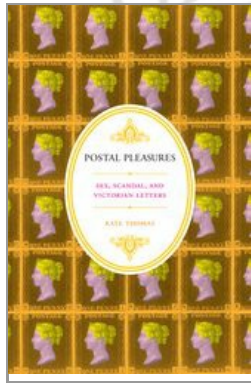


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### Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters

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Print publication date: 2011

Print ISBN-13: 9780199730919

Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2012

DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199730919.001.0001

## A Queer Job for a Girl: The Communicative Touch in Trollope, Hardy, and Lynn Linton

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DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199730919.003.0004

### [–] Abstract and Keywords

Between 1877 and 1881, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy and Eliza Lynn Linton published stories which all portray women companions who are "more like lovers than girl and girl." The women are also all telegraph operators or Post Office employees. This chapter explores why working with postal technologies goes hand in hand with these women's "predilection" for women. In search of independence, these heroines all set up home with their female companion: these are fictions which imagine what domestic relations might look like for the unmarried, middle-class woman who chooses a working life. This chapter proposes that it is the telecommunicative nature of Post Office work, which elicits stories of lesbian relations. The unmarried women are part of a communication matrix and civil service; the trope of the network thus displaces the rule of the family tree.

## A Queer Job for a Girl: The Communicative Touch in Trollope, Hardy, and Lynn Linton

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**Keywords:** post office, sex, queer, thomas hardy, eliza lynn linton, anthony trollope, lesbian, telegraph, telecommunication, literature, victorian

Between 1877 and 1881, Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, and Eliza Lynn Linton<sup>1</sup> published stories which all portray women companions who are “more like lovers than girl and girl” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 50). The women are also all telegraph operators or Post Office employees. This chapter explores why working for the Post Office or with postal technologies goes hand in hand with these women’s “predilection” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 113) for women. These are fictions that ask what work and domesticity might look like for the unmarried, middle-class woman who chooses a working life. Their answer is that these workers, workplaces and households look lesbian: Anthony Trollope’s 1877 short story “The Telegraph Girl,” Eliza Lynn Linton’s 1880 novel, *The Rebel of the Family*, and Thomas Hardy’s 1881 novel *A Laodicean* all depict their heroines in passionate relation to another woman and trace how these couples set up same-sex domesticity. The heroines eventually leave behind both same-sex partnership and postal work, as the plots each resolve into heterosexual marriage and female non-employment. The traces of queer erotics and financial independence remain, however. Having figured the women as part of a communication matrix and civil service, this fiction finds it hard to completely vanquish the alternatives that those networks allowed the women to glimpse, or indeed, touch. Post Office work and lesbian partnership may be just a phase, but the hasty heterosexual marriage plots with which each story ends are overhung with remnant, affective threads which loop the women back around to lives and loves precursive to marriage. Communications work, **(p.100)** and “communicative” girls out-trammel the trammels of marriage, with the consequence that unidirectional vectors of desire and attachment can no longer be guaranteed.

The heroines’ subjectivities are formed by working with circulation systems that literally and metaphorically engage practices of *passing round* and *writing back*. The women work in what Jean Baudrillard has described as a “universe of communication,” made up of “connections, contact, contiguity, feedback, and generalized interface” (1983). Baudrillard’s essay is useful because it characterizes interface culture as entailing erotic sprawl, and is indeed titled (in translation) “The Ecstasy of Communication.” But Baudrillard condemns the erotics he describes, claiming that communicative ecstasy has numbed us even to alienation (and thus its revolutionary potential). He extends the metaphor of sexual depravity, decrying the “*promiscuity* that reigns over the communication networks” (my italics 131) and what he calls the “*pornography* of information and communication” (my italics 131).<sup>2</sup> Baudrillard’s call to resist the orgy of an overwired world is made from the perspective of late capital, animated by a fear of playwrights becoming automatons, and the rest of us similarly enslaved to our computer terminals.<sup>3</sup> In Baudrillard’s late-twentieth-century dystopia, sex and the communication network together dissolve public space and subjectivity.

But the nineteenth-century fiction I will explore in this chapter does not figure the worker as privatized, made into a “pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence” (153). Instead, it explores the very public role and public spaces given to the communications worker in the nineteenth century, asking how these public aspects of the

employment affect the woman worker who is entering civil service for the first time. She, too, of course, must be understood to be at risk of being consumed by the machinery of capital, but loss of subjectivity is not new to the female character, and the ways she gets lost within the communication network sometimes appear generative, or at least, alternative to more conventional forms of female disappearance. The noise and the feedback of the network can act as useful amplification devices, and the prosthetic relations they engage—putting women in relation to each other, to supervisors, to customers and myriad correspondents—function as a stent that can relieve some of the pressures of unelected subjectivity. The practice of achieving female subjectivity through a marital attachment to a single, oppositely sexed partner is not, in the stories I explore, compelling or concluding. The resultant marriages are instead fretted by recognition of the other (p.101) options they have foreclosed. Postal routes allow these women access to alternate erotic and social routes, and these routes play against the marriage plots.

Sedgwick has proposed that many a Victorian novel finds the climax of its sexual plot in what she calls “periperformative refusals, fractures, warpings of the mobile proscenium of marital witness” (*Touching Feeling* 73). The periperformative is, she explains, not itself an utterance as we derive the concept from J. L. Austin, but rather something that surrounds and troubles and even un-utters the utterance. The end of Trollope’s “The Telegraph Girl” demonstrates peri-performativity to a T: how his heroine “became as good a wife as ever blessed a man’s household, need hardly here be told” (“TG” 385). It is an acknowledged paradox that the Victorian marriage plot rarely shows you the marriage toward which the entire novel has driven, but Trollope’s story ends with a double omission, a negating formulation that specifically shuts down the “telling”—I won’t show you the marriage, and I won’t tell you about it either. The other two stories also end with troubled utterances: Hardy’s heroine closes out her story with a sigh and a wish that her husband were more like her female lover, and Lynn Linton tempers an otherwise didactic concluding engagement scene by allowing her heroine to wonder what has become of her lesbian suitor (*Laodicean* 397). Sighs, silences, and regrets constitute interference—noise on the line—that scrambles the univocality of the vow “I do.”

### Civilly Servicing

The three stories I will examine were published in the immediate wake of women entering the civil service and during a time of vigorous debate about whether the sex and marital status of the civil servant, itself an emergent identity, had a relationship to the work they did for the state. The three heroines all look alike: the descriptions of their physical appearance, as workaday and decidedly unromantic looking, are remarkably similarly expressed. Lynn Linton’s Perdita Winstanley is “unlovely” (*RF* 6) and “plain” (*RF* 10), and Trollope’s Lucy Graham is characterized by a “serviceable” and “pervading brownness” (“TG” 356). In *A Laodicean*, Thomas Hardy’s heroine, Paula Power, has an “imperfect” face and she, too, is predominantly “brown” (*Laodicean* 17). Brown like wrapping paper and twine, these heroines’ plainness equips them all the better for public service. They fiercely desire to find meaningful work or position in the public world, and their struggles for self-definition turn upon the question of whether they are destined for the workplace and public life—an ending each author portrays as lesbian—or for the enclosure of

marriage.

The Post Office was the gate through which women first entered the civil service. Women workers were admitted into the Post Office workforce in 1870 as a so-called “daring experiment” (Post 33/3213) by the authorities.<sup>4</sup> Their employment was in fact not daring at all, but rather a side effect of nationalization. The 1869 Telegraph Act, which (p.102) was implemented on 5 February 1870, had handed over complete control of the telegraph system to the Postmaster-General. The government purchased the separate, privately owned businesses that dealt with inland telegraphs prior to this time and thereby simply inherited the services of the women operators who already worked for these commercial companies. Thus, as civil service historian Hilda Martindale explains, “By this act women for the first time became civil servants” (15). The “experiment” was a notable success; the Post Office soon became the largest single employer of women in the country and, as I shall explain later, women soon came to be regarded as ideal Post Office workers specifically *because* of their gender. In turn, the Post Office was commonly seen as a spouse or guardian of these women. The institution offered women what Anthony Trollope called “tender surveillance” (“YW” 378); the government department was imagined to provide for and protect the unmarried women workers in place of a father or husband.

It was also a homosocial environment in which the women’s sensory organs, their “fingers, eyes, ears and intellects” (Trollope, “YW” 377–84), mediated and disseminated the public’s personal messages: mail passed through large rooms of women whose job it was to transmit and translate feeling. They turned vibrations into messages, and together they formed what might be called a homo-sensorium. Moreover, the work of mediating and disseminating messages had hermeneutic potential: the meaning and status of the post-letters or telegrams was changed by being passed through the women’s workers’ interpretative bodies. Not only could the women “read” the letters that they processed, becoming a third party to private correspondence, but also the relationships between the women workers could interact with and entwine the messages they sorted. In short, the trajectory of a post-letter or telegram was anything but straight. The organization that enabled its swift, cheap, and regular distribution was enabled by a complex material network that prompted the public to imagine the postal system as an instigator of an infinite variety of human interfaces.<sup>5</sup> The girls’ mediations of human intercourse fired the cultural imagination and produced fictional accounts of the impassioned bonds between “communicative” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 32) girls.

The Post Office specifically recruited well-educated, middle-class women for their workforce. The relationship between work and marriage for middle-class women was in the second half of the nineteenth century generally undergoing change. Middle-class girls and women started to be sent to schools and colleges and were encouraged to take up philanthropic work. Although many reformers viewed female education and charitable work as a means of strengthening the moral, home-focused life of women and the nation, education and charity work nonetheless introduced young women to public, institutional life and notions of civic duty. Elaine Showalter has pointed out that although unmarried

women were regarded as a social “problem” across the nineteenth century, there was a simultaneous, growing awareness of the “unmarried woman as a new political (p.103) and sexual group, not just an absence or cipher in the social body, but a constituency with potential opportunities, powers and rights” (21). “Constituency” is an appropriate term: unmarried women entered the social body via largely female communities like school and philanthropic societies that offered an alternative social network to that of the family. Showalter’s use of the word signals how nineteenth-century middle-class women’s move into the public sphere was an important means to acquiring political agency. Working women, in other words, had begun to acquire a civic profile.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, discussion of the “woman question” homed in on the ostensible problem of what W. R. Greg and others called “redundant” women, for whom there would be no chance of marriage. Reaction to this “problem” sedimented out into debates about separate spheres which pitted the middle-class domestic home against the public arena.<sup>6</sup> The premise that society was burdened with superfluous women who were not contained in marriage, however, concealed a demographic sleight of hand. The debate centered on middle-class women, but its prompt, the results of the 1851 census, had specifically referred to *working-class* women.<sup>7</sup> Separate sphere rhetoric was driven not only by concerns that middle-class women who worked would become equivalent to, or like men, but also by concerns that they might become confused with working-class women. The later nineteenth century was haunted by the spectre of middle-class women whose primary companions were other working women and whose class positions were vulnerable because of their wage-earning status in the public sphere.

The admission of women into the postal workforce occurred in the midst of this intense debate about the sexual and class status of the woman worker. It also occurred at a time when general definitions of the civil service and the role of the male civil servant were similarly contested. As early as the 1850s, there had been growing discontent in the Post Office workforce, and this escalated across the last quarter of the century into full-scale worker disputes. Wages were low and were lowered further on several occasions; fines for misdemeanors were imposed; workers who campaigned for better conditions were imprisoned; strikes were busted and union organizers were put under surveillance. Ironically, postal workers suspected of unionizing activity had their own mail and telegraph messages intercepted. These struggles threw into relief the eccentric civic position of the civil servant; he served a citizenry of which he was not allowed to be fully part. Most notably, he was not allowed to vote until a long-awaited “Bill of Rights” was carried in Parliament “in despite of formidable opposition” in (p.104) 1868. This lack of franchise was a relic of the eighteenth-century method of recruiting postal workers through patronage. Patronage could leave employees open to demands for political allegiance to the patron and in 1782, postal clerks had petitioned for the removal of their franchise rights in order to protect themselves from coercion. In the nineteenth century, after postal reform, nationalization, and the dissolve of recruitment by patronage, the demand for the franchise for civil servants was the cornerstone of a drawn-out crisis in the definition of citizenship: how were public servants to understand themselves? Did

they, as Sir Stevenson Blackwood, who headed the commission investigating Post Office labor disputes claimed, “forfeit the privileges of English citizenship by entering the public service”? Blackwood remarked that workers’ “private lives” were severely compromised by their “public service” and he condemned the Post Office for allowing its workers fewer rights than the British subjects whom they served (Donald 13).<sup>8</sup> This argument highlighted once again that the postal worker occupied a thoroughly median position; not only did he materially mediate the textual exchanges of others, but he also held an intermediate position in terms of civic constructions of public and private.

The conflict over the male workers’ civic status also entangled their sexual status. The Post Office was repeatedly accused of emasculating its workers; to be intermediate was, many feared, to be effeminate. Trollope articulated this connection between civic and gender/sexual status in a lecture about allegiance, obedience, and authority that he delivered to postal workers in 1861 titled “The Civil Service as a Profession.” Trollope equates “manliness” with the nature of the profession: “Then as to the independence, or what I may call the manliness, of our profession! [. . .] Manliness, a spirit of independence, grows quickly with a man, as does a deficiency of that spirit” (Trollope, *Lectures* 12). The connection between masculinity and the obligations involved in civil service work was a persistent concern of Trollope’s. In his autobiography, the only Post Office reform of which he voices approval is civil service examinations, suggesting that it might bring the public servant “in closer connection with the real master who pays him—the public” (Trollope, *Autobiography* 12). He also warns against treating civil servants like machines, emphasizing that “the first and chief obedience required is that of a workman to his work [. . .] an obedience which is Godlike in its nature, and which is the very source and fountain spring of manly independence!” (Trollope, *Autobiography* 14). The crux here is the relationship between the master and the servant; Trollope wants the master of postal workers to be either the work itself or a communal body, “the public.” He approves of civil service examinations because they replaced appointment through patronage—a system that left the civil servant beholden to a man of higher rank. Otherwise, he believed that manliness had been endangered by the increased bureaucratization of the Post Office, and in 1870 many others, including Union organizers, saw the employment of women as **(p.105)** both sign and cause of the increased erosion of the status, rights, wages, and masculinity of male postal workers.<sup>9</sup>

For many, women laborers were, as the professional antifeminist Eliza Lynn Linton put it, “a proof of a barbarous and imperfect civilization,” and working women therefore seriously threatened the “community or nation” (“Queen Bees” 576).<sup>10</sup> “Civilization,” “community,” and “nation” were the foundational principles of the reformed Post Office. From the late 1830s onward, the Post Office had been seen as a “civilizing engine” (Hill, *Post Office Reform* 7) that promoted national and imperial unity. The reformed Post Office’s “universal” invitation to each and every household and citizen to imagine themselves as connected to each other and as part of a national discourse network stumbled over the idea that the discourse functionaries themselves could be “universal”—women as well as men. Not only was there opposition to the Post Office employing women because of the effect of employment upon middle-class womanhood,

but the terms of this opposition suggested that working women would erode the national and imperial ideals of the postal mission.

Nonetheless, in 1871 the Postmaster-General, Mr. Frank Ives Scudamore, extended the employment of women as telegraph operators, also appointing them to clerical work. His description of the rationale behind this move and the general desirability of women employees for the Post Office is worth quoting at length because it shows very clearly that middle-class women were not preferable to all male employees, but preferable to a certain *class* of male employee:

In the first place, they have in an eminent degree the quickness of eye and ear, and the delicacy of touch, which are essential qualifications of a good operator.

In the second place, they take more kindly than men or boys do to sedentary employment, and are more patient during long confinement to one place.

In the third place, the wages, which will draw male operators from but an inferior class of the community, will draw female operators from a superior class.

Female operators thus drawn from a superior class will, as a rule, write better than the male clerks, and spell more correctly; and, where the staff is mixed, the female clerks will raise the tone of the whole staff.

They are also less disposed than men to combine for the purpose of extorting higher wages, and this is by no means an unimportant matter.

**(p.106)** On one other ground is it desirable that we should extend the employment of women. Permanently established civil servants invariably expect their remuneration to increase with their years of service, and they look for this increased remuneration even in the cases, necessarily very numerous, in which from the very nature of their employment they can be no more use of value in the twentieth than in the fifth year of their service [. . .]. Women, however, will solve these difficulties for the department by retiring for the purpose of getting married as soon as they get the chance.

