Fearful Bodies into Disciplined Subjects: Pleasure, Romance, and the Family Drama of Colonial Reform in Mary Carpenter’s *Six Months in India*

Antoinette Burton

Everywhere the appearance of men, women, and children was sufficiently novel and curious. The deficiency of clothing in the men struck me peculiarly. They seemed to consider that a black skin supersedes the necessity of raiment, and in this respect the lower orders appear perfectly devoid of any sense of decency. I never became reconciled to this, and believe now, as I did then, that living thus in a sort of savage state in the midst of a civilised people increases that want of proper self-respect and that separation from the higher classes which is so painfully characteristic of Hindu society. . . .

Multitudes of both men and women assembled before sunrise to perform their ablutions. . . . Strange was the scene which was here every morning presented to an English eye; for the women appeared wholly devoid of any feeling akin to decency, and in this public place, to avoid wetting their garments, left the greater part of their bodies uncovered. It would seem as if the great seclusion of the women of the higher classes withdraws

This article was prompted by Marjorie Lightman’s thoughtful piece, “A Comment: The Pleasure of Social Reform” (1992). It has profited from conversations with Paul Arroyo, Chandra de Silva, Jennifer Morgan, George Robb, Hannah Rosen, Laura Mayhall, and Susan Thorne, as well as from the comments of several anonymous reviewers. The careful reading, critical questions, and continued interest of Philippa Levine, Mary Poovey, and Barbara Ramusack have strengthened this project immeasurably. I am equally grateful to Darlene Hantzis for urging me to think through some of the implications and complexities of the “family romance.”

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the refining influence of their sex from society;—those who are not so shielded are thus left in the rude position of barbaric life, where the weaker sex is oppressed by the stronger and being degraded, is deprived of its special excellence. (Carpenter 1868, 2:19, 85)

SOCIAL REFORM was serious business in Victorian Britain, especially where “the woman question” was concerned. Josephine Butler, writing in her introduction to Woman’s Work and Woman’s Culture in 1869, epitomized the public face of Victorian feminism when she insisted that “all who look upon this question of women’s interests from a grave and lofty point of view must behold it, as it is indeed, a question which concerns humanity at large, and that very vitally” (Butler 1869, xiii). With social duty the most readily available justification for women’s public work—and women’s natural frivolity one of the most readily available arguments against the possibility of female emancipation—gravity of purpose was among the prerequisites of respectability and hence of respectable action for middle-class women in the public sphere. If there were any pleasure to be had in the pursuit of reform, convention or shrewdness inhibited its disclosure. In order to be taken seriously, one had to appear both solemn and cognizant of the solemnity of the reform enterprise; to do otherwise was to endanger the cause “by perpetuating the delusion that women are so many kittens—charming to play with but no more fit than Caligula’s horse to be made a Consul” (Cobbe [n.d.] 1987, 94). Combating such presumptions was as much of a crusade as the work of social reform itself—so much so that when Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon argued that the care of the nation’s poor was “the serious duty” of single women, her choice of words helped to guarantee the sobriety of her cause rather than functioning, as it does for us, as a quaint redundancy ([1869] 1987, 41).

And yet pleasure also informed the experiences and hence the discourses of Victorian female social reformers, where it existed in tension with both the call to seriousness and the strategic necessity of self-erasure. While Millicent Garrett Fawcett urged rationality, dispassion, and impartiality, other nineteenth-century feminists argued that female suffrage was necessary because women “desired” the vote, “cherished” their rights, “yearned” for emancipation—and, not least, could be gratified by reform success. The utopian visions that underwrote much of women’s philanthropic activity in the Victorian period, together with contemporary evangelical enthusiasm for the possibility of secular transformation, shaped a rhetoric of reform in which duty could be suggestive not just of pleasure but of romantic desire as well. Frances Power Cobbe,
who was given to hyperbole but rarely to rapturous prose, spoke, for example, of women's "ardent longing to bring about . . . sorely needed reform" (quoted in Morgan [1896] 1987, 471). Isabella Todd, writing to an Ulster M.P. about a franchise bill in 1884, described herself as a "pleader" for the cause, argued that "hope deferred . . . maketh the heart sick," and reminded her readers that "if our demand is a quiet and unexcited demand, it is also a persistent one" (Todd [1884] 1987, 403). Romantic love was among the languages Victorian women used for talking about the pleasure of sociopolitical reform and the intensity of their commitment to it—partly because it was a conventionally Victorian feminine concern, but equally because, as more than a decade of scholarly work on Victorian feminism has shown, what its practitioners wished was for the women's movement to preserve precisely what was "womanly" about British women in the service of the national good (Banks 1981; Rendall 1985; Vicinus 1985; Levine 1987).

If the object of Victorian feminists' reform desire was "true femininity" working for the public good, the language in which this quest was figured focused on romantic pursuit, sexual love, and, ultimately, bourgeois family formation. Metaphorically, reform was a process in which women figured as suitors seeking the attention of the body politic so that they could become partnered with it. Getting the nation to take notice of, and then fully to appreciate, the women's movement was one of the chief preoccupations of its advocates. Lydia Becker, writing for the Westminster Review in 1872, likened the woman question to a secret passion that, "long dormant but never dead, has remained hidden in the hearts of thoughtful women, to be repressed with a sigh over the hopelessness of the attempt to gain a hearing" ([1872] 1987, 118). Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, writing to the Times in 1884, used a stanza of Spenserian poetry to represent the strategies women reformers deployed in order to gain the attention of the legislative body at Westminster. "The pathetic words of Spenser," she wrote, "but too truly portray the experience of all women who have endeavoured to influence legislative action for the benefit of their own sex, since they can only sue, and have no power to demand, remembering the while with an added pang that at every moment some heart is broken or some life undone by reason of the legislative injustice which they are helpless to remedy" ([1884] 1987, 405). Social reform figures here as a love story, with the national body—in this case, Parliament—as the resistant lover and female reformers as scorned (or, perhaps more accurately, ignored) suitors. Disenfranchisement in these scenarios corresponds to exclusion from the lover's company, and the project of emancipation to the realization of what might be called, in Victorian terms, the quest for a "companionate marriage" between women and the state. Pleasure is derived from the seriousness of the cause.
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and from the suffering it exacted—the capacity for suffering being another characteristic of "the womanly woman" in Victorian culture.

This is not necessarily an argument about the masochism of Victorian feminists but, rather, a comment on the ways in which the desire for traditional femininity underwrote the quest for female emancipation. The means by which this was attained could be unconventional, and not without its transgressive pleasures. For, in the allegories that Becker and Wolstenholme Elmy use, pleasure comes from the kind of cross-gendering that the project of feminism in a patriarchal society can involve. Women play the traditionally male suitor role as they approach the all-male parliamentary body, thus demonstrating both the validity of their claims and their essential femaleness: they must become men—the supreme sacrifice—in order to secure the attention and hence the equality that they seek as women.

