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In the midst of [Sir Willoughby's] deliberations, a report of the hot pursuit of Miss Durham […] drew an immediate proposal from [him]. She accepted him, and they were engaged. She had been nibbled at, all but eaten up…

George Meredith, *The Egoist*

The above epigraph, taken from George Meredith's 1879 novel *The Egoist*, identifies notions of female consumption driven by the commodification of bodies in the Victorian marriage market. Prompted by the acknowledgement of Miss Durham's desirability by other suitors, Sir Willoughby Patterne proposes marriage anticipating the devouring of his fiancée. Meredith's choice of cannibalistic rhetoric evinces sinister connotations implicit in the consumer-driven marriage market, a corporeal consumerism characterised by Meredith as predator and prey, eater and eaten.

Willoughby's Egoist is but a social, civilised reincarnation of the savage, his inherent primitivism polished, yet not absented, by social constructions of respectability and morality:

> …the primitive is born again, the elemental reconstituted. Born again, into new conditions, the primitive may be highly polished of men and forfeit nothing save the roughness of his original nature… he has become the civilised egoist; primitive still, as sure as man has teeth, but developed in his manner of using them.[1]

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[1] George Meredith, *The Egoist*; ed. George Woodcock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979; first ed. 1879), p. 466.

The dangerous atavism of the Egoist is identified in his teeth, unused now to the tearing of raw flesh from bone, appeased with cutlery and napkins, yet still exulting in the consumption of meat. Cannibalism, the most atavistic of behaviours in its celebration of the absence of morality and its transgressive gluttony is naturally linked to Meredith's depiction of the primitive with teeth. Though masked by Sir Willoughby's refined manners and courtly exterior, the teeth remain as evidence of the beast within; the admission that Willoughby 'lived backwards almost intensely as in the present',[2] suggests the potential for atavistic reversion, his inherent primitive instincts displayed in bestial rhetoric:

> Women have us back to the conditions of primitive man…Jealousy of a woman, is the primitive egoism seeking to refine in a blood gone to savagery under apprehension of an invasion of rights; it is in action the tiger threatened by a rifle when his paw is rigid on quick flesh; he tears the flesh for rage at the intruder. The Egoist, who is our original male in giant form, had no bleeding victim beneath his paw, but there was the sex to mangle.[3]

Meredith's link between courtship and bestial violence conveys the ominous nature of the marriage market in the mangling of women; the verb connotes mutilation and disfigurement but not death, perhaps in hopes of remodelling the object of the Egoist's courtship in his own image.

While contemporary magazines, advice manuals for both men and women and popular fiction, strongly endorsed marriages based on mutual love and respect,[4] the realities of the middle and upper-class Victorian marriage markets necessitated the careful consideration of family, wealth and social position in choosing a life-partner. Equipped with financial autonomy, men adopt the role of discerning consumer and women the valuable commodities, invariably

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[2] Ibid., p. 29.

[3] Ibid., p. 284.

[4] For many during the Victorian period Victoria and Albert provided what Jennifer Phegley has termed a 'beacon of companionate domesticity and a model for the nation', a paragon of marital bliss. The Victorian marriage should amount to, what Coventry Patmore termed 'the arithmetic of life', a true union of souls constituting the apogee of Victorian morality. See Jennifer Phegley, *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England* (Santa Barbara and Oxford: Praeger, 2012), p. 3.

evoking images of consumer and consumed to which the novel consistently returns in metaphors and rhetoric of hunting and cannibalism. It is in the acknowledgement of this predatory language that this article suggests the notion of marriage as cannibalistic; that Sir Willoughby's role as sexual aggressor is cannibalistic in his desire for ownership to the point of assimilation, and that the rhetoric of swallowing and devouring is used to place women in positions of vulnerability, trapped by webs of submissive behavioural conduct. The novel identifies male sexual aggression as gluttonous corresponding to the novel's revisited images of cannibalistic marriage, preserved by male fantasies of self-effacing female chastity:

> To keep him in awe and hold him enchained, there are things she must never do, dare never say, must not think. She must be cloistral. […] they address their performances less to the taming of the green and prankish monsieur of the forest than to the pacification of a voracious aesthetic gluttony, craving them insatiably…[5]

Meredith continues to note that the male Egoist prefers his women 'as inanimate, overwrought polished pure metal precious vessels […] to drink of, and fill and drink of…'[6] Objectification is not the only issue here, but the inherent emptiness of women. The image of a constantly refillable vessel connotes constant female emptiness, able to achieve 'wholeness' - the fulfilment of her purpose - only with a husband who will consistently 'drink of' her, rendering her empty again. In order to simultaneously fulfil her purpose as vessel and satisfy masculine urges, women must be consumed; the novel's repetition of alimentary images and hungry masculine desire, consistently enforce the roles of male consumer and the female consumable.

