

## Chapter 5

### Progress: Valid Invalid Identity in *Ships That Pass in the Night* (1893)

#### Introduction

*Wuthering Heights* ridiculed consumptive stereotypes, and *Jude the Obscure* exposed socioeconomic and cultural factors that disabled people with chronic illness, but neither could hope for a better future – much less suggest real strategies for improving the lives of people with tuberculosis in the nineteenth century. Beatrice Harraden's 1893 bestseller *Ships That Pass in the Night* also offers a complex, bitter critique of the way in which sentimentality obscures the abuse and neglect of disabled people by nondisabled carers; it undermines the Romanticisation of consumptives, and shows consumptives driven to suicide by social marginalisation that leaves them feeling useless and hopeless. Yet its depiction of a romantic friendship between an emancipated woman and a disabled man also engages with the exciting possibilities of 1890s' gender politics, and imagines new comradeship between disabled and nondisabled people based on mutual care and respect.

*Ships That Pass in the Night* is a love story set in an Alpine 'Kurhaus' for invalids. Once enormously popular, adapted for the stage in remote corners of America and translated into several languages, including Braille, *Ships* was 'said to be the only book found in the room of Cecil Rhodes when he died.'<sup>1</sup> The novel is rarely read now, and so requires a brief synopsis. The heroine, Bernadine Holme, represents a recognisable type of New Woman: unmarried, educated, and active in contemporary political movements. To her great dismay, she suffers a break-down from overwork and moves to an Alpine resort, where she becomes acquainted with a wealthy, talented, but obnoxious invalid called Robert Allisten. Robert not only feels excluded from the nondisabled world, but has also withdrawn from the disabled community he inhabits. He stays in the health resort only to please his elderly mother and, longing to commit suicide, he explains the 'great sacrifice' of 'going on living one's life for the sake of another [...] when, in fact, living is only a long tedious dying'.<sup>2</sup> Despite his attitude, Bernadine and Robert explore the possibility of rebuilding the supposedly thwarted,

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<sup>1</sup> 'Miss Harraden', *The Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> May 1936, p. 18; find.galegroup.com (Times Digital Archive) [27<sup>th</sup> July 2017]. See Beatrice Harraden, *Concerning 'Ships That Pass in the Night'* (London: S.S. McClure, [1894]), pp. 5-6. Rhodes (1853-1902) became consumptive aged sixteen; see Dormandy, *White Death*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>2</sup> Beatrice Harraden, *Ships That Pass in the Night* (1893) (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauschnitz, 1894 'continental edition'; facsimile repr. [n.p.]: Kessinger, 2007), XI, p. 121. An electronic version of the novel can be obtained online for free.

wasted disabled life as a valid identity with potential for growth and development. In the permissive Kurhaus environment, rules dictating intimacy and mainstream gender hierarchies are modified by the relationship between carer and invalid (or invalid and invalid), and their delicate romance hints at a new model of interaction between the sexes. However, Robert remains incapable of confessing his love for Bernadine and she returns to London, unaware of his feelings. He writes an effusive love-letter but destroys it unsent. When Bernadine hears of his mother's death, she fears Robert will commit suicide as planned. Instead, he follows Bernadine to London, and they begin to reveal their feelings for one another. That evening, Bernadine is killed in a road accident before they can plan their future. After this abrupt, inexplicable tragedy, Robert returns to the Kurhaus alone to an unknown fate, his life nonetheless redeemed by their love.<sup>3</sup>

The novelist herself is now almost as obscure as her once-famous novel. Beatrice Harraden (1864-1936) was educated at Cheltenham Ladies' College and received a degree in Classics and mathematics from the University of London in 1884.<sup>4</sup> *Ships* was her first novel; her earlier tale, 'The Mathematical Master's Love Story' (1892), is evidently a precursor to *Ships* in its depiction of romance between an emancipated young woman and a consumptive man, while her later volume of two stories, *Hilda Trafford, and The Remittance Man* (1897), continues the theme of gender relations redefined by illness. Harraden identified proudly as a person of mixed race, as a feminist, and as disabled: she experienced 'a complete failure of the ulnar nerve' affecting her right hand, leaving her unable to write much of the time.<sup>5</sup> She stated that the town of Petershof in *Ships* was based on her own experience of health resorts.<sup>6</sup>

However, the precise interaction between her own experience of impairment, her politics, and her fiction is unclear – especially in her use of illness to dismantle traditional gender roles in readiness for feminist reconstruction.<sup>7</sup> An 1897 article on Harraden states that:

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<sup>3</sup> A review of *Ships That Pass in the Night* in *The Bookman*, 4: 19 (April 1893), p. 27, <https://search.proquest.com> (British Periodicals I&II) [27<sup>th</sup> July 2017], states that 'the story is distinctly of the present day', and bewails 'the cloying morbidity which, unfortunately, is the strongest impression left by the book.'

<sup>4</sup> See Fred Hunter, 'Beatrice Harraden', <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33720> [8<sup>th</sup> June 2009], and 'Miss Beatrice Harraden', *Review of Reviews* (June 1897), p. 569; <https://search.proquest.com> (British Periodicals I&II) [27<sup>th</sup> July 2017]. Harraden became a member of the militant Women's Social and Political Union.

<sup>5</sup> 'Miss Beatrice Harraden', *Bookman*, 4: 22 (July 1893), p. 108; <https://search.proquest.com> (British Periodicals I&II) [27<sup>th</sup> July 2017]. See 'Miss Beatrice Harraden' (1897), p. 569.

<sup>6</sup> Harraden, *Concerning 'Ships'*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Most of Harraden's recorded involvement with feminist activities occurred *after* she wrote *Ships*. The insertion of parables in *Ships* suggests the influence of Olive Shreiner's proto-feminist novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883).

The writings of Shelley and of Ibsen, with their note of freedom for woman and due recognition of her true place in the economy of nature, appeal strongly to Miss Harraden, the keynote of whose character is, as we have before said, a love of freedom and a hatred of the unmeaning and useless conventionalities of society.<sup>8</sup>

Her faith in the potential for communication between emancipated women and hostile men was lifelong, visible both in *Ships* and in her 1926 retrospective article 'My Liberty'. Here, Harraden states that:

Friendships and comradeships with men have been some of my great pleasures, for although an ardent feminist, I have never, in the whole of our exciting suffrage campaign, either been or felt 'anti-man'. I have always felt that what we were up against was the stubbornness, the granite conservatism, the bedrock selfishness of men – ministered to by women – but not up against an unassailable antagonism. I remember leaving in anger the house of a very dear and valued friend because of his insulting remarks on something which seemed to him to be the last word in degradation and dishonour [...] – nothing less or more than a suffrage procession of women graduates in their robes! But even he learnt – chivalrously, too, and generously; and down came his fortress with a crash, demolished by common sense.<sup>9</sup>

Could this incident have occurred early enough to inspire her depiction of Bernadine's argument with Robert in chapter XVII, discussed later? In 1926, Harraden also expressed faith that the wild girls of the 1920s would make 'their gradual, their inevitable evolution into the fine type visualised by true pioneers of the past'.<sup>10</sup> This sense of continuity, with gratitude to past pioneers and hope for future generations, is expressed by Bernadine in the same argument with Robert, and may have interesting implications for her exploration of disabled identities in *Ships*.

This novel makes two significant contributions to disability studies. First, Harraden's depiction of Robert negotiates the need to criticise the social structures that damage disabled people *without* dismissing the identities shaped by those negative forces as hopelessly degraded. Robert's moody vacillations between tenderness and avoidance of intimacy must be understood in the context of widespread abuse of vulnerable invalids by their 'care-takers'. The successful dialogue and true intimacy finally achieved by Bernadine and Robert therefore has political significance: a positive, socially-conscious new identity and comradeship can arise from a seemingly ruined life. In *Ships*, this even occurs without requiring the disabled character's physical impairment to be cured.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Miss Beatrice Harraden' (1897), p. 569.

<sup>9</sup> Beatrice Harraden, 'My Liberty', *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, 76: 394 (February 1926), pp. 26-27, continued pp. 108-112 (pp. 26-27); <https://search.proquest.com> (British Periodicals I&II) [27<sup>th</sup> July 2017].

<sup>10</sup> Harraden, 'My Liberty', p. 111.

