

## Sensation and the City: Charlotte Riddell's *George Geith* and the Emergence of the Sensation Genre

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Abstract: Charlotte Riddell's *George Geith of Fen Court* was published in 1864, just after Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, Ellen Wood's *East Lynne*, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* seemed to initiate the sensation genre. It features adultery, bigamy, false identities, forgery, illegitimacy, and a fake pregnancy, and Riddell is often referred to as a sensation author by modern critics. However, *George Geith* resists easy categorisation as a sensation novel and Riddell was frequently compared with George Eliot, a respected realist author. Riddell uses sensational plots in a way that managed to avoid *George Geith* being castigated as a sensation novel by reviewers, but that allowed her to convey some transgressive notions about marriage and to further her agenda to make the City of London and its hardworking businessmen viable fictional subjects. In undertaking this analysis of *George Geith* this article suggests that one new direction for sensation studies is to reconsider why certain authors (such as Riddell) have been classed as sensational, and by doing so revisit the criteria that have been used to identify sensation fiction (including plot, tone, and reputation) then and now.

Keywords: bigamy; Charlotte Riddell; genre; illegitimacy; realism; sensation fiction

### Introduction

Charlotte Riddell's *George Geith of Fen Court* was published in 1864 (under the pseudonym F. G. Trafford), just after Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (serialised 1859-60), Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1860-61), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-62) seemed to initiate the sensation genre.<sup>1</sup> It was published by Tinsley Brothers, whose books included the most famous and successful sensation novels of the day, including *Lady Audley's Secret*. *George Geith* features adultery, bigamy, false identities, forgery, illegitimacy, and a fake pregnancy. Numerous modern sensation fiction researchers have referred to Riddell as a sensation author. Tellingly, these references rarely arise during

discussion of Riddell's fiction, but often appear in lists of sensation authors whose work needs further attention.<sup>2</sup> In fact, despite appearances, *George Geith* resists easy categorisation as a sensation novel. Plotlines turning on bigamy and illegitimacy are set up in the first volume, then left until almost halfway through the third volume, meaning that the majority of the story is about a hardworking City of London accountant who falls in love with an impoverished country gentleman's daughter. Sensation fiction could therefore appear to be sandwiched uncomfortably around domestic realism, simply to add some drama to Riddell's accounts of city life. As the following analysis will show, Riddell is braiding the two genres together more carefully than this.

As Derrida reminds us, the whole concept of genre is characterised by 'impurity' and 'contamination' (59). Recent approaches to sensation fiction have increasingly shown that it is rarely useful to try and pigeon-hole novels or novelists into sensationalist, realist, or other categories: 'the sensation genre is difficult to define and fix, and [...] it cannot be entirely separated from other genres and modes of expression, including the realist novel, the ghost story, melodrama, burlesque and even scientific and medical discourses', and while 'sensation is often defined against realist or domestic fiction', there are 'overlaps between these narrative forms' (Beller and MacDonald 147). Accordingly, sensation fiction critics have looked at how accepted realists use sensationalism or how recognised sensation authors use realist techniques.<sup>3</sup> Yet, while there is 'no example of "pure" sensation' (or realism) 'which is not in some way influenced by, or influences, other genres and discourses' (Beller and MacDonald 147), many influential Victorian literary reviewers, in the early 1860s, drew distinctions between the sensational and the realist. There were 'horizons of expectation' (Todorov 163) relating to style, content, and literary and moral value. Riddell worked within a cultural environment that was preoccupied with the perceived emergence of an exciting new genre that could only be recognised and sustained by the classificatory policing of the

reviewers who called for its suppression and demise, even as they gained work, and the opportunity to assert moral and artistic boundaries, through their denouncements. This article argues that Riddell capitalised on the initial rage for, and against, sensation fiction in order to offer a social critique of marriage and divorce laws, and as part of her commitment to portraying ‘[a]ll the pathos of the city, the pathos in the lives of struggling men’ that so moved her (‘The Ladies’ Corner’ 3). Riddell shows an acute awareness of literary features and forms of representation that were associated with both sensation fiction and realism, but does not commit to either school of literature. Instead, she uses whatever tactics will help her to tell George Geith’s story in such a way as to make an ostensibly uninteresting character appealing and sympathetic to her readers.

Without categorising Riddell as a sensation author, or reading *George Geith* as a sensation novel that uses realism (or vice versa) this is a contribution to what Beller has identified as ‘a second phase of recovery’ of sensation fiction scholarship that moves beyond the Braddon, Collins, Wood triumvirate (‘Fashions of the Current Season’ 463), bringing attention to a popular author who certainly deserves more critical recognition.<sup>4</sup> Though focusing on the well-studied early 1860s, I build on recent critical tendencies to broaden and challenge our conceptions of sensation fiction. Like Janice Allan I aim to move beyond seeing ‘the relationship between realism and sensationalism in oppositional terms’ (97), and so look at Riddell’s incorporation of features from both genres into her novel. Like Silvana Colella I am committed to seriously analysing popular fiction and ‘apply[ing] to Riddell’s texts the kind of close reading usually reserved to “elite” works with their consolidated pedigree of sophistication’ (*Charlotte Riddell’s City Novels* 5);<sup>5</sup> it is only through paying careful attention to the structure, pacing and tone of the novel that we can appreciate the way Riddell negotiates a path between unexciting and scandalous subject matters. Like Tamara Wagner I seek to ‘broaden our understanding of [sensation fiction’s] cultural centrality and

its impact on the novel genre' ('Stretching "The Sensational Sixties"' 211) by showing how sensational elements appealed to, and were swiftly employed by, an author who did not present herself as sensational. Exploring Riddell's responses to the genre can help us to understand more about how novelists utilised the phenomenon of sensation fiction.

