

**Saving General Gordon:
Review of Gillian Slovo's *An Honourable Man***

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Gillian Slovo, *An Honourable Man*

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Take one frustrated Victorian housewife with a growing laudanum addiction, married to a young doctor who is disconcerted by her passionate sexuality and feels ill-equipped to deal with her 'nerves'. Send him off to the homosocial world of the British forces abroad, to become embroiled in a mission to rescue a deranged General, rumoured to be a 'boy lover'. Allow frustrated housewife to strike up an incongruous friendship with an alcoholic sex-worker who is a fictionalised version of Rebecca Jarrett, a woman who was 'reformed' under the influence of Josephine Butler. Have said wife find an outlet for her suppressed passion – and addiction – in trips to selected slums, gin dens, and houses of ill-repute. Add a cameo appearance from famous Victorian journalist W. T. Stead, sprinkle with various used and abused street-urchins, and leave to simmer until a neo-Victorian potboiler is ready to be served. Or not, as the case may be. *An Honourable Man* is Gillian Slovo's thirteenth novel, but her first to be set in the nineteenth century. Although the plot might seem to have some of the key ingredients for a generic neo-Victorian novel,¹ it sometimes frustrates neo-Victorian expectations as well. The extent to which such variations might satisfy the appetite of a seasoned reader of neo-Victorian fiction is debateable. However, Slovo's novel does, at times, provoke the reader to acknowledge their addiction to certain stock-features of neo-Victorian novels, particularly in relation to representations of sexuality.

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The historical context of the novel comes from the events surrounding British intervention in unrest in the Sudan in the early 1880s. The Egyptian government was struggling to maintain control of the region after a Mahdist revolt led by Muhammad Ahmad in Abd Allah in 1883. Despite William Gladstone's reticence that Britain should become involved, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, under the editorship of W. T. Stead, published an interview with and a series of articles about General Gordon in January 1884, featuring some confident recommendations from this famous British army officer as to how the situation in the Sudan should best be handled. After a high-profile press campaign led by Stead, Gordon was posted to Khartoum. However, Richard Davenport-Hine's account of Gordon's state of mind at this point describes him as "increasingly excitable, volatile, and impulsive" in the course of his march to the Sudan (Davenport-Hines 2008: n.p.), demonstrated by the series of strange and impassioned telegraphs which the General sent back to Britain during his posting. When it became apparent that Gordon and the garrison were under siege with no means of escape, a relief expedition led by Sir Garnet Wolseley was sent to rescue him in September 1884. Unfortunately, they were not able to reach him in time, and a final attack on the garrison resulted in the death of Gordon and some of his troops and Arab followers in January 1885.

Slovo's 'Acknowledgements' section at the end of the book briefly states these historical events, yet explains: "I have, however, run a multitude of fictions, date and event changes through the novel, reshaping and reinventing history to suit my story" (p. 339). Slovo's decision to recount the events of the siege of Khartoum as a backdrop to the more personal perspectives of fictionalised individuals affected by the documented events is a fine example of the neo-Victorian trait of reimagining marginalised historical voices.² Slovo's 'story' is largely told through three narrative perspectives: John Clarke, a doctor who has joined the expedition to rescue Gordon, initially to contribute his medical services, but resulting in his decision to enter into the military action; Mary Clarke, his wife, who perceives John's absence as an 'abandonment' and who becomes increasingly dependent upon laudanum; and Will, a young man who has been taken in by Gordon from the streets of London but subsequently persuaded to accompany him on his mission to the Sudan.

In terms of Will's relationship with Gordon, it is worth considering a sub-section of Davenport-Hines's entry on General Gordon in the *Oxford*

Dictionary of National Biography, suggestively entitled ‘Philanthropist and boy lover’. Davenport-Hines’s commentary remarks that Gordon struggled to form relationships with women beyond his family ties and manifested a commitment to the “sublimation” of his sexual desires. During his years in Britain, Gordon was engaged in religious philanthropy; he would offer accommodation to young men living on the street in one of his own residences, where he “fed, clothed, and taught them” and apparently “enjoyed giving them baths”. According to Davenport-Hines, there were some insinuations of Gordon’s same-sex proclivities during his lifetime, but such rumours have no tangible evidence and thus cannot be confirmed (Davenport-Hines 2008: n.p.). Considering the palpable interest in many neo-Victorian texts in writing same-sex desire back into the historical record, one might suppose that such themes would become explicit in Slovo’s depiction of Gordon’s alliance with Will. However, although Will certainly has historical precedents with regards to Gordon’s ‘boys’, their relationship in *An Honourable Man* is ambiguous and not easily quantified. Will himself seems uncertain as to why Gordon has brought him to Khartoum. The interaction between the men is largely limited to Will dodging Gordon’s blows, and endeavouring to keep the increasingly unstable General from running the besieged garrison into complete ruin and/or killing the stray dog that Will has adopted for companionship. Nevertheless, in a brief – though telling – exchange, Gordon confesses: “I’m sorry for bringing you here. It was selfish [...] I wanted your company” (p. 147). Will’s reaction – anger and confusion, which he is unable to articulate due to fear of retribution – clearly underscores the class-related power imbalance in their relationship, but also suggests that their alliance is something of a mystery to him, as well as the reader.

