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DREDGE, Sarah

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Citation:

DREDGE, Sarah (2023). “Rice puddings made without milk”: Mother Seacole reforms “home habits” in the Crimea. In: CARROLL, Rachel and TOLAN, Fiona, (eds.) The Routledge Companion to Literature and Feminism. Routledge Literature Companions . London, Routledge, 393-405. [Book Section]

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“Rice puddings, made without milk”: Mother Seacole reforms “home habits” in the Crimea.

Sarah Dredge

0000-0002-8212-9347

Abstract

In her autobiographical narrative *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (1857), Mary Seacole both claims and reforms the idea of the British home fit for its Empire, with herself as mother. Analysing Seacole’s text and the press dispatches of the war reporters who helped make her fame, this chapter focuses on Seacole’s ability to provide a taste of home, but also expose the weakness of British troops on the frontline. In describing her own particular culinary and medical skills, with which she had tended to British soldiers and support staff in the Crimean War, she implicitly criticises the tacitly-white British domestic ideal and the fighting men it had produced.

Watching foreign men being “charmed” out of their money by dancers in Panama, Mary Seacole calls them “susceptible travellers” and this term resonates throughout her 1857 autobiographical narrative *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (Seacole, 2005: 53). Seacole was the daughter of a Scottish father and Creole mother and spent her adult life making her living as a nurse, hotelier and provider in sites of empire-building, including Jamaica, Panama and the Crimea, recreating several times her “British Hotel”. In her adventurous career, Seacole variously served many ailing travellers, but it was her care of British imperial forces in Crimea that made her name and gave an audience for her selective

life story. *Wonderful Adventures* was published swiftly after the end of the Crimean War (1854-56), in order to capitalise on the fame that news reports of her war-time exploits caring for the British Crimean forces had generated, and her text culminates in the Crimean battlefields. Throughout her book, she tells stories of tending to the men who suffer outside of their home element, but the issue of British men and their attachment to the home that seemed to be failing them becomes a central theme, both within the book and in the context of its publication. More than any previous conflict, the actions and consequences of the Crimean War were held up to public scrutiny as on-site war reporters and telegraphing technology brought dispatches into British homes (see Collins, 2013: 900), and – in the context of public anger at the mismanagement of food and medical supplies – Seacole’s mothering of British men abroad turned her into a “heroine” (Seacole, 2005: 71). Describing the Christmas celebrations that she catered for in Crimea, Seacole asks: “I wonder if the people of other countries are as fond of carrying with them everywhere their home habits as the English. I think not. I think there was something purely and essentially English in the determination of the camp to spend the Christmas-day of 1855 after the good old ‘home fashion’” (Seacole, 2005: 159). Seacole’s ability to provide Christmas fare to the British army in the Crimea in the Christmas season of 1855-6 was noted by the British newspapers as a key factor in the improved conditions for the nation’s fighting men from the dreadful previous winter, in which poor conditions and disease seemed like the real enemy, and this won her the popularity that made an audience for her narrative. C.A. Windham in the *Morning Post* of 8 January 1856 makes the comparison, saying “Now, happily, all is changed for the better” and goes on to talk about the “celebrated old lady, Mrs. Seacole[’]”s pudding book (“War in the East”). These reports were widely read: Helen Rappaport notes that the circulation of *The Times* increased by a third over the year after war broke out in 1854, and so “it was a war that would change for ever the public conception of what war really meant,

brought home as it was to the front parlours of every Victorian household” (Rappaport, 2008: 2). This war inextricably linked the front line to British homes.

Written just after the war, Seacole’s narrative plays on this emotive connection. With her “British Hotel” and her nickname of “Mother” at the Crimean front, Seacole prides herself throughout her narrative on her ability to provide home comforts on the battlefield. But in the process, she presents the British soldiers she feeds and tends to as needy, home-sick children. Seacole tacitly contrasts her own moral and physical fortitude with the vulnerability of British men when exposed to the rigours and attractions of imperial interaction. While many contemporary commentators identified a source of particular *aptitude* for empire in the domestic tastes of British men, Seacole implies a *weakness* in their “home habits”, one that she is uniquely placed to redress. British men, her narrative reveals, are susceptible to a form of home-sickness in the dual sense that their bodies are prone to sickness away from home, and that they miss home comforts when abroad, with critical implications for their ability to maintain – or survive – their Empire. Seacole throws into doubt her readers’ veneration of the concept of ‘home’ as a space of quasi-mystical regeneration by implying that its native ‘heroes’ are inadequate to defend the “mother country” (Seacole, 2005: 58). She thus pulls herself in from the marginal position with which she begins her “adventures” – as a middle-aged, bankrupted Jamaican Creole widow – to offer herself, in the guise of “Mother Seacole”, as the cure for a malaise born in the ideological core of the Empire: the British home.