The discussion begins with a consideration of some Victorian and modern responses to Riddell's work which align her with realism rather than sensation fiction. Several Victorian reviewers compared her with the most respected realist author of the period, George Eliot. Yet Riddell's sensational plotlines of bigamy and illegitimacy are unapologetically prominent in *George Geith*, and the next sections look at how these are used to structure the novel in a way that manages to avoid it being castigated as a sensation novel by reviewers, even as she conveys some notions about marriage which hold more transgressive potential than the contemporaneous sensation novels that were so often seen as immoral by reviewers. The final sections show how Riddell uses sensation to promote her valorisation of the hardworking businessman over the upper classes, and to further her agenda to make the City of London and its everyday people accepted as viable fictional subjects. In undertaking this analysis of *George Geith* this article suggests that one new direction for sensation studies is to reconsider why certain authors (such as Riddell) have been classed as sensational, and by doing so revisit the criteria that have been used to identify sensation fiction (including plot, tone, and reputation) then and now.

#### A Sensation Novel?

Riddell is attracting increased critical attention, but the focus tends to be on her supernatural fiction, her city novels and her 1883 Künstlerroman *A Struggle for Fame*.<sup>6</sup> Despite her presence in lists of sensation authors, little work has been done on what is actually sensational about Riddell's writing. James Murphy provides one of the few discussions of Riddell and sensation, calling *George Geith* 'a sensation novel [and] a novel of the city':

As a sensation novel it is not a notable success in respect to that dimension of sensation that involves heightening tension and frightening with surprises.

Riddell's narrative tends to reveal all in one fell swoop concerning the novel's two undoubtedly sensation-content stories, one about illegitimacy and aristocratic inheritance, the other about bigamy. There is little suspense or detection, even though some extraordinary circumstances are revealed and there is much to be uncovered. (101)

Below, I discuss the two 'sensation-content stories' that Murphy identifies, and how Riddell downplays the possible shocks and suspense that could be derived from them. I refrain, however, from measuring the novel's success 'as a sensation novel', and the implication that novels are intended or required to meet the criteria of a specific genre. Rather than judging how effectively she adheres to, or fulfils the requirements of, sensation fiction, I focus on how Riddell has drawn on, and deployed, some of the features of the genre that became a culturally visible, and critically reviled, phenomenon just as she herself was realising literary success and the start of decades-long fame.

It was in 1862 that Margaret Oliphant felt that there was enough of a stir caused by a certain type of fiction that was 'sufficiently individual to be capable of originating a new school in fiction' ('Sensation Novels' 565). It has long been acknowledged that sensation fiction was 'not so much invented by Collins, Wood, and Braddon and then recognised by reviewers but was created by the reviewers who insistently grouped these together among a varying list of other novels' (Loesberg 115). Nemesvari has attributed this grouping to the Victorian reviewers' desire to 'creat[e] an improper genre against which to define an acceptable realist standard' (18). More recent sensation studies reveal that the emergence of

sensation fiction ‘was more a dawning recognition on the part of critical commentators and the middle-class press that this type of fiction had gradually been gaining momentum for several years and was now popular to a worrying degree’ (Beller, ‘Sensation Fiction in the 1850s’ 8). The result has been a ‘prevalent current tendency to view literary sensationalism in its broader temporal parameters, rather than as a phenomenon largely confined to a single decade’ (Beller, ‘Fashions of the Current Season’ 462). This means that 1859-62 no longer holds the special place it once did, as the moment when sensation fiction was born. And yet, largely thanks (and according) to the reviewers, it did seem for many at the time as if something new and unprecedented had happened.<sup>7</sup>

*George Geith’s* composition suggests that Riddell was well aware of the grouping into proper and improper, literary and non-literary texts that was engineered by Victorian reviewers. She managed to avoid (for the most part) the charges of impropriety that were levelled at recognised sensation authors, despite the apparently sensational content of the novel and her publisher’s associations with sensation fiction. One reason for this is that, as Murphy notes, she eschews the ‘tension’ and ‘surprises’ of works which were viewed as sensational. Riddell’s ability to dampen shocks is reliant on Victorian readers’ rapidly acquired knowledge of what a sensation novel was; by using plot “twists” (revelations of bigamy and illegitimacy) that were so common as to not count as twists, Riddell can include (as the next section shows) shocking topics written in such a way so as not to shock. The result is a knowing, sometimes metafictional, use of sensation that was overlooked, dismissed, or forgiven by her reviewers, who instead focussed on the realist features of Riddell’s writing.

Riddell was often compared, by Victorian reviewers, with George Eliot. Eliot was seen by many as standing ‘in the first rank of living novelists’, and as the very opposite of a sensation author, bringing ‘out her characters by a multiplicity of delicate touches’, and

avoiding ‘glaring and positive colours’ (Smith 177-8).<sup>8</sup> This 1863 *North British Review* article goes on to compare Eliot with Wilkie Collins as ‘a writer of quite a different stamp’, who is ‘a master of mystery’, but whose ‘books collapse’ as soon as ‘the mystery is unravelled’. For Collins, the article asserts, ‘plot and incident are all in all, character nothing’, and ‘[e]verything is tense, strained, and unnatural’ (Smith 183-4). Such criticisms were commonly directed towards sensation fiction. When Riddell is compared with Eliot, elsewhere, the tone is very different. For example, the *Saturday Review* declared George Geith to be ‘a conspicuous failure’ (*George Geith* 291), but not because Riddell was favouring action and excitement over characterisation. Instead, it tellingly likened her to Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot as examples of impressive female authors who cannot write convincing male characters (the author is sure that ‘F. G. Trafford’ is female and disgruntled by the gender-neutral name on the cover). One reason for the comparison is that both Eliot and Brontë hid their gender and were revealed as women, but comparisons with Eliot (rather than with Brontë), continue during Riddell’s career. For example, the *Westminster Review* stated that in ‘her poetical feeling’ Riddell was ‘only surpassed by “George Eliot”’, even as it lamented the quality of her most recent novel (*Belles Lettres* 526).<sup>9</sup> In her list of sensation novelists, Elaine Showalter counts Riddell as one of those female authors who ‘saw themselves as daughters of Charlotte Brontë [associated with ‘passion and assertive action’] rather than George Eliot’ (154). Yet in the 1860s, with both writing professionally but with Eliot more established, Riddell is presented by reviewers more as a less-gifted sister of Eliot, implicitly judging her as a realist author, rather than a sensational one.<sup>10</sup>

