Rhoda Broughton (1840-1920).

Rhoda Broughton was born at Segrwyd Hall near Denbigh in North Wales. Her mother, Jane Bennett, was the daughter of a Dublin lawyer and her father, Delves Broughton, a Church of England clergyman. Broughton moved to Broughton in Staffordshire when her father was presented with the family living near their ancestral Elizabethan home, Broughton Hall. She was educated at home and wrote her first novel, *Not Wisely, but Too Well* after reading the youngAnne Isabella Thackeray’s, *The Story of Elizabeth* serialized in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1862. Her maternal uncle, the author Sheridan le Fanu, helped her to publish both her first novel, *Not Wisely, but too Well* in twelve installments from August 1865- July 1866 and her second novel, *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867) in the *Dublin University Magazine* which he edited in installments between July1866 and January 1867. Although she is now remembered as the author of romances ,Broughton was ‘first identified as a sensation novelist in the 1860s, largely because the protagonists of *Cometh Up as a Flower* and *Not Wisely bu t too Well*, her first bestsellers, describe their passion in terms of its physical effects on them – which evidently caused a corresponding shock to the decorous readers’ nerves … Broughton’s heroines were bold and bad (within limits).’[[1]](#footnote-1) Like other Victorian women she concealed her identity at first by publishing anonymously but from *Good-bye Sweetheart, Goobye!* (1872) onwards began to use her own name. Le Fanu introduced her to George Bentley, son of Richard Bentley, founder of the Bentley publishing house, who published all of Broughton’s books until the company was taken over in the 1890s by Macmillan with whom she published six more novels and a further three with Stanley, Paul & Co. Her last, *A Fool In Her Folly* (1920) appeared posthumously with a forward by Marie Belloc Lowndes.

After the death of her mother in 1860 and her father in 1863 Broughton lived comfortably with her sister Eleanor Newcombe and her husband, William, a gentleman farmer, in Denbighshire. Broughton began writing *Second Thoughts* in 1878 when she moved with the widowed Eleanor from north Wales to set up home in Oxford. However, the welcome that Matthew Arnold had led her to expect in the university city did not materialize and she encountered some hostility, due, at least in part, to her being confused with the sensation novelist, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who was wrongly but widely assumed to share the morally disreputable past of her eponymous heroine in *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). As Margaret Oliphant, remarked; ‘I rather think I was set up as the proper novelist in opposition to Miss Broughton who has gone to live at Oxford and has much fluttered the dove-cotes, though I don’t exactly know how.’[[2]](#footnote-2)Nevertheless, Broughton who ‘led during the whole of her long life an extraordinarily active social existence’[[3]](#footnote-3) did gain admittance to Oxford’s literary and aesthetic circles through her friendship with Margaret Woods and became acquainted with among others, Walter Pater and Mark Pattison, the Rector of Lincoln College, although Oscar Wilde, then living in Oxford, remained distant. According to Wilde’s biographer, Richard Ellmann, of the many writers with whose work Wilde was acquainted, ‘Only three aroused his critical antagonism. Rhoda Broughton was one.’ [[4]](#footnote-4)

Written for her dying friend, Adelaide Sartoris, the sister of Fanny Kemble, *Second Thoughts* was Broughton’s seventh novel and like its immediate predecessor, *Joan* (1876) was not published in installments before publication in book form. Broughton had hitherto struggled to accommodate her writing to the procrustean bed of the Victorian three-decker novel. *Second Thoughts* was the first novel to be published in only two volumes. ‘Bentley offered £1,200 for three volumes, but only £750 for two. The book could not be stretched beyond two volumes so she accepted the latter sum, though reluctantly.’[[5]](#footnote-5) The work was originally to have been entitled *First Impressions* and to have been issued in three parts entitled *First Thoughts,* *Second Thoughts* and *Second Thoughts are Best*.’[[6]](#footnote-6) As Marie Belloc Lowndes put it, Broughton’s usual subject matter was ‘the effect of the passion of love on what one must call, for want of a better term, the civilized woman’s heart?’ [[7]](#footnote-7)The plot of *Second Thoughts* is strewn with misunderstandings after the high spirited Gillian Latimer learns that her inheritance is conditional on her agreeing to marry the idealistic doctor, John Burnet, and that in the event of her refusing to do so her legacy will become his. The romantic denouement is complicated by Gillian’s misreading of Burnett’s intentions in relation to the socialite Sophia Tarling and by Burnett’s misreading of the unwanted attentions of the languid poet Francis Chaloner with his ‘early Byzantine face’, ‘feint voice’ and ‘long waves of his honey-coloured hair’, directed at a decidedly unimpressed Gillian to whom he attempts to recite verse in what purports to be the style of ancient Greece.