These images of capture and consumption are continuously embedded in the novel in Sir Willoughby Patterne's dogged pursuit first of Constantina Durham and then, following his jilting by her, of Clara Middleton. Notions of marriage and cannibalism, established in the article's epigraph from Chapter Three of Meredith's novel, are made possible in the acknowledgement of the marriage market as a potential space for bodies to be obtained and consumed in the metaphoric dissolution of the individual inherent in marital unity. While much

[5] Meredith, p. 151.
[6] Ibid., p. 152.

academic discussion surrounding Meredith's novel has focussed on its relationship to Darwinian theory,[7] this article will examine Sir Willoughby Patterne's courtship and marital ideals in terms of social consumption. The term is hereby established to suggest the transference of culture-capital, in which marriage to a highly-prized partner adds to the social value of the individual. This notion of culture-capital is significant in considering Sir Willoughby's position as a wealthy, eligible land-owner and 'picture of an English gentleman';[8] his search for a wife must conform to both social and personal expectations of a woman worthy of his family name and superior genetics. Vacillating between the beautiful, strong-willed Clara Middleton and the more pliable, yet less beautiful, Laetitia Dale (already in love with him), the narrative concerns Clara's unwillingness to marry Willoughby and his determined pursuit (and domestication) of her in his desperate attempts to simultaneously satisfy his social circle, his personal happiness and his own vanity. Willoughby's friendly relationship with Laetitia Dean serves only to satisfy his ego following any doubts of matrimonial union demonstrated by Clara. Laetitia serves as the self-replenishing feast to which Willoughby can return, renew and recharge notions of himself as superior. Returning home from America, Willoughby embraces Laetitia and 'found the man he sought there, squeezed him passionately, and let her go'.[9] And so, while Willoughby replenishes his ego with fantasies of an idealised self provided by Laetitia, she must be content with feeding on 'the dry husks of him'.[10] Fitted as she is to be Willoughby's idealist mirror, Laetitia could never be his bride, impeded by birth and beauty. Willoughby's initial attraction to Clara Middleton is increased by her many accomplishments, listed by social matriarch Lady Mountstuart Jenkinson: 'Her father is, I hear, some sort of learned man; money; no land. … The very girl to settle down and entertain when she does think of settling. Eighteen, perfect manners; you need not ask if a beauty. Sir Willoughby will have his dues.'[11] Successfully appraised and qualified, Clara Middleton appears the perfect Patterne bride. Clara's appraisal by provincial society emphasises the significance given to aestheticism, genetics, economics and social position in constructions of value; Willoughby's own position of eminence within each of these integral qualifiers announce his entitlement to the very best of brides.

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[7] Specifically see Anna Maria Jones, 'Eugenics by Way of Aesthetics: Sexual Selection, Cultural Consumption and the Cultivated Reader in *The Egoist*', *Literature Interpretation Theory,* 16 (2005), 101-28; and Carolyn Williams, 'Natural Selection and Narrative Form in *The Egoist*', *Victorian Studies,* 27 (1983), 53-79.

[8] Meredith, p. 8.

[9] Ibid., p. 59.

[10] Ibid., p. 57.

[11] Ibid., p. 65.

