

P e n d e n n i s: The Strategies of Discontent

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The History of Pendennis, one of Thackeray's less appreciated novels, is analysed as a complex symbolical text which deals with Victorian sexual politics. The basic argument of the article is that the text undermines the social/narrative codes it ironically adopts by developing a striking and powerful subtext of subversion.

Thackeray is one of the Victorians who profited by the proliferation of literary theories in the last three decades. Before that, during the reign of modernist criticism, his reputation flagged as early modernism defined itself in reaction against writers of the mid-Victorian period. Thackeray produced the type of texts that modernism would largely come to consider as outdated and perhaps even less literary, texts which used authorial narration – a kind of narrative mediation ostracised by the bulk of modernist poetics, and texts which were somehow difficult to describe as “the art of fiction”, but easily shelved, or rather closeted as monsters. On the other hand, the representative Thackeray critics, such as Gordon N. Ray and the Tillotsons, accounted for much of their fascination with Thackeray by trying to bring him closer to the Jamesian-based poetics of the novel or in accordance with the notion of greatness in English literature produced by F. R. Leavis.¹ New theoretical discourses changed the tone and type of Thackeray criticism, or at least created a possibility for such a change. The narratological declaration of equality of all types of narrative situations helped a renewal of interest in the Victorian novel, as may be easily demonstrated by the works of such narrative

1. See for instance Gordon N. Ray's two-volume biography of Thackeray, *Thackeray: The Uses of Adversity (1811-1846)*, Oxford University Press, London 1955, and *Thackeray: The Age of Wisdom, (1847-1863)*, Oxford University Press, London 1958.; then Kathleen Tillotson's *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, Oxford University Press, London 1956, and Geoffrey Tillotson's *Thackeray the Novelist*, Methuen and Co., London 1963. Ray wanted Thackeray into the Great Tradition, and the Tillotsons wanted to squeeze Thackeray into Jamesian poetics. G. Tillotson also tried to show that Thackeray influenced George Eliot and Henry James, two writers from the Great Tradition.

typologists as Seymour Chatman and Franz Stanzel.² Other critics resorted to Thackeray's writing to exemplify their theories of textuality and reading. Wolfgang Iser's readings of *Vanity Fair* and *Henry Esmond* were intended to demonstrate the way in which the reader is changed by the process of reading, embedded in horizon-spreading textual lacunae.³ J. Hillis-Miller produced a deconstructive interpretation of *Henry Esmond*, the novel he praised as "the masterwork of Victorian irony, or of irony as such"⁴; his aim was to expose the self-deconstructive nature of textuality by following the effects of irony in this novel.

This short, selective and intentionally crude sketch of the situation in Thackeray criticism, indicative to some extent of trends in criticism as such, is meant to give an idea of what I shall not try to do in my reading of *Pendennis*. Though Iser and Miller unleashed potentials and vehicles of meaning-making in Thackeray's writing such as remained largely unobserved in traditional criticism, they immediately confined them within the limits of their own models of textuality. In doing so, Iser and Miller both locked history out of the privilege of meaning-making, in effect creating highly formalistic, historical discourses. Instead of proceeding from such a rigidly formalistic viewpoint, I shall try to develop a "situational" approach, giving voice to that hitherto unheard meaning-spinning in *Pendennis* which is related to a historically specific context or situation. The basic idea on the juncture and interplay between textuality and history from which I shall depart is a situational one: "that literary works are less *objects* than *strategies*, complex symbolic devices for managing certain often intolerable conflicts in historical experience itself".⁵

This means that I shall not look upon *Pendennis* as an exemplification of some key aspect of textuality irredeemably entangled in its own self-referentiality, but shall rather concentrate on specific historical problems posed by this novel and on its symbolic treatment of them. At the core of my essay will be an analysis of the work's sexual politics, an aspect of Thackeray's writing which has scarcely been addressed so far, though sexual politics is most often what his novels are about.

The Pending Chapter

Pendennis is, in a way, Thackeray's central novel.⁶ It was written between *Vanity Fair* and *Henry Esmond*, the two novels which have been considered Thackeray's best

2. See Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1980, Cambridge 1986.

3. See Wolfgang Iser's *A Theory of Narrative*, Cambridge University Press, Baltimore 1974.

4. J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1982, p. 73.

5. Terry Eagleton, "Editor's Preface" in James H. Kavanagh, *Emily Bronte*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1985, p. x. Eagleton describes Kavanagh's starting point in these terms.

6. There are several senses in which the novel is "central". In Thackeray's oeuvre it marks the completion of a transition from the earlier stage characterised by strong picaresque elements (in characterisation, story organisation, etc.), which were still very much felt in *Vanity Fair*, to the second stage in which something like the *Bildungsroman* predominates. Another sense in which this novel is "central" is ironic, as the novel deals with the idea of centredness and centring, which is central to Thackeray's work, inasmuch as it is continually questioned.

by a great majority of his critics. However, like the rest of Thackeray's writing, this novel in the main has been ranked as inferior to the two masterworks. *Pendennis* was relegated to relative obscurity in part due to a feeling that it reveals a "sentimental" and less provocative streak in Thackeray. Symptomatic in this respect is the opinion of the most influential of Thackeray's biographers Gordon N. Ray, who repeated the feeling of many when he claimed that *Pendennis* represented an attempt to "soften the asperities of *Vanity Fair*"⁷ (incidentally, Ray believed it was a truer Thackeray who did the softening). Without launching into a comparison between *Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis*, I shall try to show that *Pendennis* has its own asperities – that the novel functions as a subversion of an easily recognisable domestic ideology.

