

Beautiful Stranger: the Function of the Coquette in Victorian literature.

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Abstract

Theories of beauty normally engage with beauty in the abstract, or with reactions to beauty - beauty's effect on others. This thesis considers how coquettish female beauty has been embodied in Victorian literature by the Brontës, Dickens, George Eliot, Christina Rossetti, and to a lesser extent women's periodical literature. It argues that the figure of the coquette addresses antithetical discourses on the Victorian woman and assimilates them in such a way as to express a subversive beauty discourse, in which beauty consolidates differing female experiences and formulates the search for identity as a collective female effort.

The coquette is linked with controversial women's issues such as marriage failure, domestic abuse and female eroticism; the ambivalence of her relationship with the text's heroine shows the scope and limits of female autonomy. The dialectic between rejection and acceptance in which the coquette participates in specific narrative strategies shows women engaged with women's problems, their erotic potential, and their relationship(s) to each other.

The thesis also reflects on feminist literary theory, especially current ideas on female writing, broadly defined as a search for female belonging. Recent criticism holds that the Victorian coquette operates either to show that eroticism was part of the Victorian woman's identity, or as a passive surface upon which certain aspects of the protagonist are illuminated. This thesis argues that this is only part of the story; additionally, the issue of eroticism is installed within a framework of women's social, political, and legal concerns, and the coquette can be read as an active site in which aspects of both the coquette and the protagonist are combined to form an innovative way of seeing the Victorian woman.

List of Contents

Abstract	2
List of Illustrations	4
Introduction: the function of the coquette in Victorian literature	5
Chapter 1. Ginevra Fanshawe in Charlotte Brontë's <u>Villette</u>	47
Chapter 2. Rosalie Murray's plight in Anne Brontë's <u>Agnes Grey</u>	78
Chapter 3. Frivolous Beauty in Charles Dickens's <u>David Copperfield</u>	110
Chapter 4. Rosamond Vincy in George Eliot's <u>Middlemarch</u>	135
Chapter 5. Spectacular Beauty in Charles Dickens's <u>Great Expectations</u>	159
Conclusion: Beauty, mirrors, fashion: the coquette in Victorian literature	185
Bibliography	194

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. “Dresses, Table and Jewel Case”. Harper’s Bazaar. 12 Sept. 1885. 40

Introduction

The function of the coquette in Victorian literature.

This thesis examines the function of the coquette in Victorian literature, and suggests that she operates to reflect controversial issues of the day concerning women, in a manner which indicates the fracture these issues caused in women's perception of their own experience. In the novels examined here the coquette is attached to controversial social and moral women's issues, such as marriage failure and a woman's right to divorce; the protagonist's reaction to the coquette is an exposition of how Victorian gender ideology urged women to interpret instances of legal and societal failure to cater for the female experience as instances of personal, and often moral, failure on the part of the woman herself. Coquetry thus articulates both the discourse of discipline, and a female-centred discourse which clarifies what is problematic about disciplining, and also how this disciplining operates upon the women themselves. Current work on Victorian coquetry holds the coquette either as the erotic aspect of the protagonist (of the Victorian woman, if the subject is periodicals and fashion illustrations) and/or as evidence of how relationships between women further or not the plot of marriage in a novel. This thesis argues that the coquette functions additionally as a female-centred evaluation and assessment of the wider social, legal and moral context which surrounded and defined the lives of women. In novels where the protagonist has ambivalent or even hostile feelings for the coquette – as in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) and Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847) – authorial treatment and narrative strategy suggest that the coquette encapsulates the forceful manner in which the erotic and playful aspect of woman is disciplined, in part by the woman herself, and also anxiety over this form of prejudicial disciplining. In novels where the female protagonist is attached to the coquette – as in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1870-72) – the latter figure illustrates an understanding between women which revises stereotypes and lodges female belonging within the workings of a female community. Beauty becomes a space in the narrative where women are not objectified but act as subjects of controversy and desire. Rather than exhibiting the discipline of form, beauty exhibits the un-discipline of content. It becomes the common denominator for antithetical discourses on the female self.

Interestingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that the first use of the term “feminism” in English links it with a woman's coquettish behaviour. The term

“feminism” first appeared in the April 1895 issue of the *Athenaeum*, which spoke of a woman’s “coquettings with the doctrines of ‘feminism’”¹. If feminism has been described as an expression of coquetry, this thesis situates coquetry as a feminist expression of Victorian womanhood and a participation in the ongoing debate about women’s rights. I begin the Introduction by defining the term “coquette”, and providing a literature review of coquetry in Victorian Studies; then I discuss the coquette in relation to Beauty Theory and current developments in feminist studies. This is followed by a section on the historical background to the thesis, and a reading of Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* (1862) and of a fashion illustration which combines issues raised by my argument and the historical material. The Introduction closes with a note on chronology, and a chapter outline.

Defining the Coquette and the Selection of texts

The term coquette, or spectacular woman, is used in this thesis to refer to women characters in fiction who are not only beautiful, but also conscious of and comfortable with their own beauty. They enjoy being beautiful; they enjoy admiration, and like to flirt with men, perhaps with no more serious purpose in mind than flirting itself. They love luxury and fashion, are gifted in music and dance, and are drawn to laughter and pleasure rather than domestic sobriety.

As we shall see, these women have been traditionally trivialised by critics, perhaps not unsurprisingly, since the trivialization of beauty goes hand in hand with the trivialization of the feminine, as Susan Sontag has explained². For Sandra Lee Bartky, this trivialization extends to the beauty rituals of femininity – women are stereotypically condemned for their concern with physical attractiveness, clothes, hair-styles and ornament³. In the Victorian era, coquettish women could also run counter to dominant

¹ “Feminism”, *OED online*, 2009, Oxford English Dictionary, 15 Feb. 2009 <<http://0-dictionary.oed.com.lib.exeter.ac.uk/entrance.dt>>.

² “Beauty can illustrate an ideal, a perfection. Or, because of its identification with women [...] it can trigger the usual ambivalence that stems from the age-old denigration of the feminine. Much of the discrediting of beauty needs to be understood as a result of the gender inflection”. Susan Sontag, “An Argument About Beauty”, *Susan Sontag: At the Same Time; Essays and Speeches*, eds. Paolo Dilonardo and Anne Jump (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007) 10.

³ Woman’s concern with beauty rituals “partakes of the general depreciation of everything female. [...] [W]omen are ridiculed and dismissed for the triviality of their interest in such ‘trivial’ things as clothes and make-up”. Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, Thinking Gender (New York: Routledge, 1990) 73. Sontag concurs: “... if women are worshipped because they

ideals of female modesty and selflessness. The *OED* suggests that the noun “coquette” has been usually used to describe women who behave heartlessly, though it seems that this heartlessness comprises no more than “trifling” with the affections of men⁴. Thus, the coquette’s heartlessness carries with it ideological undertones; it is defined in relation to the assumption of male power and superiority. In the Victorian era, women who did not devote themselves to the happiness of others (especially that of their husband and children or other male relatives) but instead focused on their own, could not be “improperly” regarded as monsters – as influential conduct-book writer Sarah Stickney Ellis pointed out⁵.

However, the spectacular woman can neither be called an angel, nor a monster. She loves pleasure and, in this sense, she is a sensual woman⁶; but she is not fallen, are beautiful, they are condescended to for their preoccupation with making or keeping themselves beautiful”. Women are associated with frivolity, beauty and the beauty industry with the “‘merely’ feminine, the unserious, the specious”. Sontag 10. In the Victorian era, a coquette would be doubly criticized, given the pressure on women to remain inconspicuous; nevertheless, the idea of the modest woman who made herself invisible may not have been as absolute as has traditionally been thought. This issue will be discussed below.

⁴ “Coquette”, *OED online*, 2009, Oxford English Dictionary, 15 Feb. 2009 <<http://0-dictionary.oed.com.lib.exeter.ac.uk/entrance.dt>>.

⁵ As influential conduct-book writer Sarah Stickney Ellis had written in 1839, “it is necessary [for the woman] to lay aside all her natural caprice, her love of self-indulgence, her vanity, her indolence – in short, her very *self*- and assuming a new nature [...] to spend her mental and moral capabilities in devising means for promoting the happiness of others, while her own derives a remote and secondary existence from theirs”. Sarah Stickney Ellis, The women of England: their social duties and domestic habits (London, 1839) 45.

⁶ The terms “sensual” and “sensuality” had negative connotations in Victorian culture, and still have negative connotations today. The *OED* defines a “sensual” person as one absorbed in the life of the senses, and indifferent to intellectual and moral interests; or excessively inclined to the gratification of the senses, voluptuous. “Sensual”, The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., 1989. The dictionary definition of “sensuality” may sound not mortally sinful today: excessive fondness for the pleasures of the senses. “Sensuality,” The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed., 1989. Not so in the Victorian era, with its emphasis on spirituality, moral purity and abstinence (see end of the footnote for a discussion of this). Yet the more innocent term “sensuous” (according to the *OED* “apparently invented by Milton to avoid certain associations of the existing word *sensual* and from him adopted by Coleridge”; of persons it means keenly alive to the pleasures of sensation and was used, for example, in 1880 to describe the poet Keats) is not preferred, because the women characters I examine here are all fond of pleasure, whether it is the pleasure of fashion, of food, of music, or of the courtship game. Ginevra Fanshawe and Rosalie Murray even seem very comfortable with the idea of having a sexual life; they can only be called *sensual* women. Conversely, Victorians emphasised the need for life to be pure and wholesome. John Tosh, A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999) 29-39. The evangelical revival had imposed the ethic of purity on society. Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1957) 359. Sensuality in literature (Houghton

though she is flirty and frivolous. The ability of the coquette to transcend and disturb categories has drawn my attention to novels in which she is not the protagonist; what is most fascinating is, it seems to me, the way this character, who is made up of both essence and otherness, interacts with the dominant female characters, and exploits the dominant concerns of the narrative.

Therefore, it is the coquette's peculiar relationship with the female protagonist, or her interpretation by a particularly domestic-minded point of view, which was the guiding principle for my selection of characters and novels in this thesis: Ginevra Fanshawe (with Lucy Snowe) from Charlotte Brontë's Villette, Rosalie Murray (with Agnes Grey) from Anne Brontë's Agnes Grey, Dora Spenlow (with Agnes Wickfield) from Charles Dickens's David Copperfield, and Rosamond Vincy (with Dorothea Brooke) from George Eliot's Middlemarch.

Having set out this list, I will now briefly mention the reasons certain texts and characters were not included, though they would have made obvious, because well-known, choices. Becky Sharpe, from William Thackeray's Vanity Fair (1847-48), for instance, is not a coquette as defined in this thesis, for she is not a secondary character, and is not subjected to a continuous interpretation from a female protagonist. It is true that neither Dora Spenlow is scrutinized by Agnes Wickfield; nevertheless, Dora is subjected to a specific, domestic-minded, type of scrutiny from David, the narrator, in a way Becky Sharpe is not. The narrator in Vanity Fair is unsparing on all the characters, including domestic-minded Amelia Sedley. Besides, is Becky enjoying flirting and the company of men, or is she seeking to rise in life? Beauty, fashionableness, and flirtatiousness alone do not suffice. An original playful attitude is a main criterion for selection, and has made me exclude two other obvious choices: Gwendolen Harleth from George Eliot's Daniel Deronda (1876), and Blanche Ingram from Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847). Gwendolen is not a secondary figure and, though beautiful, does not seem to enjoy light-hearted flirting and the admiration of men for its own sake. As for Blanche Ingram, her interest in courtship and display is not at all genuine, but mercenary. She flirts with Mr Rochester, and wishes to attract him by exhibiting her splendid, white-clad figure, but this is only because she desires a rich husband. The coquettes examined here all genuinely enjoy flirting: they find the admiration of men exciting in itself, and they are not necessarily domestic-minded.

