Love, Consent, and the Sexual Script of a Victorian Affair in Dublin

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In January 1841 a pair of young lovers spent the night in the Downshire Hotel in Blessington, about twenty miles southwest of Dublin, Ireland. They slept in separate beds in separate rooms; nevertheless, their behavior flouted conventions. Snow trapped Mary at the hotel because the horse caravan that brought her there could not make the return journey. James, however, had his own horse and could have returned to Dublin. When he suggested that he stay with Mary, "she said no but I insisted & she yielded."[1] James recorded the details of their meeting in his diary, where he also transcribed copies of the letters the pair wrote to one another. They parted ways in the morning, and, as the diary reveals, each had a different understanding of what had happened that night and what it meant. James, bolstered by gossip and a memory of Mary's consent to intimacy in the hotel, would later accuse her of sexual impropriety. Mary's letters reveal her to be shocked and hurt by his rereading of the evening's events and suggest she may have regretted her decision to meet.

The fallout surrounding this one night in 1841 may seem familiar to anyone who has been following the #MeToo movement and the concurrent rise of sexual consent training for teens and adults across schools and university campuses globally. The negotiation of consent was as central to the relationship of Mary and James as it is to many contemporary couples. Yet historians have generally ignored such intimate negotiations, preferring to look at sexuality through the lens of laws and norms on a larger scale. By contrast, sociologists, activists, writers, and even lawmakers have taken individual cases seriously; they have tried to understand the lived experience of

[1] Diary of James Christopher Kenney, 12 January 1841, TCD MS 10800, Manuscripts & Archives Research Library, Trinity College Dublin.

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sexual culture. Historians can make a valuable contribution to contemporary issues of importance if they do the same. This article uses the case of Mary and James, a nineteenth-century couple living in Dublin, to demonstrate the value of sexual scripting theory as a methodological approach to the history of sexuality. Their story shows how we can use this approach to learn much about how individual people have made and continue to make and experience cultural norms, gender, and power dynamics in their daily lives. It is in all the small decisions, like whom we kiss and how and where, that each of us reinforces or resists these norms. In these small decisions we shape our own lives and the lives of those around us.

In this relationship, James initiated and Mary refused. James pushed, Mary relented. When he "begged a keepsake" of Mary, "she refused," James wrote in his diary, "however after some indeed a good deal of pressing I prevailed upon her to give me a tress of her hair."[2] When she left Dublin to become a governess in Carlow, deep in the Irish Midlands, she initially refused to write to or meet James. He was undaunted: "I will coax her into this too."[3] More disturbing for the modern reader are the numerous instances where James persuaded Mary to accept his physical advances, apparently against her wishes: to let him kiss her in the hallway of his grandmother's house or in Mount Jerome Cemetery in Harold's Cross, to sit in his lap at the Monkstown Botanical Gardens, to let him wrap his arms around her waist while they dined at the hotel in Blessington.[4] Yet Mary was not the passive recipient of unwanted attentions. After all, *she* had suggested that James travel from Dublin to spend the afternoon with her in the Downshire Hotel. Mary also actively participated in planning the rendezvous, which had been arranged through secret letters that she and James exchanged using post offices and intermediary addresses to avoid detection.

This journal is premised on the belief that sexuality is historically constructed. Historians and sociologists agree that sexuality not only depends on individual choice or biological drive but also reflects the influence of social, cultural, and even economic systems.[5] As Barbara Rosenwein has argued, however, investigating how sexuality and emotions are intertwined also involves appreciating that contradictory understandings of proper emotional expression or sexual behavior may exist within a single time and place and even within one individual.[6] In this spirit, we also take inspiration from Leonore Davidoff's study of the romance between Arthur J. Munby (a British diarist, writer, and photographer) and Hannah Cullwick (first his

[2] Diary, 9 August 1840.

[3] Diary, 4 September 1840.

[4] Diary, 12 January 1841.

[5] Ellen Ross and Rayna Rapp, "Sex and Society: A Research Note from Social History and Anthropology," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 1 (1981): 51–72, 54.

[6] Barbara H. Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions in History," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 821–45, 821.

servant and later his wife). Davidoff convincingly argued for the importance of "detailed study of one case" to illuminate how ideas of gender, class, and sexuality operate on individuals.[7] Here we explore the issues of power and consent in nineteenth-century love outside of marriage. Studies of sexuality in modern Ireland have focused on illegitimacy, rape, and courtship.[8] In the international literature there is also a focus on the issue of consent in relation to crimes such as rape. We are unaware of studies focused on consent to other forms of intimacy.[9]

Historians such as Peter Stearns and Katie Barclay have argued that romantic love within marriage became a key marker of modern emotional life in the Western world during the eighteenth century and grew in importance over the course of the nineteenth century.[10] The search for love in the form of an appropriate marriage partner was shaped by the modern realities of urbanization and migration.[11] Recent work suggests that sexual intimacy outside of marriage may have been more common among the middle classes than previously thought.[12] Yet we still know comparatively

[7] Leonore Davidoff, "Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 1 (1979): 86.

[8] See, for example, Sean Connolly, "Illegitimacy and Pre-nuptial Pregnancy in Ireland before 1864: The Evidence of Some Catholic Parish Registers," *Irish Economic and Social History* 6, no. 1 (1979): 5–23; Leanne Calvert, "'He Came to Her Bed Pretending Courtship': Sex, Courtship and the Making of Marriage in Ulster, 1750–1844," *Irish Historical Studies* 42, no. 162 (2018): 244–64; and Maria Luddy, *Matters of Deceit: Breach of Promise to Marry Cases in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Limerick* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011).

[9] On rape and the definition of consent, see Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 124–46.

[10] See, for example, Peter N. Stearns, "Modern Patterns in Emotions History," in *Doing Emotions History*, ed. Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 17–40; and Katie Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power: Marriage and Patriarchy in Scotland, 1650–1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 92–94, 112–20.

[11] See, for example, Pamela Epstein's study of matrimonial advertisements: "Advertising for Love: Matrimonial Advertisements and Public Courtship," in Matt and Stearns, *Doing Emotions History*, 121–39.

[12] Much of the evidence focuses on extramarital rather than premarital relationships. See, for example, Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, *Murder and Morality in Victorian Britain: The Story of Madeleine Smith* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Kate Gibson, "'I Am Not on the Footing of Kept Women': Extramarital Love in Eighteenth-Century England," *Cultural & Social History* 16, no. 5 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2019.1642064; Sally Holloway, "'You Know I Am All on Fire': Writing the Adulterous Affair in England, c. 1740–1830," *Historical Research* 89, no. 244 (2016): 317–39; and Katie Barclay, "Illicit Intimacies: The Imagined 'Homes' of Gilbert Innes of Stow and His Mistresses (1751–1832)," *Gender & History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 576–90. Premarital sex and sexual violence are discussed in Anna Clark, "Rape or Seduction? A Controversy over Sexual Violence in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Sexual Dynamics of History: Men's Power, Women's Resistance*, ed. London Feminist History Group (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 13–27; and Katie Barclay, "From Rape to Marriage: Questions of Consent in the Eighteenth-Century United Kingdom," in *Interpreting Sexual Violence: 1660–1800*, ed. Anne Greenfield (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013), 35–44.

little about social boundaries governing intimacy outside of marriage. If James and Mary had been conducting an open courtship, we could anticipate how each might have behaved and what levels of intimacy might have been socially acceptable. By studying a clandestine affair conducted against the wishes of family and friends, we gain new insights into the power dynamics of consent in the nineteenth century.

Sexual Scripts as an Approach to the History of Emotions and Sexuality

In order to make the case that gender and class played key roles in the negotiation of consent for physical intimacy during the nineteenth century, we have chosen to frame this unusual relationship using sexual scripting theory. This methodology was developed in 1969, when sociologists John H. Gagnon and William Simon proposed that sexual scripts, which are highly conditioned by cultural contexts, shape sexual encounters and sexuality more generally. Sexuality, they argued, was more learned behavior than biological drive. Gagnon and Simon proposed that three levels of "scripts" shaped a person's sexual behavior: the cultural scenario, the interpersonal script, and the intrapsychic script. By cultural scenario they meant how cultures teach individuals the norms of sexuality, and they argued that interpersonal scripts are developed through the application of those norms to sexual encounters. Finally, the idea of the intrapsychic script acknowledges that a person's desires, while affected by cultural scenarios and interpersonal scripts, may also deviate from them. To employ sexual scripting theory is therefore to argue that sexuality is shaped by the person themselves, by their direct interactions with others, and by the ideas they absorb from the wider society in which they live.[13]

In this article we argue that sexual scripting theory can help us to analyze the gendered power dynamic of sexuality outside of marriage in nineteenth-century Ireland. Contemporary sociological investigations of sexual scripting have demonstrated a high degree of adherence to traditional gender roles among heterosexual young adults in Western society. While some recent changes linked to wider acceptance of gender equality are evident, the idea that men should make sexual advances and women should refuse them persists to a remarkable degree. Scholars such as Melanie Beres, Jennifer Hirsch, and Shamus Khan argue that such a gendered power dynamic partly explains why problems with sexual violence on college campuses persist despite "consent training."[14] Although Western society in the twenty-first

[13] W. Simon and J. Gagnon, "Psychosexual Development," *Society* 6, no. 5 (1969): 9–17.