If not a comedy, *Pendennis* is surely a domestic novel.⁸ The world it portrays is the world of middle-class domesticity. More specifically, the novel deals with the problem of marriage. The narrative opens with Arthur Pendennis wanting to marry Emily Costigan and ends with his marrying Laura Bell. The two women mark (or feign to mark), in a manner typical of *Bildungsroman*, the "development" of Arthur's "mind", or an assumed "progress" in Arthur's judgement,⁹ which makes him embrace Laura rather than Emily or Fanny Bolton. However, this very narrative movement is countered by such disruptions as prevent us from reading this text as a discourse in support of that "progress".

The story – the instrument in the text which is the carrier of the sexual and familial ideology underlying that "progress" – works in such a way as to present several successive possibilities of "mismatch" for Arthur, which are then rejected by him one by one, until he is conventionally pacified in the conventional marriage with Laura. First in this succession is Emily Costigan, or the Fotheringay,¹⁰ a third-rate actress in a travelling theatre company, for whom her father continually tries to find someone rich to marry. In this episode, whose criticalness is contained in the very fact that it opens the novel, Pen is still under age. He is at that point already described as a creature of convention: "Pen began to feel the necessity of a first love"¹¹ – the suggestion that the problem for Pen is to find someone to fit a preexisting pattern foreshadows already this early in the novel that Pen's "development" is predetermined, a cultural example rather than a formulation of individuality. Arthur enters this episode and functions in it following a standard of behaviour which he considers Byronic as we find out from his reading: violent love defiant of social norms, rebellion, romantic escape, all tinged with

7. Gordon N. Ray, *The Buried Life*, Oxford University Press, London 1952, p. 49. Ray also saw this novel as an expression of Thackeray's "positive ideals" represented by the "sentimental" domestic values embodied in Helen and Laura.

8. The narrator of *Vanity Fair* calls the novel a "domestic comedy", W. M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1983, p. 219.

9. W. M. Thackeray, *The History of Pendennis. His Fortunes and Misfortunes, His Friends and His Greatest Enemy*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London 1903, p. 751. The whole sentence which ironically describes the aim of the story goes as follows: "Our endeavour is merely to follow out, in its progress, the development of the mind of a wordly and selfish, but not ungenerous or unkind or truth-avoiding, man."

10. Fotheringay is a place in Northhamptonshire in which Mary, Queen of Scots, cousin of Queen Elisabeth, was imprisoned and executed. The name ludicrously hints at one of the themes of the novel – intrafamilial fight for power, as well as at female occupation of a conventionally male site of power. In a way, Helen will "execute" Fanny Bolton, or at least lock her out of Arthur's presence.

11. Thackeray, *Pendennis*, p. 32.

a slight subtext of erotic desire. Ironically, Pendennis is represented in the episode as a Pygmalion – an interpretive Pygmalion. He functions here significantly as a totally self-centred reader whose interpretation of Emily produces a “text” which reproduces only his expectations and wishes and which does not have a lot in common with the text it sets out to interpret. The object of his desire, Emily, is not so much an actress as a machine put together by another Pygmalion: “Those who remember this grand actress on the stage can recall how she always used precisely the same gestures, looks and tones”.¹² Her stage Pygmalion is Bows, a member of the theatre company: “Where he told her to laugh, she laughed. She gave the tirade or the repartee without the slightest notion of its meaning”.¹³ Pendennis is so enthusiastic about her acting, that he takes his mother and Laura to see her in a play. Off stage, he also reads into Emily, who can hardly discuss any of the topics he imposes on her, including dramatic arts, but “he supplied the meaning which her words wanted”.¹⁴ The repeated motif of misinterpretation may be read here as a mere conventional ploy serving the purpose of moving the story along the expected lines – if there is to be a “progress”, there must initially be a misinterpretation. But a subversion is already heralded – the same motif may be read as a protestation against the kind of reader who will go on constructing the meaning according to what he expects to find rather than to what the text offers. This stands as an early warning to the reader – that in this text the conventional may not come to pass after all.

There is another way in which the text plays this early on double meanings, subverting the conventionalities it showingly uses. Emily Costigan is described as one who not only is given meaning by Arthur, but who also gives him meaning. She was the “centre of the universe, kernel of the world”¹⁵ to him. This highlights one of many truncated or displaced signifiers crowded in Arthur’s family name. The name Pendennis obviously reverberates, among other things, with intertwined meanings contained in *pend*, a full signifier in its own stead and a truncated trace of quite a few other signifiers. The verb *pend* may generally mean two things: to remain undecided or unsettled, or to hang, to be suspended (etymology makes the latter meaning less metaphorical than the former). Similarly, the adjectives *pendent*, *pending* and *pendulous* also produce plural meanings: if Arthur’s mind is *pendent*, this may mean that it is not yet decided, or that a decision is *pending*, but Arthur’s being *pendent* may also indicate that he is somehow hanging or suspended, or *pendulous*, which at the same time may mean that he is oscillating like a *pendulum* between two points in space, or fluctuating between beliefs, values, etc. The suggestions of undecidedness and fluctuation may again be read as evoking the typical *Bildungsroman* motif, expressed explicitly elsewhere in the text – the hero’s search for his centre of gravity, his “kernel of the world”, which should put things in order for him, and end the state of *pendency*. However, there is an obvious deconstructive potential in the tension produced by the plural meanings – if Pendennis bears the inscription of being *pendent* in his name, does it not imply that his desired anchoring to a centre will always be *pending*, but never achieved? Or, does this indelible mark of

12. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

undecidedness not cast a shadow of doubt on the consolidating meaning of his conclusive union with Laura? Is the conventional ending with the most conventional marriage of all that Pendennis could have made in the book in this way not chained to a subtext which threatens to topple its conclusive position?