364) and art was feared and condemned. Alison Smith, The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality and Art (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1996) 5-6.

The one exception in my selection of characters is that of Estella from Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861). Estella is a creature who is manifestly uninterested in her own beauty and her beauty's power. However, the text suggests that this inability of Estella to love and respond to passion is not natural but enforced. Further, as we shall see, her beauty too can act as a vehicle for feminist concerns, because it belongs to an unusual way through which a woman's story becomes harmonized and integrated inside the main story, that of a man; Estella is a female voice inside a male voice. Dickens manages, through Estella's beauty, to construct a powerful critique of the dominant masculinity ideals embodied in Pip.

Having defined the coquette and mentioned my selected texts, I will now proceed to explain my argument in more detail, by outlining the current position on coquetry in Victorian literature, and by indicating the way this thesis contributes to it.

Coquetry: A Literature Review

The figure of the coquette in Victorian literature suggests, I argue, that Victorian gender ideology operated upon a logic of exclusion, whereby women had to learn to exclude certain problematic women's issues as unanswerable and irresolvable – or, rather, to learn to resolve certain problematic issues only by reference to religion and conventional wisdom. For example, marriage failure could only be the fault of the wife; woman's art could only be inferior when compared to a man's; the way out of domestic violence was prayer, and not seeking the protection of the law⁷. The coquette embodies female art, love of fashion and is attached to marriage failure, domestic abuse and a more general questioning of Victorian gender codes. The bond between the coquette and the protagonist, which is rarely severed, and never on the initiative of the coquette, makes her a strategy whereby the author expresses, first, an awareness of a female sensual and erotic identity which goes beyond norms and boundaries and, second, a concern over the ease with which the dominant, patriarchal ideology sought to resolve contradictions in female experience. The figure of the coquette thus enables the author to engage actively with women's problems, and present them as a matter of strong prejudice, not only on the part of men or the social collective, but also on the part of women themselves. Coquetry

⁷ If the woman prayed devoutly enough, her husband might change, or she might be given strength to endure. This is the solution Agnes Grey proposes on the matter of domestic neglect and abuse in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey*; see the *Agnes Grey* chapter for a full examination of this matter.

allows the author to examine and disclose the discourse through which certain attitudes, which prejudiced women in the legal and social fields, gained moral authority.

Consequently, authorial treatment of the spectacular woman speaks of a femininity which was aware that there were parts of her identity she had to deny; to turn into a “proper” woman, she had to abort a part of herself and learn to turn a blind eye to the inability of the law and social institutions to adequately deal with the implications of female sexuality, sensuality and expression, especially expression through music and art.

Thus, my thesis revolves around the subjects of coquetry, fashion and female eroticism; also, it involves the question of female concern with beauty in the Victorian period. Given the ideal of female inconspicuousness⁸, would a concern with beauty and display be automatically condemned? In other words, is the coquette’s concern with beauty to be interpreted as a sign of vice? The theorists who have recently dealt with these questions and the figure of the coquette in the Victorian period are Margaret Beetham, Sharon Marcus, Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, Anna Krugovoy Silver and Valerie Steele.

Silver has answered the question whether a concern with beauty would be evidence of vice in the negative. Looking beautiful, she has argued, “was an important concern, across class-lines, for Victorian women”⁹. Female clothing was elaborate and highly decorative; beauty was “woman’s special duty and domain”¹⁰. Girls would be trained to appreciate clothes and beauty with the use of dolls, and the advertisements for dolls. Dolls exemplified ideals of female appearance¹¹. There was no strict division between the domestic woman, and the woman who cared for beauty and fashion. The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine, writes Margaret Beetham, “assumed that women

⁸ According to conventional morality, the true woman was self-effacing, invisible, domestic. Beth Newman, Subjects on Display: Psychoanalysis, Social Expectation and Victorian Femininity (Athens: Ohio UP, 2004) 15, 21. Newman explores the conflicts this ideal would produce in women who also experienced the normal desire to be seen and noticed, 21-22. She argues that the spectacular woman dazzled the Victorian cultural imagination (21) so that endorsement of the feminine inconspicuousness ideal is never unambiguous in major novels such as Villette, Jane Eyre and David Copperfield.

⁹ Anna Krugovoy Silver, Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 28. Victorians idealised the ethereal and pure woman, symbolised by her slim body and lack of appetite (9, 10, 14). This enables Silver to say that the Victorian was a “nascent anorexic culture”. Silver 26. In her book, she argues that “the normative model of middle-class Victorian womanhood shares several qualities with the beliefs or behaviours of the anorexic girl or woman”. Silver 3.

¹⁰ Silver 28-29.

¹¹ Sharon Marcus, Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007) 154-55.

wanted fiction and fashion, but also dealt with the dailiness of readers' lives"¹². The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine accommodated in the idea of the domestic the element of fashion, "the signifier of femininity as an erotic surface, rather than active hands or loving heart"¹³.

Which brings us to the question of the erotic, and its position in relation to Victorian norms on femininity. Current research seems to hold that, despite the pervasiveness of the angelic, sexually anaesthetic woman ideal, Victorian women did not necessarily see themselves in that way, or at least not exclusively so¹⁴; and that Victorian literature did not shy away from portraying the tension between opposing categories of womanhood (such as angel/ fallen, virgin/ magdalen)¹⁵. Current research sees the

¹² Margaret Beetham, A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800-1914 (London: Routledge, 1996) 59. Domestic journals and periodicals were sympathetic to a concept of femininity which was alluring and conscious of its own beauty. The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine, described clothes in coquettish and fancy terms, designed to attract interest: "dressy toilet", "one of the prettiest dresses we have ever seen" (The Fashions", The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine May 1860: 46-47); and replied to queries about fashion to its readers in the regular column "The Englishwoman's Conversazione". Elegant dresses were minutely described. Style and the beauty of dress were celebrated. The descriptions are joyful; fashion seems to have been a shared pleasure between the fashion writer and the audience. "We have lately seen, and must describe, a very elegant dress" (The Fashions", The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine July 1860: 141); "[s]hawls of white muslin, with embroidered borders, are very dressy and stylish [...]" ("The Fashions", The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine July 1860: 142); "[w]e will now mention a few PARISIAN DRESSES which have been very much admired" ("The Fashions", The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine Sept. 1860: 238. Capitals original). The same magazine serialised a "Domestic History of England"; the "1272 to 1399" section referred to the excessive royal feasts, ending thus: "Ah, well-a-day! This nineteenth century finds us, no doubt, all moderate eaters and drinkers, and moderate dressers, careful citizens, sober sons, and dutiful daughters. Who will tell, in after-days, of our over-dressing, or municipal feasts? This is the golden age, no doubt, and we the men and women who make it!" ("The Domestic History of England, from 1272 to 1399", The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine Sept. 1860: 211). For the Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine the minute attention to fashion and accessories was clearly not overdressing, and domesticity with love of display could easily be reconciled.

¹³ Beetham 68-69.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of Victorian approaches to female sexuality see the David Copperfield chapter.

¹⁵ For Carolyn Dever, sexuality in the Victorian novel is "everywhere and nowhere". Eroticism "saturates the world of Victorian fiction", though it emerges in primarily "disguised and coded terms". Carolyn Dever, "Everywhere and Nowhere: Sexuality in Victorian Fiction," A Concise Companion to the Victorian Novel, ed. Francis O' Gorman, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 157. Sean Purchase also believes that sexuality in Victorian literature emerges in codes, and becomes quite conspicuous, because of this silence. Sean Purchase, "Sex and Sexuality", Victorian Key Concepts, Palgrave Key Concepts (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 128. According to Valerie Steele, "[t]he

Victorian woman as in the process of negotiating a viable position between domesticity and sexuality. The corset, for example, signified both propriety and sexual allure; it “allowed women to articulate sexual subjectivity in a socially acceptable way”¹⁶. The Victorians “were aware that beauty of form was essentially sexual. [...] They were also aware that dress could accentuate the erotic appeal of the body”¹⁷.

For Martha Vicinus, accepted categories and definitions of Victorian womanhood must all remain provisional¹⁸. In her research on female intimate friendships in the Victorian era, she has identified in women a desire for eroticized relationships with other women¹⁹. The erotic aspect of proper Victorian womanhood, of which the figure of the coquette is read in this thesis as an elaboration, has also been brought forward by Sharon Marcus, who argues that women in the Victorian era had and felt the same forms of desire as men. Women directed those desires “at both masculine and feminine objects”²⁰. Women admired and were fascinated by female beauty²¹.

In the Response to the Victorian Studies Review Forum for her book Between Women, Marcus says: “medical writing and advice literature [...] inaccurately suggest

documentary evidence [from the Victorian period] indicates that there was a wide range of opinion on sexuality, in general, and on the eroticism of fashion, in particular. For every Doctor Acton, who believed that ‘good’ women did not experience any sexual pleasure, there was a Doctor Debay who thought that they did, or could and should. Similarly, for every Mrs Linton, who attacked ‘indecent’, ‘false’ and whorish dress, there was a Mrs Haweis, who argued that a beautiful body and beautiful dress were things to be proud of”. Valerie Steele, Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 100. Steele believes that “if we can speak at all of a ‘Victorian’ ideal of femininity, that ideal was, in large part, an erotic one”. Steele 144. Voluminous dress was not meant to bury the woman under heaps of cloth, but to convey the impression of beauty. Steele 93. Attention to appearance also served practical considerations in a culture where there was such pressure on the woman to marry. Since women and men did not have too many opportunities to converse and socialize with each other, it was primarily through personal beauty that affection and admiration were won. Steele 105. Pre-Raphaelite art also gave implicit recognition “of the female sexuality that well-brought up women were not supposed to feel”, in its representations of women with luxurious hair and gorgeous jewellery and accessories. Still, the images of women exhibiting their physical charms “was deeply shocking to many”. Jan Marsh, Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art (London: Guild Publishing/ Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd, 1987) 86.

¹⁶ Valerie Steele, The Corset: a Cultural History (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001) 35.

¹⁷ Valerie Steele, Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) 118.

¹⁸ Martha Vicinus, Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928 (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2004) xxii.

¹⁹ Vicinus xviii-xix, xx. An intimate friendship in this book, says Vicinus, is “an emotional, erotically charged relationship between two women”. Vicinus xxiv.

²⁰ Marcus 115.