Secondly, *Ships That Pass in the Night*'s assimilation of Harraden's feminism provides a clear intellectual and social context for the relatively obscure issues of 1890s' disability politics. This context illuminates the novel's critique of power inequalities in the sentimental sickroom, and the urgent need for a new form of relationship between disabled and nondisabled people – an urgent need that is shown to mirror contemporary demands for new, non-exploitative relationships between the sexes. In its suggestion that emancipated women and disabled men may be united by a consciousness of shared oppression, *Ships* begins to offer a solution to the problems depicted by Hardy and Brontë. The bold, confident feminist Bernadine shows Robert strategies for negotiating social and emotional re-engagement on equal terms – and yet she, too, must rethink her first-wave feminist preoccupation with work and independence, becoming less dismissive of people who seem inactive and weak, or who have withdrawn from society because they are marginalised or disheartened. It is Robert's post-sentimental disabled identity that renders him a worthy mate for the emancipated woman, and it is his comradeship with the emancipated woman that gives him hope for the future.

### **The limits of biomedicine in the Kurhaus**

The Alpine 'Kurhaus' of *Ships That Pass in the Night* offers a unique social space for exploring relationships between disabled and nondisabled people. Unbeknownst to Harraden in 1893, the real communities on which she based her story would not last much longer. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the culture of consumptive health resorts was distorted by the sanatorium movement; it was then erased completely by the introduction of effective chemotherapy that enabled TB patients to be treated rapidly at home and continue their lives as normal.<sup>11</sup> This novel inhabits a very brief but exciting moment in the history of disability.

*Ships* has access to a biomedical model of consumption-as-tuberculosis without being dominated absolutely by biomedical attitudes to disabled people themselves. Recent medical changes opened up new possibilities for representing viable consumptive disabled identities in a very obvious way: Brontë in 1847 could hardly be expected to imagine a consumptive surviving beyond the end of the novel, but the average life expectancy for middle- and upper-class consumptives increased from an estimated three years in 1835 to seven or eight years in

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<sup>11</sup> See L. Bryder, *Below the Magic Mountain: A Social History of Tuberculosis in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

1894.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in *Ships*, Robert's death never seems imminent, and it is feasible for him to live beyond the last page: 'he always looked very ill, but he did not seem to get worse' (V, pp. 45-46).

Harraden identifies important Romantic consumptive traits, only to dismiss them in the light of her assimilation of mundane biomedical observation. Robert has:

nothing striking nor eccentric about his appearance. He was neither ugly nor good-looking, neither tall nor short, neither fair nor dark. He was thin and frail, and rather bent. But that might have been the description of anyone in Petershof. There was nothing pathetic about him, no suggestion even of poetry, which gives a reverence to suffering, whether mental or physical. As there was no expression on his face, so also was there no expression in his eyes: no distant longing, no far-off fixedness; nothing, indeed, to awaken sad sympathy. (V, pp. 46-47)

Designating Robert's tubercular physique as commonplace undermines the Romantic literary function of consumption to denote 'specialness'.<sup>13</sup> This supposed void of spiritual or sentimental meaning is an explicit rejection of traditional cultural representations of consumption, just as Ippolit and Jude desired in Chapter 4.

Nonetheless, in *Ships*, the reach of biomedicine is limited. The 1890s' Kurhaus appears to be a hotel for invalids who spend their time socialising and indulging in their hobbies, employing their own doctors and nurses as desired – unlike the authoritarian biomedical institution depicted in A. E. Ellis' *The Rack* (1958), where patients are stripped of autonomy and controlled by medical professionals.<sup>14</sup> The Kurhaus cannot utilise invasive surgery or chemotherapy; its only therapeutic claims are its dry air and high altitude. This limited range of tools with which to intrude on patients' bodies seems to curtail the power of medical professionals to pathologise, categorise and segregate diseased individuals. For example, Bernadine is accepted by the consumptives as a 'comrade' (XX, p. 224) despite her unclear biomedical diagnosis and very different prognosis. Medical details seem irrelevant.

Life in Harraden's Kurhaus is characterised not only by the absence of intrusive medical regimes and surgery, but also by the absence of the fear of contagion – a fear that

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<sup>12</sup> Clark, *Treatise*, p. 177; Newsholme, *Prevention*, pp. 49-50. By contrast, George Gissing, *The Odd Women* (1893), ed. by Patricia Ingham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 41-42, ignores the fact that young female deaths from tuberculosis were falling dramatically in the second half of the nineteenth century (Smith, *People's Health*, p. 289) and implies that single women entering the workforce are dying from consumption in droves.

<sup>13</sup> Bailin, *Sickroom*, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> A. E. Ellis is the *nom de plume* of English writer Derek Lindsay (1920-2000), who underwent treatment in a Swiss sanatorium as a student in the 1940s. Inspired by his experiences, *The Rack* is a horrifying and brutal novel clearly set in a similar (or identical) location to *Ships*, but fifty years later.

dominated twentieth-century approaches to handling consumptives.<sup>15</sup> In the 1890s, the stigma of contagion was evidently so slight as to escape discussion in Harraden's novel. Although in 1893 Squire declared 'no other person should occupy the same bed with a consumptive', and 'kissing should be avoided between the patient and other members of the family', he insisted that, overall, 'there need be no restrictions as to intercourse with the invalid'.<sup>16</sup> Robert and Bernadine never reach the point of kissing or sharing a bed; Harraden therefore avoids any problems a conscientious 1890s' consumptive might face. Bernadine does, however, spend a lot of time in close contact with dying consumptives, and no comments are made about contagion whatsoever.

Arguably, the novel moves through the reductive biomedical conflation of impairment and disability to a more sophisticated social model of disability beyond, locating the consumptive characters' suffering not in their impaired bodies but, as UPIAS put it, in 'the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments'.<sup>17</sup> Like *Wuthering Heights*, *Ships* exemplifies the liberating possibilities of the biomedical model emergent rather than labouring under the biomedical model triumphant: biomedicine releases consumptives from tedious Romantic stereotypes, and has yet to replace it with a new tyranny. As such, *Ships* also marks the historical limit of distinctively Victorian disabled identities and communities which were unable to withstand the pervasive cultural pathologisation of deviant bodies in the early twentieth-century sanatorium regime.

### **Identity and damage**

The hero of *Ships That Pass in the Night* is as far from a 'positive' representation of disabled identity as Linton Heathcliff. Robert Allisten is misanthropic, chauvinistic, bitter, withdrawn, and suicidal, declaring that for him:

'everything that would seem to make that life acceptable has been wrenched away, not the pleasures, but the duties, and the possibilities of expressing one's energies, either in one direction or another: [...] in fact, living is only a long tedious dying' (XI, p. 121)

His assertion is not merely a biomedical judgement that life with impairment must be unbearable, as he also alludes to the disabling social exclusion that accompanies impairment

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<sup>15</sup> See Dormandy, *White Death*, p. 312, and *Tuberculosis and the Commonwealth: the full verbatim transactions of the Second Commonwealth and Empire Health and Tuberculosis Conference* (National Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis [NAPT], 1949), p. 287.

<sup>16</sup> Squire, *Hygienic Prevention*, pp. 130-132.

<sup>17</sup> UPIAS in Barnes, 'Legacy', p. 4.

and thwarts self-realisation. Robert is not the only disabled character to regard suicide as the solution to a ruined life. There are three other suicides in *Ships*: one is a consumptive ‘Dutchman’ who ‘had received rather a bad account of himself from the doctor a few days previously, and in a fit of depression, so it was thought, he had put a bullet through his head’ (XI, p. 112).<sup>18</sup> While his motive is assumed to be a reaction to his medical prognosis – an assumption that the mere fact of impairment makes life impossible – the inserted ‘so it was thought’ reminds us that his feelings may be more complex and opaque. Harraden’s treatment of this incident is sympathetic to all involved: she depicts the traumatic impact on the whole community, but passes no unkind judgement on the Dutchman’s decision. When Robert informs Bernadine that he expects to kill himself eventually, Bernadine ‘wished to wrap him round with love and tenderness’ – neither approval nor outrage, but merely a desire to protect and reassure someone in pain (XII, p. 130). Harraden accepts that the consumptive may *feel* his life is invalid, but does not endorse that judgement.

Nonetheless, Robert’s impairment and social disablement represent a stew of damage which has become an unavoidable fact of his existence. Acknowledgement of disabled identity as one generated through damage is highly problematic – even when one locates the source of damage in avoidable social oppression rather than in bodily impairment. According to Paul Abberley, in many modern cultural representations of disability:

whilst his/ her ‘primary identity’ [...] resides in disability, the legitimacy and value of this identity is simultaneously denied. Whether it is perceived as ‘tragic’ or ‘brave’ a total identity of the person and the disability is assumed – but at the same time the disabled state is taken for granted as necessarily illegitimate.<sup>19</sup>

In this scenario, the identity born of damage is a false identity and an invalid dead-end. The biological and social phenomena that make the entity ‘Robert Allisten’ are criticised as wrong, diseased, and unjust, consigning him to the identity of ‘Petershof invalid’ (XX, p. 228) and then labelling that identity illegitimate; it is a condemned-hold in which he merely awaits execution.