The Familiar Familial Story

What kind of conventionality is reproduced by the story? Tackling the question of marriage, and not just any marriage, but middle-class marriage, the novel plunges into the discourses of bourgeois sexual/familial politics. By marrying Laura (whose name indicates from the start that she may be the one to take the *laurels* in this marriage competition), Arthur embraces a familial ideology which involved some of the typical bourgeois mid-19th century sexual/familial ideologies and practices. Laura is a rather characteristic example of that type of conventional Victorian heroine which is often referred to as "angel in the house", after a 1857 poem by Coventry Patmore (who did not create that character type, but rather gave it a memorable name which had been brewing anyway for quite a while – Thackeray himself called such characters "angels"). This character type, which represented a role-model for middle-class women, was a product of a complex phallogocentric sexual politics, which exalted the roles of wife and mother, at the same time imposing a strait-jacket definition on femininity. It must be remembered that economically, politically and juridically women were not free agents during a greater part of the 19th century, and even a long way into the 20th century; they were even less free when married. The enfranchisement of women was completed only after World War I. Once married, a woman lost all her property to her husband, which was changed by law only in 1882. If separated or divorced, a woman had practically no hope of winning custody of her children. This "if" in the last sentence was indeed almost a sign of impossibility over a greater part of the century, as by 1857 divorce was granted only by an individual act of Parliament. Even when this was changed, the burden of the affair was much heavier on the woman, who still did not enjoy the same position in filing for divorce.¹⁶ In addition, there was no propriety for a woman to run a business. The dominant sexual division of labour prescribed that her place was in the house as the pillar of household morality. The man was free to penetrate all domains of social life, and the woman was allowed only a fairly limited space.

The underlying sexual politics, as well as its transgressions, was often the subject of Victorian novelists – Amelia Sedley or Florence Dombey, for instance, were much in accordance with the role of angelical woman, as Becky Sharp or Dorothea Brooke were in their different ways uncomfortable within it. However, there is a longer tradition behind this character type (both in literature, which often defined culturally desirable ends, and in culture itself), which goes back to the 18th century novel. Model women in the literature of the period – such as Richardson's Pamela and Fielding's slightly

16. This data are presented according to Richard D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas*, Norton, New York 1973.

ironised Sophia Western – served as examples of an impulse-controlled, decarnalised femininity as a source of domestic morality. In the Victorian era the attempt to quell middle-class feminine corporeality became even more intensive as part of the requirements of the angelical woman. Discussing psychiatric sexual politics of the time, Elaine Showalter states that woman's madness was explained by the "forbidden throb of sexuality and ambition",¹⁷ or by a transgression of the expected sexual and social roles. There was a strong conviction that it was woman's nature to be prone to such escapes from sexually and socially codified behaviour. "The female life cycle, linked to reproduction, was seen as fraught with biological crises during which these marked emotions /psychiatric symptoms/ were likely to occur".¹⁸ Such sexist definitions of womanhood entailed "Victorian psychiatric theories of femininity as a kind of mental illness in itself".¹⁹ To be an angel, then, was to accept the strait-jacket of social constraint, rise above suspicious biology, and perform only those roles admitted as appropriate: religious education of children, charity work, communication with servants as an in-between creature and – subsuming everything else – physical and ideological reproduction of the family, that is, reproduction of the same structure which defined and required her subordination and man's superior authority.

Such qualities became the object of exaltation much before Coventry Patmore. Thackeray's authorial narrator in *Pendennis* offers several ironic panegyrics on the subject of angelical women, represented in the novel by Helen and Laura, such as the one that follows:

I think it is not national prejudice which makes me believe that a high-bred English lady is the most complete of all Heaven's subjects in this world. In whom else do you see so much grace, and so much virtue, so much faith, and so much tenderness with such a perfect refinement and chastity? And by high-bred ladies I don't mean duchesses and countesses. Be they ever so high in station, they can be but ladies, and no more. But almost every man who lives in the world has the happiness, let us hope, of counting a few such persons amongst his circle of acquaintance – women in whose angelical natures there is something awful, as well as beautiful, to contemplate; at whose feet the wildest and the fiercest of us must fall down and humble ourselves, in admiration of that adorable purity which never seems to do or think wrong.²⁰

The succession of superlatives and eulogia in this panegyric (the most complete subjects, so much virtue, perfect refinement, adorable purity) is abruptly countermanded by the word "seems", which produces a curious caesura in the eulogic series and raises a cloud of irony over what consequently begins to look like eulogistic pretence. The ironic panegyric "praises" primarily the social coercion by which women are bridled into the socially consecrated role (by high-breeding and perfect refinement). Thus the focus switches from the qualities praised to their social conditioning. The eulogistic redistribution of family authority in favour of the angelical woman is additionally ironised by the very fact that the "wildest and fiercest of us ... must humble ourselves" at the feet of such women, which clearly shows that the supreme familial authority is not in the hands of "the most complete of all Heaven's subjects". The word "awful", which is associated with man's high reverence for the angelical woman, reappears significantly

17. Elaine Showalter, "Victorian Women and Insanity", *Victorian Studies* 23 (2) 1980, p. 175.

18. *Ibid.*, 169.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

20. Thackeray, *Pendennis*, pp. 16–17.

after several pages, this time describing Helen's authoritarian reverence for her husband: "she ... revered him as the best, the most upright, wise, high-minded, accomplished and awful of men".²¹ The ironic eulogies of the narrator alternate with ironic sexism: "These women were made for our comfort and delectation, gentlemen - with all the rest of the minor animals"²² - the narrator has Helen and Laura in mind. In another meditation on the sexual division of labour, the ironic sexism is resumed: "Damon has taxes, sermon, parade, tailors' bills, parliamentary duties, and the deuce knows what to think of; Delia has to think about Damon: Damon is the oak (or the post), and stands up, and Delia is the ivy or the honeysuckle whose arms twine about him. Is it not so, Delia? Is it not your nature to creep about his feet and kiss them, to twine round his trunk and hang there; and Damon's to stand like a British man with his hands in his breeches pockets, while the pretty fond parasite clings round him?"²³