[14] For a full explanation of sexual scripting theory, see W. Simon and J. Gagnon, "Sexual Scripts: Permanence and Change," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 15, no. 2 (1986): 97–102. For a more recent exploration, see Melanie A. Beres, "Points of Convergence: Introducing Sexual Scripting Theory to Discourse Approaches to the Study of Sexuality," *Sexuality &*

century tolerates much greater sexual freedom for both men and women than in previous centuries, the contemporary sexual script still demonstrates echoes of how romantic love operated in the nineteenth century: men would give love to women, who would receive it. A woman might even refrain from any avowal of love until she had received a proposal of marriage. Historians have also suggested that romantic love could shore up a man's independence while subordinating a woman's role to the support of her partner. As historian Katie Barclay put it, "The act of loving was patriarchy in practice."[15] We wanted to know how this scripting worked outside of the approved customs of courtship.

What happens when individuals do not follow the cultural rules? As we shall see in the affair of Mary and James, people police themselves even when participating in an affair that deviates from the norm, and family and friends sometimes directly intervene to reassert sexual norms. What is private is still political. When two individuals are seemingly alone and responding to one another they are in fact joined in their moment of intimacy by a swirling mass of ideas, influences, and past encounters that shape their behavior.[16] The affair of Mary and James allows us to watch two historical actors as they struggle to navigate their roles in the sexual script amid a maelstrom of social expectation, family ties, gender norms, economic demands, and individual desires. Mary and James thus give us insight into the ideas and attitudes that make up the cultural world of the Catholic middle classes in prefamine Dublin.[17] Performing a deep reading of their case allows us to gain insight into the dynamics of gender and power and how these operated within a specific slice of Victorian society. Mary and James lived in what Gagnon and Simon would call a "traditional" society where individual behavior usually adhered to the cultural scenario. Nonetheless, they privately struggled to reconcile their desires and interactions with the norms that they accepted. The diary helps us to complicate the motivations of the actors, including Mary, and to see a wider emotional range than might be found in court proceedings or other kinds of texts.[18] As we shall see, it took direct

Culture 18 (2014): 76–88. For an overview of the current debates in the field, see Jennifer S. Hirsch and Shamus Khan, *Sexual Citizens: A Landmark Study of Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020), ix–xxxiv.

[15] Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power*, 91–92, 120.

[16] J. H. Gagnon, "The Explicit and Implicit Use of the Scripting Perspective in Sex Research," *Annual Review of Sex Research* 1 (1990): 1–43. The idea of scripting is still used in twenty-first-century sociological studies of sexuality, for example, Verena Klein, Roland Imhoff, Klaus Michael Reininger, and Peer Briken, "Perceptions of Sexual Script Deviation in Women and Men," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 48, no. 2 (2019): 631–44.

[17] Lindsey Earner-Byrne employed a similar microhistorical approach to understand sexuality and morality in twentieth-century Ireland. See "The Rape of Mary M.: A Microhistory of Sexual Violence and Moral Redemption in 1920s Ireland," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 24, no. 1 (2015): 75–98.

[18] Similar methodologies are employed in Gibson, "Extramarital Love"; Barclay, "Illicit Intimacies"; and Holloway, "Writing the Adulterous Affair."

intervention from family, friends, and even medical professionals to reinstate the actions and attitudes expected within the Victorian sexual script.

The primary source for our investigation is a diary produced by James Christopher Kenney in the early 1840s. The diary is an unusually detailed account of approximately one year of a four-year affair. We also include extracts from a later diary fragment that confirm that the affair continued.[19] Although written by James, the first diary includes ninety-five complete transcriptions of letters from Mary. Over six hundred densely written pages, James explored his own feelings in intimate and often painful detail. The diary provides a rare insight into the mind of a lover accompanied by accounts of the events that James is reacting to. Because he transcribes letters (received from Mary and others) and conversations we can also see how he responds to both words and actions. Acknowledging the limitations and complexities of diaries as sources,[20] we see this particular diary as a valuable source for building up a picture of James's emotional life and, to a lesser extent, the emotional life of Mary. We can surmise that the diary was intended as a secret document because throughout the entries describing the affair James expressed his concern about being caught. He and Mary used post office boxes to exchange letters, and James avoided signing anything that might be used against him in a court of law. Nonetheless, James copied the diary at some stage (we are not certain about when) rather than destroying it. We cannot therefore rule out the possibility that he thought the affair might be material for an autobiography or memoir, although nothing was ever published.[21] The diary is remarkable for the emotional vulnerability that the author reveals in the entries. James recorded his own conflicted feelings about the affair, often reprimanding himself, changing his mind, and circling back. He recorded his immediate reactions to Mary's letters, and he apparently copied the letters themselves into the diary without alteration. Again, these letters were secret documents transmitted through intermediaries or the anonymity of post offices. What we get from this diary, then, is a rare glimpse into the emotional impact of the conflict between individual desires and social expectations. We can watch the politics of gender dynamics and sexuality being played out by our protagonists not just through their actions but also in how they talk about those actions to one another and in how James explains them privately to himself.

The diary allows us to see very clearly how the social, cultural, and familial expectations of the rising Catholic middle classes in prefamine Dublin

[19] We have fragmentary evidence that the affair was ongoing to at least early 1843. Diary of James Christopher Kenney from 1843, TCD MS 11097, Manuscripts & Archives Research Library, Trinity College Dublin.

[20] See, for example, Irina Paperno, "What Can Be Done with Diaries?," *Russian Review* 63, no. 4 (2004): 561–73.

[21] There is only one extant copy of the diary. On the first page, at the bottom James wrote that he compiled various diaries into a single volume "with the idea of making my diary into a book." The diary was annotated by James several years after it was written.

impinged upon the thoughts, feelings, and decisions of two young people in the throes of love. The love affair of Mary and James demonstrates that there was a Victorian sexual script for illicit romance just as there was for standard courtship and that within this script female power remained tied to chastity.[22] Microhistories such as this can contribute to a nuanced history of emotions and courtship embedded in the web of social forces that shape them.[23]

THE CULTURAL WORLD OF MARY AND JAMES

Mary and James were both in their early twenties during the period of the affair that James recorded in his diary, though Mary was close to four years older than James. They had different levels of romantic experience: Mary was James's first serious love interest, while she had had other suitors. They moved in different but intersecting social circles within Dublin's Catholic middle class. Mary, estranged from a bankrupt father, was in danger of falling out of that circle entirely. As the second son of a much richer family with a landed estate, James had a much safer position within his class. Their parents, who had experienced life before Catholic Emancipation and the rise of Catholic politician Daniel O'Connell, must have felt some sense of rising Catholic confidence and visibility in city life.[24] But religion itself had limited influence on many of the social activities of Dublin's better-off citizens. Mary and James discussed literature, attended the theater, sipped tea in parlors, and sang and played piano, like every self-respecting bourgeois Victorian from Brighton to Boston.

James Christopher Fitzgerald Kenney was born on 6 November 1819 to Colonel James Fitzgerald Kenney and Jane Olivia Nugent, who derived their wealth from a 3,540-acre estate in County Galway, although they usually lived in their townhouse in the prestigious Merrion Square

[22] Other authors have argued that women who engaged in such affairs were not always exploited but had their own motivations of love and desire. We do not dispute that; however, most examples have focused on the mistress of a married gentleman. The relationship between Mary and James was quite different because it was between two unmarried young people of marriageable age. On affairs involving married men, see Gibson, "Extramarital Love."

