

# The Marriage Debate, Mona Caird and Her Feminist Radicalism

**Haonan Chi**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4427-6052>

Southeast University, China

101013509@seu.edu.cn

## Abstract

New Woman scholarship presents the English novelist and essayist, Mona Caird, as a radical marriage reformer and emphasises how she challenged the patriarchal structure of Victorian marriage norms. However, this article aims to demonstrate that Caird's radicalness was not merely a challenge to marriage norms, but an attack on legal, cultural and religious restrictions on womanhood. Caird developed her radical arguments through her interaction with her mentor, John Stuart Mill, the New Woman novelist, Sarah Grand, and the influential Victorian anti-feminist writer, Elizabeth Lynn Linton. The article explores Caird's engagement with these three writers regarding their thoughts on marriage, based on the study of her novels *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) and *The Wing of Azrael* (1889), and the collection of her journalistic articles *The Morality of Marriage* (1897). Caird differed from these three writers by arguing for a more liberal and equal gender relationship, resisting eugenic theory, and challenging anti-feminist arguments.

**Keywords:** liberalism; essentialism; the New Woman; motherhood; marriage

## Introduction

Mona Caird was an active British feminist writer who rose to fame for her radicalness that was a challenge to Victorian marriage norms. She vehemently attacked the unfair treatment of women in her articles, which were published in *Westminster Review* and later compiled into a monograph, *The Morality of Marriage* (1897). Her thoughts on marriage are also to be found in her novels *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) and *The Wing of Azrael* (1889) that present the New Woman's struggle to flee from the patriarchal family. Her radical argument against the marriage system sparked controversy in Victorian society, not to mention her support for female suffrage, animal rights and anti-vivisection. She was both "the priestess of revolt" (Anon. 1893) and a



Journal of Literary Studies

Volume 40 | 2024 | #17561 | 16 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/17561>

ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

© The Author(s) 2024



Published by the Literature Association of South Africa and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

radical New Woman writer in the eyes of her supporters and critics. Her challenge to Victorian marriage norms undermined the dominant idea of an ideal woman in Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House" (1854). Patmore celebrated his 15-year marriage to Emily Augusta Andrews, but the "oppressive effect of this ideal" (Greenblatt and Abrams 2005, 1581) about womanhood drew criticism from feminist writers such as Virginia Woolf. This ideal thus became the emblem of Victorian patriarchy. One ardent defender of Victorian gender norms, Elizabeth Lynn Linton (1891, 598), decried women who wanted to be free from maternal roles and pursued professional choices as "unwomanly". She also named those unsatisfied women who struggled to defy gender norms and protest against "the limitation of sex" as "Wild Women" (Linton 1891, 598). For Caird's New Woman counterparts, her anti-essentialist stance challenged the eugenic ideas that were central to the New Woman novelists such as Sarah Grand and George Edgerton.

Caird inherited feminist legacies from pre-Victorian feminists and writers, and her fin-de-siècle counterparts. Caird (1890, 421) mentioned John Stuart Mill as the first Victorian scholar who developed her feminist ideas, "John Stuart Mill, I think, was the first to help me to bring these thoughts and feelings into form by his writings". According to Hookway (2012, 876), Mill's concepts taught Caird to focus on "independent thought", "self-development", and "a quest for precision in word choice and usage". These ideas were central to her characterisation of female protagonists in *The Daughters of Danaus*. Caird (1890, 421) also learnt from the works of Mary Wollstonecraft and scientific writers such as "Tyndall, Huxley, Herbert Spencer, and of course, Darwin". For example, Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) and William Thompson's *Appeal of One Half of the Human Race* (1825) foreshadow the concern over marriage and motherhood in Caird's works. Her discussion of nature and nurture in "The Human Element in Man" (1897) demonstrated her active response to the social debate over women's nature. She developed her feminist arguments through the exchange of ideas with her contemporaries such as Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Emma Brook, Karl Pearson and Annie Beasant.

In 1888, Caird seized national attention with her radical argument against the existing marriage system in "Marriage" published by the *Westminster Review*. She questioned the nature of marriage, considering it a "vexing failure" for conforming to dominant social ideas and degrading womanhood. Such a diatribe against marriage drew a heated debate, leading to a series called "Is Marriage a Failure" in the *Daily Telegraph*. Opponents distorted and disparaged her arguments. Husband (1898, 131–132), a contemporary of Caird, described Caird's ideas as "starling pessimism", and argued for married women's roles in developing "the rational will and judgement" of the community. Husband's comment presented a trend to represent Caird as a radical misogynist, thereby misrepresenting her feminism. Caird refused to connect womanhood to any essentialist or patriarchal definition of a woman's choice. As Heilmann (2000, 148) argues, Caird created her own "autonomous and self-determining mothering". In the article, I will address Caird's collection of articles *The Morality of*

*Marriage* and her novels *The Daughters of Danaus* and *The Wing of Azrael* to show how her writing should not simply be understood as anti-marriage polemic. Instead, she embraced a more liberal and equal treatment of both men and women in a marital relationship.