Riddell’s work was often praised by reviewers for its authenticity and verisimilitude. For example, the *Athenaeum* described her *Too Much Alone* (1860), which also contains bigamy and inheritance plots (see below), as having ‘an air of human truth and reality about it

that novels do not often possess' (Jewsbury, 'New Novels' 373). In fact, her novels were often commended for not being sensational (see Colella 119–20).<sup>11</sup> The *Morning Post* reviewing *George Geith*, for example, guessed that:

the author's popularity may be more deep than wide, for her style is not adapted to the million; it requires taste, education and discernment; above all, it needs that the reader should not have been vitiated by the sensation school in order that the beauties and the merits [...of Riddell's novels] should be thoroughly understood and enjoyed. ('*George Geith of Fen Court*' 2)

The idea of appealing to the discerning few, rather than the sensationally vitiated many, was something that Eliot applied to her own fiction, when she mused that the reason Braddon's *The Trail of the Serpent* appeared on the 'railway stalls' (synonymous with cheap entertainment) rather than her own books was that 'the most carefully written books lie, both outside and inside people's minds, deep undermost in a heap of trash' (cited in Maunder 1). Yet *George Geith* did go on to be immensely popular, and in the 1860s Riddell often achieved the combination of popularity and respect that both Eliot and Braddon (who wished to serve 'two masters', to be 'sensational' and 'artistic' (Wolff 14)) aimed for.

Two of the most recent critics to offer in-depth studies of Riddell's early works discuss them as primarily realist. Silvana Colella sees Riddell's novels as 'formal experiments with Victorian social and psychological realism' (5), and the bigamy 'subplot' in *George Geith* as a way of 'spic[ing] up' the novel 'with an eye to the popularity (and marketability) of sensational themes and solutions' (133). Nancy Henry acknowledges that 'Riddell's novels contain their share of romance and melodrama along with their evocative descriptions of the City' ('Charlotte Riddell' 195), and that Riddell makes use of bigamy, which was 'so common

in the sensation novels of the 1860s', but she asserts that Riddell's 'influence on later realist fiction is greater than has been credited in literary history, though it was recognised in her time' (*Women, Literature and Finance* 185, 184). Henry compares Riddell's and George Eliot's careers, noting that 'the two authors shared a determination to represent common people and a narrative voice that self-consciously commented on the importance of realism in fiction' (181), and that Riddell offers a similar 'manifesto' (185) to George Eliot's at the start of the second volume of *Adam Bede*, when she asserts that 'trade [...] can find no writer worthy of it' (Riddell, *George Geith* 1:205-06), and that '[e]very other class has found some writer to tell its tale', but no writer has yet 'described a shopkeeper as a man' or told the story of office and warehouse workers (*George Geith* 1:204-05). Indeed, as well as giving those very people a chance to see themselves as the focus of fiction, Riddell's conception of the power and purpose of artistic representation shares features with Eliot's theories about how fiction can create sympathy with everyday people, especially City people in Riddell's case.<sup>12</sup> Like Eliot, Riddell was concerned with representing the people, with all their annoying habits, that many of her readers would encounter in their daily lives:

my reader; if you could only feel that the most commonplace man you meet has acted out in his own way some tragedy, on which his Maker and yours, has looked with interest, I think it would make you more patient towards those who are neither clever nor attractive; [...] and more indulgent towards those writers who choose their heroes from amongst the men who pass you by in the street. (*George Geith* 1:221)

Despite this similarity to Eliot's sympathetic realism, the focus on the 'commonplace man' does not necessarily discount Riddell's writing as sensational. After all, as Henry Mansel

pointed out, ‘it is necessary to be near a mine to be blown up by its explosion; and a tale which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader is never thoroughly effective unless the scene be laid in our own days and among people we are in the habit of meeting’ (‘Sensation Novels’ 488–9). As the following sections will show, rather than ‘electrifying’ her readers, Riddell muffles the potential blast of her more sensational plotlines. And yet, these plots are significant in achieving her literary agenda: the depiction and valorisation of businessmen and the ethos of self-help and hard work that *George Geith* promotes.

### *George Geith of Fen Court*

As a young man George Geith marries a woman who turns out to be his ‘inferior in every respect, and older than [him] in addition’ (3:185), and to be cheating on him with a friend of his. When the couple run off together, George joins the church, only to have her reappear, demanding to be ‘receive[d]’ as George’s ‘wife’, and ‘introduce[d] to [his] friends’, or paid off (3:187). The result is that George ‘relinquish[es] the Church, and [goes] to London to seek [his] fortune’ (3:187) so that he can ‘secure [his] release from her’ (3:189). He works, incognito, as an accountant, until his wife fakes her own death, and (believing he is now free) he starts living under his real name again, allowing her to track him down. By this time George is married to a client’s daughter, Beryl Molozane, with a child, and he allows himself to be blackmailed to keep the truth from her. George eventually demands that his wife name a set allowance rather than making impossible demands upon him; she confronts Beryl and convinces Beryl’s grandmother to have George arrested for bigamy, from which he is acquitted. George attempts and fails to gain a divorce, then lives apart from Beryl until he comes to her as she dies of an unnamed wasting disease. George ends the novel successful in business but broken-hearted.

In the subplot, George's cousin Mark, Baronet of Snareham (to which George is the heir), discovers that he is illegitimate. His supposed mother, Lady Geith, faked a pregnancy with the help of her companion who, unbeknownst to her, was having an affair with Lady Geith's husband. So Lady Geith knows that Mark is the son of Mrs Lennor, but not that his father is Lady Geith's own husband.