Willoughby's acknowledgement of his own value recognises the marriage market as a space of mutual commodification, but Kirby-Jane Hallum's observation that Sir Willoughby is also 'an agent of aesthetic commodification'[12] emphasises the power of selection and appraisal given to eligible Victorian bachelors of the upper and middle-classes. Willoughby's admission that 'the breath of the world, the world's view of him, was partly his vital breath, his view of himself',[13] connotes an identity bound to social constructions of worth and the public appraisal of worth, which drives his marital selection. Constantia Durham, Willoughby's first choice of wife, 'had money, and she had health and beauty: three mighty qualifications for a Patterne bride',[14] her beauty moreover 'was of a kind to send away beholders aching',[15] implying a communally-valued beauty which would potentially increase public acclaim of the successful captor. Clara Middleton's commodification by patriarchal social institutions is later underpinned by the circuit of exchange within Meredith's marriage market: Willoughby exchanges Constantia for Clara, Clara exchanges 'a father for a husband',[16] then exchanges Willoughby for his virtuous cousin and secretary Vernon Whitford and Willoughby is forced to exchange Clara for Laetitia. The novel's insistent aesthetic rhetoric conforms to the decade's relationship with commodity culture,[17] in which circuits of transaction and exchange are consistently repeated socially. The commodification of marriageable women recognises their role as desirable objects with the potential to benefit their consumer in various ways: sexual gratification, domestic hegemony or the production of progeny. As in transactions of exchange however, the benefits are mutual, and for women marriage brought economic stability and the cessation of social pressure in realising their biological destiny in becoming the 'helpmate of man',[18] the demands of which shaped their lives.

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12 Kirby-Jane Hallum, *Aestheticism and the Marriage Market in Victorian Popular Fiction* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2015), p. 55.
13 Meredith, p. 312.
14 Ibid., p. 48.
15 Ibid., p. 51.
16 Ibid., p. 89.
17 James Eli Adams, *A History of Victorian Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), p. 249: 'The interest in material refinement nurtured by the aesthetic movement was reinforced by the development of department stores in the 1870s, those temples of commodity culture in which shopping as a matter of utilitarian need blurred with ever-more varied appeals to fantasy and the pleasures of "just looking", a pursuit that middle-class women increasingly could indulge unchaperoned.'
18 Henry Maudsley in 1874 wrote that '[t]he female qualities of mind which correlate her sexual character adapt her, as her sex does, to be the helpmate and companion of man [...]', thereby asserting that female biology fostered dispositions which would facilitate women in their passive lives as compassionate companions. Henry Maudsley 'Sex in Mind and in Education', *Fortnightly Review,* 15 (1874), pp. 466-83 (p. 471).

Stephanie Coontz notes that many nineteenth-century women developed 'marriage trauma',[19] worrying about 'what would happen if a spouse did not live up to their high ideals'.[20] The catchphrase "Better single than miserably married" became popular as, as the century wore on, rates of lifelong singlehood rose in both Britain and America.[21] Numerous women however were forced into loveless marriages as a means of survival, forcing parallels between marriage and prostitution to be drawn. In an article in an 1850 edition of the *Westminster Review* liberal manufacturer W.R. Greg scandalously proposed that for every woman who sold herself to a client, ten sold themselves to a husband: 'The barter is naked and as cold in the one case as the other; the thing bartered is the same; the difference between the two transactions lies in the price that is paid down'.[22] Greg's acknowledgement of the business of marriage as transactional emphasises the role of capitalist economy in marital affairs, and is paralleled in Meredith's novel in Willoughby's fierce possessiveness of Laetitia Dean, a woman who, by the end of the novel, openly cannot love him but who Willoughby is forced to marry due to his indiscretions. He compares her with treasure: 'You loved me, you belonged to me, you were mine, my possession, my jewel…',[23] the notion of ownership and commodification at the forefront of Willoughby's final marriage.

Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) explores the relation of consumers to a consumer culture shaped by Darwinian theory, critiquing conspicuous consumption as a function of social success. Mary Louise Roberts suggests that Veblen's work centralises the contradictory place of women in consumer culture:

> The earliest form of property in ancient cultures, he believed, was the "ownership of the women by the able-bodied men of the community." In archaic cultures, women served as "trophies," the spoils of war that proved the prowess of young warriors. Like all wealth for Veblen, the aim of this earliest form of property was

[19] Coontz argues that: 'The exultation of romantic love also made some people, especially women, more hesitant to marry. Many nineteenth-century women went through a 'marriage trauma', worrying about what would happen if a spouse did not live up to their high ideals. Such disparate characters as Catharine Sedgwick, the great defender of domesticity, and Susan B. Anthony, the future leader of the woman suffrage movement, had recurrent nightmares about marrying unworthy men. In the end neither married.' Stephanie Coontz *Marriage: A History* (London: Viking, 2005), p. 179.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., p. 180.

[23] Meredith, p. 477.