Caird's thoughts on marriage were a mixture of liberalist feminism and reformist arguments, rejecting the involuntary choice of marriage but expecting to build an economically equal relationship between the sexes. She questioned established notions, such as a woman's duty, in *The Daughters of Danaus*, showing how patriarchy relied on family education to indoctrinate women with gender norms. By interrogating the patriarchal implications within daily language usage, Caird scrutinised the discriminatory linguistic treatment of women that belittled their physical and psychological features. Her resistance to the patriarchal or nationalist idea of womanhood incorporated contributions inherited from her mentor Mill and contributed to her political activism.

I argue that Caird's radicalism was not in the sense that she contended for marriage reform, but rather her revealing criticism of the underlying essentialist understanding of gender or class differences. I contend how Caird's writing challenged the patriarchal structure of Victorian legal, cultural and religious norms by exploring her engagement with J. S. Mill, Sarah Grand, and Elizabeth Lynn Linton regarding their thoughts on marriage. The article firstly explores how Caird not only inherited from Mill but also exposed the hypocritical aspect of a society that claimed equality and freedom yet deprived women of their rights. Secondly, the article compares Grand and Caird, revealing how Caird challenged the cultural supremacist ideas of middle-class Victorian marriage norms. Finally, the article focuses on Caird's debate with Linton to show her feminist effort decoupling motherhood from marriage and defending a woman's right to make decisions.

## Restructuring Marriage as a Private Contract

Caird's writing demonstrates the explicit influence of Mill, especially regarding his idea of marriage and equality between the sexes. For instance, Hookway (2010; 2012) discusses how Mill's emphasis on small talk and free discussion would be central to Caird's design of conversations and social gossip in her novels. She reveals the latent details underpinning the plot from Mill's thoughts. For Heilmann (1996), Mill had a direct and visible influence on Caird through his book *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Both writers underscored the marginalised status of women in Britain. However, I would like to add that Caird made an argument that was different from Mill or others. She investigated how marriage was a special form of social contract that denied the equality of treatment of husband and wife. In so doing, Caird critically undermined the basis of marriage by revealing the unlawful and unreasonable elements of its principles.

In Mill's time, British laws excluded the property rights of women and merged their legal existence with that of their husbands, which was known as coverture. As Lee (1983, 27) explains, when British women got married, their husbands owned their property or at least "control of their property", which placed women at subjugated status to their husbands. Women were at the mercy of their husbands who could accuse them of adultery or declare them unfit to be mothers at any moment. Mill defended women's property rights. His position on giving rights equally to everyone is echoed by his argument in *On Liberty*:

The majority, being satisfied with the ways of mankind as they now are (for it is they who make them what they are), cannot understand why those ways should not be good enough for everybody. (Mill 2011, 102, 203)

Mill valued the equality between people and basic human rights. He challenged the fact that coverture deprived women of their property rights. He encouraged women to become economically independent. The power to earn their income marked their ability to lead a respected life. His discussion of women's status in coverture exposed the problems of marriage as an institution, and also encouraged those writers who came after him to entertain the problems of marriage as a contract.

Supposing that marriage was "an equal contract" and a family relied on earnings, Mill (1869, 59) considered a "man earns the income, and the wife superintends the domestic expenditure" as the most suitable division of labour between the sexes. According to Mill, that division of labour relieved a wife's pressure to work outside the family, while she already undertook domestic roles. He wanted to draw public attention to the heavy burden of a working woman. He fully supported a woman's right to develop her talents or find a job, but was concerned that husbands would shirk their responsibilities and retreat to their own comfort. Mill (1869, 60) proposed what he saw as an ideal form of gender relationship in that a woman, if she could free herself from obligation and freely find employment, should not choose to work "for her protection". In that case, Mill portrayed a positive picture of marriage, so that husband and wife could fully exert their own faculties and treat each other equally. Women's choice of employment was thus not a means of earning their living, but an option for fulfilling their ambition of career achievement.

For Caird, however, Victorian marriage was oppressive because women lost their freedom of choice and were excluded from having educational or career opportunities. One reason she argued against the marriage norm was that ecclesiastical and governmental power could forcefully determine the marriage norms. To Caird (1897, 58), marriage should never be established based on the rules made by others, otherwise "freedom will be lacking in the most important relation in life, so long will the right of private contract be denied". Her emphasis on marriage as a private contract spoke to the Victorian marriage that was under strict legislative restraint. However, Victorian society did see a series of marriage reforms in legislation, such as The Matrimonial Causes Act

of 1857, which permitted “absolute divorce” (Hammerton 1990, 271), but still discriminated against women’s plea for divorce; the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870; and the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882.