Significantly for a novel which ostensibly focuses upon a rescue mission to save a notable and celebrated General, Gordon himself remains a shadowy, mysterious figure afforded only a limited narrative perspective. Again, this might be viewed as a strategy of reappropriating the privileging of certain white, ‘important’ men in the master discourse of history, yet in addition it fuels the ambiguity over Gordon’s mental state and intentions. Our insights into Gordon’s mind come in the representation of his dreams: firstly, a feverish rendering of his sense of anxiety about pursuit and punishment, and secondly, a prophetic dream of his own death through decapitation (p. 142; pp. 236-238). The concept of the unconscious as the

only access to Gordon's mind positions him as a subject for psychoanalysis, with the attendant emphasis on this man as divided, complex, and tortured with repressed desires. A further avenue of reflection on Gordon's relationship with Will comes at the moment of the General's death: "as the life ran out of him, he found to his surprise that he was thinking not of his God, but of his precious boy" (p. 312). The potential tension between Gordon's religious zeal and queer desire is poignantly suggested, but never fully articulated, refusing to offer any glib answer to the speculations which might be raised by his philanthropic interest in adolescents.

As my own perfunctory summary of Mary Clarke's character at the beginning of this review implied, the doctor's wife would seem to be a prime candidate for a textbook neo-Victorian reimagining. Mary's initial anxiety at John's absence is motivated by her dependence upon him for organising her time and giving her life meaning: "How would she manage now that he had gone?" (p. 10). Nevertheless, her narrative perspective as a devoted wife is riven with her growing frustration with her gendered confinement within the home. Mary's desire to break out of the domestic sphere is literalised by her periodic destruction – sometimes accidental, but increasingly intentional – of domestic artefacts: the breaking of a vase which was a wedding gift (p. 11); the purposeful shredding of John's newspapers, which "he liked [...] clean, pressed, and neatly folded" (p. 29); the destruction of John's home dispensary: "Such satisfaction as the bottles fell. Such splendid mayhem" (p. 157). The fact that each of these instances of destruction is related to her husband conveys a strong impression that it is her marriage which has become a site of particular disturbance and dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, Mary's pet canary also functions as an important symbol of her own captivity. As Elaine Shefer has argued in relation to Victorian art, the connection between women and birds was regularly made in nineteenth-century culture. Such an association possessed ideological overtones of women's inclination towards having a caring 'nature' with regards to being sympathetic to small and delicate animals, but also of their entrapment (Shefer 1990). In an epiphanic moment, Slovo's heroine realises: "She was the one who was truly caged. By the house. By its emptiness [...] She was seized by the urge to escape its confinement. She needed to get out" (p. 75). Interestingly, however, Mary is not particularly kind to her caged bird, struggling to bond with the animal and alarming it

with her erratic behaviour and moods. Perhaps Mary's antagonistic attitude towards the unfortunate canary can be understood as an additional facet of her rejection of gendered expectations or, more sinisterly, her quasi-masochistic impulses.

For Mary's strategy for escape from domestic boredom is at significant risk to her own health and safety; her increasing demand for laudanum to quell her anxiety leads her to pursue the friendship of Rebecca Jarrett, a 'rescued' woman who has supposedly been rehabilitated by Josephine Butler. Rebecca's status as having renounced her life of sex-work and alcoholism is questionable from her first meeting with Mary. Jarrett is depicted as feisty and unrepentant, yet Mary approvingly notes "the heavy fall of her blonde hair and the confident swing of her hips [...] the upturned tweak of almost indecently full red lips" (p. 100). Those familiar with neo-Victorian fiction's penchant for exploring queer connections between middle- and working-class women might be tempted to interpret the beginnings of a familiar pattern here, but this is not a route which Slovo pursues.³ Mary's interest in Rebecca is overtly motivated by her need to maintain a supply of drugs – she accurately supposes that Rebecca can procure her more laudanum via her underworld connections – but also seems inspired by some sense of mutual understanding and recognition. Mary is also a sexually confident woman who rails against conventions of 'respectable' femininity.