> to confer "invidious distinction." While in modern society, women are no longer seen straightforwardly as slaves of men, according to Veblen, their status in marriage still bears a trace of their former servitude. In a modern consumer society, the wife "has become the ceremonial consumer of goods which he produces. But she still quite unmistakably remains his chattel in theory; for the habitual rendering of vicarious leisure and consumption is the abiding mark of the unfree servant." Rather than pursue her own interests or career, the wife of a wealthy man must consume "conspicuously," that is, purchase valuable goods for herself, her husband, and his household-goods that provide evidence of his wealth and dominance in a social hierarchy of invidious distinction. But by this very act of consumption, the wife also demonstrates her status as property. For although, unlike a slave, she is allowed to consume, that consumption is always vicarious-for another, not her. It marks her as a commodity herself, no less than the big house or fancy car. She provides tangible proof of her husband's wealth through her self-ornamentation and vicarious leisure.[24]

Veblen's *Theory* suggests that the economic freedom of the leisure classes permits wives to be read as signifiers of their husbands' success, noting that: wifely duties of the upper-classes are 'disguised under some form of work or household duties or social amenities, which prove on analysis to serve little or no ulterior end beyond showing that she does not occupy herself with anything that is gainful or that is of substantial use'.[25] The institution of marriage may therefore be read as status symbol, masculine success marked not only in the economic stability inherent in the ability to marry, but in the possession of a wife of leisure. Both encourage the objectification of a wife, the accumulation of the very finest objects being the true testament of economic and social prosperity:

> The quasi-peaceable gentleman of leisure, then, not only consumes of the staff of life beyond the minimum required for subsistence and physical efficiency, but his

[24] Mary Louise Roberts, 'Gender, Consumption and Commodity Culture', *The American Review,* 10 (1998), pp. 817-44 (p. 819).
[25] Thorstein Veblen *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* 1899; *Archive.org* https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.136462/page/n5/mode/2up [Accessed 20 June 2020] p. 39.

> consumption also undergoes a specialisation as regards the quality of the goods consumed. He consumes freely and of the best, in food, drink, narcotics, shelter, services, ornaments, apparel, weapons and accoutrements, amusements, amulets, and idols or divinities.[26]

The marriage market enables “marriage partner” to be added to Veblen’s list of consumer goods which characterise the fashionable gentleman of leisure. Sir Willoughby Patterne’s desperate attempts to affirm the superiority of his bloodline, reputation and social currency rest on his ability to capture a worthy bride in comical opposition to conventions of traditional romance novels in which would-be-brides seek out eligible bachelors. While Elizabeth Bennet and her sisters were pushed into the paths of eligible suitors by their forceful, yet enterprising, mother, the aggression demonstrated by Willoughby is demonstrably both male and privileged.

Sir Willoughby Patterne’s calculation of his genetic and social superiority invites Meredith’s satire of upper-class entitlement, directly linked to his satirical hyper-aestheticism of the upper-class marriage market. Patterne’s gross selfishness blinds him to the impracticability of his desired match with Clara, focussed as he is on obtaining the most beautiful prize. His domesticated conservatism also embodies what Richard C. Stevenson has claimed, ‘was fast becoming a set of anachronistic presumptions about the entitlements associated with aristocratic position’.[27] The anachronisms of the aristocracy can also be linked to contemporary ambivalence surrounding British empiricism, the deconstruction of masculinity inherent in both institutions revealing a monstrous underbelly. The novel’s subtle ties with empiricism are literalised in Willoughby’s strained relationship with his cousin, Lieutenant Crossjay Patterne described as ‘one of the unpretending cool sort which kindles British blood’,[28] and whose famous act of bravery concerned ‘the storming of some eastern riverain stronghold, somewhere about the coast of China.’[29] Once revered by Willoughby, Lieutenant Patterne is revealed as a mere ‘thick, stumpy man’[30] in Willoughby’s pretentious maturity, and is refused admittance into his young cousin’s elite social circle. Stephanie Green contends that the lieutenant serves as a reminder of the Victorian masculine values of ‘stoicism,

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[26] Ibid., p. 35.
[27] Richard C. Stevenson, *Introduction to ‘The Egoist’* (London: Broadview, 2012), p. 9.
[28] Meredith, p. 6.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., p. 8.