This chapter has benefitted from the excellent research that has been done since the relatively recent rediscovery of Seacole as a key character in the narratives of the Crimean War (see, for example, Rappaport, 2008), as a mixed-race Jamaican woman writer and an energetic female Victorian traveller (see, for example, Gunning, 2001, Poon, 2009, Rappaport, 2022), and as an important figure in the history of nineteenth-century nursing (see Staring-Derks, Staring and Anionwu, 2015). Seacole crosses many apparent divides: of genre, border, nation,

race and gender. But it is the way that she is able to not only exploit what several critics have usefully termed her “hybridity” (see for example Howell, 2010 and Silkü, 2008), but also use her liminal status to recreate and – she implies – improve some key constituents of the British home that I focus on here, in particular by drawing attention to Seacole’s colonisation of the British culinary staples for want of which Crimean troops were weakening. As she does by using the title of “Mother”, by naming her establishments “British Hotels” and in her assertion that she can make rice puddings “without milk” (Seacole, 2005: 123), Seacole both lays claim to and re-forms key attributes of the British home, to better fit its sons for the wider world in which she finds them. As a mixed-race “Creole” hotel keeper and nurse in spaces subject to imperial exploitation, Seacole owed both her existence and her living to the processes of empire. Rezzan Kocaöner Silkü argues that Seacole “mediates between the black and white cultures by redefining her identity in terms of Englishness rather than blackness” (Silkü, 2008: 126); likewise, Simon Gikandi argues that Seacole “assumes that it is only within the dominant codes of Victorian England that she can inscribe herself as a subject” (Gikandi, 1996: 131). I am more in agreement with Jessica Howell, however, that “Seacole manipulates elements of several discourses to script an alternate identity” (Howell, 2010: 3). Where Seacole substitutes for “English” mothers and sisters, she makes clear that it is by not being identical to them that she is able to be in place to help these men at all.

According to contemporary British imperial ideology, this peculiarly *domestic* character of the middle-class British was part of their manifest fitness to rule an Empire. In an article, “Lady Travellers”, Elizabeth Rigby focuses particularly on the wives of British men abroad, and rhetorically asks:

What... is the secret of that facility with which the Englishman adapts himself to a residence in any remote corner of the world? — why do we so often find him settled happily among scenes and people utterly uncongenial in climate and habit? Simply

because he takes his *home* with him; and has more within it and wants less beyond it than any other man in the world. (Rigby, 1845: 103. Emphasis in original.)

What symbolises this English home is the idea of the domestic Englishwoman, as Rigby makes clear. Even when these wives are also travelling (which is the context of Rigby's review article), it is by virtue of their British moral characters that they serve their husbands best: "We see her with her national courage and her national reserve, with her sound head and her tender heart, with the independent freedom of her actions and the decorous restraint of her manners" (100). Angelia Poon, in *Enacting Englishness*, notes that conduct books of the period credited British women with being "distinguishable from their female counterparts in other nations both civilized and 'barbarous' by their superior ability to provide the comforts of home" (Poon, 2009: 22), and thus ensuring the strong moral foundation from which foreign exploration can safely be undertaken. This connection between British home habits and Empire can be seen in the contemporary iconography of Queen Victoria. A portrait of Queen Victoria and her family in 1846 by Franz Xaver Winterhalter, "The Royal Family in 1846", for example, emphasises Victoria's triple role as imperial monarch, wife and mother. Victoria is both enthroned and surrounded by her children, whose attitudes convey warm interaction to create a domestic scene. The backdrop shows a beach and shore, and the view of the sea stretches off into distant skies suggesting the reach of her dominions, but this conduit to the wider world and empire starts out from the bosom of the family. An 1856 painting by Jerry Barrett representing Victoria meeting the Crimean invalids at Chatham also presents her as a wife and mother as well as monarch: she meets her injured forces from the midst of her family ("Queen Victoria's First Visit to her Wounded Soldiers").

The fiction of the period often makes the same connection, offering the white woman as the implied solution to problems of empire. Replacing the Jamaican (white creole) Bertha Mason with the pale British Jane Eyre is the remedy for the sullied soul of Edward Rochester in *Jane*

Eyre (Brontë 1847, 1973), and Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848) also ties colonial trading success to the health of the virtuous British home, centred on the domestic woman. The happy ending of the latter novel links the renewal of the family trading firm to the proper acknowledgement of Florence Dombey, who throughout the novel has been associated both with love - as the resident angel of the domestic *and* the trading house - and the British homes she supports; the acceptance of Florence's love allows for the regeneration of the family and family firm in *Dombey and Son*: "'Thus,' said my wife, 'from his daughter, after all, another Dombey and Son will ascend'—no 'rise;' that was Mrs Toots's word—'triumphant!'" (Dickens, 1970: 974).