The sentiment these stagings create and the sympathy they work to elicit suggest that feminists were no less attached to what Christina Crosby calls the "melodramatic fix" than other Victorians (1991, 69–109). Indeed, it could be argued that such scenarios were mobilized in self-consciously ironic opposition to the arguments from chivalry that were used to frame arguments against female emancipation and especially against women's suffrage from the 1860s onward. Recurrent images of heterosexual romantic convention and its inversions are also evidence that the reform vocation not only was not devoid of pleasure but was actually fueled by a desire that could be imagined as sexual longing, even when domesticity and motherhood were considered to be its most gratifying ends. Such longing was by no means without its own dangers. For although it was evidently useful for mobilizing women in the public arena, it threatened to undermine the premises of respectability and self-denial on which the edifice of female emancipation was being established in Victorian England. According to Josephine Butler, "earnest work"—defined in part as "a share in grave national interests"—was the solution to this dilemma, for it regulated the "sentimental tendencies" to which women were prone and guaranteed that they would not be undone by their own unrestrained feelings (1869, xxxiii; Flint 1993, 25). In the end, it reconciled the female reformer with the body politic by making her the respectable citizen-mother rather than the illicit—and ambiguously gendered—lover of the nation-state. Reform itself could thus gratify women's desire because of its promise to transform women from unattached, potentially disruptive, and unstably gendered bodies into disciplined, potentially political, and gender-certain subjects. If, as Anne McClintock has claimed, nations have been figured as domestic genealogies (1993, 63), feminists in Victorian Britain appropriated the nation-state as a motherland and imagined their desire for reform as a familial
drama. In doing so, they did not replace the narrative of heterosexual romance so much as they regulated it in the form of a domestic, familial script. Inside this particular family romance, the mother was the authoritative parent because of her particular concern for women and children and, above all, because of her self-conscious identification with the motherland itself.

Although romance and melodrama have become keywords in analyses of modern Western women’s writing, their strategic use in Victorian feminist cultural production has been less carefully scrutinized.¹ Their appropriation by British women for imperial reform purposes has also gone unremarked upon. Mary Carpenter’s interest in Indian social reform, her four visits to India between 1866 and 1877, and her attempt to institutionalize philanthropic commitment to the improvement of Indian women through the National Indian Association can be read as a sociosexual romance in which the English female reformer attempts to reconcile herself to the imperial body politic through the family drama of British imperial reform. Drawn to the cause of India’s women initially by Rammohun Roy and other Indian male social reformers who traveled to England in the Victorian period, Carpenter’s colonial concerns were fueled by what she herself called “a sort of romance . . . lying dormant or bottled up, as in the Arabian tales, waiting only to come forth in full vigour” (Carpenter 1879, 277). Her encounter with India was mediated, if not exclusively then certainly primarily, through Indian men, with whose anxieties about the practices of child marriage she strongly identified and whose concerns for the future of the nuclear family in India she made her own. Indian women’s reproductive capacity, and hence their (hetero)sexual activity, was implicitly at issue here: for Carpenter acted unswervingly on the Victorian presumption that early marriage was the source of Indian cultural stagnation and therefore an appropriate site of British imperial intervention (Forbes 1979; Ramusack 1981; Engels 1983; Anagol-McGinn 1992). Her determination to improve Indian women’s status was bound up with a desire to manage the bodies of Indian girls by diverting them from immediate marriage into professional occupations—a route toward improvement and “uplift” that brought them, from the 1870s onward, under the discipline of professional, Western female-supervised teacher training and that had as its ultimate goal the preservation of Indian women’s procreative capacities inside the ideal of adult companionate marriage. Carpenter herself never married, but she did adopt a white British girl and, rather more informally, two Indian children as well. These gestures, along with her manifest satisfaction at being called “mother” by a variety of Indians she encountered during her

¹ I am grateful to one of my reviewers for urging me to engage with this point.
visits to India, suggest that the pleasures of seriousness could be legitimized in part by the maternal role that philanthropic work afforded to female reformers—especially in Victorian imperial culture, where the empire was commonly considered to be “no place for a white woman” and Britain itself embodied the centrifugal motherland.

As the opening quotations indicate, Carpenter was simultaneously drawn to and disturbed by the variety of “uncovered bodies” she witnessed during her tour of India in 1866–67. It was this troubling fascination that shaped Carpenter’s romance with India, her passion for the cause of Indian women, and her cultivation of the role of mother to both Indian womanhood and to British female reform initiatives in India. Because she was one of the few British female reformers who actually traveled to India in the Victorian period, and because she was in large measure responsible for generating interest in the reform of Indian women among Victorian feminists from the late 1860s onward, understanding her approach to the imperial project is consequential to analyses of the colonial encounter in the modern period, particularly when that encounter occurred between Western women and “Oriental womanhood.” *Six Months in India* affirms Gayatri Spivak’s definition of liberal imperial ideology: as a narrative of colonial reform, it is a specific historical example of a white woman conferring with brown men over the fate of brown women (1988, 296–97). Equally significant is how it illuminates the ways in which that triangular relationship was familiarized, romanticized, and subsequently translated into reform initiatives—how, in other words, the “representations and routines” of the colonial female body were linked to the institutionalization of imperial social reform ideologies, particularly though not exclusively among Victorian feminists (Laqueur and Gallagher 1987, vii). If *Six Months in India* represents one Victorian female reformer’s negotiations with the romance of empire, it also suggests that women’s desire, especially in an imperial context, is not now and has never been historically innocent (Curthoys 1993, 174). Scrutinizing how Western women have been seduced by this imperialized romance is crucial to the production of contemporary feminist ideologies that wish not just to confront their own histories but to engage with critiques of colonialism as well.

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From the beginning of her public career, Mary Carpenter grappled with the tensions between the call to seriousness and the pleasures of reform only hinted at by other women activists of her generation. Born in 1807, Carpenter came from a family that, in the words of her biographer, “belonged to the aristocracy of English Puritanism” (Manton 1976, 18). Her father, Dr. Lant Carpenter, was a Unitarian minister in
Bristol, a fervent antislavery activist, and an author of books on the moral principles of education. His personal high-mindedness, as well as his commitment to social justice and moral reform, meant that Mary grew up in an atmosphere in which seriousness was not only expected but required. Inspired by her father’s life of public service and, after his death, compelled to kindred pursuits by his memory, Mary Carpenter distinguished herself in the 1840s and 1850s chiefly by promoting the Ragged Schools system, which laid the foundation for primary and industrial education. She was also involved in antislavery agitation, prison reform, and, in the 1860s and after, philanthropic activity in India (Manton 1976; Ramusack 1992). Throughout her life Carpenter both publicly and privately invoked the Christian mission as the selfless purpose toward which her “blessed work” was directed, though she was not always totally at ease with the mission she believed she was called to. In a phrase quite characteristic of her peculiar bluntness, she described the whole philanthropic enterprise as “naturally repugnant” to her (Carpenter 1879, 244).

Carpenter’s correspondence and diaries are full of indications that such “natural repugnance” was in fact the outcome of a tremendous struggle between the imperative for self-denial that commitment to the Christian mission could demand and the sense of gratification that she experienced in her own work. She referred to the “children of the streets” as “those forsaken young immortals whom I love with a heart’s desire” and to her various reform projects as “the desire of my heart.” Nor was she hesitant about recording her “unspeakable joy” at the success of her Ragged School in Bristol in 1846 (Carpenter 1879, 168, 107). From the time she was a teenager, however, she wrestled with a tendency to pride in her own accomplishments, as the following passage illustrates: “I profess not to think myself deserving of praise, but I have a secret consciousness of having performed (my duty) better than others would have done. I also feel a very unchristian satisfaction in imagining my own feelings of a superior cast to those of others: this I hope I am correcting” (Carpenter 1879, 27). Anxiety about the pleasure she experienced in doing good works surfaces again and again in her writing, causing her to question the seriousness of her commitment to the kind of “real sacrifices” that she believed necessary for true Christian piety—and hence for effective social reform (Carpenter 1879, 33).

