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Writing as Re-Vision: the Strange Cases of
Emma Tennant's *Two Women of London* (1989)
and Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* (1990)

For the narrator of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is "very possibly . . . the best guidebook to the [Victorian] age," for "behind its latterday Gothick lies a profound and epoch-revealing truth" which is "the fact that every Victorian had two minds" (319). Readers' fascination for this schizophrenic age may well explain the ongoing appeal of Stevenson's story and the numerous adaptations of it that were made. Indeed, as Claire Harman puts it in her introduction to the 1996 Everyman's edition of Stevenson's work:

I doubt there are many contemporary readers of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* who can pick up the story for the first time and not already know—or think they know—it is all about. Since its publication in January 1886, the story has been told and retold countless times in plays, films, sermons and common parlance, becoming a generic term, a cliché, a piece of revised wisdom: a story which we all know by osmosis, and scarcely need to read... (vii)

So it may seem rather pointless over a hundred years after the original story was published to rewrite it once again. That is however exactly what two contemporary authors set out to do at the very end of the 1980s: British writer Emma Tennant with *Two Women of London* (1989) and American author Valerie Martin with *Mary Reilly* (1990). Even though the titles of the novels do not explicitly refer to Stevenson's tale, their subtitles on the other hand

are quite straightforward: “The untold story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” in *Mary Reilly*’s case and, a little more provocatively, “The Strange Case of *Ms Jekyll and Mrs Hyde*” (my emphasis) for *Two Women of London*.

If Emma Tennant has made it a habit throughout the years to “revisit” XIXth century classics,¹ Valerie Martin for her part does not specialise in “retro-Victorianism,”² nor in prequels³ or sequels of Victorian works and *Mary Reilly*, her fourth novel, is so far—and as far as I know—the only novel of that kind she has written. So why should such different writers choose to tell once again the ill-fated story of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde? And how do they manage, each in her own way, to make something new out of such a *topos* in works of fiction?

First, it could well be that Emma Tennant and Valerie Martin use Stevenson’s tale simply for mercenary reasons: because the original story is so “strange” and famous, any novel where the names “Jekyll and Hyde” appear on the front page is likely to attract the attention of potential readers, who might purchase the book out of mere curiosity. Without entirely discarding this motivation, I would tend to think that it is not the only one. Indeed, sheer plagiarism is definitely not the mainspring of Emma Tennant’s and Valerie Martin’s novels: some serious rewriting of the original tale has taken place.

¹ See for example her sequel to Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice: Pemberley, or Pride and Prejudice Continued* (1993) and then the sequel to the sequel, *An Unequal Marriage, Or, Pride and Prejudice Twenty Years Later* (1995). She also wrote *Emma In Love*, subtitled “Jane Austen’s *Emma Continued*” (1996), and *Tess*, a sequel to Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. *The Bad Sister* is also seen as a rewriting of James Hogg’s *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824).

² This term was used by A.S. Byatt in her conference in Strasbourg at the SEAC convention in November 1999 to describe novels written by 20th century writers, but set partly or totally in the 19th century.

³ According to *The Chambers English Dictionary* (1990 edition), a prequel is “a film or book produced after some other film or book has proved a success, based on the same leading characters but depicting events happening before those of the first one.”

The question of the point of view in particular has totally been reconsidered. Contrary to Stevenson, whose tale is told solely by male narrators, and as many critics have pointed out from the start, is peopled with “successful middle-aged professional men,” (Lang in Maixner ed. 56) from which women are almost completely and conspicuously absent, both Valerie Martin and Emma Tennant chose women narrators: Dr Jekyll’s housemaid, who writes in the first person singular, in *Mary Reilly* and a series of women narrators in *Two Women of London*. Re-writing the story of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde from the point of view of a woman certainly gives the tale a totally different slant. However, the choice of women narrators is the only common point between the two contemporary novels, and we shall see that Emma Tennant and Valerie Martin have opposed and symmetrical approaches to the revision of Stevenson’s novel.

