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Incidental Murder: Mary Cholmondeley's Sensational Humour

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ABSTRACT

Mary Cholmondeley's *The Danvers Jewels* is a serio-comic homage to the 1860s sensation novel, serialised in *Temple Bar* from January to March 1887 and published anonymously in volume form later that year. The novella draws on domestic realism, sensation and humour to investigate the construction of class and gender roles: a combination that would become characteristic of Cholmondeley's mature fiction including *Diana Tempest* (1893) and *Red Pottage* (1899). *The Danvers Jewels* and its publishing history show the author developing a critical network, as she balanced her own experiments in genre with the demands of the commercial market. The extant correspondence between Cholmondeley and a range of well-connected figures offers a test case for examining tensions between women writers' sense of a literary vocation and the necessary negotiation of a professional network.

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KEYWORDS: Cholmondeley; Bentley; Sensation; Crime; Jewels

Mary Cholmondeley is most often discussed as the author of bestselling New Woman novel *Red Pottage* (1899). *The Danvers Jewels*, serialised in *Temple Bar* from January to March 1887 and published anonymously in volume form later that year, has received comparatively little attention. Written when Cholmondeley was twenty seven, the novella is a serio-comic homage to the 1860s sensation novel, and is suggestive of what we might term the intersectional modes shaping late-Victorian women's writing. This early work draws on domestic realism, sensation and humour to investigate the construction of class and gender roles: a combination that would become characteristic of Cholmondeley's mature fiction including *Diana Tempest* (1893) and *Red Pottage*. *The Danvers Jewels* and its publishing history show the author developing a critical network, as she balanced her own experiments in genre with the demands of the commercial market. The extant correspondence between Cholmondeley and a range of well-connected figures offers a test case for examining tensions between the literary vocation and the negotiation of a professional network.

On hearing that her novella had been accepted for publication, Cholmondeley wrote bitterly in her diary that it had been written "when I was in the depths last winter. I hated doing it. … Bright and humorous, is it? I look back with a sort of grim smile at the darkness and depression out of which this brightness and humour came." (Cholmondeley 17 August 1886; cited in Lubbock 1927, 83). Not surprisingly, she assured herself that "There is better stuff in me than that which I put in this story, but not the same kind of stuff" (ibid., 84). She was right on both counts. Nonetheless *The Danvers Jewels* experiments in interesting ways with what Carra Glatt terms "The inherent hybridity of most works of Victorian realism – whose generic affiliations may be indeterminate until late in the novel and often remain a matter of critical dispute" (44). Cholmondeley's early career speaks to the "multi-vocal patterns" and intergenerational influences characteristic of women's writing during these years (Gavin and Oulton 2024, 5).

On the one hand, "Victorian society could not define the late-century feminist figure as easily as it had defined the good woman and the bad woman" (Das 2024, 11). But on the other, the 1886 trial of Adelaide Bartlett for poisoning her husband reminded an excited public that women were literally dangerous. The possibilities for female characters in the 1880s thus included both domestic

efficiency and criminal propensities. These varied concerns fed directly into the literary modes in circulation during these years. Indeed Maurizio Ascari argues that "It is in these border-territories that processes of creative innovation often take place." (Ascari, 2007, xii) Barry Godfrey notes that, "Even though the misery they caused was deep and distressful, cases of murder were comparatively rare" (Godfrey 2014, 7). Nonetheless, murder was a particular source of fascination to late-Victorian readers. Undeterred by their more conservative opponents, women authors continued to respond to the earlier trend for sensational tropes.

What came to be known as the Great Fiction Debate included sometimes heated exchanges about both authors' rights and the value of new forms of writing. But crucially, it also involved serious consideration of whether 1860s sensation titles should be included in public libraries. In its disruption of the marriage plot inherent in much domestic realism, the sensation novel creates an interdependence between two seemingly different genres. It is notoriously both titillating and disturbing, precisely because it locates dramatic crime in domestic settings. And helpfully for women, their supposed eye for small details was an essential skill for crime writers. As Judith Flanders pithily expresses it, "Observing was an equal-opportunities occupation in fiction" (Flanders 2011, 297). By the 1880s women were also able to draw on sophisticated, and crucially respectable models that incorporated criminal plots, including George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872).