[23] See, for example, Earner-Byrne, "The Rape of Mary M." The possibilities of microhistory for examining gender were established by early modern scholars. See Steven Ozment, *The Burgermeister's Daughter: Scandal in a Sixteenth-Century German Town* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Natalie Z. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

[24] One example is the reform of the Dublin Corporation in 1840, which allowed for the election of Catholic and liberal politicians to the city council. See Stefanie Jones, "Dublin Reformed: The Transformation of the Municipal Governance of a Victorian City, 1840–1860" (PhD diss., Department of Modern History, Trinity College Dublin, 2001), 5–15. Queen Victoria was thought by some to be particularly sympathetic to Catholics. See James H. Murphy, *Abject Loyalty: Nationalism and Monarchy in Ireland during the Reign of Queen Victoria* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), 20–27.

area of Dublin or in rented summer accommodation in the southeastern coastal suburbs. James's father had served in the King's Regiment in the West Indies before retiring as lieutenant colonel. His mother had a more illustrious lineage within the Catholic elite. Jane was the eldest child of William Thomas Nugent, the fifth Baron Riverston, and James's close relations included an uncle who was the future ninth Earl of Westmeath (Anthony Francis Nugent) and a grandmother on his mother's side who was Catherine, Lady Riverston (née Bellew).[25] It is reasonable to speculate that through this Nugent line James probably inherited some relationship baggage. James was a relation of the Marquess of Westmeath, whose 1812 marriage to Emily Cecil—daughter of the Marquess of Salisbury—ended in divorce in 1857 after a very public series of court dates through the 1820s and 1830s. It was one of the most infamous and protracted divorces in Britain and Ireland in the nineteenth century, and the experience doubtless had a significant psychological impact on a family as closely related to the Nugents as the Kenneys were.[26] The family regularly attended mass but, like many wealthy Catholics, they moved in social circles that included Protestants. For example, when James fell from his horse, he visited the surgeon general for Ireland (Philip Crampton, a Protestant) to check for a broken collarbone.[27] In 1840 and 1841, the years tracked in the diary, James attended the Protestant Trinity College Dublin, where he earned a law degree in 1847. He had previously attended Stonyhurst, an English Catholic boarding school favored by Irish elite families.[28] Aside from his legal studies, James spent his time visiting the theater, reading novels, hunting, shopping, and riding the family's horses (NoGo and Flora) around the city.[29] He also attended to his mother, who was gravely ill and often confined to bed. She died in December 1842.[30] James had three siblings: an older brother (William), a younger brother (Thomas), and a younger sister (Julia). As he was not the eldest son, he could not have expected to inherit, which to some extent explains his legal training. The sudden death of his brother William in December 1850, just two years after James

[25] James later compiled and printed his own genealogy. See J. C. Fitzgerald Kenney, Esq., "Liber Geraldinorum Cura Jacobi-Christoper Fitzgerald-Kenney De Kilclogher . . . 2 Merrion Square South Dublin 1858," and a copy of "Pedigree of the Family of Kenney of Kilclogher, (or Kenne-Court,) Co. Galway" (Dublin, 1868), MS 49, 605, National Library of Ireland. Grandmother Riverston (1776–1855) was born Mary Catherine Bellew, of Mount Bellew, in Galway.

[26] See Diane Urquhart, *Irish Divorce: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 48–75 for a full coverage of this troubled, even hateful, marriage.

[27] Diary, 8 March 1840.

[28] See Ciaran O'Neill, *Catholics of Consequence: Transnational Education, Social Mobility, and the Irish Catholic Elite, 1850–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 21–68.

[29] See, for example, the diary entries on hunting (21 February 1840), shopping (17 June 1840), and the theater (17 August 1840).

[30] For biographical information on the Kenneys, see Bernard Burke, "Kenney of Kilclogher," in *Burke's Landed Gentry of Ireland* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1899), 233.

Figure 1. Portrait of James in 1846 (age twenty-seven). Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

had completed his legal training, changed his fortunes. When his father died in 1852, James inherited the entire family estate. He came into his inheritance prior to the transfer of vast tracts of land and political power to the Catholic majority in the decades either side of Independence. Families like the Kenneys were well placed to succeed in the society that emerged from the revolutionary era, and so it proved with James's own second son, also called James, who served as minister for justice in the Irish Free State between 1927 and 1931 (fig. 1).[31]

Mary Louisa McMahon was born in Dublin to Mary (or Margaret) McMahon (née Coughlan) and Hugh McMahon, most likely in 1816.[32] Figure 2 depicts two images of Mary that James produced for his diary. Hugh made a living as a dancing master, and the family lived for some time in rented rooms at 99 St. Stephen's Green, an attractive square of large

[31] Marie Coleman, "James Christopher Fitzgerald-Kenney 1878–1956," in *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[32] Hugh and Margaret McMahon registered the birth of Mary Elizabeth McMahon in 1816. They also registered Arthur McMahon in 1819 and Margaret in 1817, all of which corresponds exactly to the order of Mary's family. See microfilm 09149/02, Catholic Parish Registers, St. Mary's, Dublin City, National Library of Ireland.

Figure 2. Mary as James drew her. Diary, 6 October 1841. Image courtesy of the Board of Trinity College Dublin.

houses slightly less prestigious than Merrion Square, where James lived. She was educated at a respectable but not elite day school for young ladies run by Mrs. Kelly at Frescati House, in Blackrock.[33] By the time Mary entered James's life, her mother had died and her father had remarried. Evidently left to her own financial devices, she was working as a companion to James's grandmother (Lady Riverston). Mary played piano and sang, even giving lessons to James's younger sister. Her own social circle included representatives of various ranks of the middling classes: her sister, Margaret, and Margaret's fiancé, the attorney Mr. Archbold; the nouveau riche Cox family of brewers; and Lizzy Kelly, the daughter of a Grafton Street confectioner. Her brother, Arthur, apparently in the army, made infrequent appearances in her life. During the months covered by the diary Mary took up a governess position in the Brigidine convent in Tullow, County Carlow, and then acted as governess or lady companion for several families, including the O'Briens and the Lennons, who also lived near Tullow.[34]

[33] James notes in his diary on 14 September 1840 that Mary's school was not elite. The school was a classic middle-class day school for young ladies, as described in the local newspapers. See "Frescati House," *Saunder's News Letter*, 6 January 1827.

[34] She was with the O'Briens in the summer of 1840. See the diary entry for 11 August 1840. The convent is mentioned several times, including on 17 September 1840 and in a letter from Mary dated 27 October 1840, where she explains that she is moving on to the Lennon household. On the convent, see Catherine Ann Power, *The Brigidine Sisters in Ireland, America, Australia and New Zealand, 1807–1922* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2018).

Victorian cultural norms for the respectable middle classes set a number of constraints on lovers like Mary and James, which were further affected by gender, status, and the level of family oversight. Social mores dictated that sexual intimacy be confined to marriage, but we know that deviations from this norm were not uncommon.[35] The prevalence of court cases over a "breach of promise to marry," some involving women who had become pregnant, suggests that couples, especially at lower levels of society, found ways to evade supervision.[36] In Ireland there is also some evidence for the idea of a "gentleman's miss," who might receive long-term support and bear children for a man of higher status without marrying him.[37]

Financial resources, social status, and romantic love all played important roles in the negotiation of marriages during the nineteenth century.[38] Men were supposed to pursue women, although women might "capture" a man's attention in carefully controlled ways. Within these boundaries there was considerable flexibility and autonomy for young adults to pursue relationships.

Mary and James each had independence, necessary to the conduct of a secret affair. Mary's father exercised little or no control over her, and she was constrained mostly by her cultural understanding of propriety, her work as a governess, and the loose oversight and expectations of family and friends, several of whom enabled the affair. As a young man, James could move about much more freely. As the middle son, who was not expected to inherit, he may also have had less parental oversight than either his sister or his older brother. Yet he too was constrained, mostly by his own culturally conditioned expectations for his future and occasionally by direct intervention from his family.

Sticking to the Script

The early part of the relationship between Mary and James conformed to a sexual script of male pursuit, female refusal, and eventual consent. The Victorian sexual script for the middle and upper classes assumed that a courtship ended in marriage rather than intercourse. During courtship, the woman's

[35] See, for example, E. H. Hair, "Bridal Pregnancy in Rural England in Early Centuries," *Population Studies* 20, no. 2 (1966): 233–43; and "Bridal Pregnancy in Rural England Further Examined," *Population Studies* 24, no. 1 (1970): 59–70. For cases in Ireland, see Connolly, "Illegitimacy." Carolyn Steedman has also demonstrated some degree of sexual permissiveness at all social levels in Nottinghamshire. See *An Everyday Life of the English Working Class: Work, Self, and Sociability in the Early Nineteenth-Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[36] Luddy, *Matters of Deceit*. See also Elaine Farrell, *"A Most Diabolical Deed": Infanticide and Irish Society, 1850–1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 27–28, 249–50.

[37] Dympna McLoughlin, "Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Ireland," *Irish Journal of Psychology* 15, nos. 2 and 3 (1994): 266–75.

[38] See Stearns, "Modern Patterns," 25–26; and Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power*, 70.

decision to refuse or consent to attentions depended upon complex factors and reflected the high value placed on female chastity. As the authors of a recent psychological study of "sexual economics" put it, "sex is a female resource" to be given in exchange for goods of more or less value depending on the "local going rate" as determined by cultural norms.[39] In Victorian culture, the focus was less on sex as a resource and more on the power of maintaining chastity. Refusing advances allowed women to maintain the high value of their chastity. Even walking alone in the evening or frequenting the wrong streets might be read by others as an implicit acceptance or even solicitation of male advances.[40] When Mary refused a kiss from James she told him that "what was easily got men did not value."[41] In this phase of the relationship, Mary held considerable power, although that power was arguably reactive. Both Mary and James depended upon Mary to keep the budding relationship within socially appropriate boundaries. She was expected to refuse James's advances and to keep his desires in check. As long as she did this and as long as James did not press for more intimacy than an embrace, neither partner risked very much.