[. . .] On the whole, it may be stated without fear of contradiction that, if we place an equal number of females and males on the same ascending scale of pay, the aggregate pay to the females will always be less than the aggregate pay to the males; that, within a certain range of duty, the work will be better done by the females than by the males, because the females will be drawn from a somewhat superior class; and further, that there will always be fewer females than males on the pension list. (qtd. in Martindale 17–18)<sup>11</sup>

This memo asserts that middle-class women were physically, socially, economically, and temperamentally the ideal employees for the public institution of the Post Office. Scudamore's directive clarifies a particular worker profile that appears repeatedly in literature concerning women postal workers. Women represented economic value for the

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civil service: while there were regular queries made about whether or not women's various frailties would offset these savings, at base the authorities realized that the work would be done better and at less cost with female staff.<sup>12</sup> Gender thus served to rearrange the relation of wage to class; the Post Office could pay women less money, but employ a higher *class* of women than they could men. The class superiority of women employees was important not only to Post Office managers, but also to proto-feminist writers. Lady John Manners, who was the wife of the Postmaster General, published essays that encouraged women to work and she urged the reassessment of gender distinctions in the workplace. In her book *Employment of Women in the Public Service*, Lady Manners assured her readers that women employees' class positions would be maintained: "their future prospects shall not be compromised, nor their social position affected" (22).

Assurance about workers maintaining social distinctions was particularly important precisely because the postal technologies themselves were often represented as having the potential to erase or at least blur markers of gender, race, and class. Communication that was cheap, accelerated, universal, and accessible increased the potential for **(p.107)** social intercourse that crossed these boundaries.<sup>13</sup> The "discourse functionary" therefore needed to be ultra-ordered and ordering: the class and conduct of the postal workers who mediated the public's intercourse was of great concern to the Post Office. The "raising the tone" of which Mr. Scudamore writes is a reference to the importance of sexual and moral propriety. In the same year that his directive was produced, the Post Office investigations into homosexual prostitution among boy-workers that I examined in chapter 2 had concluded that the boy's low wages had driven them into part-time renting. The hiring of women was in part a response to this problem and was seen as a way of avoiding the low wages/sexual immorality equation.

### Trollope's Telegraph Girls

Whereas the Post Office had, by many accounts, "turned" messenger boys to prostitution, many regarded Post Office employment as a way to save women from the same fate. Anthony Trollope represented work in the Post Office as a way for women to avoid both prostitution and the sexual exploitation to which women working in private households could be vulnerable. In 1877 Trollope visited the new Post Office headquarters at St. Martin's-le-Grand and shortly afterward published an article called "The Young Women at the London Telegraph Office," followed by a short story titled "The Telegraph Girl," both printed in the popular, Christian-oriented magazine *Good Words*.<sup>14</sup> "The Telegraph Girl" opens with the heroine of the title, Lucy Graham, "[finding] herself alone in the world" (Trollope, "TG" 354). The sudden death of her brother, with whom she had lived, means that unmarried Lucy is forced to rearrange her life. The tale charts how Lucy establishes her own household, independent of blood family. Significantly, however, the death of her brother and the opening of the tale are not coincident with her becoming a telegraph girl. Even before her brother's death, Lucy's "life had been full of occupation" and she had worked at the telegraph office to "earn her own bread" (Trollope, "TG" 354). Trollope's tale, in other words, focuses on the beginning of Lucy's quest for domestic, as opposed to financial, independence.<sup>15</sup>

The problem that Lucy faces after her brother dies is her lack of social context or household. While the telegraph office provided for women workers in many ways—ways that Trollope’s story and article go on to praise and promote—it was not a job that situated **(p.108)** the woman in a domestic household, a necessity for the middle-class Victorian woman. Consequently, “it was suggested to [Lucy] that she had better abandon the Telegraph Office and seek the security of some household” (Trollope, “TG” 355). Trollope explains that “seeking the security of a household” ordinarily means looking for a job as a nursemaid, nursery governess, or servant; these jobs would make Lucy an adjunct to a family and give her lodging in a private home. The suggestion that Lucy find this kind of work, however, is both anonymously cited and constructed in the passive voice, prompting the reader to imagine it as the voice of social pressure. Lucy recognizes that employment in a private household would compromise her freedom and make her “subject at all hours to the will of others” (Trollope, “TG” 355). Trollope demonstrates a similar concern for her that he’d expressed about male workers who were made beholden to men with more power. “Her spirit,” Trollope writes, “rebelled against the counsel” (“TG” 355) and she rejects the pressure to find this kind of security. Defiant and proud, she commits herself to employment in the telegraph office and sets about fashioning her own household, forging a domestic partnership with fellow telegraph girl Sophy Wilson. This partnership mimics a heterosexual marriage: “It was as though,” Trollope tells his reader, “she had consented to marry” (“TG” 358). All marriage is, of course, mimetic. The power of the wedding vow derives from its referral to past and future reiterations.<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Freeman has described the wedding as a fundamentally allegorical mode, and a ritual that has alternative kinships systems and repudiated Others “congealed” within it (*Wedding Complex*, 38). There is therefore a reverberation produced by a partnership that is described as resembling marriage: that “Other” partnership is already rattling around within the structure of the wedding, so when it is likened to marriage it is tautologically referred back to itself. When Trollope proposes that Lucy’s relationship with Sophy is like a marriage, his simile is a reminder that “I do” is a noisy speech act.

Just as her relationship with Sophy is described through simile, Lucy styles herself in a similarly antiphonal manner. She had “taught herself to despise feminine weaknesses,” and she identifies with a masculine role, explicitly reiterating a masculine gender to herself: “She must begin life after what seemed to her to be a most unfeminine fashion—‘just as though she were a young man,’—for it was thus that she described to herself her own position over and over again” (Trollope, “TG” 355). “*As though*”—this is the same simile-based mechanism through which Trollope describes Sophy and Lucy’s “marriage.” It calls up other forms, other types to which Lucy refers herself. She rejects several other kinds of roles she could be, priding herself on being singular and unlike other women. Prior to her brother’s death, we learn that she had always determined not to be “feckless, helpless, and insufficient for herself as had so many females” (Trollope, “TG” 355). She is wary not only of being “helpless,” but also of being a mere helpmeet. She had rejected one suitor, a widower looking for a “second mother for his children” (Trollope, “TG” 357) and imagined spending her life not in a marriage, but in a different kind of partnership: a business **(p.109)** partnership with her brother. Lucy’s brother was a

bookseller, as was the spurned suitor; it is thus made quite clear that Lucy rejects marrying the trade in favor of working in it. After her plans for commercial partnership with her brother are dashed by his death, sturdy brown Lucy teams up with the “startlingly pretty” young Sophy Wilson, and she cares and provides for Sophy as if she were her husband. Just as Lucy wanted employment that would make her “bound of course to her work at certain hours, but so bound only for certain hours” (Trollope, “TG” 355), her relationship with Sophy enables her to express a kind of devotion that she can imagine as mutual:

From the first Lucy Graham made up her mind that it was her duty to be a very friend of friends to this new companion. It was as though she had consented to marry that widowed bookseller. She would then have considered herself bound to devote herself to his welfare. It was not that she could say as yet that she loved Sophy Wilson. Love with her could not be so immediate as that. But the nature of the bond between them was such, that each might possibly do so much either for the happiness, or the unhappiness of the other! (Trollope, “TG” 358–89)

As the story unfolds, Sophy proves herself increasingly unworthy of the devotion expended on her by Lucy. Sophy is Lucy’s inverse; she is pretty, primed, and eager to be married. Sophy seeks to entrap a husband, and she takes both her job and propriety lightly. The extent to which Lucy considers herself “bound to devote herself to [Sophy’s] welfare” is striking—depriving herself of money and food, in order to support the wasteful girl. In consequence, the principal term here is that of the “bond”; Lucy contracts herself, devotes herself to both work and a spouse. Sophy’s shortcomings are emphasized in order to showcase the depths of Lucy’s sense of duty.

In 1877, the year in which Trollope published “The Telegraph Girl,” the question of women postal workers’ sense of duty had come under Post Office and public scrutiny. More specifically, the question concerned how women’s sense of duty to the workplace—and thus to the State—corresponded to their marital status. Women postal workers’ employment was conditional upon their celibacy; when they married they were required to leave the service. There were no such requirements or considerations with male workers.<sup>17</sup> In 1876, however, this regulation was brought into question and became the subject of both public debate and a Post Office inquiry. Some argued that “in steadiness and attention to duties, the service rather gains than otherwise by the presence of married women” (Daunton 219). Others, including the Post Office Secretary, believed: “Directly they get married, other and high duties devolve upon them, and it is not [. . .] for their own good nor for the good of their husbands, children or society, that they should be **(p.110)** encouraged to neglect those duties” (Daunton 220). Both sides of the argument surrounding the celibacy requirement emphasized that for women postal workers, their job was a quasi marriage, demanding duty and devotion in the same way that a marriage did. Both sides insisted on the same terms and the same equation: that the institutional nature of the Post Office was comparable with the institution of marriage.

The central term in Trollope’s fiction and the legislative materials concerning women civil servants is duty. Whether it adhered to a husband or to the workplace—and I am

arguing that marriage and work were imagined as somewhat interchangeable terms—duty was a surprisingly malleable abstraction. Although it was a discourse of governance and discipline, it could be variously inflected and discursively transferred across a range of occupations and, indeed, a range of kinds of relationships. It is through, not despite, a discourse of duty that Lucy enters into a marriage with Sophy. That duty can have a creative, as well as a legislative, quality calls to mind Michel Foucault's theorization of the coincidence of regulation and desire. "Pleasure and power," he writes, "do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement" (*Sexuality* 48).<sup>18</sup> Foucault's implied metaphor is of the technologies of amplification and resonance. In a similar way, I am arguing that this fiction's exploration of same-sex partnerships between unmarried Post Office women workers proposes not a conflicted, but rather a *constitutive* link, or plane of contiguity, between public duty and same-sex partnership and passion.

Martha Vicinus has shown how, in the second half of the nineteenth century, nonmarital bonds of duty began to form substitutes for familial blood ties for women: she writes that the "more pervasively disciplined life" of schools, sisterhoods, and societies "meant simultaneously a breaking down of the division between public and private and the encouragement of an emotional life dependent upon distance and discipline," and that "sexuality found expression [. . .] through a disciplined love" (187). Scholars of masculinity and sexuality have identified the ways in which the homosociality and homoerotics fostered in the disciplined institutions of public school and the armies not only equipped a boy for public life, but also were a cohesive force in the imperial endeavor.<sup>19</sup> Their work demonstrates the interrelations of "private" sexual desires and "public" duties, complicating any impulse to see them as opposed principles. As more women entered institutional and civic life, grammars of discipline and duty, like those that had long applied to men, similarly fueled and were fueled by homosocial bonds and contexts.

**(p.111)** The trope of the bond or covenant dominates "The Telegraph Girl." Lucy Graham does not depend on her looks or dress, but is earnest, honorable, and actively seeks what Trollope repeatedly calls "bonds" of affection and duty. The story is similarly dominated by an emphasis on how much she works: both with and for Sophy. Her work brought about her partnership with Sophy and her partnership with Sophy brings about more work. I would like to read the bond of *work* as something more than an incidental occupation, or a casual connection between the two women. When Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who wrote under the name Michael Field, characterized themselves as "poets and lovers" (*Underneath* 79), they radically conflated their sexual relationship with their professional relationship. They pair work and same-sex marriage in a similar way to Trollope's Lucy Graham. In a letter to Havelock Ellis in 1886 the Fields used the language of the marriage service to describe their professional partnership: "As to our work, let no man put asunder what God has joined" (qtd. in Sturgeon 47). It was a powerful conflation and one that they reiterated. In their journal, titled *Works and Days*, they describe themselves as "closer married" than the Brownings, explaining that although both Robert and Elizabeth Barrett wrote, they wrote alone and "did not bless or quicken one another

at their work" (Field, *WD* 16). These references have formed an important basis for recent scholarship on both the Fields and the field of lesbian studies more generally, and are used to note, as Chris White does, that "marriage was an available metaphor or conceptualisation for both women to apply to their relationship" ("Poets and Lovers" 202–3).<sup>20</sup> The critical focus has been upon the Fields' invocation of marriage to describe a lesbian relationship. I would suggest that *work* was at this time an equally available, equally connotative metaphor for lesbianism. The very audacity of the Fields' invocation of the marital metaphor, and the comparison of their love to the Brownings, that "famous benchmark of marital passion," as Emma Donoghue reminds us (43), has blinded us to the other term in the equation: work. At each point that the Fields use the language of marriage, they are writing of their work. Work and marriage, and the implied interchangeability of these two occupations, each signifies the closeness of their relationship: that unnameable fact of same-sex love between women.

The bond of work is similarly something more than an incidental occupation, or a casual connection between Lucy Graham and Sophy Wilson. Lucy is determined to have an "independent" (Trollope, "TG" 354) life outside of marriage, and this independence entails both professional work and devotion for another woman; the work and the same-sex partnership are coincident. They imply and engage each other. Lillian Faderman makes a similar point about the lesbian characters in the 1903 German novel by Aimé Duc, *Sind Es Frauen?* In this novel, Faderman notes, the "other life" of the women "takes its shape not primarily through love but through work" (249). The combination of Lucy's same-sex domestic bond on the one hand and her job as a functionary of the General (p. 112) Post Office on the other gives her a personal autonomy: "During a third of the day she was, as she proudly told herself, a servant of the Crown. During the other two-thirds she was lord—or lady—of herself" (Trollope, "TG" 355). Trollope establishes Lucy's decision in precise and charged terms; she rejects the duties of a servant in favor of those of a civil servant. Instead of serving a private household, either as a wife, or as an employee, she serves the government and achieves a personal dominion that gives her both gender and class mobility—she could be "lord—or lady" through the beneficence of the General Post Office. The story progresses toward Lucy being courted by Abraham Hall, an engineer at a printing factory who strikes up a friendship with the two girls. At Hall's proposal of marriage, the Post Office recedes into the background as a place that had developed and proved Lucy's sense of duty. Her service there enabled her to reject the loveless marriage in which she would have become little more than a servant and allowed her instead to develop a moral self-sufficiency that Trollope portrays as the basis of a sound marriage. Disappointed by Sophy's personal shortcomings as a companion, Lucy loses her masculine impulses and begins to desire "a mode of life more fitting to her feminine nature" (Trollope, "TG" 383).

Trollope's story is something of an exemplum. It was a common assumption in late-century periodical literature that working for the Post Office was an excellent precursor to a sensible marriage. I am going to show how lesbian relationships emerge in these coming-of-age as a telegraph girl stories, as an equally excellent (if ultimately reviled) precursor. The Crown provided a guardianship that allowed women to (just) sustain

themselves economically,<sup>21</sup> keeping them safe from the lure of prostitution or from sexually predatory private employers. Lucy is acutely aware of the proximity between financial and sexual transactions; when her soon-to-be suitor Abraham Hall asks why he should not give her and Sophy money, “her answer was ready. ‘We are both girls.’ ” Hall pauses and realizes that she means that “for a young woman to accept money from a man seemed to imply that some return of favours would be due” (Trollope, “TG” 375). This little scene would be quite generic—an unmarried girl refuses money from a man because to do so would imply prostitution—were it not for the way Lucy includes Sophy in her refusal. “We are both girls,” Lucy says when she rejects his charity. Lucy is not a prostitute because she is a telegraph girl and because she is a telegraph girl she is a lesbian; accepting money from the State keeps Lucy free from sexual obligation to a man, *and* accepting money from the State allows Lucy to live in a marriage-like relation with **(p.113)** another woman. Her employment and her queer marriage are mutually constitutive, and both exclude Abraham Hall from the equation. She must leave both her employment and her relationship to Sophy before he can expect “some return of favours” from her.

I have shown, in chapter 1, how the causal relationship between work at the Post Office and homosexual prostitution scandalously troubled the employment of Boy Messengers. Here we see lesbianism also produced through labors at the Post Office, the opposite of and indeed the answer to the prostitution that seemed to loom as the alternative to postal employment. If girls who are employed by the Post Office would otherwise be prostitutes (and as I will show, their labor of passing messages indiscriminately was understood to be sexually charged), how can their labors in the public sphere and in the business of passing indiscriminate messages anywhere and everywhere be framed as something other than promiscuous? How can postal work make them into good wives?