‘It should be read’, he said, gently, ‘to the low pale sound of the viol or virginal: with a subtle perfume of dead roses floating about, while the eye is fed with porphyry vases and tender Tyrian hues.’

‘Then it certainly cannot be read here,’ replied Gillian, with a dry but humorous glance at the India-rubber plant, and the lustres under glass shades.’ (p. )

In this spirited riposte Gillian humorously punctures the male aesthete’s pretentiousness. Throughout the gendered dialogue of the novel the sensible woman is more than a match for the male aesthete. Broughton positions the two suitors, Burnet and Chaloner, at the extreme polarities of the Victorian debates between supporters of traditional social and moral values and of the aesthetic movement for whom the quest for beauty was freed from all moral and social imperatives. The effeminate Chaloner with French and German tripping off the tongue in his ‘Fruhlings Gruss’ and ‘Ritournelle’ (p. ) is a pointed contrast to the stolidly English Burnett with his practical manly vocation as a doctor. Moreover, while Chaloner appears vapid and purposeless, Burnet has taken the temperance pledge, and unbeknown to Gillian, is involved in the reclamation of drunkards, a project that is also close to her heart.

Aestheticism was both a high-art and mass cultural movement and the Victorian aesthetic debates extended beyond literature and art to commodity culture, to furnishings, lighting and interior décor. Broughton’s use of colour in *Second Thoughts* is symbolic and aesthetic ideology is registered through colour that speaks not only of aesthetic preference -- the paintings in Chaloner’s studio reflect the Pre-Raphaelite’s fondness for models with red or Titian coloured hair -- but also of commodification and the practices of the Victorian market place.’

By the 1860s most natural colours could be manufactured synthetically and relatively cheaply even the prohibitively expensive Tyriann Purple, once the prerogative of Roman emperors, ‘could no longer lay claim to its status as a color of royal privilege: everyone could afford to wear the new synthetic mauve and for several years it became all the rage in London.’[[8]](#footnote-8)As Denis Dennisof explains, Morris’s interest in the ‘House Beautiful’ … encouraged the middle class to maintain an artistic eye even in the privacy of their own homes.’ [[9]](#footnote-9) In *Second Thoughts* Gillian prefers a ‘first-class walnut drawing-room suite’, strong blue curtains, and the ‘lively colour of the expensive carpet’ (p. ) to the ubiquitous inexpensive ‘sunflowers and peacock eyes’ (p. ) of Victorian middle class homes with limited incomes but some artistic pretensions.