²¹ Marcus 117.

that all Victorians considered women asexual, hysterical or redundant unless married. Women's lives were much more complex"²². Marcus notes that her reviewers in Victorian Studies (i.e. Richard Dellamora, Laura E. Nym Mayhall and Martha Vicinus) have accepted the key arguments of Between Women, and found them "pervasive enough to be tested by future research"; one of those arguments being that middle-class Victorian women "were capable of many different kinds of sexual and erotic feelings and actions, and a variety of people acknowledged that capacity"²³.

In the figure of the coquette –the woman who loves fashion, and is playful and flirty- the Victorian authors examined here do "acknowledge that capacity", and wish to extrapolate her as an area where women's sensuality and love of pleasure could be fruitfully discussed. The Victorian was a period where female eroticism was expressed and expanded upon in cultural representations and actual relationships. Indeed, Dellamora spoke about how a world of commodities designed for female consumption (dolls, fashion items, fashion plates) referred to female pleasure and desire (same-sex pleasure in this case)²⁴. Pleasure in looking at other women was a constitutive component of heterosexual femininity, this is what Marcus's research has illuminated, says Mayhall²⁵. Vicinus found Between Women to be "a refreshing reconsideration of same-sex relations between women"²⁶.

In researching these same-sex relations, Marcus has also examined connections between women in Victorian novels, including the connection between the figure of the coquette and the novel's protagonist. Her idea is that such connection is essential in establishing each woman's identity (for example, Dora Spenlow and Agnes Wickfield highlight aspects of each other²⁷) or in aiding the marriage plot (for example, the erotically charged encounter between Dorothea Brooke and Rosamond Vincy gives Dorothea the knowledge necessary to marry Will²⁸). Conversely, Lucy Snowe's

²² Sharon Marcus, "Response", Victorian Studies 50 (2007): 92.

²³ Her other two main arguments are that typical middle-class Victorian women were defined not only in relation to men, "but also by bonds with female friends who were neither kin nor lovers", and that "sexual relationships between women were not automatically condemned". Marcus 87.

²⁴ Richard Dellamora, "Friendship, Marriage and *Between Women*," Victorian Studies 50 (2007): 68.

²⁵ Laura E. Nym Mayhall, "Did the Victorians Accept Female Marriage?" Victorian Studies 50 (2007): 79.

²⁶ Martha Vicinus, "Normalizing Female Friendship," Victorian Studies 50 (2007): 81.

²⁷ Marcus, Between Women 89.

²⁸ Marcus 84. All references to Marcus are from Between Women unless otherwise indicated.

ambivalent dislike for Ginevra Fanshawe in *Villette* means that Lucy cannot marry successfully: friendship was considered capable of making a woman fit for marriage²⁹. Lucy's desire for Ginevra is, ultimately, inseparable from their contest over men³⁰. Silver has seen Ginevra as essential womanhood³¹, whose enduring friendship with Lucy means that Lucy tempers her dislike for "corpulence" (and, by association, for sensuality). Therefore, Charlotte Brontë does not wholeheartedly embrace the ideal of the ethereal woman; "in Paulina, she suggests that such a woman is little more than a helpless child"³².

Finally, Ellen Bayuk Rosenman has read William MacArthur Reynolds's best-selling mid-Victorian novel *The Mysteries of London* (1844-46) as a novel which presents women as specially made for pleasure – that is, their own pleasure³³. Though the novel retains the central tenets of Victorian sexual ideology³⁴, it refuses the conclusion which contains female sexuality³⁵. The novel imagines an erotic body that evades degradation; Ellen, one of the main characters, for example, looks at herself in the mirror with pleasure, and re-appropriates her image for her own desire³⁶. Ellen becomes both

²⁹ Marcus 13, 102, 103.

³⁰ Marcus 104.

³¹ Silver 110.

³² Silver 115.

³³ Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, "Spectacular Women: *The Mysteries of London* and the Female Body," *Victorian Studies* 40 (1996): 50.

³⁴ Bayuk Rosenman 53.

³⁵ Bayuk Rosenman 58.

³⁶ Jacques Lacan maintains that an infant's recognition of its image in the mirror makes it identify "jubilantly with the wholeness of a reflected form". William Cain et al., "Jacques Lacan 1901-1981," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, eds. William Cain et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001) 1281. However, as Lacan observes, "the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his [or her] power is given to him [or her] only as *Gestalt* [i.e. form, pattern, whole (German)]". Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, eds. William Cain et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001) 1286. Thus, the joyous recognition of ourselves is "overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject [...]". Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *The Narrative Reader*, ed. Martin McQuillan, repr. ed. (London: Routledge, 2004) 178. Bayuk Rosenman believes that scenes where women look at themselves in the mirror in *The Mysteries of London* do not involve misrecognition or loss, but are constructive of a complete identity. "[W]e see the interplay of complementary processes in which the loop between body and image promises perpetual fulfilment". Bayuk Rosenman 50. Mirroring helps to constitute sexuality; the woman experiences sensual pleasure in her own femininity. Bayuk Rosenman 46. In analyzing woman's presence in film cinema, Laura Mulvey explains that "[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly". Women are displayed, they connote what

subject and object, body and image³⁷. The woman is the object of her own pleasure; thus, objectification is subtly distinguished from dehumanization³⁸.

Similarly to Bayuk Rosenman, I do consider the spectacular woman as a figure which re-appropriates femininity for her own pleasure, and which moves from object- to subject-status. However, my research on the spectacular woman examines a variety of texts, and is relational; though I focus on that figure, I examine her in relation to the protagonist (and the angelic woman, if they are not the same) and analyze the tension produced by this relation, in order to associate it with the workings of the legal and moral framework of norms in Victorian society. The abovementioned works have been innovative in establishing the playful, coquettish and erotic element in Victorian womanhood; and, in the case of Marcus and Silver, have fruitfully looked at the relationship, inside the novel, between the protagonist and the coquette as a way of defining identity³⁹.

Nevertheless, these interpretations look at the coquette only in terms of eroticism and sensuality; they do not mention that, in Victorian Literature, these are implicated with complex socio-political issues. Through the different examples of the spectacular woman in fiction, I re-imagine her not only as the passive surface upon which aspects of the identity of the protagonist are reflected (and perhaps restricted or expanded upon) but also as an active site on which aspects of the protagonist are combined with aspects of the coquette to reflect something altogether different. Sensuality, display and excess form only one part of the framework within which the coquette operates. Taking sensuality as its starting point, this thesis understands the coquette as a chart of the instabilities characteristic of woman's place inside the social and legal structures. Coquettish beauty interacts with social and legal institutions; the story which is left untold by current critical works is the story where coquetry raises issues which were controversial and difficult to solve – issues revolving around women's rights (and the abuse of those rights) in Victorian society. This thesis argues that it is the story where coquetry addresses antithetical discourses on the Victorian woman, and assimilates them in such a way as to

Mulvey terms “to-be-looked-at-ness”, Mulvey 179. Bayuk Rosenman expressly differentiates the gaze in *The Mysteries of London* from Mulvey's analysis. Reynolds, says Bayuk Rosenman, uses the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of women in a different way: for example, Eliza “needs to construct and see herself as a woman to be fully one”. Bayuk Rosenman 45-46. Meanwhile, the novel is filled with failed male voyers. Bayuk Rosenman 51.

³⁷ Bayuk Rosenman 44.

³⁸ Bayuk Rosenman 59.

³⁹ Even in the case of *Villette*, where no marriage happens for Lucy, the friendship plot, says Marcus, explains why there can be no marriage plot. Marcus 106-08.

express a female-centred, subversive beauty discourse, in which beauty consolidates differing female experiences, and formulates the search for identity as a collective female effort. I pose the question, why are there these (secondary) coquettish women figures in Victorian literature, who are all playful, artistic and musical, and who are dealt with by the protagonist with an odd mixture of fascination and disapproval, even repulsion, while they remain invariably attached to the protagonist? The answer is, to act as vehicles for feminist concerns, ranging from a woman's erotic power to the question of divorce, and for a willingness on the part of authors to express concern for these issues, and for the easy manner in which women had to learn to dismiss them as instances of personal (and never institutional or societal) failure.

For the studies examined above, the female gaze is liberating – the woman gazes at her own body, for example, to enjoy the pleasure of her own femininity (Bayuk Rosenman); she gazes at other women to satisfy an erotic urge of her own (Marcus); she uses fashionable dress to present herself both as an affluent middle-class woman, and as an erotic spectacle (Steele and Beetham). My research, however, argues that the female gaze is not always liberating, because beauty is a sum total of ways of seeing women, and functions to expose the violent manner in which certain types of womanhood were made invisible. The female gaze, therefore, can *become* liberating, and the abovementioned works are correct in interpreting it so. This thesis, however, concentrates on the tension between a liberating and constraining gaze centring on the coquettish woman.

Current research examines the interplay between acceptance and rejection, but does not connect it to narrative strategy, to how the implied author plays with the acceptance/rejection dyad, to explain her/his perception of female experience in Victorian culture. It is my view that the problematic of female eroticism and sensuality can not be adequately dealt with unless it is seen in terms of the (implied) author's making the various women's stories interrogate each other. My research examines coquetry as a means through which silencing is resisted; the coquette is attached to stories which test the main story. The social, moral and legal frameworks were used to teach women to impose closure on certain plots, but the implied author creates a plot which shows that closure is imposed controversially, violently, and with specific interests in mind.

Consequently, I would say that this thesis contributes to the field of Victorian gender studies, and the area of women and beauty in particular, by exploring coquettish beauty as the organizing term for a female subjectivity concerned with the prejudicial manner in which women themselves had to learn to displace woman's plight into the area of female frivolity, and by reading coquetry as a collective female effort towards

understanding the female experience. Female coquetry prompts, in this thesis, an examination of the network of social, legal and cultural values surrounding women. I use the figure of the coquette to suggest a female concern with, and a female awareness of, and anxiety over, the labels and limits women were urged to place on their own experience, including the erotic and sensual experience. I explain how spectacular beauty, rather than rendering the woman an object, makes her a controversial voice, and an insight into a desiring, and powerful, mode of existence. The coquette is a space where the stories of female eroticism, and the abuse of woman's rights, become narratable inside texts with a strong tendency to affirm domesticity. I have called the coquette's story a female-centred beauty discourse; it is a discourse⁴⁰ because it relates beauty to institutions, cultural production, ideology, power and its effects; and it is female-centred, because it focuses on the experience of the female, from the female point of view, within a female community which includes, in the case of the Brontës, George Eliot and Christina Rossetti, the implied author herself.

Theoretically, then, this thesis is not only situated within Victorian studies, but also on two further themes. These are the concept of beauty and feminism's relation to the beautiful female figure.

Beauty and Feminism

As demonstrated by the literature review, the approach to beauty taken in this thesis is practical and concrete. What is being studied is the embodiment of coquettish beauty in specified authors and texts; beauty is neither abstracted, nor related to the moral capability and state of consciousness of a (presumed to be male) spectator. In other

⁴⁰ The term "discourse", says Michel Foucault, "can be defined as the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation". Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, Routledge Classics (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2002) 121. Discourse is not only certain objects, but "the body of rules that enables them to form as objects of a discourse". Foucault, Knowledge 52-53. Elizabeth Langland also relies on the insights of Foucault to say that discourse "refers to signifying practices of all kinds," including those formulated within institutions, fields of knowledge, those focusing on the home, and those governing relationships and interactions. Discursive practices regulate what is "sayable". Elizabeth Langland, Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995) 3. A beauty discourse in this thesis refers to the beautiful coquette and how she interacts within the novelistic world, together with the cultural, social, legal and historical formations that seem to have produced the way she is being perceived within that world.

words, beauty as used in this thesis differs from Kantian aesthetics and Edmund Burke's ideas on the beautiful and the sublime.