The text makes sure that the reader recognises Helen and Laura as examples of a cultural construct of femininity. Interpreting at one point the title of the book, the narrator juxtaposes Arthur's self-indulgence and Laura's self-sacrifice: "In a word, Pen's greatest enemy was himself; as he had been pampering, and coaxing and indulging that individual all his life, the rogue grew insolent ... A person who is used to making sacrifices - Laura, for instance, who had got such a habit of giving up her own pleasure for others - can do the business quite easily; but Pen ... savagely grumbled at being obliged to forego anything he liked".²⁴ By that moment in the text, the word "sacrifice" has been invoked several times to describe angelical women. Helen, who cuts household expenses so that Pen may appear a greater gentleman, is put into a category of women who "are always sacrificing themselves or somebody else for somebody else's sake".²⁵ Putting aside the strange offhand remark about sacrificing somebody else (which anticipates Helen's treatment of Fanny Bolton), the meaning of "sacrifice" is evidently related to the sexual politics which invests man with the supreme familial authority, and of which Helen is a constant supporter.

The passage quoted above in which the narrator speaks of Helen's reverence for her husband continues with a social contextualisation of such familial relations: "If the women did not make idols of us, and if they saw us as we see each other, would life be bearable, or could society go on? Let a man pray that none of his womankind should form a just estimation of him".²⁶ In another of these highly ironic commentaries on the middle-class sexual politics, women's sacrifice, or their giving up their "heart's desire", is again related to the exercise of social control: "They are used to it - we take care to accustom them to sacrifices".²⁷ By Helen's sacrifices for Pen one is reminded of Julia Kristeva's discussion of possible female masochism generated by certain representations of motherhood: "Silence weighs heavily ... on the corporeal and psychological

21. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 674.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 609. For the full title see footnote 9.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 24. Knowing that the novels of the time had a very large female readership, this remark cannot be treated as that which it ironically advocates - keeping women in the dark.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

suffering of childbirth and especially the self-sacrifice involved in becoming anonymous in order to pass on a social norm. A suffering lined with jubilation – ambivalence of masochism – on account of which a woman, rather refractory to perversion, in fact allows herself a coded, fundamental, perverse behaviour, ultimate guarantee of society without which society will not reproduce and will not maintain a constancy of standardised household”.²⁸ It is significant that Kristeva’s essay starts from a discussion of the cult of the Virgin, or the Christian representation of motherhood, as “Christianity is doubtless the most refined symbolic construct in which femininity ... is focused on Maternity”.²⁹ In other words, “the resorption of femininity within the maternal is specific to many civilisations, but Christianity, in its own fashion, brings it to its peak”.³⁰ Not entirely unexpectedly, Thackeray uses the same paradigm for the characterisation of angelical women in a narrator’s panegyric on “maternal passion”:

The maternal passion is a sacred mystery to me. What one sees symbolised in the Roman Churches in the image of the Virgin Mother with a bosom bleeding with love, I think one may witness (and admire the Almighty bounty for) every day. I saw a Jewish lady, only yesterday, with a child at her knee, and from whose face towards the child there shone a sweetness so angelical, that it seemed to form a sort of glory round both. I protest I could have knelt before her too, and adored in her the Divine beneficence in endowing us with the maternal *storge*, which began with our race and sanctifies the history of mankind.³¹

The narrator offers to repeat the same gesture of kneeling admiration that he described in the other quoted encomium on angelical women, and uses very much the same glorifying language, but redefines “high-bred ladies” in terms of the model of motherhood and womanhood represented by the Virgin Mother. Though the passage treats primarily the mother’s relation to the child, it also provokes a reading which sees it as foregrounding of the bodilessness of the angelical woman, for which the immaculate purity of Mary seems a logical cultural model (note that the text says Virgin Mother, and not Mother of God). Also, to interpret this type of representation of femininity as a blessing to “the history of *man*kind, rather than to a history of *our race* (what indeed *is* the meaning of the presence of this dual denomination here?), is not too great a stretch for a text which puts so much emphasis on differences in cultural constructs of femininity and masculinity.

There are other ways in which the text slips into the conventional clothing of mid-Victorian sexual politics, only to find it bursting at the seams. Following Arthur’s “progress” (which will turn out to be more of an oscillation), the novel stages with curious anticipation a kind of “family romance” not unlike Freud’s. The story revolves very much around the process Arthur’s becoming a “Father”, i.e. around his occupying the place of authority in a definite familial scenario. The family in the psychoanalytic

28. Julia Kristeva, “Stabat Mater”, in *The Kristeva Reader* (ed. by Toril Moi), Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1986, p. 183.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

31. Thackeray, *Pendennis*, p. 24. This panegyric was of course triggered off by Helen’s passion for Pen. The irony of such eulogia is most clearly brought to light by the narrator’s switching of viewpoints. Several pages preceding this commentary the narrator says: “The unfortunate superstition and idol-worship of this good woman was the cause of a great deal of the misfortune which befell the young gentleman who is the hero of this history.” (p.18). The object of the idol-worship is Pen, of course.