Does *Ships* challenge this perception? Leonard Kriegel observes that ‘the condition addressed in the biography of the cripple is a denial of the life one had originally envisioned for himself’: to narrate the disabled person’s actual life is to give it status as the ‘real’ life above the life that might have been had not disability intervened.<sup>20</sup> In *Ships*, the narrator briefly adopts the gossipy tone of Robert’s unperceptive neighbours to remark that his rare

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<sup>18</sup> See two more mentioned on III, p. 29.

<sup>19</sup> Abberley, ‘Concept of Oppression’, p. 171.

<sup>20</sup> Kriegel, ‘Cripple in Literature’, p. 43.

smile 'made one pause to wonder what could have been the original disposition of the Disagreeable Man before ill-health had cut him off from the affairs of active life' (V, p. 45). Yet the novel wastes no more time on such nostalgia: if Robert is to develop any legitimate identity, it must emerge from this damaged present self and not from some lost pre-impairment self. Interestingly, the 'denial of the life one had originally envisioned for himself' is a vital component of Robert's own concept of disabled identity:

'Nothing can be of much happiness to me,' [Bernadine] said, half to herself, and her lips quivered. 'I have had to give up so much: all my work, all my ambitions.'

'You are not the only one who has had to do that,' [Robert] said sharply. 'Why make a fuss? Things arrange themselves, and eventually we adjust ourselves to the new arrangement. A great deal of caring and grieving, phase one; still more caring and grieving, phase two; less caring and grieving, phase three; no further feeling whatsoever, phase four. Mercifully I am at phase four. You are at phase one. Make a quick journey over the stages.'

He turned and left her, and she strolled along, thinking of his words, wondering how long it would take her to arrive at his indifference. She had always looked upon indifference as paralysis of the soul, and paralysis meant death, nay, was worse than death. (III, p. 23)

Robert does not describe disabled identity springing into existence at the moment of medical diagnosis, nor as a state of paralysis; rather, he describes the generation of disabled identity as a prolonged psychosocial process with identifiable stages. The *content* of these 'stages' is, of course, bitterly negative, but the *structure* of the process hints at the potential for development. By contrast, it is Bernadine's fixed, repetitive obsession with 'all my work, all my ambitions' that denotes stagnation, continuing even after Robert has plotted her trajectory and moved on. Crucially, the novel later demonstrates that Robert's 'phase four' is not a terminal point but merely another stage on his ongoing journey: to narrate the actual life of the disabled character (however damaged), rather than dwelling on their pre-impairment self, is the first step to acknowledging it as a living identity with potential for development and growth.

### **Disability and romance**

*Ships* advocates a development and validation of disabled identity through emotional bonds with others. This may seem like an unthinking reversion to sentimental models of disability, but in fact *Ships* reaches this conclusion through a torturous journey that explores all the dangers, limitations, and perversions of sentimentality. At first, the hero attacks this notion of validating life through relationships, despairing that the only philosophical question most



people care about is: ‘our beloved ones – shall we meet them [after death], and how? Isn’t it pitiful? Why cannot we be more impersonal?’ (XVII, p. 205). However, Bernadine says:

‘There was a time when I felt like that; but now I have learnt something better: that we need not be ashamed of being human [...]. We shall go on building our bridge between life and death, each one for himself. When we see that it is not strong enough, we shall break it down and build another.’ (XVII, pp. 205-206)

Bernadine adopts and then modifies Robert’s description of life as both process and journey, gently challenging Robert’s pessimism. Crucially, her new validation of the individual is not conditional on success:

‘[T]he greatest value of them all has been in the building of them. It does not matter what we build, but build we must; you, and I, and every one.’

‘I have long ceased to build my bridge,’ The Disagreeable Man said.

‘It is an almost unconscious process,’ she said. ‘Perhaps you are still at work, or perhaps you are resting.’ (XVII, p. 207)

Bernadine describes a relationship which accepts the obnoxious consumptive’s bitterness and withdrawal as a perfectly acceptable stage in the bridge-building process: even when Robert appears to have withdrawn into ‘paralysis of the soul’ (III, p. 23), he is probably ‘still at work’. Indeed, the withdrawal may represent a period of recuperation made necessary by the damaging effects of social marginalisation. *Ships* demonstrates an optimistic approach to re-evaluating even the darker moments of disability history and representation: Robert is an ostensibly ‘negative’ disabled Victorian who is in fact still toiling on his difficult journey towards re-connecting with the world.

While that process unfolds, any relationship involving Robert must find some way to accommodate the damage that constitutes his identity – an especially difficult challenge, as this damage manifests itself in a mistrust and rejection of emotional bonds. Robert declares not only that nobody loves him, but also that nobody truly cares about anyone, and that one should simply withdraw (XIX, p. 219). This is the kind of self-sabotaging characterisation Paul K. Longmore criticises in conservative twentieth-century ‘dramas of adjustment’ that depict disabled characters shut out from romance not by the real prejudices of nondisabled people but by their own blameworthy paranoia and bitterness.<sup>21</sup> Robert’s unsent love letter to Bernadine does indeed convey this paranoid anticipation of rejection, stating ‘it is not I who may hold you in my arms. Some strong man must love and wrap you round in tenderness and softness. Would to God I were that strong man!’ (XX, pp. 231-232). His complaints are wholly unjustified because Harraden never presents us with a ‘strong man’ as a rival love-

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<sup>21</sup> Longmore, ‘Screening Stereotypes’, p. 73.

object – unlike, for example, Henry James’ *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Anton Chekhov’s *The Story of a Nobody* (1893), and even *Wuthering Heights*. Perhaps the only point at which Robert’s letter offers a convincing objection to his credentials as a lover is in his description of the strong man’s ability to ‘wrap you round in tenderness and softness’ – a description almost calculated to expose the inadequacy of Robert’s ‘thin and frail, and rather bent’ (V, p. 46) consumptive body. Otherwise, Harraden presents Robert’s imaginative construction of a rival lover as unnecessarily paranoid. Perhaps the disabled man has only himself to blame for his loneliness.

However, unlike Longmore’s ‘dramas of adjustment’, *Ships* reveals that cultural pressures really do justify Robert’s anticipation of rejection. His comment that ‘in my state of health, what right had I to think of marriage, and making a home for myself?’ (p. 225) echoes the accusations of selfishness Henry Smith makes in his *Plea for the Unborn* (1897).<sup>22</sup> As demonstrated in Chapter 1 and in *Jude*, these objections to disabled people finding love are not figments of Robert’s imagination. *Ships* presents a range of romantic and sexual relationships between disabled and nondisabled people, each functioning conspicuously as a critique on the others. In the Reffolds’ marriage, Harraden depicts explicitly the abuse and rejection that Longmore finds lacking in the ‘dramas of adjustment’ that blame the disabled person’s own ‘negative attitude’ rather than a widespread cultural prejudice against disabled sexuality.<sup>23</sup> After months of suffering neglect in silence, dying consumptive Mr Reffold finally tells his nondisabled wife:

‘you are a selfish woman. Has it ever struck you that you are selfish?’

Mrs Reffold gave no reply, but she made a resolution to write to her particular friend at Cannes and confide to her how very trying her husband had become.  
[...]

‘I remember you telling me,’ continued Mr Reffold, ‘that sick people repelled you. That was when I was strong and vigorous. But since I have been ill, I have often recalled your words. Poor Winifred! You did not think then that you would have an invalid husband on your hands.’ (XIII, p. 145)

Mr Reffold cites a specific example of his wife’s ableism: this is no figment of a paranoid invalid’s imagination. Mrs Reffold confiding in an absent ‘particular friend’ even suggests an act of emotional infidelity in exposing intimate aspects of her marriage to an outsider while failing to reply to her husband.

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<sup>22</sup> Smith, *Plea for the Unborn*, pp. 27, 40 and 101.

<sup>23</sup> Longmore, ‘Screening Stereotypes’, p. 73.

Thus, Harraden shows that Robert's fears of rejection are quite justified – but she also shows that rejection is not inevitable. In contrast with the Reffolds' dysfunctional marriage, Harraden also depicts a trouble-free romance between a nondisabled woman and Wärlü the 'hunchback' postman. This romance is highly conventional in form, despite its unconventional cast:

There was something very winning about the hunchback's face.

'Ah, ah! Marie,' he said, shaking his curly head; 'I know how it is with you: you only like people in fine binding. They have not always fine hearts.' (IV, p. 34)

Wärlü only *pretends* to anticipate rejection in these clichéd terms: he goes on to flirt confidently with Marie, and is accepted. His effortless sexual success suggests that the relationship is both legitimate in itself and proof of his unproblematic disabled masculinity.