James met Mary for the first time on 2 July 1840 when visiting his grandmother at her home on Mount Street in Dublin.[42] Lady Riverston had hired Mary as her companion. James first noticed Mary because of her physical attractions. She was around twenty-four years old and acknowledged as a beauty by her employer, who wished that she looked older and suggested that Mary wear a cap to disguise her youth.[43]

James made a calculated effort to attract Mary's attention. He began spending a lot of time in Lady Riverston's house and found ways to talk to Mary on her own. In the leadup to their first kiss he recorded increasingly lengthy encounters with Mary at his grandmother's house, from the "tete à tete" on 12 July, to a "kind of quarrel" on 18 July, to bestowing her with a prize poem he had written on 20 July. By 26 July all pretense of visiting Lady Riverston had been dropped: James arrived at his grandmother's "after I knew she was gone in the carriage with Julia & succeeded in seeing Miss McMahon." He tried to impress her with witty conversation, poetry, odes, and singing. He later dissected these encounters in his diary, searching for signs of Mary's affection for him. He noted when she praised his intellectual endeavors (21 and 23 July) and lamented that "she has never betrayed

[39] Roy F. Baumeister and Kathleen D. Vohs, "Sexual Economics: Sex as Female Resource for Social Exchange in Heterosexual Interactions," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 8, no. 4 (2004): 340.

[40] Katie Barclay, "Mapping the Spaces of Seduction: Morality, Gender and the City in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain," in *Routledge Handbook of Gender and the Urban Experience*, ed. Deborah Simonton (London: Routledge, 2017), 103–15. Despite the title, this chapter examines a case in Dublin.

[41] Diary, 19 September 1840.

[42] Diary, 7 September 1840.

[43] Diary, 7 September 1840.

pleasure at seeing me" (23 July). He sulked along the Royal Canal when the meeting on 26 July did not go well and then spent pages of his diary obsessively reviewing all their interactions, concluding, "I think she likes me."

The lover faced his first obstacle soon after. On 27 July Grandma Riverston dismissed Mary because she was "endeavouring to fascinate 'a young gentleman'" or perhaps because, according to James's sister, "she wore gowns too low."[44] James now had plausible confirmation of Mary's interest.

The first kiss that Mary and James exchanged shows each playing their role exactly as expected. A pattern was set for future physical encounters in which James would initiate and Mary would at first refuse but then, perhaps, submit.

> I seized the moment for going when I heard ~~her~~ ^Miss McMahon^ go into the parlour. On hearing me run down ^stairs^ she came to the back parlour door to bid me good bye. She gave me her hand but I gently pushed her into the room so that no one cd see & clasped her to my bosom. "Go off with yourself" she said, but she scarce if at all resisted & I kissed her neck & then her cheek & then bending still more forward for she timidly turned away her head, ~~pressed~~ imprinted upon the dear lips I have so often pressed in my dreams, the first kiss of my love. It was half returned at least it was permitted & years may roll away before so perfect a moment of happiness shall again be mine.[45]

A contemporary reader of this passage might consider whether James has recorded a sexual assault upon Mary. Such a reading would oversimplify the complexities of this interaction and the degree to which Mary and James's actions were shaped by the Victorian sexual script. We must consider that James understood that his role was to pursue, while Mary's role, regardless of how she felt about James, was to resist.

Historians studying courtship and intimacy have debated how much agency people like Mary actually had, given the gendered social constraints acting upon them. Feminist scholars have long argued that the shift from kin-negotiated, companionate, and pragmatic marriage patterns in the early modern period to individuated choices dependent on ideas of romantic love and attraction in the modern period did not lead to an increase in female power and equality in relationships.[46] Katie Barclay has recently argued that in some senses romantic courtship further silenced women by emphasizing that their emotions were to be held by men, while their marriages were to be negotiated by their families. Viewed from this perspective, romantic love is not about two equals agreeing to spend a life together but rather

[44] All dates in the paragraph are from the diary in 1840.

[45] Diary, 9 August 1840. We have tried to replicate the text as exactly as possible. James used carets when he inserted a word in the space above a sentence.

[46] On companionate marriage, see Thalia Schafer, *Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–40.

represents one more aspect of patriarchal society that can be weaponized by men against women.[47] Gillian Brown has argued that, far from being a contradiction in terms, female consent "epitomizes individual subjection in a liberal society."[48] Furthermore, because consent presupposes subjection, and to "give consent" is in some senses to accede to domination, feminist theorists have expressed doubts about consent being seen as a marker of equality. In other words, consent is an acknowledgment of one's subjection, of having lost a game that was rigged against you. It is not difficult to see James and Mary's courtship in this light.

We do not have Mary's diary, so we must try to interpret her actions on the basis of the letters included in James's diary and his perceptions of her behavior. Mary had at least one form of agency available to her: she could avoid contact with James. Acknowledging the limitations of using James's diary to uncover Mary's intentions, we do have some evidence that Mary encouraged the pursuit and assumed her role in the sexual script that was playing out. She sought or at least did not avoid James's company: she asked after him (16 July), accompanied him at the piano while he sang love songs (18 July), praised his poetry (21 July), and did not flee from him when he found her alone in the house without Lady Riverston (26 July).[49] Of course, James may well have interpreted Mary's behavior to suit his own desires. However, Mary had successfully repulsed the attentions of other men. She revealed in September that James's married uncle Anthony Nugent had arrived at Mount Street when Mary was alone (much as James had done). He had "put his arm on her chair ^& on her moving it away^ ~~& next~~ round her waist endeavouring to kiss her. She started from him and flung her book at his head wh it struck asking him how he dared to insult her." After that Mary avoided Anthony if possible, telling James that she refused to shake his hand.[50]

Mary had also refused at least two suitors who had sought her hand in marriage: a lawyer named Mulhall and a "gentleman from the North of large property" called William Coulter. James believed that Mr. Mulhall, who had been "an intimate friend" of her family and a former next-door neighbor, had discovered her interest in James and ceased his pursuit.[51] Mary's family and friends applied pressure for her to marry Coulter, viewing him as a good match because of his fortune. Mary told James that they were "worrying her to marry him & accusing her of treating him ill" because she refused. James also urged Mary to accept Coulter.[52]

[47] Barclay, *Love, Intimacy and Power*, 95. See also Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

[48] Gillian Brown, "Consent, Coquetry, and Consequences," *American Literary History* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 625–52, 627.

[49] All from the diary for 1840.

[50] Diary, 11 August 1840.

[51] Diary, 15 September 1840.

[52] Diary, 21 September 1840.

Mary and James shared an idea of the Victorian sexual script that directed their behavior and set its boundaries. The Anglophone cultural world of the middle and upper classes of the 1840s placed a high value on marriages initiated with romantic love in which the man pursued and the woman was captured. Passion could develop quickly, but while the man's passion often derived from the woman's physical appearance, the woman's passion was presupposed to have derived at least as much from the man's intellectual prowess and social standing. The speed with which James formed an attachment was not unusual: love at first sight had become a trope of masculine romantic experience by the 1840s.[53] The feminine and masculine roles in the Victorian sexual script were clear. James's role was to win Mary over, to persuade her to consent to his affections, and to draw from her a confession of her affections for him. For a man, the pursuit of affection did not necessarily need to lead to marriage. A woman could also flirt (some) without censure but had to be careful to avoid becoming known as a "coquette," which would damage her marriage prospects.[54] Neither would it do for a woman to fail to show any interest in male attentions and be deemed "cold." Handshakes, kisses, and time spent without chaperones appeared to be well within the realm of expected behavior for people of marriageable age in mid-nineteenth-century Dublin.[55]

Yet even within a shared sexual script, negotiation of consent was tricky when Mary's role was to refuse and James's role was to insist. Here is where the idea of the interpersonal script is useful. James had to use his understanding of cultural norms around courtship to try to understand Mary's behavior. The idea that a woman's body or eyes would betray an intention different from her speech was well established in the English-speaking world by the nineteenth century.[56] James was evidently puzzled about how to reconcile Mary's words and actions. When he shook her hand he felt her "very perceptibly returning my pressure."[57] She did not speak words of affection, but her eyes "returned my gaze with a fondness & intensity."[58] She "hurried away" after he kissed her hand, but he saw her then kiss the same hand "as if to transfer the embrace to her lips." And when he sought to kiss her, she of course showed a variety of signs of resistance, including telling him to go away, physically resisting his pressure, and turning her

[53] Christopher Matthews, "Love at First Sight: The Velocity of Victorian Sexuality," *Victorian Studies* 46, no. 3 (2004): 425–54.