Caird inherited Mill’s stance on women’s economic independence. She attributed the reason for the failure of marriage as an institution to their dependence on husbands, which she flagged in *The Morality of Marriage*:

Dependence, in short, is the curse of our marriages, of our homes, of our children, who are born of women who are not free – not free even to refuse to bear them. (Caird 1897, 134)

This dependence reduced women’s status to the subjugated and deprived them of their right to choose whether or not they wanted to have babies.

Caird’s novels present married women’s dependence on their husbands and the overarching patriarchal definition of their domestic role. Hadria Fullerton, the rebellious female protagonist of *The Daughters of Danaus*, defies the Victorian stereotype of an ideal woman and wants to be rid of marital norms. Her marriage concludes with a resolute decision to leave the family and pursue her pianist career in Paris. Her seemingly radical choice of setting aside her duties is not an impromptu act, but a well-planned decision to defend the freedom of choice. Even though Hadria finally returns home to take care of her mother, her defence of personal choice marks her as an example of the New Woman. In *The Wing of Azrael*, Viola Sedley is a strong-minded heroine, but she has to marry Philip Dendraith in order to avert her father’s financial crisis. The final tragic result, in which Viola kills her husband, demonstrates not only the unavoidable outcome of this unhappy marriage, but also the heart-wrenching fate of a woman who could not evade patriarchal marriage norms or find a solution. Both novels present conflict within these marriages to show the problematic result of forced marriages.

Hookway (2010, 135) considers the “precipice” in *The Wing of Azrael* a result how society “impinges” on individuality. This indicates the difficult situation of the New Woman who feels unable to find a possible route of leading an independent life. From a narrative perspective, Cano (2019, 9) demonstrates the metaphorical connection between the pervading darkness in the ending and Hélène Cixous’s description of “the womb”. Those various interpretations of the embodiment of the novel address the tragic nature of Victorian marriage. Considering Hadria or Viola, their attempts to divert or resist oppressive marriage end up in futility or disillusion. Viola’s ending as being missing or possibly dead reveals an even more pressing issue of those New Women who try to challenge marriage norms. In so doing, Caird demonstrated the problematic result of forced marriage that would cause physical and mental injury to women.

Compared with Mill, Caird was more assertive in emphasising economic independence for women. She explicitly pointed out that economic inequality between the sexes made it hard for women to develop their own career. Moreover, as she revealed in “Marriage”:

Our present competitive system, with the daily increasing ferocity of the struggle for existence, is fast reducing itself to an absurdity, women’s labour helping to make the struggle only the fiercer. (Caird 1888, 198)

This argument showed her critical perception of the social system: the impoverished condition of both men and women made it even harder for both sexes to realise gender equality. She proposed a straightforward solution to improve social economy and reduce unfair competition to establish a peaceful and cooperative society. That was her contribution to Victorian feminism, calling for social equality and cooperation. Based on Mill’s liberalist arguments, Caird critically examined the nature of marriage as a social contract; emphasised the need to protect women’s property rights; and aimed to improve the economic status of both sexes.

### Presenting the Fallacy of “the Angel in the House”

Caird’s “Marriage” (1888) presented her criticism of the existing marriage institution, which drew a backlash from her contemporaries such as Sarah Grand. Grand was the first New Woman writer to publicise the term “New Woman” in her debate with the anti-feminist journalist Ouida (Maria Louise Ramé) in 1894. In contrast to Caird, Grand developed a conservative tone of defending the role of Victorian marriage, sanctifying the patriarchal family structure and women’s need to conform to social norms. She denounced celibacy as “an imperfect state” and celebrated the nurturing of a child as “the sweetest of professions” (Grand 2000a, 125). Grand found an unmarried woman’s life problematic and defined family as women’s most important sphere. She was slightly different from those conventional anti-feminists who defended the home as a woman’s sphere. Instead, she considered that men earn money and women do housework as “the fairest division” (Grand 2000a, 124). For Grand, this was a division that conforms to nature. However, she also defended women’s right to work if necessary. The problem with her argument was the ignorance or understated description of women’s repressed desire in domestic life and the essentialist understanding of the division of labour along the lines of sex. Such a viewpoint would reinforce the mainstream discourse of “the Angel in the House” that restricted women to their homes.