hardiness and endurance' in the face of Willoughby's affected masculinity of the 'little prince'.[31] Green suggests that 'the young Crossjay Patterne [the lieutenant's son] always appears at significant moments as a testament to his father's manly values: loyalty, courage, good appetite and a keen disregard for scholarly pursuits in service of national ideals.'[32] This reading however appears reductive of colonial anxieties prevalent during the time of the novel's writing at the end of the 1870s.[33] Rather than projecting two disparate ideals of masculinity (one aristocratic and anachronistic, one hardy and contemporary), Willoughby and the Lieutenant both assume roles as consumers, Willoughby socially and Lieutenant Crossjay globally in his role as imperial servant. The bodies consumed by both men (Willoughby's maritally, Crossjay's as imperial slave labour) connote positions of power, a power conveyed not only through gender but through blood. Willoughby's superior aristocratic genetics and Lieutenant Crossjay's Caucasian heritage connote the significance of blood in matters of corporeal consumerism, the dominance of class and race ensuring influence over inferior bodies.

A distinguished bloodline, 'beauty and wit'[34] and economic affluence should, Sir Willoughby perceives, afford him any number of beautiful women. In his position as market consumer Willoughby assigns value to each prospective bride based on aesthetic and moral merit, this control of the market becoming the narrative's fundamental motif in Willoughby's chasing of Clara Middleton. The insistent pursuit of Clara mirrors the hunting of a wild animal, the threatening aspect of which she astutely recognises: 'Willoughby has entangled me ... He schemes incessantly to keep me entangled. I fly from his cunning as much as from anything. I dread it'.[35] Not only does Willoughby stalk and manipulate Clara, he encourages her father to aid him in weakening his daughter's resolve during an evening in the Patterne wine cellar. Dr Middleton regretting he has 'only a girl to give'[36] in return for access to the contents of the

[31] Stephanie Green, '"Nature was Strong in Him": Spoiling the Empire Boy in George Meredith's *The Egoist*', *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 5 (1999), pp. 87-95 (p. 92).
[32] Ibid., p. 91.
[33] By the mid-1870s Britain found itself in the midst of a deep economic depression, looking to its colonies as a means of triggering economic recovery. While some considered colonialism a vital part of Britain's role as global power, Darwinism introduced theories concerning the degeneration of civilisation suggesting the reversal of colonial roles. These theories coupled with riotous unrest in the colonies invited the beginning of the rethinking of imperialism, explored in fiction and social theory most significantly during the *fin de siècle*.
[34] Meredith, p. 43.
[35] Ibid., p. 331.
[36] Ibid., p. 244.

cellar. Willoughby's desperation to capture Clara can be explained by the perceived critical nature of his genetic responsibility, the 'duty to his House was a foremost thought with him'.[37] Hallum has commented on the link between aesthetic attraction and genetic suitability, suggesting that: 'Woman's beauty in literature became charged with new meaning after the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* because it also came to signify health and reproductive ability.' [38] Meredith appears aware of this current of thinking when Willoughby deems Clara: 'young, healthy, handsome; she was therefore fitted to be his wife, the mother of his children'.[39] Her appellation by Mrs Mountstuart however, as 'a dainty rogue in porcelain',[40] intimates Clara's unsuitability for the role of Lady Patterne. The 'rogue' behaviour identified by Willoughby as being possessed of 'a spirit with a natural love of liberty',[41] at odds both with the respectable conduct of elite society and of a bride Willoughby wished to be 'the mirror of himself'.[42] Willoughby convinces himself he is able to domesticate Clara's independence, disguising his cannibalistic desire for possession of his bride, body and soul, beneath outpourings reminiscent of both anachronistic romance and Gothic scoundrel.

Willoughby's outdated notions of romantic love include capturing a bride wholly innocent of the world and its corruption; he desires a wife 'to have come to him out of an egg-shell [...] seeing him with her sex's eyes first of all men'.[43] Willoughby wishes to occupy not just the paternal role, but a deified one, reinforcing the traditional role of husband as both teacher and father. Meredith states that Willoughby's 'enemy was the world, the mass [...] which has breathed on her whom we have selected, whom we cannot, can never rub quite clear of her contact with the abominated crowd'.[44] The implication is that woman's innate and natural purity is contaminated by contact with society, knowledge and social influence and that imperfections (in women at any rate) cannot be tolerated. Willoughby's desire for purity and innocence therefore transfers into an impulse to evaluate and nominate value; his estimation of women is based on this ability to visibly discern purity, as a collector detects faults in pottery:

37 Ibid., p. 49.
38 Hallum, p. 74.
39 Meredith, p. 76.
40 Ibid., p. 77.
41 Ibid., p. 79.
42 Ibid., p. 80.
43 Ibid., p. 51.
44 Ibid., p. 52.