discourse, as well as in this text, is obviously a phallogocentric one. *Pendennis* is about the struggle for power concentrated in the position of Father, and this dealing with a patriarchal culture is in a way announced by the very fact of the text's having a masculine name. Furthermore, this very name is inscribed with a phallic significance – *Pen(den)is* (not to mention the sexual dimension of the image of a pendulum, contained as a hint in the name). The story serves exactly the purpose of making Arthur comply with the sociosexual norms inscribed – or prescribed – in his name. I am tempted here to Lacanically say that one of textual movements is to bring Pendennis in accordance with Law and the Name of the Father, but I shall abstain from further *lacanianism*. Arthur's becoming Father is a process in the text which is followed by an exclusion of others striving for or holding that position. Arthur's father died when Arthur was quite young: "Arthur was about sixteen years old ... when he began to reign".³² The language in which the occasion of his father's death is rendered seems as if it had been constructed in anticipation of the pleasure of Freudian critics to come:

As for Arthur Pendennis, after that awful shock which the sight of his dead father must have produced on him, and the pity and feeling which such an event no doubt occasioned, I am not sure that in the very moment of grief, and as he embraced his mother, and tenderly consoled her, and promised to love her for ever, there was not springing up in his breast a feeling of secret triumph and exaltation. He was the chief now and lord. He was Pendennis, and all around him were his servants and handmaids.³³

However, Arthur's becoming Father is a little delayed. Legally under age, he is not in full possession of his little property yet, and his mother is the one in financial control. The novel insists on the significance of sexual-economic binds which regulate the relationship between Arthur, Helen and Laura. As we have seen, Arthur at sixteen is about to become the patriarch of his family ("Pendennis, and *all* around about him his servants"), but Helen is evidently still in charge of a lot that constitutes fatherly power. Helen keeps influencing Arthur's actions also through letting him be financially indebted to herself and Laura – Arthur's extravagance makes him borrow money from them, money which comes from their own fortunes. However, Helen's share of patriarchal power is regulated by her husband's will in such a way that she would lose it were she to remarry. On the other hand, there is an obvious suggestion that Arthur comes to take his father's place in more than one way. His love for his mother was always stronger than the feelings he had for his father, as the passage just quoted clearly shows. "Is anything the matter with – my mother?"³⁴ are young Arthur's words when he was about to be told that his father is dying. Young Pen easily adheres to his mother's authority once his father is gone, and is prepared to symbolically castrate himself rather than question her power: "Now Pen would have as soon cut off his nose and ears as deliberately ... made his mother unhappy"³⁵. Arthur's affection for his mother is a manifestation of an unsettled (pendent) duality (he will oscillate within throughout the text): his uneasiness with fatherly authority (and social authority as such) and his desire for this very authority

32. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

(which embodies and reproduces certain sexual and social relations characteristic of Victorian society).

On the other hand, Helen is an adherent and symbol of the very same sexual politics. Her very name – Thistlewood – is a sign of her adhesiveness. Also, it must be remembered that she marries John Pendennis for his authoritarian character (“the most awful of men”), and respects him for the very same thing she expects from her son: “how good he had been to his mother, and constant in his care of her”³⁶ – the older Pendennis marries only after his mother died. Helen’s self-sacrifice and phallogocentric adhesiveness are easily related to Kristeva’s description of the feminine role in reproduction of patriarchy: “Feminine perversion (*père-version*) is coiled up in the desire for law as desire for reproduction and continuity – it promotes feminine masochism to the rank of structure stabiliser”.³⁷ Helen’s masochism, perversion, *père-version*, is obviously her acceptance of the pendennisocentric perspective. She draws her identity only through man, and since John’s will makes another marriage impossible for her (unless she is willing to give up her class status), she turns to Pen for whom she early had marriage plans (Laura). The stipulation in her husband’s will actually prescribes that she should be a sexless creature, but her ability to suppress her desires was already a prominent part of her character, as we are told by a brief sketch of her premarital life, and especially by her affair with Francis Bell. Helen and Bell renounced their love for each other in the name of “duty” (Bell was blackmailed into a marriage, could have avoided it, but for their sense of duty and his fear that he would lose his living). This pattern of foregoing her desires or even having desires is repeated in Helen’s being courted by poor chaplain Smirke. Now, *Smirke* – through the very overtone of offensive familiarity about his name – draws our attention again to the class aspect of sexual politics embodied in Helen – the aspect which codifies the familiarity of lower classes as offensive and calls for a class endogamy. This is just one of many signals which emphasise that Helen’s masochism is fed by a desire for power, accessible only through certain class prerogatives. Helen’s resolute ignoring of Smirke’s advances may be read as a sign of her refusing to even contemplate the loss of her class position.

The text insists on identifying Helen and Laura (whose full name is Helen Laura). When Laura says “My life is hers”,³⁸ this is not just an expression of her affection and gratitude to Helen for bringing her up after Francis Bell’s death. Laura’s words echo the fact that she functions in the text as Helen’s extension and substitute, and that Laura’s marriage to Arthur is an outlet for Helen’s repressed sexuality. When Arthur seemed to be on the verge of breaking away from his mother’s control in his courtship of Blanche Amory, the narrator produces a curious actiologic discourse on the mechanism of Helen’s frustrations and projections of displaced desire:

But when, in the course of a month or two, and by watching the pair with anxiety with which brooding women watch over their sons’ affections – and in acknowledging which, I have no doubt there is a sexual jealousy on the mother’s part, and a secret pang – when I Helen saw that the intimacy appeared to make progress, that the two young people were perpetually finding pretexts to meet, and that Miss Blanche was at Fair Oaks or Mr Pen at the Park every day, the poor widow’s heart began to fail her –

36. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

37. Kristeva, “Stabat Mater”, p. 183.

38. Thackeray, *Pendennis*, p. 337.

her darling project seemed to vanish before her; and, giving way to her weakness, she fairly told Pen one day what her views and longings were: that she felt herself breaking, and not long for this world, and that she hoped and prayed before she went that she might see her two children one. The late events, Pen's life and career and former passion for the actress, had broken the spirit of this tender lady. She felt he had escaped her, and was in the maternal nest no more; and she slung with a sickening fondness to Laura - Laura who had been left to her by Francis in heaven.³⁹

The identification between Helen and Laura in the text takes place not only through Helen's displaced desire, but also through a movement of the narrative line which makes Laura's story a rewriting of Helen's in many ways. Helen's parentless youth was spent as companion to Lady Pontypool, and Laura is in much the same position in Helen's own household (though receiving far better treatment). The role that Francis Bell played in Helen's life is paralleled by the role George Warrington played in Laura's - both men were tied up in unsuccessful marriages, and both are suggested by the text to be in some respects better choices (George is Pen's "abler" friend) than the two Pendennises. Finally, the marriages made by Helen and Laura provide them with social position and stability - precisely that which Bell and Warrington could not provide. Both women opt for middle-class respectability, rather than risking scandal with their superior, but socially handicapped lovers. In this way, Helen's "watching over" Pen's affections and also her masochistic "idol-worship" of her men are again shown as a part of a class strategy which reproduces and stabilises the phallographic family structure. Helen's and Laura's marriages thus come to metaphorically represent a sociosexual contract/by which they are allowed to enter the power-invested phallographic family in exchange for masochistic repression of their sexuality - in both senses: as women who must change their sex to angelical sexlessness, and as creatures of desire who must quell their desire. Their masochism - their manifold sacrifice - stems from this act of acceptance of a *père-version*, without which society could not "go on".

Oedipal Family Versus Transgression

That Thackeray's texts involve strong Oedipal subtexts is a fact that has been only recently brought to attention: J. Hillis Miller pointed to the long-ignored but very obvious and self-advertising patterning of the stories of *Henry Esmond* and *The Virginians* on the Oedipal myth.⁴⁰ Like the two novels, *Pendennis* undertakes a rewriting of the Bildungsroman motif of "development" as an Oedipal story of vicious circularity: the "progress" of the hero is denounced as a regression to the starting point: Arthur does play out his role defined by a family scenario, rather than move away from this role. In addition, this circular movement of the narrative is inseparable from the fact that it focuses on a historically specific gender politics: Arthur's Oedipalisation (his marrying

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 293-294. Blanche is disqualified as a choice for Pen, as she only plays an angel, without believing in it.

40. In fact, Oedipal symbolism in Thackeray's oeuvre appears as early as *The Yellowplush Papers*, and structures virtually all Thackeray's novels. However, *Henry Esmond* and *The Virginians* are the most closely modelled on the Oedipus myth cycle - *Henry Esmond* on the story of Oedipus, and *The Virginians* on the story of Eteocles and Polyneices.

his mother's substitute), by which the story completes the circle begun by Helen's marriage to Pendennis, signals that laurels for completing that circle are won by the gender politics represented by Helen/Laura. However, the analogy with the classical myth also suggests that there is Oedipal guilt – that Arthur's marrying his mother's substitute can be read as the text's hint that in this way it withdraws its support to the specific phallogocentric familial politics. Moreover, Arthur's search for the centre will not be completed by his matrimonial choice; rather, he will himself embrace undecidedness (inscribed in his name), while resigning himself to his choice unconvincedly, as we are led to believe. In his sly way, the narrator highlights Pen's discontent at the end of the novel – after stating that Laura's life "is passed in making other lives happy", the narrator draws a portrait of an unhappy Pendennis, relaying what is obviously Laura's point of view:

"And what sort of a husband would this Pendennis be?" many a reader will ask, doubting the happiness of such a marriage and the fortune of Laura. The querists, if they meet her, are referred to that lady herself, who, seeing his faults and wayward moods – seeing and owning that there are men better than he – loves him always with the most constant affection. His children or their mother have never heard a harsh word from him; and when his fits of moodiness and solitude are over, welcome him back with a never-failing regard and confidence.⁴¹

Arthur's discontent with his mother's expectations comes out in the open in only one of his love affairs, the one which explodes with the class significance of the marriage ideals cherished by Helen. Whereas in the affairs with Emily Costigan and Blanche Amory Arthur ultimately only tries to represent the two women as harmonious with his mother's standards (or his uncle's, which are only a more worldly version of Helen's), with Fanny Bolton he gives up this attempt and openly rebels against Helen. The episode stages the conflict between Arthur's desire for Fanny Bolton and Helen/Laura as agents of repression. Arthur's desire is both bolted by Fanny and then contained within the bolted door of the domestic ideology. Arthur meets Fanny in Vauxhall Gardens and is immediately drawn to her ("what would I not give for a little of this pleasure"⁴² – meditates Arthur on seeing how Fanny got thrilled by a pantomime). He craftily loses her mother in the crowd and takes Fanny to a gallery to watch the fireworks. The language used to portray Fanny as she watches the fireworks reverberates with erotic connotations:

How she wondered! how happy she was! how she cried Oh, oh, oh, as the rockets soared into the air, and showered down in azure, and emerald, and vermilion. As these wonders blazed and disappeared before her, the little girl thrilled and trembled with delight at Arthur's side.

From the beginning of their encounter, Arthur tries to curb his desire by reminding himself – and Fanny, as well – of the difference in their social positions:

"I may call you Fanny, because you are a young girl and a good girl, and I am an old gentleman. But you mustn't call me anything but sir, or Mr Pendennis, if you like; for we live in very different stations, Fanny."