Such attitudes, connecting the middle-class domestic British woman to the moral and hence physical health of the nation and empire, also fed into the developments in nursing that were taking place in this period, made famous by, and best reflected in, Florence Nightingale's reforms of military nursing in the Crimean War, with her establishment of a body of female nurses, where previously nursing care was provided by male orderlies. As Anne Summers describes in "Pride and Prejudice: Ladies and Nurses in the Crimean War", two types of female nurse were sent out – working-class women who had had nursing experience and were paid for their work, and unpaid middle-class ladies whose fitness for nursing depended on their class and moral position – and authority was given to the latter category. The moral influence of the middle-class woman, derived from evangelical notions of domestic ideology, was her prime qualification for nursing (Summers, 1983: 36). This corresponds to Elizabeth Rigby's claim of British women in "Lady Travellers" that "we see her the finest production of the finest country upon earth – man's best companion, whether in the travels over this world or the voyage through this life" (Rigby, 1845: 101). Rigby then challenges readers to find otherwise: "where is she, whatever may be the difference of talent or taste, who ventures to bring forward an infidel opinion or a questionable moral?" (Rigby, 1845:101). Nightingale

was anxious to uphold these gender expectations of women as ministering angels rather than medical professionals: carrying ‘home’ with them and extending care, rather than toiling as paid workers. Her prospective nurses were rigorously vetted for their good character more than relevant experience (Summers, 1983: 35), and it was emphasised that their work was always performed under the instruction of male doctors, maintaining the gender ideology that cast middle-class male work as professional and salaried, and middle-class female work as deriving from innate sensibilities, and performed for love not money. Mary Seacole’s narrative both acknowledges and resists the gender expectations that the fame of Nightingale was busy reinforcing. She demands her right to go to the Crimean front based on what she claims as proven expertise, and she presents herself as at once a businesswoman, a “doctress” and a surrogate mother. At the same time, she exposes the implicit whiteness of the British female ideal and draws attention to her difference by calling herself a “yellow doctress” and identifying her medical expertise as Jamaican.

“Susceptible travellers”: the British abroad

British ideas of national identity relied on the sense of its people as naturally possessing the attributes that created and justified their Empire: energy, ingenuity, intellectual and industrial development, love of liberty. An integral part of this was particular enjoyment of domesticity: what Henry Brougham in his 1803 *An Inquiry into the Colonial Policy of the European Powers* called “the virtuous pleasures of domestic life” (Brougham: 1803, 70). And – as Rigby’s comment shows – such self-identification depended on an assumed difference from other nations and subjects, and especially colonised ones (see for example Colley (1984) and Hall (1992)).

But in the time leading up to and encompassing the period in which Seacole enacts and writes of her adventures, there were signs that the British national self-perception was under

pressure – signs of which Seacole's text makes use – suggesting a faltering confidence in the foundations of Britain's power in its own domestic character. The Abolition campaigns of the previous decades (the time when the early action of Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures* is set) that argued for and demonstrated British moral superiority, equally exposed the brutality and domestic degeneracy of the white British plantation owners in the Caribbean, and so undermined this justification of Empire. Catherine Hall in *White, Male and Middle-Class* quotes missionary reports comparing unfavourably the “oppressed” “sons of Africa” with the “debauched white population” (1992: 217). Their failings are often those of proper domestic behaviour and are not restricted to the plantation-owning class: stories of sexual impropriety were endemic concerning white men in the colonies, such that missionaries (like St John Rivers in *Jane Eyre*, written in 1847) were encouraged to marry before they left, to guard against the temptations of baser masculine nature (see Hall, 1992: 222). Henry Brougham had expressed such concerns in his 1803 *Inquiry*, arguing that:

The want of female society, while it brutalizes the mind and manners of men, necessarily deprives them of all the virtuous pleasures of domestic life, and frees them from those restraints, which the presence of a family always imposes on the conduct of the most profligate men. (Brougham, 1803: 70)

