

Secrecy, Deformity and Illegitimacy in Dinah Mulock Craik's *Olive*

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Abstract

This paper will examine Dinah Mulock Craik's 1850 novel, *Olive*, to show how secrecy becomes one of the key elements in the articulation of unspoken fears and anxieties in Victorian culture. I argue that Craik employs secrecy as a narrative strategy to take issues with deformity on the one hand and illegitimacy on the other, offering unexpected twists and turns to bring about the sentiments of reading among the audience. To develop this argument, I start with the narratives of Olive's mother, Sybilla Rothesay, who keeps the secret of her daughter's spinal curvature from her husband, Captain Angus Rothesay, during his four years' absence from home. While Olive's physical deformity contributes to our understanding of the Victorian idea of disability, it, nonetheless, brings the ill-matched marriage between her Scottish father and English mother into sharp focus. Further attention will also be paid to the ways in which Angus conceals his extramarital affair from his wife. The process of uncovering Angus's liaison with a West Indian quadroon and their mixed-raced daughter enables Craik to engage with ideas of illegitimacy and racial hybridity. Angus's secret not only offers a means of guarding the family's reputation but attests to the racial construction of the nation. In short, the purpose of this paper is to offer an explanation for how the tension between secrecy and disclosure could be used to create a standard of social and moral value in the Victorian period.

Keywords: Dinah Mulock Craik, *Olive*, deformity, illegitimacy