Where does the central romance of Robert and Bernadine fit in the context established by these two contrasting relationships? The ostensibly undesirable Robert – 'neither ugly nor good-looking', but 'thin and frail, and rather bent' (V, p. 46) – is rendered desirable by calculatingly fulfilling several literary erotic fantasies. Like Byron's *Giaour* and Brontë's Heathcliff, Robert is cold and untouchable to all but the right woman, thus offering the fantasy of saving a lost soul. He is glamorously tormented, self-destructive, and brooding, but the underlying cause of his brooding (consumption rather than Byronic danger and incest) is familiar and manageable; his physical frailty makes him still more accessible. After withholding judgement on Robert's suicidal plans in chapter XI, leaving Robert's own bleak Byronic despair dominating the reader's sentiments, Bernadine regains control in chapter XII, directing the reader's response towards protective, sympathetic impulses: 'when he told her about the one sacrifice, she could have wished to wrap him round with love and tenderness' (XII, p. 130). Bernadine's response renders moody Byronic self-destruction a palatable object of affection without entirely precluding its erotic appeal. Harraden exploits Robert's physical impairment and social disability – traits that could have excluded him from the romance plot – to enhance his desirability instead.

That Robert is designed to embody commonplace nineteenth-century literary erotic fantasies is embarrassingly clear. Yet it is also significant that it is a disabled man fulfilling such a transparently erotic role. Unlike Beardsley's drawings, Harraden does not eroticise physical difference *per se*. Rather, *Ships* features a disabled man as the hero of a mainstream and formally conventional hetero romance: boy meets girl, misunderstanding occurs, boy loses girl, boy wins girl back. As I will demonstrate below, the peculiar ending, in which girl

is crushed to death by wagon, serves as a jarring reminder of the unpredictable (if not chaotic) nature of life, rather than as a comment on the viability of their relationship.

Robert begins to feel that his relationship with Bernadine provides him with a legitimate disabled identity. He learns to accept Bernadine's claim that 'building one's bridge' (XVII, pp. 205-207) between self and others is the proper function of human life, and that the individual is legitimated by the attempt, however unsuccessful or sporadic: as Robert states, 'I shall never call my life a failure now. I may have failed in everything else, but not in loving' (XX, p. 232). As *Jude* showed, this is a precarious position for a consumptive – but *Ships* never shies away from the danger that his life may be destroyed if the more mobile nondisabled partner decides to abandon him.<sup>24</sup> When Bernadine returns to London, Robert writes pathetically that 'you are better, God bless you, and you go back to a fuller life, and [...] God help me, I am left to wither away' (XX, p. 224). Indeed, when Bernadine meets Robert later, 'he seemed to have shrunk away since she had last seen him' (2. V, p. 253). Nonetheless, the novel ends by suggesting that their relationship is resilient enough to withstand the removal of one of the partners. After Bernadine's death, the 'Disagreeable Man' went back to the mountains: to live his life out there, and to build his bridge, as we all do, whether consciously or unconsciously. If it breaks down, we build it again' (2. V, pp. 262-263). Not only has Robert seemingly abandoned his plan to commit suicide, but he has also adopted a project of emotional self-development that continues not despite but *because* of the loss of his nondisabled love-object. The relationship was not merely propping up an otherwise untenable existence: rather, it generated real change within Robert, and his real assimilation of Bernadine's values sustains their relationship beyond physical proximity.

But why, after years of loneliness, must Robert be deprived of his lover at all? Analysing Harraden's representation of Bernadine's death is crucial in ascertaining the legitimacy the novel accords to Bernadine's relationship with Robert and, by extension, to Robert as Bernadine's disabled love-object. Tomorrow, Robert hopes to meet Bernadine, probably intending to confess his love or even propose marriage; meanwhile, Bernadine is considering their future holidays together:

That was what she was thinking of at four in the afternoon [...].

At five she was lying unconscious in the accident-ward of the New Hospital: she had been knocked down by a wagon, and terribly injured. (2. III, p. 259)

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<sup>24</sup> Although Bernadine has some unspecified impairment, her social marginalisation is less disabling than Robert's; she is able to leave the Kurhaus while he must stay to survive.

Harraden emphasises not only the unexpectedness of death, but also its randomness: swift and devoid of purpose or meaning. The randomness was certainly observed by contemporary readers as a statement in its own right – a meaninglessness with meaning. The *Spectator* complained:

The death of Bernadine Holme [...] will seem to most readers a gratuitous and even inartistic piece of cruelty, for this story has the general characteristics of one that ought to end happily. It is to be hoped that the author of *Ships That Pass in the Night* will not give way to the popular affectation of cynicism, for there is decided promise in what seems to be her first work.<sup>25</sup>

It is significant that the *Spectator* regarded a love story about an emancipated spinster and a consumptive man as having potential for a happy ending. Harraden later explained that ‘I felt at the time that [Bernadine] had to die, and that it was in keeping with the irony of life that she, the stronger of the two, should be suddenly swept away’.<sup>26</sup> In a world ruled by ‘irony’, not eugenic order, the weak outlive the strong. There is no reason whatsoever for them to be separated – no judgement to be executed. It simply happens.

The ‘inartistic’ runaway wagon that crushes Bernadine also strips consumption of its traditional literary (and, indeed, social) function as the factor that divides young lovers.

According to Congreve’s *On Consumption of the Lungs* (1881[?]):

I know not of any one thing more painful in the annals of disease than the premature and rapid decline of the young [...]; the more still when strong attachments have been formed, and the pangs of hopeless love contribute to the patient’s misery.<sup>27</sup>

Reversing all cultural convention, Harraden’s consumptive is placed in the position of weary, chastened survivor at the end of the novel: it is he who learns from others’ lives and deaths, and it is they who become demonstrative objects for his interpretation.

Harraden observed that readers often wrote to ask her:

whether in my opinion Bernadine, if she had lived, would ever have married the Disagreeable Man. My answer was, that, so far as my understanding of her went, she would not have married him.<sup>28</sup>

Bernadine’s (and Harraden’s) feminist convictions offer ample reason for the heroine to refuse a conventional patriarchal marriage contract – none of which have anything to do with disability. For heroines in New Woman texts like Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), Menie Muriel Dowie’s *Gallia* (1895), Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895), and

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Review of *Ships That Pass in the Night*’, *Spectator*, 24<sup>th</sup> June 1893, p. 861.

<sup>26</sup> Harraden, *Concerning ‘Ships’*, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Congreve, *On Consumption*, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Harraden, *Concerning ‘Ships’*, p. 6.

George Egerton's 'The Heart of the Apple' (1897), healthy breeding is a priority in selecting a partner.<sup>29</sup> In his essay 'The Girl of the Future' (1890), Allen declared that emancipated women, free to choose, would surely select physically and mentally perfect men and dedicate their lives to producing superior offspring.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, Harraden appears to have been an anti-eugenic feminist like Mona Caird (1854-1932), contemptuous of a woman's supposed duty to devote her life to regenerating the race, for she later explained 'my utter horror [...] of having my gifts snuffed out by husband and children'.<sup>31</sup> Harraden's depiction of a woman so emphatically free to choose her mate falling in love with a physically and emotionally 'diseased' man looks like a deliberate challenge to contemporary eugenic feminism. Her ongoing commitment to celebrating non-reproductive or dysgenic couples is demonstrated by her later volume, *Hilda Strafford, and The Remittance Man* (1897). The first of two linked stories features a failed marriage between a sickly man and his demanding young bride, while the second features a sweet domestic romance between two young men on a Californian ranch. As in *Ships*, the unconventional loving couple, juxtaposed with an unhappy heterosexual marriage, acts as a destabilising force that offers fresh possibilities for love and personal growth where conventional relationships have failed, and where reproduction is not the sole purpose of existence.

### **Sentimentality, care, and communication**

*Ships*' (and Harraden's) scepticism about conventional forms of social interaction extends to the sentimental sickroom. The novel embraces aspects of sentimentality, but expresses grave concerns about allowing sentimentality unregulated, unexamined control over disabled identities. As discussed in Chapter 2, sentimental morality validates identity for disabled people through relationships in which they act as grateful recipients of pity and care; however, those who fail to be grateful – or, indeed, to receive pity – cannot achieve a valid disabled identity under the sentimental model. Like *Jude*, *Ships* demonstrates that this threat represses communication between disabled and nondisabled people, precluding the

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<sup>29</sup> See Richardson, *Love and Eugenics*, pp. 162-164, comparing 'The Heart of the Apple' with *The Woman Who Did*. See Gail Cunningham, "'He Notes': Reconstructing Masculinity', in *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms*, ed. by Angélique Richardson and Chris Willis, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 94-106, on *Gallia*.

