RE-PLOTTING INHERITANCE: THE TRIANGULATION OF LEGACIES AND AFFINITIES IN THE FATAL THREE

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As it capitalizes on the narrative potentials of what is sensationaly conceived as a “fatality”,¹ a fatal inheritance in more than one sense, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s fictional contribution to debates on the Deceased Wife’s Sister Act in The Fatal Three (1888) questions not merely the laws and conventions governing kinship marriage, but the most prevalent plotlines of sensation fiction itself. In a triangulation of different kinds of legacies, the novel makes problematic the established structures of the traditional inheritance plot. But by engaging with some of the sensation novel’s most recognizable formulae, it also revaluates literary legacies at large. On interconnected levels, a “fatality” is successively enacted as a cultural enterprise of coming to terms with the genre’s popularity. As a result, inheritance as an established patrilineal structure that is regularly undercut, and yet as frequently reinstated, in women’s writing of “the sensational sixties” is deliberately pushed aside.

Instead the novel’s emphasis rests on the new significance of the individual family unit, what later came to be termed the nuclear family, in opposition to inherited laws regulating extended kinship ties. This is no less than a complete inversion of Braddon’s representations of family life in her earlier fiction. But if the domestic Gothic seems to make way for a curious sentimentalization of parenthood and sibling love, this family ideal is beleaguered as much by new social and legal constructions as by customary arrangements. What threatens the privacy of individuals and their most domestic ties are suspicions of precisely these intimate family ties as an invidious

¹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, The Fatal Three, Stroud: Sutton, 1997, 138 (further references are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text).
network of consanguinity and affinity that borders on the incestuous –
suspicions that are, however, exposed as completely unfounded, as
merely yet another public way of policing the private.

Given Braddon’s central position in the sensation genre with its
structural and topical reliance on a form of Gothic seen to be inherent
in bourgeois domesticity, the insistent idealization of the home that
characterizes so much of this unusual novel is indeed perplexing. But
it is the kernel of a provocative critique of the Victorian social
panorama. By writing against such ideals of larger networks, partly
still entrenched in the feudal model of responsible landowners and
masters as paternal authority, *The Fatal Three* reconfigures the
immediate family circle as a purely personal, more and more
constricted, refuge. It is cut off from any further branches of an
extended family, from a household populated by servants, tenants,
retainers, dependents of various kinds. In other words, in dissecting
the narrative as well as the social and cultural potentials of a new
conceptualization of core family members, Braddon takes up both the
mid-Victorian understanding of the home as sanctuary and the
domestic Gothic as a, by then easily recognizable, cliché to play them
out against each other. It is vital to note in what ways this emergent
model of the core family of father, mother, and often an only child
differs from the legacies of mid-century cultural and social policies in
bourgeois households. Peculiarly self-confining, this triangle becomes
intriguingly doubled within the intricate structure of *The Fatal Three*.

The novel, in fact, works through an interconnection of doubles
within a triangulation of different forms of inheritance. Its reappraisal
of literary and legal legacies is interlinked on three levels: first, the
adaptation of inherited literary structures, including both the
traditional inheritance plot and the domestic Gothic; second, the
rethinking of the authority of law, religion, and convention; and third,
a bringing together of new concepts of affinity beyond its
understanding in terms of kinship structures. The opposing
ecclesiastical, legal, and scientific definitions of affinity are evoked
within ongoing debates on the Deceased Wife’s Sister Act. As a
relationship created through marriage, affinity is essentially conceived
in opposition to consanguinity. In the novel, however, it becomes
provocatively juxtaposed with topical concepts of mesmeric attraction
or sympathy: the affinity between individuals differently attracted to