What Stallybrass and White refer to as Carpenter’s “self-critical restlessness” (1986, 199) was informed by a mid-Victorian religious ethic that emphasized continuous self-sacrifice as the hallmark of the Christian mission to the secular world. The same ethic encouraged female religious enthusiasm that bordered on the ecstatic and that, in Carpenter’s meditations, gave her spiritual yearnings a quasi-sexual character (Carpenter 1879, 244).
1879, 137). This was particularly true when she prayed to her “heavenly Father,” with whom she expressed a sense of intense communion and with whom she often conflated her real father after his death in 1840. Yet Carpenter feared that even this “religious emotion,” which she did view as permissible, might “take the place of what is to me far more difficult—that active discharge of the duty of the hour” (Carpenter 1879, 57). She justified the suppression of such emotions—such pleasures—and the personal suffering caused by such self-denial by reasoning that “God gives us painful discipline” and that “it was intended that we should suffer sympathetic pain to stimulate us to make efforts for our fellow-creatures” (87, 104). The need for self-discipline was a constant refrain for Carpenter; without it, she became “too full of thoughts which keep me in a constant state of excitement” and could not accomplish her duties in the world (57). In fact, so convinced was she of her tendency to “unchristian satisfaction” that she believed that public action was something “to which my woman’s nature quite unfit[s] me” (165).

Fitting herself for Christian reform work involved all kinds of physical rigors, including a vegetarian diet and minimal sleep—routines that astonished her erstwhile housemate, Frances Cobbe, and eventually drove her from Carpenter’s company (Saywell 1964, 14; Schupf 1974, 311; Manton 1976, 148–52; Caine 1992, 122–23). It also meant renewing on a regular basis the pledge she had made in 1836 to devote her life to the poor and destitute, “caring not at all for my own comfort or labour” (Carpenter 1879, 49, 30). Experiencing the pleasures of success in reform projects impelled her to regular self-reproach and periodic regimens of self-discipline, not to mention to endless declarations of solemn purpose. Professions of solemnity were chief among Carpenter’s cures for the over-excitement that could be brought on by reform endeavors—partly, of course, because there was pleasure to be had in seriousness and its vocations.\(^2\) Even after his death, Carpenter viewed her father as the standard against which she measured her own enthusiasm and reform achievements. As Vron Ware has shown, she was not alone in this tendency: the antislavery movement, for example, produced several notable women for whom their fathers served as emotional center and political inspiration (1992, 91). Unlike the parental figures in other historically situated family dramas, however, Carpenter did not wish to displace her father but rather to approximate his self-governing temperament and his self-effacing social reform efforts through such regulatory feats of her own (Stallybrass and White 1986; Hunt 1992).

\(^2\) Philippa Levine reminds us of what odd forms such serious pleasure could take when she recalls Emilia Dilke’s girlhood practice of atoning for her sins by lying “for hours on the bare floor or on the stones, with her arms in the attitude of a cross.” See her Feminist Lives (1990, 36).
Although these “psychological transactions” were a feature of Carpenter’s psychic life before the 1860s, it was the prospect of undertaking reform in India that occasioned Carpenter’s most impassioned declarations of serious reform commitment and eventuated in her most public profession of her desire for reform, *Six Months in India*. In the most immediate sense, her intention to go to India was prompted by an Indian Brahmin convert to Christianity who visited England in 1860, and whose preaching in Bristol inspired Carpenter. “Never before had I seen an instance of the wonderful power of Christianity to surmount all old prejudices of gross idolatry,” she wrote in her journal in September 1860. “His simplicity, unaffected manner, and genuine devotion to the cause of his master, inspired us all with very warm interest and desire to help him. . . . How my Father would have rejoiced to see the day when his pulpit should be occupied by one who reminded us of the early followers of the savior. The chapel was more crowded than I ever remember to have seen it, except when my Father preached the funeral sermon for the lamented Rajah” (Carpenter 1879, 273).

Carpenter’s earliest biographer, her cousin Joseph Estlin Carpenter, suspected that she had romantic feelings toward this Indian man, who is referred to only as “Mr. G——” in the published excerpts from her correspondence. Mary herself alluded to this possibility, for it was his visit that she described to a correspondent as “a sort of romance to me in the midst of the great tension of the stronger and less poetic parts of my nature. . . . I find that all my old feelings and enthusiasms are as fresh as ever, bottled up, as in the Arabian tales, waiting only to come forth in full vigour. And indeed it is well that they are generally imprisoned, for they sadly interrupt me in my work” (Carpenter 1879, 277). Here the familiar pattern of excitement and self-restraint is given an expressly romantic object as well as an overtly orientalist flavor. The cultural taboos working against any kind of union between a Victorian Englishwoman and an Indian man (Sinha 1992), notwithstanding his conversion to Christianity, may be adduced by the fact that he is the only Indian visitor who goes unnamed in Joseph Estlin Carpenter’s account of Mary’s life, and he is never again mentioned after his departure from Britain.

Harihar Das’s research indicates that “Mr. G——” was in fact Joguth Chandra Gangooly, an Indian who had had some theological training in the United States before he came to Britain in 1860 (Das 1924, 106–7). This is the term that Norman Mackenzie uses to describe Beatrice Webb’s negotiations between the “Ego that affirms” and the “Ego that denies.” See his introduction to *My Apprenticeship* (Webb 1979, xix). I am grateful to Laura Mayhall for suggesting the application of Mackenzie’s term to Carpenter.

This in any event is how Carpenter referred to him. For some Unitarians, and perhaps even for Carpenter, joining the Brahmo Samaj represented a kind of conversion to Christianity. Whether or not he actually converted is unclear.
Shortly after Gangooly returned to India, Mary Carpenter recorded her first vow to go to India to undertake work with native girls and women there (Carpenter 1879, 277). Although it is tempting to see Gangooly as the great unfulfilled romance of her life, and indeed as the source of her longing for India, he was in fact only one of several Indian men whom Carpenter encountered on British soil who prompted her interest in India and nurtured her fantasies about extending her father’s reform work to Indian soil. Rammohun Roy was undoubtedly the first. Roy was a prominent Brahmo Samajist who traveled to Britain in the early 1830s. (The Brahmo Samaj was “a monotheistic Hindu reform movement which ultimately became a separate Hindu sect” [Brown 1994, 77].) Although he was not a convert to Christianity, Roy’s attempts to reconcile reform Hinduism with Christian monotheism encouraged some members of the Unitarian community about the possibility of reform in India. His visit to Bristol, his friendliness with local religious communities, and his untimely death there in 1832 made him something of a cult figure—not least for the young Mary, who prepared a rather gushing retrospective titled The Last Days in England of the Rajah Rammohun Roy in 1866. Roy’s friendship with her father, together with his progressive views on the treatment of women, inscribed him in Carpenter’s memory as both a great man and a great reformer (Manton 1976; Ray 1984; Ramusack 1992). In death Roy’s life story acquired a romantic solemnity among those English women whom he had met during his brief sojourn in Britain. Carpenter noted the effect that Roy had on one of her contemporaries, Lucy Aikin, who had spent long hours with Roy discussing the common ground between reform Hinduism and Christianity and, in particular, the condition of Indian women. “He pleaded for pity toward them with such powerful, heartfelt eloquence as no woman, I think can peruse without tears and fervent blessings on his head” (Carpenter [1866] 1976, 77). Roy was buried under the elms on the property of the Castle family in Stapleton Grove. A commemorative shrine was established there, to which Carpenter herself made devotional visits, especially when Indian travelers came to Bristol.