In *Two Women of London* there are no explicit references to Stevenson’s tale as such. However, there are a lot of indirect intertextual references to the XIXth century; for example the first sentence of the book, “A man lies dead in the gardens of Rudyard and Nightingale Crescent” (1), points to two icons of Victorianism and British imperialism: Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) and Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), thus anchoring the story and the crime in the XIXth century. There are also recurrent character names: the most obvious ones are of course Eliza Jekyll and Mrs Hyde, but there is also a (Roger) Poole: he is no longer Dr Jekyll’s butler as in Stevenson’s story, but he is introduced in the “Cast List”—a variant of the “*Dramatis Personae*,” provided by the narrator of *Two Women of London* at the beginning of the book—as:

Gardener to the Rudyard/Nightingale Crescent gardens. Despite twenty five years’ work there, the residents take very little interest in him—with the exception of MS JEKYLL, who sometimes asks him in for a cup of tea and has given him permission to use her telephone.
(8)

Two Pooles are in fact directly linked to Ms Jekyll, for Eliza Jekyll’s butlering has been taken over by Poole’s wife Grace (who does not appear in Stevenson’s tale), who cleans for her. And of

course the intertextual reference to Grace Poole, the keeper of the first Mrs Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, is quite transparent. In a way, Emma Tennant's Grace Poole is also the keeper of a madwoman, since Eliza Jekyll's split personality certainly qualifies her as a mental case. Mrs Poole also witnesses the final events at the flat in Nightingale Crescent—"There were tables overturned when she came in this morning, she said—and further signs of a struggle"—(101), just as Stevenson's Poole witnessed the tragic demise of Jekyll/Hyde. More subtly, "Hastie," Doctor Lanyon's first (and unusual) name in Stevenson's story, is the same as the (woman) solicitor's surname in Emma Tennant's *Jean Hastie*. The fact that Jean Hastie is a Scot and a lawyer may also be read as a kind of ironic homage to R. L. Stevenson.

In *Two Women of London* "the reconstruction of events must begin on Monday the ninth of February" 1988 (11, my emphasis), *i.e.*, over a century after Stevenson's story was published. Numerous allusions to twentieth century history are made, for example to World War II and to concentration camps. As far as the story itself is concerned, the process of transformation is reversed: in Stevenson's story, Dr Henry Jekyll, with the help of the drug he has developed, turns into Mr Edward Hyde. In *Two Women of London*, Mrs Hyde turns back into Ms Eliza Jekyll, "the person [she] had been" (113). Stevenson's Mr Hyde, a child batterer and a murderer, is "a much smaller, slighter, and younger" (51) version of middle-aged Dr Jekyll, whereas Tennant's Mrs Hyde, a child batterer and a murderer as well, is the older and darker version of Eliza Jekyll.

The obvious differences between Stevenson's story and Emma Tennant's revision of it are fairly superficial and there are in fact many similarities in the narrative structure of their novels.⁴ In Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the story is told by three narrators: a third-person narrator for the first eight chapters (including within the first chapter Enfield's account of

⁴ For a detailed comparison of the basic structure of the two novels, see the APPENDIX at the end.

Hyde's treatment of the little girl), then there are "Dr. Lanyon's Narrative" and finally "Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case," both in the first person. The structure of Emma Tennant's *Two Women of London* is slightly more complex but basically similar. The interventions of a female "editor" (the "Editor's Introduction" at the beginning and "the "Editor's Postscript" at the end) frame the story. They include, within her first person narrative, the transcript of a video recording and of "Mara's Film," but also "Jean Hastie's Journal," and finally "Dr Frances Crane's Notes and Memorabilia," where a "reasonable" explanation is given to Mrs Hyde's transformation into Eliza Jekyll. Some scenes are almost literally repeated: for example, Stevenson's chapter "Search for Mr Hyde" is duplicated in Emma Tennant's as "Looking for Mrs Hyde," and once Utterson and Jean Hastie have found the Hyde they were—"If he be Mr Hyde . . . I shall be Mr Seek" says Utterson, in a rare pun—(Stevenson 12)—the dialogue between on the one hand Utterson and E. Hyde and on the other Jean Hastie and Mrs Hyde is very similar: "Will you let me see your face?" asks Mr Utterson; "Can I see your face?" is Jean Hastie's question. In both cases, the Hyde character obliges: "Mr Hyde appeared to hesitate; and then, as if upon some sudden reflection, fronted about with an air of defiance; and the pair stared at each other pretty fixedly for a few seconds" (Stevenson 13); "And I did see her face," says Jean Hastie (Tennant 50). Then both Mr Utterson and Jean Hastie talk about the friend they have in common with the Hyde characters:

"We have common friends," said Mr Utterson.