Before *George Geith* Riddell already had a number of titles in print with the publisher Skeet, including the relatively successful *Too Much Alone* (1860), and *City and Suburb* (1861), which were establishing her as a novelist of the City.<sup>13</sup> With the support of the larger, more proactive Tinsley, *George Geith* became her greatest hit, and was associated with her for the rest of her career, essentially her equivalent of *Lady Audley's Secret*, *East Lynne* or *The Woman in White*.<sup>14</sup> Considering the plots, the publisher, and its appearance just after the publication of the sensational 'big three', it seems reasonable to assume that Riddell's novel is following in the footsteps of these recent literary successes. S. M. Ellis (in 1931) supposes that

[s]ome of [*George Geith's*] success was probably owing to the fact that Lady Geith of the story in certain respects reminded readers of the protagonist of *Lady Audley's Secret*, the most popular romance of the day; but apart from the Braddonesque flavour *George Geith* has very distinctive merits of its own, for it is an engrossing and moving tale (278–9).

The term 'Braddonesque flavour' is a catchy one, but as the following analysis will show, Riddell actively avoids giving too much of the 'flavour' of a sensation novel, even as she uses sensational plotlines.<sup>15</sup> It is this lack of a sensational tone that most strongly indicates that

*George Geith* was not intended, and would not have been received by most Victorian readers, as a sensation novel.

### Sensational Plots: Bigamy

Bigamy was a popular theme in literature and on the stage at the start of the 1860s (even before the publicity of the Yelverton case in 1861 (see Fahnestock 48–50)) and was common in genres other than melodrama and sensation fiction (see McAleavey 13). Nevertheless, bigamy became particularly associated with sensation fiction, to the extent that in his 1863 castigation of the genre, Henry Mansel observed that ‘so popular has this crime become, as to give rise to an entire sub-class in this branch of literature, which may be distinguished as that of Bigamy Novels’ (490), and Oliphant claimed that Braddon ‘brought in the reign of bigamy as an interesting and fashionable crime’ (‘Novels’, 1867 263). Mary Elizabeth Braddon referred to *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* (1863) as her ‘pair of Bigamy novels’ (Wolff 12). Riddell has her own pair of bigamy novels, with *Too Much Alone* (1860) preceding, and *George Geith* (1864) following, Braddon’s. Bigamy and illegitimacy are part of a single subplot in *Too Much Alone*, and though they do have an impact on two of the central characters, Herbert Clyne (who discovers he is not the prospective baronet he thought he was) and Mr Glенаen (who gains the title), bigamy is not the driving force of the story as it is in *George Geith*. Braddon’s success and Riddell’s own move to Tinsley may well have encouraged her to include the storyline more prominently.

The bigamy plot was acknowledged by some reviewers, but the novel was not grouped with sensational bigamy novels such as Braddon’s. The *Athenaeum* was ‘sorry that the author should have selected so hackneyed an incident as bigamy for the main hinge on which the story turns’, and asked ‘[w]hy are novelists so fond of bigamy?’ but also thought that *George Geith* was ‘an excellent novel, powerfully and carefully written’ (Jewsbury, ‘*George Geith*’

233).<sup>16</sup> The *Fortnightly Review* similarly noted that ‘[t]he two leading incidents of the story are no doubt “sensational.” They are part of a novelist’s trade stock, and have been used with effect in a score of modern novels.’ It also noted, however, that ‘setting [bigamy and false pregnancy] aside [...] the tale deals with the actions and feelings of ordinary life’, and it felt that there was ‘eloquence and passion, exquisite pathos, and great strength of expression’ (Dennis, ‘*George Geith of Fen Court*’ 254-5).<sup>17</sup> For these reviewers, the use of sensational incidents is an unfortunate blip in an otherwise admirable realist work.

Riddell’s narrative structure and style has a lot to do with this reception. Sensation novels keep readers on the edge of their seats with a mixture of suspense, melodrama, cliff-hangers, and ‘startling and sudden effects’ (Oliphant, ‘Novels’, 1863 169). Riddell, contrastingly, pre-empts surprises, packaging potentially shocking content with forewarnings and delivering it in a manner that inhibits the thrill of sensation. For example, when George first sees Beryl the narrator laments that ‘could he have foreseen what the future held for him and for her’ he would have left immediately, and ‘would have taken the sunshine out of his own life to save the clouds from darkening down on hers’ (1:253). Rather than create a sense of mystery or suspense, the result is an ‘extreme and untampered gloom which pervades the story’, as the *Saturday Review* put it (‘George Geith’ 1865, 291). This is not to say that there are no exciting or emotionally-charged moments in *George Geith*. At one point, for example, Beryl slides ‘out of [George’s] arms to the floor, and l[ies] there with her loosened hair falling over the carpet’ (3:216), perhaps in an ironic echo of Augustus Egg’s first painting in *Past and Present* (1858) in which the adulterous wife lays on the floor at her husband's feet. The irony lies in the visuals and the situation: Beryl’s loosened hair makes her appear, by Victorian standards, like more of a “loose woman” than the braided head of the woman in Egg’s painting, but it is not the wife’s infidelity that has brought this about, but the man’s legitimate marriage.<sup>18</sup> The narrative tone is often heightened, especially the descriptions of

Beryl and George's devotion to each other and the depths of their misery: 'the summer glory was at its zenith, and it had come but to bring this wretchedness to the two, who had enjoyed the full happiness of so many a summer's-day together' (3:216). However, in general potentially shocking revelations are heavily foreshadowed with prophetic doomsaying on the part of the narrator.

Even without the narratorial warnings, the early references to George's unfortunate past are enough that readers who knew the plots of *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* could guess his secret. We are told from the start that George wears a beard as a disguise, is living under a false name, and has 'fled from the Church' because of 'the one great folly of his youth' (1:23). We know that he is working hard for 'freedom' (1:24) and by the end of the chapter he has received the good news that '[t]he person who had cursed his life was dead' (1:28). The hints that George is free from an unfortunate marriage to an unwanted wife are quite blatant. Having set up George's secret, Riddell spends most of the rest of the first and the second volumes describing his growing intimacy with the Molozane family and his continued hard work. While there are some conversations about the past, such as when he and his aunt, Lady Geith, almost confess their past errors to each other (1:202-03), there is little sense of mystery or excitement generated around George's bigamy.