The powerful religious personality Carpenter attributed to both her dead father and to the deceased Roy was extended to Gangooly and other Indian social reformers who came in Britain seeking, according to Mary, “to become acquainted with English men and women in their public and private work . . . and thus to qualify themselves on their return to India to transplant there what they have found most deserving of imitation among us” (Carpenter [1866] 1976, n.p.). In 1864 two Indians, Satyendranath Tagore (brother of the poet Rabindranath Tagore) and Monomohon Ghose (a Bengali barrister), visited Mary in Bristol while on a pilgrimage to Roy’s grave and urged upon her the need for female edu-
cation in India. “Having them here,” she wrote of her visitors, “has carried me back thirty years to Rammohun Roy and my Father. Indeed, my own private life is chiefly in the past, with the beloved departed” (Carpenter 1879, 300). After receiving them at the Red Lodge, she confided the following to her diary: “I here record my solemn resolve that henceforth I devote my heart and soul and strength to the elevation of women of India. In doing this I shall not suddenly abandon my work here . . . but I shall obey the remarkable call which has been given me so unexpectedly, which is in accordance with former deep feelings and resolves. Without any present and apparent change of plan I shall watch openings . . . gain information, and prepare in every way for my great object, going to India to promote the Christian work for the women” (298–99). As she prepared for her departure, she confronted her own torturous relationship to pleasure. “This will be the great event of my life,” she wrote to her brother Russell. “I feel some female weakness in my pleasure in looking at my things all getting ready and looking nice” (Carpenter 1879, 315). Carpenter continued to discipline these emotional responses, anticipating the kinds of gratification that this Indian trip would bring while at the same time “question[ing] myself, suspect[ing] myself of enthusiasm,” and finally embracing her “strong and settled conviction” that India was “a new field . . . about to open to me . . . in which my natural powers will have free scope” (299).

Her emphasis on her encounters with Indian men enabled Carpenter to sustain the fantasy—from the 1830s to the 1860s, and well before she went to India—that Indian reform preserved the mystical union between her and her father, and between her and Roy as well (Schupf 1974, 306–7). Most important, they helped to organize Mary’s reform project around particular notions about Indian women: first, that they were a “problem” that troubled progressive, evangelically minded Indian men; second, that they were “degraded” (a term whose meanings I shall return to) by child marriage and enforced widowhood; and, finally, that their situation required the attention, intervention, and discipline of English women. Such was not necessarily the intention of Indian male reformers. As Lata Mani has written, although Roy shared some of the presumptions of colonialist discourse about suttee, he had a complex understanding of how patriarchy worked. He was as convinced as other reform-minded Indians that the condition of women was the index of any culture’s “civilization,” and he was one of many Indian men in the nineteenth century who viewed English women as a sympathetic audience before whom to plead the case of Indian female reform (Visram 1986; Chakravarti 1989, 29–35; Mani 1989, 89, 102–5; Anagol-McGinn 1992, 103–5). Nonetheless, Carpenter read Indian reformers’ descriptions as sensational and in turn sensationalized them. This is not because

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orientalism was simply an ineluctable feature of modernity (or even of imperialism) but because of the ways in which Victorian cultural pre-suppositions about a lurid and exotic East intersected the history of both her romanticized associations with India and her public reform commitment. For Carpenter it was precisely this intersection of romantic attraction and serious social work that prompted her commitment to Indian reform. In the first chapter of *Six Months in India*, Carpenter recalled that it was the “graphic and fearful . . . picture of the condition of Hindoo women” that inspired her “to form the solemn resolve to do something to ameliorate their condition” (Carpenter 1868, 1:4). She told her readers that she apprehended those “graphic and fearful” images from a public lecture in England in the early 1860s given by a Brahmin convert to Christianity whom she does not name in *Six Months*. What the general reading public could not know was that this unnamed Indian was in all probability Gangooly.

Roy too had spoken of “extreme cruelties practised towards Indian women”—specifically with reference to suttee—in terms that made a long-standing impression on Carpenter’s mind, as had Ghose, Tagore, and others (Carpenter [1866] 1976, 65). Thus Indian women were not only constituted as a “problem” for Carpenter by Indian men before she ever got to India, but her “knowledge” about their status and condition was mediated through men to whom she may well have had romanticized attachments and, at the very least, transgressive associations. They were, moreover, mediated publicly—which is to say, in mixed company—at a historical moment when women speaking (or hearing) in public about sex, disease, and even women was considered a breach of the code of sexual propriety on which Victorian society was based. Although we have no record of the impact such transgressions had on Mary Carpenter, we do know that for Annette Akroyd, another Unitarian female social reformer interested in India, the effect of hearing an Indian man speak in public of Indian women’s condition was positively “electrifying” (Kopf 1979, 35).

Carpenter’s motivations for traveling to India and the history of her attraction to the cause of Indian women were thus variously implicated in the romance of empire. Even more telling, the romance of empire was implicated for Carpenter in the family drama of colonial reform. She privately identified Indian reform with her romantic longings for Indian men and with her feelings for her father; as we shall shortly see, she translated this into a serious public commitment to supervising Indian women’s sexual lives so that they more closely resembled Victorian middle-class heterosexual domestic practices. Unlike some of her contemporaries writing about sexual relations in the East, Carpenter did not view Indian men as tyrannical and hence responsible for Indian women’s “subjection.” Quite the contrary: she read Roy’s and other Indian men’s
concerns for the fate of Indian women as not only enlightened but chivalrous. In fact, she imagined herself as the reform successor to both her father and Roy and took up their protectiveness toward Indian women. It was from this somewhat ambiguously gendered position that Carpenter sought to appropriate the cause that Indian men had made of Indian women, transferring her own privatized family drama as well as her romance with India onto the public project of colonial reform and in the process stabilizing herself as the indubitably female, maternal subject of the British empire.

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Mary Carpenter’s first visit to India (September 1866–March 1867) was in many ways a pilgrimage—not in a sectarian sense, since she repeatedly disavowed any proselytizing purpose and professed to understand how unwelcome missionary work would be among educated Hindus, but in a spiritual and religious sense nonetheless. As the home of her “noble Rajah,” the landscape held a peculiar fascination, even if her search for the traces of Roy in Calcutta proved slightly disappointing (Manton 1976, 201). And despite the disclaimer of any “proselytizing objects” (Carpenter 1879, 314), Carpenter could not but imagine herself as a pilgrim in India. Concerned friends, worried about her undertaking such an arduous trip at her age (she was almost sixty), urged her at least to go by way of Palestine, thereby making her voyage a true peregrinatio por christo. She told one correspondent that “all my strength must be for India; that will henceforth be my Holy Land” (Carpenter 1879, 315).