[54] Margaret Fuller Ossoli, an American journalist and women's rights activist, outlined a roughly contemporary account of the implications of coquetry in her treatise on the nineteenth-century woman, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Boston: J. Jewett, 1855), 62–65.

[55] Maeve O'Riordan, "Elite Courtship: The Case of Mabel Smyly and Dermod O'Brien, 1901–2," in *Sexual Politics in Modern Ireland*, ed. Jennifer Redmond, Sonja Tiernan, Sandra McAvoy, and Mary McAuliffe (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2015), 36–52.

[56] Brown, "Consent, Coquetry, and Consequences," 629.

[57] Diary, 26 July 1840.

[58] Diary, 5 August 1840.

head to avoid the kiss. However, James concluded that because the kiss was "half returned at least it was permitted."[59]

James did not quite accept the dichotomy between a woman's words and actions: he longed for Mary to confess that she loved him. When she did not, he worried that all her fondness for him was only flirtation. The appearance of a rival gentleman who caused her to be "blushing even down her neck" made James think: "This accounts for her not saying the words I wanted. She does not love me."[60] He fretted constantly about whether Mary had returned his kisses and beseeched her to voluntarily give him a kiss. Throughout their clandestine meetings in early September 1840, James sought greater and greater physical intimacy. One day he felt that she had finally returned his kiss, and he further garnered "two long enrapturing kisses."[61] He even recorded that Mary had voluntarily kissed him, but two days later she denied having done such a thing.[62]

Mary and James had individual desires (what Gagnon and Simon called the "intrapsychic script"), but these were strongly affected by their different social and economic circumstances. Although both Mary and James could be considered middle class, they were not from the same part of that middle. James's family were minor gentry, and money was never a problem for them. James boasted to his diary of the price of his clothes and the cost of renting the family's summer quarters in Blackrock.[63] Mary, by contrast, worked for a living, and her father was likely bankrupt.[64] The early Victorian cultural world allowed for love and marriage between two people whose economic status and social capital did not closely align, but such marriages were rare. Adhering closely to traditional cultural norms, James did not consider Mary as a potential wife. Though well educated, her prospects were poor, and her family's income was precarious. He revealed to his diary a complicated mixture of class snobbery and romantic ideals all at once:

> And why sd I not love her! What tho she is only a dancing master's daughter her soul bears the impress of natures own aristocracy & why sd the fictitious barriers of society & custom prevent my bestowing my love ~~where~~ on one deserving of the love of one far more perfect than me. Shd I blush to own to myself that I love her no. True I wd not marry her but were she of high rank even without fortune I wd then unite her in marriage to myself & as I never wd be tempted into marriage either by rank of fortune or beauty alone or altogether, it is

[59] Diary, 9 August 1840.
[60] Diary, 10 August 1840.
[61] Diary, 8 September 1840.
[62] Diary, 10 September 1840.
[63] See, for example, diary, 2 March 1840, when he had £7 5s. 11d. in his pocket on his return from Galway.
[64] See "Insolvent Debtors," *Dublin Weekly Register*, 4 July 1840.

> evident I love her, For were she of rank I wd wed her & I never wd wed rank or anything without love.[65]

James recapitulated what had become the ideal of Victorian love in marriage: both status and attraction. Mary met the qualifications for being loved, and James was willing to overlook social disapproval to love her. He was willing to resist "the fictitious barriers of society & custom," and he felt that her economic status was outweighed by her physical, intellectual, and moral qualities. But despite pushing against these barriers, he would not break them: marriage to Mary was out of the question. James could not marry someone who was "only a dancing master's daughter." He sought only a romance in which Mary would confess her love for him and he could enjoy physical intimacy with an attractive woman.

Mary's actions suggest that she held or hoped for a more flexible interpretation of social values. The fiction and history of this era testify to the possibility that a lower-class woman "with the impress of nature's own aristocracy" might be rescued by marriage to an upper-class man.[66] Mary and James even discussed a recent novel, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Ernest Maltravers* (1837), in which a young lady is rescued from poverty by a chance encounter with a wealthy young man.[67] Female beauty was a significant commodity in this unequal exchange. James felt keenly his own "want of beauty" even while celebrating Mary's, who had told him that she loved him "not from my appearance, but from my character."[68] Mary's refusal of other suitors suggested that she too sought a combination of status *and* attraction. She told James that she refused the advances of the wealthy William Coulter because she "never liked him." Yet her economic status made her vulnerable, and she admitted that if she had not met James "she might have been worried into a marriage . . . by the persecutions of her relatives."[69]

Without the prospect of marriage, there was no socially acceptable consummation of the romance for Mary, and she was not unaware of the risks she might be taking. She told James that a friend had warned her that "if he cared for a girl he wd not ask her to walk with him & put her name in peoples mouths."[70] She retreated to the convent in Tullow not only to seek employment but also to allow talk of their romance to subside.[71] Despite her limited social capital, she had plenty of suitors and appeared determined

[65] Diary, 5 August 1840. James's own later annotation of this passage reads: "I have more of the heart after all than I have written above but I was not altogether in love *then*. JCK. Nov 18. 1842."

[66] See Davidoff, "Class and Gender," 111.

[67] Diary, 22 July 1841. The eponymous character discovers the young lady when he is allowed to shelter in her house, caught in a storm on his journey.

[68] Diary, 10 September 1840.

[69] Diary, 21 September 1840.

[70] Diary, 20 September 1840.

[71] Diary, 18 September 1840.

to make her own choices. She knew that she would suffer total disgrace if the details of her courtship became common knowledge, but she also knew that the courtship would damage James. If James *did* marry her, she stood to gain a great deal of financial stability, social respectability, and upward social mobility. By contrast, James stood only to lose, in both material and social terms, a fact to which he repeatedly alluded in his diary. The match would be disapproved of by everybody in his family and his social circle, since no fortune compensated for Mary's low rank. This is why he declared so often that he "never could marry" Mary.[72] Yet James had the freedom to pursue Mary as long as he did not make promises of marriage or, as his father would later say, "compromise his honour" in any way. He later confessed to his diary that "I never signed my letters lest she might bring them up to me in a law suit."[73] This was unattractive calculation on his part and very far from the high-flown romantic rhetoric he exhibited elsewhere when talking of his love for Mary.

Yet Mary and James's blossoming relationship did challenge Victorian norms both through the secrecy maintained and the autonomy enjoyed by the two lovers in Dublin. This was not, of course, exactly aligned with the freedoms enjoyed by lovers elsewhere. Ellen Rothman has argued that it was not at all atypical for middle-class courting couples in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New England to be granted a great deal of time free of parental supervision.[74] By contrast, Martyn Lyons's study of personal correspondence between couples in France in this period shows us that little evidence of clandestine correspondence between couples survives and that most letters sent between couples presupposed that third parties would have access to them.[75] James and Mary, however, roamed the city with comparative ease, selecting strategic locations for their meetings and securing a surprising amount of time alone together. Historians such as Maria Luddy have typically argued that less freedom and autonomy were afforded to bourgeois and elite couples in Britain and Ireland than was the case elsewhere, but for the most part research has been limited by the available sources and has therefore focused on extreme cases arising from breaches of law relating to sex and marriage proposals.[76] Dynamics of consent within relationships continue to be poorly understood, as are all intimate negotiations between individuals, whether historical or contemporary.

Mary and James's early relationship shows that considerable freedom was available to couples who were willing to practice even a small amount

[72] Diary, 18 March 1841. See also, for example, 5 August 1840 and 18 September 1840.

[73] Diary, 10 December 1840.

[74] Ellen K. Rothman, "Sex and Self-Control: Middle-Class Courtship in America, 1770–1870," *Journal of Social History* 15, no. 3, special issue on the history of love (Spring 1982): 409–25.

[75] Martyn Lyons, "Love Letters and Writing Practices: On Ecritures Intimes in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Family History* 24, no. 2 (1999): 232–39.

[76] Luddy, *Matters of Deceit*, 22–26.

of deception. Although Grandma Riverston tried to protect James from what she viewed as Mary's pursuit of *him*, no one attempted to restrict his movements. Nor did Mary have trouble moving about the city without supervision. She appears to have been regularly left alone in Grandma Riverston's house, and, as we shall see, she frequently traveled through the city and even between towns without an escort. Taking trains, walking, or traveling alone by coach appears to have been acceptable for young middle-class women to do unaccompanied in the city, as we know from other studies of women at this time.[77] Such freedom carried both risks and rewards.

Departing from the Script

The authors of a recent study of differences between male and female perceptions of deviations from the sexual script note that the sexual script is "characterized by a gendered power inequality" that favors men. That is, women are more likely to face consequences when they deviate from the script.[78] The affair of Mary and James suggests that this was also true in the Victorian era. Mary might have had control over her own actions, but she could not control how others, including James, perceived her. The lovers negotiated a secret meeting at a hotel, the fallout of which was significant for James but even more devastating for Mary. A departure from the script occurred once through the actions of James and Mary and was reinforced and made public through subsequent slander and rumor. James and Mary were far from alone in their secret affair, and a series of intimate outsiders began to shape Mary and James's script through innuendo. The prevailing dynamics of class and gender meant that the fallout of the Blessington affair was unequal: the suspicion surrounding Mary, especially James's suspicion of her, appeared to derive at least in part from the presumption that she had something to gain from the relationship with James and little (in terms of social status) to lose.