These examples all focus on the British abroad, and suggest the (implicitly) white domestic woman as cure, but Jennifer Howell in her article “Mrs Seacole Prescribes Hybridity” shows that social commentators like Charles Kingsley and Thomas Carlyle also feared that, at home as well, the middle classes were succumbing to the previously aristocratic malady of excessive luxury, becoming less “hardy” and – as a corollary – less “valiant” (Howell, 2010: 117). Disease epidemics had swept through the nation in the first half of the nineteenth century as they had done through the camps and hospitals of the Crimea, killing huge numbers, making clear that disease was not just found abroad. Domestic conditions of

industrial society as well as a physically weakened population were blamed. Meanwhile the agricultural poverty and industrial unrest of the 1830s and 1840s brought fears of ‘uncivilized’ mob rule in the imperial centre, with the British under-classes as the ‘other’ within. This again challenged ideals of the British as models of constitutional and moral vigour, and hence natural rulers of a less-cultivated world (see, for example, Evans, 2001). The reporting of the Crimean war (which determined Seacole that her services there were needed) brought to the fore the fears of decline in Britain's imperial management. A new species of independent war reporter (famously William Howard Russell of *The Times*, who wrote a Preface for *Wonderful Adventures*) suggested that British forces and British society – not just the fighting men but the system that produced them – could not live up to their claims of martial and moral supremacy (see Lambert and Badsey, 1994, and Goldie, 1987).¹ Seacole's autobiographical narrative is published in the acrimonious aftermath of the Crimean war and as rebellion is breaking out in India. At a time of anger and deep concern about Britain's ability to maintain national physical and moral health, and hence its supremacy abroad, Seacole takes the opportunity to offer her own prescription - or recipe - to regenerate the British subject and home, and cure the weakness that Empire did not cause, but exposed.

“Illness and weakness make these strong men as children”: *Wonderful Adventures*

Wonderful Adventures is full throughout of references to home and homeliness, but especially the Crimean section where Seacole's focus is explicitly on her interactions with British men. The British idea of ‘home’ is the pattern she always tries apparently to replicate; during her ‘adventures’ she repeatedly sets up establishments that she calls ‘British Hotels’ in sites of Empire (Jamaica, Panama, Crimea), and she reports that even before these adventures began, she had longingly watched British ships leaving Jamaica “homeward bound” (Seacole, 2005:

13): ceding the term “home” to the place she has never at that point seen. However, this recognition was not equally returned by white British society: even favourable press reports, *Punch* articles and letters cannot help but make clear her difference from expectations of ‘Britishness’, commenting on her colour, noting her birthplace or transcribing her accent.² However, if she cannot fit into the dominant ideal she finds of the British home, the version of it that Seacole *recreates* reveals a critique of the original by focusing on the infantilised men it produces, and the domestic women who have shaped them this way. It must always be borne in mind that Seacole's readership is British, and that she wrote to make money after going bankrupt due to the sudden end to the Crimean War, so her identification of Britain as “home” is not neutral; but under such circumstances, where her defensive wounded pride over her bankruptcy must be tempered by an awareness of the need not to alienate her readers, her affectionate but clear criticisms are the more marked. In this context, Seacole's emphasis on her own form of “mothering” and determination to present the British men as her sons, looks more like an assertion of authority than an appeal to British charity.

The newspaper reports of the war from Seacole's first Christmas-time in the Crimea in 1855-6 are full of her plum puddings and festive provisions. Of their determination to celebrate Christmas in the style of home, Major-General C.A. Windham in the *Morning Post* wrote: “Were all else wanting to prove our true John Bull descent, the pertinacity with which the customs instilled into our minds from boyhood are so energetically carried out alone would do so” (Windham, 1856: 5).³ It is this nursery-bred habit that Seacole can feed. In a telling boast, Seacole notes:

had you been fortunate enough to have visited the British Hotel upon rice-pudding day,
I warrant you would have ridden back to your hut with kind thoughts of Mother
Seacole's endeavours to give you a taste of home. If I had nothing else to be proud of, I

think my rice puddings, made without milk, upon the high road to Sebastopol, would have gained me a reputation. (Seacole, 2005: 123)

In this passage, Seacole has claimed the “British” identification with her hotel name, while the British reader – “you” – is relegated to a hut. She implies that here at last is the “Mother” who could provide the taste of the absent home where British agents could not, and in so doing, creates a home fit to defend Britain’s imperial reach. The shift to the direct address to the reader as “you” for this extended passage stands out and emphasises Seacole’s distinguishing herself here from her British readers, to her own advantage. Her assurance of British readers’ fortune and “kind thoughts”, plus her own “endeavours” and pride, demand readers’ gratitude. The curious use of the past conditional tense both places readers within her hotel, and insists on their agreement with her claims: if they had been there, they would have enjoyed the comforts she describes. Her later direct comment that the British more than any others love their “home habits” only confirms what she had already made apparent: away from home the British miss the familiar comforts that only “Mother Seacole” could provide. Newspaper reports agree: *The Standard* of 29th January 1856 reports that Seacole provided wine, mince pies and plum pudding, and was received with “Immense cheering” (“The Crimea”, 1856: 3). By noting this national characteristic in a context where native Britons had proved incapable of providing the means to satisfy their fighting sons’ “home habits”, Seacole challenges Rigby’s complacent view of the British man abroad, that he was armoured and strengthened by his love of home.