Clearly Carpenter’s trip was unusual for someone of her generation. It was certainly considered dangerous in an age when women traveling anywhere, let alone from West to East, were viewed under that persistent Trollopian trope of “unprotected females” (Melman 1992, 1). Nor would I wish to deny that by traveling without an attendant, staying with and generally socializing among educated Indians, Carpenter transgressed certain racial and gender boundaries in ways that were probably unimaginable for most of her contemporaries. Her many Indian contacts, gained over the years from visitors to Bristol and through her acquaintance with Roy, meant that she experienced a certain sphere of social and domestic life in India highly unusual for an English woman. She was at moments quite uncomfortable with this realization; recalling the scene at the Tagores’ dinner table, she remarked, and not in any braggart way, that “I was the only individual there of the Anglo-Saxon race” (Carpenter 1868, 1:34). As Jo Manton puts it, by “sleeping on a string bed, eating vegetable curry and unleavened bread and listening to mantras [she] was committing two of the worst crimes of Victorian England, blasphemy and letting the side down” (1976, 202).
And yet it is precisely for these reasons that *Six Months in India*, essentially an account of a secular reform pilgrimage, functioned as a kind of revealed text—because it could be read simultaneously as a white woman’s romance with India and as a serious program for colonial reform. This very duality meant that it worked as a cautionary tale: in classic Carpenter style, the serious business of reform was the solution not only to the problem of India, but to the troubling pleasures that Indian reform gave her. Carpenter’s organization of her text is quite literally instructive. The book is divided into two parts: volume one and the first chapter of volume two narrate her journey, from her arrival in Bombay, through her trips to Ahmedabad, Calcutta, and Madras to her journey back again to Bombay, her point of departure. The second volume is devoted almost exclusively to what Carpenter calls “general observations”: “Religious Movement,” “Social Position of Women,” “The Inhabitants of India,” “Education,” “Female Education,” “Reformatory Schools,” “Prison Discipline,” and, in an appendix, a variety of speeches, memorials, and the like connected with her trip. This structural division—oddly out of sync with the generic travelogue—would seem to replicate Carpenter’s habit of movement from pleasure to seriousness, from romance to reform. Even the dedication (“to the honoured memory of the Rajah Mohammun Roy . . . who first excited in the author’s mind a desire to benefit his country, these volumes are respectfully dedicated”) evokes Carpenter’s well-practiced maneuver of channeling desire into respectability.

What becomes immediately apparent in *Six Months* is how India worked to trouble both Carpenter’s authority as a reformer and those well-practiced habits by which she had, up until now, managed her own responses to the pleasures of philanthropic reform. First of all, once she left the motherland, Carpenter’s claim to colonial authority had to be demonstrated, if not repeatedly proven. What had been a kind of family heirloom—knowledge of and concern for India—suddenly became a constraint on the realization of her aspiration to be recognized as an autonomous woman with colonial expertise. Her determination to displace the claims made by others to “know” India, and hence to make her own what had been handed down as “family knowledge” about Indian women, is discernible from the very first chapter of *Six Months*. On the voyage out, she canvassed her fellow passengers about their views on India. In *Six Months*, she describes how those interviews enabled her to claim her own authority over India: “The very different, and even contrary statements I received . . . confirmed my belief that the accounts of India and the Hindoos which we hear in England are greatly coloured by the character and views of the narrator; I perceived especially, that what may be true of one part of India is very incorrect of another . . . [and] that
though everything I heard from gentlemen or ladies who had lived long in the country was most valuable. . . yet I must not allow my mind to be influenced by the representations of individuals, however intelligent or however long they had resided in India” (Carpenter 1868, 1:14). Although this passage may be read as a critique of British and Anglo-Indian readings of India, it must also be seen as a rejection of claims to knowledge about the Indian female population by Indian men she knew in England. Carpenter contrasts the diversity of opinion about India at this juncture in the narrative with her own lofty and unified perspective—what Mary Louise Pratt calls a “promontory view” and ascribes to male travel writers like Richard Burton (1992, 205). Her regulation of the images of Indian women throughout the rest of the book may likewise be read as an attempt to sustain that authority and to confirm herself in the eyes of the public not merely as an “unprotected female” traveler in the empire but as the self-disciplined voice of metropolitan reform knowledge as well.

Despite the confidence with which she made such claims to authority about colonial matters, however, traveling in India and being in contact with Indian men and women in situ seems to have destabilized Carpenter’s regime from time to time. There are two such occasions recorded in *Six Months*, both of which involve her looking at naked or semiclothed colonial bodies. The first occurs just as she is disembarking from the boat for the first time in Bombay, where “everywhere the appearance of men, women and children was sufficiently novel and curious.” According to Carpenter, the “black” men in the crowd do not wear clothes because they think the color of their skin “supersedes the necessity of raiment”—a powerful comment on the capacity of middle-class reform ideology to construct blackness as a willfully perverse assault on white women’s sensibilities. For Carpenter these naked black men are the totality of “the lower orders.” As such, they “appear perfectly devoid of any sense of decency”—devoid, that is, of the self-censure that for Carpenter was a sign of civilization as well as the hallmark of her own individual struggles with passion and propriety.

The fact that these black men were not simply devoid of a sense of decency, but “perfectly” so, suggests that Carpenter’s discomfort did not prevent her from admiring the ways in which they were apparently “perfectly” comfortable with it. It suggests, in other words, that there is an ambivalence, a kind of “dreadful delight” operating here that may or may not be related to Carpenter’s romantic attachments to Gangooly, Roy, and the other Indian men with whom she had been acquainted before coming to India (Walkowitz 1992). Meanwhile, Carpenter herself is not simply acutely conscious of the nakedness of the men she observes but of the effects it produces. In her view, “living thus in a sort of savage state
in the midst of civilised people” (presumably among the Anglo-Indians, or perhaps upper-caste Indians) “increases that want of proper self-respect and that separation from the higher classes which is so painfully characteristic of Hindu society.” Determining who suffers more from these effects is crucial to the regulatory work Carpenter is doing here. In the first instance, those who suffer are the naked men “in a savage state”: those who have no access to self-consciousness are alienated not only from Western civilization, but from the potentially civilizing effects of the higher classes or castes in Hindu society. At the same time, those who observe this scene are also in danger of being “un-civilised,” in this case of losing their self-respect, by virtue of the fact that they are looking. It is the potential that the gaze has to disintegrate the viewer’s integrity, his or her self, in addition to Indian society per se, that makes the sight of those naked bodies a painful pleasure for Carpenter and, ultimately, for her readers as well.

In the process of recording her discomfort at this sight, Carpenter thus registers her own ambivalences—ambivalences about her desire to look and, more significantly, about the necessity of looking itself. For if Carpenter was to be taken seriously by her readers as the colonial reformer she aspired to be—the voice that articulated at once the critique of Indian society and the terms of its reform—she had to look. Moreover, she had to be seen to be disciplining her look—shaping it into acceptable technologies of colonial reform—before their very eyes. To understand how she performs this, it is worth scrutinizing Carpenter’s claim that “the deficiency of clothing in the men” struck her “peculiarly” (1868, 1:19).

“Peculiar” is an adjective that she frequently uses in Six Months to describe Indian landscapes or “natural” scenes. Two pages before the passage about naked men, however, she observes that people on the boat referred to Indian natives as niggers—“a term peculiarly improper, as the Asiatic race is perfectly different from the African, and no term of contempt ought to be applied to the negro or any other human being” (Carpenter 1868, 1:15–16). By professing a knowledge of taxonomy and a commitment to egalitarianism Carpenter tries to distance herself from the term nigger and from its users. She also signals the crisis of looking that India—and Indians—provokes in her: for it compels her to privilege the scientific explanation over a humanitarian one. In the passage on black bodies without “raiment,” this crisis again plays itself out as Carpenter’s “peculiar” reaction. By taking refuge in the impersonal as the passage continues, so that the “I” disappears from the analysis of what happens among “civilised peoples,” Carpenter situates herself as all-seeing observer who yet sees nothing “improper”: the objective Western female reformer in India whose vision is telescoped by the spectacle of colonial masculinity that her eye is drawn to and perhaps even seeks out.
Mary Carpenter and Colonial Reform

Burton Carpenter's response is not primarily one of personal sympathy but rather that of the disciplined, self-denying authority of quasi-scientific philanthropy.