The Post Office had trouble pitching itself as a wholesome work environment for young women; positions at the Post Office were unlike other jobs that seemed naturally feminine. Martha Vicinus points out that a devotion to teaching “represented the best combination of public service and motherhood” (168). Devotion to careers in nursing, social, and church work preserved femininity by being hitched to the notion that although this work was conducted in the public sphere, it iterated the maternal or sisterly roles of the private family (Vicinus 168). But working for the Crown is a national, rather than a familial or sexual, duty. An article titled “Civil Service Examinations” in *The Woman’s Gazette*, a publication for women about work, tries to argue that it is duty that makes Post Office employment ideal for girls:

[. . .] it cannot be too earnestly enforced on the minds of all who voluntarily seek work that lays them under the authority of others, that subordination to constituted authority is a *duty* from a high point of view and a *necessity* from a worldly point of view. Let no one accept a post without a settled resolution to believe that their superiors in official position *are* superiors, or they would not be so placed. The law of subordination runs through the whole course of social life. Why then, should women attempt to reverse that law by foolish jealousies, unjust

fault-findings, or unworthy suspicions? If a girl will not submit in the home life, let her not imagine herself fitted for encountering the various little roughnesses which must inevitably crop up between subordinates and superiors, equally unknown to each other. (87)

This passage struggles to find the terms in which to define the particular kind of duty and public service demanded of the female Post Office clerk; it darts between the rhetorics of domestic, commercial, moral—and even divine—duty, as if searching for the right register. Unlike the *Gazette*-approved occupations of nursing, needlework, and teaching, Post Office work did not have direct access to the languages of philanthropy, maternalism, or virtue. Rather, Post Office work incorporated women into a non-familial structure. The *Gazette* passage emphasizes that Post Office work involved “roughnesses” because it **(p.114)** demanded interpersonal communication between people who are strangers to each other. Women postal workers worked among and served a dispersed crowd of people whose connections to one another might be *anything*, as long as they were postal. It is this promiscuous quality of postal work for which the *Gazette* writer is anxious to compensate, and it is subordination for subordination’s sake that will transform a girl employed by the Post Office from a loose woman whose fingers might touch anyone, anywhere, into a good and loyal wife. Just as Trollope’s tale ultimately likens the qualities that make a good telegraph girl to the qualities that make a good wife, this passage relates the subordination required in the Post Office to the submission required in the home. The passage starts and ends with the woman’s will; she “voluntarily” enters the employment in which she will, by definition, be a subordinate, and she must not try and “reverse” that hierarchy. Much as she is therefore a policed subject, she is also one who unhinges the relation of woman to kinship.

The article’s author is intriguingly specific about the kind of behavior that would interfere with the hierarchy of the Post Office department. The female employee is minded not to harbor “foolish jealousies, unjust fault-findings, or unworthy suspicions.” This language suggests the obligations and emotions of the personal relationship. The failings could even be imagined as the faults of a peevish wife. Employment by the Post Office, this author argues, may not train a woman in the specific, hands-on skills of household management and childrearing, like nursing or teaching would. Rather, its influence will be on her affective life; she will be trained to feel the pleasures of submission and the rewards of acting upon a sense of duty.

“Public duty” was itself a fractured notion. As civil servants, Post Office employees were the instruments and reflection of the State, but as individuals, they were not part of the State. It was a paradoxical position: public servants were not members of the public. A passage from *Post Haste*, an 1880 collection of postal tales written by the popular adventure-story author R. M. Ballantyne, demonstrates a fascination with the curious position of female postal workers who were the mediators of everyone else’s intimate and commercial business, but not their own:

May Maylands chanced, by a strange coincidence, to command the instrument in direct connection with Cork. The telegrams just laid beside her were those

destined for that city, and the regions to which it was a centre of redistribution. Among others her own village was in connection with it, and many a time had she yearned to touch her keys with a message of love to her mother, but the rules of the office sternly forbade this. The communicative touch which she dispensed so freely to others was forbidden to herself. If she, or any other telegraphist in St. Martin's-le-Grand, wished to send a private message, it became necessary to step out of the office, go to the appointed place, pay her shilling, and become one of the public for the occasion. Every one can see the necessity for such a rule in the circumstances. (15)<sup>22</sup>

**(p.115)** Ballantyne presents this story as something more than a tale of a shop girl who is tempted to help herself to the goods. It is rather a story of a girl who finds that her employment simultaneously provokes and denies her most heartfelt expressions of love. The story derives sentimental appeal by inviting the reader to momentarily imagine the telegraph office as a cruel machine that legislates against that most “natural” of connections between mother and daughter. The irony works because, as Harriet Martineau had put it, the postal system had been reformed *in order* that a working girl could “ease her heart by pouring out her cares and difficulties to her mother before she slept” (2:426). Ballantyne’s rhetorical feint thus highlights the strange civic position of the civil servant and resonates against the idea that the nation’s communication networks were a way of maintaining the bonds between separated family members. The story resolves, however, into moralizing that May Maylands must exercise restraint only in order that “every one” can gain the benefit of the Post Office. The telegraph is able to connect up dispersed families, but only by enforcing its own household rules; May has to subjugate her filial duty to her duty to the State.

The rules of May’s workplace test even her physiological discipline; her fingers tap out myriad messages, but one message is forbidden—her own. The crux of this story is that the telegraph or postal message must always be mediated. There is no such thing as a “private message”; you must be “one of the public” to send a message, and you must send it through a public servant. Your communication must always pass through the hands of an anonymous Post Office worker and even the Post Office worker herself must consign her message to anonymous hands. May Maylands is invoked to dramatize the moment the telegraph girl “steps out” of the office, showing how leaving the office transforms her into the citizen and the daughter she is prevented from being while at her post. The same moment is also highly dramatized in “The Telegraph Girl,” when Abraham Hall has to request permission to break the office’s rules, to get Lucy to leave the office during work hours, so that he might propose marriage to her. For Lucy, leaving and breaking the law of the office transforms her into a wife.

The civic status of the postal worker, and the reason that stepping out of the Post Office was so transformative an act, had recently been defined in law. Postal workers were the intermediaries through whom written intercourse passed from writer to reader, but, legally, the workers were regarded as impressionable and cognizant readers rather than mechanical processors. The Telegraph Act of 1868 legislated against workers revealing or

tampering with the contents of telegrams. The main section of the law determines that “any person having official duties connected with the post-office [. . .] who shall, contrary to his duty disclose or in any way make known or intercept the contents or any part of the contents of any telegraphic messages or any message intrusted to the Postmaster-General for the purpose of transmission” (qtd. in Carmichael 77–78) could be imprisoned for up to twelve months. The law also contains a subsection, however, which reads:

This provision does not prevent the “publication” of a libel to the telegraph clerks: *Williamson v. Freer* (L.R.9, C.P.393; 43 L.J.C.P. 161; 30 L.T. 332; 22 W.R. 878).

**(p.116)** When a communication libellous in itself, but such that the occasion of it would have rendered it privileged if made by letter to the person to whom it was addressed, was, in fact, made by means of a telegram, it is not privileged, though made *bona fide*, because the mode of conveying the information necessarily involved publication to the post-office clerks, and it is no less a publication because this section makes the disclosure of the contents of a telegraphic message by any official in the post-office a misdemeanour. Communications or messages transmitted through telegraph offices are not privileged, and the clerks transmitting the same must disclose their contents in a Court of Justice: *Waddell, In re* (8 Jur. [N.S.] 181, Part II.; *Ince, In re*, 20 L.T.421). (qtd. in Carmichael 77–78)

The telegraph workers do not, then, merely convey messages—they are the means of them becoming published. Not only are they public servants, but also their bodies are designated by law as a site of publication; private messages that pass through the sensory organs of telegraph workers are transformed into published texts; their contents have been made public and are therefore subject to the laws of libel. That the stories of Lucy Graham and May Maylands focus on the transformative nature of the moment they leave the office is therefore highly symbolically charged. Not only did employment as a civil servant change the nature of girls’ citizenship, but also their telegraphic bodies transformed private texts into public texts.

Trollope wrote a companion to his short story—a factual article titled “The Young Women in the London Telegraph Office,” also published in 1877. Despite the informative frame of this piece, Trollope’s object is to unveil the telegraph girls’ private loves, pleasures, and desires. Trollope invites the reader, whom he calls “the stranger” (“YW” 379), to survey the metropolis<sup>23</sup> and follow him from the streets into the interior of the Post Office:

Those who pass from Cheapside into Newgate Street after the lamps have been lighted may observe, on looking up, that the whole top floor of this new building is illuminated. It is here that the eight hundred young women are at work, and their business consists in the receipt and dispatch of telegraph messages. (“YW” 378)

The article occupies the journalist-as-voyeur mode of urban investigative literatures; Trollope declares that the “condition of the girls” and not the telegraphy will be the focus of his article (“YW” 379). These girls, however, are not to be found in the dimly lit streets, which are the territory of the prostitute, the public woman usually focused on by the urban investigator.<sup>24</sup> These women have been rescued from this fate by the beneficent

**(p.117)** Post Office and are safely housed in a large, elevated, illuminated room. Furthermore, social documenters such as Henry Mayhew reported on the “public woman” from the streets, exhorting the women to “tell their own tale” and “publish” their sentiments (20).<sup>25</sup> The kind of exchange in which a prostitute deals lends itself to confession to an author—they will have sex with a man for money and will also therefore have conversation with Mayhew. The telegraph girl, however, is differently participant in exchange between strangers. Throughout his article, Trollope’s desire to hear the telegraph girls’ own stories and thus “judge somewhat of their inward natures” (“YW” 379) is repeatedly frustrated. Instead, the girls are constantly talking between themselves, and their work is itself a “noise” of “multitudinous communications” that Trollope can only observe and write about from a distance. He *desires* to be privy to the girls’ intercourse but never gets to hear them. Consequently, both Trollope’s voyeurism and the girls’ homosocial conversation take on a distinctly sexualized character: “Oh!—if I could only know what those two pretty girls in the distance were talking about!” he laments (“YW” 379). Despite his hammed-up frustration, Trollope recognizes that his distance and lack of interaction with the girls is an integral condition of their work:

“May they talk?” I asked. Now I certainly had heard them talking—a low hum of cheery young female voices, very pleasant to the ear [. . .]. When messages are coming and going the operator may not speak or be spoken to [. . .]. Secrecy is essential. There seems to be no ground for fearing that any undue use is ever made of those multitudinous communications which are always passing under the eyes or through the ears of these young women. But the temptation might be great if any outside sinner were able to hold free communication with that room at any time. (“YW” 383–84)

Trollope’s emphasis upon the ways in which messages pass through the young women’s sensory organs—“under the eyes or through the ears”—is echoed by the “pleasant” effect the girls’ conversation has on his own ears. These are communicative girls, but their communication is limited to the sending and receiving of anonymous messages or sending messages between themselves.

Talking and flirting are the twin focal points of the article; Trollope is, in his own words, “anxious” about these practices and he portrays them as linked.<sup>26</sup> He writes, “But I was very anxious to know whether they flirted for there are young men in the same room” (“YW” 380), and later he repeats himself, “But was there any flirting? I was very **(p.118)** anxious on that head when I saw the young men” (“YW” 383). Anxious he may be, but not to banish all flirting—just that of his male competitors. Trollope’s tone throughout the essay is itself highly flirtatious; he refers constantly to the girls’ prettiness and repeatedly informs the reader that he is not about to enlighten anyone about telegraph technology as “I did not pay by any means as much attention as I ought to have done to the new system, so much was my attention taken up with those two pretty girls—and with others” (“YW” 380).

Vigilant against any messenger-boys flirting with the girls, Trollope dedicates the essay to his own sensory pleasures. When he discovers that late attendance is a punishable

offence, he uses the opportunity to imagine a young lady languishing in bed: “And how would it be if some gentleman who wanted his horse at the covert-side punctually at eleven should lose his run with the foxhounds because some young lady found herself too comfortable in bed?” (Trollope, “YW” 383). Trollope’s joke is a self-reflexive one. The gentleman that the slugabed telegraph girl should be serving is Trollope himself; the reference to hunting is a reference to his personal passion for the sport. Like the sleepy telegraph girl, he also knew how to be paid to play. In his autobiography he describes his duties as General Post Office Surveyor in Ireland and writes of how he managed to hunt on Post Office time and expenses.<sup>27</sup> Trollope’s references to the transgressions and disciplining of the girls are titillated rather than fraught with panic. The only anxiety he expresses is a concern about who is co-respondent to the girls’ attractiveness. The question of flirting and talking initially arises for Trollope because of the occasional presence of men in the telegraph room, but the question of the girls’ influence on *each other* through conversation and physical proximity quickly becomes prominent. The entire article emphasizes that the women in the telegraph room operate as a mass—the opening words of the piece are “Eight hundred young women at work, all in one room,” and Trollope repeatedly wonders at the fact that so many women all work together in one place. Later, he attributes the attention that the girls pay to their dress to the effect of having “a large number of girls [. . .] come together” (“YW” 380), and when he inquires about (p. 119) talking, he again features a pair of girls in conversation with each other: “If two girls of twenty can be got to sit close to each other without talking, human nature must have been changed up in the Telegraph Office” (“YW” 383).<sup>28</sup> “Young Women” is prompted by and devoted to Trollope’s own flirtatious, heterosexual pleasures: his flaneur-like persona pushes open the door to the telegraph room of eight hundred women as if it were a pastry shop. But his delectation of the women encompasses figuring them as stimulating each other as much as him. It becomes part girl-on-girl fantasy and part a portrait of desires more transitive than he had perhaps bargained for. That girls might be provided for him by the State is thrilling to him. The fact that their close-packed bodies are resonance machines, which make mail public and make each other communicative, legible, and closest to each other, means that when Trollope turns this vision into a short story, one girl consents to marry another.

### The Socialist Sphere: *The Rebel of the Family*

Eliza Lynn Linton’s 1880 novel, *The Rebel of the Family*, follows the fortunes of an independence-seeking heroine, Perdita, who takes employment in the Savings Bank section of the General Post Office.<sup>29</sup> Born into a family that carries a double-yoke of impoverishment and good breeding, Perdita is an inky-fingered and plainly dressed socialist, frustrated by life with silly sisters and a “well-bred conventionalist” (1: 10) of a mother who all survive on watered-down soup and a fiction of gentility. While her mother takes refuge from their financial troubles in schemes and dreams of marrying her other daughters to men of fashion and station, it is Perdita who maintains financial and moral order in the family, first by working at the Post Office and eventually by marrying a tradesman.

Like Trollope’s Lucy, who thinks of herself as a “young man” and determines that she

“was not to depend upon feminine good looks, or any of the adventitious charms of dress for her advance in the world” (“TG” 356), Perdita lives in “frayed and fettering rags” (Linton, *RF* 1: 59) and wishes that she were a boy who could work, or that there were a civil war, so that she could “disguise [herself] as a man and enlist on the side of the people!” (Linton, *RF* 1: 31).<sup>30</sup> Her battle cry is “liberty and country” (Linton, *RF* 1: 29) and her avowed cause is socialism. Perdita’s Shakespearian namesake in *A Winter’s Tale* was a princess who was put in a vessel that floated to the seacoast of Bohemia; Lynn Linton’s Perdita, who finds that her quest for social and financial independence washes her up at the doorsteps of unconventional households, determines upon being bohemian rather (**p.120**) than bourgeois. Like Lucy Graham, Perdita’s employment at the Post Office is part of a search to find an alternative household, one built upon completely different values from those of her blood family.

One of these households is the West Hill Society for Women’s Rights, which offers female emancipation and a home in which the place of heterosexual marriage is usurped by lesbian love. Bell Blount, the president of the Society, lives with a “wife,” Connie Tracy,<sup>31</sup> and her relationship with Perdita is described in sexually predatory terms. She woos Perdita, with kisses of “strange warmth” (Linton, *RF* 1: 74) and tries to force her to smoke, making Perdita scared that she “would take her by main force and initiate her against her will” (Linton, *RF* 1: 281). Bell Blount offers not only sexual love, but also a household. She tells Perdita, “You are not in your proper sphere. Your real place is with us” (Linton, *RF* 1: 62). At the opening of the novel, Bell’s lesbianism is presented as a powerful and potentially viable element of a utopian existence:

Again that indistinct glimpse into the vast Unknown! Perdita’s imagination burst up into a sudden flame at the suggestive vagueness of her new friend’s words. She felt as if about to be initiated into those hidden mysteries wherein the springs of human history are to be found—as if about to be admitted into a secret sect working beneath the surface of society, sapping the bases of wrong and preparing the ground for the glorious establishment of truth and justice. (Linton, *RF* 1: 65–66)

Bell’s words thrill Perdita; her dreams of “the sacred duty of insurrection against tyranny” (Linton, *RF* 1: 12) are momentarily fulfilled by the subversive nature of this “secret sect” and by the suggestiveness of Bell’s language.

Blount is a compelling figure and her unorthodoxies are attractive to Perdita, but she is eventually rebuffed by Perdita and ridiculed by Lynn Linton’s narratorial voice. Perdita comes to reject Blount’s lesbian relationship as a false model of emancipation, essentially critiquing it for its butch-femme mimesis of heterosexuality, as she regards Blount’s wife Connie as “as much Bell Blount’s creature as if she had been a man’s mistress to be discarded [. . .]. Bound to serve and obey” (Linton, *RF* 2: 49). As with Trollope, Lynn Linton is suspicious of those who “bind” subordinates to them, and Bell Blount’s command over Connie is a symptom of her highly ambivalent position within the narrative. Having initially presented Bell Blount’s household as an attractive alternative home for Perdita, Lynn Linton sets its feminist politics and lesbianism up in opposition to Perdita’s politics of, and hopes for, class-based social equality. Perdita is described as “a woman

**(p.121)** who sympathized with the ‘hands’ ” (Linton, *RF* 1: 121), and Bell’s hand is sensual and fine-skinned, rather than laboring and leveling: “Something in Mrs. Blount’s face chilled and repelled her, she did not know why; she only felt that this was not the ideal for which she was looking, and that supreme good did not lie in the leading of that soft, milk-white, caressing hand” (Linton, *RF* 1: 66). Mandy Merck describes how “the lesbian hand has a cultural history in which it figures both as an instrument of sexual contact and as a marker of gender transitivity” (127). Lynn Linton certainly figures Bell Blount’s hand as sexually seductive and transitive; both femme and butch in character, it is an insinuating *and* a “leading” limb. If Bell’s hand is figured as a point of connection—between her and the “caressed” Perdita, or between genders—it is conversely figured as incapable of class transitivity, of reaching out to the “hands.” Its determinedly aristocratic and racially reserved character is signaled by its Marie Antoinette shade of “milk-white.” It loves, rather than labors. It touches, but is untouched by work. In contrast to Perdita’s hands, which are stained with ink,<sup>32</sup> Bell’s hands are peculiar in their whiteness and demonstrate a “delicacy of touch,” to use Postmaster Scudamore’s phrase, which is unnerving to Perdita.