> Women of mixed essences shading off the divine to the considerably lower were outside his vision of woman. His mind could little admit an angel in pottery as a rogue in porcelain. For him they were when fashioned at the beginning; many cracked, many stained, here and there a perfect specimen designed for the elect of men.[45]

Willoughby's intolerance of 'rogue[s] in porcelain' revisits Mrs Mountstuart's warning of Clara as just such a danger, but his ability to only see women in 'the primitive black [or] white'[46] limits the ability for further judgement when social value has already been assigned through beauty and social position. Notions of visible moral perfection[47] can be identified through dress, posture, behaviour, refinement; she must 'never do, dare never say, must not think. She must be cloistral'.[48] Willoughby's desire betokens a coveted commodity, paralleling Victorian tropes of the female model, a notion observed by Hallum:

> In *The Egoist* the emphasis on female purity is at odds with the idea of a commodity that acquires its value on the market, a notion which comes out of the Victorian social context whereby women were valued for their virginity and its associated implications of genetic integrity.[49]

For Willoughby, it was a woman's duty to remain pure and undiscovered that is, to deny the public-value placed on her body. His chivalrous demeanour adopts a sinister and possessive aspect in his pursuit of Clara, as Willoughby seizes the responsibility to preserve his chick in egg-shell paradigm. Anna Maria Jones suggests:

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[45] Ibid., p. 150.
[46] Ibid., p. 149.
[47] The connection between aesthetics and morality in the nineteenth century is grounded in phrenology. *Coombe's Popular Phrenology* (Boston, Printed for the Author, 1841) advises that '[o]ne of the first requisites in a good wife is to ascertain that she has a good head.' Coombe goes on the stress the importance of philoprogenitiveness (which was located centrally at the back of the head), which produced affection for children, and ensured excellent maternal skills.
[48] Meredith, p. 151.
[49] Hallum, p. 66.

> The deciding factor in the rise or decline of civilisation – the missing link, if you will, between aesthetic production/consumption and social evolution - is the public body and its appetites, a body which left to its own devices represents destructive (consumptive) potential almost without limit, but bred up properly has the potential to achieve an evolved state of perfection. Within this paradigm, the few who understand and revere culture are responsible for the husbandry of the masses, responsible for a kind of cultural selective breeding and management to promote sweetness and light among the raw and unkindled masses.[50]

As Patricia O'Hara has suggested Willoughby openly displays 'the erotic appetite for female purity that turns women into objects for consumption'.[51] To expand further, Meredith's 'devouring male Egoist'[52] acquires the value bestowed on this purity through marriage, in an act of social consumption.

Despite his aristocratic distinction, Willoughby embodies the primal desires of consumption and appetite which are translated into the marital contract of possession. When Clara asks Willoughby to release her from their engagement because she does not love him, Willoughby responds with images of bondage and capture:

> 'Seriously, plighted faith signifies plighted faith, as much as an iron-cable is iron to hold by. [...] But, my Clara, when I say to you that bride is bride, and you are mine, mine! [...] Bride is bride, and wife is wife, and *affianced* is, in honour, wedded. You cannot be released. We are united. Recognise it; united. There is no possibility of releasing a wife!'[53]

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50 Anna Maria Jones, 'Eugenics by Way of Aesthetics: Sexual Selection, Cultural Consumption and the Cultivated Reader in *The Egoist*', *Literature, Interpretation, Theory,* 16 (2005), 101-28 (p. 106-07).

51 Patricia O'Hara, 'Primitive Marriage, Civilised Marriage: Anthropology, Mythology and *The Egoist*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 20 (1992), pp. 1-24 (p. 10).

