

On Nursing as “Women’s Work”: D. H. Lawrence and his “Ministering Angels”

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Nursing has traditionally been considered women’s work, whether as paid profession or domestic performance of female duties. Lawrence had much to say about the subject in his letters as well as in *The Lost Girl* and other novels, in which the nursing qualification provides an avenue to female independence. As he boasted in December 1912, shortly before writing what became the germ of *The Lost Girl*, “I shall do my work for women, better than the suffrage.” Yet, across his oeuvre Lawrence problematized female nursing, and in *Aaron’s Rod* even wrested nursing from female hands.

In her history of nursing in England, Sue Hawkins relates how the home in the nineteenth century was considered a natural environment for women given their putative inborn nurturing proclivities and talents. Across all classes, respectability was key and domesticity was an important component. In tandem and not in conflict with these values, middle class women ventured out into the community to do philanthropic work; within the limitations of their roles and duties they “constructed a ‘borderland’ between public and private spheres, enabling them to move out of the home, into public space which was predominantly theirs.” Hawkins adds that the “presence of lady visitors who dispensed kind words and spiritual guidance throughout the wards of voluntary hospitals, no doubt eased the way for lady nurses.” By the end of the century, Florence Nightingale and her followers had so reconciled the profession of nursing with expectations for women that nursing “was accepted as a suitable occupation for single middle-class women.” The new nurse was “constructed in the image of a saint or an angel, untouchable and asexual”; for the relationship of nurse and patient was conceived as analogous to that between mother and child.

Social forces contributed to the acceptability of the nursing profession. Starting in the mid nineteenth century the number of unmarried middle-class women rose dramatically, threatening the ethos of respectability and straining a father's resources. The traditional positions for these women, of governess or lady's companion, were "oversubscribed and underpaid." Also, an impetus toward the education of women beyond mere home schooling or finishing schools coincided with the establishment of nurse training schools, with the result that nursing was "refashioned as a respectable occupation."

Lawrence's *The Lost Girl* illustrates these developments. In 1920, revising the 1913 manuscript then called *The Insurrection of Miss Houghton* (the second version of the Elsa Culverwell story), Lawrence wrote to Martin Secker, "I don't think it is at all improper: quite fit for [the lending libraries]"; even the cover of his advance copy was "brown and demure and anything but lost looking . . . She looks testamental." For the sake of Lawrence's finances, it was essential after the suppression of *The Rainbow* that this new novel appear respectable. At the novel's start, Alvina Houghton represents what the very first page states is the "deary malady" of the age: "Dead Sea fruit of odd women, unmarried, unmarriageable women, called old maids." Schooled at home by Miss Frost, Alvina "remain[s] for twenty years the demure, refined creature of her governess' desire," but she chafes at the limitations of "the well-known surety of Woodhouse" and rather randomly opts to become a nurse. The narrator comments that "[a]t that time it was rather the thing for young ladies to enter the nursing profession if their hopes had been blighted or checked in another direction." Alvina's family, voicing a lingering Victorian conception of nursing as fit only for coarse women, considers her decision to enter training school as "a repulsive and indelicate step to take"; but with her father's doomed business schemes, she needs a profession to afford her financial as well as emotional independence.

The Lost Girl soon diverges from the Nightingale idealization of the middle-class nurse as angelic. If, as the narrator says, “Alvina had been bred to think of herself as a delicate, tender, chaste creature with unselfish inclinations and a pure, ‘high’ mind,” she is rather a different woman in the context of the hospital. As Dr. James puts it, “Of course, as a lady *and* a nurse, . . . you are two sorts of women in one.” She allows caresses and kisses, and the doctors “wrestle” with her in hallways and empty labs. In a line that Secker cut, “They took unpardonable liberties” – because “[o]n the whole, these young men had not any too deep respect for the nurses.” Indeed, the assumed primacy of the male doctors in the novel is an historical fact. Hawkins relates that the family metaphor of nurse as mother, patient as child, “also conveniently reinforced existing patriarchal hierarchies which placed doctors (and male managers) in control.” Though a central system of registration for nurses was finally achieved in 1919, the preeminence of doctors lasted (to this day, many would argue). In *The Lost Girl*, Dr. Mitchell epitomizes the arrogant, know-it-all doctor. Alvina realizes that marriage to him would provide status, respectability, and financial security, but she ultimately rejects being pigeon-holed in the role of doctor’s wife. After all, in the 1912 letter about doing his work for women “better than the suffrage,” Lawrence had in mind “a novel about Love Triumphant.” Alvina gains fulfillment not by nursing—which, in any case, never once comes across as a calling per se—but by submitting to a force that will tear her away from her profession, family, and country and “put [her] together again.”

Throughout his life, Lawrence chafed at being ill; as he said to Edward Garnett early on, “I loathe to be an invalid . . . I hate to be waited on, and to be treated gently.” This lament is echoed by such fictional invalids as Mr. Rockley in “Hadrian” and James Houghton in *The Lost Girl*, who feel their daughters have usurped their rightful power. The infantilization of a sick

man by his nurse appears most dramatically in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, though Clifford Chatterley relishes it: here, Mrs. Bolton perversely exemplifies Florence Nightingale's analogy of the nurse-patient relationship to that of mother and child. The vulnerability of the male, and especially the male invalid, to a female power grab reverses what Lawrence considered the natural order of things. One antidote that he provided is found in *Aaron's Rod*, written at the same time as the final version of *The Lost Girl*.

In the chapter "Low-water Mark," when Aaron Sisson faints in the street, Rawdon Lilly takes him into his home and tends to him for days; the high-water mark is a massage with oil that restores Lilly's "patient" to life. Aaron attributes his illness to having given himself to a woman, and Lilly, whose wife is visiting her people in another country, states that it is best for married people to be separated at times. The chapter culminates in a declamation on how women, in the service of their children, make their men into infants, and how men need to stand on their own feet. In *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, Lawrence describes woman's true realm as "the world of love, of emotion, of sympathy," attributes that would seem to suit women for the profession of nursing; indeed, one of the self-images cultivated by Woman is that of "ministering Angel." However, this a mere idea of herself, says Lawrence: "self-conscious idealism," an intellectual construct. The true goal should be to find "our own true spontaneous self." In *The Lost Girl*, Lawrence has Alvina throw off *respectability* and find *self-respect* through Love Triumphant. Nursing, after all, is only a stop-gap measure, until the time when a woman's hopes are no longer "blighted or checked in another direction."