For Immanuel Kant, beauty can be "free" or "adherent". Free beauty is beauty according to form. Satisfaction in free beauty (the Beautiful) is disinterested⁴¹. Human beauty, however, is "adherent beauty", which is attached to "a concept of the purpose which determines what the thing ought to be"⁴². In this sense, the feeling excited by the coquette in the texts examined here does come close to Kant's idea; men and women wish to cast the spectacular woman in roles and moulds. However, my research on beauty is not general, but specific; it refers to a specific time and place in literary history, and to a specific category of woman and woman character—the coquette—in a particular literary and historical period. Edmund Burke gives feminine attributes to his concept of beauty: beauty is delicate, smooth, submissive and weak⁴³. Burke clearly subjects beauty to a male stare: "Men are carried to the sex in general [...] but they are attached to particulars by personal beauty"⁴⁴. Beauty is loveliness, but not use⁴⁵. His analysis does give an insight into the way beautiful women are perceived (as ornamental and weak) but is not particularly relevant if the research concerns ways in which women themselves express their idea of agency through beauty.

A feminist approach to abstract beauty is that taken by Elaine Scarry⁴⁶. However, her work on beauty is referring primarily to the features of beauty --for example, it is sacred, unprecedented, lifesaving-- and to beauty's effects on others⁴⁷. Beautiful things give rise to the notion of distribution, to a life-saving reciprocity, to fairness not just in the sense of loveliness, but in the sense of "a symmetry of everyone's relations to one another"⁴⁸. Beauty is a call on us to create something better⁴⁹. Though Scarry's analysis

⁴¹ Immanuel Kant, The Critique of Judgment, trans. J.H. Bernard, Great Books in Philosophy Series (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000) 55.

⁴² Kant 82.

⁴³ Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, ed. Adam Philips (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 102-06.

⁴⁴ Burke 39.

⁴⁵ Burke 96.

⁴⁶ Elaine Scarry's discourse on beauty, says Alexandro Alberro, reads beauty through the lenses of "historical feminism", in that it addresses and challenges the traditional association of the beautiful with the feminine (the diminutive) and the sublime with the masculine (the grand). Alexander Alberro, "Beauty Knows No Pain," Art Journal 63 (2004): 38.

⁴⁷ For the characteristics of beauty see Elaine Scarry, On Beauty and Being Just (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999) 23-24.

⁴⁸ Scarry 105.

⁴⁹ Elaine Scarry, "Does Beauty Really Equal Truth?", interview, Salon.com 9 Nov. 1999, 26 June 2008 <http://www.salon.com/books/feature/1999/11/09/scarry>.

is valuable in pointing out that the demotion of beauty is linked to the denigration of the feminine⁵⁰ and in her refusal, throughout her book, to demote beauty in this way, it is again an abstract analysis, and can only be indirectly relevant to studies about the embodied beautiful form in a specific medium and in a specific age.

My overall approach is to regard the beautiful coquette as a site shaped by ideology and by the discourse of institutions, as well as governed by a peculiar narrative strategy. The coquette is a constructed space, which interrogates women's status and the ideological and normative framework that governed women's lives⁵¹. Beauty in woman, rather than simply offering an occasion for commenting upon the attributes of the beautiful, and its difference from the sublime is, to use Kathy Alexis Psomiades's term, a "discursive field admirably suited to the figuration of two sides of the same question, even of ideological self-contradiction"⁵². The female figure can work to set the territory and boundaries of a definable space in which antithetical values may meet⁵³, come together and even haunt each other⁵⁴. This thesis deploys coquetry as a connoted system of signification, purposefully constructed to investigate the limits and scope of female autonomy⁵⁵. Coquetry is a position from which to speak.

⁵⁰ Scarry 83-85.

⁵¹ Kathy Alexis Psomiades has shown how the beautiful female figure can be a form of signification speaking to specific ideological concerns. In *Beauty's Body*, Psomiades looks at art (painting, poetry, prose) of nineteenth century British aestheticism, and argues that the representation of the beautiful woman is a way for the artist to express two central narratives of aestheticism: the narrative of withdrawal (art separate from everyday life) and the narrative of commodification (art as commodity). Femininity being the location of opposites, being conceived as both spiritual and material, it can be used to express these two contradictory things at the same moment. Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 9-10.

⁵² Psomiades 32.

⁵³ Psomiades 63.

⁵⁴ Psomiades 107.

⁵⁵ The artist (author or poet) is perceived in this thesis as active in producing meaning, or at least in generating the elements which produce meaning. However, the extent to which she/he can be fully identified with the real-life woman or man who produced the text is seen as negotiable. Though I have studied and used biographical sources for every author I refer to, I believe that I am closer to a notion of the author as "implied", i.e. in Wayne C. Booth's picture of an implicit author who stands behind the scenes. Wayne C. Booth, "From *The Rhetoric of Fiction*," *The Narrative Reader*, ed. Martin Mc Quillan (London: Routledge, 2000) 70. This persona is related to the text's author, but can not be fully identified with her/ him. An excellent summary of the relevance of the author's biography for a text has been given by Foucault in "What is an Author?" The author, says Foucault, is a principle of unity in a text, a particular source of expression, and explains the presence of certain events in the text. Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Vincent B. Leitch et al., eds (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001) 1630. The first person pronoun in

In feminist studies, the question of whether coquetry –lipstick, fashion, accessories, the colour pink and other paraphernalia of beauty—can be empowering and a form of agency has recently been the subject of debate. A brief outline of the terms of this debate will help locate coquetry within current developments in feminism, and also further illustrate how the Victorian coquette may function as a figure of feminist empowerment.

So-called “Girlie feminists,” Rebecca Munford explains, “identified with the writers of zines such as *Bust* or *Bitch*, have [...] located ‘girl power’ [e.g. reclaiming feminine accoutrements like Barbie and housekeeping] as a site of agency and resistance”⁵⁶. For Girlie, “‘femininity’ is not opposed to feminism, but is positioned as central to a politics of agency, confidence and resistance”⁵⁷. Girlie speaks to “a generation of young women who self-identify as feminist, but do not necessarily relate to second wave feminist institutions”⁵⁸. Embracing your femininity with make-up and fashionable clothes and accessories is female self-empowerment⁵⁹. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in *Manifesta*, “perhaps the best-known work in the third-wave canon”⁶⁰, explain: “feminism needs Girlie and Girlie needs feminism”⁶¹.

a first person narration does not refer directly to the writer: it stands for a second self, whose similarity to the author is never fixed. Foucault, *Author* 1631. It is tiresome, Foucault believed, to ask who was “the real author” of a text, and what she/he has revealed of her/himself in the language. There are new questions to be asked, such as, what are the modes of existence for this discourse? What placements are determined for possible subjects? Foucault, *Author* 1636. Throughout the thesis, the various characters in a novel, and the way they are placed in relation to each other, are related to the implied author, who is examining the placing of subjects inside her/his society. The author of the text is not identified with the first-person narrator; so, for example, Charlotte Brontë is not Lucy Snowe, and Anne Brontë is not Agnes Grey. The grounds for reaching this conclusion are examined, as well as the level of approval that can reasonably be presumed to exist on the part of the implied author towards the first-person narrator. For example, Charles Dickens, by inserting in *Great Expectations* a more mature first-person narrator (the older Pip) who exercises judgment on his younger self, can be presumed to sympathize with the mature narrator, and to approve of his “growth”.

⁵⁶ Rebecca Munford, “‘Wake Up and Smell the Lipgloss’: Gender, Generation and the (A)politics of Girl Power,” *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, eds. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford, exp. 2nd ed. (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 272.

⁵⁷ Munford 274.

⁵⁸ Munford 273.

⁵⁹ Tamara Straus, “A Manifesto for Third Wave Feminism”, *AlterNet*, 8 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.alternet.org/story/9986/?page=entire>>.

⁶⁰ Kellie Bean, *Post-Backlash Feminism: Women and the Media Since Reagan-Bush* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc, Publishers, 2007) 75.

⁶¹ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) 164.

Girlie is an aspect of Third Wave Feminism⁶². To their credit, Baumgardner and Richards recognize that Girlie stops short of being a forceful movement because its desire to distinguish itself from Second Wave Feminism has made it “mistake politics for a Second Wave institution as well, rather than seeing it as inherent in feminism”⁶³; in their “Manifesta” for the Third Wave they declare that any new development in feminism must “have access to our intellectual feminist legacy and women’s history”⁶⁴.

However, Third Wave Feminism in general, and Girlie in particular, are still seen to lack a political, social justice agenda. Can meditations on sex and fashion really be part of a new political women’s movement? wonders Munford. Ghettoising feminist histories makes girl-power the site of a dangerous slippage between third-wave feminism and post-feminism⁶⁵. There is more to beauty regimes, coquetry, and relationships than consumer and style choices, and Girlie refuses to interrogate the roots and consequences of women’s experiences and choices in terms of all of those things⁶⁶.

⁶² On Girlie as part of the Third Wave Movement see for example Bean 76; Baumgardner and Richards 135-36; the Third Wave being “a resurgence of interest in feminist activism on the part of young women who wish to differentiate themselves from the post-feminism label”. “Third Wave”, The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Post-Feminism, ed. Sarah Gamble, Routledge Companions, repr. ed. (London: Routledge, 2004) 327. Third Wave claims things that are feminine (Manifesta 135) and makes strategic use of beauty, sex, and power. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier, “Introduction”, Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century, ed. Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (Boston: Northeastern UP, 2003) 12.

⁶³ Baumgardner and Richards 138.

⁶⁴ Baumgardner and Richards 279.

⁶⁵ Munford 275-76.