In contrast with Grand, Caird resisted the division of labour based on gender and denied the dominant role of nature in forming women’s social roles. In *The Daughters of Danaus*, Hadria, who would not bow to public pressure, determines to define her own choice of marriage or motherhood. The story focuses on Hadria’s decisions, exemplified by her resistance to getting married, her surprising choice of marriage, and the final decision to flee from her family. Caird showed the looming pressure on the New Woman within her family through Hadria’s debate with her sister-in-law, Henriette. As Hadria

flees to Paris, Henriette exhorts Hadria to forsake her pianist career and to return home. Hadria feels offended and vehemently answers back to her sister-in-law. The debate between Hadria and Henriette illustrates Hadria's criticism of marriage. When Henriette defends marriage as a contract, Hadria responds:

What you call the "contract" is simply a cunning contrivance for making a woman and her possible children the legal property of a man, and for enlisting her own honour and conscience to safeguard the disgraceful transaction. (Caird 1989, 344–345)

For Hadria, marriage is an excuse for the patriarchal system to incorporate women into the established division of labour along the lines of sex. She also points out that the so-called contract protects men's authority and turns women into their husbands' property. Hadria's words also imply Caird's attack against marriage, which is a social contract based on unequal division of labour and repression of women's rights. The debate between these two women speaks to the concern of Victorian women, expressing their desire for gender equality and fear of the male-dominated marital relationship. Caird was also able to reveal the hypocrisy of the patriarchal discourse of marriage, as well as how such a misleading rhetoric of marriage could deceive Victorian women.

Caird's contribution to the late-Victorian feminist debate over marriage was also her attack against the so-called "contract" in the sense of social obligations and roles. She not only challenged the biological determinism represented by Grand's eugenic arguments for womanhood, but also rejected the nationalist discourse of marriage. Grand (2000b, 209) celebrated marriage as a great profession for women that she recommended British middle-class women to get married and produce a generation of high culture: "for it is in the middle-class itself that the best breeding, the greatest refinement, the prettiest manners and the highest culture are now to be found". Grand became an active campaigner and defended the what she saw as the superiority of the white middle-class British culture. Women, as she presented them, should undertake their roles in breeding the next brilliant middle-class generation for the nation.

In contrast to Grand's highlighting of women's roles in the British empire, Caird's novel depicted Hadria's strong resistance to such a class-biased and nationalist discourse of the role of women. Hadria contests the idea of women's conformity to either nationalism or patriarchy in the name of contract or duty. She expresses her idea in the debate with Henriette:

Have they no sense of dignity? If one marries (accepting things on the usual basis, of course) one gives to another person rights and powers over one's life that are practically boundless. To retain one's discretion in case of dispute would be possible only on pain of social ruin. I have little enough freedom now, heaven knows; but if I married, why my very thoughts would become the property of another. (Caird 1989, 129)

Hadria denies the bond between husband and wife as marriage failed to treat both parties as equal in their contract. Unlike Henriette, who follows a Victorian discourse and

celebrates marriage as the ineluctable choice of women, Hadria questions the legitimacy of such a contract that ignores women's needs and reinforces the gender inequality. This reveals Caird's key reason for challenging marriage. A truly equal marriage contract could never be established by betraying the need of individuals or sacrificing women's needs to cater to a nationalist or patriarchal purpose.

In the novel, Caird also challenged the notion of duty by exploring Hadria's rejection of her role as a wife and mother. According to Caird (1910, 58), "Duty is co-extensive with existence" throughout a woman's life and disciplines women with "penalties, legal and social". Hadria questions how Victorian marriage sustains itself by imposing duties on women:

I would never marry anyone who would exact the usual submission and renunciations, or even desire them, which I suppose amounts to saying that I shall never marry at all.  
(Caird 1989, 130)

Hadria's radical rejection of marriage is more of a strategic announcement to her opponents that her existing marriage is less than acceptable and far from the realisation of her ideal marriage. Her criticism of marriage stands in stark contrast to Henriette's attitude. Henriette is the epitome of a traditional Victorian woman, who faithfully submits herself to the thrall of the mainstream idea of womanhood. To the contrary, Hadria sees through this ploy, and vocally opposes the so-called woman's duty, considering it a trick to deceive women. In Hadria's eyes, Henriette is a pitiful woman because she has been so gullible as to be blinded by these notions. Hadria shows how a patriarchal discourse of marriage ignores a woman's rights and makes her a slave and property of her man. "That is the sort of 'woman's nature' that our conditions are busy selecting" (Caird 1989, 347). In so doing, Hadria's characterisation represents Caird's ideal of a New Woman who would not submit to a male-dominated discourse of duty or nature.

Unlike Grand, Caird challenged the eugenic discourse of morality along the lines of sex. Grand (2000c, 31) averred that a woman has moral superiority over a man who is "morally is in his infancy". Women had a mission of enlightening men and tolerating their moral defects. She produced an essentialist understanding of morality. For Grand, women would assume greater responsibility for breeding a distinguished middle-class generation, because of their superior moral sense. For example, "Woman may be foolish, but her folly has never been greater than man's conceit" (Grand 2000a, 31). She legitimised her eugenic project based on biological determinism, establishing women's key role in the selection of healthy partners and the racial regeneration of the empire. To oppose that, Caird underscored the role of social environment in nurturing a woman's character and emphasises how education could help women develop their knowledge and talent. Caird (1897, 149) astutely observed that the education of her time did not help humanity to educate themselves but made "freedom more impossible". Caird found social education reinforced traditional ideas and failed to reform people's



understanding of gender equality. As Richardson (2003, 182) points out, Caird believed that “the development of an individual was social” and “the development of society was historical”. She challenged the eugenicists and argued for nurture over nature in forming a woman’s character and ability, which marked her as an anti-essentialist feminist in contrast to Grand who was an essentialist.