"Common friends!" echoed Mr Hyde, a little hoarsely. "Who are they?"

"Jekyll, for instance," said the lawyer.

"He never told you," cried Mr Hyde, with a flush of anger. "I did not think you would have lied."

"Come," said Mr Utterson, "that is not fitting language." (Stevenson 13)

"We have friends in common," Jean said. 'Eliza Jekyll -' she added quickly, when the expressions on the face of Mrs Hyde and her companion showed extreme disbelief...

"You mind your fucking business," said Mrs Hyde. (Tennant 51)

Another such example can be found at the end of "The Last Night," or "The Last Evening" in Emma Tennant's version. Just before the narrators quote "Dr Lanyon's Narrative" and "Dr Frances Crane's Notes and Memorabilia," the documents are presented in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as "the two narratives in which this mystery was now to be explained" (41). In *Two Women of London*, the editor says "Ms Eliza Jekyll's message, to whomever it may concern, is presented here . . . in order to solve the mystery" (99). The two novels also have basically the same story line, with the murders, the strange wills entrusted by the Jekyll character in each novel to lawyers (Jean Hastie and Gabriel John Utterson), who as friends strongly object to the contents of those wills. There are also the visits by Jekyll/Hyde to their doctor friends (Frances Crane and Hastie Lanyon), who both die shortly after Jekyll's "revelations."

It seems at first that in *Two Women of London* Emma Tennant goes much further than Valerie Martin in distancing herself from the original, since, basically, the same story, within the same time-frame (end of the XIXth century), with the same characters (Dr Jekyll, Utterson the lawyer, Poole the butler, etc.) are used in *Mary Reilly* as in Stevenson's version. Most of *Mary Reilly* is presented as the eponymous Mary's journals, in the first person narrative, starting with "the account I wrote for my master . . . at his request" after he had "first remarked the scars on my hands" (7). That account, which explains about Mary's social and psychological background (a sadistic father who abused her when he was drunk) does not of course appear in Stevenson's story. The novel is then divided into three books, and the housemaid's tale breaks off abruptly, with Mary deciding to lie down beside her beloved master's corpse in a macabre parody of the sexual act:

I rested my head upon his chest and put my arms about his neck. I could hear my own heart in my ear and it seemed to be beating against his still one.

That is how they found us. (237)

So the diegesis in *Mary Reilly* starts before and ends slightly after *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*'s. In the end, it is up to Mary to explain what she has understood for a long time but never put into words;

that is to say, that “[her] gentle Master and Edward Hyde was one and the same” (236). This of course the contemporary reader already knows from the very beginning. In both Emma Tennant’s and Valerie Martin’s novels the role of the reader is similar: because of the fame of the original story, there cannot be any doubt as to the identity of Mrs Hyde or Edward Hyde. Thus the interest of the reader is not in the solving of the mystery, but rather in the re-telling of the story itself.

After Jekyll/Hyde’s death, Mary Reilly’s narration is suddenly taken over in an “Afterword” by an editor who explains how “the preceding extraordinary diaries” arrived in (his/her?) hands and who confesses to having “taken various liberties with Mary’s text to prepare it for publication” (239) and who proposes “two possible solutions” (242) to “the question of what really happened to Mary’s employer, Henry Jekyll” (241). There is no direct reference to Stevenson’s text, but the editor ends in ironically casting doubt over the “authenticity” of the manuscript, raising “the possibility that the sad and disturbing story enfolded for us in the pages of Mary’s diaries is now and always was intended to be nothing more serious than a work of fiction” (244).