⁶⁶ Bean 92. Though Girlie is, as Baumgardner and Richards explain (see Manifesta 135-36), tied to the cultural and historical framework of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries --Madonna, Courtney Love, Queen Latifah, Chelsea Clinton and the Women’s World Cup—it does often seem to construct women as nearly unconditionally empowered and free, holding a romanticized view of women’s lives even in previous periods of history. For example, Linda M. Scott’s Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) meticulously traces the development of the US cosmetics industry and fashion and magazine cultures in the hands of certain independent-minded women entrepreneurs (see Fresh Lipstick chapter five, “The Power of Fashion,” 127-63). However, she fails to explore the fact that these women were the exception, rather than the rule, in a constraining social environment; further, Scott fails to address the fact that (even if we assume that the cosmetics, magazine and fashion industries have been historically determined by women entrepreneurs to such a great extent) the women *at whom* those industries were addressed were still judged by male standards. Things have not changed too much since then. Beauty is still vital in the formation of sexual and other relationships, so that both heterosexual and homosexual women unconcerned with beauty may be shunned by members of the opposite sex (Lee Bartky 76). Moreover, male power at which beauty (in a heterosexual woman) is addressed, is still, to an extent, “reinforced through ‘personal’ institutions such as marriage, child-rearing and sexual practices”. Sue Thornham, “Second Wave Feminism”, The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism, ed. Sarah Gamble, Reprinted

Further, the rhetoric of Girlie is often reduced to over-simplifications, generalizations, and the taking of feminism out of context. For instance, Tamara Straus's critique of Second Wave feminism reduces it to a phenomenon affecting the marriage-market: it has resulted in a generation of women who, in Straus's own words, "can't get hitched in the booming market place of sexual liberation"⁶⁷. Baumgardner and Richards express a suspicion that "Second Wavers" may not have had "a sense that things *should* change"⁶⁸ and deride work from Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millett for not being "comforting" enough⁶⁹. Linda M. Scott's lipstick feminism text called, appropriately, Fresh Lipstick, attacks feminism's so-called "anti-beauty" ideology, in that, inter alia, "it reduces self-representation to sexual allure"⁷⁰ and discredits "femininity by ridiculing it"⁷¹. Nevertheless, she describes the so-called "anti-beauty" ideology of feminism as an attitude originating with dress reformers with "connections to institutions of power"⁷², which leads Scott to ignore two important facts about any feminist critique of tight beauty standards. First, the context in which such critique was developed, which is not the context of "Whig sympathiz[ing]" American women⁷³, but the context of a woman's lack of choices in life except attracting a man to marry and of a woman's lack of rational education⁷⁴. Second, that if "anti-beauty" is generalizing and oppressive, then so are the

ed, Routledge Companions (London: Routledge, 2004) 30-31. Thornham is referring to the late 1960s; yet, given the grim statistics which show that there has been "at best [only] partial fulfilment" of Second Wave goals of equal pay and access to equal education and opportunity (Thornham 42), she could have been referring to the world of today. Bean also discusses the tendency in Girlie to regard all women as empowered and having a choice. Girlie is "middle-class", "a consumer trend for the privileged". 96-97. Sadly, "just because men find themselves occasionally under the erotic sway of women [...] doesn't put more women in Congress, close the wage gap, increase access to abortion, reduce incidents of rape, domestic abuse or sexual harassment". Bean 119-20.

⁶⁷ Straus, "A Manifesto for Third Wave Feminism".

⁶⁸ Baumgardner and Richards 170.

⁶⁹ Baumgardner and Richards 173.

⁷⁰ Scott 6.

⁷¹ Scott 531.

⁷² Scott 2.

⁷³ Scott 51.

⁷⁴ For early feminists, a woman's desire to please, and her often vain manner were the result of the inadequate education they—as supporters of a woman's chance to a better life—reacted against. Women were educated in an enervating style, and lived only to please; they were educated "in worse than Egyptian bondage". See Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, ed. Miriam Brody, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2004) 144-48. Harriet Martineau explained that the time of young girls was expended on "light accomplishments" while their powers were checked in their growth. Harriet Martineau, "On Female Education (1822)", Harriet Martineau on Women, ed. Gayle Graham Yates, The Douglass Series on Women's Lives and the Meaning of Gender (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1985) 89. This is not to say that coquetry was simply evidence of frivolity; we have seen that current criticism holds coquetry to have fomed

beauty mandates and regimes which confine women to a life centred on the body, in a struggle to comply with an impossible feminine norm⁷⁵. Germaine Greer has accused Girlie and the idea of “girl power” for using a “language of independence [to] conceal utter dependence upon male attention”⁷⁶.

The dangerous and often fatal proximity of the desire to be fashionable and sexually alluring –itself a form of coquetry—to patriarchal disciplinary methods has been explored by Susan Bordo, who argues that our culture with its slenderness ideal is “not simply contributory but *productive* of eating disorders”⁷⁷. Coquetry can be a form of entrapment, as Diana Tietjens Meyers explains. The values of beauty and attractiveness are culturally inscribed, and circumscribe the scope of self-determination⁷⁸. “Although Western representations of narcissism conflate the feminine self with its mirror double, they also portray the mirror as holding in its depths an image of perfection that women’s reflected images cannot possibly match [...]”⁷⁹.

What critics like Bordo and Tietjens Meyers are doing is showing the capacity of the figure of the beautiful and erotically appealing woman to encapsulate a discourse of culturally and historically specific oppression. Girlie, on the other hand, reads coquetry as an expression of the self, but can be seen as unwilling to discuss what beauty might mean in political terms. This thesis builds upon coquetry’s capacity to illustrate the interplay between oppression and self-expression, by claiming that the Victorian coquette is an investigation into women’s rights or lack thereof in Victorian society; and that, by exposing a discourse of culturally and historically specific oppression, the Victorian coquette also exposes a particular female awareness of, and reaction against, this oppressive discourse. This thesis is situated at the juncture between Victorian Studies, studies on the Victorian coquette, and the exploration of beauty and coquetry by feminist thinkers.

At the same time, this thesis is not retroactively applying Girlie or Bordo/ Tietjens Meyers to Victorian literature and Victorian feminism; nor is it tracing the origins of

part of most women’s lives, even those who were domestically-minded. But it is to say that, if feminism must be accused of being “anti-beauty”, the reasons for it must be carefully documented and examined.

⁷⁵ Susan Bordo, Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body, 10th anniversary edition (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003) 17-19.

⁷⁶ Germaine Greer, The Whole Woman (New York: Anchor Books, 2000) 329.

⁷⁷ Bordo 50. Emphasis original.

⁷⁸ Diana Tietjens Meyers, Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women’s Agency, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 122.

⁷⁹ Tietjens Meyers 123.

Girlie to the Victorian coquette⁸⁰. What it is doing is to register coquetry in the framework of feminism then and now, and to demonstrate the potential of coquetry to participate in feminist politics. This potential is starting to be explored, as the Literature Review indicates; however, I hope that this thesis is original, in linking the depiction of coquetry in Victorian literature directly to the struggle for social justice for women.

Further, coquetry is placed in the context of recent feminist developments and Girlie to suggest that some of the concerns current feminism has expressed (that coquetry

⁸⁰ The term “feminist” was not officially used until 1894. Valerie Sanders, Eve’s Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Women Novelists (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1996) 2. The term “feminism”, according to the *OED*, did not appear until 1895, though “the woman question had been debated vigorously from at least as early as the late eighteenth century onwards”. Sean Purchase, “Feminism”, Key Concepts in Victorian Literature, Palgrave Key Concepts (Houndmills, UK: PalgraveMacmillan, 2006) 213. Victorian feminism was perhaps not so much concerned with the politics of personal appearance as with effecting legislative and social changes which would improve woman’s position within marriage, and would afford woman the opportunity of economic independence. For an analysis of the aims of Victorian feminism see Valerie Sanders, “First Wave Feminism”, The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Post-Feminism, ed. Sarah Gamble, Routledge Companions, Reprinted ed. (London: Routledge, 2004) 17-23, 27-28. Nevertheless, dress was a concern for both feminists and non-feminists alike. Harriet Martineau proposed in 1859 criteria for dress reform and for good dress, that would not hinder female vigour and well-being. Gayle Graham Yates, “On Economic, Social and Political Issues,” Harriet Martineau on Women, The Douglass Series on Women’s Lives and the Meaning of Gender (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1985) 211. Martineau argued that women’s clothing did not protect women from cold, heat, or damp, and perverted the form. Harriet Martineau, “Dress and its Victims,” Harriet Martineau on Women, ed. Gayle Graham Yates, The Douglass Series on Women’s Lives and the Meaning of Gender (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1985) 232-34. Gina Marlene Dorrè writes that “dress reform debates”, informal discussions regarding appropriate feminine dress flourished in the nineteenth century: “feminists and non-feminists alike began petitioning for change in women’s costume, and found a shared focus in the hyperbolic image of the tightly corseted and big bustled woman”. Gina Marlene Dorrè “Horses and Corsets: *Black Beauty*, Dress Reform, and the Fashioning of the Victorian Woman,” Victorian Literature and Culture 30 (2002): 165. Sean Purchase argues that the founding in 1881 of the Rational Dress Society, an “organization which championed the cause of loose and free clothes,” was “symbolic” of the ‘new woman’ movement at the end of the century, which promoted the liberty of women in all walks of life”. Sean Purchase, “Clothing”, Key Concepts in Victorian Literature, Palgrave Key Concepts (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 27. At any rate, Girlie’s love of finery would connote immorality as far as Victorian dominant discourse was concerned; see, for example, Mariana Valverde, “The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth Century Social Discourse,” Victorian Studies 32 (1989): 169-70. It is only fairly recently that an alternative view of Victorian womanhood has started to emerge from work on periodical sources, fashion illustrations and conduct book advice on beauty and dress, as the Literature review shows. All the same, the Victorian coquette’s love of finery, adding as it does an erotic charge to her figure, makes her ambivalent enough to be able to address issues of controversy and pertaining to morality, such as marriage breakdown and domestic abuse.

is only about fashion, not politics) are not present in the Victorian coquette, a figure firmly grounded on the political, and functioning as an index of gender ideology. Girlie shows the dangers inhering in divorcing coquetry from politics; it shows that, as Bean argues, to reach a point where all behaviours are markers of empowerment, is to say that no behaviours are⁸¹. Victorian coquetry is a woman-to-woman question; and how other women view the coquette has strong political connotations. When Anne Brontë makes Agnes Grey unable to see that Rosalie Murray's demise reveals her social vulnerability rather than her personal failure of "duty", she also shows that domesticity and the background of moral and legal rules which sustained it were unable to protect women from their husbands, and required a certain amount of female complicity to the policing of women. Agnes Grey reveals the implied author's anxiety over this female policing of other women. Girlie coquetry separates women from the network of other women; Victorian coquetry is directly addressing the women's network, as well as the network of norms which defined those women's lives⁸².

The emerging investigation is female-centred; it is the way the women's stories circulate among the women themselves which makes the coquette a potent figure. Female writing has been defined in many ways – it is writing as a woman, "writing with who I am"⁸³, creating the feminine: women are provoked to re-imagine their lives and their world⁸⁴. It is the discovery and exploration of the place of women⁸⁵, a beauty contest – i.e. a contest for an acceptable shape⁸⁶. Coquettish beauty in Victorian literature is a dialogue between the acceptable and unacceptable in women's lives, which questions the acceptable, even while recording its domination. Coquetry depicts a collective female effort toward finding a female voice; toward giving a shape to antithetical aspects of experience, and finding a space where the erotic and undisciplined side of woman can be discussed vis-à-vis the disciplinarian forces in society.

⁸¹ Bean 80.

⁸² In Catching a Wave, it is also acknowledged that playful forms of behaviour can be useful to feminism only if we take into account "the power relations surrounding gender, race, class and sexual orientation". Dicker and Piepmeier 18.

⁸³ Luce Irigaray, "Writing as a Woman, Interview to Alice Jardine," The Re-Claiming of Barbie: Essays on Female Writing, ed. Christiana Lamprinides, Female Writing: Thought and Theory (Athens, GR: Kohlias Publishing, 2002) 43.

⁸⁴ Kari Weil, "French Feminism's *Ecriture Feminine*," The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) 169.