*Second Thoughts* was published a year before the best known satire of the aesthetic movement, the comic opera *Patience; or Bunthorne’s Bride* by W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, took the London theatre by storm in 1881. The risible Chaloner would have been recognizable to some of Broughton’s first readers as a thinly-veiled Oscar Wilde although Wilde had yet to publish his first book of poetry, *Poems* (1881). Ellmann concludes that ‘Given the still spare population of aesthetes in Oxford at the time, Wilde seems definitely meant.’[[10]](#footnote-10) However, there are also distinct echoes of Algernon Swinburne in Chaloner’s fixation with the unnatural, with death, disease and decay which is ridiculed when he demotes that ‘”there is nothing so beautiful as disease. The beauty of a pearl is greater than that of any other jewel, because it is the beauty of disease.’” (p. ) Chaloner is also linked to Dante Gabriel Rossetti whose poem ‘Blessed Damosel’ Chaloner recites, and whose paintings of Titian haired models (‘carrot-headed’. P. ) as they are colloquially termed) are displayed in his studio. Chaloner, then, appears more a composite, an artistic type easily recognizable by the 1880s and considered amusing and mildly absurd by most respectable Victorians, than a caricature of any specific historical personage. But the male artist’s reverential attitude to the art of ‘The Master’, alongside the objectification of women in the worship of beauty, as well as the eroticization of sexuality and disease are ridiculed by Gillian. ‘Amor!’ she cried scornfully: Love! I thought it was cholera!’ (p. ) As Margaret Stetz puts it, female authors ‘wished to rescue women themselves from the consequences of an exoticized and demonized vision of female sexuality that had established itself as a cliché in aesthetic literature.’ [[11]](#footnote-11)

In contrast to Patience, *Second Thoughts* was not a commercial success and Broughton was disappointed by its sales but pleased that it was being read ‘aloud by Calvinist clergymen to their families!’ and by the Archbishop of Dublin.[[12]](#footnote-12) Wilde’s response to the book was delayed and rebarbative: ‘In Philistia lies Miss Broughton’s true sphere and to Philistia she should return.’ [[13]](#footnote-13)

Rhoda Broughton published twenty-six novels and a book of ghost stories although it was not until 1891 *A Widower* *Indeed* written in collaboration with E. Bisland, that she was able to publish her first one volume novel. *Red as a Rose is She* (1870) is mentioned by James Joyce *in Ulysses*, as the favourite reading of the sailor, W. B. Murphy. Many years later Broughton was told by Captain Clements Markham that a mountain on Ellesmere Island had been named ‘Mount Rhoda’ in acknowledgment of the pleasure that her books had given the crewe of HMS Alert on an Arctic expedition in 1872-1873. [[14]](#footnote-14) Broughton became aware that her reputation as a scandalous writer had mellowed considerably and that her novels, once considered risqué, had come to appear innocuous in her later years. In his biography of Mary Cholmondeley Percy Lubbock writes; ‘It is said that our Rhoda herself was once thought improper.“I began my career”, said she with a joyful snort, “as Zola, I finish it as Miss Yonge; it’s not I that have changed, it’s my fellow countrymen.”’[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. Pamela K. Gilbert, *Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Novels* (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Isabel C. Clarke*, Six Portraits: Madame de Stael, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Mrs Oliphant, John Oliver Hobbes (Mrs Craigie), Katherine Mansfield* (London: Hutchinson, 1935), p.217. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marie Belloc Lowndes, Foreword, *Rhoda Broughton, A Fool in Her Folly (London: Odhams Press, 1920), pp.5-6, p.5.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Michael Sadleir, *Things Past* (London: ), p.108. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Barbara Silberg, quoted in R. C. Terry, *Victorian Popular Fiction 1860-80* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983), p. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Marie Belloc Lowndes, Foreword, *Rhoda Broughton, A Fool in Her Folly (London: Odhams Press, 1920), pp.3-4, p.6..* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Alison Victoria Matthews, ‘Aestheticism’s True Colors: The Politics of Pigment in Victorian Art, Criticism and Fashion’, in Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (eds), *Women and British Aestheticism* (Charlottesville and London : University of Virginia Press, 1999), pp. 172-191, p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dennis Denisoff, ‘Decade and Aestheticism’, in Gail Marshall (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siencle* (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 31-52, p.36.. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Richard Ellmann*,* p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Margaret D. Stetz, ‘Debating Aestheticism from a Feminist Perspective’, in Schaffer and Psomiades, British Aestheticism, pp. 25-43, p.31. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sadleir, *Things Past*, p.109. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Marilyn Wood, *Rhoda Broughton: (1840-1993*) *Proflie of a Novelist* (Paul Watkins: Stamford, 1993), p.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Percy Lubbock, *Mary Cholmondeley: a Sketch from Memory* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), p. 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)