52 Meredith, p. 146.

53 Ibid., 194.

Faced with the possibility of losing Clara, Sir Willoughby descends into cannibal rhetoric after flirting with Laetitia reaffirm his sexual prowess: 'Of his power upon one woman he was now perfectly sure: - Clara had agonised him with a doubt of his personal mastery of any. One was a poor feast, but the pangs of his flesh during the last few days and the latest hours caused him to snatch at it, hungrily if contemptuously.'[54] Clara recognises Willoughby's need to devour the affections of women, warning Laetitia that: 'Egoists have *good* women for their victims; women on whose devoted constancy they feed; they drink it like blood.'[55] The text's convergences of social-consumption (through marriage) and cannibalism are connected through notions of Willoughby's power as male, achieved at the expense of the female body. Beneath the veneer of the civilised marriage market are what O'Hara has termed the 'primitive and violent customs of wife-capture'[56] prevalent in 'love [or hunting] season'.[57]

Willoughby's initial desire is to find a wife who would 'burn the world for him [...] reduce herself to ashes, or incense, or essence in honour of him, and so, by love's transmutation, literally be the man she was to marry'[58] is finally thwarted as he finally marries Laetitia Dale, 'a bloodless creature'[59] as Clara disappears into the arms of Vernon Whitford. Having been heard first professing his love for, and then proposing to, Laetitia by the young Crossjay, Willoughby is confronted by Clara who is then able to free herself from their engagement. Willoughby quickly transfers his affections to Laetitia, persuading himself of a love which 'burn[ed] with an ardour… that incited him to frantic excesses of language and comportment…'[60] She, however, has grown 'hard, materialistic;' has 'lost faith in romance', craving money and would 'only marry to be rich.'[61] Laetitia now sees Willoughby as he is and cannot love him, but her rejection of him only fuels Willoughby's desire to possess her. Their marriage acknowledges Willoughby's failure to preserve and promote the Patterne line, as Laetitia is diagnosed as 'anaemic' with 'not much life',[62] confirming her status as 'patiently starving'.[63] The notice given to Laetitia's bloodlessness echoes Clara's warning to Laetitia of Willoughby's vampiric lust for a wife of constancy to feed upon. Her anaemia suggests that,

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54 Ibid., 384.
55 Ibid., 206.
56 O'Hara, p. 9.
57 Meredith, p. 150.
58 Ibid., pp. 81-82.
59 Ibid., p. 203.
60 Ibid., p. 589.
61 Ibid., p. 594.
62 Ibid., p. 203.
63 Ibid., p. 56.

despite Willoughby's contentment, the marriage will be unsatisfying and un-nourishing, incapable of providing ultimate assimilation, Laetitia proving to be an undesirable victim of the slow feeding Willoughby desired from a wife.

Laetitia's wifely shortcomings reduce her to Willoughby's feeding source, a source that he later learns will not succeed in nourishing his ego. Patterns of female objectification and consumption pervade literature from classical mythology to contemporary fiction, but the social context of the mid/late nineteenth century, and its ambivalence concerning the future of the traditional gender-centric society, allows us to read this commodification as socially consumptive. For Barbara Caine the mid-nineteenth century was characterised by: 'An intense concern about marriage and family life, about child-bearing and rearing, and about the physical and mental nature of women.'[64] The Victorian appetite for literature culminating in the traditional marriage resolution provided a vehicle for the discussion, and suspicious scrutiny, of the contemporary analysis of women's rights. Articles stressing the importance and sanctity of marriage were qualified by pressures and anxieties foretelling the end of civilisation should women refuse their biological duties and seek economic or individual autonomy. The separate spheres which brought order and structure to Victorian society were rooted in a state of harmonious and biologically-endorsed matrimony that both men and women were conditioned to expect, idealise and desire.

The cannibalistic tropes apparent in George Meredith's *The Egoist* espouse the consumption and commodification of the marriage market, in which women were products for a discriminating male consumer. Women were products (in a very real sense) of their social conditioning that taught them to aspire to master the wifely qualities of submission, motherhood, passivity and domesticity; not only were these qualities to be learnt as part of the education of the middle-classes (with additional florid accomplishments for women of the upper-classes), but were desired and valorised as the duty and aspiration of their sex. Consumptive metaphors and cannibal rhetoric in *The Egoist* suggest a hesitancy in the unquestioning acceptance of traditional marital ideals and, perhaps more worryingly for the Victorians, a growing female reluctance to be consumed.

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[64] Barbara Caine, *Victorian Feminists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 15.

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