It is not until almost halfway through the final volume that Beryl finds the letter reporting the supposed death of the first Mrs Geith. The narrator again prepares us for what comes next by assuring us, as Beryl cries at the realisation of George's deception, that 'when the day of their common trouble came, Beryl thanked God for having taken all wounded pride, all harsh judgements out of her heart' (3:152). After this, things begin to move quickly, as in the next chapter, pre-emptively entitled 'Not Dead', George's lawyer arrives with the news that the first Mrs Geith is still alive and making enquiries about him; George immediately says that he 'will pay anything' and will not tell Beryl (3:163). The lawyer

pragmatically advises George to tell Beryl ‘the whole of the circumstances, and separate’, then see if he can obtain a divorce (3:164). Although George refuses, and there is a period of time when Beryl is kept ignorant of what is happening, the reader is fully aware of the situation and there is little suspense beyond the question of when Mrs Geith is going to turn up and ruin things.<sup>19</sup>

The opportunity for sensational scenes is often avoided or restrained. Mrs Geith and George’s meeting for the first time in many years is skipped over, and her blackmailing of him until ‘he was slave, she mistress’ is covered in one page (3:201). Mrs Geith’s initial meeting with Beryl is also quickly covered, though Riddell does give space to Beryl’s momentary triumph as she shocks Mrs Geith (and potentially the reader), by refusing to prosecute George for bigamy and pretending that they never married, presenting herself as a mistress:

‘Do I look like a woman who has been deceived?’ And Beryl rose and fronted her enemy, ‘do I look like a betrayed and injured wife? Did I receive your news as news? Was I hurt? Was I astonished?’ (3:204-05)

It is quickly confirmed to the reader, however, that Beryl has ‘for so long known of the visits of some strange woman’ (3:207) that Mrs Geith’s arrival is ‘rather a confirmation of her fears than a surprise to the poor devoted wife’, much as it is for the reader (3:208). Subsequent events (another confrontation between Beryl and Mrs Geith, the public revelation that George is a bigamist, and his being taken into custody) are narrated quickly. This keeps things moving along at a good pace, but the space devoted to mystery and suspense is small compared to the descriptions of city and domestic life.

Moreover, the novel refuses to indulge even the potential for more extreme crime that readers would expect from a sensation novel. When Beryl asks Mark, ‘how can he get rid of

[Mrs Geith] unless she dies?’ (3:223), his metafictional response is, ‘I was not talking about her dying [...] and *I was not thinking of killing her either*; but George might get a divorce’ (3:224, emphasis added). The fact that George seeks a divorce and then abides by the legal outcome is underwhelming by sensational standards. Riddell is using a plot device that is popular with, and well-known because of, sensation fiction, but is not using it for particularly sensational effects. And yet, the way bigamy is treated in the novel – especially Beryl’s response to her situation – is as transgressive as any controversial topic in sensation fiction.

The passing of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act resulted in ‘uncertainty about marriage [...] caused by the liberalization of the divorce laws’ (Fahnestock 66). Fictional bigamy was one way of exploring these anxieties: ‘in terms of narrative, the bigamy plot undermines the security of a wedding as the nineteenth-century novel’s inescapable ending’ (McAleavey 7). McAleavey suggests this is one answer to her own observation and question about the bigamy plot:

just when middle-class Victorians no longer needed to commit bigamy, or, for that matter, murder, to get rid of an unwanted first spouse, bigamy was transformed from a real crime into a popular narrative device. Why, then, did the rise of divorce in Great Britain seem to correlate with bigamy novels rather than divorce novels? (6)

Another answer is offered by *George Geith*, which is that divorce may have been easier, but was not assured. By depicting the great love between Beryl and George, and the tragic consequences of his inability to divorce his clearly unsuitable first wife, Riddell criticises the law that allows this to happen.

George and Beryl have a strong and happy marriage: '[i]n the whole of London [...] there could not have been found, I think, a more contented, more united couple than Mr. and Mrs. Geith' (3:120). Their devotion leads to morally questionable behaviour, but the narrator encourages readers to view them with admiration and pity, and to want them to find a way out of their dilemma. For example, when she discovers that George has a living first wife,

[a]ll the judges in the land could not have persuaded Beryl she was not his wife; all the clergymen in the kingdom, all the bishops and archbishops with the head of the Church to boot, could not have made her believe she was sinful because no thought of leaving him ever crossed her mind. (3:209)

The narrative voice refrains from judging here, leaving room for the reader to perceive an implicit 'but she was wrong to think so', and/or 'and she was right to feel so', hovering in the background. Similarly, when he hears of Beryl's decline and impending death, George returns to her regardless of the law: 'whether in the sight of heaven they were man and wife, or whether it was criminal for them to stay together, it mattered not to George Geith. They would never part again' (3:275-6). At other times, the narrator expresses frustration at the disconnection between true love and legal requirements:

Oh! woe for the great waste of love which there is in this world below; [...] to think how those who may never be man and wife, those who are about to be parted by death, those whose love can never be anything but a sorrow and a trial, merge their own identity in that of one another, whilst the lawful hands of respectable households wrangle and quarrel, and honest widows order their

mourning with decorous resignation, and disconsolate husbands look out for second wives. (3:280)

Throughout, the law that has separated Beryl and George feels petty yet fatal in contrast to their powerful love. The novel comes very close to suggesting that Beryl and George should live as husband and wife, whatever the law, God, or society has to say about it.