<sup>30</sup> Grant Allen, 'The Girl of the Future', *Universal Review*, 7: 25 (May 1890), pp. 49-64 (p. 60); <https://search.proquest.com> (British Periodicals I&II) [27<sup>th</sup> July 2017].

<sup>31</sup> Harraden, 'My Liberty', p. 26. See 'Miss Beatrice Harraden' (1897), p. 569. See Richardson, *Love and Eugenics*, pp. 179-214 on Caird. Robert refers to Bernadine and even to himself as a child (XII, pp. 133-135, and II. IV, pp. 255-258), but never as potential parents.

redemptive 'love based on comradeship and true understanding of the soul' (*Ships* 2. IV, p. 257).

Harraden problematises sentimental morality by making her hero a consumptive who rejects a sentimental disabled identity and the validation it confers:

The moralists tell us that suffering ennobles, and that a right acceptance of hindrances goes towards forming a beautiful character. But the result must largely depend on the original character: certainly, in the case of Robert Allisten, suffering had not ennobled his mind, nor disappointment sweetened his disposition. His title of 'Disagreeable Man' had been fairly earned, and he hugged it to himself with a triumphant secret satisfaction. (V, p. 42)

Robert's defiance of sentimentality affords him some antisocial gratification. Yet it is also a sad relic of sentimentality, not a valid alternative, as Robert's inappropriate 'hugging' of his nickname indicates his unsatisfied longing for real affection.

Like Nelly in *Wuthering Heights*, Bernadine is initially annoyed by the consumptive's failure to embody the prescribed sentimental disabled identity, but her feelings evolve rapidly, enabling a slightly different emotional connection to be formed:

She hardened her heart against him; there was no need for ill-health and disappointment to have brought any one to a miserable state of indifference like that. Then she looked at his wan face and frail form, and her heart softened at once. At the moment when her heart softened to him, he astonished her by handing her his paper. (XI, p. 119)

This is the first time Robert has shared his newspaper (or anything else) with anyone. Bernadine's unmediated emotional response to the sight of his impaired (and presumed-to-be-suffering) body indicates her involvement in some aspects of sentimentality. By the reciprocation between Robert's flesh and her own – the shared vulnerability of his 'frail form' and her softening heart – Bernadine draws Robert into a world of emotion he had seemed determined to reject: her softening coincides with his own gesture of reaching out generously to her. This does, indeed, resemble the connection between two feeling human hearts in *Nicholas Nickleby* (p. 762), discussed in Chapter 2, but here intimacy has been earned through the most difficult process, rather than through the disabled character's simple adherence to sentimental stereotypes.

Indeed, it is conventional sentimentality that makes true intimacy so difficult to achieve. One of the founders of the women's suffrage movement, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) observed in 1869 that, in conventional marriage, 'even with true affection, authority on one side and subordination on the other prevent perfect confidence', leaving couples unable

to communicate honestly.<sup>32</sup> A similar form of domestic (self) censorship occurs among invalids in *Ships*. Harraden demonstrates that sentimental prescriptions of uncritical gratitude and cheerful piety hinder communication between disabled people and their ‘care-takers’, and that stubborn or lazy adherence to conventional sentimental roles perpetuates real loneliness and need. Forced to sit with the dying husband she usually neglects, Mrs Reffold gives an exemplary performance of these conventions:

‘Now,’ she said, with great sweetness of manner. And she sat down beside him, drew out her fancy-work, and worked away contentedly. She would have made a charming study of a devoted wife soothing a much-loved husband in his hours of sickness and weariness. (XIII, pp. 142-143)

Harraden not only highlights the artifice and insincerity of Mrs Reffold’s ‘manner’, but also simultaneously recalls familiar representations of sentimental sickbeds – another ‘charming study’ among many – and taints them with the same insincerity. Harraden’s treatment of Mrs Reffold’s behaviour seems to recall James Fitzjames Stephen’s 1864 observation (discussed in Chapter 3) that modern audiences increasingly mistrusted cultural representations of feeling where the author or performer had:

ceased to think naturally about the fact, real or supposed, which originally drew out the feeling, and had begun to think about himself, and how cleverly he could describe the sources of tender emotion, and how pleasant it was to stimulate their action.<sup>33</sup>

The artifice of these representations is, of course, recalled by the title of the chapter: ‘A Domestic Scene’. Mrs Reffold ‘was now feeling herself to be almost a heroine. It is a very easy matter to make oneself into a heroine or a martyr’ (XIII, p. 146) – especially when one can draw upon a century of fictional sickbeds in which the integrity or exploitation of the participants is scarcely questioned.

Worse still, like the unequal wives discussed by J. S. Mill, the consumptives are forced to collude in the pernicious deception: after all, according to sentimental morality, to be pitied and to be grateful for pity is what justifies the disabled person’s existence. In chapter XIV, the invalids only ‘smile quietly’ (p. 160) when their care-takers neglect them. The reason for this collusion is already apparent as it follows the ‘Domestic Scene’ in which Mr Reffold finally criticises his neglectful wife, only to be met with disbelief and resentment: Mrs Reffold declares ‘I can’t understand you’ (III, p. 146), refusing to engage in conversation and devaluing her husband’s (justified) anger.

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<sup>32</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (1869), in *On Liberty, and Other Essays*, ed. by John Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 471-582, (p. 482).

<sup>33</sup> [Stephen], ‘Sentimentalism’, p. 71.



Mr Reffold quickly recants his protest and asks Bernadine to ‘tell my wife it made me happy to have her with me this afternoon; then perhaps she will stay in another time’ (XIII, p. 152), painfully aware that the invalid who fails to display uncritical sentimental gratitude will be punished by further neglect. The distribution of power between the sympathetic carer and grateful invalid is wholly unbalanced, as the former can withhold their pity with devastating consequences for the latter. Mrs Reffold tells Bernadine:

‘His grumbling this afternoon has been incessant; so much so that he himself was ashamed, and asked me to forgive him. You heard him, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, I heard him,’ Bernadine said.

‘And of course I forgave him at once,’ Mrs Reffold said piously. ‘Naturally one would do that, but the vexation remains all the same.’

‘Can these things be?’ thought Bernadine to herself.

‘He spoke in the most ridiculous way,’ she went on: ‘it certainly is not encouraging for me to spend another afternoon with him. I shall go sledging tomorrow.’ (XIII, pp. 155-156)

As in *Jude the Obscure* (6. VIII, p. 386), the wife dismisses her disabled husband’s protests as ridiculous, incoherent and without any specific object. There is no place for such behaviour within Mrs Reffold’s representation of the sentimental sickroom, and she immediately censors it and declares Mr Reffold an illegitimate consumptive. Bernadine, of course, states that ‘I heard him’, indicating that she is capable of sympathy without censoring aspects of behaviour that do not meet traditional sentimental demands.

Sentimentality is not presented as an inevitably abusive model of invalid/ carer relationships. Rather, it is shown to carry an inherent *potential* for abuse because it lacks any internal safety mechanism: Frawley points out that traditional sentimental and religious models also demand constant self-criticism from the disabled partner – and, as I suggested earlier, they do not seem to demand the same from the nondisabled partner.<sup>34</sup> A full evaluation of this ‘Domestic Scene’ must be provided by an outsider (Bernadine): this is, in itself, a flaw in the conventional sentimental model.

Mr Reffold’s distressing situation undoubtedly illuminates Robert’s mistrust and rejection of all relationships, and his flaunted disengagement from the feelings of Bernadine and the Kurhaus community. He tells Bernadine:

‘[W]e can be done without, put on one side, and forgotten when not present. Then, if we are foolish, we are wounded by this discovery, and we draw back into ourselves. But if we are wise, we draw back into ourselves without being wounded’ (XIX, p. 219).

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<sup>34</sup> Frawley, *Invalidism*, p. 27.

In a culture of sentimental abuse, his rejection of sentimentality constitutes a form of ‘disability consciousness’.<sup>35</sup> His ostentatiously insensitive behaviour, too, may be interpreted as a peculiar form of communication – an attempt to negotiate social interaction without risking harm – as aggressor, not victim. After the lonely suicide of a fellow consumptive resident, the narrator observes that Robert ‘was particularly disagreeable on the day when the Dutchman was buried’ (XII, p. 130). There is no suggestion of causation and no attempt at explanation: Robert seems to be simply behaving badly. Yet, when Bernadine confronts him later, this behaviour is revealed to have some subtle significance:

‘You were in a horrid mood last night.’

‘I was feeling wretchedly ill,’ [Robert] said quietly.

That was the first time he had ever alluded to his own health.

‘Not that there is any need to make an excuse,’ he continued, ‘for I do not recognise that there is any necessity to consult one’s surroundings, and alter the inclination of one’s mind accordingly. Still, as a matter of fact, I felt very ill.’