Rebecca's interest in Mary is less transparent. For example, when Mary seeks out her would-be friend in the slums of London, Rebecca sneeringly comments on Mary being "under the influence" of the reform movement rather than intoxicating substances (p. 226). Such a turn of phrase is pertinent, as a parallel is drawn between more obvious forms of addiction, and the Victorian obsession with philanthropy and the 'saving' of 'fallen women'. Are such acts of benevolence and concern actually satisfying a selfish need, rather than being worthy expressions of altruism? In this sense, are the middle-class 'saviours' of Rebecca merely submitting her to an alternative round of use and exploitation? Mary's sense of identification with Rebecca falters and ultimately fades away when the latter is successfully 'reformed'. In the scene of their final contact, Rebecca attempts to communicate her thanks to Mary through the window of the rescue home, but Mary turns away: "she would rather keep to herself the memory of a wild, undaunted woman she had wanted to befriend" (p. 330).

This conclusion to their relationship makes the reader pause for thought; in what ways has Mary also ‘used’ Rebecca as an object with which to act out her personal desires? Could such a ‘use’ be conceptualised as a further facet of Rebecca’s prostitution, and, metatextually, are we as neo-Victorian readers also encouraged to consume the lives of historical sex-workers for our own personal entertainment and/or prurient gratification?⁴

The character of Rebecca is based on an actual historical figure; Rebecca Jarrett was a sex-worker from an early age, but was ‘saved’ by the Salvation Army, spending some time in Josephine Butler’s rescue home before being assisted in setting up her own establishment to provide shelter for reformed prostitutes. It is the historical Rebecca Jarrett’s association with William Thomas Stead which provides an important context for understanding her depiction in Slovo’s novel. W. T. Stead is perhaps most famous for his journalistic exposé of child prostitution in Victorian London. With the assistance of Jarrett, he procured a thirteen-year-old girl to demonstrate the ease with which virgins could be bought for sexual exploitation, and wrote a series of articles in 1885 entitled ‘The maiden tribute of modern Babylon’ for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which detailed his experiences and expressed his outrage at the moral state of the nation. This sensational case led to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, but also resulted in both Stead’s and Jarrett’s imprisonment.⁵ The events of Slovo’s text take place a matter of months prior to Stead’s campaign against sexual exploitation, yet the proximity of fictionalised versions of him and Jarrett might strike a chord of recognition and interest for readers with knowledge of the ‘maiden tribute’ case. Though their contact is limited, the fictional Rebecca’s ability to perform repentance perhaps has implications for re-reading the historical record of her role in Stead’s journalism as a ‘reformed’ woman assisting him in his work.

The novel is punctuated with extracts from Stead’s articles declaring his support for Gordon’s mission, emphasising the central role the actual Stead played in the events surrounding Wolseley’s relief expedition. The fictionalised Stead is generally represented from Mary’s perspective, and though he is a largely sympathetic character, he is also depicted as having an astute awareness of the growing powers of the press in his own historical moment. He is adept at persuasive rhetoric, exemplified by his pleas to Mary to speak publicly about her correspondence with John as evidence of the plight of the British men in Khartoum. He visits her in her own home,

and despite her reticence, he is adamant that her contribution – couched in his terms – will be of value to his campaign. He explains:

My lengthy – and I hope you won't think it immodest if I add successful – apprenticeship as a newspaperman has taught me the power of ordinary stories to stir the imagination [...] All you would need to do is answer a few questions. My pen would do the rest," (pp. 61-62)

Stead's confidence in being able to emotionally manipulate his readership, and Mary, has meaningful parallels with present-day concerns about press intrusion and political power. Stead's methods are not quite worthy of a Leveson-esque investigation, yet his subsequent self-consciousness about the role he might have played in Gordon's downfall opens up an interesting avenue of neo-Victorian interrogation. In a textual echo of Gordon's own prophetic dreams, Stead comes to be haunted by nightmares of the General's death. He questions his championing of Gordon's posting, asking his wife: "By sending him to the Sudan, did I do wrong?" (p. 296). Even in this moment of soul-searching, the fictional Stead claims influence over political decisions.