The second encounter with colonial bodies that Carpenter notes in Six Months occurs during her stay at Surat, a city in western India. Carpenter recalls that she was drawn one morning to the window of her "sleeping-room" after "a great confusion of tongues early broke my rest." Looking out the window, she saw "multitudes of both men and women assembled before sunrise to perform their ablutions, and for various household purposes, such as drawing water and washing clothes." Although this is a mixed group—and perhaps because of it—Carpenter's attention focuses on the women in the crowd, who appeared wholly devoid of any feeling akin to delicacy, and in this public place, to avoid wetting their garments, left the greater part of their bodies uncovered. It would seem as if the great seclusion of the women of the higher classes withdraws the refining influence of their sex from society;—those who are not so shielded are thus left in the rude position of barbaric life, where the weaker sex is oppressed by the stronger, and being degraded, is deprived of its special excellence. In India the voices and manner of the lower classes of women appeared to me more harsh and coarse than those of the men. . . . I felt assured, however, that this did not arise from their nature being inferior, but from the condition in which they are placed. (85)

There are a number of parallels between this passage and the one on naked men: in each instance, Carpenter looks down from above, remarks on the natives' lack of self-consciousness about nakedness, and signals that the act of looking is potentially dangerous to the viewer. Such arrival scenes were by the 1860s a fairly conventional aspect of travel writing. For Carpenter as for other European travelers, they served (in Pratt's terms) as "potent sites for framing relations of context and setting the terms of its representation" (1992, 78). There is, however, some initial instability in these frames: in both cases the mess of bodies "disrupts and intrudes upon the calm order" of Carpenter's normally "plain speech" (Barker 1984, 7). For when Carpenter writes that "those who are not . . . shielded [from such sights] are thus left in the rude position of barbaric life where the weaker sex is . . . deprived of its special excellence," she is talking not just about the condition of Indian women but about its disintegrating effects on her. She is also speaking her resolve to "shield" herself and to protect her reading public from the ambivalence of her own reaction. After all, she does not turn away from the window.
but lingers on the spectacle as she tries to manage her response to it. Her move from desire to solemnity, though scarcely successful, circumscribes without erasing pleasure even while it works to reestablish that “special excellence” of self-regulation on which, as we have seen, Carpenter’s self-image as a reformer depended. In terms of its capacity to restore propriety to an “unseemly” scene, Carpenter’s maneuver not incidentally stabilizes her as the proper Victorian woman and lady philanthropic reformer.

And yet despite its structural similarities with the first passage, Carpenter is unquestionably fixing on Indian women and, more specifically, on the sight of naked female colonial bodies in public in the second passage. She works hard here to explain, and hence to justify, Indian women’s nakedness; she gives the impression that she is more “sympathetic” to it. These women are naked, Carpenter suggests, for a purpose: they are performing their “ablutions”—a term that, in addition to its hygienic meanings, also has religious connotations. They thus are not willfully naked, like the black men, but leave their bodies uncovered for purposes understandable in terms of cultural domestic practices. Moreover, the “condition” in which she views them is, as she explains, not of their own making: they have been “degraded” by the fact of purdah—by the fact that the potentially civilizing effects of upper-class women who are in seclusion are denied them. Although degradation may refer to uncleanness—elsewhere in *Six Months* Carpenter emphasized the “sunless, airless” existence of zenana life as an example of the ways in which Hindu women were degraded—in this context it also connotes a fall from rank, a demotion from the cultural height that Carpenter believed women qua women should occupy and that Indian male reformers and Victorian Englishwomen of the period believed Indian women had occupied in the ancient Vedic tradition (Chakravarti 1989). The fact that Carpenter is looking down from such a height does more than validate her reading of their degradation: it authorizes her readers to justify the intervention of sympathetic female reformers like herself in the project of uplifting Indian womanhood.

There is undoubtedly an element of ambivalent attraction in this scenario as well: for Carpenter sees the Indian women as “wholly” devoid of “delicacy” just as Indian men were “perfectly” devoid of “decency.” Her use of “delicacy” resonates with notions of proper, privatized, and perhaps also passionless Victorian womanhood: the kind of ideal womanhood that Carpenter desired from Indian women even as she worked to claim it for herself. At the same time, there is less of an attempt on Carpenter’s part to render her gaze scientific than in the first passage, partly because women looking at women was considered a more “natural” phenomenon than women looking at men; women serving as care-
takers of other women was a central tenet of Victorian philanthropy and, indeed, of feminism itself. Carpenter would not have been alone among white middle-class Victorians in deriving pleasure from ministering to nonwhite populations, though little has been written about the dynamics of that pleasure when it arose between women in a colonial setting. What this suggests about the pursuit of “true femininity,” and the homoeroticism of that pursuit in the context of Victorian female reform, is well outside the scope of this article. It does, however, raise interesting questions about the pleasures that Victorian women may have experienced in their identification with the suffering of “degraded” Other women and about how underexamined the notion of female spectatorship has been in the recent literature on gender and empire. My point here is this: if Carpenter was troubled by the sight of these Indian female bodies, and she undoubtedly was, it moved her to articulate an apparently sympathetic, woman-to-woman reading, the end of which was nevertheless the same as the quasi-scientific one (Pratt 1992, 68). That end was the legitimation of Western women’s authority over colonial natives and, hence, over the reproduction of the civilizing values—decency, delicacy, and “true femininity” for all women—of Western culture itself.

Although Carpenter intimated that the upper classes or high castes of Hindu society were an important site for the transmission of Western values to the whole of Indian society, Hindu women remained the central “problem” of Indian culture from Carpenter’s point of view. “From the first to the last days of residence in India,” Carpenter wrote in volume 2, “the point which most painfully strikes the mind is the position of Hindu women. This seems to affect every part of society, both native and English” (Carpenter 1868, 2:74). Whether she was visiting schools or prisons or Indian families’ homes, it was the condition of Hindu women that moved her first to pity and then to solemn reform purpose. Carpenter was impressed by the efforts that educated Indian men were making toward what they considered Indian women’s uplift, but she found the state of girls’ education basically unsatisfactory, for reasons I shall discuss momentarily. In a declaration very much in keeping with previous leaps to purposeful social reform, she decided on her return to Bombay that “I must make this subject my primary one . . . and all other plans must be superseded by whatever seem[s] most likely to promote this” (Carpenter 1868, 2:102).

For Carpenter it was Hinduism that made Indian bodies threatening to the colonial status quo and dangerous to the British imperial mission. Her descriptions of her visit to a Hindu temple are thick with orientalist referents and also with her own ambivalences about observing Hindu rituals: “A heathen temple, however picturesque, was no great attraction to me,” but “repugnant as it was to my feelings, this was an experience
I ought to have" (Carpenter 1868, 2:117, 194). By elision, the totality of “women's condition” in India could be attributed to their heathen religious practices: “Extreme ignorance, and the vices connected with idolatry, render woman in India very unfit to perform the duty nature intended for her—the care of children; for even if she can take proper care of their little bodies (which is doubtful) she infuses into their opening minds a degree of deception and willfulness which years may not be able to eradicate” (80). Sympathy for the condition of Indian women clearly did not prevent Carpenter from articulating the orientalist equation between Hinduism (here, idolatry), vice (child marriage), and unfitness for motherhood. Because sympathy was grounded in the presumption that Indian women’s condition should approximate that of middle-class English women and that “Indian” women desired this (or could be trained to do so), it virtually required such a reductio ad absurdum. Women in India were thus reducible to Hindu women, Hindu women to Hindu mothers, and Hindu mothers to universal maternal unfitness in India.