‘And to-day?’ she asked.

‘To-day I am myself again,’ he answered quickly: ‘that usual normal self of mine, whatever that may mean. I slept well, and I dreamed of you. I can’t say that I had been thinking of you, because I had not.’ (XII, pp. 131-132)

Despite his professed refusal to moderate his feelings according to the mood of his companions, Robert vacillates anxiously between emotional exposure and withdrawal. After revealing his weakness, he quickly asserts his recovery – and then retracts this with a reference to the chronic nature of his illness that resembles Beardsley’s remark on his symptoms diminishing to ‘(what I have grown to look upon) as normal’: the invalid must always qualify his subjective normality as chronic abnormality.<sup>36</sup> Robert’s startling revelation of secret suffering is, again, undermined by his flippant ‘whatever that may mean.’ This prompts yet another vacillation of intimacy offered then immediately withdrawn: ‘I slept well, and I dreamed of you’ (perhaps implying that Bernadine’s presence in the dream favoured his recovery), followed by a denial of considering her. The act of obnoxious, sullen retreat after the brief flirtation with self-exposure is more revealing about his vulnerability and need than any open admission of vulnerability could be – especially when we see how consumptives who *do* try to speak openly are punished.

Like Brontë and Hardy, Harraden acknowledges that the very people who are supposed to respond to suffering with spontaneous sentimental sympathy often fail to do so, and that the invalid is then left in a desperate situation – emotionally (or even physically)

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<sup>35</sup> Mitchell and Snyder, ‘Representation’, p. 208.

<sup>36</sup> Beardsley to Raffalovich (12<sup>th</sup> December 1896), p. 225, discussed in Chapter 2.

neglected, rejected, and prevented from becoming a grateful sentimental subject because their carer gives them nothing to be grateful for. *Ships* offers another possibility in disabled people caring for each other:

It was said that on more than one occasion [Robert] had nursed the suffering and the dying in sad Petershof, and, with all the sorrowful tenderness worthy of a loving mother, had helped them to take their leave of life. But these were only rumours, and there was nothing in Robert Allisten's ordinary bearing to justify such talk. (V, pp. 42-43)

There is a significant discrepancy between Robert's public and private engagements with sentimental models of disability: in its late-Victorian context, sceptical about ostentatious displays of sentiment, the secrecy of Robert's tenderness towards other consumptives might prove its sincerity. More importantly, it ameliorates the power-imbalance in disabled invalid/nondisabled carer interactions.

Indeed, those roles are shown to be fluid in a way Mrs Reffold surely never imagined when she told her then-nondisabled husband 'that sick people repelled' her (XIII, p. 145). Robert is, at different times – or simultaneously – a carer and a recipient of care. In chapter ten ('The Disagreeable Man in a New Light'), Bernadine is astonished by Robert's 'tender and kindly' manner with a peasant girl who has developed some form of mental illness (p. 97). He reveals that, when he was seriously ill, 'she used to take every care of me. And it was a kindly sympathy which I could not resent' (p. 100). Crucially, Robert now cares for Catherina by *soliciting* care, asking her to cook for him and rousing her from her helpless torpor by reminding her of her capacity to give care as well as receive it. Catherina nurtures both Robert and Bernadine because '[s]he had always loved everything that was ailing and weakly' (p. 104). Robert's method of caring by soliciting care may recall the sentimental model of disability in which disabled people contribute to the emotional development of nondisabled people by acting as objects of pity, but in *Ships*, as with Catherine's care for Linton in *Wuthering Heights*, we may see that:

the basis of special relations between individuals arises from the vulnerability of one party to the actions of another. The needs of another call forth a moral obligation on our part when we are in a special position vis-à-vis that other to meet those needs.<sup>37</sup>

This notion of moral obligation to help someone when we have the power to do so (not merely when we feel sufficiently moved by the spectacle of their affliction, or when they display proper gratitude) is not only a challenge to older sentimental models of disability, but

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<sup>37</sup> Kittay, *Love's Labor*, p. 35.

also to contemporary eugenic fantasies that defective individuals could be identified, isolated, and left to die, as Harraden insists that the disabled/ nondisabled roles are frequently exchanged – or, rather, that all human beings are vulnerable and need to both give and receive care simultaneously.<sup>38</sup>

Allowing her to accompany him on his visits to picturesque peasants, Robert's revelation of his secret sentimentality to Bernadine is an act of self-exposure undertaken as the first step of romantic courtship. His peculiar association between sentimentality and romantic love suggests that they carry similar social and personal risks: making himself available for acceptance and affection also makes him vulnerable to rejection and exploitation. Finally, by the end of the novel, Robert is ready to speak honestly to Bernadine. This suggests that they have somehow overcome the disabling power-inequality that necessitated his previous withdrawal. The key to this transformation of Robert's damaged disabled identity undoubtedly lies in Bernadine's fully-realised feminist identity and her already developed feminist strategies for negotiating fearless intimacy on equal terms with men.

### **The New Woman and the New Consumptive Man**

*Ships* comes closest to constructing a coherent form of disability politics in its recognition of the shared interests of an emancipated woman and a disabled man. While the other novels discussed in this book diagnose the various cultural problems that disable consumptives and prevent free and equal social interaction, *Ships* appropriates contemporary feminist discourses to offer a solution. In depicting three heterosexual couples in which the male has a conspicuous physical impairment (the Reffolds, the postman and the maid, and Robert and Bernadine), the novel engages with contemporary arguments about injustice in marriage but invites transferral of discourse from gender to disability.<sup>39</sup> The successful transferral of Bernadine's feminism to Robert's 'disability consciousness' is indicated by his assimilation of her ideals of free and equal intimacy, and by his apparent rejection of his earlier plan to end his life.

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<sup>38</sup> See Doat, 'Evolution and Human Uniqueness', pp. 16-19, on nineteenth-century writers suggesting that vulnerability and care of the vulnerable is an essential part of human evolution, not a hindrance to natural selection. See also Kittay, *Love's Labor*, p. 29.

<sup>39</sup> See also Mona Caird, 'Does Marriage Hinder a Woman's Self-development?' (1899), in *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894; facsimile repr. [n. p.]: Aegypan Press, [2009]), pp. 373-376, in which Caird reverses gender roles to demonstrate the impossibility of self-fulfilment for anyone (male or female) taking on a woman's place in marriage.

Although the phrase ‘New Woman’ is not used in *Ships* – the term was supposedly coined a few months later in 1894 – Bernadine refers to ‘the Girton girl’ (XVII, p. 195) and we are informed that Bernadine had been:<sup>40</sup>

teaching, writing articles for newspapers, attending socialistic meetings, and taking part in political discussions – she was essentially a ‘modern product,’ this Bernadine. (II, p. 19)

Chris Willis states that:

Bernadine’s successful wooing of [Robert] represents a victory of feminism over chauvinism. However, they are not allowed to enjoy happiness: in the best tradition of New Woman fiction, Bernadine meets with a fatal accident before they can marry. It would seem that the New Woman cannot be allowed to attain the conventional happy ending and still keep her principles intact.<sup>41</sup>

Yet this reading does not embrace the emphatic meaninglessness of Bernadine’s death, or the novel’s important focus on the legitimacy of the disabled love-object. The light tone of Harraden’s depiction of Bernadine’s death must be contrasted with the doom-laden thwarting of the heroines of Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895), Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and Hardy’s *Jude*, which make pessimistic statements about the impossibility of the New Woman finding love or fulfilment. The meaninglessness of Bernadine’s accident suggests that this New Woman *could* have constructed a successful (albeit unconventional) relationship with the disabled man had the wagon not intervened. Alternatively, perhaps the perfected heteroerotic relationship, like the regenerated disabled identity, belongs to the future: *Ships*’ refusal to depict its consummation in the present does not imply doubt in its credibility but, rather, faith in a ‘long game’.<sup>42</sup>

There are, nonetheless, some problems raised by this peculiar alliance. Robert complains that he has seen more than he wants to of ‘political or highly educated women’:

‘That was probably some time ago,’ [Bernadine] said rather heartlessly. ‘If you have lived here so long, how can you judge of the changes which go on in the world outside Petershof?’

‘If I have lived here so long,’ he repeated, in the bitterness of his heart.

Bernadine did not notice: she was on a subject which always excited her. [...]

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<sup>40</sup> Marion Shaw and Lyssa Randolph, *New Woman Writers of the Late Nineteenth Century* (Tavistock, Devon: Northcote, 2007), p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Chris Willis, ‘Heaven defend me from political or highly educated women!’: Packaging the New Woman for Mass Consumption’, in *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms*, ed. by Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis, 2nd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 53-65 (p. 57).