It is easy to forget that this decade also saw various experiments with literary humour. Importantly, Tamara Wagner references the ways in which "the increasingly critical, even tongue-in-cheek, invocation of sensation fiction's most prevalent tropes testifies to its adaptability" (Wagner 209, 211). But humour, like sensation fiction, had the tendency to become politically divisive: by the end of the 1880s criticism of the largely masculine New Humour was being used to reinforce class differences; in the 1890s feminists became the target of jokes directed at the "New Woman". To complicate matters further, Margaret Stetz argues that "Women in general and feminists in particular at the close of the nineteenth century were allegedly too psychologically unbalanced to appreciate the sanity and healthfulness of jokes" (Stetz 2000, 221). Cholmondeley herself always set a high value on a sense of humour, claiming that her invalid mother

had been 'sometimes helped by her sense of humour' in the struggle with her "anxious, over-apprehensive mind" (*Under One Roof* 1918, 50).

The Danvers Jewels achieves a tone of amused detachment through the deployment of an unreliable narrator, a country house setting, a scapegrace heir and a few breezily dismissed murders. Cholmondeley's innovation is to pastiche the sensational plot of *The Moonstone* and co-opt it into the service of comedy, through the misguided assertions of an unreliable narrator. Much of the humour derives from the novella's self-conscious use of familiar sensation tropes: theft, bigamy and murder are all duly registered by the characters.

The story begins with Col. Middleton being summoned to the deathbed of the irascible Sir John in India. Cholmondeley's debt to *The Moonstone* (1870) has long been recognised, and the decision to set the first scene in India suggests a deliberate echo of Wilkie Collins's novel. The catalyst for the plot is Sir John's decision to entrust Middleton with a bag of plundered gems, with instructions to deliver them to Ralph Danvers (the son of the woman he once wanted to marry) in England. The brutal Sir John freely admits that he has stolen the jewels he is now giving to Ralph Danvers. His confession is embedded in a series of comments on his character confided to the reader by Middleton. Admittedly in *The Danvers Jewels* "India takes on the status of a curiosity" (Murphy 2009, 134) and the narrator "situates the gems within merely a fragment of context" (ibid., 135). Cholmondeley's interest in international politics is confined here to a few vague hints about the abuse of colonial subjects. But if the casual asides are not interpreted or fully registered by Middleton, they remain available for the reader to interpret. Retribution of some kind is surely to be expected.

The morning after his conversation with Middleton, news breaks that Sir John has himself been murdered.

> Murdered in the night! Cathcart heard a noise and went in, and stumbled over him on the floor. As he came in he saw the lamp knocked over, and a figure rush out through the veranda. The moon was bright, and he saw a man run across a clear space in the moonlight—a tall, slightly built man in native dress, but not a native, Cathcart said; that he would take his oath on, by his build. (13)

On the boat back to England, the naïve Middleton befriends an American called Carr, and having first confided the secret of the jewels to him, secures his

invitation to the Danvers estate as a stand-in for a guest who has had to pull out of the family's amateur theatricals. Unlike the ingenuous Middleton, the reader versed in sensation fiction immediately grasps Carr's dubious motives for pursuing this acquaintance.

Despite its sensational trappings, *The Danvers Jewels* avoids cashing in on its shocking prologue. When Sir John himself is murdered, there is no sense of his death as a providential intervention or even an act of justice. Rather the incidental murder becomes a subsidiary plotline and even a comic device. Once the action moves to London, a second death is treated in desultory terms as a strange coincidence. Middleton has given Carr his sister's last address, only to find that she has moved in the years since he has been in India. The hapless landlady of the original lodgings is killed during a break-in that night. A day later Jane Middleton fends off two intruders with a policeman's rattle.

The narrative itself obfuscates the question of how the previous landlady died. Middleton's first informant is the baker's boy. "'It's murder!' he said, with relish. 'Burgilars in the night.'" (20) According to a policemen, "The poor lady had not been murdered … but, being subject to heart complaint, had died in the night of an acute attack, evidently brought on by fright" (20). In recounting the story to Charles, Middleton revives the original theory that "a poor woman was murdered in Jane's old house" (44). Clearly the incident has had little effect on him, "I remember it especially, because I went to the house by mistake, not knowing Jane had moved" (44). Later in the novel Charles summarises the events leading up to the theft, including the attack on the London house, and how "the poor woman in it is murdered, *or* dies of fright" (58, emphasis added). The sequel *Sir Charles Danvers* (1889) shows a similar instability, when the heroine's brother Raymond Deyncourt is hit round the head by a gamekeeper. Deyncourt assures Charles that he was already dying of his injuries after a fall while trying to escape. In the world of the novel, this incident apparently requires no further investigation.

