

Florence Marryat's "The Box with the Iron Clamps": Pent-Up Grief and Guilt

Tatiana Kontou

By May 1868, when Florence Marryat published the first part of "The Box with the Iron Clamps" in the *London Society* magazine, she was a well-known sensation novelist. Readers glancing over the magazine's table of contents would expect that the combination of the story's title and Marryat's name promised both suspense and the revelation of secrets. A box, especially one clamped with iron, invites speculation as to what is being concealed. As the story unfolds, the reader discovers the clamped box is also secured with a padlock, a further provocation to speculate as to its contents. The box's owner, Blanche Damer, however, is anxious to keep her possessions well guarded and secret. Her husband, Colonel Damer, has recently returned from India, and her cousin, Bella Clayton, to whose house the Damers have been invited to spend Christmas, has shown little interest in the box.

Distant and unsympathetic, Colonel Damer alludes to his "wife's fancy for a travelling *kit* of old" (424, emphasis in original), marking the box as an outmoded affectation. Elsewhere he "facetiously" reflects that "there must be something very valuable in that receptacle," as if wilfully evading the question of the box's contents despite the "imploring tone" in Blanche's voice (425) when she requests that her boxes remain untouched. Bella Clayton assigns a practical function to the box by identifying it as Blanche's "linen-box" (425). Husband and cousin recognize the box as something intimate, but the disconnect between Blanche's restive feelings and her husband's and cousin's passing interest urges the reader to wonder not so much at the box's contents as at its power to repel curiosity. Marryat depicts the box as a hiding-place for precious things and as a dwelling-place for Blanche's thoughts and feelings. It is, to borrow a term from Gaston Bachelard, a "hybrid object, subject object" (99), at once inanimate and enlivened by Blanche's reactions toward it, and it

comes to stand as a synecdoche for Blanche's selfhood, containing and hiding parts of her past that she can neither banish nor lay open.

I wish to ponder this rather obstinate box, which Blanche uses as a keepsake and as a miniature purgatory, for Blanche is a "fallen" woman and the evidence of her "*fall*" (520, emphasis in original) is at once freighted with remorse and lovingly commemorated in the padlocked box. Marryat is candidly sympathetic to a respectable woman's fall and does not linger on the event itself but on the remorse and grief that ensue. She uses the image of the closed box, a conventional motif in sensation fiction, to store what will not go "*anywhere*" (424, emphasis in original) in polite society, namely Blanche's extramarital affair and subsequent pregnancy.¹ Lawrence, Blanche's former partner in the affair, who is also a guest at Bella's Christmas party, justifies her moral lapse: "[s]he *was* then, thoroughly unhappy, as scores of women are, simply because the hearts of the men they are bound to are opposed to theirs in every taste and feeling" (521, emphasis in original). These details provide a critique of marriage and its restriction of elective affinities rather than of Blanche, described as an "unselfish woman" who gave into Lawrence's "selfish" desire (521). From such hints, the reader may deduce that the box contains the remains of Blanche's newborn baby. The contents, however, are not explicitly described by the narrator until after Blanche's death, when Lawrence opens the box for Bella to see "carefully laid amidst withered flowers and folds of cambric, the tiny skeleton of a new-born creature" (521). Marryat avoids calling this figure a baby; it is liminal, a "creature," "whose angel even then beholding the Face of his Father in Heaven" (521) revivifies the relics that are presented as peaceful, even beautiful. Marryat notably pares down the Gothic connotations in this passage: the skeleton, covered in soft fabric and flowers, is that of a baby lost, and the infant's illegitimacy (its father is the Father in Heaven) is eclipsed by the scene's poignancy.

Marryat invites her contemporaries to show the fallen woman empathy rather than blunt judgment. Blanche might have enjoyed sexual relations outside of marriage, but now she is a grieving mother, overwrought by the strain of concealing her child's existence and the trauma of its death, presumably unbaptized. She feels deep regret for having an affair and indelible pain after losing her baby. According to religious tracts of the time, a child's death was "intended as a spiritual challenge that could purify the parents' souls" (Jalland 122), so Blanche's deep maternal grief compresses the magnitude of her "fall" into a sin for which she should atone. Her purification is enhanced by the description of her physical and mental deterioration. She "had been beautiful in her early youth" (424), but after the affair, her face is "worn," the eyes "hollow" (425), and "her hair, which had once been abundant and glossy," (426) is mostly lost. Her "slight, willowy figure, and a complexion which was almost transparent in its delicacy" (426) transform Blanche into a ghost of her former self, once "a high-couraged creature" and the "life of the house" (427). Blanche's "black evening-robe," which accentuates the "falling away of her figure" (426), presents an animated memento mori, a moving relic of a self that once was and will no longer be.