Seacole tells stories of British men in the Crimea stealing her tarts from the oven and begging for her home cooking, which seem to echo school-boy stories of pranks inspired by a constant desire for sweet treats:

The officers, full of fun and high spirits, used to crowd into the little kitchen, and, despite all my remonstrances, which were not always confined to words, for they made me frantic sometimes, and an iron spoon is a tempting weapon, would carry off the tarts hot from the oven. (Seacole, 2005: 123)

She treats this with a tone of motherly indulgence, but by interspersing such tales with narratives of her medical interventions and unique nursing skills, she implies that this need for home infantilises, and constitutes a weakness in the army of a colonial power. The need has been created by the British home, but at the frontiers of Empire, she alone can satisfy it:

What a shout there used to be when I came out of my little caboose, hot and flurried, and called out, “Rice-pudding day, my sons”. Some of them were baked in large shallow pans, for the men and the sick, who always said that it reminded them of home. You would scarcely expect to finish up your dinner with pastry, but very often you would have found a good stock of it in my larder. Whenever I had a few leisure moments, I used to wash my hands, roll up my sleeves and roll out pastry. Very often I was interrupted to dispense medicines; but if the tarts had a flavour of senna, or the puddings tasted of rhubarb, it never interfered with their consumption. I declare I never heard or read of an army so partial to pastry as that British army before Sebastopol (Seacole, 2005: 123).

This passage exemplifies Seacole’s tone, and the complex relation of both motherly care and doctorly authority that she claims, and again the reader is drawn in by the direct address. Her descriptions of puddings and pastries, and calling “sons” in for their food, invokes the ideal of the nurturing maternal figure at home. The idea that she might more resemble a servant than the lady of the house is refuted by her reference to “sons” and her pointed use of pronouns of ownership: this is *her* space. This mother can do more than mop the brows of

ailing sons though: she is equally keen to assert her medical abilities. And unlike the Nightingale nurses, she is neither trying to heal via moral influence alone, nor relying on a doctor to prescribe and treat. In the chapter that begins the relation of her Crimean efforts, Seacole describes her role in the camp as “doctress, nurse and ‘mother’” (Seacole, 2005: 110). Better than the mother at home, or the doctor in his hospital, Seacole’s hotel combines (quite literally she jokes!) the comforts of both nursery treats and medicinal treatments.

Again here, Seacole emphasises the particularly British love of home foods: as the Crimean episodes are the culmination of her “Adventures in Many Lands”, this has, by this point in the narrative, comprised a number of different places and peoples. Where Rigby had argued that the civilised home habits of British men enabled their imperial duties, Seacole suggests this has instilled the opposite: the enervating “disease of civilization” that Howell discusses, quoting physicians Thomas Beddoes and Thomas Trotter, and “resulting from the consumption of too many luxuries” (quoted in Howell, 2010: 10). This is reinforced as Seacole notes in the Crimea that, “illness and weakness make these strong men as children” (Seacole, 2005: 80). Far from proving manliness, their imperial exploits reveal the inadequacy of British men abroad, with their love of sweets and need for a surrogate mother. The British home with its presiding mother has formed the taste for a specific kind of nursery homeliness, and in so doing made a demoralising dependency in the soldier of empire who needs to be able to leave this home behind. This can only be redressed by Seacole, the mother on the front-line, with her ability to produce rice pudding in a warzone. She draws the comparison with British mothers at home very explicitly:

Don’t you think, reader, if you were lying, with parched lips and fading appetite, thousands of miles from mother, wife, or sister, loathing the rough food by your side, and thinking regretfully of that English home where nothing that could minister to your great need would be left untried—don’t you think that you would welcome the familiar

figure of the stout lady whose bony horse has just pulled up at the door of your hut, and whose panniers contain some cooling drink, a little broth, some homely cake, or a dish of jelly or blanc-mange? (Seacole, 2005: 111).