At the same time, the overt influence of Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* heightens the comic treatment of Ralph's fiancée, the apparently vacuous Aurelia. Lucy Audley is routinely described in terms of her childish beauty, with "the most wonderful curls in the world – soft and feathery, always floating away from her face, and making a pale halo round her head when the sunlight shone through

them" (13). Aurelia is also repeatedly characterised through her appearance, and the reader's response to her is necessarily overdetermined, filtered as it is through the blundering and clearly smitten Middleton. Too good to be true and implausibly stupid, it is no surprise when Aurelia is revealed to be the thief. The joke works, not because she is inherently funny but because her representation is out of date.

From the start of her career, Cholmondeley had been deeply interested in the construction of gender. One of her first stories, "Geoffrey's Wife" (1885), plays with cultural identities through the figures of a young couple on honeymoon in Paris. The bride Eva is a forerunner of Aurelia; although in the story the character's childish dependence is genuine, it is inappropriate for the 1880s and marks her as unfit for the modern environment. When Geoffrey and the delicate Eva are caught up in an angry crowd, the fragile woman has to be physically carried by her husband, with tragic results.

Aurelia's parodic performance reworks the earlier motif of the fragile young woman as untrustworthy and manipulative. Readers of Braddon's text should quickly pick up clues, both through Aurelia's petulant blonde prettiness, and in the family's concerns that she is of unknown family. The holiday encounter is a familiar ploy in sensation fiction, but is here treated parodically. Charles explains to Middleton that Charles first met Aurelia in Switzerland:

> Lovely orphan sat by Lady Mary at *table d'hôte*. Read tracts presented by Lady Mary. Made acquaintance. Lovely orphan's travelling companion or governess discovered to be live sister of defunct travelling companion or governess of Lady Mary. Result, warm friendship. Ralph, like a dutiful nephew, appears on the scene. Fortnight of fine weather. Interesting expeditions. Romantic attachment, cemented by diamond and pearl ring from Hunt & Roskell's. (28-9)

Nonetheless Patricia Murphy notes "the family's inability to penetrate the guise of a conventional Victorian maiden, albeit a highly petulant one, that she adopts to conceal her felonious scheme." (Murphy 2009, 142) The suspicious Charles comments that "he admired her complexion most because it was so thoroughly well done, and the coloring was so true to nature" (280). But perceptive though he is, he assumes until the end that she is "a pink-and-white nonentity, without an idea beyond a neat adjustment of pearl-powder" (88).

The novella's strategy of drawing on sensational tropes is overtly intertextual. In 1862 Braddon had used shock tactics to deride purblind responses to feminine beauty, as the murderous outsider uses her looks to inveigle her way into an upper-class household. Lucy Audley's blonde prettiness allows her to get away with the murder of Luke Marks, at least. In *The Danvers Jewels*, the jewels are stolen on the night of the play and suspicion instantly attaches to the scapegrace oldest son Charles, who is known to be in debt and claims to have discovered the theft in the middle of the night. Carr, the obvious suspect, is found to have slept in the lodge rather than in the house. The mystery is resolved when Aurelia is discovered with a tell-tale piece of paper used to wrap the jewels, and absconds a few hours later. She is revealed as Carr's wife when she is killed in a train crash while trying to escape with the jewels.

Aurelia's original scheme to steal Lady Mary's jewels has necessitated her presence in the house, which in turn suggests the more ambitious theft. The underlying premise of *The Danvers Jewels* – that a married couple should plot to obtain one set of jewels, only to find themselves in the same house angling for another – is particularly implausible. But "Of course sensation novels are implausible. That is the point" (Glatt 48). While Aurelia stops short of bigamy, the scenario again suggests a debt to *Lady Audley's Secret* as well as *The Moonstone*. But readers, as Cholmondeley knows full well, will not fall for the same trick twice. The literal unveiling is not so much a plot twist as a knowing intertextual joke - in a moment of allusive irony, Aurelia is shown to be wearing a wig over her own dark hair. To Middleton's horror, the change "so completely altered the dead face that I could hardly recognize it as belonging to the same person" (84).