Sustaining this figuration of hands as indicative of the suitability of the suitor, Lynn Linton pits Bell’s unnatural advances against those of Leslie Crawford the chemist, who waits for Perdita outside her workplace at the Post Office and “with the most natural manner in the world, [. . .] went up to Perdita and held out his hand” (Linton, *RF* 3: 246). Crawford’s hand is direct, egalitarian, and businesslike, offered to Perdita against the backdrop of her workplace. It thus trumps the manipulative and seductive hand of the lesbian salon. This novel quite literally points an accusing finger at sexual radicalism, but this narrative effort to demonize the lesbian unravels by means of its own tropes. If the hand does indeed feature, as Merck suggests, as a site of transitivity, it has the quality of a cursor, a symbol indicating the position at which one of any number of actions will take effect. Perdita’s Post Office setting is a place that mediates and congregates any number of possible narratives, lives—and in her particular case—life savings and interest. Can we see the hand as a diacritical mark, a signal that at this point in the text we could pursue an “other” narrative, via a transitive mode of reading? Katherine Rowe’s study *Dead Hands: Fictions of Agency, Renaissance to Modern* emphasizes the hand as a site of immanence and negotiation “between intention and act” (7). She proposes that “dead hands articulate what might be called the dispossessive conditions of identity, in which the body, its alienable parts, and even its voluntary motions fail to ratify the rights, authority or propriety of the self” (12). In Lynn Linton’s novel, the hand appears **(p.122)** at the moments when Linton is struggling to steer us toward a particularly awkward narrative option. That the heroine’s romantic crisis, her choice between Bell and Leslie, comes to rest on the figure of their hands literalizes the paradigmatic idiom of selection: “on the one hand . . . but on the other.” The trope of the hand clearly functions to produce, or signpost, a site of divergence. It refers the reader to the idea of giving one’s hand in marriage; Perdita’s decision to spurn Bell’s hand in favor of Leslie Crawford’s is an exchange of hands, or if you like a handshake, that seals the novel’s contract with the heterosexual marriage plot. It is a contract won, however, late in the game and by a low-cost bidder. It is possible to push past the flimsy walls of this plot structure by engaging a

transitive reading practice that crosses the novel's own narrative boundaries, toward a different—but gestured toward—text.

That alternate text might well be Eliza Lynn Linton's *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland* (1885). This autobiography includes a powerful scene that I understand as a rewriting and recasting of Bell Blount's caressing hand. Christopher, Lynn Linton's thinly disguised, cross-gendered self-portrait, is describing his passion for Adeline Dalrymple, an older married woman who is refined, captivating, and possesses "an almost feverish activity of mind, an almost dangerous energy of thought" (1:174). He loses himself in his giddy passion for her, forgetting social convention and how "things look from the outside" (1: 177):

"Time and space may divide us from each other, and circumstances may be stronger than our will; but thought overrides matter, our souls are ever one and inseparable, and the bond of the spirit once made is indissoluble. Love is in itself immortality. It cannot die; it cannot change; and no force in nature can kill it."

She laid her white and scented hand on mine, so brown and large and bony—and bent her head till she looked full and straight in my eyes. I was sitting on a low stool by her side; she was on the window-seat made in the embrasure.

"You, dear boy, will go into the world far away from all of us here," she said; and—was it my fancy? or did that sweet voice which always reminded me of pearls tremble, and something as tender as tears come into her glorious eyes?—"but, wherever you go, my spirit will go with you, surrounding you, guarding you, one with your very breath, your very life. Never forget that, my child. I am with you always—like God and with God—in the future always, as I have ever been in the past."

Her hand closed on mine with an almost convulsive grasp. It burnt like fire, and the diamonds on her fingers and at her throat flashed as if by their own internal light. Her voice had sunk almost to a whisper, and something seemed to pass from her to me which thrilled me like electricity. I could not speak. My heart suddenly swelled so that it strangled my voice and cut short my breath. I only felt a dumb kind of desire to carry my life to her hands and worship her as I would have worshipped the Eternal Mother of men and things. She was beyond womanhood to me—she was the casket that embodied and enclosed the Divine.

**(p.123)** As I looked at her, she still bending down her head and looking into my eyes, I felt a strange rapture and loss of myself in her personality. (1: 199)

In this version of the handclasp, the "white and scented" hands are not demonic, but rather, divine. Christopher desires, even, to deliver his life into these hands. The sexual power of the hand is as evident here and it was with Bell, the difference being that here the sexual encounter is consummated. When Adeline's hand closes on Christopher's, it is with the shudder ("convulsive grasp") and heat ("like fire") of orgasm. What Perdita

could not bring herself to consummate, Christopher, the heterosexual proxy of Eliza Lynn Linton, can. Upon this sexual consummation, Christopher feels “something pass from her to me which thrilled me like electricity” and leaves him wordless, breathless. Robbed of his powers of communication, he is able to be all feeling and all desire, and the rapture that comes to him comes, emphatically, through loss of himself and through having passed into the being of his beloved. This is the rapture that Perdita never finds. The concluding lines of *The Rebel of the Family* pay lip service to “that Love which alone makes our life divine” (397), but run decidedly short on any passion. It is only by *passing* over from *Rebel* to the *Autobiography* that we find erotic satisfaction. *Passing* is what Lynn Linton is doing, by donning the male, heterosexualizing guise of Christopher. Christopher is then, however, reabsorbed into the feminine when he “passes” into Adeline and loses himself in her. This loss is enabling, rebirthing, and it translates Christopher and the world around him:

Henceforth all things were transformed for me, and life meant a new existence as it had a new *message*. The sunrises and the sunsets, the song of the birds, the flowers in the fields, the shadows of the clouds on the mountains, the reflections in the lake and the ripple of the blue waves, the voice of the waters making music in cascades, the budding and the fall of the leaves of the trees—all were the circumstances of a more beautiful world than that in which I had hitherto lived. Nature had a *secret language* which was revealed to me, and I understood the *hidden meaning* of things which hitherto had had no meaning at all. (203–4, my italics)

In the earlier passage, quoted above, Christopher loses one kind of communicative capacity—speech—but here, the self is made communicative again by the power of erotic exchange.<sup>33</sup> Significantly, Christopher is not now exchanging words with words, but **(p.124)** rather finds a correspondence between the natural world and language. Words get in the way when they bear the burden of meaning—Christopher describes the look in Adeline’s eyes as “more eloquent than words,” and he loses the sense of her actual words because they “filled my ears with too much music” (203). And so, finally, under the sign of discursive respite—of wordless exchanges and unintelligible polyphony—we are delivered a lesbian love scene.

This scene cannot happen in *The Rebel of the Family* because Lynn Linton immobilizes the possibility of communication or overlap between political causes. She disavows lesbianism by pitting sexual politics against social politics. Bell Blount vociferously and explicitly criticizes Perdita’s socialist theories as “nothing in comparison to the franchise” (Linton, *RF* 1: 300–301) and later still in the novel, she explicitly desires to disassociate her cause from “Red Republicanism” (Linton, *RF* 3: 135). Invited to enter a lineup from which Perdita might find an equal companion, Bell is rejected and framed as a sexual menace to the socialist utopia for which Perdita is searching (Meem 550).<sup>34</sup> One of the ways in which Bell Blount is established as an enemy of socialism is through an epistolary metaphor that allies her letters with private, coded, or secret communication. The link between letters and spying was an incendiary matter for Lynn Linton. Her one-time husband, Chartist engraver William James Linton, helped uncover the government plot to

intercept the mail of revolutionary exile Giuseppe Mazzini.<sup>35</sup> There is therefore peril in the air when, early in her relationship with Perdita, Bell assures her that she can freely **(p.125)** choose to come and live with her: “We are not,” she reminds her, living “in days when you could be [. . .] sent to the Bastille by a *lettre de cachet*” (Linton *RF* 1: 67). The reference to *lettres de cachet*—the blank warrants for arrest used in the French ancien régime—signals Bell’s sinister intent, particularly as the Winstanley family view Perdita as “an upsetting rebel [who] would be the focus of a local revolution, and the neighbouring gentry would cut her and hers as deliberate traitors to their order” (Linton *RF* 1: 121). While not exactly compelled to live with the Society by order of a sealed letter, Bell Blount herself courts Perdita by writing to her every day:

There were letters which made Perdita’s cheeks burn, she scarcely knew why [. . .] she was in a strange halting state of feeling altogether. Half attracted and half repelled—fascinated by the woman’s mental power and revolted by something too vague to name yet too real to ignore. (Linton *RF* 2: 50–51)

Bell’s letters to Perdita elicit a physical reaction from her: a blush. This is the same reaction that Perdita has when she is kissed and touched by Bell, and Bell, too, “flushed wildly” when Perdita agreed to stay with her. Throughout the novel, Perdita expresses a hatred of her blushes, as they communicate feelings that she wants to suppress or hide.<sup>36</sup> Bell rebukes her for this, saying that her blushes “show the passion and vitality of your nature—which are just the qualities that attracted me” (Linton *RF* 1: 65). Bell, in other words, reads or deciphers Perdita’s “nature” through physiological signals. Bell’s daily letters communicate desire in much the same way that their blushes do; the letters are passionate, recall her physical caresses, are a form of exchange, and appeal to what Bell views as their corresponding natures. They call on Perdita to enter a mode of feeling, to give in to her fascination, whereas when Leslie Crawford “read[s] the secret writing of [Perdita’s] poor wayward soul,” he does so to “command,” “protect,” and “guard her from herself” (Linton *RF* 1: 262–63). The “communicative touch,” to use Ballantyne’s phrase, that arises between Perdita and Bell is one that Lynn Linton develops only to condemn it as dangerous. But Bell fascinates because she literally embodies communication. When Perdita first meets her, she appears with a halo of whitened hair, dressed in “a kaleidoscopic arrangement of colours [. . .] a walking rainbow” (Linton, *RF* 49). Materializing like a goddess, Bell’s rainbow attire likens her to Iris, who in Greek mythology is goddess of the rainbow and *messenger* of the Olympic gods (the name has a double meaning: “iris,” meaning rainbow and “eiris,” meaning messenger). Bell is “Bell,” not “Belle” —an “odd-looking” (Linton, *RF* 49) woman whose role is that of, first, a sensorium, then, second, **(p.126)** an alarum. She does indeed bear a message for Perdita, namely that Perdita should “take [her] life in [her] own hands” (Linton *RF* 1: 67), but Bell’s communicativeness exceeds the message. She loiters after its delivery and desires to deliver more than this communiqué of emancipation. Bell is media. And in Lynn Linton’s hands, the communication network and the queer connections that it materializes are portrayed as sinister and in need of regulation.

Both Lucy Graham’s and Perdita Winstanley’s sexually ambiguous roles are resolved by

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marriage. Their work at the Post Office provides what Lady John Manners calls the “preliminary training” required to “rule a household intelligently.” Lady Manners explains that

young ladies do not devote themselves irrevocably to the public service as if they were entering a convent. In fact, the public life of many of them is concluded by the presentation, not of the red or blue riband and of one of those stars which, according to the author of “*Endymion*,” are the “poetry of dress,” as is occasionally the case with retiring male officials, but with the gift of a plain gold ring. (40)

The allusion to Benjamin Disraeli’s *Endymion* is apposite. *Endymion* is a novel that addresses the influence of women over the public careers of the men they love, and Lady Manners uses the reference to bolster her suggestion that women can have a powerful influence over the public sphere, without assuming permanent public positions themselves. Lynn Linton was not wholly, or at least not consistently, adverse to women working outside of “their own natural portion of the field of labour,” as she expresses it in her article “The Modern Revolt,” but hated the thought that it would become the commonplace and urged acknowledgement of the importance of child-rearing and housekeeping to “the State and the race” (“MR” 148, 144). Lady Manners is similarly concerned about women’s “natural” roles and assures the young women entering the civil service that their work there will doom them neither to celibacy nor manliness. They will wear neither the nun’s veil nor the public man’s medal but can fully and happily expect to end up wearing a wedding band.

Lady Manners’ assurance that public work is not incommensurate with feminine garb and a marriage plot is an attempt to shut the gate after the horse has bolted. The civil service does, for Lynn Linton and Trollope, offer women a way to experience nonfemale roles. Both Lucy and Perdita enter homosocial or homosexual domestic orders and workplaces by way of rejecting the frivolities of femininity and imagining a masculine identity for themselves. Trollope describes Lucy’s eventual marriage as a release from masculinity, as a rescue from the “hard, outside, unwomanly work” (“TG” 369) of the Post Office. Perdita, too, had to imagine herself as masculine in order to distance herself from what her eventual husband calls an emasculated age: “It is this false god of Caste [. . .] this absurd belief in rank [. . .] which is taking the true manhood out of our country” (Linton, *RF* 3: 284), he declares. In both stories the girls’ aspirations toward masculinity are deemed admirable, since masculinity represents industry, duty, and patriotism. **(p.127)** In neither story, however, can the girls *successfully* adopt the heterosexual role of the male as provider, and in each story their valorized masculinity eventually gives way to a new femininity invigorated by the girls’ tourism in the masculine realm. Employment at the Post Office does not actually give the women the financial or domestic independence that they imagine it will. Lucy cannot, after all, support her household on her Post Office income, nor can Perdita secure financial stability for hers. Both come to rely upon the money of their husbands-to-be. Perdita’s fiancé’s income even enables the marriages of Perdita’s sisters. Neither does either girl find fellowship with the other workers; despite her socialist politics, Perdita is disappointed to find that most girls work in the office for

“prosaic” rather than romantic or imperialist reasons:

She had expected to find in them the same political principle and high-strung earnestness which she herself carried into her work—the same proud consciousness of participating in the conduct of the Imperial Government which made her routine business letters and dry rows of figures essentially poems—and she found instead the dullest indifference to the whole thing [. . .]. Neither heroines nor martyrs were they, but just a congregation of commonplace young women whose family finances were scanty, and who preferred employment that took them away from home and into society, to that which would have kept them within four walls and in the bosom of their family. (Linton, *RF* 2: 52)

Lynn Linton both applauds Perdita’s commitment to Queen, country, and empire and also gently mocks her desire to find her patriotic enthusiasms reflected in a female workforce. The ideal of imperial duty is laudable, but the excessive (“high-strung”) enthusiasm that Perdita attaches to it is represented as a dangerous capacity. After all, it was the same kind of overwrought politics, principles, and earnestness that nearly led Perdita into the arms of Bell Blount. This passage suggests that Lynn Linton has an appreciation for the very levelheaded prosaism of the Post Office girls that Perdita despises. This appreciation clarifies—if such a word can be applied to Lynn Linton’s astoundingly conflicted brand of feminist antifeminism—into praise in *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland*: “The Post Office and the Telegraph Office put money into the pockets of some hundreds of industrious girls,” she writes, and she sees this as a means by which “the running [between men and women] has been more equalised” (Linton, *KC* 3: 10–11).

This equalization of relations between men and women through work is central to both *The Rebel of the Family* and “The Telegraph Girl.” Lucy and Perdita find expression for their industriousness at the Post Office and then find equally industrious men to marry. I opened this chapter asking how and why this late-century fiction could figure female postal workers as lesbian. Another answer lies partly with the vexed “complex mechanisms,” to use Foucault’s phrase, linking marriage and work at this time. Both Trollope and Lynn Linton are concerned with the problem of the nonindustrious middle-class (p.128) married woman. They both object to the way in which women can be “bound” to men, either through being lazy, frivolous, and dependent themselves, or through being unequal, exploited, and subjugated by men. In “The Modern Revolt,” Lynn Linton makes this explicit, declaring that women’s modern desire to work “has two meanings: the one, a noble protest against the frivolity and idleness into which they have suffered themselves to sink; the other, a mad rebellion against the natural duties of their sex, and those characteristics known in the mass as womanliness” (“MR” 142). Trollope’s and Lynn Linton’s fiction figures women learning to reconfigure the function and duties of marriage, forging partnerships in which the wife and the husband have distinct roles, but are similarly focused on work and duty. The interstitial spaces in which both young women do this learning are those of the Post Office and the lesbian household, two configurations of duty that, as I have shown, are constitutive of one another.