In *The Wing of Azrael*, Caird questions the meaning of a Victorian marriage that would destroy a woman’s dignity and deprive her freedom of choice. The heroine of the novel, Viola, has to marry Phillip to avert her father’s financial crisis. However, she suffers from this possessive and domineering husband and kills Phillip on her way to meet her lover, Henry. Caird (1989, 63) presents the repressive patriarchal discourse of womanhood that haunts people’s minds by the dialogue between Viola and her father,

“What’s the good of a woman but to marry and look after her husband and children? ... Do you hear me, Viola?”

“I would try and earn my own living,” said Viola at last in a low, trembling voice.

“Earn you own living!” echoed her father, with a shout of laughter. “You earn you own living! And pray, in what profession would you propose to become a shining light? ... Oh! pray don’t think of marrying, a far more brilliant and congenial career lies before you.”

Her father speaks out about the truth of Victorian women’s status quo, that neither educational nor career opportunities were open to them. Caird presents Viola’s reticent response to reveal her suffering under this reality and Victorian women’s struggle in a patriarchal society. According to Caird, women’s desire to subvert the gender hierarchy has been repressed and channels of class mobility blocked. Caird also shows how a repressive husband would force his will upon a powerless woman. In the dispute over Viola’s hair-pin that is a gift from Henry, Philip coerces her to give this back based on the fact, “You have no other standing or acknowledged existence” (Caird 1889, 144). His words prove the unchallengeable authority of husband and the gender hierarchy between husband and wife. Caird underscores that a wife conforms to the ideal of submissive wifedom, which would only bring repression and unhappiness for a woman. Her portrayal of the tension between Viola and her male family members foregrounds the problems of marriage that are seen as a destined choice. Viola’s story invites readers to contest the patriarchal discourse that either celebrates the role of marriage in a woman’s life or brands marriage as a social duty for her.

The radicalness of Caird’s novels was therefore not merely a challenge to marriage norms, but an attack on legal, cultural and religious restrictions on womanhood. Caird demonstrates a New Woman’s challenge to such restrictions through either Hadria’s resolute rejection of marriage and family life or Viola’s rebellion against her husband. Through these examples of rebellious heroines, Caird explored how marriage norms would undermine the gender relationship and patriarchal society could ruin a woman’s

choice of life. She was not a radical misogynist, as Caird (1890, 421) envisioned the ideal marriage as “a Free Contract” in which people perfectly understand their responsibilities. However, those critical perceptions of marriage in her novels would be a revealing effort to present the problematic outcomes of marriage and to call for a change in the existing form of marriage relationship.

## Decoupling Motherhood from Marriage

By arguing for a voluntary choice of motherhood, Caird shook the foundation of late-Victorian marriage norms and social ethics. Late-Victorian women were restrained by coverture, being “reduced to a special status, subordinated to and dependent upon their husbands” (Holcombe 1983, 25). Women were deprived of their right to property as well as independent social status. They faced the choice of being either a spinster or a housewife and taking care of children. By taking women’s maternal role as their ineluctable duty, conventional writers such as Linton presented marriage and motherhood as the best choice for women.

Linton was a feminist Victorian journalist, but she later developed a quite conventional attitude towards women. Her notorious polemical article “The Girl of the Period” made a scathing attack against women who used make-up. To Linton (1888, 2–3), these women lost “decency”, “cleanliness”, and “modesty”. She had no respect for these fashionable women, instead admiring the “old English ideal” of women, who were “the most beautiful, the most modest, the most essentially womanly in the world” (Linton 1888, 9). Linton’s idea of the ideal women obediently conformed to their husbands’ authority and dutifully undertook housework. Linton would also attack those women who rejected the burden of family and childbearing:

They are not famous for looking ahead on any matter; but to expect them to look beyond themselves, and their own present generation, is to expect the great miracle that never comes. (Linton 1888, 17–18)

Linton believed that these women were either too self-centred or short-sighted to foresee the future of their choices. However, her observation would show an essentialist understanding of women’s social roles, ruling out the possibility of presenting a critical attitude towards marriage and motherhood.