While that British home is far away, on the battle front, Seacole herself has become “familiar”. But then she becomes the “woman-comrade”, who, sharing the “barren heights” on which he now finds himself, can tend to the soldier whose eyes “moisten” as her “woman’s voice and woman’s care” remind him of “those happy English homes”. It is in these moments that she feels her designation as “mother” takes on full significance – both of their need and her ability to meet it:

Then their calling me “mother” was not, I think, altogether unmeaning. I used to fancy that there was something homely in the word; and, reader, you cannot think how dear to them was the smallest thing that reminded them of home. (Seacole, 2005: 112)

There are several instances like this, where she offers herself as a substitute for the British mothers, sisters, wives and daughters who were *not* strong enough to tend their menfolk abroad. Seacole invokes the privileged ideology of home at once to beg sympathy for the wounded soldiers, and to insist that her own efforts be seen in this context: she presents herself as the selfless mother, not the profit-seeking sutler or waged servant. The references to home repeat and multiply in this extract, insisting that readers see the soldiers (and imagine themselves) as sons and brothers by exploiting the discourse of *feeling*, rather than as valiant fighting men via a martial discourse of honour and sacrifice. This emphasises Seacole’s unique fitness for the role she has given herself: she calls herself “the right woman in the right place” (Seacole, 2005: 71). She is the only person who could be “comrade” as well as “mother” at the front – unlike both the British mothers at home, and the professional doctors at the front (and the Nightingale nurses at a safe distance away). The contrast between

“home” and “hut” here, with Seacole representing the “home” side of the comparison with the British men imagined in “huts”, refutes again any suggestion that her position might more resemble the servant in the British home than its mistress – the roles she ascribes herself are not subordinate.

This representation of Seacole sweeping in to feed and tend the wounded also requires the reader to see that while the war has made a “heroine” of Seacole, it has turned the British fighting men back into children: sons in need of their mother. The British men need her tending: they are home-sick and sick away from home – and only a “Creole” woman in her specialised role of mother and “doctress” can assuage both these ills. There are two processes here: she demonstrates the frailty of the prime agents of empire, the British men she feeds and tends, and also implies her superiority over the domestic British woman to look after them. She recounts so many examples of such surrogacy that the reader cannot help but take from it the awareness of the weakness of these would-be colonisers and soldiers, so reliant upon the habits of home.

The home that Seacole (re)creates and labels “British”, in her attempt to revive these ailing sons, both meets the homely desires of British men abroad and attempts to invigorate them by reflecting her own difference from the British domestic norm: the difference that allowed her to make rice pudding without milk. A report from August 1856 in the *Morning Chronicle* – after she has returned to London to face bankruptcy – confirms both this ability and difference. It tells of Seacole attracting almost more attention than the general at a celebration at Surrey Gardens, referring to her as “the celebrated Mrs Seacole, whose store relieved so many of the wants of the allied armies”. It goes on: “The Lady, who has dark blood in her veins, and whose eyes lack none of the vivacity of the tropical races, held quite a court of her old acquaintances” and notes that her features show “energy, vigour and decision, quite sufficient to account for her extraordinary success in her mercantile venture in the camp”

(“Dinner to the Guards”, 1856: 5). Seacole’s “blood” difference is carefully noted, before being associated with the virtues the British usually associated with themselves: the “energy, vigour and decision” required for an imperial campaign, that enabled her to supply the “want” created in this case by failing British supply lines. Both her own narrative and the Crimean news reports tell of her West Indian recipes (for both food and medicine), but also, as with the rice pudding, emphasise her creation of British favourites reconstructed from what she can find or acquire at the frontline: meat-pies (“I grew as familiar with the mysteries of seasoning as a London pieman”), “A good Irish stew”, “Welch rabbits” and also “something curried” – a sign of a new taste from another colony (Seacole, 2015: 122-3). Her cuisine reflects her own process of colonisation and adaptation of the British home comforts, like a kind of inoculation against illnesses the British were vulnerable to away from home. Seacole’s rice pudding “made without milk” is a symbol of her ability to make a better home for the British soldier abroad through her hybrid modifications.

This requires a strategy of positioning herself initially neither fully in nor out of a British identity before triumphantly claiming her central place, employing what Silkü refers to as her “strategic liminality” (2008: 113). Where it suits her, Seacole uses colour as a racial identifier to demonstrate her *variance* from British ideals and suggest her own superiority. In her capacity as doctor, a role from which women were excluded in Britain by professional restrictions, she is happy to highlight her difference by reporting her nickname of “the yellow doctress” (2005, 38). But the difference often equated to treatments that worked versus those that did not; Seacole confidently recalls that her popularity in the Crimea was due to her ability to acquire supplies, her familiarity from previous experience with the diseases the men were contracting, and her successful treatments (Seacole, 2005: 111). This plays upon comments in the British press reports from the Crimea, that Seacole’s medical attention was often preferred over that of the army doctors.⁴ The role of “doctress”, which she had