The lesbian partnership, in each story, is a cautionary tale—Bell Blount is held up as a

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terrifyingly masculine predator and Lucy Graham's flirtation with lesbianism masculinizes and exhausts her. But the lesbian partnerships are also valorized as a potentially useful developmental phase. The same-sex relationships are, in both stories, hypermimetic of traditional heterosexual marriage and as such are used to show up two different kinds of inequalities that can be produced within heterosexual marriage. Bell Blount's "wife" is exploited, "bound to serve and obey," and Sophy Wilson is frivolous, frittering away her "husband's" money. The same-sex relationships allow Lucy and Perdita to switch scripts—to take, or imaginatively inhabit the role of the husband—and thus see what makes a bad wife. In other words, Lucy and Perdita both experience husbanding, and are able to experience—from within same-sex relationships—the failures of the "bonds" of marriage not defined by mutual duty. Lesbianism is used as a pedagogical space, through which the girls can pass, emerging unfallen and still marriageable. The Post Office similarly keeps the girls sexually pure and marriageable, but is a place in which passion and devotion can be turned to Queen and country. Lucy and Perdita are passed through both lesbianism and the Post Office in order that they learn *civic* virtues that can be translated back into *domestic* marriages, founded now on a reinvigorated model of duty and industriousness.

#### Dissent, Diversity, and Modernity: Thomas Hardy's *A Laodicean*

Trollope's and Lynn Linton's stories confront the complicated role of the Post Office woman worker within an institutionalized, civic structure, but are less direct in their exploration of the material "complex mechanisms" of the communication network and communication technologies themselves. In *A Laodicean*, however, Hardy explores a fascination with the queer effects of communication machines. The heroine of *A Laodicean*, Paula Power, is not a Post Office employee, but she and her "frank and communicative" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 32) companion, Charlotte De Stancy, are passionate telegraphers. Their passion attaches both to the communication technology and to each other; it is Paula and Charlotte who are described as "more like lovers than girl and girl" (p. 129) (Hardy, *Laodicean* 50). An 1882 reviewer of *A Laodicean* picked up on the oddity of both the characters and their pastimes when he described it as a book in which "the author showed us very queer people doing very queer things" (Rev. of *A Laodicean* 674–75). The queerness of both the female characters and the communication technology of which they are so fond is signaled by the way that lesbianism and telegraphy together continually disrupt a heterosexual marriage plot. Paula is a "modern maiden" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 17) who inherits a new fortune that her father had made in railway construction, and she lives in a derelict medieval castle. Her competing suitors are George Somerset, who is an architect, and Captain De Stancy, who is an aristocrat, brother of Charlotte, and one-time owner of Paula's castle. While Paula repeatedly refuses to exchange either kisses or letters with her male suitors, she is constantly engaged in the exchange of telegrams, physical affection, and tokens of love with Charlotte. The "inscrutability" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 91, 96) that marks her relationship with her male suitors is inversely matched by the communicative nature of her relationship with Charlotte.

The novel opens with the architect Somerset using the "musical threads which the post-office authorities had erected all over the country" to find his way to the village in which

he intends to spend the night. The “friendly” humming thread that Somerset uses to guide him across the country landscape is the telegraph wire, a “mark of civilisation” that he trusts more than the country road when the two fork off in different directions. The wire seems to have a vigor of its own; it “plunges,” “sings,” and “leaps” over hill, hedge, and hollow (Hardy, *Laodicean* 21). But its song is something of a siren song; it leads Somerset literally off the beaten track and instead of guiding him to the village, he finds himself at De Stancy castle, into which he is surprised to see the wire disappear. Inside the castle, the other end of the wire is attended by two unmarried women who live there together, Charlotte De Stancy and the current owner of the castle, Paula Power. Like Trollope’s magazine pieces and Linton’s novel, Hardy’s “Story of To-day,” as the novel is subtitled, associates unmarried women, their same-sex love, and their households, with communication networks.

The telegraph wire is the direct line to Paula Power that so eludes her male suitors. When Somerset first follows it, he observes how it sails over the obstacles—a moat and a girdling wall—designed to keep uninvited guests out of the castle. Somerset himself has to “withdraw” from the defended castle this night and spends the bulk of the novel puzzled and thwarted by Paula’s distant ways. She and her castle are impenetrable to her male suitors, whereas the singing telegraph wire vanishes “through an arrow-slit into the interior” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 22). The arrow-slit—an aperture designed to allow projectiles exit but not entry—is an image of invagination that fits with Paula’s role as a “maiden” and her sexual repudiations of Somerset and Captain De Stancy. The men may find barricades (like “girdle” walls) to Paula’s affections, but the telegraph wire does not; the anthropomorphized wire and its messages “leap” freely into or out of the “loophole” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 35, 210) of the castle’s keep. Telegraphy and Charlotte find the literal and metaphorical loophole to Paula’s self-containment and they have access to the “interior” that Somerset and De Stancy seek.

**(p.130)** The image of an aperture with a wire or line threaded through it is also found in a description of the acclaimed railway tunnel made by Paula’s father. Somerset regards the scene:

Somerset looked down on the mouth of the tunnel. The absurdity of the popular commonplace that science, steam and travel must always be unromantic and hideous, was proved on the spot. On either slope of the deep cutting, green with long grass, grew dropping young trees of ash, beech, and other flexible varieties, their foliage almost concealing the actual railway which ran along the bottom, its thin steel rails gleaming like silver threads in the depths. The vertical front of the tunnel, faced with brick that had once been red, was now weather-stained, lichened, and mossed over in harmonious hues of rusty-browns, pearly greys, and neutral greens, at the very base appearing a little blue-black spot like a mouse-hole—the tunnel’s mouth. (Hardy, *Laodicean* 96)

This description of a man-made structure that has been obscured or incorporated into nature—“lichened,” “mossed” and made harmonious with the landscape— matches the description of the castle. The castle is “muffled in creepers” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 22) and

its driveway is “half overgrown with green” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 21). A castle, like a railway or a telegraph wire, is a part of a national infrastructure: it is merely the more antique form. A castle once functioned as a “post” in a nationwide network of fortified buildings that together formed a defense and communication system. Hardy shows us an England in which these infrastructures do not disrupt the landscape, but become an organic, almost invisible part of it. When Somerset gets access to the inside of the castle and climbs up to the battlements, he can see clearly the telegraph wire that before he had only seen at a distance, “vanishing” into the keep, and he uses an organic simile to describe it. Now “the arrow-slit and the electric wire that entered it, like a worm uneasy at being unearthed, were distinctly visible” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 25).

While this means that the railway and telegraphic technologies do not disrupt the landscape, they most certainly perturb Somerset and De Stancy. The vanishing point of both the wire and the tracks is descriptively invaginated: either as a slit that opens to an interior, or as rusty red, mossed over tunnel with a mouth. Paula Power has the power that her last name suggests over the technologies of intercourse, and it is a power that, at least temporarily, unmans her suitors. When Somerset first sees the castle’s telegraph machinery in action, it is conveying a message between Charlotte and Paula, and it is a message about him. Somerset does not understand the machinery’s language and is discomforted by the resultant secrecy: “There was something curious in watching this utterance about himself, under his very nose, in language unintelligible to him” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 42). There is (p.131) something “curious,” something queer,<sup>37</sup> about the communication passing across him and being about him, but not being understood by him; it takes place across his body, “under his nose,” proving the faculties of this sensory organ useless and mocking his imperfect powers of comprehension and reaction. The women’s confidential telegraphic communications thus disable Somerset’s masculinity. This emasculation is not, however, represented in traumatic terms. Jay Clayton’s excellent reading of *A Laodicean* points out that the unmaning of Somerset stimulates him. Rather than being castrated, something which implies merely a turn of the heterosexual table and the woman taking over the phallus, the scene instead queers Somerset. Clayton calls these the “queer effects” of the telegraphic machinery (220). This reading, focusing on effect rather than subjectivity, is wonderfully commensurate with Hardy’s emphasis on the machinery’s powers of flow and flux. The communication machinery’s capability for exchange and interchange is not limited to the messages themselves. The network makes myriad interfaces possible, some of which will be queer—in this case, girl to girl—and it can allow the correspondents themselves to experience the exchange of subject position. The “curious” quality of the telegraph that Somerset senses is its capability to bring about imaginative exchanges of subject position, exchanges which can include transpositions of sex, gender, and sexual desire.

Postal communication’s capacity to cross sexual wires is made apparent in an interview Hardy granted the author, critic, and translator, William Archer. In this interview, first published in the *Pall Mall Magazine* in April 1901, Archer asked Hardy if it was true that he used to write love-letters for the local girls of his boyhood village. Hardy’s reply is defensive:

**Mr. Hardy.** (*reluctantly*). Well—yes, to their soldier sweethearts in India

[. . .]

**W.A.** That was part of Samuel Richardson’s apprenticeship, too. He trained for Clarissa, you for Tess.

**Mr. Hardy.** But I think you will find that Richardson’s case was different. He was employed to compose the letters; I was only the amanuensis. Indeed, I was chosen on account of my tender years—because I could write, and read the replies, yet couldn’t understand. They looked upon me as a mere writing machine, or a sort of phonograph to be talked into. And as a matter of fact I understood very little, and took very little interest in what I wrote and read; though I remember to this day one lover’s address, as given in his letter: “Calcutta, *or Elsewear*.”

**W.A.** I fancy many of those letters remained written in your mind in sympathetic ink, only waiting for the heat of creation to bring them out.

**Mr. Hardy.** Possibly, in a sub-conscious way. The human mind is a sort of palimpsest, I suppose; and it’s hard to say what records may not lurk in it. (qtd. in Gibson 67)

**(p.132)** The “reluctance” that Archer parenthetically records is amusingly evident in the text of the interview.<sup>38</sup> Hardy’s concern is to make it plain that—unlike Samuel Richardson—he did not *author* the words of love, and in fact did not even understand the discourse. To have done so, his anxious evasions make paradoxically plain, would imply that he himself desired the soldiers in India. Hardy takes refuge in the idea that he was a mere recording-writing machine in order to avoid being construed either as a girl or as part of a same-sex erotic epistolary exchange.<sup>39</sup> It is ironic, therefore, that what he finally admits to remembering is an “oddity”—the strange address “Calcutta, *or Elsewear*” [*sic*]. His defense against deviance breaks down, as indeed it does when Archer presses his point, rejecting Hardy’s claim that the letter-writing left no impression upon him, insisting that the act of writing women’s letters must have made him think *like a woman*. Moreover, Archer suggests that the “sympathetic ink” that had been suffused into Hardy’s brain would get released in a moment of passion, through the “heat of creation.” Archer makes fiction-writing sound like an erotic act, a kind of cross-gendered ejaculation. In order to generate the words of a woman, Hardy becomes, in that moment of writing, a woman writer. The communication network in which Hardy participated detached the epistle from the hand of the lover and inserted into the relationship a number of other variously gendered bodies—not only his own, but also those of the postal workers. The machine to which Hardy appeals as a standard of imperviousness is in fact a penetrating, penetrated network that creates and leaves traces of desire. As Marshall McLuhan might retort to Hardy, “the medium is the message.”<sup>40</sup> If the medium is, as Hardy insists, a machine, it is a desiring machine.

The postal medium’s capacity for producing exchanges of gender and desire derives

from its universal, organized character. A postal exchange means that it is not possible **(p.133)** to imagine the trajectory—the single pathway—of a post-letter or telegraph without imagining the multiple pathways of the network. Just as the machine, despite Hardy's protestations, always mediates, the network always complicates the idea of a single line of connection between two correspondents. In *A Laodicean*, Hardy contrasts Paula, with her command of telegraph and railway networks, with her male suitors (and their supporters) who have merely one-track minds; they are each obsessed with blood-lineage. These men besiege Paula, plotting and contriving to win her hand and in the process, they make intriguingly similar interpretative mistakes. Captain De Stancy is urged to woo her by his illegitimate son, William Dare, in order that Paula's wealth and castle might once again become De Stancy property.<sup>41</sup> Somerset similarly has inheritance and genealogy on his mind. He interprets Paula's "preference" for the De Stancy line and her taste for the ancient as the desire for "family pedigree" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 212), and he goes in search of his own genealogical tree with which to press his suit. De Stancy's courtship of Paula is instigated and, quite literally, stage-managed by the illegitimate Dare and by Paula's uncle Abner Power. Abner Power similarly contrives to arrange the marriage for socially conservative reasons, believing that if Paula "finds the money, and this Stancy finds the name and blood, " 'twould be a very neat match" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 237). Dare is the product of a mismanaged heterosexual union and seeks to compensate for the fragmentation of the kinship structure that he embodies, conspiring to patch together the semblance of a blood-descendancy. Both he and Abner Power seek to line up and conjoin the flows of blood, title, and money.

The relationship between Charlotte De Stancy and Paula Power bypasses the constructions of blood-lineage that the men try to reestablish. While Captain De Stancy and Somerset duel over who will become master of the castle, it is Charlotte who moves in as Paula's companion. Charlotte's residence at the castle confuses Somerset: "This is home to you, and not home?" he asks (Hardy, *Laodicean* 32), struggling and failing to understand and articulate the queer semantics of her domestic situation. Further—and particularly—confusing to him is Charlotte's lack of regard for her ancestral connections to the castle. Instead of searching for her history in the portraits of her blood ancestors, she thinks the pictures not "useful" and is "serenely conclusive" about the castle's current ownership: "It doesn't seem to me as if the place ever belonged to a relative of mine" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 32). Even her physiognomy reflects genetic *dissent* rather than *descent*; hers "was not the De Stancy face with all its original specialities; it was, so to speak, a defective reprint of that face: for the nose tried hard to turn up and deal utter confusion to the family shape" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 29). Charlotte's **(p.134)** relationship to the castle is also a confusion to the family shape; her presence there is a consequence of her love for Paula, rather than a consequence of her family line. Paula similarly deals out confusions to family shapes by conversely taking a "lively interest" in the castle's artifacts, demonstrating an " 'artistic' preference for Charlotte's ancestors instead of her own" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 212).<sup>42</sup> Her predilection for the De Stancy line is most certainly "artistic," as Oscar Wilde uses the term; it is a predilection not for any De Stancy but for *Charlotte*.

When the novel ends with Charlotte secluding herself in a nunnery and Paula marrying Somerset, it is not an unmitigated heterosexual resolution. Somerset encourages Paula to abandon hope of rebuilding the now burned and ruined castle and desires her to “recover, if you have not already, from the warp given to your mind [. . .] by the mediaevalism of that place.” She asks if he would prefer her to be a modern spirit and he agrees, saying, “Yes; for since it is rather in your line you may as well keep straight on.” Paula agrees: “Very well, I’ll keep straight on; and we’ll build a new house beside the ruin, and show the modern spirit for evermore [. . .].” Her acceptance of the “line” Somerset assigns to her, and the “straight”—as opposed to “warped”—life they will make together is interrupted. The ellipsis marks a “repressed sigh” and an unfulfilled wish: “I wish my castle wasn’t burnt; and I wish you were a De Stancy!” she bursts out. The alternative life that she grieves in this outburst is described earlier in the same paragraph in terms of another “line”; their decision to leave behind the castle was a bid to have a home “unencumbered with the ghosts of an unfortunate line” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 431). Paula’s final words of the novel make it clear that she herself is haunted by desire and desires to be haunted. That this is a queer desire and that the yearned-for spectral presence is Charlotte is, as Terry Castle describes it, indicated through the trope of “the spectral lesbian [who] is ultimately expelled from the ‘real’ world of the fiction” (7) and through the epistemic mistake made by Somerset when he talks of Paula’s medieval tastes.

Somerset’s reference to Paula having been under the “warped” influence of “medievalism” flies in the face of a conversation he and Paula had shortly after meeting, when Paula informs him that she is “not a mediaevalist,” but “Greek” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 82). Her declaration concurs with Charlotte’s earlier representation of Paula’s tastes in a conversation with Somerset. Upon hearing of Paula’s interest in pottery, he declares that she must be a “practical” woman. Charlotte is quick to say that he misconstrues Paula: “‘Oh no! no!’ replied Miss De Stancy in tones showing how supremely ignorant he must be of Miss Power’s nature if he characterised her in those terms. ‘It is *Greek* pottery she means—Hellenic pottery she tells me to call it’ ” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 36). Paula later gets (p.135) Charlotte to explain to Somerset her ideas for building a Greek courtyard in the castle, which Somerset finds “rather startling” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 83). As they are considering the plan for this “anachronistic” architectural feature, the three of them spot the turret that Somerset had fallen into the day before (Hardy, *Laodicean* 82–83). They remember the story of a man who fell into the same turret, but could not get out and starved to death. Instead of imagining this fate for Somerset, Paula “arose and went across to Miss De Stancy. ‘Don’t you go falling down and becoming a skeleton,’ she said [. . .] after which she clasped her fingers behind Charlotte’s neck, and smiled tenderly in her face” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 84). As Charlotte is describing Paula’s plans for the Greek colonnade that so startle Somerset, Paula pulls up a young sycamore tree that had sprung up between the joints of the paving (Hardy, *Laodicean* 84). Hardy’s symbolism is blunt: Paula’s presence in Stancy castle and her architectural plans for Greek features uproot some orthodoxies. Paula is most certainly not interested in the genealogical trees of either of her male suitors; instead, she desires the companionship (including, as the above passage implies, the body) of Charlotte and an architecture that echoes a culture

in which such love finds its roots.