Caird’s novels fittingly challenged the traditional discourse of motherhood based on a biological relationship. By surprisingly portraying how Hadria pays more attention to her adopted child Mary than her own children, Caird put motherhood under the microscope. The traditional idea of motherhood is rigidly defined as tender maternal love for one’s own child. As Caird reveals how Hadria’s family and friends believe, this maternal love would soften a woman’s nature and stimulate her desire for babysitting. As everyone but Hadria says, a woman will change when she has her own children: “An appeal to the maternal instinct had quenched the hardest spirit of revolt” (Caird 1989,

187). However, Hadria's choice astonishes everyone. She adopts Mary, an illegitimate girl whose mother died and father was missing, and then takes her alone to Paris to earn her living—fleeing from her own family. As she tells her friend Valeria, “They [her own children] represent to me the insult of society – my own private and particular insult.” When Valeria asks the reason, Hadria attributes her anger to “people, traditions, unimpeachable sentiments” (Caird 1989, 190). Her resentment shows a strong desire to deviate from the public expectation of the maternal role. By adopting Mary, Hadria shows her autonomy in expressing her idea of motherhood.

This choice demonstrates Caird's theme, which aims to “replace the supremacy of motherhood in a woman's life with the more individualist goal of writing” (Rosenberg 2005, 500). Hadria's adoption disentangles motherhood from a biological relationship and shows a universal maternal affection for children. Her adoption also demonstrates three ideas against the patriarchal discourse of motherhood. Firstly, a woman should resist the patriarchal family and define her own choice of motherhood. Secondly, there should never be such an assumed connection between marriage and motherhood that makes it a duty for women to give birth to children. Thirdly, Hadria also demonstrates her sense of unselfish love in contrast with Mary's unknown father who shirked his own responsibility. In so doing, Caird's description not only highlights the importance of women's role in defining their own motherhood, but also argues for a more empathetic motherhood towards every child. This undermines Linton's stereotypical understanding of motherhood.

Linton emphasised the inextricably connected roles of marriage and motherhood in an ideal Victorian woman's life. Her articles “The Girl of the Period”, “Modern Mothers” (I), and “What is Woman's Work” expressed the same purpose of sanctifying the choice of motherhood. Linton (1888, 8) made a contrast between traditional women and those wild women, lamenting how modern women would ruin the stability of British society and bring danger to themselves:

But the Girl of the Period does not please men . . . All men whose opinion is worth having prefer the simple and genuine girl of the past, with her tender little ways and pretty bashful modesties, to this loud and rampant modernization.

She presented men's assessment of these modern women as a barometer of social tolerance of women's sexual deviation. Linton (1888, 114) urgently addressed women's resistance to having children by describing their choices as “the unnatural feeling” and “the worst mental signs”. Her criticism of those female professionals who refused motherhood, diverted public attention from the fact of how patriarchal society unequally segregated women. Instead, she would manipulate readers' interest into questioning women's lack of responsibility for their destined roles. In Broomfield's (2004, 254) words, Linton's radical anti-feminist stance demonstrates her intentional use of exaggerating rhetoric to “champion scandal and controversy” to generate interest and sales. Scholars thus attributed the confusing contrast between Linton's independent

choice of professional life and her anti-feminist attitude, to her vested interest in making a profit from journals and the “messy and hypocritical societal contradictions” of that period (Donovan 2022, 88). By comparing this with Caird’s novels and journalistic writings, I have demonstrated that Caird was unlike Linton, as she offered Victorian readers intellectual rather than propagandist discussions over the Woman Question.

Caird’s novels consistently questioned the legitimacy of confining women’s choices to marriage or motherhood. She presented such conflict between her heroines and patriarchal families through the depressing mother-daughter relationship. Hadria represents a deviant New Woman daughter in contrast to her Old Woman mother:

In her youth, Mrs Fullerton had shewn signs of qualities which had since been submerged ... Mr Fullerton thought imagination “all nonsense,” and his wife had no doubt he was right, though there was something to be said for one or two of the poets. ... The memory of her own youth taught her no sympathy. (Caird 1989, 33)

Mrs Fullerton used to love reading poetry and literary works and demonstrates the calibre of her creative imagination. However, her desire is soon subdued by her husband. Interestingly, both her daughters, Algitha and Hadria, become interested in social relief and piano, respectively. Moreover, they spiritedly resist the route to marriage chosen by most of their female counterparts. Although both girls finally get married, Caird still presents conflicting attitudes towards marriage between daughters and their mother. For example, Algitha and her partner Wilfrid choose to hold a wedding ceremony only under pressure from her mother. They believe this is only a “barbaric show” and marriage should be bound by “love and faith” (Caird 1989, 468). They demonstrate a liberalist understanding of marriage as a form of legal contract, and fully based on love and mutual respect. Such an attitude presents an ideal match between a New Woman and her New Man, and Caird’s own vision for free marriage. In the face of her unorthodox daughters, Mrs Fullerton has no useful solutions to redress their problems. Instead, she plays a more pathetic role in the family by pleading for her daughters to return to family life.