Carpenter, moreover, was not particularly scrupulous in her application of the term caste—which depending on the context could function interchangeably for Victorians with class—so that at times, as in the text leading up to this passage, she began by talking about lower-caste Hindu women and ended up generalizing from them, and from the “heathenness” of their maternal bodies, to all women in India. This was despite the personal contact she had with a variety of educated and upper-caste Indian women during her trip. To Carpenter it was self-evident that among Hindus their “religion and social habits are indissolubly connected” and that the condition of Hindu women could be taken as representative of the condition of Indian womanhood (68). Particularity evaporated when she was confronted by what she viewed as a sea of idolatrous masses—and when she took as her personal responsibility the task of rescuing those “little bodies” and hence the future of India and empire from the hands of ignorant Hindu mothers. This passage operates quite differently from the one in which Carpenter is watching generic women bathing in which she attributes little or no willfulness to them. Significantly, it is primarily in the context of motherhood that Indian women are pathologized because of the power they have to shape the bodies (and with them, the minds) of the future colonial population—a context in which the fate of the British empire was at stake.

It was therefore the threats that Indian bodies of different kinds posed to the normative, civilizing effects of the nuclear family that were foundational to Carpenter’s commitment to reform in India and, more specifically, to her program of female education. Like other educational reform initiatives undertaken by the British in India in the nineteenth century, Carpenter’s project was motivated by what Gauri Viswanathan
calls a belief in “the sustaining structure of error in Hinduism” and inscribed that error and its sociosexual ramifications on the body of Hindu women, meaning Hindu mothers and mothers-to-be (1989, 37). In theory, this Hindu error blighted the whole female population of India though, significantly, Carpenter concerned herself primarily with the daughters of the Hindu educated classes. The problem with Indian girls’ schools was that they were not, for the most part, supervised by women. There were exceptions to this rule, as she noted: the Bethune School in Calcutta was one of the few places where she observed “a female native convert, a widow . . . teaching with evident success” as well as “a young Hindoo widow . . . receiving instruction with a view to train as a teacher” (Carpenter 1868, 1:184). Such exceptions reassured Carpenter about the possibility of Indian female improvement, for, as Barbara Ramusack has written, she “clearly desired to socialize Indian girls into Victorian domesticity” (1992, 121). Attention to Indian women who were fulfilling Carpenter’s reform aspirations in Six Months was no doubt intended to reassure a curious philanthropic readership that such a project was not only desirable but possible as well.

But the fact that Indian girls—even in these exceptional schools—were not under the watchful and regulating eye of European women remained distressing to Carpenter. She was anxious about the idle, “listless,” and undisciplined Hindu female girls who were not being trained in needlework, not getting enough exercise, not being subject to the kind of “proper instruction” that would begin to discipline them to be trained professionals on the English female model (Carpenter 1868, 2:143). Creating desire in Indian girls—and managing that desire so that it bolstered both the reform purpose of Western women and of British imperial rule—was therefore integral to Carpenter’s colonial education project. It was these same girls who were in the meantime being “withdrawn from school earlier than they otherwise would be” for teenage marriage (143). Carpenter considered fitting Indian women for useful work through education instrumental in raising their status in Indian society, but especially in the reclamation of the “Hindu race.” “All enlightened natives know,” wrote Carpenter, “that their race is becoming physically deteriorated by the social customs to which they are bound. Mothers at twelve, grandmothers at five-and-twenty, cannot be the parents of a strong and hardy race; nor can those who are confined to sunless apartments to which we have been introduced . . . inspire their children with the genial influences of God’s beautiful world” (1868, 1:77). For Carpenter, the physical evidence of Hindu mothers’ degradation—their lack of status and the suffering it caused to them—was visible and readable insofar as it was written on their very bodies: “those who are acquainted with native customs with regard to women, are well aware why these are too often
old and shrivelled [sic] when they might be in the full beauty of womanhood—why their minds are dwarfed to the measure of childhood, when they should be able to draw out the faculties of their children, and inspire them with thoughts and principles which should guide their minds through life” (78).

This passage reveals, among other things, the authoritative reform project that was at the very heart of Victorian female “sympathy” for colonial womanhood, as well as the extent to which it was dependent on control of Indian women’s bodies. Indian, and more specifically Hindu, culture was “made body” by Carpenter for her readers in these passages: the colonial female body became a “surface on which the central rules, hierarchies and even metaphysical commitments” not just of Indianess or even of “heathenness” but of British colonial reform was imprinted. Normalizing such a body through the discipline and regulation of professional training—and through the delay in marriage it would hopefully ensure—was thus constructed as essential to the survival of the Indian and, by extension, to the durability of the “family of nations” that constituted the British empire (Bordo 1989, 13–15). Carpenter claimed to have no doubt that “Hindoo girls were capable of the same development as English girls” and would eventually succeed to the position of lady superintendents themselves (1868, 2:143). But all the schemes for reform that she enumerated in the text of Six Months—including her letters to the viceroy and the secretary of state for India that she later published—recommended the export of English professional women in the strongest terms possible. These recommendations were accompanied by suggestions about what housing arrangements might be made and at what level salaries might be fixed. Early on in Six Months Carpenter confessed that before going to India, she had imagined that Indian women might profitably come to England for their teacher training but claimed that her observations of Indian girls’ schools now suggested otherwise. The conclusion she reached, repeated practically from the beginning of Six Months, was that Indian women first needed the civilizing example of English women—they needed, in other words, the object lesson of English women’s physical presence in India—in order to reach their full potential.

Carpenter did not necessarily view her program for reform as an exclusively public project: “There is . . . work to do for every lady who employs native women in her service in India, and one which need not remove her from her home” (1868, 1:83). And yet the overarching purpose of Six Months in India was to persuade her reading public in Britain (or wherever in the empire or dominions they might be) that the proper response to the romance that was India was not sentiment alone, but sentiment transformed into sober reform action. Publicizing such reform action could be pleasurable, as Carpenter’s enthusiastic prose in Six
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_Six Months in India_ opens with an impassioned declaration of Carpenter’s “desire of many years” for reform in India and ends with a series of memorials from Indian men and women testifying to the virtues of Carpenter’s reform scheme and to their own desire to see that scheme carried out by the government in India. Although there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of such testimonials, they complicate rather than resolve the tensions between desire and reform that characterize both _Six Months_ and the totality of Carpenter’s interest in India. Ever concerned to proclaim her own disinterestedness in the romance of colonial reform, Carpenter insisted that the project of uplifting Indian women had to come from Indians themselves and that her own plans for teacher-training schemes were generated out of “friendly sympathy” rather than official or even personal commitment. Despite the fact that her alarm at the sight of the “graphic and fearful” condition of Indian women was motivated by evangelical antipathy to Hindu practices—an antipathy complicated by her personal history with Indian men and implicated in her attraction to a variety of colonial bodies—she continued to view and to construct her initiatives as the secular and noninterventionist gestures of a private citizen. She was thereby doubtless able to understand her passion for India as an extension of the liberal reformist impulses of her father and of Roy and was also thereby able to manage, without fully containing, that romance with “unchristian satisfaction” that she pursued all her life.