Paula's interest in Greek culture, her "modern" outlook and her queer relationship with Charlotte are interrelated. Critics have hitherto largely ignored her interest in Greek culture, but it poses a significant complication to the notion that Paula is a woman torn between her love for the modern and her love for the medieval. Her declaration "I am Greek" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 82) also disrupts the critical commonplace that she is torn between wanting to marry Captain De Stancy and wanting to marry George Somerset. Linda Dowling's study *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* has established the cultural significance of scholarly interest in Hellenism that burgeoned from the 1860s onward.<sup>43</sup> Dowling points out that Hellenism offered a civic ethic that could respond to and supplant the "pinched" narrowing of Protestant religion, a narrowing which had been compounded by industrial modernity. For liberal thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, Matthew Arnold, and Benjamin Jowett, Hellenism promised to reinvigorate a stagnant culture and supplant the "older ideological structures of public life" (Dowling 35) through its emphasis on diversity and nonconformity. Dowling claims that this "diversity ideal" of Hellenism meshed with the "emphasis on diversity within both the English tradition of religious Dissent and the newer discourse of biological or Darwinistic evolution" (62). The rejection of "uniformity" and an embracing of "diversity," Dowling claims, paved the way for a late-Victorian "counterdiscourse of social identity and erotic liberation" (36).

**(p.136)** The discourse of Hellenism, therefore, is a suggestive school of thought to pursue in relation to this novel that is so concerned with era and aesthetic, and intertwines these concerns with a story of same-sex love. The story opens with a scene set "on an ordinary plodding and bustling evening of the nineteenth century" in which Somerset witnesses Paula Power's last-minute refusal of baptismal immersion. The church is newly built, with "pseudo-classical" and "geometrically oppressive" ornamentation, in short, "ugly" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 13–14). It transpires that Paula had only agreed to the ceremony because it was her father's last dying request; this Nonconformist ceremony is consequently an act of personal conformity, which Paula cannot follow through. The ceremony and its building stand for "narrow religious character [. . .] self-effacement [and] assimilation," which Dowling identifies as the avowed enemies of Hellenism (57).

The two modern improvements Paula has added to the castle are the telegraph and a gymnasium modeled on those found in the new colleges for women.<sup>44</sup> Like the telegraph machinery that connects Charlotte and Paula, the gymnasium is also a site for same-sex desire; Paula's maid Milly Birch says that Paula is "bewitching" when she is in the gymnasium "Because when she is there she wears such a pretty boy's costume and is so charming in her movements, that you think she is a lovely youth and not a girl at all" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 169). The gymnasium, probably modeled on those at Girton and Newnham Colleges, Cambridge, which were founded in 1869 and 1871 respectively, is a marker of Paula's educated and independent nature, but is also a manifestation of her association with the Greek athletic, homoerotic aesthetic. Not only is the gymnasium a place where Paula's gender becomes mutable, and she can look like a boy rather than a

girl, but the gym is a product of Paula's enthusiasm for "the physical training of the Greeks, whom she adores" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 170).

Before we learn of Paula's "predilection" for the Greek ideal, Somerset's first sightings of Paula connect her to the Greek aesthetic. When he spies her on the brink of descending into the baptismal pool, she is "clothed in an ample robe of flowing white, which descended to her feet," and instead of following the minister into the water, she "remained rigid as stone" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 16). She looks like one of the Greek statues that she later says she has admired in the British Museum (Hardy, *Laodicean* 84).<sup>45</sup> Paula is also described as a statue in a scene with Captain De Stancy, where her imperviousness to his romantic machinations and "double-entendre"<sup>46</sup> is signaled by her statue-like stillness: "At last **(p.137)** Paula spoke, so stilly that she seemed a statue, enunciating" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 190). Not only is Paula as still as a statue, but she is also as white as one, clothed in "flowing white." Richard Jenkyns has traced the homoerotic significance of whiteness through the work of Walter Pater, who, according to Jenkyns, "contrasts Greek whiteness with the spiritual unease of the modern world" (148). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published ten years after *A Laodicean*, Oscar Wilde repeatedly portrayed Dorian as a Greek god: pallid, perfect, and posed, the embodiment of the Hellenism which Lord Henry espouses. Lord Henry believes that erotic liberation might lead the world to "forget all the maladies of medievalism, and return to the Hellenic ideal" (Wilde, *DG* 41). This conjunction of sexual frankness, rejection of medievalism, and embrace of Hellenism describes Paula Power perfectly, but did this discourse have homoerotic significance for women as well as men?

Eileen Gregory has analyzed the female homoerotics of the white and static forms of Greek sculpture through her study of the poetry of H.D. She shows how H.D. used references to whiteness and statues to encode a queer sexuality, embracing the "iconography of Dorian hellenism" as a discourse of "discipline, hardness and brilliance" (Gregory 102, 105).<sup>47</sup> We might also remember Robert Browning's description of Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who wrote as Michael Field, as "two dear Greek women" (qtd. in Prins 77).<sup>48</sup> This homoerotic Hellenism was not a discourse exclusive to the male domain. Yopie Prins decides the matter in her essay "Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinsters," which directly addresses the question of whether women feature in the Greek homoerotic nineteenth-century tradition, noting, "The cultural prestige of Classical studies in nineteenth-century England and the fascination with Greek antiquity in particular created a desire among women to know the language of ancient Greece and, like their male counterparts, they discovered in ancient Greek a new language of **(p.138)** desire."<sup>49</sup> The connection of homoerotic Greek eros to women is made most explicit in *A Laodicean* in the passage where Paula compares her beloved Charlotte with a white statue; one of the most erotic scenes in the novel, it depicts the sensuousness so remarkably lacking from the relationship between Paula and Somerset or De Stancy. Coming across an "alabaster effigy of a recumbant lady" in a church, Paula sighs and says, "She is just like Charlotte." Then

Paula drew her forefingers across the marble face of the effigy, and at length [she]

took out her handkerchief, and began wiping the dust from the hollows of the features. [Somerset] looked on, wondering what her sigh had meant, but guessing that it had been somehow caused by the sight of these sculptures in connection with the newspaper writer's denunciation of her as an irresponsible outsider. (Hardy, *Laodicean* 111)

Once again Somerset finds Paula's nonverbal language illegible; just as he has proved himself unable to interpret both her blushes and her telegraphic signals, he cannot understand her sigh or her caresses of the statue. Later in the novel, frustrated by the nondemonstrative language of the telegram, he tries to force Paula to correspond by letter, hoping for explicit verbal expression of her sentiments. Throughout the novel Somerset is thoroughly disconcerted by Paula's "telegraphic" manner. Just as Somerset is frustrated by Paula's telegraphic, independent directness, there are indications that the type of womanhood embodied by these young, unmarried, independent girls was equally "startling" to the general public. A common complaint was that telegraph girls were too "brusque" and "impertinent" in manner. Even Lady John Manners, who commends the women workers for their satisfactory work, notes: "It may be hoped that in time the somewhat brusque manner in some of these damsels may become more like that of their foreign sisters, and that they will learn that gentle courtesy is not inconsistent with self-respect" (20). Lady Manners clearly thinks the girls are anything but old-fashioned "damsels"; she intimates that they are modern girls who put assertiveness before gentility.<sup>50</sup> In this *A Laodicean* scene, Paula's modernity and lack of reverence for antiquity is very much the issue. Somerset uncodes her "telegraphic" emotions by cross-referencing her sigh to a letter published in the newspaper that attacks Paula's plans to build her Greek courtyard, branding her an "iconoclast (p.139) of blood [. . .] without respect for the tradition of the country" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 109). Paula's forms and impulses are wrong; as a modern, telegraphic girl with a taste for the Greek aesthetic she is a threat to the orders of race and nation.

The opening pages of the novel also present the telegraph as a machine that challenges ancestral and national orders. Somerset is disconcerted by the incongruity of the telegraph wire entering the castle and meditates on the nature of the telegraphic machinery. Instead of the insularity that the castle represents, the telegraph promotes "interchange" and universal "kinship" that is racial, intellectual, and moral:

There was a certain unexpectedness in the fact that the hoary memorial of a stolid antagonism to the interchange of ideas, the monument of hard distinctions in blood and race [. . .] should be the goal of a machine which beyond everything may be said to symbolise cosmopolitan views and the intellectual and moral kinship of all mankind. (Hardy, *Laodicean* 22–23)

The crux of the matter is lineage; in this novel the network of telegraph wires runs counter to individuated lines of blood and title. The kinship of "all mankind" interferes with narratives of inheritance and genealogy. Hardy dramatizes the struggle between the two influences when William Dare recognizes that the telegraph's potential for engendering human contact threatens his plans for Paula's marriage to his father: "That wire is a

nuisance, to my mind; such constant intercourse with the outer world is bad for our romance" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 207). The plural possessive pronoun—"our," instead of "your" romance—is highly ironic. Dare is complaining that the telegraph complicates matters by enabling communion with others at exactly the moment that he reveals how unnaturally commingled he and his father are. His point, however, remains; telegraph lines to the outside world allow an intercourse that is catholic rather than exclusive. The communication network as his enemy, he and Abner Power set about trying to manipulate its potential. Power intercepts telegrams between Paula and Somerset, and Dare forges a telegram that makes Somerset appear to be a gambler. They are not, however, part of the telegraphic network, merely criminals who break into its circuitry. It is Charlotte and Paula, however, who can actually operate the machinery, can work it "beautifully" and "delight" in it (Hardy, *Laodicean* 35). They find pleasure, not enmity, in its wires and use it to build friendship and connection rather than mischief.

The technology that stands for interchange and kinship therefore also stands for the love between the women. The telegraph signals the love between them: " 'Another message,' she said.—'Paula to Charlotte.' [. . .] Miss De Stancy blushed with pleasure when she raised her eyes from the machine" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 52). The telegraphic signals provoke a physiological sign of Paula's love for Charlotte—the blush. When Somerset suggests to Paula that she is Charlotte's "good friend," Paula "looked into the distant air with tacit admission of the impeachment. 'So would you be if you knew her,' she said; and **(p.140)** a blush slowly rose to her cheek, as if the person spoken of had been a lover rather than a friend" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 35). As in *The Rebel of the Family*, in which the attraction between Bell Blount and Perdita was marked by the women's blushes, the blush functions here as a signifier of same-sex passion and correspondence between Paula and Charlotte. In *Telling Complexions: The Nineteenth-Century English Novel and the Blush*, Mary Ann O'Farrell has described how the blush can "partake of both body and language," and that in the nineteenth-century novel, the "ephemeral materiality" of the blush is a suggestive means of communication (3).<sup>51</sup> The blush is, as the title of O'Farrell's study implies, a means of telling, something that can make the body legible. In *A Laodicean*, the blush is the physiological manifestation of the telegraphic mode that binds the two women together.

While physiological and technological communication forge a bond between Charlotte and Paula, bodily disfiguration, distortion, and inscription characterize the men in the novel. Dare is tattooed with the name of his biological, but illegitimate father; Mr. Power's face is "pitted, puckered, and seamed like a dried water-course" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 236), and Dare contrives a photograph of Somerset, manipulating the image to show "distorted features and wild attitude of a man advanced in intoxication" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 319). The disfigured male bodies are manifest forms of the crises of representation upon which the plot of this novel turns and turns again. Hardy stages problems of reading and representation and a tug-of-war between information and misinformation throughout the novel.<sup>52</sup> The information and misinformation problems that beset heterosexual relationships all concern the establishment of character, ancestry, and familial relation. Unlike the women who have functional and fluid communication between them, the men in

the story get marked or scarred in their attempts to pursue kinship structures.

Hardy resolves the novel with Paula, in the lukewarm fashion indicated in the novel's title,<sup>53</sup> declaring that "somehow or other I have got to like George Somerset as desperately as a woman can care for any man" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 418) and marrying him. Charlotte subsequently writes to Paula to tell her that she has decided to withdraw from the "social (p.141) world" and join a Protestant sisterhood. Calling Paula her "more than sister," she says her decision will mean that Paula will always be with her and "if an increase in what I already feel for you be possible, it will be furthered by the retirement and meditation I shall enjoy in my secluded home" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 427). The women's lives diverge, but it is clear that they have both chosen paths of duty. Duty is an affective commitment linked, as I have shown, to lesbianism. Repudiating a lesbian relationship for the sake of duty is therefore no repudiation of lesbianism at all. Just as there is a distinct whiff of resignation in Paula's declaration of her engagement to Somerset, which avoids the word "love" as determinedly as she avoided his kisses, Charlotte also presents her decision to join a convent as a compromise: "Whatever shortcomings may be found in such a community, I believe that I shall be happier there than in any other place" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 427). Just as Charlotte first loved Paula at a distance through the telegraph wires, she now must love her from behind convent walls. And Charlotte's own last name reminds of this. The "de Stancy" Paula Power yearns to be with can only, it seems, be loved at a "di-Stance."<sup>54</sup> As with Trollope's Lucy Graham, same-sex love is inextricably linked to discipline, devotion, and the erotics of distance.

#### Media and Measure

The opening scene of *A Laodicean* describes Somerset occupied with measuring and copying the architectural detail on a doorway on the village church. To ensure precision of his copy, he uses a curious instrument:

He took his measurements carefully, and as if he revered the old workers whose trick he was endeavouring to acquire six hundred years after the original performance had ceased and the performers passed into the unseen. By means of a strip of lead called a leaden tape, which he pressed around and into the fillets and hollows with his finger and thumb, he transferred the exact contour of each moulding to his drawing. (AL 7)

What neither Hardy, nor any of his subsequent editors note, is the name of this leaden measure. It is called a "Lesbian rule." The phrase, and instrument, is cited by Aristotle in *Nichomachean Ethics*: "For when the thing is indefinite the rule also is indefinite, like the leaden rule used in making the Lesbian moulding; the rule adapts itself to the shape of the stone and is not rigid, and so too the decree is adapted to the facts" (5.10: 99). A Lesbian rule goes around corners and curves, and can be fitted to molding so that a precise (p.142) copy can be made, or exact measurements taken. It conforms, as Aristotle emphasizes, to the most nonconformist of shapes.

There are several ways in which this instrument is a fitting emblem for the novel's heroine, Paula Power, who answers the accusation that she's a medievalist with the

retort “I am an eclectic” (92). She embodies nonconformism and irregularity in that she is a Dissenter, a castle-dwelling heiress to an industrial fortune, and she loves Charlotte better than any of her male suitors. But in this opening scene, the Lesbian rule is firmly in the hand of Somerset, and he, too, finds close, even erotic, affinity with its adaptive nature. Hardy presents Somerset as eccentric in his pleasures. Somerset is described finding sensual pleasure in the molded stonework, and the dramatic emphasis of this scene is that Somerset literally turns his back on the glorious sunset that Hardy tells us most others would consider the highlight of the setting. Somerset’s tastes render the visual secondary to the tactile. Alerted to the sun’s spectacular, glamorous leave-taking only by “the warmth of the moulded stonework under his touch,” it is in the touch of the stonework that he finds satisfaction. This touch is animating because of the sense it brings him of connection to others, connection made across the ages. The technology he employs is reproductive, and it is also retrospective, enabling him to imitate the work of those who are long dead.

Bathed in the medium of the photographic, that is to say light, Somerset is indifferent to its “chromatic effect,” preferring the tactile, sculptural “fillets and hollows” that he must feel with his fingers. The stonework takes on feminine and sexual associations—“fillets” usually adorn the heads of maidens (OED), and the fingering of sculptural “hollows” consequently appears as sexually penetrative and caressing. It is a scene that will later find its counterpart and consummation when Paula wipes the dust from the “hollows” of the sculpture that reminds her of Charlotte (111). The bendy Lesbian rule becomes too bendy for Somerset, almost something of a boomerang, when his beloved Paula turns out to be as invested in exploring feminine curves as he is. But the setbacks to Somerset’s heterosexual courtship, and indeed the gender/sexuality organization of the characters, receive less descriptive attention than the technologies of tactility that they employ. Both Somerset and Paula use an intermediating instrument to feel: for Somerset this is the Lesbian rule and for Paula it is a handkerchief. In *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick remarks that “the sense of physical touch itself, at least so far, has been remarkably unsusceptible to being amplified by technology” (15). An exception, she notes, is breast examination in which women are taught to use “a film of liquid soap, a square of satiny cloth, or even a pad of thin plastic filled with a layer of water to make the contours of the breast more salient to their fingers” (15). Cutaneous contact involves friction that can confuse the hermeneutic capacities of touch: these intermediating materials reduce “noise” and instead amplify the signal features. Sedgwick’s point, however, is that the diagnostics of touch are little more than third cousin twice removed to the “literally exponential enhancements of visual stimulus” (15) that she dates as having entered the cultural vernacular in the nineteenth century. She cites *Middlemarch*’s narrative ability to “zoom in a mere two sentences from telescope to microscope” to argue that once such (p.143) ranges of visual perception became commonplace, ocular proof thoroughly overtook the “authority of the fingers” (15).