In spite of the obvious structural parallelisms in the time-line and the use of the same characters in *Mary Reilly* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Valerie Martin’s tale may well in the end be more “original” than Emma Tennant’s. In using Mary Reilly, Dr Jekyll’s housemaid, as a narrator, Martin amplifies on a nameless but nonetheless existing character in Stevenson’s novel, who appears at the end of the story in the chapter “The Last Night,” and who, “at the sight of Mr. Utterson,” the lawyer, “broke into hysterical whimpering.” In the following paragraph, Stevenson’s narrator notes that “only the maid lifted up her voice, and now wept loudly” and she is told by Poole, the butler, to “hold [her] tongue” with, the narrator adds, “a ferocity that testified to his own jangled nerves; and indeed when the girl had so suddenly raised the note of her lamentation, they had all started and turned towards the inner door with faces of dreadful expectation” (33-34). As Cécile Petit writes:

Mary Reilly est un clin d'œil à la femme de chambre de l'histoire originale, qui se lamente nerveusement lors de la métamorphose de Jekyll en Hyde et dont le droit à la parole se limite à ces pleurs puisque le majordome la somme de tenir sa langue. Mary Reilly, par contre, prend corps grâce à ses propres mots . . . Point de vue doublement féminin d'une histoire initialement vécue et véhiculée par des hommes. (93-94)

That type of revision of the novel seems to me to be of the same nature as the first and third parts of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which the narrator is the first Mrs Rochester, who in *Jane Eyre* is also a speechless and screaming creature. The point of view of "the mad woman in the attic" retrospectively sheds as disturbing a light on Charlotte Brontë's famous story as the housemaid's diaries do on *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.⁵

As Cécile Petit also notes, in *Mary Reilly*, "chaque scène originale se dédouble car elle est désormais l'objet d'une seconde vision" (94) and this second vision is provided by the servants. From the very title of the novel, the reader can infer that the emphasis of the story has shifted from Jekyll/Hyde to Mary Reilly, from man to woman of course, but also from master to servant. In Stevenson's story, only Poole, the butler, is given some sort of characterisation and stands apart from "the whole of the servants, men and women" who are seen "huddled together like a flock of sheep" at the end of the story (33). Only Poole shows some sense when he rushes to the superior Mr Utterson and asks him for his help. But in *Mary Reilly*, the reader is given the different servants' reactions to what is happening, and they (Cook, Bradshaw, Annie...) and their lives at Dr Jekyll's are given the most important roles. For example, Dr Jekyll's short statement that he "announced to [his] servants that a Mr. Hyde (whom [he] described) was to have full liberty and power about [his] house in the square" (52) is taken up and developed in *Mary Reilly*: "The Master" had asked the servants "to gather in Mr Poole's parlour, as he wished to speak to [them] as a group" (75):

⁵ It is quite interesting to note that both Emma Tennant and Valerie Martin also use *Jane Eyre* as a sub-text as they re-write *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

As you all know . . . my work at the laboratory consumes so much of my time and energy that I scarcely have enough of either to carry it out . . . so after much thinking and searching about, I have decided to take an assistant . . . I inform you all of this decision . . . because it is important to me, and to my work, that this young man, Mr Edward Hyde, have complete liberty in my house as well as in my laboratory, and that you treat him with the respect and diligence in service that you show me. (77)

Then Mary goes on to describe the effect of that announcement on Poole (not pleased), Cook (indifferent) and herself (curious). In the same way, when Dr Jekyll mentions in his last statement that at the beginning, "there was no mirror in [*his*] room," and that he had one "brought there later on, and for the very purpose of those transformations" (Stevenson 50), the episode is amplified by Valerie Martin and rewritten as a comic scene between Poole the butler and Bradshaw the footman who have "to move the cheval glass from Master's bedroom to the cabinet in the laboratory, for it seemed Master had called Mr Poole in early to request that this be done" (Martin 41). But it also allows Mary to enter the laboratory and describe it in much greater detail than the narrator of the original story when Utterson and Poole eventually force the door open, for she is called to by Poole to open the door for him and Bradshaw: "and then," she said, "as I couldn't get back around them, there was nothing to do but step inside. I felt a thrill, though I dared not show it, that I was seeing at last where Master spends so much of his time" (47). And of course the laboratory is the place where at the end of her tale she will return and symbolically take her place next to her dead master.