previously in her narrative identified as a particularly Jamaican female role, was one she learned from her own mixed-race mother (Seacole, 2005: 12; see also Gunning, 2001). Early in her narrative, Seacole boasts that her mother “was, like very many of the Creole women, an admirable doctress; in high repute with the officers of both services, and their wives, who were from time to time stationed at Kingston”. She adds that “It was very natural that I should inherit her tastes; and so I had from early youth a yearning for medical knowledge and practice which has never deserted me” (Seacole, 2005: 11-12). And implying that racism prevented her acceptance as an official nurse, she states: “Now, I am not for a single instant going to blame the authorities who would not listen to the offer of a motherly yellow woman to go to the Crimea and nurse her “sons” there” (Seacole, 2005: 72). Here she situates herself not only as a mother to the troops but actually as a *better* mother through her difference from their white mothers at home, who are unable to take their mothering care where it is needed by their susceptible sons. She claims possession of (and infantilises) these British “sons” based on both her hybrid constitution and her now proven ability, which she associates with her ‘colour’ as not-white. She shows herself to be more resilient and skilled than the white British of both sexes. Functions that are largely split between professional medical men and domestic women in Britain (even the Nightingale nurses were meant to act strictly as unpaid ‘ladies’ not professional women, and explicitly were instructed not to challenge the authority of the male doctors), the motherly “yellow doctress” Seacole can encompass in herself. Rappaport also describes the range of medical skills that Seacole was able to exhibit, drawing from her years of experience, and with medical traditions other than the current Western methods and treatments (Rappaport, 2008: 192-3). Unlike British nurses, Seacole was prescribing, creating her medicinal treatments, and applying them. She also points out that she can do her doctoring “three or four days nearer” to the front line than the Nightingale nurses (Seacole, 2005: 82).

Countering the ideological implication that the white woman is the solution to problems of empire, Seacole presents the white British woman as part of the problem. Seacole's description of Florence Nightingale presents her as opposite to Seacole's own "plump person" (Seacole, 2005: 83) and "duskier" complexion, describing her as: "A slight figure, in the nurses' dress; with a pale, gentle, and withal firm face, resting lightly in the palm of one white hand" (Seacole, 2005: 82). Seacole seems to echo in this description the conception of the ideal British woman produced by domestic ideology: her moral strength and ministering capacity are measured in inverse proportion to her physical delicacy (the comparison between the ethereal Jane Eyre and the large, very physical Bertha Rochester exemplifies this also). The deceptive strength of the ministering woman's hand, used by Seacole of Nightingale, is a feature of domestic ideology that Seacole imitates and improves upon. Whereas Nightingale's "white hand" supports her own pale face far from enemy lines, Seacole imagines hers being the required "woman's hand" at the front (again, "the right woman in the right place" [2005: 71]). In tending the ailing soldier, she shows that she can combine a doctor's skill with an improved version of British womanly care and the British home. A front-line report from W.H. Russell backs this up:

I saw the good old woman actively engaged in succouring the wounded after the battle of Tchernaya, and was on the ground in front of the camps on the 8th of September, with a huge plum-pudding, wine, and other creature comforts, to give gratuitously to those in need of them. The number of navvies and Land Transport Corps men who have been cured by her of the head-aches, stomach-aches, fevers, and other maladies, rendered the doctors almost jealous of her. (*Times* 16 May 1856: 10)

This report echoes Seacole's own depictions of herself providing care with both domestic and medical skill, and the reference to her giving this "gratuitously" continues the association of Seacole's work as performed for love and duty like a mother or a doctor, rather than as a

business-woman seeking profit. But the report then goes on to repeat a joke that marks out Seacole's difference: "Mrs Seacole's partner is called Day, and the wags of the camp have irreverently termed the firm 'Night and Day', in allusion to the fine mahogany hue of the warm-hearted West-Indian" (Russell, 16 May 1856: 10). Though the tone here is clearly warm, Seacole's skin tone is evidently presented as something that jokes can be made of – an attribute marking her difference negatively.

But while in other circumstances Seacole's narrative frequently resists presenting her colour as non-white (she relates the racial mockery of a darker companion by contrasting her skin to Seacole's own, which she terms only "a few shades duskier than the brunettes whom you all admire so much" [Seacole, 2015: 13]), in the context of her medical care, Seacole herself is happy to note her difference, and present this difference as a positive. This had earlier also been the case, when, on being congratulated for her efforts treating cholera in Panama, an American man toasts her with the wish that she could be bleached white.⁵ She firmly rejects both his desire to make her white and the wish to gain admittance to American society that this would allow: "as to his offer of bleaching me, I should, even if it were practicable, decline it without any thanks" (Seacole, 2005: 49). Being the "yellow doctress" marks her out as neither the white domestic woman at home, nor the white male doctor at the front, but something better than this: the woman who combines both sets of attributes and so can tend the vulnerable British "sons" on the battlefield.