Telegraphy is, however, a technology that “zooms,” vanquishing range in the form of distance *and* relies upon acuity of touch or ear. The signals it sends are not visual, and the body becomes the echo chamber to the message. Sedgwick’s point, that modernity

separates touch from sight, holds, however, when we remember that Hardy frames this story as a meeting of the ancient and the modern. Paula Power, and her telegraphy, produces a point of interference between the wavelengths of modernity and antiquity, and this interference produces some crossed wires, some queer effects. Feeling, in this novel, happens through and across intermediating surfaces and spaces. And because these media themselves signify, because they have histories and characters, they not only convey desire but also transfer it and transform it. The business of communicating across distance detaches the communication from bodies, animates it through the form of the media involved, and reconfigures the relationship of the correspondents through having rendered the message exchangeable and mobile. Telegraph wires are always crossed, their messages are—by definition—mixed. Indeed, the trope of crossed wires is exhibited through the transferred apparatuses involved in the “touching sculpture” scenes. Somerset, who desires and courts Paula, is equipped with the Lesbian instrument. Paula, whose primary affective and erotic attachments are to Charlotte, is furnished with the accessory preeminent in the flirtations and betrayals of heterosexual love plots: the handkerchief.

Amplification is the most apt term through which to analyze *A Laodicean*. The resonance *between* the two “feeling sculpture” scenes is produced in part because they are scenes of resonance: a “hollow” is an amplifying chamber; Somerset uses the Lesbian rule amidst such silence that “every trifling sound could be heard for miles” (11); and the “faintly clicking sound” (206) of Paula and Charlotte’s telegraphic machinery reverberates throughout the novel. Such amplification is figured as more enabling than visualization. As I begin arguing above, Somerset’s copying by means of the rule stands in implicit opposition to another reproductive technology of representation: photography—or what Hardy later calls “the heliographic science” (320). Although photography is not explicitly referenced, its lexicon suffuses the scene, and the novel unfolds to reveal a dastardly photographer who uses “ingenious device[s] in photography” (367) to misrepresent his rival. Hardy emphasizes that the results are most convincing to the uninitiated (319, 320), and thus falls in line with Roland Barthes’s phenomenological assertion in *Camera Lucida* (1980) that “the photograph possesses an evidential force” but “its testimony bears not on the object, but on time.” Barthes describes the totalizing effects of the medium and **(p.144)** the way that it offers itself as the whole story, disavowing others: “in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation” (88). Likening the *stasis* of photography to an “arrest” (91), he argues that it immobilizes time in such a way as to divorce one from the past (it “blocks memory,” 91) and “it is *without future*” (90).<sup>55</sup> Sculpture, however, mobilizes. It frees us from the arrest of photography by allowing adoration and interactive ritual (90). In *S/Z* (1970), Barthes directly and forcefully celebrates this interactivity: “Free-standing, penetrable, in short *profound*, the statue invites visitation, exploration, penetration” (208). My comparison flattens out, mangles even, the rippling, reflective, and desiring texture of *Camera Lucida*, which describes a coming-to-love and a coming-to-love-the-losses of the medium of photography. Carolyn Dinshaw, among others, has described *Camera Lucida* as a queer historical project distinguished by its “emphasis on the cross-temporality” (50) of the connective somatic relations proffered by photography. But still, *Camera Lucida* is wary

of the fixities of the form, fearing that, as Michel Foucault urged, “Visibility is a trap.”<sup>56</sup> In *A Laodicean*, Somerset turns his back on the Kodak Moment<sup>57</sup> and the attempted entrapments of a photographer-villain, and Paula Power threads her telegraph wire through the medieval precursor to the panopticon: the arrow-slit. Her renovation disarms the unidirectional visual mechanics of the arrow-slit with the two-way communication of the telegraph. Paula and Somerset both initially favor the replacement of specularizing technologies with haptic technologies, that is to say with the media of touch. Somerset loses his attraction to pliancy as he progresses further into suitorship of Paula, and by the end of the novel, married to Paula, he urges her “to keep straight on” (431). No more Lesbian rule. Paula, however, remains allied with forms of intermediation that interrupt the heterosexual resolution of her life and the novel. When Charlotte writes to her from the convent, assuring her “you will *always* be with me” (427), she writes “with the fellow pen to yours, that you gave me when we went to Budmouth together” (427). The town of “Budmouth” and the exchange of phallic pens that occurred there, form Hardy’s leering implication of the women’s sexual intimacy with each other. The writing instruments in their hands, and the post-letters they exchange, will be Charlotte and Paula’s somatic connection from here on out.

Thoroughly intermediated by convent walls, geographical distance, a postal system and—indeed—heterosexuality and marriage, can we say that Charlotte and Paula’s love for each other survives this narrative? To answer in the affirmative, I turn to what is literally the last gasp of the novel. When Paula enunciates a postscript to her marriage, wishing her castle un-burned, and lamenting that Somerset is no De Stancy, she does so as she “repressed a sigh” (431). Not merely the affective symptom of regret, a sigh recalls us to the idea of media: a *media* is a linguistic term for a “voiced stop in ancient Greek; (more **(p.145)** widely) a (voiced) unaspirated stop” (OED). When Paula holds back, or unaspirates, her sigh and voices her reservations about her marriage, she is mediated and mediating. Although she does not return to physically living with Charlotte, the novel ends with this return to the “communicative” life they used to enjoy together. And it is as media, which in Latin means “middle,” that we should understand the curious term that titles the novel, but appears nowhere in it. If Paula is “Laodicean,” lukewarm or “middling” in her love for all of her male suitors, this is not mere apathy but rather an aesthetic, erotic affiliation: a lesbian passion for media.

But what might it mean to argue for a mediating lesbian ending to a novel by Thomas Hardy? Is such a reading merely a wishful overlaying, catachrestic even? This is certainly a reasonable objection when we remember that Hardy disavowed a lesbian interpretation of Sue Bridehead, asserting that there is “nothing perverted or depraved in Sue’s nature. The abnormalism consists in disproportion; not in inversion.”<sup>58</sup> Perhaps, however, overlaying a lesbian reading to *A Laodicean*, or even *Jude the Obscure*, is to take up the method of the architectural instrument that stirs Hardy imagination: the Lesbian rule. The Lesbian rule *overlays* in order to takes its impression, and its pliancy is as modifying as it is modified. Amy Villarejo’s pertinent and brilliant study *Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire* finds in the leaden measure “an ethical principle, a principle of pliancy of judgment” (5). She argues that “lesbian is best

understood as ‘catachresis,’ a metaphor without an adequate referent.” (18). Villarejo uses “lesbian” not as a noun, but as a “modifier” (4). To protest that Hardy could not have produced a lesbian heroine is to value the authenticity of the lesbian heroine (or, on the other end of the political spectrum, to protest the lesbian heroine), but Villarejo’s work suggests that authenticity is a ruse and that representation of the lesbian is always already catachrestic, “always the possibility of something else” (28). Along with Villarejo, I see little use in disciplining a metaphor to the exact contours of its referent, and I am more taken by the notion that a metaphor can produce possibility simultaneous to constraint. The leaden rule can passively comply, but it can also leave impressions, and the transferrals it enables—transporting medieval or Greek shapes into a modern age, for example—can have a protensive, disruptive existence. Such potential derives from the involvement of proxy surfaces and subjects: that is to say, utilizing the substitute of a telegram for physical contact, for example, renders the technology itself eroticized, and erotic charge more meandering. The erotics are not dependent upon, nor contained within, the particular subjects, or organization of the subjects, involved in the exchange. Rather they find a network of relations through the instruments of exchange. Seemingly compliant, the Lesbian rule is also defiant. In *A Laodicean*, the multidirectional instruments of the Lesbian rule and the telegraph insinuate into the heterosexual marriage plot. When we stop reading for the message, or reading for the plot, or the content, or the character, and allow ourselves to be distracted by the media—this is when queer relations emerge. (p. 146)

### Similes and Circuits

In the interview entitled “Friendship as a Way of Life,” Michel Foucault critiques the assumption that homosexuality is always about finding and unearthing the secret self. He says that instead of considering one’s homosexuality in order to ask: “Who am I?” it would be better to ask, “What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?” (Foucault, “Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth” 135). The narratives I have analyzed in this chapter investigate the various relations that can be invented and modulated through imagining queer desire and partnership. They are stories that portray female homosexuality through the filters of simile (“more *like* lovers”) or hostility (“Mrs. Blount’s face chilled and repelled her”), filters which are clearly distancing. This very distancing, however, reveals a complex network from within which all variety of human relationships are possible. That these women work for or communicate through postal networks fulfils the civic logic of the postal system: postal reform promised a “universal” lifting of the “tax on knowledge” and the barriers to human intercourse. The organization of communication through bureaucracy became rhetorically figured as democracy, and governmental and cultural dedication to bureau-democracy fostered fictions about the marvel of unlimited, indiscriminating interfaces. Some of these interfaces were indiscriminate in regard to gender and the sexual orientation of the resulting relationships: when the marriage plot goes postal, queer fictions ensue.

Foucault goes on to describe homosexuality as a technology that reveals the spectrum of connections open to all people and reorients those who fear “the formation of new

alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force" ("Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth" 136). Queer love, he concludes, "short-circuits" the rigid channels of law, rule, and habit (Foucault, "Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth" 137), and homosexuality that is untrammelled by a fear of polysexuality is part of achieving a "great community fusion" (Foucault, "Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth" 138). His metaphor is one of lines and junctions and circuitry. Through this metaphoric, he invokes the notion of the network as an instrument that can reorganize society without limiting it. His model mirrors the idealized vision that Thomas Hardy has of the potential of Paula and Charlotte's love. "That the two [women] should be such intimate friends," Hardy writes, "was an engaging instance of that human progress on which [Somerset] had expended many charming dreams in the years when poetry, theology and the reorganization of society had seemed matters of more importance to him than [. . .] a big house and income" (*Laodicean* 40). Somerset drinks to the health of and salutes the two women who "had found sweet communion a necessity of life, and by pure and instinctive good sense had broken down a barrier which men thrice their age and repute would probably have felt it imperative to maintain" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 40).

Women's new modes of entry to public—civic—life, enabled these three writers to imagine the ways in which they broke down barriers that had previously restrained not (p. 147) only women, but men too. Somerset's tribute to the women's relationship points out the limitations to which men of "age and repute" often feel beholden. He recognizes that their lives are performances, but, given the regulation props of property and propriety, they are only allowed to rehearse the same, singular, limited role. Through his articulation of the passionate relationship between the telegraphing women, Hardy briefly imagines how roles could be switched or modified and conventions broken past. The telegraph wire does not ask the gender or wealth or reputation of the lovers that it serves: it is a connection, rather than a "barrier." The "Sweet communion" of love and telegraphy stems from and flows back into a fleeting vision of a reorganized society in which the logic of a communication network engenders intercourse between a diversity of people and configurations of gender.

Notes:

(1) These writers were all known to each other. Anthony Trollope corresponded briefly with both Eliza Lynn Linton and Thomas Hardy, and Lynn Linton and Hardy were in lengthier communication with each other beginning in 1888.

(2) This conflation of sexual and communication excesses, along with a mistrust of both, is to be found throughout Baudrillard's work. When he writes of the subject being "seduced" by the object, the root sense of the word "seduce" is being "led astray" by excess of signs and meanings. This is unlike De Quincey's Scheherazade who proposes that overwhelming the hostile sign with a plethora of signs is a good way of confounding the enemy (see introduction).

(3) Baudrillard briefly addresses the otherwise antisex consequences of his metaphors, when he proposes that obscenity has itself changed—that "the hot, sexual obscenity of

former times is succeeded by the cold and communicational, contractual and motivational obscenity of today. The former clearly implied a type of promiscuity, but it was organic. [. . .]. Unlike this organic, visceral, carnal promiscuity, the promiscuity that reigns over the communication networks is one of superficial saturation" (151–52).

(4) In *Women in English Life: From Medieval to Modern Times*, Georgiana Hill also cites the Postmaster-General of 1871 using the term "experiment" to apply to the employment of women clerks (2: 179).

(5) The word "interface," which the OED traces back to the 1880s, is a term that often appeared in periodical literature about postal communication from midcentury onward.

(6) See W. R. Greg, "Why Are Women Redundant?" 434–60. Greg was a liberal manufacturer, and a regular contributor to periodicals, whose concern with the remedy of social ills found full expression when he cofounded the eugenics movement with Francis Galton.

(7) See Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets, William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Social Issues, 1837–1883* 2: 134. This is a compendious three-volume study of the woman question in nineteenth-century Britain and America. For further studies of women and work in the nineteenth century and the separate spheres debate, see Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850–1920* and Lee Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work: Middle-Class Working Women in England and Wales*.

(8) See A. K. Donald, *Why There Is Discontent in the Post Office*. For a full account of the lengthy and complex worker disputes for which the Post Office became notorious, see H. G. Swift, *A History of Postal Agitation from Fifty Years Ago Till the Present Day*.

(9) Trollope's autobiography also makes a connection between civil service work, manliness, and authorship. He was anxious to impress that he regarded one of his greatest achievements as having raised the "style of writing official reports" and that it was much more important to him that a report be well composed than neatly copied out. He claims that "it is hardly manly that a man should search after a fine neatness at the expense of so much waste labour [he] should send [the letters] out as written by himself, by his own hand, with his own marks, his own punctuation, correct or incorrect, with the evidence upon them that they have come out from his own mind" (*Autobiography* 2: 129). Trollope desires to see the Post Office clerk not as a nameless cipher, but as someone with an institutional profile who leaves his imprint on paperwork.

(10) See Lynn Linton's "Queen Bees or Working Bees," published in the notoriously antifeminist *Saturday Review*, which later hired her as a full-time journalist.

(11) See Hilda Martindale, *Women Servants of the State 1870–1938: A History of Women in the Civil Service*.

(12) W. R. Greg also considered cost effectiveness as reasonable grounds for making an

exception to his objection to women having “industrial careers”: “Women and girls are less costly operatives than men: what they can do with equal efficiency, it is therefore wasteful and foolish (*economically considered*) to set a man to do” (456).

(13) In *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Carolyn Marvin details a case in America where a couple married over the telegraph, never having seen each other (93–94). The technology obscured the fact that the bride was white and upper-middle-class and the groom was a black barber. The courts annulled the marriage.

(14) “The Young Woman at the London Telegraph Office” was published in *Good Words* 18 (June 1877): 377–84. “The Telegraph Girl” was published in *Good Words* 19 (January 1878): 1–19.

(15) Alfred Austin, campaigning for a “masculine” literature, saw something odd in a male author putting himself so squarely in a woman character’s shoes. He accused Trollope of being a “feminine novelist, writing for women in a womanly spirit and from a woman’s point of view” (464). Austin concludes that literature has been “ruined” by women, women’s issues, and the female perspective. Though a somewhat hysterical essay, Austin’s comments serve to remind us that Trollope’s narrative perspective in this story is firmly cross-gendered and displays active—to many minds, unseemly—concern with the domestic plight of the unsupported woman.

(16) See J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words* 14–15.

(17) The only equivalent situation was that of Boy Messengers who were required to vacate their positions at the age of sixteen, the age at which they were considered to have reached manhood.

(18) The original French confirms a metaphor of amplification (overlap, relaunchings): “Plaisir et pouvoir ne s’annulent pas; ils ne se retournent pas l’un contre l’autre; ils se poursuivent, se chevauchent et se relancent. Ils s’enchaînent selon des mécanismes complexes et positives d’excitation et d’incitation” (*Histoire de la sexualité* 66–67).

(19) See, for example, *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire*, in which Christopher Lane provides a comprehensive account of how many imperial administrators, who appreciated the combination of homosexual impulses and duty to empire, “considered the vigilant internal discipline of passions as a valuable quality for export” (16).

(20) For more on marriage as a way of imagining lesbian relationships, see Sharon Marcus, *Between Women*.