James and Mary met at a hotel in Blessington at her suggestion, and they then stayed overnight at that hotel. In terms of the typical sexual script in 1841 this begs many questions, especially why Mary might have risked her reputation in this way. The obvious answer is that she was a forlorn and lonely lover seeking to maintain the nascent relationship. In the months since she and James had met, the correspondence had lapsed into repetition, manufactured argument, and performance. Mary implored James for news of his life and routines, while she insisted that she could never have any news of her own to relate, since she was marooned in rural County Carlow.

[77] Barclay, "Mapping the Spaces," 113.

[78] Verena Klein, Roland Imhoff, Klaus Michael Reininger, and Peer Briken, "Perceptions of Sexual Script Deviation in Women and Men," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 48, no. 2 (2018): 1–14.

Mary's solution was the apparently casual suggestion that she and James should steal an afternoon together at what was effectively a point halfway between James's home and Aghade House, near Tullow in County Carlow, where Mary had been residing as a live-in employee of the Lennon family since late October 1840.[79] She had left the Brigidine nuns in Tullow by then, and thus to meet her lover she needed only to deceive her employers and her brother, Arthur.

> My Brother will be returning on Monday or Tuesday week, I have been thinking of going as far as Blessington with him to *that* no one can object. The caravan stops at the hotel there for fresh horses at 10 o'clock and again on its return to Tullow at 5 in the evening. My reasons for thinking of such a thing was that I might induce you to ride out to see me. I know it is a long ride, 11 or 12 miles, but then you would go nearly as far to a hunt and you once rode from Stradbroke to Tallaght for me.[80]

James responded, somewhat ungallantly, that the distance to Blessington was in fact much longer than she estimated but that he would certainly be able to meet her there.[81]

Had the meeting conformed entirely to Mary's vision, it might have served as a fillip to their flagging relationship. The fact that they breakfasted with each other unchaperoned at Charles Kilbee's Downshire Hotel in Blessington, however, meant that they were much more exposed to reputational damage.[82]

The fallout was immediate for James. Upon returning to the family home from his unplanned and unexplained overnight absence, James was met by his sister, Julia, who told him that his father, who was often out of the house, was home. This was bad luck indeed, and just before James arrived, his father, enraged that his son seemed to be missing without explanation, had ordered that James's bedroom door be broken open. There followed a controlled confrontation:

> I went to Mama and afterwards Papa came into my room saying he should look over my correspondence. I followed mechanically too

[79] Mary had written that she would leave the convent at Tullow on 27 October 1840 to care for Mrs. Lennon, who appears to have been ill. This would be Mary's principal residence from this point onward in the diary. Mrs. Lennon was likely the wife of Michael Lennon, with a house on forty-three acres in Aghade in the late 1820s.

[80] Mary wrote her letter at Aghade, and James transcribed it into his diary for 31 December 1840.

[81] He knew this partly because he had already ridden his horse, NoGo, to Ballybawn several months previously in order to check that the Blessington and Ballybawn caravan corresponded to Mary's description of it in a letter. Diary, 26 October 1840.

[82] James Fraser describes this "excellent" hotel in his 1844 travel guide to Ireland. It was operated by Charles Kilbee. James Fraser, *A Hand Book for Travellers in Ireland* (Dublin: William Curry and Co., 1844), 128.

> much overpowered with sorrow and despair to make any opposition by words. On coming to my table on which lay the embossed portfolio I bought from John R- at Stonyhurst he opened it and took out the letter I received yesterday saying he had not before touched it. I entreated him not to read it. "Where I have been I will go no more" I said in reply to his observation "this is a female hand, who is the writer, where have you been." He spoke for some minutes saying that it was his duty to look over the connexions of his children but I was too sad to remember long his words. "I trust you have not bound yourself" he said, and I interrupted him eagerly "no no, I am open as the winds." He said he hoped I had not compromised my honor or that of the family and I said no.[83]

There are several ways to read this passage. It could be read as the intervention of a well-meaning and concerned parent. In one sense it is a simple reestablishment of patriarchal order. The connection is exposed, honor is satisfied, and there is no question as to who might be the alpha male in the room. What complicates this reading is a slander by James's father that immediately followed, when he revealed that he knew of James's interest in Mary, or that "W-," as he called her.[84] He told James that a man he had met told him he had "married" Mary several times, hinting, one supposes, that her sexual conduct was the subject of open conversation and thus implying that she was very much unsuitable for James. James had recorded a similar accusation made in calmer circumstances a month earlier, in mid-December, by his sister, Julia, an early enabler of the relationship. She had relayed to James the details of a conversation between their father and Grandma Riverston about an unnamed officer who had told their father "about [the officer] 'knowing Mary as well as he could know any woman.'"[85]

When confronted again with this rumor in January, James sat down with Julia and their brother Tom, and Julia told them both that Mary had attributed the various rumors about her to the malign intentions of her antagonistic stepmother.[86] With the Kenney family closing in around him, James demonstrated remarkable internal resolve when he pledged to himself in the diary that he would not break the connection with Mary.[87] Mary's reputation, however, seemed irrevocably tarnished in the Kenney family, and it is easy to surmise that the relationship was all but untenable as a result of the altercation between James and his father after Blessington.

In contrast to James's confrontation with his father, Mary experienced no adverse reactions to her extended absence from the Lennon house

[83] Diary, 13 January 1841.

[84] Either James or his father or both refused to use the full word, but "whore" would be a logical guess, given the accusations leveled at Mary.

[85] Diary, 10 December 1840.

[86] Diary, 16 January 1841.

[87] Diary, 13 January 1841.

back in Aghade. Mrs. Lennon commented on how fatigued she seemed, but no other aspersions were cast on her absence. Her explanation was accepted. James's letter to Mary on 14 January, however, reiterated the various accusations made by his father. She reacted with defensive dismay, throwing herself on his mercy, appealing to his honor, and invoking the standard Victorian script of a "wronged" woman in need of rescue. James seemed to accept her explanations, siding with her against his father, but he still wanted proof of her innocence. The script was thus partially reestablished: James became not only her defender but also her investigator. With this dynamic, the relationship entered into a phase of intense correspondence surrounding Mary's virtue and character, or the extent of what Deborah Anna Logan would call the "fallenness of a woman in her position."[88]

In many pages of his diary, James reflected on Mary's character and on his own. He sought to discover whether he had really loved her and thus been a fool, or if he had mistaken some other emotion for love. He relived the incident in Blessington and other interactions and constantly debated and reinterpreted Mary's behavior in the diary. She had, according to his own previous accounts, followed the Victorian sexual script and refused James's advances. Yet as James reviewed the night in the hotel in light of his father's accusations, he concluded that "tho she wd not give me leave to put my hand in her bosom . . . I felt she *wd* have let me do *anything* & *all* but there is no proof."[89] In other words, he now reversed the sexual script and claimed that *he* had restrained himself despite Mary's apparent permission for further sexual intimacy. He now assumed Mary's permission and consent despite the evidence of her verbal and physical cues (recorded in his own diary immediately after the events) that she had tried to repulse his sexual advances.

While James prevaricated on the issue of her guilt, Mary was busy taking steps to restore her own honor in the Midlands. Demonstrating precisely how vulnerable it made Mary to conduct a relationship outside the bounds of the Victorian sexual script, she sought the testimony of two doctors to verify her virtue.[90] Acting only days after she first learned of the accusations that had compromised her reputation, Mary told James that the doctors could provide James with proof of her "condition." In his fevered letters to her following the Blessington meeting, James had evidently noted an increase in Mary's size since they had last seen each other some months previous. This not only was a failure of tact and civility but also for the first time indicated to Mary that James suspected her of unladylike conduct. Her response was swift and worth quoting at length:

[88] Deborah Anna Logan, *Fallenness in Victorian Women's Writing: Marry, Stitch, Die, or Do Worse* (St. Louis: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 2–9.

[89] Diary, 19 January 1841.

[90] Diary, 23 January 1841.

> You have accused me of every species of infamy. It was not enough that you charged me with having been the "victim of seduction" you also charged me with having had a liaison with Mr Coulter, & oh merciful God with what you have charged me regarding yourself? With attempting to *seduce you* & with attempting to make *you* a cloak for my infamy. James, I send you your two letters. Read them. Read them carefully. You have made accusations, barbarous and infamous accusations. . . . Still still I love you, madly love you. . . . You will discover you have wronged me . . . for your suspicions as to the cause of my increase in size I can thank God (no matter at what sacrifice of feeling) remove them. I will (under any circumstances) I owe it to myself, to my family—submit to undergo the most strict, the most minute, *personal* examination.[91]

James wrote back and dismissed the need for any such examination. He even told Mary that "to the examination you propose *my* consent will *never* be given."[92] He then reflected in his diary that he really ought to have believed her in the first place.