⁸⁵ Christiana Lamprinides, "Introduction," The Re-Claiming of Barbie: Essays on Female Writing, ed. Christiana Lamprinides, Female Writing: Thought and Theory (Athens, GR: Kohlias Publishing, 2002) 16.

⁸⁶ Lamprinides 13.

The exploration of female belonging generated by the coquette is specifically Victorian. That is, it exists inside the Victorian text, and is determined by discourses on woman's role and nature which are characteristic of the Victorian period. Also, she is attached to women's issues which were controversial to the Victorians. The next section shall therefore briefly consider the historical background to the texts and authors featured in this thesis.

Historical Background

The Victorian culture was dominated by the ideals of domesticity, family and home⁸⁷; the proper middle-class woman was "the godly wife and mother"⁸⁸, the domestic woman, the angel in the house. Elizabeth Langland offers a useful summary of the myth:

By and large, Victorians believed woman belonged in the home where she served as presiding angel. Although the most famous representation of the notion –the Angel in the House-- did not appear until 1854-56 in Coventry Patmore's poem of that name, the idea was gaining currency from the beginning of the century. Briefly, the myth of the angel in the house idealised woman and her innocence in ways that made central her confinement to a separate domestic sphere, where, free from the vicious influence of the competitive business world, she could preserve the nation's moral values. Even Victorians who did not subscribe to the idea of the Angel in the House were attracted to the implicit ideal of woman's redemptive or salvatory potential⁸⁹.

Stickney Ellis described the angel ideal at work in the home: the man comes home from work, his mind confused, his integrity shaken; but he stands corrected before the clear eye of woman. This secret influence is like a second conscience. The humble monitor who guards the fireside, clothed in moral beauty, scatters the clouds of man's mental

⁸⁷ Tosh 27.

⁸⁸ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle-Class 1780-1850, Revised Edition (London: Routledge, 2002) 114.

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Langland, Anne Brontë: The Other One (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1989) 24.

vision, and makes him better and wiser⁹⁰. Virginia Woolf has given an excellent account of the ideal: the Angel in the House was,

intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily [...] – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all –I need not say it- she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty – her blushes, her great grace⁹¹.

To be a custodian of the moral flame, according to Victorian Angel ideology, was the chief practical duty of a wife; and the home was the first sphere for a woman's angelic mission. She was an agent of redemption⁹².

The harmful effect of the angel myth on women themselves had been examined by John Stuart Mill, who had seen through the myth altogether and had exposed it as a construct:

All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will and government by self-control, but submission and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegations of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections.

And these are the affections they are "allowed" to have – i.e. towards their husband and children⁹³.

⁹⁰ Ellis 53.

⁹¹ Virginia Woolf, "'Professions for Women' The Death of the Moth (1942)", Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader, ed. Mary Eagleton, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1996) 78.

⁹² Tosh 55.

⁹³ John Stuart Mill, On Liberty and the Subjection of Women, ed. Alan Ryan (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2006) 148.

Despite the pervasive Angel ideal, Victorians debated the nature and role of woman, in their treatises as well as their fiction. Mill argued that the natural differences between the sexes was “a subject on which it is impossible in the present state of society to obtain complete and correct knowledge – while almost everybody dogmatizes upon it [...]”⁹⁴. Preliminary knowledge is still crude and incomplete. “Medical practitioners” and “physicians” have ascertained, to an extent, “the differences in bodily constitution”. However, “respecting the mental characteristics of women, their observations are of no more worth than those of common men. It is a subject on which nothing can be known, so long as those who alone can really know it, women themselves, have given but little testimony, and that little, mostly suborned”. Few men have even “a tolerable knowledge of the character of the women in their own family”⁹⁵.

Women writers themselves probed the validity of the obvious and the commonsensical, and saw woman as a subject who could claim rights, and demand change. While mid-century feminists did not deny domestic ideology (but rather resorted to it, for a language within which to state their claim for citizenship⁹⁶) they did press for a place in the public sphere and did demand political rights. Barbara Leigh Bodichon, writing in 1866 in support of the women’s franchise, said that it was not true that women took no interest in the public sphere. What women wanted was to be “more direct and straightforward, in thought, word and deed”. On the subject of the fabled women’s influence, Bodichon asserted that there was no proven necessary connection between goodness and indirectness⁹⁷ (so that women would lose goodness if given direct power). Harriet Martineau’s disappointment was manifest when she said in 1855: “I have no vote at elections, though I am a tax-paying housekeeper and responsible citizen; and I regard the disability as an absurdity, seeing that I have for a long course of years influenced public affairs to an extent not professed or attempted by many men”⁹⁸.

As we shall see in the Agnes Grey chapter, one of the issues raised through spectacular beauty is the woman’s precarious position within marriage. The coquette’s

⁹⁴ Mill 156.

⁹⁵ Mill 157.

⁹⁶ Barbara Caine, Victorian Feminists (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) 41-42. Since they had very developed moral qualities, women argued that they could surely be trusted in the public sphere.

⁹⁷ Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, “Objections to the Enfranchisement of Women Considered (1866),” Victorian Women Writers Project, U of Indiana, 15 June 2008 <http://www.lettrs.indiana.edu/cgi-bin/vwwp-query>.

⁹⁸ Harriet Martineau, “The Woman Question (1855),” Harriet Martineau on Women, ed. Gayle Yates, The Douglass Series on Women’s Lives and the Meaning of Gender (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1985) 83.

story highlights a wife's vulnerability, and is aligned with those thinkers who managed to see things from the wife's point of view. Frances Power Cobbe had been outspoken in condemning the doctrine of coverture: "[b]y the Common Law of England", she explained, "a married woman has no legal existence, so far as property is concerned, independently of her husband. The husband and wife are assumed to be one person, and that person is the husband. The wife can make no contract, and can neither sue nor be sued". The law takes "no note" of husbands who are unable, "from fault or from misfortunes," to maintain their wives. And the law offers no help in cases of abuse or neglect; it sets up an ideal of perfect union; those who fall outside of it must do the best they can⁹⁹. With the right of divorce being severely limited¹⁰⁰, and with the husband having the right to chastise¹⁰¹ and rape his wife¹⁰², John Stuart Mill was not mistaken to conclude that marriage "is the only actual bondage known to our law. There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house"¹⁰³. As a result, the "vilest malefactor has some wretched woman tied to him, against whom he can commit any atrocity except killing her, and, if tolerably cautious, can do that without much danger of the legal penalty"¹⁰⁴.

Mill was enlightened enough to see a concern with beauty and personal appearance as a necessity for women, rather than merely frivolity or vanity. Since a woman entirely depends on her husband, Mill reasoned, and since all her social ambition

⁹⁹ Frances Power Cobbe, "Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors (1869)", Victorian Women Writers Project, U of Indiana, 15 June 2008, <http://www.letts.indiana.edu/cgi-bin/vwwp.-query.pl?type>.

¹⁰⁰ As Mary Lyndon Shanley explains, "[p]rior to the Divorce Act of 1857 the only way to end a marriage other than by ecclesiastical annulment was by private Act of Parliament, an extraordinarily complex and expensive procedure. Even under the Divorce Act, only if a husband was physically cruel, incestuous, or bestial in addition to being adulterous could his wife procure a divorce". Mary Lyndon Shanley, Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989) 9.

¹⁰¹ The husband's right to correct his wife physically ceased only with the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878. Shanley 169. Earlier, the rule that determined the issue was the so-called "rule of thumb," according to which it was lawful for a man to beat his wife, provided that the stick were no thicker than his thumb. Alison Diduck and Felicity Kaganas, Family Law, Gender and the State: Text, Cases and Materials 2nd ed. (Portland: Hart Publishing, 2006) 383. Even after the 1878 Act, "husbands remained immune from prosecution if they raped their wives and were still legally entitled to exercise a right of reasonable confinement". Diduck and Kaganas 384.

¹⁰² This "last bastion of husbands' legal sovereignty over their wives fell only relatively recently. It was only in 1991, in the case of *R v R (Rape: Marital Exemption)* that it was finally held without qualification that a husband could be convicted of raping his wife". Diduck and Kaganas 393.

¹⁰³ Mill 220.

¹⁰⁴ Mill 170.

can be obtained through him, “it would be a miracle if the object of being attractive to men had not become the polar star of feminine education and formation of character”¹⁰⁵. Florence Nightingale went further, and spoke for a woman’s right to a fuller emotional and erotic life. Any real attraction between a man and a woman is very difficult, argued Nightingale, “because there is so little choice, for there must be similarity of means and age. There must be acquaintance”¹⁰⁶. The sexual double standard completely ignores the desires of women: a seduced woman will be ostracised by society, while the seducer will be offered the drawing-rooms and society’s high-bred daughters. At the same time, society stimulates passions in men, for which only illegitimate satisfaction is allowed. “And we who are not ‘fallen women’ [...] what has mankind done for us? It has created wants which not only does not afford us the opportunity of satisfying, but which it compels us to disguise and deny. It affords us neither interest, nor affections, nor employment”¹⁰⁷.

Nightingale makes a strong demand for the enrichment of women’s lives; similarly to Mill, Power Cobbe and Martineau, she reacts against dominant constructions of womanhood. Another such strong reaction is depicted in Christina Rossetti’s Goblin Market.

Life-Giving Female Beauty and Eroticism

Goblin Market can easily be seen as a subversive text, which furthers an idea of female experience that will override attempts to contain it, or explain it alongside

¹⁰⁵ Mill 148.

¹⁰⁶ Florence Nightingale, Cassandra and Other Selections from Suggestions for Thought, ed. Mary Poovey (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1991) 144.

¹⁰⁷ Nightingale 129-30.

accepted limits and boundaries¹⁰⁸. The reading I am proposing here relates to the idea of a female-initiated sensuality, while not making any strong biographical claims.

To begin with biographical criticism, the erotic aspect of the poem has been related to some lost love in Rossetti's life, a view which now appears to be largely discredited. On the one hand, perhaps Rossetti's unhappy love life has been allowed to assume a "disproportionate influence" in the reading of her poetry, as Betty S. Flowers points out¹⁰⁹. On the other hand, it is virtually impossible to identify this "lost love". Lona Mosk Packer believes this man to have been William Bell Scott, who was married. In Goblin Market, therefore, Rossetti condemns sensuous passion¹¹⁰. Jerome McGann, however, points out that "informed scholars recognize the worthlessness of Packer's critical imaginations"¹¹¹ and calls the biographical searches for Rossetti's lost love "largely misguided". He proposes an approach which examines "the patterns of frustrated love as they appear in the works and the social and historical formations which those patterns dramatize"¹¹².

At all events, Rossetti seems to have been a religious and reclusive woman. For Cora Kaplan, she was "sexually uninitiated"¹¹³. Flowers calls her chaste, pious, quiet¹¹⁴.