As in *The Moonstone*, crimes involving the upper classes are managed for preference without external agency. No suggestion is made that the police should investigate the burglary at Stoke Morton, although when the train breaks down they are seen to be "stationed here and there" (78). Instead the solution to the mystery "is patched together by a number of participants" (Flanders 375). Among them, the affable Middleton ironically sees himself as an astute amateur detective. He is indignant when Charles claims to have "pumped" him about Carr, and expresses himself as "charmed" by Aurelia's request for a serious conversation, "inwardly wondering what that little curly head would consider to be serious conversation" (65). When she cleverly deflects attention from herself

by casting aspersions on Evelyn, he congratulates himself on being "the most likely person to follow out a clew, however slight, in a case that seemed becoming [sic] more and more complicated" (66). The final explanation, that Aurelia is already married to Carr, is given by a police inspector only after her death miles from the family home.

The novella's use of a country house as the primary locale aligns it with sensation fiction and also with Julian Symons's discussion of setting as one determinant of crime (as opposed to detective) fiction. In this analysis, the environment itself is "Often important to the tone and style of the story, and frequently an integral part of the crime itself, i.e. the pressures involved in a particular way of life lead to this especial crime" (Symons 1972, 174). *The Danvers Jewels* uses the linked themes of amateur acting and burglary in high life to mediate the interactions of an inept bachelor and a dysfunctional family. But as an upper-class writer herself, Cholmondeley was not purveying a fantasy of high society for an aspirational middle class. She was writing about the world she knew best. Cholmondeley later told George Bentley (Mary Cholmondeley to George Bentley, [1890]) that the idea for *The Danvers Jewels* had occurred to her in January 1886, during the preparations for an amateur production of Tom Taylor's *To Oblige Benson*. There is no obvious link between this light comedy, in which a flirtatious young man writes a love letter to his friend's wife, and the novella. But importantly, the play was being rehearsed at her uncle Regie's house, Condover Hall in Shropshire. She would somewhat condescendingly send Bentley "a snipping of a menu" from Condover in 1895, confirming it as the original of Stoke Morton (22 January 1895).

In 1887 serialisation of her early novella in *Temple Bar* allowed Cholmondeley to develop what would become a crucial relationship with the Bentley firm. There were useful precedents for a woman author seeking to establish herself with this particular publisher. One of their authors, Rhoda Broughton, was a family friend of the Cholmondeleys. Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* had been serialised in *The New Monthly Magazine* between January 1860 and September 1861, and Jennifer Phegley notes "how aggressively she hounded the Bentleys to guarantee the profitability of her novel" (Phegley 2005, 185). As Cholmondeley gained in confidence, she would begin to ask similarly demanding questions about the supply of her novel to circulating libraries. Her interactions with both her social

network and her publishers between 1886 and the takeover of the firm by Macmillan in 1898, confirms that she kept a careful eye on the market.

But negotiations for the publication of Cholmondeley's fiction did not begin with Richard Bentley. As a teenager she had spent four intense months on a manuscript (since lost or destroyed) called *Her Evil Genius*. Her diary presents this venture as very much a family concern:

> Much depends on what Mama thinks of it. I have begun reading it to her, but she has not got far yet. I am getting quite anxious about it. … I wonder what will happen to it. Will it be put by for ever in the bottom shelf of my cupboard, or will it be returned with thanks by some publisher, to whom *we* have screwed up courage to send it. Or will it again be published and remain unread, be published and run down, be published, and become popular. (Cholmondeley, Diary 16 May 1877. Emphasis added)

Even at 17, Cholmondeley shows an informed interest in the literary market and the probable fate of a first book. She registers that manuscripts are routinely turned down with a formal note of thanks; others serve simply to fuel poor reviews or saturate the market; exceptionally a novel will become popular with readers. Women authors were often accused of flooding the market with cheap fiction, in a reverse correlation between bad reviews and high sales. By contrast, the young Cholmondeley assumes that critical displeasure will kill off a new book.

By the early 1880s she was sending out material to the *Cornhill*. James Payn turned down one story with an encouraging letter (recalled in a letter Cholmondeley wrote him on 3 January 1895). Linda Peterson identified what is probably Cholmondeley's earliest journal publication, a story called "All is Fair in Love and War" published in *The Graphic* in 1882. Another early story, "Lisle's Courtship", appeared anonymously in *Household Words* in 1884. All this meant that by the time of writing *The Danvers Jewels*, Cholmondeley could draw on both family support and the experience of a literary network. The dedication to her sister Di (Diana) of "the story which she helped me to write" may refer to Diana's nursing over the winter of 1885-86.