So, *George Geith* shares some of the moral ambiguities that drew disapproval from reviewers of sensation fiction. For example, H. L. Mansel took offence that the bigamous Aurora Floyd was ‘meant to be admired’ (1863, 492), and Margaret Oliphant complained that ‘there is not a reader who does not feel disposed to turn her [*East Lynne*’s adulterous Isabel Vane’s] virtuous successor to the door and reinstate the suffering heroine, to the glorious confusion of all morality’ (‘Novels’ 1863, 170). Contrastingly, with *George Geith* the *Saturday Review* accused ‘Miss Trafford’ of ‘playing fast and loose with the distinction between right and wrong’ because she does not openly condemn Beryl’s ‘conduct’, but they were still delighted by Beryl, who ‘stands out from among the crowd of characters with which the novel-reader is daily making acquaintance’ (‘*George Geith*’ 291). Beryl – wronged against, devoted and charming – attracted much sympathy. Many were moved by her ‘hopelessly sad’ death (‘*George Geith of Fen Court*’, 2). Yet, while the *Fortnightly Review* could not ‘help wishing that the author had not dealt with her so ruthlessly’, and went on to suggest that ‘if the story closed happily’ there would be no ‘injury to the moral’ (Dennis, ‘*George Geith*’ 255), Beryl’s death is one likely reason that the novel caused limited offense; rather than being pleased at the reward the heroine gains once the first spouse is removed (as with Aurora Floyd) readers are saddened that the laws should allow such a happy couple to suffer so. If Beryl had continued to live and ended up with George – even if the first Mrs Geith was somehow removed – this might have suggested an endorsement of, or reward for,

her previous willingness to disregard the marriage laws, but her tragic death (not to mention that the first Mrs Geith ends up ‘quite a respectable lady, residing at Brighton’ (3:287)) is a sad confirmation of legal injustice. So, Riddell’s critique of Victorian marriage and divorce laws is expressed through the common sensational plotline of bigamy, but in a tempered manner that partially hides, and so mitigates for moralistic reviewers, the radical potential of Beryl and George’s relationship.

#### Sensational Plots: Illegitimacy

As with the bigamy plot, the story of Mark’s illegitimacy is set up in volume one, and returned to in volume three, with little to remind us about it in the middle. And once again, Riddell keeps mystery, suspense, and shocks to a minimum. She begins with a brief misdirection when George and Mark discuss a story from their family history, of a Walter Geith who died in the Civil War, whose wife and son died in childbirth, and whose family portrait looks ‘as like [George] as it can be’ (1.142). George wonders ‘if that son did die, or whether he lived and had children’ (1.143), but the possibility is not taken further, although it does lead George to speculate about more recent generations, and Mark’s legitimacy.<sup>20</sup> There is also some mystery concerning why Lady Geith so thoroughly dislikes her son, Mark, who half-jokes to George, ‘I sometimes think there was some mistake, and that you are Lady Geith’s son, not I’ (1:131). Both the reader and George are ready to look with suspicion on Mark and his position as Baronet. On our behalf, George runs mentally through several options which skirt around the truth, including whether Mark is his own younger brother, was ‘changed at nurse’, or is a ‘false heir’ introduced by the baronet. Ironically, but understandably considering his own secret marriage, the only possibility he does not fully dismiss is that there might be ‘a previous contract, a living wife, which rendered Lady Geith’s marriage null and void, and her children illegitimate’ (1:147).

Shortly after this, Riddell removes most of the mystery she has created. We are introduced to Lady Geith, and the narrator quickly confirms that ‘she had sinned’ (1:177), and rather cheekily, but correctly, comments that ‘[t]he reader, of course, by this time guesses what that secret was’ (1:183). While the specifics may not be guessable yet, Mark’s illegitimacy, and so George’s right to the baronetcy, certainly are. The narrator then lays out the entire story for us as confirmation: Lady Geith’s childlessness; Miss Teddesley’s planting of the idea of ‘bringing a false heir to Snareham’ (1:192); Lady Geith’s confusion that Sir Mark is clearly ‘aware of her deception’ but lets her get away with it and is strangely affectionate towards the child (1:194-5). The only detail withheld is that Miss Teddesley, later Mrs Lennor, is Mark’s mother, though enough clues are laid here for the perceptive reader to guess the truth. The kind of secret that *The Woman in White* is built around, and which Sir Percival Glyde dies trying to preserve, is told to us very plainly in the first volume of *George Geith*. This also explains why Lady Geith dislikes Mark, and wants George (son of the man she loved and her best friend, as well as the legitimate heir) to inherit Snareham. When George cannot understand why his aunt is so determined that Mark will not marry, the reader already knows why (1:211). While we are still left to wonder when the truth will come out, and what will happen when it does, this is not very in keeping with sensation fiction.

Mark discovers his illegitimacy immediately after the first Mrs Geith returns in ‘Not Dead’. As with that chapter title, ‘The Two Baronets’ strongly hints at what is about to happen, and this is reinforced as it is an echo of a previous chapter title in the same volume, ‘Baronet and Accountant’, which also referred to Mark and George. The revelation scene is certainly more sensational than anything relating to the bigamy plot. Lady Geith states the matter plainly: ‘the simple fact is this: You are not my son; I am not your mother.’ (3:171) The coldness, the lack of drama, with which she says this to the man she has raised as her own creates drama for the reader, and Mark’s response, “‘Your ladyship must be mad,” [...]

as he grasped the mantelpiece for support' (3:172), is quite sensational. There is also plenty of dramatic irony for anyone who has guessed (which, as I have been arguing, would be many readers who were used to sensation fiction plots) that Mrs Lennor is in fact Mark's mother, when he tells her '[y]ou have come between me and my mother, madam' (3:171), shortly before he is told the truth. When he, midway through the revelation, pleads, 'If it be true what you say, if I am not your son, whose son am I? Was George your child? Am I his brother?' (3:173) we as readers already know, or can guess, the answers to most of these questions as the narrator acknowledges: Lady Geith 'told him everything with which the reader is already acquainted' (3:173). She refrains from telling him who his mother is, however, allowing for another dramatic moment as Mrs Lennor is driven to declare the truth: "I am your mother. Oh! Mark", cried the unhappy woman, "have you never felt that I was your mother?" (3:175) The heightened tone continues as Mrs Lennor goes on to reveal that Mark's father is Lady Geith's husband (3:176). This leads to Lady Geith collapsing 'with the blood gurgling from her mouth' (3:177), having, it is to be assumed, burst a blood vessel in true sensational style. While this is the most melodramatic scene in the book, Riddell does not allow the excitement to continue. Mark immediately travels to Fen Court and tells George the truth. Rather than this leading to any rivalry or argument, George says (partly because the spendthrift Mark has already lost the family lands and fortune, and partly because he is at that point struggling with his own secrets) that Mark can keep the title and tells Mark about his own marital problems (3:182). By the end of the novel, George owns Snareham Castle (though Mark keeps the title of baronet), is in business with Mark, and has benefited from 'the aid of capital advanced by Lady Geith' (3:285-6), who lives at the castle with Beryl and George's child.