Nevertheless, she sought out and obtained such an examination from not just one but *two* local physicians. The examination of Drs. Thomas Burnett and Jonathan Payne carried echoes of the near-contemporaneous Flora Hastings affair in Queen Victoria's inner circle. In 1839, almost exactly a year before James and Mary met in Blessington, Lady Flora Hastings was accused of becoming pregnant by John Conroy, comptroller to the royal household of the young queen. Hastings was exonerated of the affair and the pregnancy, but only after consenting to physical examination by the royal physicians. The scandal was widely known across Britain and Ireland.[93] The doctors who examined Mary were certainly less famous than those who examined Flora Hastings. Jonathan Payne was a Quaker based in nearby Tullow, while Thomas Burnett operated out of the Tullow Dispensary and the Fever Hospital.[94] It is reasonable to assume that Mary's request for an examination of this nature was a highly unusual one in Tullow in 1840. Just days after James's letter, on 23 January, he received a letter signed by both practitioners the previous day (see fig. 3), certifying that Mary was not in fact pregnant or, as the letter coyly labeled it, "enceinte."

[91] Diary, 19 January 1841.

[92] Diary, 19 January 1841.

[93] For a fuller discussion of the Flora Hastings affair, see Kathryn Hughes, *Victorians Undone: Tales of the Flesh in the Age of Decorum* (London: Fourth Estate, 2017), 1–70.

[94] Diary, 21 August 1875. Burnet is noted in Medical News, *The Lancet* 106, no. 2,712, 297. Jonathan Payne had been licensed as an apothecary in Dublin in 1828 but also operated out of Tullow. See *Return of Persons Examined and Certified as Qualified by Apothecaries' Hall in Dublin, and Number of Prosecutions*, 1791–1829, HC 235 (1829) Sessional Papers 22, London, 1829, 491.

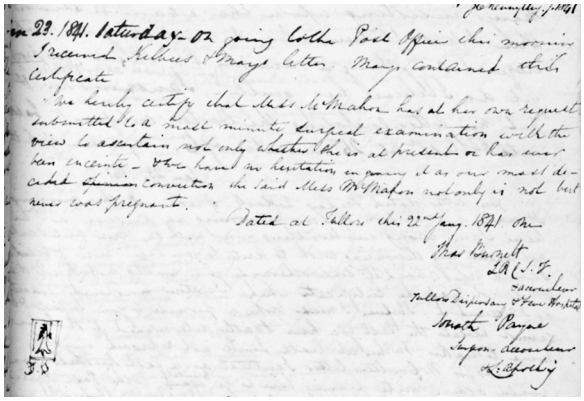

Figure 3. James's transcription of the doctors' certificate. Diary, 23 January 1841. Image courtesy of the Board of Trinity College Dublin.

Yet this remarkable private correspondence did not immediately convince James of Mary's innocence. In fact, it reversed his charitable mood and repulsed him: "The certificate says she never was pregnant, but it does not say that she is a virgin. I don't like Mary's insisting on the examination when I said I believed her. A modest girl would seize at anything to avoid it."[95] In an era with no reliable pregnancy tests, the correspondence depended to some degree on the doctors' reckoning of whether or not Mary had experienced "quickening" (movement of the fetus).[96] Virginity testing, controversial at just about any point in time and in most societies, was a particular fixation of the late 1830s and early 1840s in England and France.[97] That this discourse was widespread at the time may even have encouraged Mary's decision to seek proof of her innocence. For a vulnerable and financially precarious young person like Mary, suspicion of premarital pregnancy would have spelled the end of her hopes for a respectable marriage.

The various unreliable studies we have on premarital pregnancy in the first half of the nineteenth century tell us that pregnancy outside the strict confines of a marriage contract was quite common among low-earning and rural populations.[98] For bourgeois or elite women, however, such open flouting of

[95] Diary, 23 January 1841.

[96] Lisa Forman Cody, *Birthing the Nation: Sex, Science and the Conception of Eighteenth-Century Britons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 32.

[97] Hanne Blank, *Virgin: The Untouched History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 58–62.

[98] The foundational studies of pregnancy in early modern rural England are by E. H. Hair, "Bridal Pregnancy in Rural England in Earlier Centuries," *Population Studies* 20, no. 2 (1966): 233–43; and Hair, "Bridal Pregnancy in Earlier Rural England Further Examined," *Population Studies* 24, no. 1 (1970): 59–70. For Ireland, see Connolly, "Illegitimacy."

respectability was a scandal.[99] Mary's letter to James accompanying the doctors' note was hurried and emotional, declaring not only her love for him but also the extent to which she was suffering. His response was accusatory, defensive, and emotionally tone deaf, but somehow the relationship limped on.[100]

On 28 January James received Mary's second "proof." Mary enclosed with her own letter a letter from her rejected suitor William Coulter. Mary had evidently not told Coulter exactly whom he was addressing, but Coulter confirmed that "with *you* I *never* took the least liberty" and wrote in support of Mary's honor.[101] James scrutinized the letters, envelopes, and postmarks for signs of a ruse against him. He discovered some small inconsistency between Coulter's avowal that he kissed Mary's hand and Mary's own account and concluded that "Mr Coulter has lied." James claimed to take little comfort from either the medical examination or Coulter's letter.

Mary's extraordinary efforts to prove her chastity and to reassert the narrative of the night in Blessington as one in which she never waivered from preserving that chastity suggest the vulnerability of a woman without a father to defend her. Breach of promise to marry cases and cases claiming sexual violence were usually launched by fathers on behalf of their daughters. While Mary mentioned the implied insult to her family, she had to find alternative patriarchal figures to defend her. She reached for the established figure of the landed gentleman (in the form of her disappointed suitor) and the rising authority of the medical doctor.

THE END OF THE AFFAIR

The fallout of the meeting in Blessington was significant: James's father had been made aware of the affair, and he had forbidden his son to continue seeing Mary. But James did not give her up. Although Mary had risked more than James, he too had deviated from the Victorian sexual script. His views of Mary were shaken by his father's revelations, but they recovered (at least in part) in the weeks following. The need for secrecy deepened, and any pretense that James pursued an honorable courtship leading to marriage disappeared.

The escapade in Blessington continued to vex the lovers for some months afterward and drove James to constantly question Mary. In mid-March 1841 one of her letters reveals this dynamic in his letters. "You have asked me to tell you what I would have said or done had you 'insisted' on and reiterated your request at Blessington," she wrote.

[99] For examples, see Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 42–45; and Clare Hanson, *A Cultural History of Pregnancy: Pregnancy, Medicine and Culture, 1750–2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), 16–23.

[100] Diary, 23 January 1841.

[101] Diary, 28 January 1841.

> I would not have *allowed* you to attempt such a thing—you will laugh at my saying I would not *allow* you but indeed I would not tis true if you went to try your strength against mine I could not prevent you but that *you would not do*. I would tell you I would not allow such a thing & I am sure you would not then attempt it. As to what I would have thought I would have been convinced that you did *not love* me yet I would have been more angry with *myself* than with *you* I would have felt I had done wrong in allowing you such an opportunity as having ever gone to Blessington, & I would hate myself as having been such a temptation to *you*.[102]

When Mary returned to Dublin in May 1841 and was able to meet him again, James continued testing her. He suggested that he would break off all relations with her if he was not allowed to "tie her garter." This seemingly innocent but suggestive joke may have been a crude solicitation. In the popular bawdy song "The Tying of the Garter," a rural young woman loses her virginity to a gentleman as she walks to London to sell "buttermilk and whay."[103] It seems unlikely that James thought Mary would agree to sex, but perhaps he wished to judge the manner of her refusal. Mary appeared offended and refused absolutely; James was "delighted to find her so virtuous."[104] When he bought her blue silk to make a dress, she initially refused but eventually accepted it after he threatened to throw the material into a ditch. He demanded that she return his letters so that he could review each moment of their affair, returning to episodes where he suspected her of liaisons with other men.[105] However, by 3 June he had concluded that he had "wronged her" by believing his father's story.[106]

Despite being preoccupied with the question of Mary's virtue, James continued his relentless pursuit of physical intimacy. During the summer of 1841, their clandestine meetings often took place at Monkstown Botanical Gardens, in the south of the city (see fig. 4). James's mother was still unwell, and the family had relocated to a different suburban house in the adjacent town of Blackrock, an area synonymous with wealth and privilege in Dublin's social geography.[107] In common with the couple's previous

[102] Diary, 15 March 1841.

