Chapter 2. Brain fever in Gaskell's *Cousin Phillis*: reading and hiding love in the body of Victorian heroines

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Abstract

When we consider Victorian literature, it is striking to note the high number of novels that participated in the growing debate of the time around health, in particular that of women. This debate was encouraged by the attention nineteenth century medicine paid to the female body. Thus, there are countless examples of novels in which the heroine falls mysteriously ill at a certain point in the plot, disconcerting family and friends and requiring the immediate assistance of the doctor and the nurse. Contemporary medical theories warned about the somatic consequences of both emotional excess and repression, particularly in the case of women, considered by nature more emotional than men. Therefore, medical anxieties focused on women, especially bourgeois women, scrutinizing their bodies for external signs of emotion. The female body, subject to the medical gaze, turns into a text that offers her readers privileged access to her emotional life. Its vigilance and the control of her emotions was necessary to grant her health and that of the Empire. Despite the effort of doctors to acquire it, this ability to read bodily signs of emotion was directly attributed to women. However, it is interesting to analyse how novels like Cousin Phillis (1865) provided instruction in the emotional language of the body. Gaskell's novel supports medical theories about the threat of emotions to the fragile balance of female health while, simultaneously, questioning the supposedly natural association of women with affective hermeneutics

Keywords:emotions, signs, interpretation,language.

Theoretical background

During the second half of the nineteenth century, literature interacted with medicine in multiple ways in order to construct a model of femininity that

represented the middle class woman and differentiated her from her counterpart in the other social classes.

At the height of its professionalisation, medicine circulated theories about the supposedly pathological nature of women, insisting that their health was controlled by the tyrannical influence of their reproductive system. According to notorious physicians like Thomas Laycock (1840), the uterus was connected to every single part of the female body, so any alteration of its functioning, due to physical or emotional causes, could lead to a collapse in their health. Given the workings of this *uterine economy*, strict vigilance was deemed necessary. The health of reproduction, and consequently the future of the nation was at stake.

So, medicine insisted that women were naturally more prone to emotions, more delicate, that their place was at home looking after their families. Any attempt to pursue activities outside this role, would make them ill.

However, they also warned that it was precisely this tendency to feel rather than to think that made women innately weak. The threat posed to female health by emotions implied that any symptoms of disease revealed the emotional overflowing of the patient. The female body was then subjected to the *medical gaze*, as Foucault (1973) called it, searching the body for outward signs of emotion.

Curiously enough, despite physicians' efforts to learn how to interpret this emotional language, it was believed that women mastered the ability not only to read these signs in the body of others—hence the rise of the nurse as a Victorian icon—but also to hide them in their own body. Relevant sociologists like Herbert Spencer (1896) insisted that the hermeneutic ability

and the capacity to codify corporeal signs in order to avoid interpretation were skills women had naturally developed since primitive times.

Many historians such as Elaine Showalter (1987) and Mary Poovey (1989) have studied the repercussion of these ideas in the reality of women's lives and the construction of the feminine ideal.

Method

The novel that occupies us constitutes one example of the education in this language of emotions and the complex interplay between issues about gender, interpretation and female health. Our analysis will try to show how its plot reinforces many of these theories while, at the same time, it reveals thecontradictions implicit in their validation.

Results

Elizabeth Gaskell's story, *Cousin Phillis* (1864) is told from the perspective of young Paul Manning, who arrives in a little town to work as an apprentice engineer in a new railway line. At his mother's insistence, he visits some relatives that live on a farm nearby: Ebenezer Holman, an Independent minister, his wife and their only daughter, Phillis, who is the same age as Paul.

Paul's description of Phillis when he meets her already reveals some of the cultural conventions associated with the feminine ideal. Physically described as an angel, Phillis is docile, respects her parents and helps with the housework. However, she seems different. In contrast to the classical shyness and silence of other heroines, she is self-confident. For instance, the

first time she is left alone with Paul, she does not hesitate to open the conversation. Her loquacity and the steadiness of her voice sharply contrast with Paul's stammering and awkwardness. A voracious reader and very cultivated, Phillis feels at ease with classical languages and literature. Her habit of reading in Latin and Greek with her father and her translating skills have made her regard the importance of words and the coherence between significant and signifier. Closer to her father's intellectual world than to her mother's domestic world, Phillis has received a better education than any of her peers, better than the narrator's himself, who often feels ashamed of his intellectual inferiority.