¹⁰⁸ This poem is often read in religious and spiritual terms. Lizzie is a female Christ, and her actions are symbolic of the Eucharist. Lizzie willingly sacrifices herself as an innocent victim for the sake of her sister. Marilu Hill, "'Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me: Eucharist and the Erotic Body in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*,'" Victorian Poetry 43 (2005): 462. The poem has also been read as "a Christian allegory of temptation and redemption". Sean C. Grass, "Nature's Perilous Variety in Rossetti's 'Goblin Market,'" Nineteenth Century Literature 51 (1996): 356. Other readings discuss Goblin Market in relation to the market economy. According to Herbert F. Tucker, "[t]he readings of the poem that make the most comprehensive sense of its multiplex appeal are the ones that put the *market* back in Goblin Market". Tucker believes that Rossetti's masterpiece "reflects upon, and takes part in, systems of commodity exchange that during her lifetime transformed Victorian society [...]" Herbert F. Tucker, "Rossetti's *Goblin Marketing*: Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye," Representations 82 (2003): 117. Another view considers the poem "as a commentary on the nature of desire, and in relation to consumerism, vampirism and anorexia [...]". Betty S. Flowers, introduction, The Complete Poems, by Christina Rossetti (London: Penguin Books, 2001) xlv. It is also possible to see a lesbian passion between the girls, as Isobel Armstrong has pointed out. Isobel Armstrong, Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics (London: Routledge, 1993) 349, or read Goblin Market in terms of Rossetti's own sexual frustration. Hill mentions Ellen Moers and Germaine Greer who have focused on the poem "as an expression of Rossetti's unconscious and repressed sexuality". Hill 47.

¹⁰⁹ Flowers xlv-xlv.

¹¹⁰ Lona Mosk Packer, "Symbol and Reality in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*," PMLA 73 (1958): 384, 376.

¹¹¹ Jerome McGann, "Christina Rossetti's Poems: A New Edition and a Revaluation," Victorian Studies 23 (1980): 238.

¹¹² McGann 241.

However, that Rossetti was a chaste and pious woman does not necessarily mean that she was never concerned about matters relating to female, or human, sensuality. Work with the prostitutes and destitute women¹¹⁵ gave Rossetti “access to a uniquely feminocentric view of women’s sexuality and simultaneously opened her eyes to its problematic position in Victorian culture”¹¹⁶. Disruptive ideological discourses¹¹⁷ may emancipate a writer¹¹⁸ so that “a powerfully feminist and homoerotic poem can be written by a devout Victorian lady poet”¹¹⁹.

According to Isobel Armstrong, “[Rossetti] claimed, not only the freedom of the unmarried woman to express her sexuality, but also the freedom to be absurd, undignified, if feminine sexuality necessitated this”¹²⁰. According to Armstrong again, “[p]art of the secret of Goblin Market is the questioning feminine discourse it masks”¹²¹. One of the elements in play in the poem is “the harsh moral exclusion of the erotic”¹²². Is Goblin Market a biblical allegory of sin and redemption? It may be seen as such, but this is not the only way to see it¹²³. Goblin Market “continues to be the enigmatic core of Rossetti’s work”, Sean C. Grass has noted¹²⁴. This is because of its many-sidedness and

¹¹³ Cora Kaplan, “The Indefinite Disclosed: Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson,” Women Writing and Writing About Women, ed. Mary Jacobus, The Oxford Women’s Series (London: Croom Helm, 1979) 69.

¹¹⁴ Flowers xli.

¹¹⁵ Rossetti did volunteer work with prostitutes, homeless and destitute women at the St Mary Magdalene Home at Highgate; at some time in the late 1850s she became an associate of the order. Kathleen Jones, Learning Not To Be First: The Life of Christina Rossetti (Moreton-in-Marsh, UK: The Windrush Press, 1991) 101.

¹¹⁶ Mary Wilson Carpenter, “‘Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me’: The Consumable Female Body in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’”, Victorian Poetry 21 (1991): 417.

¹¹⁷ Such as texts on women’s mission to women produced by the Oxford Movement.

¹¹⁸ Wilson Carpenter 418. The feelings in Rossetti’s poetry represent her other, true self. “This other self had passionate sexual feelings awakened [as Jones believes] by her love affair with Collinson, which were denied any outlet”. Jones 92.

¹¹⁹ Wilson Carpenter 419.

¹²⁰ The reference is to Rossetti’s Monna Innominata but there is no reason why it should not apply to Goblin Market as well. Armstrong 344.

¹²¹ Armstrong 347.

¹²² Armstrong 349.

¹²³ “In other poems Rossetti utilized individual types of fruit as symbolic of sin and temptation [...] but here the forbidden fruit is not of any single type. [...] Rossetti could certainly have made use of the single tempting fruit here, had the poem been intended as a simple Genesis allegory. Besides, there is no ‘unique Satan’ but a variety of goblin men forms” Grass 363. The poem intervenes to prevent the reader from accepting that Laura becomes a fallen woman when she takes the goblin fruit. Mc Gann 253. Laura does not immediately suffer any consequences for her transgression, and is not burdened by any feeling of guilt. The results of her experience with the goblins “mark the poem’s most significant departure from the Genesis story”. Grass 369.

¹²⁴ Grass 357.

unpredictability – both characteristics of powerful art as Stephen Greenblatt points out¹²⁵. Goblin Market offers a vantage point from which to view Rossetti's culture, a vantage point she may or may not have considered herself or, as it seems better to say, a vantage point she may not have considered to be the only or dominant one. Perhaps the poem is primarily about the Eucharist, or about the destruction of fruit crops in the year in which it was written¹²⁶. But, in my view, it is also about the anomalous position of women inside the Victorian sexual economy. The loss of beauty is synonymous in the poem with the restriction of desire; the return of beauty with female initiative and female erotic assertion; beauty's body as an erotic and healing surface.

Victorian women's poetry was fraught with social and sexual anxieties¹²⁷. Women had to exist within a male articulation of their sensuality and sexuality. The goblins are men made incomprehensible to women, deformed men. The goblins "are not entirely supernatural beings," says Grass¹²⁸. The sisters are close to nature, they are humanity; the goblins are twisted humanity, sub-human rather than inhuman. Their nature has been twisted by patriarchal ideology into something so sinister as to appear monstrous. McGann also sees the goblins as expressing a sort of transformation effected on human males when he says, "we see why the only men in the story are goblin men: the narrative means to suggest, indirectly, that the men of the world have become these merchants and are appropriately represented as goblins [...]"¹²⁹.

Laura and Lizzie seem to be whole before coming in touch with goblinized sensuality. Their home is a nest (l. 185, 198) where they sleep together "[l]ike two pigeons" (l. 185)¹³⁰. Lizzie's work is related to both nature and nurture (l. 205). What is sinister in the fruit is probably the (male) mediation of the goblins; the suspect manner of

¹²⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, "Culture," Critical Terms for Literary Study, eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1990) 231.

¹²⁶ "In the spring of 1859 Britain seemed likely to grow precious little fruit in the coming season," says Richard Menke (108). A frost had brought premature destruction to blossoms and fruits (107). The unhappy condition of British fruit trade in 1859 when the poem (or at least its most important draft) was completed, must have informed Goblin Market. "If the inventory of fruit in the poem seems dreamlike in its intense physicality, the reasons may be legitimately historical" (109). See Richard Menke, "The Political Economy of Fruit: *Goblin Market*," The Culture of Christina Rossetti, eds. Mary Arseneau et al. (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1999).

¹²⁷ Angela Leighton, "'Because men made the laws': The Fallen Woman and the Woman Poet," New Casebooks: Victorian Women Poets ed. Joseph Bristow (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995) 234.

¹²⁸ Grass 365.

¹²⁹ McGann 248-49.

¹³⁰ References to Goblin Market come from Christina Rossetti, The Complete Poems, ed. Betty S. Flowers (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

cultivation, the naming – “Plump unpecked cherries” (l. 7); “Bloom-down-cheeked peaches” (l. 9); “Pomegranates full and fine” (l.21) and so on. If the fruit represents sensuality, the goblins act only as conduits of that sensuality, they do not create it. Sensuality is the essence of the fruit, the produce of Mother-Earth. The goblins intervene through culture. Laura’s feast with the goblins has been seen by Grass as her assimilation into a nature devoid of moral meaning,¹³¹ yet the fruit do not connote nature only, because it has been cultivated through artificial means. The fruits “all ripen in the same season, like hothouse fruits”¹³².

The fruit of the goblins is male-constructed female sensuality. This is why Laura withers; she has to experience her sensuality within male constraints, definitions, and forms. The goblins not only intervene to transform female sensuality, but can withhold the experience if they so wish. “Must she then buy no more such dainty fruit?” (l. 257). A woman must deny her desires, or learn to accommodate them within male-constructed and thus alien structures.

To be content, a woman better stay dormant; better not take “a Peep at the Goblins”¹³³. Rossetti is clear on how much this is costing a woman. Laura sits up in bed “in a passionate yearning,/ And gnashed her teeth for baulked desire, and wept [...]” (l. 264-67). Laura feels “exceeding pain” (l. 271), her hair grows “gray” (l. 277) and she dwindles as her “fire” burns away (l. 278-80). Beauty and sensuality are linked, and are part of (woman’s) nature. Beauty is the blood-price Laura has to pay as she is being denied her own sensual desires. Within social structures, sensuality for the woman belongs to the realm of the forbidden, and involves pain and denial, even death¹³⁴.

With her boldness and decisiveness, Lizzie repossesses feminine sensuality. It is important that she does not take the fruit itself, but the juice of the fruit. Lizzie “laughed in heart to feel the drip/ Of juice that syruped all her face,/ And lodged in dimples of her chin [...]” (l. 433-35). She takes the essence behind manufactured sensuality; the essential “other” sensuality. Goblin Market affirms “the power and self-sufficiency of a

¹³¹ Grass 366.

¹³² Hill 460. As Menke mentions, the nineteenth century British scientists and horticulturalists cultivated foreign plants in the gardens and houses of Britain, creating a reality reminiscent of the goblin world. Menke 111.

¹³³ The poem’s original title; Rossetti’s brother Dante Gabriel substituted the title we have now. Rossetti approved of the Goblin Market title as “greatly improved”. Note by Christina Rossetti, in Rossetti 884.

¹³⁴ There is little doubt that the fruit and goblin men are allegorical ways to speak about sensuality and sexual experience: Jeanie, who has also tasted the fruit, “... should have been a bride;/ But who for joys brides hope to have/ Fell sick and died [...]” (l. 313-15).

feminine community and the feminine imagination”¹³⁵. Laura’s love-feast on Lizzie’s fruit-drenched body is, according to Hill, an “overtly homoerotic” scene, in which several critics “have seen [...] a revolutionary depiction on the part of Rossetti of the power of ‘sisterhood’ including what Mary Wilson Carpenter calls ‘a uniquely feminocentric view of women’s sexuality’ where ‘salvation is to be found not in controlling [female] appetite but in turning to another woman’”¹³⁶. The female body regenerates; Laura is restored to health and desire¹³⁷. The ensuing fire and illness may be taken to symbolize the difficulty of translating into female terms what has been a rigidly male configuration.