Whereas the bigamy plotline is used to deliver a controversial message about marriage and divorce, the illegitimacy plotline helps to promote a set of middle-class values associated

with capitalism and self-help which rely, for their depiction, on the juxtaposition of City men and the aristocracy, the City and the countryside, and realism and sensation. In *George Geith*, sensation is most often associated with the idle, pastoral aristocracy.<sup>21</sup> London was an ideal setting for sensation fiction, promising ‘the anonymity on which many sensational plots depended; the city-dweller could be a respectable professional, a bigamist, and a murderer, without these several lives impinging on one another’ (Palmer para. 7) Of course, George Geith is two out of three of these. However, whereas authors such as Braddon used ‘sensational discourse to represent London’ as a place of ‘sensational mystery and danger’ (Palmer para. 1, para. 10), it is noticeable in *George Geith* that the kind of situations that are commonly associated with sensation fiction all arise from outside the city, and from outside the middle and professional classes who live there.

George Geith, with an unknowing claim to a baronetcy and country estate, comes to live under an assumed name with a shameful secret (i.e. he comes from the countryside with sensational potential), but in the City he learns the attractions of hard-work, profit making, and pride in achievement. George comes to represent the self-made man, and develops the ‘uprightness, industry, fortitude, and self-reliance’, but also ‘hardness’ and ‘reticence’ which made him admired, if not liked, by many reviewers (*‘George Geith of Fen Court’* 2).<sup>22</sup> The City is a world of hard-working, ‘real’ people who have to deal with the everyday risks of business. Contrastingly, life in the countryside is idealised – George meets Beryl, and has many moments of rest and happiness there – but also populated by aristocrats who engage in sensational bad behaviour and who fail to see the reality of their own decaying role in the world. Both Mr Molozane and Mark have lost fortunes through poor financial management, but also through a refusal to recognise their position and take action, never really believing that they can lose the social status that has come to them through blood rather than self-help. They also both repeatedly encourage George not to work – Molozane procrastinates and

distracts (1: 271), while Mark offers George the Snareham curacy, regardless of whether he actually does any preaching (1: 125). It is in the countryside that George meets his first wife who cheats on and deserts him, and where she goes undercover to get the opportunity to fake her death and draw George out of hiding;<sup>23</sup> it is also where the plot of the fake heir takes place. The title of the novel cleverly reflects this favouring of business and work over nobility and idleness: Fen Court could be a stately home, when it is actually the location of George's offices in London.<sup>24</sup>

While Riddell renders some of the most common plots of sensation fiction relatively unsensational, and associates sensational bad behaviour with the countryside, one of *George Geith*'s most dramatic scenes is generated within the city and not due to a conventional sensation plotline – George's financial ruin due to a run on a bank.<sup>25</sup> George's sprint 'like a maniac' (3:27) through the streets of London in a vain attempt to 'rescue his all from the ruins' (3:28), his tearing up of a now worthless cheque for ten thousand pounds, and his chapter-ending collapse 'in a heap on the pavement in the midst of the passers-by' (3:32) is just as exhilarating as any of the scenes relating to bigamy and illegitimacy. Here, the excitement may make the novel 'Braddonesque' in tone to some extent, but not in plot, and this is a further way in which Riddell balances sensation and realism.

## Conclusion

Numerous modern critics (myself included before conducting this research) have categorised Riddell as a sensation author or a realist. The presence of (to return to my original list) adultery, bigamy, false identities, forgery, illegitimacy, and fake pregnancy in a single novel seems to clearly indicate sensation fiction, but the story of an accountant falling in love with a client's daughter, accompanied with detailed descriptions of office work, seems clearly aligned with realism. As this article has shown, Riddell is not a sensation novelist, nor a

realist who peppers her work with sensationalism, but an author who skilfully draws on both genres for her own ends. *George Geith* ‘participates’ in the genres of sensationalism and realism, it uses the ‘remarks of belonging’, but ‘such participation never amounts to belonging’ (Derrida 65). The result was that Riddell could use some of the plots, themes, heightened tones and excitement that her readers would recognise (and enjoy) from sensation fiction, but combine these elements in a way that avoided her being classed as a sensation author by Victorian reviewers, who instead often read and respected her as what we would now call a realist author. Without her audience’s knowledge of the conventions of sensation fiction, her treatment of bigamy and illegitimacy could seem underdeveloped or rushed. As it stands it shows her understanding of dominant trends in popular fiction. This article exemplifies one way of revisiting the peak of the ‘sensational sixties’ with a broader concept of what it means for a novel (or novelist) to be sensational, and to use sensationalism, while acknowledging the power and influence of the generic boundaries that were established at that time.

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<sup>1</sup> Braddon, Collins, and Wood are referred to as sensation novelists here because of their reputations in the early 1860s, but these authors were generically diverse. While, for example, 'it cannot be overstated how far Braddon became a byword for sensation' (Beller and MacDonald 145), she also 'worked as an actress, edited a successful magazine, and wrote poetry, plays, penny-dreadfuls, ghost stories, realist novels, and historical fiction' (Cox, 'Introduction' 2).

<sup>2</sup> See Beller ('Fashions of the Current Season' 464), Cox (*Victorian Sensation Fiction* 162), Maunder (24), Showalter (154), Wagner ('Silver-Fork Legacies' 307).

<sup>3</sup> For example see Janice Allan's exploration of 'the role of the realistic *within* the sensational' (99, emphasis in original) and Tamara Wagner on 'the adoption [...] of sensational paradigms in fiction by domestic novelists' ('Stretching "the Sensational Sixties"' 211).

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to the digitisation project Archive.org, the first edition *George Geith* is free to read online: <https://archive.org/details/georgegeithorfe02riddgoog/mode/2up>.