Cholmondeley was always willing to seek advice from other writers and critics whose opinion she respected. Her cousin Edward, a fellow admirer of George Eliot, may already have had literary ambitions of his own. In an essay

for *The Cornhill* in 1888, he describes himself as trying to write a poem called "A Barrister's Outlook", because "barristers are supposed to be literary, especially the briefless ones." (Edward Cholmondeley 1888, 3) She wrote to her sister Hester that he had been "very generous in what he says of [the manuscript]" (to Hester Cholmondeley, [March 1886]) and she had made 60 grammatical and stylistic edits on his advice.

At the same time she hoped that Anne Thackeray Ritchie's husband, to whom she had written, "will be kind and help me with it" (To Hester Cholmondeley [March 1886]). Ritchie responded with a long letter, and a grateful Cholmondeley told him, "A little praise (when one knows it is not ignorant praise) is such a help. How I do hope Bentley, if he ever looks at it, will approve; but *Temple Bar* seems too good to be likely to be true" (To Richmond Ritchie 3 June [1886]). One reason for her concern was that two years earlier Bentley had turned down an essay she submitted to him on the advice of *Athenaeum* editor Norman MacColl (To Richmond Ritchie 30 June 1886).

On 9 June she wrote again to Ritchie, expressing relief that "the story (unlike Gladstone's bill) did survive the second reading", but also concern about the impact of serialisation:

> I suppose such a golden opportunity as being possibly admitted to *Temple Bar* must on no account be let slip if it presented itself, but otherwise do you not think a story like this, which is a first and inexperienced attempt would appear to greater advantage as a whole, than if it were cut up into little bits? (to Richard Ritchie 9 June 1886)

Cholmondeley's concern is how to sustain her readers' imaginative connection with the story. The inevitable breaks and distractions of serialisation allow readers to "think, talk, and read about a number of fictional worlds even as they were going about their own lives" (Gettelman 9). But this disrupted reading could also prove a strain on both sides.

In the meantime Cholmondeley had been told that Andrew Lang (who was a reader for *Longman's*) wanted to see the manuscript. While the tone of the letter is self-deprecating, Cholmondeley's drive and determination are already apparent just below the surface, as is her frustration with her situation. She is not afraid to ask her friend's husband to read the manuscript for a second time, and she is

beginning to align herself with a metropolitan literary network through an adroit use of humour, "I know I can do nothing for myself. I am nobody, and what is worse, a nobody buried in the country (the funeral takes place on Saturday)" (to Richmond Ritchie 9 June 1886). In the event, it was Ritchie who proposed the title *The Danvers Jewels*. By mid-July Cholmondeley was asking anxiously if he had secured the recommendation of Bentley author Rhoda Broughton, or if he would prefer her to approach her directly as she was due on a visit to Hodnet (15 July 1886).

Her step-uncle James Legard "was so overcome by astonishment at the contents of your letter of 20th that it has taken me a week to get over the shock to my nervous system sufficiently to frame a suitable reply" (James Legard to Mary Cholmondeley 27 September 1886). Cautiously deprecating the status of *Temple Bar*, "Bentley is not thought much of nowadays and Temple Bar is rather a one horse magazine", he nonetheless expresses pride in her achievement "and [I] hope and believe that it will lead to other successes in the future. I have always had a great opinion of your talents since you kept me awake one evening after dinner by reading me of your stories" (ibid.). He was also alive to the value of the £50 cheque Mary had received for the manuscript.

Her uncle Charles was still more snobbish and considerably less enthusiastic:

> I don't quite like all this. Mary haggling with a publisher…! Nevertheless good luck to you and 'more power to your elbow' as the Irish say. If I like your novels it will be the first time I ever liked a women's novel writing except only 'George Elliot's' [sic] (14 January 1887).

Hester's comic poem captures the mood:

> All read and praised, and all advised.
> The lawyers, authors, fools.
> And all her friends they criticised
> The charming "Danvers Jules [sic]."