41. Thackeray, *Pendennis*, p. 913.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 566.

However, Arthur does not seem to be able to subdue his desire for Fanny at that moment. There follows another suggestive passage, which alludes to Victorian sexual usages:

You have but the same four letters to describe the salute which you perform on your grandmother's forehead, and that which you bestow on the sacred cheek of your mistress; but the same four letters, and not one of them a labial. Do we mean to hint that Mr. Arthur Pendennis made any use of the monosyllable in question? Not so. In the first place, it was dark – the fireworks were over, and nobody could see him; secondly, he was not a man to have this kind of secret, and tell it; thirdly, and lastly, let the honest fellow who has kissed a pretty girl, say what would have been his own conduct in such a delicate juncture?⁴³

Of course, Arthur could have behaved as some gentlemen from Mayhew's London would – he could have taken Fanny as his mistress, not as an angel in his house; still he prefers not to play “with this little girl's heart”.⁴⁴ The unseen scene of the hypothetical kiss jokingly refers to that area of Victorian sexual behaviour which was in the main removed from public language and a forbidden territory to novelists: having a lower class mistress was a widespread custom (“let the honest fellow who has kissed a pretty girl say ...”), but it was performed in relative secrecy (where “nobody could see”), and it was not named (“he was not a man ... to tell it”). The passage thus invokes the famous Victorian double-standard, which is itself twofold – based on a gender division (it is primarily a middle-class male who dives into the demimonde of desire), and on a division in morality (household and demimonde). At the same time, the text also mocks the culture which prefers not to have sexuality appear in language, and which coincidentally even has a word for the labial activity without a labial consonant in it. By emphasising the lack of what linguists would call a motivational link between the signifier *kiss* and its signified, the text sneakily draws denaturalising attention to the conventionality of the ruling sexual and moral ideology. Without really naming it, the text stages the Victorian exnomination of sexuality (in an obviously ironical gesture of mimicking the very mechanism of exnomination), revealing the mechanisms of social channeling of desire, mechanisms which function as instruments of familial and social control, as the course of the Fanny Bolton episode will show.

In his relationship with Fanny, Arthur is at first governed by a Dionysian streak in his character, which is again inscribed in his name (Dennis is a variant of Dionysus). However, he does not want to take her as his mistress, and he has no intention to give his desire the roof of a marriage. “With the experience of the world /he/ now had, he would have laughed at and scouted the idea of marrying a penniless girl out of the kitchen” – these are the words by which the narrator sums up Arthur's sentiments in the matter, once Arthur had decided that he would “crush any unlucky fondness” for Fanny.⁴⁵ Symptomatically, his decision is very much influenced by the working of the internalised censorship of Helen/Laura: “on this Sabbath evening, as the church *bells* were ringing, I thought of my own home, and of women angelically pure and gold, who dwell there; and I was running thither ... that I might avoid the danger which besets me,

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 570–572.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 572.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 617.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 600. Italics added.

and ask strength of God Almighty to do my duty".⁴⁶ Note how Arthur's giving up Fanny is expressed in the high religious register of Victorian middle-class morality (Sabbath, church bells, angelical women, danger which besets me, strength, God, duty). Laura's censorial presence here is foregrounded by the metonymic echo of *bells*, a word which contains her family name. Moreover, Helen and Laura are agents of the middle-class censorship of Pen's desire in a more active way as well: during Pen's illness caused by his inability to "drive the thoughts of that fascinating little person out of his head",⁴⁷ Helen prevents Fanny from seeing Pen and intercepts her letters to him as well, with Laura a silent accomplice. They even take Arthur on a foreign tour so that he may be cured of his passion more easily. When finally Arthur realises that there has been some tampering with his letters, he breaks into the strongest rebellion in the book against his fatherly mother's authority. By that time Helen has fallen ill with fear of Arthur's emancipation from her: "The late events connected with her son had cruelly shaken her ... there was ... an anguish or rage almost on the mother's part, to think that she was dispossessed of her son's heart, or that there were recesses in it which she must not or dared not enter. She sickened at the thought of the sacred days of boyhood when it had not been so".⁴⁸ As Pen was about to ask his mother's explanation for the interception, Laura accuses him of matricide: "You may kill her if you do. Your conduct has gone far enough to make her wretched".⁴⁹ Helen thinks very much in the same vein: "He prefers the creature of his passion to his own mother ... She felt she should die of his unkindness".⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Pen promises to go back to Fanny:

"It is you who are cruel, it is you ... with your wicked persecutions of those who love me — yes, those who love me, and who brave everything for me, and whom you despise and trample upon because they are of lower degree than you. Shall I tell you what I will do — ... — I will go back to this poor girl whom you turned out of my doors, and ask her to come back and share my home with me".⁵¹

But the tide of Pen's anger and revolt withdraws soon, and he is brought back to his mother's point of view, first by Major Pendennis's invocation of the family name: "the name of Pendennis was left undishonoured behind us"⁵², and then by George Warrington's story of how he made the mistake of marrying a person of a "much lower degree", who was a "boor", and "could not comprehend one subject than interested" him.⁵³ This is immersed in a lot of Christian sentiment, significantly rounded off by Arthur's saying Our Father at her deathbed. By what appears to be an act of matricide/patricide, Arthur is now prepared to take full hold of his patriarchal attributes: "All the lady's affairs were found in perfect order, and her little property ready for transmission to her son, in trust for whom she held it."⁵⁵ One is led by the text to conclude that Laura is also part of that "little property", held in trust for Pen, as Pen's conversion to his

47. *Ibid.*, p. 609.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 673.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 683.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 684.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 687.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 688.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 690-691.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 692.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 694.

mother's viewpoint indeed brings him to marry Helen's protégé in the end – though some qualms still remain.