In chapter 38 of *The Daughters of Danaus*, as Mrs Fullerton falls seriously ill, Hadria and Algitha are by their mother’s bedside nursing her with round-the-clock care. The doctor attributes their mother’s illness to “mental misery” due to worries her daughters may have brought upon her (Caird 1989, 359). This makes them feel shameful about resisting family life or dutifully performing a mother’s role. However, Caird (1989, 362–363) shifts the attention from daughters to the pitiful mother herself,

... the grey sad story of a woman’s life, bare and dumb and pathetic in its irony and pain; the injury from without, and then the self-injury, its direct offspring; unnecessary, yet inevitable; the unconscious thirst for the sacrifice of others, the hungry claims of a nature unfulfilled, the groping instinct to bring the balance of renunciation to the level, and indemnify oneself for the loss suffered and the spirit offered up.

In a psalm-like reminiscent description of her mother, Hadria takes her mother's illness as a punishment of motherhood. Her mother's illness fittingly reveals the intergenerational conflicts between her and her mother, especially considering how both have undergone torture and alienation. Likewise, when Mrs Fullerton talks in her dream, she mentions, "I have always done my duty – I have sacrificed myself for the children. Why do they desert me, why do they desert me?" (Caird 1989, 364). Mrs Fullerton represents such a Victorian woman, who dutifully performs her female role but also sees her own life repressed and dilapidated. Her mesmeric emphasis on maternal duty is contrasted by the revealing fact that daughters feel constrained and even ruined by their dutiful mothers. In so doing, what Mrs Fullerton thinks is sacrifice for her children, would only become a suffocating burden for her daughters. Caird vividly presents the doomed fortune of Victorian mothers as either sacrificing their own happiness or depriving the freedom of their own daughters. The so-called maternal duty is transformed into a patriarchal discourse of disciplining the mother and their daughters.

Caird also responded to Linton's attack against the "Wild Women" in her article "A Defence of the 'Wild Women'". To Linton, those rebellious women sought to find their professional opportunities in a male-dominated society, which proved useless and distracting. A decent Victorian middle-class woman should never take a role in business but stay married and nurture her children. Linton (1891, 604) would vilify those wild women as "aggressive, disturbing, officious, unquiet, rebellious", so that they would find neither approval nor appreciation from men. Linton established men's moral and sexual attitude towards women as central to Victorian society. Her attack against women was based on their deviation from the Victorian patriarchal discourse of womanhood.

In response, Caird's article showed the problematic aspect in Linton's anti-feminist stance. Firstly, Caird questioned the woman's sphere, as women saw their talents wasted. Instead, independent working women constituted forces of "social vitality" and contributed to "the real interests of the common wealth" (Caird 1897, 168). She showed the problems of confining women to domestic life and presented how working women would benefit their own life, support their families and revitalise society. Secondly, Caird (1897, 173) challenged how Linton unfairly imposed choices upon women. She especially attacked the essentialist notion of nature, "'Nature intends', 'Nature desires'... Man intends, Man desires, and 'Nature' in the course of centuries, learns to obey". When Linton legitimised the choice of marriage and motherhood as the only natural duty for women, Caird explicitly revealed the hypocritical patriarchal power that forced women to conform with it. A person's right to freedom would be the paramount quality of social democracy and equality. She also defended women's right in the novel, by presenting Hadria's resistance to nurturing her own children and adoption of an orphan girl. Such a choice demonstrated Caird's liberalist belief in women's agency in marriage and right to choose. She challenged the patriarchal authority and redefined the ideal gender relationship as two parties living equally with each other. Finally, when Linton criticised female suffragettes and described this fight as evidence of women's "sexual enmity", Caird (1897, 187) retorted: "No man who loves his wife would seek

to hamper her freedom.” In questioning Linton’s paradoxical discussion of gender roles, Caird forcefully demonstrated the outcome of power hierarchy in the gender relationship and argued for a friendly gender relationship. Caird differed from Linton, as she argued for the women’s role in determining their marriage and motherhood. She consistently questioned the essentialist understanding of motherhood, the unequal social and lawful treatment of women, in her novels and journalistic articles.

## Conclusion

Caird was a representative female writer leading public discussion over marriage. Her central role in the Victorian feminist debate was made even more intense, considering her challenge to the biological, cultural and lawful discourses of womanhood. In charting her history of developing a critical attitude towards marriage, the article has revealed how Caird should not be understood as a misogynist, which was once widely disseminated and believed in her time. Caird questioned the unequal and unjustified treatment of women in the marital relationship. In particular, she argued ardently for a marriage reform that would devastate the existing religious authority on marriage norms, as well as for the emancipation of restraint on women’s rights. In exploring the relationship between Caird and her contemporaries who engaged with the debate over marriage, the article has revealed the feminist writer’s contribution.