Peterson confirms Legard's view of *Temple Bar* as the popular option for middle-class but not highly educated readers, "Given this middle-brow audience, Cholmondeley and her early novels were not destined for distinction" (Peterson 2001, 210). But what is notable about the varied reactions of Cholmondeley's

relations is the apparent indifference to the question of genre that underpinned the "Great Fiction Debate" during these years. As Cholmondeley herself later confirmed, there was an implicit class bias in the reception of her news by both her relations and her Shropshire set. The idea that she had allied herself with "snobs" and "outsiders" (in other words, published authors) was initially met with "amazement" (to George Bentley 24 July 1894). Her Uncle Charles's letter expresses dislike of women authors in general, but the patrician shudder is aimed at the Bentley firm with whom she would have to deal. As he reminded her on the publication of *Sir Charles Danvers*, "I am, as I always was, very fastidious & jealous of our family name" (Charles Cholmondeely to Mary Cholmondeley, 20 March 1887).

Charles Cholmondeley was not alone in his disparagement of professional authors. As late as 1900, the story "How I Didn't Become An Author" by Norley Chester (Emily Underdown) satirically equates upper-class authorship with "disgracing the family name" (Peterson 2001, 59). When the narrator submits a story to a magazine that her set are likely to read, she forgets to remove her name and her family are horrified. As her sister expresses it, "I thought it was only people like – well, the sort of people one doesn't know, who really wrote and had their names in print" ("How I Didn't Become An Author" 567).

After her death, Percy Lubbock advised readers to "look in the shelves of a country-house library for the novels of Mary Cholmondeley – they are sure to be there." (Lubbock 1927, 50). However as he perceptively noted, "she lived of necessity in the room that was left her, shaped for her, by the hardy growth of the world around her" (ibid., 51). It was a world which "didn't derange itself for the convenience of one young woman who happened to have ideas and ambitions of her own" (ibid. 51). "In particular, the men of her acquaintance "were first in the field, on their own ground" (ibid., 53), and complacent rather than otherwise about the literary ambition of "Mr Cholmondeley's eldest girl" (ibid., 52).

None of these responses, recorded or surmised, suggests a specific concern that a woman author is writing about crime. Interestingly, Cholmondeley herself implicitly rejected the imposition of literary hierarchies - as a reader of both George Eliot and Wilkie Collins, she sought popularity as much as she craved critical acclaim. In *Sir Charles Danvers*, Cholmondeley continued to follow advice

from Richmond Ritchie, and "tried to describe real life, the only life I know, the life of country people", but she feared that it was "so true to nature and consequently dull." (to Richmond Ritchie 5 March [1888]) As she wrote in an article for *Murray's Magazine* in 1889, "Fortunately for those who live in the country, it is not hard to amuse the village mind" ("The Cottager At Home" 245).

Cholmondeley's second novel would testify to her admiration of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. *Sir Charles Danvers* draws on Eliot's novel both in its depiction of a high-minded heroine with philanthropic aims, and in incorporating sensation elements into a story of country life. The novel begins with Charles's inheritance of the title and family estate on the death of his father. It includes stock sensational tropes, including the returned convict and the bigamous marriage. Indeed a major plotline is the heroine Ruth Deyncourt's rash engagement to a man whose previous divorce may not be valid in England. But in an obvious homage to George Eliot, Ruth has only agreed to marry Dare so that he will build model cottages on his neglected estate. While criminal activity serves as a plot catalyst, the interest centres on Ruth's growing attachment to Sir Charles, in the context of her life as a single woman living in the country. Cholmondeley shrewdly pointed out that there was "no resemblance between it and The Danvers Jewels, so that it may disappoint those who liked the sensational element in that story" (to Richmond Ritchie 5 March [1888]). This tension between sensation and the routine of country life resurfaces in several of Cholmondeley's novels.

Like other female authors, Cholmondeley would become adept at incorporating sensational plots into the framework of the realist novel. Her most successful novels, *Diana Tempest* and *Red Pottage*, redeployed sensation tropes in order to emphasise and test the limits of character – a characteristically realist concern. By the 1890s Cholmondeley had learned how to balance her own preoccupation with country life against the exigencies of a sensational story. Her strategy in her most successful novels is to use extreme situations and moral dilemmas as a means of exerting pressure. The key characters emerge from these volatile emotional environments having changed and become more resilient – if they fail the test, they die. *Diana Tempest* is a sensational, proto-New Woman set between London and the Tempest estate of Overleigh Castle. Cholmondeley described the novel as having "more backbone than *Sir Charles*" (to George

Bentley 10 July 1891), but her own measure of literary value is not narrowly based on the privileging of realist over sensational modes. The story itself was inspired by a dinner party anecdote; the realist setting and characters are vital to the inheritance plot, with its related themes of adultery and murder.