What do those stories tell us about the age in which they were rewritten? Valerie Martin is undoubtedly class conscious and wishes to give the lumpen proletariat of the Victorian household a retrospective voice in the telling of this most famous story. But there is also in both writers a genuine attempt at rewriting the *history* as "*her* story," and both novels can be seen as a kind of literary takeover of a male written and oriented classic, especially in Emma Tennant's "strange case," where man is seen as a potential rapist (and thus, to a certain extent, Mrs Hyde's crime justified) and where

the few minor male characters are despicable. Thus, to paraphrase the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Two Women of London* and *Mary Reilly* are very possibly two of the best guidebooks to the late XXth century, for behind their latterday Gothick lies a profound and epoch-revealing truth, which is the fact that women writers have finally come of age and are taking on in their writings the very bastions of literary male chauvinism. We can note that even Conan Doyle's "Scandal in Bohemia," one of the most famous *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, was rewritten from the point of view of Irene Adler, "the woman"—"To Sherlock Holmes she is always the woman"⁶—in Carol Nelson Douglas' *Good Night, Mr Holmes* in 1990,⁷ a year after Emma Tennant's *Two Women of London* and the same year as Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly*. Time will tell who the next male writer to be subjected to that type of revision will be.

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⁶ The first line of Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia" (161).

⁷ On that particular topic, see Delphine Kresge-Cingal's article, "Portrait de LA Femme en détective : les romans de Carol Nelson Douglas."

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APPENDIX

A parallel study of R.L. Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*
and Emma Tennant's *Two Women of London*

Two Women of London
Emma Tennant, 1989

Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde
R.L. Stevenson, 1886

characters

overwhelmingly female

overwhelmingly male

places

Notting Hill, London
fictional streets: Rudyard /
Nightingale Crescents

London
communication between
the two houses explained
from the start

dates and diegetical events

9th February, 1988: opening of Shade
Gallery (windows smashed
by Mrs Hyde); Mara Kaletsky films
Mrs Hyde in the gardens

Utterson/Enfield's Sunday
walk; story of the 2 doors;
Hyde's beating of a child

E. Jekyll wants J. Hastie to act as a
"conveyancer" in giving her house
away to Mrs Hyde

Utterson discusses Jekyll's
will

11th February: J. Hastie follows
and meets Mrs Hyde; goes to
E. Jekyll's flat

Utterson follows and meets
Hyde

12th February: dinner at E. Jekyll's

"a fortnight later": dinner
at Dr Jekyll's

13th February: Tilda sees Mrs Hyde murdering a man; J. Hastie goes back to Scotland

story of the fake letter;
Mrs Hyde disappears

May 7th: Jean Hastie goes back to London; dinner at E. Jekyll's; meets Dr Crane

May 10th: J. Hastie visits Dr Crane; finds "she (is) obviously dying"

summer of 1988: Dr F. Crane's hospitalization and death, she leaves J. Hastie a cassette

August 12th: the editor visits J. Hastie in Scotland

"Mrs Hyde" returns, quarrels with "E. Jekyll" and disappears

J. Hastie comes back to London and gives "the editor" Frances Crane's tape.

"nearly a year later",
Oct, 18-: Hyde is seen killing Carew ; Utterson goes and sees Jekyll;
story of the fake letter;
E. Hyde disappears

10th December: Jekyll's letter to Dr Lanyon written

8th January : dinner at Dr Jekyll's

9th January: Dr Lanyon receives Dr Jekyll's letter

13th January: Dr Lanyon writes his own story

12th, 14th, 15th: Jekyll's door shut against Utterson, who six nights later

"betakes" himself to Dr Lanyon's, who is very "changed"

a week later: Dr Lanyon "takes to his bed";

in something less than a fortnight: he is dead, leaving a manuscript for Utterson

"a wild, cold, seasonable night of March": quarrel between "Jekyll" and "Hyde"
Utterson discovers Hyde's body

He goes back to his office to read Dr Lanyon's narrative and Jekyll's statement.

Mara's taped conversation with
Mrs Hyde

Christmas '88: Jean Hastie's
"afterword"

narrative

narrator: "editor", Dr Crane's "notes
and memorabilia", Jean Hastie's
journal, Mara Kaletsky's videos

third person narrative; "Dr
Lanyon's narrative": 1st
person; "Henry Jekyll's
Full Statement of the
Case": 1st person