Phallic authority, the son's wish to replace his father, symbolical matricide which can be read as patricide, Oedipalised family structure – the whole family romance constructed by *Pendennis* seems to produce a discourse very much like Freudian psychoanalysis. Both discourses obviously grow by exploiting the classical Oedipus myth, and this should be seen as a result of their being responses to a similar historical structure – the bourgeois family. They both use the Oedipal metaphor to characterise a standard of normality, but they do so in radically different ways. Whereas psychoanalysis posits the Oedipal mechanism as something which regulates the subject's development into a normal family role by controlling the Oedipal desire, Thackeray's text sees the family roles ideologically codified as normal as Oedipalised rather than de-Oedipalised. If in psychoanalysis it is Oedipus that is repressed, in *Pendennis* it is Oedipus that does the repression. If Freud "closets the sexuality in the Oedipal nursery",⁵⁶ Thackeray's text claims that it is the bourgeois family that does this to sexuality. Thus, Thackeray's reading of the sexual politics of his time in terms of the Oedipal story does not make him so much a proto-Freudian, as a precursor of anti-Oedipalist discourses on the repression of desire, such as the one by Deleuze and Guattari: "Oedipus is not a state of desire and the drives, it is an *idea*, nothing but an idea that repression inspires in us concerning desire ... an idea in the service of repression, its propaganda, or its propagation".⁵⁷ The Oedipalisation of Arthur is clearly in the service of repression and its propagation, and it is only through becoming an Oedipal subject that Arthur manages to suppress his transgressive desires and enter into a conventional bourgeois marriage. Likewise, the text insists on relating Helen's Oedipalisation to her wanting to keep her class status and to her functioning as the sexual/class stereotype of angelical woman. In this way, the processes of Oedipalisation are linked to the establishment and maintenance of bourgeois self-images.

Contrasted with the Oedipalised and ironically eulogised family roles, Arthur's desire for Fanny Bolton functions in the novel as a sign of yearning for a difference, for something other than the bourgeois household, for a different ordering of things in the social and familial spheres. Yet it is only a sign, and a sign of discontent with the existing order of things, rather than a sign of a conflict of struggling oppositions. *Pendennis* does not deal with a social conflict between classes – the perspective of Fanny and the subordinated classes is not taken in the book – they are always seen from the outside, from Arthur's, narrator's or middle-class point of view. Rather, the emphasis in the book is on a rift *within* the construction of middle-class self-images, and not on a conflict *between* the classes. In this respect, the Fanny Bolton episode indicates that the formation of middle-class identities depends on the exclusion of the realm of the low – discourses and practices associated with the low in social and bodily topographies. At the same time, the exclusion is followed by the low featured as the object of bourgeois desire: the only desire, except in the similar Fotheringay case, that Arthur has in the

56. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1983, p. 115.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

book is for Fanny, and that desire is repressed; all else in his match-making adventures is either duty or convenience or Oedipal coercion. Even the fact that his passion for Fanny alludes to the unfulfilled possibility of her becoming his sexual servant emphasises the rift between the ideological constructs of bourgeois gender identities and the actual workings of bourgeois desire.

In a recent book Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe the mechanisms of this dual logic of repression and fascination in bourgeois production of images of identity. On the one hand, "the bourgeois subject continuously defined and redefined itself through the exclusion of what it marked as 'low'; on the other hand, "these low domains, apparently expelled as 'Other', return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination."⁵⁸ Dramatising the repression of Pen's fascination with Fanny, the text foregrounds the very realm of difference and otherness, though *without* taking the perspective of otherness. In this way a continual flow of disruption is created in the text: the mere suggestion of otherness supplies the text with a constant source of discontent with the symbolical value of the familial choice embraced by Arthur at the end. In this context, the Oedipalisation of Arthur works as an instrument of the repression of his desire – the desire which through its very social and sexual configuration generates signs of textual discontent with the whole mechanism of Arthur's construction as Father, or of reconstruction of the bourgeois phallographic family. Evidently, the Oedipalisation of this family is the means of repression at the level of the story, and at the same time a signal of this novel's embarrassment with the reproduction of that specific familial ideology in its story.

From Arthur to Author

Arthur, whose Oedipalisation subverts his marriage politics, is himself a social critic of sorts in the text. In his early youth, briefly described in the book, he oscillates between being a staunch Tory and a "Dantonist". The very fluctuating prefigures Arthur's politics as it is formulated towards the end of the novel. Arthur is still pendent then, and it is a centre-bound rather than centre-free pendency. To resume the metaphor, the very idea of pendency may also suggest that there is a fixed centre to which Arthur is pinned, determining the scope of his oscillations. It is a middle-class centre or perspective which he never shakes, despite his oscillations. Arthur's final politics is something which can be termed deconstructive opportunism – he accepts the society as he finds it, though he

58. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Methuen, London 1986, p. 191. It is interesting that these authors interpret Freud's "discovery" of the Oedipal complex in a way comparable to the uses of Oedipalisation in Thackeray's novel. They speak of Freud's deleting the figure of his nurse from the dream which led to the "discovery", and argue that he replaced her by the figure of mother. This "disappearance of the nurse seems to correspond to an attempt by Freud to rewrite unconscious desire in closer conformity to the endogamous rules of the bourgeoisie. Paradoxically, to desire one's mother, despite the incestuous implications, is more acceptable than to desire a hired help" (p.159). *Pendennis* similarly foregrounds the elimination of Fanny from the scene as a result of bourgeois endogamy, claiming that it is ideologically more acceptable for the middle-class that Arthur marries his mother's substitute instead of Fanny.