Finally, just before leaving the Crimea, Seacole gets to stand in for the most important white British woman of them all:

My companions were young and full of fun, and tried hard to persuade the Russians that I was Queen Victoria, by paying me the most absurd reverence. When this failed they fell back a little, and declared that I was the Queen's first cousin. Anyhow, they

attracted crowds about me, and I became quite a lioness in the streets of Simpheropol.

(Seacole, 2005: 162)

While on the one hand here, there is racist humour directed at Seacole, the point of which is her *difference* from the Queen, on the other hand, because of this difference, it is “Mother Seacole” who has been on the spot, representing the care of the British Empire for her fighting sons. The closest the actual queen gets is her visit to the hospital at Chatham, recorded by Barrett’s painting, and taken into British homes as prints (“Queen Victoria’s first visit to her wounded soldiers”). Seacole relates this story of her representing the Queen despite its racism because it coincides with elements of her self-presentation. In figuring Seacole as a surrogate for the absent monarch, the joke reinforces that absence, leaving Seacole being paraded in triumph.⁶ She also claims for herself the symbol of the lion that was used to represent Britain, often in the context of its colonial strength and racial superiority (see for example *Punch*, 8th April 1848: “The British Lion and the Irish Monkey” and *Punch* 22nd August 1857: “The British Lion’s Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger”). If Queen Victoria symbolised to the world the resolute and nurturing rule of the British Empire, based on its domestic virtues, it is Seacole who is on the spot to embody this care in the Crimea. Seacole shows herself as both quintessentially British and yet also productively different from the frail white woman; while the latter safely tends the home fires, an improved mother for the imperial nation provides the susceptible white soldier with a home and care in her “British Hotel”, at the front-line of Empire.

Wonderful Adventures relates the coming into being of its protagonist in the central role she feels she should inhabit in society, through comparisons with British women and men in the context of Empire. For Seacole, this involves offering herself as the solution to the problem Empire had presented for the British home and its flawed defenders. Ultimately, the corruption lies not within these foreign lands and peoples who tempt, challenge and

ultimately punish British men, as contemporary reports declared and many contemporary novels suggested, but in the British themselves, who prove inadequate to the role of imperial masters that they have assumed. In *Wonderful Adventures*, Seacole highlights the failings of the British male as agent and representative of the British Empire, and indicts the ‘home habits’ that produced him. Seacole identifies the insular and white British home, not as the symbol of British civilisation and justification of empire, but as itself the *problem*. Though the ambition was never fulfilled, she tells *The Times* newspaper that her next goal is to travel to post-uprising India and tend her “sons” in that next site of British failure to survive its Empire. As the news reports of the Indian uprising of 1857 focused so much attention on the vulnerability, the sufferings and the rescue of the British women caught up in the violence, it is another sign of the difference of “Mother Seacole” that she identifies this place of British imperial ambition as the next “Land” in need of her particular skills.

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¹ Howell also notes contemporary concerns that “British militaristic failures might indicate a weakening of the British constitution” (Howell, 2010: 10).

² Among many available examples, *Punch* magazine’s poem “A Stir for Seacole”, written in support of her on her return to Britain, and which Seacole quotes, refers to Seacole’s “berry-brown face” (Seacole, 2005: 112);

after the end of the war, a review of a Crimean memoir in the *Morning Post*'s literature section quotes Edwin Galt speaking of "that mulatto lady, Mrs Seacole" (25 August 1856: 3); W.H. Russell notes the "fine mahogany hue of the warm-hearted West Indian" (*The Times*, 16 May 1856: 10).

³ *The Standard* also reports on 21 January 1856 that Seacole provided women's clothes to aid soldiers' attempts at theatrical entertainments ("The Crimea": 3). N.B.: London papers such as the *Standard*, *Morning Chronicle*, *Morning Post* and *Morning Herald*, often carried the same reports from the Crimea on the same day. The *Morning Chronicle* also printed this same piece.

⁴ A report from W. H. Russell in *The Times* notes that "The number of navvies and Land Transport Corps men who have been cured by her of the head-aches, stomach-aches, fevers, and other maladies, rendered the doctors almost jealous of her" (Russell, 16 May 1856: 10).

⁵ "...Providence made her a yaller woman. I calculate, gentlemen, you're all as vexed as I am that she's not wholly white—, but I du reckon on your rejoicing with me that she's so many shades removed from being entirely black—; and I guess, if we could bleach her by any means we would—, and thus make her as acceptable in any company as she deserves to be—" (Seacole, 2005: 49).

⁶ Seacole had also stood in for Queen Victoria when the Queen sent a plum pudding to the commander-in chief of the French forces, Marshal Pélissier (as opposed to her own lowly soldiers), and Seacole had to be appealed to for instructions on how to "warm it for the table" ("The Crimea" *Morning Herald*, 22 January, 1856: 5).