The box keeps safe the materiality of Blanche's past; it holds her transgression and most importantly, her motherhood. After her first encounter with Lawrence at the Christmas party, Blanche, is alone in her room, ruminating. Marryat writes:

"There is nothing in my possession," she cried, "that really belongs to me but *this*—this which I loathe and abhor, and love and weep over at one and the same moment." And, strange to relate, Mrs. Damer turned on her side and kneeling by the iron-clamped chest pressed her lips upon its hard, unyielding surface, as if it had life wherewith to answer her embrace. (428)

Blanche's kiss, a very physical act of intimacy and passion, is a moment of affirmation that the relics in the box still maintain something of the self's presence, as if life is stirred back

into them through the lovingly bestowed kiss. According to Deborah Lutz, the Victorians' reverence of relics "help[s] make apparent the terrible poignancy of the body becoming an object; it could reenact that moment again and again. Relic culture expressed a willingness to dwell with loss itself, to linger over the evidence of death's presence woven into the texture of life" (8). Blanche refuses to let go of her baby by keeping the clamped box close to her. She had previously "tried to get rid of [the box] but to no purpose" (430), and she is now intensely possessive of it. We might suspect that the box enables Blanche to create a material representation of her loss, because nothing (for the baby is dead and its existence concealed) would have remained had she relinquished the box's contents.

Contemporary readers of this story would have been well versed in public and legislative debates over the concealment of pregnancy and infanticide. William Burke Ryan in *Infanticide: Its Law, Prevalence, Prevention, and History* (1862) deploys a motif that forms the crux of Marryat's story: "Turn where we may, still are we met with the evidence of widespread crime. In the quiet of the bedroom we raise the box-lid, and the skeletons are there" (qtd. in Hunt 75). Where Burke Ryan uses the Gothic motif of the skeleton in the bedroom box to expose and condemn the practice of infanticide, Marryat uses it to explore the emotional freight of Blanche's maternal loss. Importantly, the story does not suggest infanticide has taken place, although the reader, through Lawrence's questioning of Blanche, might initially entertain this possibility.

During her final hours, Blanche hears the baby's cries and the text thus shatters the silence surrounding the infant's existence. Irrespective of the baby's illegitimacy and lack of Christian burial rites, Blanche sees "Heaven open tonight, and a child spirit pleading with the Woman-born for us; and that the burden is lifted off my soul at last" (519). Lawrence destroys the box after he has placed the baby inside Blanche's coffin. Blanche's final

internment (for she has been burying herself for years in the small black box) with her baby's remains follows the spiritual reunion she has achieved in her heavenly vision.

"The Box with the Iron Clamps" promises sensational secrets and revelations that never truly gather force. Instead Marryat's readers are forced to ponder the extent to which they are complicit in boxing-up uncomfortable issues such as illegitimate pregnancy and the much-debated figure of the "fallen woman." Marryat pares down the expected sensation fiction motifs because she chooses to start the story not with the careless abandon of a woman in love, which leads to her fall, but with a woman ravaged by unspoken grief and guilt and by the death in life that the black box signifies. As Brittany Roberts has noted, sensational short stories did not face the same expectations as novels with regards to social proprieties because they were less remunerative and editors thus tended to be light-handed in censoring them.² These factors contributed to Marryat's treatment of female sexual transgression in a story in which the most shocking element is not the protagonist's fall but her inability to forgive herself. The *London Society* of "*Light and Amusing Literature*" gave Marryat the space for a reflexive engagement with the act of concealment and fear of exposure. Rather than further contribute to the public shaming of fallen women, Marryat examined an illegitimate affair and pregnancy with compassion.

Notes

1. Georgina O'Brien Hill reads "The Box with the Iron Clamps" as a critique of society's treatment of women's histories that disallows them to publicly grieve for what they have lost. O'Brien Hill discusses Blanche Damer as a figure whose inability to grieve publicly for her lost baby pushes her further into melancholy.
2. See Roberts.

Works Cited

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Penguin, 2014.

Hunt, Aeron. "Calculations and Concealments: Infanticide in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2006, pp. 71–94.

Jalland, Pat. *Death in the Victorian Family*. Oxford UP, 1996.

Lutz, Deborah. *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Cambridge UP, 2015.

O'Brien Hill, Georgina. "'Nothing Can Wipe Out the Memory': Remembering the Dead in Florence Marryat's 'The Box with the Iron Clamps.'" *Acts of Memory: The Victorians and Beyond*, edited by Ryan Barnett and Serena Trowbridge, Cambridge Scholars, 2010, pp. 137–50.

Marryat, Florence. "The Box with the Iron Clamps." *London Society: A Magazine of Light and Amusing Literature for the Hours of Relaxation*, vol. 13, no. 77, 1868, pp. 422–31; vol. 14, no. 78, 1868, pp. 515–22.

Miller, Andrew H. *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Cornell UP, 2008.

Roberts, Brittany. "Short Fiction." *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, edited by Pamela K. Gilbert, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 374–86.