<sup>42</sup> See Harraden’s letter to *The Times*, 10<sup>th</sup> November 1908, p. 17, [find.galegroup.com](http://find.galegroup.com) (Times Digital Archive) [27<sup>th</sup> July 2017], on women’s suffrage as ‘an elemental force of which no person, or group of persons, can control the manifestation’.

‘But how ridiculous for me to talk to you in this way!’ she said. ‘It is not likely that you would be interested in the widening out of women’s lives.’ (XVII, pp. 194-197)

While New Women seem to be at the centre of the modern urban elite, the consumptive lives in enforced exile.<sup>43</sup> When absorbed in feminist politics, Bernadine is uncharacteristically flippant, ‘heartlessly’ insensitive to ‘the bitterness of [Robert’s] heart’, ignoring the implied connection between them. She even dismisses any attempt at serious political discussion with Robert as ‘ridiculous’, precisely as Mrs Reffold dismissed her husband’s ‘grumbling’ (XIII, p. 156). In this instance, disability does not mix well with the more aggressive aspects of 1890s’ feminism— as Bernadine learns when she returns to her old friends in London:

Whilst she had been ill, they had been busily at work on matters social and educational and political. She thought them hard, the women especially: they thought her weak. They were disappointed in her; [...]

With these strong, active people, to be ill and useless is a reproach. (2.I, p. 239)

This clash between feminism and disability is apparent elsewhere in Victorian literature. David Bolt and Margaret Rose Torrell address the possibility that, in *Jane Eyre*, the heroine is empowered at blind Rochester’s expense, as his disability is presented as a humiliation that renders this once-powerful man inferior and dependent.<sup>44</sup> Does *Ships’* feminism exploit Robert’s disability in a similar way? Bernadine’s flippancy in this conversation is uncharacteristically cruel, and reflects the impotence of Robert’s chauvinism. As a marginalised consumptive man, he has little to gain from maintaining the patriarchal status quo, and is not even an object worthy of attack, especially for late-Victorian social purity feminism concerned with male promiscuity: because he has ‘lived lonely all [his] young life’ (XX, p. 226), he is not a seducer of housemaids, an exploiter of prostitutes, or a syphilitic husband.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See Linda Hughes, ‘A Club of Their Own: the “Literary Ladies”, New Women Writers, and Fin-de-Siècle Authorship’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35 (2007), pp. 233-260; <https://www.cambridge.org> [27<sup>th</sup> July 2017].

<sup>44</sup> David Bolt, ‘The Blindman in the Classic: Feminisms, Oculacentrism, and *Jane Eyre*’, pp. 32-50 (pp. 44-45), and Margaret Rose Torrell, ‘From India-Rubber Back to Flesh: a Reevaluation of Male Embodiment in *Jane Eyre*’, pp. 71-90 (pp. 80-81 discusses Bolt’s reading), both in *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*, ed. by David Bolt, Julia Miele Rodas, and Elizabeth J. Donaldson (Columbus: Ohio State University, 2012).

<sup>45</sup> See Trevor Fisher, *Scandal: the Sexual Politics of Late Victorian Britain* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1995) on social purity feminism in response to the 1864 Contagious Diseases Act.

However, rather than simply unmanning Robert, the disability that destabilises his masculinity gives him the potential to become something that contemporary feminists were crying out for. In 1911, Olive Schreiner would declare that:

Side by side with the New Woman, anxious for labour and seeking from man only such love and fellowship as she gives, stands the New Man, anxious to possess her only on the terms she offers.<sup>46</sup>

In the early 1890s, few commentators – radical or reactionary – expressed confidence that these New Men existed, except as Decadent fops. The heroine of Helen Mathers' conservative story 'Old Versus New' (1894) vainly 'expound[s] the gospel of the New Woman for whom the New Man has yet to be born', while Emma Churchman Hewitt's article 'The "New Woman" in Her Relation to the "New Man"' (1897) bewails the fecklessness, cruelty and infidelity of 'New Men'.<sup>47</sup> But Robert is something different. In his assertive rejection of sentimental disabled identity within a culture of abuse and oppression, Robert represents a politicised and enlightened consumptive masculinity. Since the emergence of biomedical tuberculosis and the disintegration of sentimentality have disrupted traditional consumptive disabled identities, the New Consumptive becomes an unstable, malleable figure. The New Consumptive's social emasculation allows him to seek alternatives to traditional patriarchy in his dealings with women, while his suspicion of sentimental domestic roles makes him sensitive to the potential for exploitation in unequal relationships. He provides Harraden with a solution to the contemporary feminist problem of evolving womanhood versus static, even regressing, manhood.<sup>48</sup>

The New Woman and the New Consumptive Man are shown to evolve together in attaining free intellectual and social interaction between the sexes as equals. According to Mona Caird:

We shall never have a world really worth living in until men and women can show interest in one another, without being driven either to marry or to forgo the pleasure and profit of future meeting. [...] All this false sentiment and shallow shrewdness, with the restrictions they imply, make the ideal marriage – that is, a union prompted

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<sup>46</sup> Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labour* (1911; repr. Champaign, IL: Project Gutenberg, [1999]), p. 105.

<sup>47</sup> Helen Mathers, 'Old Versus New', *English Illustrated Magazine*, 135 (December 1894), pp. 81- 88 (84); Emma Churchman Hewitt, 'The "New Woman" in Her Relation to the "New Man"', *Westminster Review*, 147 (March 1897), pp. 335-337. Both <https://search.proquest.com> (British Periodicals I&II) [27<sup>th</sup> July 2017].

<sup>48</sup> Sarah Grand, 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question', in *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Talia Schaffer (New York: Pearson/ Longman, 2007), pp. 205-210 (first publ. in *North American Review*, 158 (March, 1894), pp. 270-276), p. 208, complains that the 'trouble is not because women are mannish, but because men grow ever more effeminate', and characterises men as passive or even reactionary.

by love, by affinity or attraction of nature and by friendship – almost beyond the reach of this generation.<sup>49</sup>

In her 1890 discussion of Caird's essay, feminist socialist Clementina Black (1853-1922) agrees that everyday comradeship between the sexes is the foundation of social equality and happier marriages.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps engaging with these contemporary concerns, Harraden depicts Robert's eagerness to spend time with Bernadine unchaperoned and, early in their relationship, he remarks that:

'I don't want to be betrothed to you, any more than I suppose you want to be betrothed to me. And yet we can talk quietly about the matter without a scene. That would be impossible with most women.' (X, p. 110)

Both Robert and Bernadine are conscious of sharing the kind of intimacy for which Caird and Black had hoped: even if Robert believes that Bernadine's uniqueness is making this possible, the fact that this man values such candid conversation is surely significant.

Is Robert allowed to be alone with Bernadine because disabled men are presumed asexual? One hundred years later, Tom Shakespeare, Kath Gillespie-Sells, and Dominic Davies remarked that:

Sometimes, young disabled men, because they are seen as unthreatening and asexual, may have closer relationships with women than their heterosexual peers, perhaps replicating the relationship between gay men and straight women. However, in the case of disabled heterosexual men, this enhanced communication with the opposite sex also involves denial of their sexual potential, and can be undermining.<sup>51</sup>

Robert professes a similar dismissal of his own sexuality when a local woman asks if he and Bernadine are a couple:

'Stupid old Frau Steinhart!' he said good-naturedly. 'People like myself don't get betrothed. We get buried instead!'

'Na, na!' she answered. 'What a thing to say – and so unlike you too!' (X, p. 106)

Indeed, when one considers Robert's intelligence, wealth, and proximity, the fact that Bernadine 'had never looked upon Robert Allisten in that light before' (X, p. 106) may indicate that disability *does* preclude sexual agency here. Yet Robert's statement is immediately undermined by Frau Steinhart, who clearly shares the 'hunchback' postman's

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<sup>49</sup> Mona Caird, 'Marriage', *Westminster Review*, 130 (July 1888), pp. 186-201 (p. 196); <https://search.proquest.com> (British Periodicals I&II) [27<sup>th</sup> July 2017].

<sup>50</sup> Clementina Black, 'On Marriage: A Criticism', *Fortnightly Review*, 47: 280 (April 1890), pp. 586-594 (p. 593); <https://search.proquest.com> (British Periodicals I&II) [27<sup>th</sup> July 2017]. See also Livesey, *Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism*, pp. 47-79.

<sup>51</sup> Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, Davies, *Sexual Politics*, p. 63.



role in a novel that challenges this preconception relentlessly: the heroine herself will later assert that ‘I did not love him because I felt sorry for him, [...] I loved him for himself’ (2. V, p. 262).