Unable to reconcile Phillis's intellectual qualities to the virtues required of her sex, Paul soon rules out any possibility of romance with his cousin: "she's so clever—she's more like a man than a woman—she knows Latin and Greek" (252). His father's reply— "She'd forget them, if she'd had a houseful of children" (252)—echoes popular beliefs in the separation of the intellectual and the domestic worlds reinforced by the medical debate.

During his visits to the farm, a gradual change in her way of dressing makes Paul witness Phillis's transformation from child to woman, a transition that apparently goes unnoticed by her parents.

When Phillis meets Mr. Holdsworth, Paul's worldly young master, her logical world clashes with the ambiguity of his language, full of irony and double meanings. Confusing her with his playful use of words, his alteration of Phillis's linguistic world is not just limited to the oral but also to the written language. One afternoon, when left alone in the dining room, Holdsworth looks through Phillis's books in front of Paul. An original version of one of Dante's works immediately draws his attention. The

narrator sees how Holdsworth, far from being intimidated by her intellectual reading, feels stimulated and even ventures to annotate clarifications of meaning of the words Phillis had underlined as difficult for her. This is perceived by Paul as a violation of Phillis's textual space.

One day Holdsworth asks Phillis to sit for him in order to draw her portrait. While he is fixing his gaze on his model, the narrator detects signs of agitation in Phillis: "her colour came and went, her breath quickened with the consciousness of his regard …" (272). When required to look at him in order to sketch her eyes, Phillis cannot stand it and leaves the room. The protagonist's fear that her face and her eyes might reveal her emotions is a typical attitude in Victorian heroines. Despite women being considered experts in detecting these signs, it is Paul who notices them, for Mrs. Holman seems quite oblivious to them.

This episode contrasts with the evening Phillis gives Holdsworth a nosegay with the wild flowers he had previously admired. Holdsworth's signs when he receives them seem unequivocal for Phillis and the narrator himself: "I saw for the first time an unmistakable look of love in his black eyes …" (273).

However, the news of Holdsworth's sudden departure to Canada for work purposes provokes a physical transformation in Phillis that does not escape the narrator's eye: "her face white and set …never a question did she ask about the absent friend, yet she forced herself to talk" (278).

After this, one day Paul finds Phillis crying with a book in her hands. Holdsworth's notes in its margins help him identify it as "one of those unintelligible Italian books" (283). Holdsworth's efforts to clarify the meaning of Italian words for Phillis contrast with his own body language,

incomprehensible for Phillis, who fails to find any coherence between what she had read in his behavior and the meaning of these signs.

When Paul, anxious about her signs, decides to reveal to Phillis Holdsworth's intention to marry her on his return, she finally finds coherence between his words and his actions. This results directly in a transformation of Phillis's signs, which does not escape Paul's reading: "Her eyes … expressed an almost heavenly happiness; her tender mouth was curved with rapture—her colour vivid and blushing; but as if she was afraid her face expressed too much … she hid it again almost immediately" (285).

Soon, Phillis seems to have recovered health and speech. Just like sadness and despair had started to deteriorate her health, hope favours her recovery. Holdsworth's coherence has restored unity to her fragmented reality.

However, this coherence is soon to be broken. Paul receives a letter from Canada in which Holdsworth tells him about his plans to marry a rich heiress, Lucille, who, according to him, "is curiously like Phillis Holman" (291). This unfortunate remark reveals that, to his eyes, both women are interchangeable, lacking unique meaning. Phillis's intangibility for Holdsworth is here more evident than ever. When Paul shows her the letter, she strives to hide her signs from an improving reader. However, her tone of voice—"like a wail" (295)—betrays her once more so, she returns to silence.