Rather than serving as the final declaration of her love for colonial reform, _Six Months in India_ was just the beginning. Carpenter made three more trips to India before her death in 1877. She continued to
petition viceroy's, to press secretaries of state for intervention, and to pub-
licize what she believed was the "heart-rending" need for a government-
sponsored system of female training schools (Carpenter 1877). While
David Kopf's characterization of Carpenter's role in Indian female edu-
cation as "intrusively practical" is perhaps not inaccurate, her biographers
have generally been cautious about the institutional impact of her re-
Jo Manton suggests that it was her tendency toward confrontation with
government officials—together with their unyieldingly economical ap-
proaches to the development of colonial reform initiatives—that pre-
vented Carpenter's passion for India from translating itself directly into the
kinds of institutional changes she envisioned. The exercise of maternal
authority was not, in other words, countenanced by India Office bureau-
crats. This is not, I hasten to add, because they did not subscribe to their
own version of the family romance of empire—their motto would later be:
"O that England would only trust her sons whom she sends forth to do
her business" (Kaminsky 1986, 110)—but because they preferred the tra-
ditions of paternalism that viewed Carpenter (and Florence Nightingale
before her) as a sentimental busybody. To these explanations for the re-
sistance that her petitions met must be added the effects that her alliances
with increasingly well-organized native male Indian efforts for educa-
tional reform doubtless had on imperial policymakers. Such officials were
determined both to carry out the philosophical commitment to nonin-
terference that had characterized Indian policy since the mutiny and to
keep Indians in India at one remove from the programs of colonial power.

And yet despite the fact that no direct connections can be established
between her reform commitments to Indian female education and formal
imperial policy, Carpenter's *Six Months in India* was undoubtedly influ-
ential in directing the reform passions of a generation of Victorian
women toward empire and, more specifically, toward India and its
women. Her trip attracted more public attention than either her anti-
slavery efforts or her Ragged School movement. It was *Six Months* that
made her the celebrity among female reformers that she was to become
in the 1870s and after her death, even though she remained personally
reluctant to support women's suffrage during her lifetime (Manton 1976,
205, 217–18). Carpenter's travelogue was extremely popular and the
feminist periodical press devoted considerable attention to her Indian
reform projects throughout the 1870s, touting her as the mother of In-
dian reform. As Janaki Nair has suggested, its popularity contributed to
the creation of India as a site where British women's imperial role could
be imagined and their employment goals realized. In conjunction with
other texts, social organizations, and Josephine Butler's repeal campaign
for India (1886–95), Mary Carpenter's work and the high profile given
to *Six Months in India* by feminist advocates were responsible for justifying British women’s careerism in the empire as an essential ingredient of Indian women’s uplift and, in turn, of the colonial reform mission in Victorian Britain (Nair 1990; Burton 1992).

*Six Months in India* worked to institutionalize feminist imperial reform ideology by encouraging women readers to consider taking up imperial responsibilities beyond the indulgences of armchair romance. As the second volume of the travelogue explained, it was only by institutionalizing female professionalization that Carpenter believed she could satisfy her particular desire for Indian reform. In 1870 she founded the National Indian Association (NIA)—which for a time was called the Indian National Association for the Promotion of Indian Female Education—in order to keep the need for teacher training before the British public eye. It ended up becoming a kind of clearinghouse of information about employment for English women in India, especially where educational opportunities were concerned. The NIA, which was patronized by ex-viceroyos and subscribed to by ex-civil servants, outlived Carpenter by decades, acting as an influential mouthpiece in Indian reform circles and, most significantly, taking up the debate on Indian women’s access to medical education with great vigor in the 1880s. This campaign, which was even more explicitly concerned with the health and welfare of Indian bodies, captured the attention of male and female reformers in Britain and India and that of the British and Indian governments—all of whom, as David Arnold has recently illustrated, attempted to regulate their passions for empire and their dread of colonial bodies with suitably sober discourses (1993). Through the NIA and its affiliations with both the London School of Medicine for Women and the Countess of Dufferin’s Fund, many British women were awarded scholarships to train as doctors and hence were able to pursue professional careers in India—as missionaries, as medical doctors, and as a combination of the two (Lal 1994). As with *Six Months in India*, the NIA appealed to a broad spectrum of feminist and mission women in Victorian Britain. It can be read as a space through which Carpenter and her followers enacted their colonial reform convictions and secured a place for themselves in what Victorians believed was the great march of Western civilization.

Mary Carpenter’s legacy to Victorian debates about Western women and imperialism is considerable, not least because she was one of the

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5 The *Indian Magazine and Review* (called the *Journal of the Indian National Association* until 1886) was the NIA’s organ from the 1870s into the 1910s. For the turn toward interest in female medical education in India see, e.g., Francis 1883; Hoggan 1883.

6 I am indebted to Laura Mayhall for pressing this point.
most prominent of English women in the nineteenth century to use the family romance idiom to reconcile her passionate desires for self-realization and emancipation with the needs of the imperial body politic. If, as John Stuart Mill claimed, “the whole government of India is carried out in writing,” British feminists displayed through their own considerable literary production a distinct, if not distinctive, desire for the power and authority of colonial rule (Bhabha 1985, 72). That they framed their desire in terms of a maternalist ethic is not exclusively attributable to Carpenter’s example or even to her influence. Images of the white father and mother teaching “less civilized races” had been the standard stuff of British imperial ideology since the eighteenth century, although the special Victorian cast Carpenter gave to the familiar familial drama of colonial reform should not be discounted either (Hall 1992, 216–18). What differentiated Carpenter from other women who were attracted to the cause of Indian women—and who justified it in terms of their own ardent love of empire and motherly concern for Indian women—is that she, unlike the majority of them (including Josephine Butler), had been to India. Her claims to “know” the “authentic Indian woman” firsthand and her determination to make that personal knowledge visible to the reforming public gave other British women access to the problem of the colonial female body as well as what they imagined was the authority to speak of, for, and over it in what can be aptly termed a maternal register. Unlike many who followed, Carpenter never indulged in the language of sisterhood, preferring the expressly imperialized hierarchy that “mother” implied. Carpenter’s particular romance with India, together with the passionate commitment to empire that she and other British feminists of her generation shared, meant that Indian women became imaginable as one of the chief sites of female reform desire until World War I. It was the very seriousness of such imperial concerns—their indispensability to the future of the imperial family—that British feminists believed helped to legitimate their desires for white women’s emancipation in Britain, whether that was understood as female suffrage, female social reform, or both (Burton 1994).

As Gayatri Spivak reminds us, in the last analysis “there is no romance to be found here.” Rather than functioning merely as an archive for the pleasurable dangers that empire offered to Victorian white women, or even as more evidence in the historical drama of modern Western maternalist policies, Carpenter’s Six Months in India is an allegory for the predicaments of a colonizing Western feminism as well as a genealogy of British imperial feminisms themselves (Spivak 1985, 269). Lest we, in some unself-consciously nostalgic desire for empire, mistake her story for heroism, let us be vigilant about reading Mary Carpenter’s Six Months in India as historical evidence of Catherine Hall’s astute observation that
“there is never any guarantee that the personal voice of a white woman . . . produces a critique of colonialism” (1993, 133).

References