Caird inherited Mill’s philosophy on freedom and actively developed her own criticism of patriarchy by investigating marriage as an unequal social contract. She demonstrated how the patriarchal social system imposed a discourse of womanhood, such as ideal womanhood and maternal duty, onto women by buttressing these ideas through moral indoctrination and male-centred legislation. Her radical attitude was also revealed in a resolute challenge to the biased understanding or anti-feminist fallacy of women’s rights. Her attack against Grand’s eugenic argument was expressed vividly in her astute defence of nurture and an effort to resist any class or racial prejudice. Unlike her anti-feminist predecessor, Linton, who had paradoxical arguments, Caird showed a consistent argument for protecting women’s right to freedom of choice, allowing women to become fully independent and contributing to society by earning their own living. Her response to the mainstream Victorian discussion explicitly revealed her rebellious attitude towards gender norms, establishing herself as a feminist writer and defending an ideal marriage based on principles of respect and equality.

## References

- Anon. 1893. “Mrs. Mona Caird in a New Character.” *The Review of Reviews* 7: 519.
- Broomfield, A. L. 2004. “Eliza Lynn Linton, Sarah Grand and the Spectacle of the Victorian Woman Question: Catch Phrases, Buzz Words and Sound Bites.” *English Literature in Transition 1880–1920* 47(3): 251–272. <https://doi.org/10.2487/P277-7R01-41R0-0101>
- Caird, M. 1888. “Marriage.” *Westminster Review* 130 (1): 186–201.

- Caird, M. 1889. *The Wing of Azrael*. New York: F. F. Lovell & Company.
- Caird, M. 1890. "Interview." *Women's Penny Paper* 2 (88): 421–422.
- Caird, M. 1897. *The Morality of Marriage: And Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Woman*. London: G. Redway.
- Caird, M. 1910. "The Lot of Women." *Westminster Review* 174 (1): 52–59.
- Caird, M. 1989. *The Daughters of Danaus*, edited by M. M. Gullette. New York: Feminist Press.
- Cano, M. 2019. "A Woman's Novel: Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird, and Hélène Cixous's *Écriture Feminine*." *Victoriographies* 9 (1): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.3366/vic.2019.0323>
- Donovan, J. 2022. "Eliza Lynn Linton and the Irish Question." *Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature* 142 (1): 85–102. <https://doi.org/10.1353/vct.2022.0009>
- Grand, S. 2000a. "Does Marriage Hinder a Woman's Self-development." In *Sex, Social Purity, and Sarah Grand: Journalistic Writings and Contemporary Reception*, edited by A. Heilmann and S. Forward, 119–125. Vol. 1. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Grand, S. 2000b. "The Case of the Modern Marriage Woman." In *Sex, Social Purity, and Sarah Grand: Journalistic Writings and Contemporary Reception*, edited by A. Heilmann and S. Forward, 203–209. Vol. 1. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Grand, S. 2000c. "The New Aspect of the Woman Question." In *Sex, Social Purity, and Sarah Grand: Journalistic Writings and Contemporary Reception*, edited by A. Heilmann and S. Forward, 29–35. Vol. 1. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Greenblatt, S., and M. H. Abrams. 2005. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol.2 New York: W.W. Norton.
- Hammerton, A. J. 1990. "Victorian Marriage and the Law of Matrimonial Cruelty." *Victorian Studies* 33 (2): 269–292. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3828359>
- Heilmann, A. 1996. "Mona Caird (1854–1932): Wild Woman, New Woman, and Early Radical Feminist Critic of Marriage and Motherhood." *Women's History Review* 5 (1): 67–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612029600200100>
- Heilmann, A. 2000. *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism*. London: Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230288355>
- Holcombe, L. 1983. *Wives & Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487599577>

- Hookway, D. 2010. "Falling Over the Same Precipice: Thomas Hardy, Mona Caird and John Stuart Mill." *The Thomas Hardy Journal* 26: 132–150.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48571031>
- Hookway, D. 2012. "Liberating Conversations: John Stuart Mill and Mona Caird." *Literature Compass* 9 (11): 873–883. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2012.00911.x>
- Husband, M. G. 1898 "The Morality of Marriage, and Other Essays on the Status and Destiny of Woman, by Mona Caird, London: George Redway, 1897." *International Journal of Ethics* 9 (1): 131–132. <https://doi.org/10.1086/intejethi.9.1.2375116>
- Linton, E. L. 1888. *The Girl of the Period and Other Social Essays*. Vol. I. London: Richard Bentley and Son.
- Linton, E. L. 1891. "The Wild Women as Social Insurgents." *The Nineteenth Century and After: A Monthly Review* 30 (176): 596–605.
- Mill, J. S. 1869. *The Subjection of Women*. London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/12288-000>
- Mill, J. S. 2011. *On Liberty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richardson, A. 2003. *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198187004.001.0001>
- Rosenberg, T. S. 2005. "A Challenge to Victorian Motherhood: Mona Caird and Gertrude Atherton." *Women's Writing* 12 (3): 485–504.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09699080500200265>