occurring concurrently with wider anxieties surrounding the reading and writing of literature, Gissing was not only working within a cultural moment but was able to use this to critique the literary mass market in which he was operating.

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<sup>81</sup> George Gissing, *The Unclassed* (Victoria, BC: ELS Editions, 2010 [1884]), p. 260. Like Ida Starr, Carrie Mitchell occupies a central role in Gissing’s first novel. George Gissing, *The Workers in the Dawn* (Brighton: Victorian Secrets, 2010 [1880]).

<sup>82</sup> Gissing, *The Unclassed*, p. 260.

<sup>83</sup> In *The Nether World*, the reader is informed that ‘no permissible words would characterise the individuals with whom [Sam Byass] had roamed shamelessly on the pavement of Oxford Street’. George Gissing, *The Nether World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1889]), p. 383. Similarly, Miss Eade in *The Odd Women* disappears from the narrative as a shop-girl before emerging at the end having fallen into prostitution with, revealingly, ‘thin cheeks . . . artificially reddened’ and a ‘voice of the pavement’. George Gissing, *The Odd Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1893]), p. 329, p. 330.