To whom might the 'honourable man' of the novel's title refer? If it is Gordon or Stead, the notion of 'honour' becomes dubious, and similarly, John Clarke's narrative perspective also calls his integrity into question. His reasons for joining the expedition are not explicitly stated, yet the combination of his guilt at leaving Mary, and relief at the freedom which military life brings, implies that she is at the heart of his desire to escape England. He struggles to build friendships with the other men, initially blaming Mary for not socialising with the other military wives when waving him off at the station: "It was as if she were declaring herself not to be one of them and, in doing so, saying that he could never be at one with their husbands" (p. 7). This tendency to project his own inadequacies and anxieties onto Mary continues throughout the novel. John does find some degree of companionship with his allocated assistant, Sergeant Tom Jennings. However, as with most same-sex relationships in this novel, class inequalities lead to power inequalities and, as in the case of Gordon and Will, results in physical violence. John's inability to interpret his assistant's

behaviour causes the doctor to lose his temper with Tom, nearly killing him in a moment of madness.

Ultimately, *A Honourable Man* is concerned with middle-class masculinity in crisis, just as much as it deals with nineteenth-century expectations of middle-class femininity. It is also a story about influence in various forms: the ways in which addiction might influence behaviour; the questioning of ‘good’ influences, particularly in relation to ‘saving’ Victorian street women and boys; the influence which gendered expectations have upon individual subjects; and the potential – and perils – of the influence of the press. But perhaps the most telling theme is the tension between rescue and abandonment, and the way this shapes the lives of the central characters. Gordon, initially pitched as the ‘saviour’ of the Sudan, is deemed by Stead to have been abandoned by his home government and in need of aid. Although Gordon initially sought to ‘save’ Will, his ultimate actions towards the boy – attempting to murder him, potentially to protect him from the bloody finale of the siege – seem to be a most cruel rejection. John essentially deserts Mary, and she in turn discards the friendship of Rebecca when she fails to satisfy her need for excitement. Furthermore, John’s last act in Khartoum is to decide not to rescue Will from the ravaged city: “The boy’s an albino and his movements are strong. He doesn’t need saving” (p. 328). Significantly, it is the relatively powerless characters – either due to class, or gender – that are more vulnerable to being left behind.

Yet the novel also demonstrates that abandonment can be productive, particularly in the case of Will, as he is able to return to London safely and with renewed promise, “a confident boy [...] he seemed to know where he was going” (p. 336). It is the absence of John that stimulates Mary into exploring a life beyond the confines of her home and role as a wife, and that finally forces her to confront her addiction. But John’s desertion is temporary, and despite his recognition of his unhappiness in his marriage, he returns home to his enthusiastic wife. In terms of the potential for neo-Victorianism to reassess nineteenth-century gender politics, the text is disappointing. Mary’s liberation is short-lived, and she still cleaves to her cowardly husband. This conclusion both invokes and deviates from the more generic expectations of neo-Victorianism, in which, as the Little Professor suggests:

All middle- and upper-class Victorian wives are Sexually Frustrated, Emotionally Unfulfilled, and possibly Physically Abused. If they're lucky, however, they may find Fulfillment with a) a man not their husband, b) a man not their husband and of the Laboring Classes, c) a man not their husband and of Another Race, or d) a woman not their, er, husband. (Burstein 2006: n.p.)

Although the politically-charged impulses of neo-Victorian fiction might be ripe for parody, how desirable is it to thwart the conventions of neo-Victorianism by returning to heteronormative plot resolutions, or via reinstalling the Victorian trope of wifely self-sacrifice? *An Honourable Man* provides some important opportunities for metatextual speculation for neo-Victorian addicts, but might not inspire all to abandon their need for satisfying feminist heroines.

Notes

1. My 'recipe' for neo-Victorian fiction here is inspired by The Little Professor's 'Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels' (2006), a satirical – and thought-provoking – commentary on the recurring tropes of neo-Victorian fiction. For further reflection on The Little Professor's 'Rules', and on reader expectations of the strongly generic features of some neo-Victorianism, see Llewellyn 2009.
2. For understandings of neo-Victorianism which emphasise its interest in re-imagining/recovering marginalised perspectives, see (amongst many others) Kohlke 2008: 9, Widdowson 2006: 505-506; Llewellyn 2008: 165.
3. The most notable examples of neo-Victorian novels which feature same-sex desire between middle-class/working-class women are Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), and *Fingersmith* (2002). This is also a theme in Jane Harris's *The Observations* (2006).
4. See Muller 2012: 39-60 for an insightful discussion of this theme in neo-Victorian fiction.
5. For further information about the life and career of W. T. Stead, see Eckley 2007.

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