[103] The song also features a class dimension where the man is of superior social class to the woman. See Cathy Lynn Preston, "'The Tying of the Garter': Representations of the Female Rural Labourer in 17th-, 18th- and 19th-Century English Bawdy Songs," *Journal of American Folklore* 105, no. 417 (1992): 315–41. Our thanks to Roy Foster for bringing the importance of this phrase to our attention.

[104] Diary, 21 May 1841.

[105] For example, see diary, 4 June 1841.

[106] Diary, 3 June 1841.

[107] For a recent analysis of social prestige in the southern suburbs of Dublin, see Laura Johnstone, "'The Royal Paragon': Setting Out Suburban Space in Nineteenth-Century Dublin," in *Urban Spaces in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, ed. Georgina Laragy, Olwen Purdue, and Jonathan Jeffrey Wright (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), 13–40.

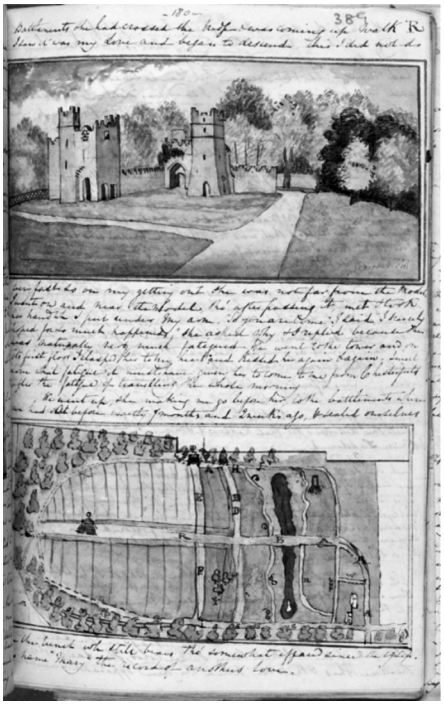

Figure 4. Monkstown Botanical Gardens as drawn by Kenney. Diary, 14 May 1841. Image courtesy of the Board of Trinity College Dublin.

sites of rendezvous, the Botanical Gardens had the considerable benefit of appearing to be an innocuous place for a mixed couple to meet and perambulate. Yet for all the myriad trials and suspicions, splits and reconciliations that had taken place between James and Mary, the Victorian sexual script reasserted itself in this location as well. James continued to press for greater intimacy, and Mary continued to initially resist and later (partially) consent. With his usual mixture of excruciating detail, James later recalled an encounter on 14 May, including accompanying maps and drawings. He remembered that he had "sat down on the seat & forced her gently to sit in my lap which she was unwilling to do but at last consented to."[108] They continued meeting throughout May and early June, when Mary had to return to her employment in Carlow.[109]

Despite Mary's repeated disavowals of any interest in marriage during the spring and summer of 1841, James seems to have continued to believe

[108] Diary, 14 May 1841.
[109] Letter dated 9 July 1841 and found in the diary entry for 10 July 1841.

that she was misreading their relationship: he remarked to his diary that "I never could marry her—she does not realize." He does not say, however, whether he ever told her this directly.[110] In her letters Mary presented herself as a much-desired fiancée, listing the suitors she had refused.[111] She related a story of a friend who had "died in Rome of decline" after her father sent a lover away who "was only amusing himself."[112] But she also insisted that "she wishes never to be married" and that she never believed James would marry her. She declared her desire to be James's "slave" rather than anyone else's wife and reassured him in her letter that "You are not in any earthly way bound to me, *not even in honour*."[113] Ultimately James's estimation of her truthfulness seems utterly inconsistent. He did not take her at her word when she told him that she loved him despite the apparent impossibility of their marriage. He seemed to suspect an ulterior motive or manipulation on her part, and so the relationship remained trapped in a frustrating feedback loop and without resolution. He was not honorable enough to break the connection despite his repeated assertions in the diary that he would never marry her.

If she did not seek marriage, then why did Mary risk so much for James? Perhaps we should just take her words (as transcribed by James in his diary) at face value when she claimed that she would "*never* find any object to interest me as you have done."[114]

Conclusion

James's earliest surviving diary ended on 6 November 1841. Almost a year after the affair at Blessington he continued to find reasons to doubt Mary's sincerity and honesty, and he continued to mull over the attractions of his other potential lovers.[115] Yet the couple's relationship persisted, embroiled in a clandestine affair that appears from the outside to have brought as much pain as joy. The next evidence we have of the affair comes from a surviving fragment of a later journal detailing James's trip to London after his mother's death in 1842. In this later fragment James continued to transcribe and number Mary's letters in such a way as to suggest to the reader that there had been a continuous correspondence since the end of the first diary. A letter from Mary dated 18 January 1843 was addressed from Wicklow, in the southeast of Ireland, and confirms that the affair had weathered the storms of 1841.[116] James had by then grown bolder in his flirtations with other women, "conquesting," as he called it, by making eyes at pretty actresses

[110] Diary, 18 September 1840, 18 March 1841.
[111] Diary, 7 June 1841.
[112] Diary, 30 July 1841.
[113] Diary, 7 June, 22 July 1841.
[114] Diary, 22 July 1841. The letter is dated 21 July 1841.
[115] For example, he discusses Miss Green on 8 August 1841.
[116] See the letter from Mary dated 18 January 1843 in the diary.

and kissing the maid who cleaned his hotel room. He wrote of the latter episode as "only a little nonsense" that would not bother Mary, whom he still described as "my love." Mary's letters continued in the usual pattern: she recalled their last visit and longed for his return. By this time, she was almost twenty-seven years old and was tied to a wealthy lover who had no intention of marrying her. She had kept the secret even from her sister.

Who was seducing whom? Labeling Mary the seductress with a financial motive would appear, from the diary at least, to be a grossly unfair reading of the dynamic at work in the relationship. Given Mary's precarious financial and social position, there is room for a sympathetic reading even if she had been intentionally manipulating James in the ways that he suspected. But it also seems far-fetched to argue that James—a socially awkward and emotionally immature young man—was a cad, a seducer, or a rake. This appears to have been his first relationship of any sort, he was candidly insecure about his appearance, and he claimed to be as interested in Mary's opinions and mind as he was in her body. Yet our story reveals the vulnerability of a middle-class woman who sought love in prefamine Dublin. James had freedom to choose, while Mary had to wait to be chosen. James never married her. Instead, at over fifty years of age, in August 1870, he married Helena Crean Lynch, a woman of his own class with property near his family's estate in Galway. She gave birth to six children in eight years, one of whom was delivered after Kenney's death on Halloween in 1877. Two sons survived infancy.[117] For James and for the Kenneys, the trajectory of life in elite Catholic circles was not at all threatened by this affair with his grandmother's former companion.

Mary, by contrast, largely disappeared from sight. The later diary fragment shows that in 1843 she was living and working in an unspecified location in Wicklow. The relationship apparently ended, but James never forgot her. A tantalizing remark from James dated by him and apparently inserted into the diary when he was rereading it in October 1848 gives only a hint about how he viewed the relationship in retrospect: "What a fool I was in those days! however never had man such a triumphant triumph as I had over this 'angel' of my first love wh lasted some 4 years."[118] We have not been able to establish the nature of James's "triumphant triumph," but the ironic use of the word "angel" suggests that it may have involved some disgrace for Mary.

We might read James's diary entry about this romantic "triumph" as expressing his pride about maintaining the affair with Mary for four years without a loss to his reputation and without the need to marry her. Mary may have hoped that she would eventually become his wife, or she might have loved him without any expectation of marriage, as she often stated

[117] The eldest son, William, served in the Connacht Rangers before settling in the United States and marrying Josephine Delmas in San Francisco.

[118] Found in the entry for 10 September 1840.

in their letters. If marriage had been her gamble, she lost badly: she was left single past the usual marriageable age, and she appears to have refused multiple proposals from suitable men. In the end James crossed no social or family boundaries because he avoided marriage with Mary, and she stayed in the shadows, making no public demands of him.

We had several motives for exploring issues of consent, seduction, and propriety through a deep reading of this relationship. What can we learn from a noncriminal, complicated love story between two parties with different levels of social prestige? We learn of the significance of parental involvement in the lives of young adults. We learn too that the sexual script dictated many aspects of behavior in the 1840s and could even require the input of credentialed professionals in order to preserve the honor of an accused party. An itinerant domestic companion such as Mary McMahon was vulnerable to sexual assault and unwanted approaches despite her advanced education and social connections. Mary described herself with some accuracy as "a creature of circumstances totally depending on the will of others."[119] We learn that male vanity, immaturity, and selfishness could combine to endanger the future of a young man and his love interest and that consent was just as difficult to measure, weigh, or gauge in the mid-nineteenth century as it is in our own time. Consent was and arguably still is ultimately something that is deeply connected to gender, status, power, and the depth and reach of the cultures that shape us.

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[119] Diary, 30 October 1841.