From that moment, Paul studies Phillis's frightening decline. Her body signs and the changes in her voice grow more worrying, especially when the news confirming Holdsworth's wedding is received. Paul watches how painfully she tries to hide behind a forced loquacity: "I had less self-command; but I followed her lead" (302). As we can see, for him, it is a matter of self-control. Paradoxically, Phillis's effort to control her feelings culminates in the loss of

control over her own health: "her grey eyes had dark circles round them, and a strange kind of dark light in them; her cheeks were flushed, but her lips were white and wan. I wondered that others did not read these signs as clearly as I did" (304). When the minister finally awakens to the reality of these signs, Phillis confesses: "I loved him, father" (308). Unfortunately, it is too late for Phillis. Her own despair and her father's accusations of selfishness make her suffer an attack and lose consciousness. When the doctor arrives, she is diagnosed with brain fever.

Over the course of Phillis's critical illness, the patient's silence extends around the house. The sickroom represents a sacred place reserved for the close family, so the narrator has to resume his reading from the corridor, looking through the half open door: Phillis lying on the bed, her hair has been cut, her beauty is a shadow of what it was and her behavior reminds us of that of a madwoman: "her head … moving … backwards and forwards on the pillow, with weary, never-ending motion, her poor eyes shut, trying in the old accustomed way to croon out a hymns tune, but perpetually breaking it up into moans of pain" (311).

Later, although slowly recovering her health, Phillis is not able to regain her strength, despite her family's efforts. Curiously swapping roles, neither her father's appeal to her shy coquetry nor her mother's endeavour to reawaken her interest in books succeed in restoring her to her former self. After her illness, Phillis's identity remains fragmented because she is no longer able to fit in the feminine domestic sphere or the masculine intellectual sphere.

Discussion

Gaskell's novel shows the instability of the Victorian system of beliefs about gender roles that medicine had tried to reinforce through its theories. Feminist criticism has frequently underlined the passivity of Victorian heroines as something characteristic of their personality, derived from their extreme participation in the feminine ideal of the angel of the house which, in turn, precipitates their illness. Notwithstanding her linguistic education, Phillis must avoid conventional language to express her emotions and turn to silence. The only means to gain access to her feelings is through her body. Phillis submits to the linguistic manipulation of Holdsworth to such an extent that "he directed her studies into new paths, he patiently drew out the expression of many of her thoughts, and perplexities, and unformed theories …" (271-272). Before his departure, he fantasizes with the idea of waking Phillis up from her lethargy, something that does not stop him from replacing her with a copy in Canada, while she must await his unlikely return.

Despite this, the question of Phillis's passivity remains problematic because it is not a permanent feature of her behavior. Therefore, those situations in which she displays personal initiative draw our attention, like during her conversations with Paul, when she defies the torment to safeguard Holdsworth's tools or when she gives him flowers. This oscillation between an active and passive role is particularly evident in the episode of the portrait, when Phillis lets Holdsworth manipulate her as if she were an inanimate object until she eventually resists her own passivation and leaves the room. Finally, her last words in the novel: "I can, and I will!" (317),

reveal a willingness to recover beyond the possibility of being awakened by Prince Charming.

Furthermore, Gaskell presents Paul's masculinity as ambiguous. His insecurities, his shyness, his fascination with Holdsworth's sophistication, and, most importantly, his progressive ability for affective hermeneutics are some examples. The reader interprets Phillis's feelings through Paul's reading. In this respect, Paul assumes the role of a nurse. For medicine, the capacity to read external signs of emotion was both feminine and potentially feminizing so, in this regard, Gaskell's novel supports nineteenth century medical assumptions. As a nurse, Paul reads his patient's emotions through her body but he also influences the development of her disease. His fear and naivety lead Phillis to create unrealistic expectations about Holdsworth's intentions that threaten her health.

Lastly, contrary to the assumption that women are by nature good readers of body language, we find Mrs. Holman's indifference to her own daughter's signs and Phillis's failure to interpret Holdsworth corporeal and verbal language. The impossibility to interpret Holdsworth's language on a logical basis provokes her breakdown. The correlation between the awakening of her sexuality, her love disappointment and her sudden illness implies taking to the extreme the ability of the heroine's body to communicate her feelings; external signs cannot be more explicit. This way, finally, the protagonist offers her own diseased body as an unambiguous text, impossible to ignore, forcing those around her to read it.

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