<sup>5</sup> Colella's tone implies a need to justify the in-depth analysis of popular fiction, in fact sophisticated close reading is now common in sensation studies (e.g. Allan's excellent analysis of realist techniques in *The Woman in White* in 'Sensationalism Made Real').

<sup>6</sup> For example, Riddell's city novels have been discussed by Colella and Henry, her supernatural fiction by Melissa Edmundson, Victoria Margree and Andrew Smith, and *A Struggle for Fame* by Margaret Kelleher, Linda H. Peterson and myself.

<sup>7</sup> While I am identifying prominent trends in Victorian literary reviews, it is important to note that some critics did acknowledge that sensation fiction had not emerged as suddenly as it appeared. 'Not a New Sensation' in *All the Year Round*, for example, observed that sensational 'devices were popular years and years ago, and the dramatic "sensation," more or less modified, will always be in favour' (517).

<sup>8</sup> To avoid drawing rigid distinctions between realism and sensation, whilst acknowledging that such distinctions were drawn and recognised by others, it is important to note that in the 1860s Eliot herself was ambivalently drawn towards sensational writing (see Tegan).

<sup>9</sup> This review blames the novel's faults on Riddell's writing too much too quickly, a common charge levelled against sensation authors: 'certainly two novels in twelve months are too much for any author' ('Belles Lettres' 526). When *George Geith* came out Riddell was still relatively unknown and less prolific; the *Morning Post* approvingly noted that she was not a 'hasty and voluminous writer' ('*George Geith of Fen Court*' 2).

<sup>10</sup> Another reminder that the groupings into realist and sensational that have occurred since the 1860s are always subjective, debatable, and political, is George Augustus Sala's claim (in his defence of Braddon against Margaret Oliphant's attack in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*) that both *Adam Bede* and *Jane Eyre* are sensational in their way (52).

<sup>11</sup> Riddell continued to be reviewed as an author who is not a sensation novelist, but who occasionally flirts (unfortunately, in the view of the critics) with sensation. In one otherwise favourable 1867 review, the *Athenaeum* laments the heroine having 'to go through a most unnecessary and overstrained sensation scene, which, like a blaze of red light, swallows up all the gentler interests', and considers the chapter featuring attempted arson and suicide 'a mistake' (Jewsbury, '*Far above Rubies*' 850-1). That the *Saturday Review* accused her in 1873 of attempting to 'imitate George Eliot and Wilkie Collins simultaneously' ('*Home, Sweet Home*' 549) demonstrates the enduring influence of the perceived distinction between realism and sensation.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Srebrnik also notes similarities between Eliot and Riddell, and suggests that one reason that critics failed to praise the latter as highly as the former is because Riddell's choice of sympathetic subject (lower-middle-class people in commerce and trade) was not to the taste of the members of the 'urban gentry' who 'wrote for the periodical press' (72). Notably, in her semi-autobiographical *A Struggle for Fame*, Riddell's heroine produces novels far closer in tone to Eliot than to a sensation novelist (see Ifill, 'Female Professional as Orphan' 137).

<sup>13</sup> In telling of her first meeting with Edward Tinsley, Riddell recalls him shouting '*Here! Bill! [...]* here's *Too Much Alone!*' to his colleague (Ellis 278).

<sup>14</sup> For Tinsley's account of Riddell's move from Skeet to his publishing house, see Tinsley (93-4). As it was shortly after this that she began publishing as Mrs J. H. Riddell, having 'the author of *George Geith*' on the cover of every new work was perhaps more important for her than for Braddon, Collins and Wood with their respective titles, as it offered some continuity.

<sup>15</sup> Ellis is probably drawing the comparison between Lady Geith and Lady Audley because both characters practise deception in order to maintain aristocratic marriages, beyond that, the two have little in common.

<sup>16</sup> The *Athenaeum* was, it should be noted, comparatively kind to Braddon, seeing *Lady Audley's Secret* as having 'some merit as a sensation novel' (Eden, '*Lady Audley's Secret*' 525). The review does not mention bigamy.

<sup>17</sup> For comparison, the next month the same reviewer summarised Braddon's novels as 'defective as works of art', with an unhealthy 'moral tone', 'errors of composition and improbabilities of plot', and 'heroines [...] which disgust one in a novel, and would be utterly revolting in real life' (Dennis, '*Only a Clod*' 511).

<sup>18</sup> Egg's painting can be viewed here: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/egg-past-and-present-no-1-n03278>.

<sup>19</sup> Perceptive readers anticipating the arrival of the first Mrs Geith may be misled when Beryl starts to see 'a certain sadness clouding her husband's face' (3:126) soon after their marriage – it turns out this is because he has burnt himself out with overwork.

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<sup>20</sup> Conveniently, the real situation means that the family legend that ‘no son would ever succeed his father at the castle’ remains true (1:148).

<sup>21</sup> The idle aristocrat is a standard sensation fiction character (see, for example, Ifill, *Creating Character* 101–7).

<sup>22</sup> Though not directly relevant here, it is important to acknowledge that George is a problematic representative of the business classes: his gentlemanly upbringing means that he looks down on ‘the manners and habits of’ (1:225) many of the City folk he meets; he marries Beryl who is from a genteel, if poor, family; and he is not entirely disinterested in his claim to Snareham.

<sup>23</sup> Spatial constraints prevent a full discussion, but it is worth noting that although the first Mrs Geith does some detecting (which is usually briefly reported second-hand), the novel lacks the active detective figure that is a common feature of sensation fiction – a Robert Audley or Walter Hartright. While bigamy and illegitimacy provide similarities with *Lady Audley’s Secret* and the *Woman in White*, in this sense it is closest to *East Lynne*, in which much of the novel is from the perspective of the secret-holder, rather than the detective.

<sup>24</sup> For a further discussion of the City/country contrast in *George Geith*, see Colella (121-2).

<sup>25</sup> Though not a staple of sensation fiction like bigamy or illegitimacy, runs on banks and bank failures were common in Victorian popular fiction, in novels by authors as diverse as Wilkie Collins, Dinah Craik, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Gissing, and Ellen Wood. Many thanks to the members of VICTORIA 19th-Century British Culture & Society for their contributions to this list.