Without the release of comedy, Cholmondeley initially struggled to negotiate the competing demands of sensational and realist approaches within the same novel. In answer to Bentley's criticism of the first volume of *Diana Tempest*, she explained somewhat apologetically that her "strong situations" needed the balance of chapters in a "lower key" (to George[?] Bentley 10 July 1891). But the confrontation between these approaches leads ultimately to new insights into the criminal character. Colonel Tempest is a weak man from within the establishment, who has accepted a drunken bet on the succession of the Tempest fortune. He is both self-pitying and an irredeemable spendthrift, as is his son Archie. But he is not inherently murderous or consistently calculating.

Diana Tempest offers a more subtle engagement with *Lady Audley's Secret* than anything attempted in *The Danvers Jewels*. The later novel revisits the trope of the duplicitous beauty, but changes the gender, transferring it to the angelic-looking but heartless Archie Tempest. In a further riff on the Lady Audley theme, Archie really is blonde, but he is killed in a case of mistaken identity. The assassins tracking John Tempest are misled because having just learned of his own illegitimacy, he makes a moral decision and tells them that his name is Fane. So exaggeratedly luscious is Archie's real hair that it never occurs to the men to doubt John's word. As one of them expresses it, "It's the other one in the tow wig, as I said from the first. That ain't real hair. It's the wig as alters him" (*Diana Tempest* 295). In a final moment of irony, this mistake means that the accessory to Archie's murder is his own father, Colonel Tempest.

In one sense *The Danvers Jewels* is hack work. But if the novella itself is superficial, its genesis rebuts critical assumptions about women's amateur approach. By her own account Cholmondeley was working against inclination and through a period of serious illness. Her correspondence with Bentley and other men and women of letters is instructive too, in showing what was possible within the confines of genre writing. The themes in this murderous comedy would be reworked in her major fiction of the 1890s.

The Danvers Jewels anticipates Cholmondeley's later strategy of foregrounding the ordinariness of criminal characters. Sir John is a rebarbative character and a self-confessed murderer, but he is not a stage villain. He is convincing because his ruthlessness is mapped onto petty selfishness and extraordinary rudeness. Carr and Aurelia are deliberately created as near-caricatures to emphasise that they are playing to a credible audience, staging the assumed attributes of Americans interacting with the English upper class.

The Danvers Jewels allowed Cholmondeley, as a young author living in the country, to build a literary network and get a sense of what the market would tolerate. Throughout her career she read widely and actively sought influence from other writers, while positioning herself in relation to a London-based network. While she was unable to take advantage of the new London clubs, her class position offered alternative networking opportunities. Riya Das's argument that "solidarity is a deliberate political choice for women in fin de siècle professional circles" (Das 2024, 27) is suggestive, given Cholmondeley's strategic correspondence with the Ritchies. But she is also able to draw in her immediate circle, using family and relations to gauge audience reaction.

The Danvers Jewels itself was an apprentice work, but as one of her titles, Cholmondeley maintained a professional eye on it for many years. In December 1897 she expressed herself as "delighted" with the gold and white binding of the new edition (although sorry that the dedication to her sister had been omitted). Macmillan signed back the dramatic rights to the work in 1901, although it was never adapted for stage or screen.

15 years earlier Bentley had thanked her for her bright and humorous story. This might seem an odd description for a work that begins with a confession of institutionally sanctioned murder in India, and ends with the escape of another highly plausible killer. But *The Danvers Jewels* shows Cholmondeley experimenting with genre as she learned to negotiate the competing demands of family, her own health and the literary marketplace. As her letters reveal, she was also managing a large household as her mother became increasingly incapacitated, as well as fulfilling the role of "rector's daughter" in an isolated Shropshire hamlet. Under these circumstances, keeping up with developments in the literary metropolis was far from easy. An 1885 caricature by her sister Victoria (later an artist) shows Mary wrestling with multiple irons including "Essays Cornhill" and

"Lending Library" as well as the inevitable "Housekeeping". The caption reads "Too many irons in the fire, Mary". As Cholmondeley herself would have been the first to point out, the one thing she could not afford to lose was her sense of humour.

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