(21) In *The Education and Employment of Women* (1868), Josephine Butler laments the fields of work to which women are “refused admission” and approvingly notes that “as a favourable symptom of the last few years [ . . . ] 1822 women are returned as employed by the Post-office. 213 women returned as telegraph-clerks.” But she warns that Post

Office wages have dwindled to reprehensibly low levels: "It is instructive to note the way in which the salary of these women telegraph-clerks has fallen. When the telegraph companies were first formed, the pay of a female clerk was eight shillings a week, to be increased by a shilling yearly, until it reached fourteen shillings a week. So great, however, has been the competition of women for these situations, that the pay has been reduced to five shillings a week, a sum on which a woman can scarcely live unassisted." Conveniently available and qtd. in Bradshaw and Ozment, eds. 706–7.

(22) This tale comes from chapter 2 of *Post Haste*, subheaded "Tells of woman's work and some of woman's ways."

(23) At the end of the article, Trollope also directly addresses the editor of *Good Words* as a fellow "investigator": "You, Mr. Editor, are much concerned with the conduct of a large population in a large city. What do you think of this representation as to the conduct of eight hundred young women in the middle of the metropolis?" ("YW" 384).

(24) For a description of the urban investigator's relationship to the figure of the woman in public, see Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* 20–21.

(25) For original, see Henry Mayhew, "Second Test—Meeting of needlewomen forced to take to the streets" in *The Unknown Mayhew*, ed. Eileen Yeo and E. P. Thompson (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 168. Conveniently available and qtd. in Walkowitz 20.

(26) In *John Caldigate*, Trollope also links talking and flirting. The "Mrs. Cromptons, Mrs. Callanders, and Miss Greens" are enraged at the prospect of Euphemia Smith seducing John, but they do not know what to do about it, for "talking is allowed on board ship, and even flirting, to a certain extent" (JC 65).

(27) Trollope's private joke about tardiness is even more pertinent, since he notes in this passage of his *Autobiography* that his habit of measuring and scheduling postmen's routes by riding them himself on horseback when they themselves would have to make them by foot meant that he "was sometimes a little unjust to them," and the unfeasibility of the routes thus adversely affected the punctuality demanded of the telegraph girls (*Autobiography* 1: 120). Trollope also confesses that he "very soon achieved a character for irregularity" himself as a postal clerk. He robustly defends his relaxed approach to civil service duties, however, declaring himself a better "public servant" than his colleagues who were critical of him (*Autobiography* 1: 59). He was a staunch anti-Hillite for the same reasons; he thought Hill despotic and attacked him for treating postal employees as "so many machines who could be counted on for their exact work without deviation," declaring that "I never came across any one who so little understood the ways of men" (*Autobiography* 1: 177–78). Thus it would seem to be Hill whom Trollope has in mind when he writes of the Secretary of the General Post Office in "The Young Women" as "an officer of majestic power outside the Telegraph Office, who may be supposed to be a sort of Jupiter up in the clouds" ("YW" 383). This ironically inflects his subsequent declaration that "it is always well that punishment should seem to come from

some inscrutable and awful power at a distance" ("YW" 383).

(28) He also talks about the dangers of "contact," stressing that one "young woman of bad character" could be "fatally noxious" ("YW" 379).

(29) Women were first employed in this department in 1874 (Dauntton 218).

(30) Perdita's surname is also a mark of her leveling tendencies. Gerard Winstanley was the leader of the seventeenth-century proto-socialist sect, the Diggers. Throughout the novel, the idea of establishing a just society, or socialist utopia, is paramount.

(31) Bell Blount is also referred to as "Mrs. Blount" in the novel, as she has an estranged husband. She may have been inspired by or modeled on Lady Monson, a friend of Lynn Linton's, who separated from her husband after only a few days of marriage. Lady Monson held literary evenings, was an enthusiastic supporter of the women's rights movement, and had female lovers. See Nancy Fix Anderson, *Woman Against Women in Victorian England: A Life of Eliza Lynn Linton* 63.

(32) Perdita's mother regards Perdita's hands with horror, regarding the signs of work as if they were those of treason: " 'What is this?' her mother asked, pointing with the tip of her scissors to the thumb and first two fingers of the right hand. 'Ink,' answered Perdita, as guiltily as if she had said blood" (Linton, *RF* 1: 26). This passage neatly pokes fun at Perdita's mother's double standards. She gestures at Perdita's stained hands to denounce her for working, but does so with a pair of scissors—the tool of the needleworker. The difference, of course, lies in the domesticity of her needlework, as opposed to the public nature of the Post Office work that will lead Perdita away from marriage and into the dangerous waters of lesbian households and tradesmen's arms.

(33) The term "to make a pass" does not, according to the OED, definitively acquire amorous or sexual meaning until the 1920s. It is clear from this passage that this meaning is, however, nascent at this earlier date and, furthermore, it seems likely that the idiom accrues erotic meaning via the business of mesmerism. To "make a pass" during hypnotism refers to the practice of passing hands over a person without touching them, sending them into a mesmeric trance. This usage dates back to the 1840s, and Linton certainly describes Christopher entering something similar to a trance—"a strange rapture"—mesmerized by Adeline. For more on the relation of communication technologies to mesmerism, see Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).

(34) In "Eliza Lynn Linton and the Rise of Lesbian Consciousness," Deborah T. Meem goes on to characterize Bell Blount as a "vampire lesbian on the prowl" (551). While Bell is undoubtedly portrayed as a woman who desires to overwhelm and dominate women, she is not the character whom Lynn Linton actually casts as vampirically threatening. Curiously, it is "pretty little Eva," the flirty, flighty, flagrantly heterosexual sister, who is repeatedly portrayed in vampiric—or cannibalistic—terms. When she laughs, she reveals "two full rows of the loveliest little sharp white teeth that can be imagined—very small,

very even; but for all their beauty, teeth that somehow suggested the eating of flesh” (Linton, *RF* 1: 23), and, again, when flirting with Sir James Kearney, she “laughed and showed all those small white teeth so curiously suggestive of the double action—kissing and eating” (Linton, *RF* 1: 172–73). (The idea of kissing-biting teeth is reiterated by George Egerton in her 1893 story “A Cross Line,” where the female protagonist demonstrates sexual power over her husband, when she “shuts his eyes with kisses, and bites his chin and shakes it like a terrier in her strong little teeth” [17]). As critics such as Meem and Nancy Fix Anderson have noted, Lynn Linton’s work is riven with contradiction, especially when it comes to female sexuality, and Meem’s misplacement of the vampiric sexual epithet is evidence of this. Lynn Linton also fantasized of herself as a “fiend-woman” or “vampire glutting itself on human blood” (N. F. Anderson 22). Compounding the confusion around Eva’s sexuality, Lynn Linton not only connects vampiric sexual aggression with her, but also links her to the sins of Sodom: Sir James wonders whether Eva is “a real bit of luscious fruitage or only a Dead Sea apple with a rosy skin and ashes for pulp” (Linton, *RF* 1: 218). Apples with ashes for pulp are the apples of Sodom; this is a reference to the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah.

(35) In 1844 it was revealed in the *Times* that Home Secretary Sir James Graham had ordered the Post Office to intercept Mazzini’s letters, which caused a large and very public scandal. William Linton helped Mazzini prove that the seals on his letters had been broken and resealed and that the time stamps on the envelopes had been tampered with to account for the delay in the handling of his letters. Lynn Linton was very proud of his role in this episode and she attacks Graham in her 1885 cross-gendered, semifictional autobiography *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland* as “the paid and authorized spy of that House of Hapsburg of which [. . .] no evil was too great to be believed” (*CK* 2: 250).

(36) Perdita’s blushes also betray Lynn Linton’s covert autobiographizing. In an interview, Lynn Linton spoke of her hatred of her own tendency to blush: “Many and many a time I blushed till I cried; even when I was a woman of thirty or forty, the tears have started, from the simple physical process of rushing blood.” Mrs. Alex Tweedie, “A Chat with Mrs. Lynn Linton,” July 1894: 357 (qtd. in Fix Anderson 18).

(37) A few pages later, a local uses the word “curious” to describe the relationship between Charlotte and Paula: “Now that’s a curious thing again, these two girls being so fond of one another [. . .] they are more like lovers than girl and girl” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 50).

(38) Hardy himself notes the trustworthiness of this interview text: he saw a transcript and wrote to Archer commending him for having been “wonderfully faithful in your reproduction.” This letter testifies again to the anxiety that this particular interview had caused Hardy, both for what he revealed and for the intimacy of the encounter between the two men: Hardy requests omission of some of the more personal information that he had revealed under the pressure of Archer’s interviewing techniques. In a letter to Florence Henniker, Hardy wrote that Archer “experimented on me in a new kind of interviewing: knowing him well I did not mind it at the time, but I have felt some

misgivings since" (qtd. in Gibson 65–66).

(39) Hardy's concern to emphasize that writing, recording, and, by extension, dissemination machines are nonhuman is directly belied in *A Laodicean* when he writes, "The telegraph has almost the attributes of a human being at Stancy Castle. When its bell rang people rushed to the old tapestry chamber allotted to it, and waited its pleasure with all the deference due to such a novel inhabitant of that ancestral pile" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 52). Here, the telegraph is not only personified, but is also personified as a master or mistress of others, and it has "pleasures."

(40) Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (London: Penguin, 1967). McLuhan enjoyed the slip between "message" and "massage" for its association of communication with the accidental effects of desire, chaos, and the masses. His son Eric McLuhan explains: "The title was a mistake. When the book came back from the typesetter, it had on the cover 'Massage' as it still does. The title should have read *The Medium Is the Message* but the typesetter had made an error. When Marshall McLuhan saw the typo he exclaimed, 'Leave it alone! It's great, and right on target!' Now there are four possible readings for the last word of the title, all of them accurate: 'Message' and 'Mess Age,' 'Massage' and 'Mass Age.'" In Phil Baines, *Penguin by Design: A Cover Story 1935–2005* (London: Penguin, 2005), 144.

(41) John Plotz argues that Hardy has an antipathy to "the legacy of cultural portability inherited from the Victorian novel," replacing it with attention to how "different individuals orient themselves in the world" (*Portable Property* 123). Hardy's characters are laden, he admits, but not with detachable cargo; instead they take with them their various ways of perceiving the world (*Portable Property* 124). Plotz's observation is highly applicable here: Somerset and De Stancy are too fixated on property and (social) portability, whereas the telegraphic girls regularly eschew ideas of belonging and belongings, and are animated rather by communication of various kinds.

(42) This line is especially notable, as variants of it occur several times in the novel. We first read it as reported speech: "I have a *prédilection d'artiste* for ancestors of the other sort, like the De Stancys," she tells Somerset (Hardy, *Laodicean* 113). Somerset recalls it when watching Paula with Captain De Stancy and jealously wondering if this predilection will cause her to favor the Captain (Hardy, *Laodicean* 221). Hardy reiterates it, in free indirect discourse, when Captain De Stancy wonders if his ancestral connection to the castle will cause Paula to favor him (*Laodicean* 334).

(43) The account given by Richard Jenkyns in *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* of Victorian interest in Hellenism makes it quite clear that *A Laodicean* was in conversation with the debates surrounding it. He writes: "It is easy for us to think of the Victorian age, with its Gothic enthusiasm, as a period of reaction against the Hellenism of an earlier generation [. . .]. To some Englishmen Hellenism seemed alien to the time and place in which they found themselves; the Gothic spirit appeared to be their natural inheritance. Others took the opposite view" (Jenkyns 15–16). This tussle between the Hellenic and Gothic ideals is architecturally embodied in Stancy Castle.

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(44) Paula's gymnasium is a mark of her modernity. Walter Besant's *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* was published just one year later than *A Laodicean*, in 1882, and also features an heiress heroine who, inspired by the sporting facilities of her Cambridge college, builds her own gymnasium. In Besant's novel, the Newnham-educated brewery scion Angela Messenger disguises herself as a seamstress in order to establish a dressmaking business dedicated to improving the welfare of young female workers. When Angela declares her intention to set up a gymnasium on the shop premises, she is met with incredulous stares: "This was revolutionary, indeed" (Besant 105).

(45) Earlier in the novel Hardy directly compares Paula to Greek goddesses: "Not sensuous enough for an Aphrodite, and too subdued for a Hebe, she would, yet, with the adjunct of doves or nectar, have stood sufficiently well for either of those personages" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 59).

(46) The whole scene is a paradigm of "double meanings." Paula has been affected by noticing the same birthmark on De Stancy as on one of the ancestors in the castle's portraits, and "a new and romantic feeling that the De Stancys had stretched out a tentacle from their genealogical tree to seize her by the hand and draw her in to their mass took possession of Paula" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 187). De Stancy tries to cash in on her enchantment; he "ardently contrives" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 188) to focus her again on the portraits and leaps into a half-suit of armor in order to look "like a man of bygone times" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 189). This "Protean quality" of his impresses Paula, but his recitation of the poem, during which he "fixed his look upon her" to suggest "a present significance of the words" fails: "the idea of any such double-entendre had by no means commended itself to her soul" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 191). The past is capable of enchanting Paula out of her "natural unconcern" (Hardy, *Laodicean* 188), but she is impervious to verbal protestations of love—she fails to read between lines or detect hidden meanings in her suitor's words.

(47) The imagery is, for both H. D. and Hardy, filtered through the work of Walter Pater. Hardy both knew and read Pater. *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy* has a number of extensive entries meditating on Pater's work, particularly his theories of Greek culture. For discussions of Pater's "The Myth of Demeter and Persephone," see vol. 1, 305 and vol. 2, 268. For entries about Greek sculpture and the Greek spirit, see vol. 2, 43, 128.

(48) Prins's study, *Victorian Sappho*, further details the way that female homoerotics could attach to "thinking Greek" in the nineteenth century. Like Martha Vicinus, she sees Michael Field's Greek work as an adoption of the tropes of male homosexuality but points out that they also *adapt* this trope, "imply[ing] a lesbian eroticism distinct from the troping of homosexual desire" (Prins 77).

(49) Yopie Prins, "Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinster," in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora, 43.

(50) A flirtatious moment in R. M. Ballantyne's May Maylands story suggests that such

complaints were due to cultural frictions: “Although an artless and innocent young girl, fresh from the western shores of Erin, May had a peculiar, and, in one of her age and sex, almost pert way of putting questions, to which she often received quaint and curious replies [. . .]. In short May’s conduct was such that we must hasten to free her from premature condemnation by explaining that she was a female telegraphist in what we may call the literary lungs of London—the General Post-Office at St. Martin’s-le-Grand” (*Post Haste* 15). This passage flirts with the suggestion of sexual impropriety. The writer plays on the fact that, if it were not her *job* to interact in this way with people, “innocent” May would be open to “condemnation.”

(51) Both O’Farrell and Kate Flint point out, however, that the blush was not necessarily seen as an involuntary response, which revealed an unmediated emotion or indicated a natural capacity for feeling. Rather, it signals the “subscription of the blushing body to the code of an extensive social network” (O’Farrell 7). See Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837–1914* 89 and O’Farrell 111.

(52) Somerset’s relationship with Paula is threatened by three material misinformations: a paragraph put in the local newspaper by Abner Power speculating that Paula and De Stancy were soon to be engaged, a telegram sent by Dare under Somerset’s name that falsely suggested he had dissolute gambling habits, and the photograph doctored to portray Somerset as drunk. Hardy demonstrates a fascination with how material representations can take over the person they represent. Paula, Charlotte reports, was so taken with the telegraph technology that “she was sending messages from morning till night” (Hardy, *Laodicean* 35). Elsewhere, Hardy introduces the villains of the tale, each of whom are estranged blood-relatives, via their photograph or portrait. The novel questions the means by which we recognize and read people; at times material and technological representations are dangerous and manipulable, but at other times, they are only manifestations of human fictions.

(53) A Laodicean is someone who is indifferent to religion, like the Christians of the church of Laodicea mentioned in the *Book of Revelations* (3: 14–18).

(54) On the contrary, Paula’s other suitor—Somerset—has a name that implies tumbling circularity. “Somerset” is another word for “somersault.” It means either to somersault oneself, or to cause a person to turn a somersault, and was still in use in the late nineteenth century. See the OED entry for “somersault.” Somerset will make a “complete overturn” in Paula, as she turns away from her passion for Charlotte De Stancy, toward her lukewarm marriage with Somerset.

(55) Barthes’s commentary on photography becomes even more pertinent to the photographic blackmail of Hardy’s novel, when Barthes notes that “the Photograph sometimes makes appear what we never see in a real face (or in a face reflected in a mirror): a genetic feature, the fragment of oneself or of a relative which comes from some ancestor” (103). Dare’s use of the “photographic portrait of a peculiar nature” attempts to make Somerset appear peculiar in nature, specifically, degenerate. It attempts to type him as an inveterate drunk.

## A Queer Job for a Girl: The Communicative Touch in Trollope, Hardy, and Lynn Linton

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(56) Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Penguin, London, 1991), 200.

(57) I use the phrase only half-facetiously. The origins of the Kodak company date back to the same year that *A Laodicean* was published. It began as the Eastman Dry Plate Company in 1881 and registered the trademark Kodak in 1888.

(58) Letter of November 20, 1895.



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