Robert’s disability is shown to facilitate this companionship not because he is asexual, but because consumptive men are shown to be excluded from the hegemonic masculinity that poses a threat to the modern woman seeking emancipation. *Ships* is permeated by a feminist consciousness of the dangers inherent in any relationship between strong and weak. In 1897, H. E. Harvey wrote:

I think anyone who looks at social questions from a scientific point of view will admit that the only right which we really recognise is the right of the strongest. [...] And it is only by the right of the strongest that the male sex has had any ascendancy. Men, having always had the means of subsistence in their hands, have been enabled to lay down laws to dictate what women ought to be, to do, to think, and to feel. And women have always found it to their interest to conform to those laws.<sup>52</sup>

Harvey’s feminist essay identifies ‘the woman question’ as a physical and socioeconomic power imbalance. The Reffolds’ marriage demonstrates that consumptives, like women (or, in this case, instead of women), have been forced to submit to the demands of their stronger, more autonomous and mobile carers. It is therefore likely that consumptive men have as much (or more) in common with women as they do with nondisabled men.

Despite his grumbling about modern feminism, *Ships* shows Robert to be remarkably sensitive to any inequalities between himself and Bernadine. Caird stated that the ‘economic independence of women is the first condition of free marriage. She ought not to be tempted to marry, or to remain married, for the sake of bread and butter’, and Black agreed ‘it is a painful thing for a woman to have always to ask a male relation for money’.<sup>53</sup> Robert’s wealth is arguably his only claim to hegemonic masculinity, and he seems aware that this is an obstacle to equality that must be negotiated with care. Chapter X, entitled ‘The Disagreeable Man is Seen in a New Light’, begins:

One specially fine morning a knock came at Bernadine’s door. She opened it, and found Robert Allisten standing there, trying to recover his breath.

‘I am going to Loschwitz, a village about twelve miles off,’ he said. ‘And I have ordered a sledge. Do you care to come too?’

‘If I may pay my share,’ she said.

‘Of course,’ he answered; ‘I did not suppose you would like to be paid for any better than I should like to pay for you.’

Bernadine laughed.

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<sup>52</sup> H. E. Harvey, ‘Science and the Rights of Women’, *Westminster Review*, 148 (1897), pp. 205-207; (repr. in *A New Woman Reader*, ed. by Carolyn Christensen Nelson (Toronto: Broadview, 2001), p.168).

<sup>53</sup> Caird, ‘Marriage’, p. 198; Black, ‘On Marriage’, p. 591.

‘When do we start?’ she asked. (X, p. 87)

They jokingly agree not to bring ‘Mrs Grundy’ as chaperone – ‘And so they settled it’ (p. 87). The scene commences with an indicator of Robert’s weakness and impairment; this reminder is then brushed aside as mainstream gender politics come to the fore: it is Robert’s respect for Bernadine’s self-sufficiency, more than his impairment, that ensures safe intimacy. By commencing with the ‘specially fine morning’, Harraden creates a pleasant context for the subsequent conversation, while the short, straightforward sentences (‘and so they settled it’) and easy banter promote this as a straightforward arrangement. Thus, Harraden does not stop at criticising unsatisfactory relationships between the sexes; rather, she goes on to naturalise this workable prototype for improvement.

What new identity does this relationship offer Robert? At the end of his love letter, Robert writes:

‘I do love you, no one can take that from me: it is my own dignity, the crown of my life. Such a poor life.... no, no, I won’t say that now. I cannot pity myself now.... no, I cannot....’

The Disagreeable Man stopped writing, and the pen dropped on the table.

He buried his tear-stained face in his hands. He cried his heart out, this Disagreeable Man.

Then he took the letter which he had just been writing, and he tore it into fragments. (XX, pp. 232-233)

Whether we believe – or he really believes – that he cannot pity himself now, his statement certainly establishes romantic love as a *potential* disruptor of sentimental disabled identities based on pity: he may now embrace a new identity as ‘lover’. But is the fact that Robert now feels able to articulate his love more significant than the fact that he still feels obliged to hide the evidence? Robert’s decision to destroy his letter might indicate that, in Bernadine’s absence, he has regressed to his former state of anxious withdrawal. However, in combining the facetious ‘Disagreeable Man’ nickname so jarringly with depictions of visceral agony – Robert’s heart forcibly cried out of his body – the narrator plunges the reader more deeply than ever into the discomfort and confusion of Robert’s emotional life. Perhaps some new level of emotional engagement has been reached after all – if only between Robert and the reader.

Indeed, in the last few chapters of the novel, Robert’s previously opaque inner life becomes increasingly transparent and accessible to the third-person narrator. And yet, this is not the easy accessibility of objectification: it is only when Robert chooses to embrace Harraden’s vision of feminist love that his mind opens to the narrator and reader for the first

time, demonstrating his willing acceptance of the power of Bernadine's ideals. Only this power can justify letting down the defences he has been forced to build. Although his mother's death sets Robert free to commit suicide as planned, he follows Bernadine to London, risking his fragile health, and Bernadine insists that he should return to Petershof and take care of himself because she cares about him. He is moved by her assertion:

He still did not speak. Was it that he could not trust himself to words? But in that brief time, the thoughts which passed through his mind were such as to overwhelm him: a picture of a man and a woman leading their lives together, each happy in the other's love; not a love born of fancy, but a love based on comradeship and true understanding of the soul. The picture faded, and the Disagreeable Man raised his eyes and looked at the little figure standing near him.

'Little child, little child,' he said wearily, 'since it is your wish, I will go back to the mountains.'

Then he bent over the counter, and put his hand on hers.

'I will come and see you tomorrow,' he said. 'I think there are one or two things I want to say to you.' (2. IV, pp. 257-258)

At last the narrator engages in meaningful intimacy with Robert, relaying the picture in Robert's mind. Robert's assimilation of Bernadine's ideals as his own proves in content and in principle that theirs is, indeed, a love generated by real intimacy and sensitivity. Bernadine cares for Robert 'with all my heart' (p. 256), but this relationship's wholehearted validity does not depend on full-time physical proximity or conventional marriage: as the Reffolds demonstrate, conventional marriage has little to do with wholehearted connection. Bernadine plans to spend her holidays with Robert as '[t]here would be pleasure in that for him and for her' (p. 259). We may suppose that Robert's confession tomorrow, and their future holidays together, would have involved negotiation to satisfy the needs of both partners – had not the runaway wagon intervened.

## **Conclusion**

*Ships That Pass in the Night* illuminates some of the most exciting possibilities of late nineteenth-century representations of disability. Harraden explores the 'damage' done by physical suffering, social marginalisation, and emotional abuse – without dismissing the identities so formed as hopelessly spoiled and illegitimate. Indeed, *Ships* manages to present acknowledgement of one's damage as the foundation of a resilient and vigorous identity. In this respect, *Ships* differs from *Wuthering Heights* and *Jude*, in which the consequence of such damage is dehumanisation or extinction. *Ships* resembles more closely Beardsley's assertive public redefinition of the 'tragic' consumptive life as one capable of self-realisation

and pleasure despite the worst depredations of unexpected impairments (and runaway wagons).<sup>54</sup>

Harraden shows that the New Woman and consumptive man share a common interest in the renegotiation of intimacy. This also allows the novel to offer hope for Robert beyond that deemed possible by *Jude* and *Wuthering Heights*. *Ships* provides an illuminating representation of invalid/ carer relationships as analogous with conventional marriage, where the vulnerable partner lives in fear of coercion, humiliation, and abandonment by the strong. While accepting that identities *generated* by social interaction can only be *validated* by social interaction, *Ships* exposes the inherent dangers of these processes for the vulnerable and disempowered, and the need to explore a new form of intimacy that avoids exploitation.<sup>55</sup> In its assertion that true intimacy can be achieved only through constant vigilance and sensitivity to power inequalities, *Ships* demonstrates the necessity for, and qualities of, a sharply politicised ‘disability consciousness’ for disabled and nondisabled participants alike – as well as questioning the validity of that binary.

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<sup>54</sup> According to Gertrude Atherton, *Adventures of a Novelist* (1932), quoted in Weintraub, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 117, Harraden and Beardsley attended the same garden party in 1894, but I am not aware of any friendship between them, or of any evidence that Beardsley had read *Ships*.

<sup>55</sup> This delicate negotiation can be illuminated by Kittay’s exploration of dependency and care in *Love’s Labour* (p. 35): ‘The relationship between the dependency worker and her charge is importantly a relation of trust. The charge must trust the dependency worker will be responsible to and respectful of her vulnerability and will not abuse whatever authority and power has been vested in her to carry out these responsibilities. The dependency worker must, in turn, trust the charge neither to make demands that go beyond her true needs, to exploit the attachments that are formed through the work of care, nor to exploit the vulnerabilities that either result from the dependency work or that have resulted in the caregiver engaging in dependency work.’