In the end, Lizzie and Laura must conventionally marry; however, there are important ways in which the girls successfully make sensuality a primarily female experience. Hill points out that the return of Laura’s bloom makes a claim for the redemptive quality of the proper satisfaction of desire¹³⁸. Beauty is an expression of sensuality, and rightfully returns to the woman herself. Rossetti “celebrates the female spectator, and the redemptive function of woman as spectacle,” argues Lorraine Janzen Kooistra¹³⁹. In fact, Janzen Kooistra has noted that Lizzie’s offering of herself is sacrificial rather than erotic¹⁴⁰ and how “Goblin Market’s illustrations have often undermined [the] exemplary representation of female power and returned Rossetti’s hero to her cultural position as erotic icon”¹⁴¹. Sexist and manipulative illustrations aside, Lizzie’s status as an erotic icon need not necessarily disturb feminist critics. Lizzie is an erotic icon for the exclusive viewing of Laura: “Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices/ [...] Eat me, drink me, love me;/ Laura make much of me [...]” (l. 468, l. 471-72). The erotic tones of the scene refer to Laura’s salvation. Laura can be saved only because Lizzie’s beauty is eroticized. As Ronald D. Morrison says, this is a poem which celebrates feminine sexuality¹⁴².

¹³⁵ Morrison 1.

¹³⁶ Hill 466.

¹³⁷ Wilson Carpenter 415-416. In Goblin Market, says Carpenter, we find a radical female subjectivity, where “the female body is represented as the object of a female gaze”. Wilson Carpenter 418. This is paralleled with a hymn to St Anne, from the All Saints Cofraternity for Girls and Young Women, where the gaze is explicitly constructed between two feminine subjects. Wilson Carpenter 424-25.

¹³⁸ Hill 470.

¹³⁹ Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, “Visualizing the Fantastic Subject: Goblin Market and the Gaze,” The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts, eds. Mary Arseneau et al. (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1999) 139.

¹⁴⁰ Kooistra 162.

¹⁴¹ Kooistra 165.

¹⁴² Morrison 6.

Rossetti envisioned “a female subjectivity encompassing action, desire, knowledge and power”¹⁴³. Laura and Lizzie produce children and are themselves heads of the household. The concept of marriage, even a marriage of convenience, has been “completely feminized”¹⁴⁴. Rossetti offers “a female economics” that could serve as a prototype for twentieth century feminists¹⁴⁵. Goblin Market has the potential for accommodating women happily within its structure in a way not possible under Victorian patriarchy¹⁴⁶. Besides, we are not told that the children of Laura and Lizzie are all girls. The gender of the children is not specified – and perhaps this is because gender does not matter at this juncture. Strict patriarchal conventions are damaging to both men and women. Patriarchal rigidity is not less damaging to men than it is to women.

In sum, Goblin Market argues for the existence of a principle of female sensuality of which women were aware and with which they perhaps wished they were more comfortable. This is an argument the figure of the coquette also engages with, and expands upon. Laura’s radiance is produced by the juice Laura gathers on her body, and it signifies the transformation of male-constructed female sensuality to genuinely female sensuality. The beautiful, coquettish woman is a key figure in exploring Victorian culture in this manner. Critics have pointed out how interest in clothing and fashion was not condemned in the monolithic way Lucy Snowe and Agnes Grey would have us believe. Attention to fashion and to one’s own beauty and figure in the Victorian age is now being read as a sign of individuality and a way for self-expression¹⁴⁷.

Further, coquetry facilitates a bond between women which transposes questions pertaining to the individual woman to the space of a female community. Spectacular beauty and coquetry can emerge as a space where the personalities of different women interact productively, as in the illustration “Dresses, Table and Jewel Case,” from a nineteenth century issue of Harper’s Bazaar (see fig. 1). The illustration refers to the idea of beauty and fashion as an aspect of feminine identity, and also points towards an idea of a community of women understanding and appreciating each other, which we will also

¹⁴³ Kooistra 142.

¹⁴⁴ McGann 248.

¹⁴⁵ Elizabeth Campbell, “Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*”, Victorian Studies 33 (1990): 394.

¹⁴⁶ Campbell 398.

¹⁴⁷ Victorian women dressed not only for men, but also for themselves. Steele, Fashion and Eroticism 143. Dress was seen as “the speech of the body”. Mary Haweis, The Art of Beauty (New York, 1878) 17. For Haweis, says Marcus, women’s clothing was a form of “individual aesthetic expression”. Through fashion, women developed “the kind of restricted autonomy associated with liberal subjectivity”. Marcus, Between Women 143.

find in Dickens and Eliot. In the Harper's Bazaar illustration, the beautiful coquette and her vanity table are placed in the foreground and in fact take up half of the space. The beautiful woman is more individualized, and stands out among the rest. Beauty gives her identity, and she is a stronger presence than the other women. Notably, she is not looking inside the mirror in a way which would satisfy the male spectator's desire to look at women during their private moments. Surveying nudes in European oil painting, John Berger points out that in Bronzino's *The Allegory of Time*, the body of the woman is arranged in the way it is to display it to the man looking at the picture. "This picture is made to appeal to *his* sexuality. It has nothing to do with her sexuality [...] Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own"¹⁴⁸. Berger also notes that "the absurdity of this male flattery reached its peak in the public academic art of the nineteenth century"¹⁴⁹. Our Harper's Bazaar illustration has no male "sexual protagonist"¹⁵⁰ to view the picture from an external position of dominance. The beautiful woman is thoughtful, and is looking at her brush; her luxuriant hair is not held in check by pins, but is decorated with flowers. Nature and culture blend in the jewel-case which is also decorated with flowers. This is an eroticized space¹⁵¹; what is most interesting in this picture is the attitude of the other women, who surround the spectacular girl in a circle of inclusion.

¹⁴⁸ John Berger, Ways of Seeing (London: The British Broadcasting Corporation; Penguin Books, 1972) 55. Emphasis original.

¹⁴⁹ Berger 57.

¹⁵⁰ Term borrowed from Berger 56.

¹⁵¹ As Casey Finch has noted. Casey Finch, "'Hooked and Buttoned Together': Victorian Underwear and Representations of the Female Body," Victorian Studies 34 (1991): 355. According to Finch, in the pre-modern period the female body was a "natural" source of abundance. In the Victorian period, however, the body became an elusive source of signs. These signs left an erotic residue on the objects they occupied. The body was articulated as an elusive site of dispersed significations. "Truth became covert. [...] A genuinely modern and illicit form of secrecy had emerged". Finch 359.



Fig. 1. "Dresses, Table and Jewel Case". Harper's Bazaar (12 Sept. 1885) 597.

Though the two figures on the left hand corner seem to be moving outside of the circle, they may equally be changing their position by reason of their being in conversation (the figure on the edge is not moving at all, and the other figure is turning to speak). The figure who is helping the spectacular woman with her toilette is probably not a servant but a friend. The woman in the middle seems to be looking directly at the spectator outside the picture; her expression is pleased and challenging. The female gaze and challenge are linked. Women's looking sometimes challenges male cultural hegemony; visual experience may allow the woman to exercise her mental faculties beyond their usual limitations. Viewing can allow for mental and spatial freedom¹⁵².

Consequently, the challenging look from the woman in the middle may be making a claim for a female-dominated discourse on beauty. So far, the discourse on beauty has been male-dominated: women are angels (innocent beauty) or fallen (bewitching, dangerous beauty). Women are sexually anaesthetic or suffering from some sort of nymphomania. The vain coquette in Victorian literature undermines the male-dominated discourse on beauty, because she belongs to a discourse on beauty which is female-dominated. It is a discourse that speaks of a woman's pleasure in being beautiful, in being looked at, and in being playful, sensual, and erotic. This is beauty translated into female terms; it is no longer an instance of domination, but an instance of pleasure – the

¹⁵² And the limitless gaze is equated with "masculine prerogatives". Jane Kromm, "Visual Culture and Scopic Custom in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26 (1998): 371-72.

pleasure a woman takes in her own image. Pleasure and image are, at the same time, ratified by other women

This image presents a female space which defines beauty and ornament as active, not passive, because they are produced by, and for, women. In this sense, it may be a utopian space, and does not exist in the novels discussed in the thesis. What both the illustration and the novels participate in is a discourse where beauty and a healthy discussion of women's problems are combined and co-exist. But while the illustration offers a smooth resolution (these women exist independently of male spectators, and enjoy their physicality and physical proximity) the novels offer fruitful discussion, assessment and grounds for thought. In both illustration and novels, however, the discourse of female beauty is proximate to the discourse of female identity, an identity which is achieved through collective female effort.

Intriguingly, there is no reflection in the coquette's mirror in the Harper's Bazaar illustration. The mirror can sometimes be seen as personifying patriarchy. In their classic discussion of the fairy-tale of Snow-White, Gilbert and Gubar wrote of the voice inside the stepmother's looking-glass being "the king's – he is the patriarchal voice that rules the Queen's (and every woman's) self-evaluation"¹⁵³. The women in the illustration seem to be enjoying what they are doing for its own sake. To repeat Marcus, fashion was a way for women to enjoy femininity --looking at other women, and being looked at by them¹⁵⁴. The gathering here gives the women the opportunity for conversation, and engagement with each other – in short, for the pleasures of female community.

A Note on Class and Chronology

The Victorian period on which this thesis concentrates is the mid-Victorian period, especially this period as experienced by the middle class in society. The middle class is not only the class portrayed in the novels featured in the thesis, it is also the class which propounded the angel ideal for women,¹⁵⁵ dominated society, culture and conceptions of Englishness,¹⁵⁶ and located woman's place in the household, at the centre of the family,¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 38.

¹⁵⁴ Marcus 117.

¹⁵⁵ Elizabeth Langland, Domestic Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995) 41.

¹⁵⁶ Sean Purchase, "Class", "Gender", Key Concepts in Victorian Literature, Palgrave Key Concepts: Literature (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 24, 74.

¹⁵⁷ Susan Johnston, Women and Domestic Experience in Victorian Political Fiction, Contributions in Women's Studies (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001) 1. One

for “[b]ourgeois respectability required that women live in a state of social and economic dependence on men [...]”¹⁵⁸. This is the class which maintained that the purity of domestic life depended on woman being sexually pure, the home itself being a sanctuary and a haven which ensured feminine purity¹⁵⁹. The thesis looks at how coquetry revises and assesses mid-Victorian middle-class proper womanhood ideals; how coquetry embodies an anxiety over the way these ideals worked upon the women who had to arrange their lives in conformity to them.

For Kelly Boyd, the mid-Victorian period begins in 1848¹⁶⁰, while Robin Gilmour ends the early Victorian period with the Great Exhibition in 1851¹⁶¹. Generally, the mid-Victorian period is thought to stretch into the mid-1870s¹⁶². What interests me more than strict chronology are the specific characteristics of this period: “increasing prosperity and middle-class confidence”¹⁶³; “a time of balance, which to many middle-class observers [...] was a sign of the [...] healthy naturalness of a widely shared moral code based on work, duty, earnestness and the sanctity of the domestic affections. The period of 20 or so years is the high noon of Victorian optimism [...]”¹⁶⁴. It was a period of “crucial intellectual and cultural developments”¹⁶⁵, with the 1850s and 1860s seeing “the emergence of the first women’s movement in Britain”¹⁶⁶, and a time when “the self-image acceptable exception to the general rule was the (public) philanthropic sphere; see, for example, Davidoff and Hall 171, 313. “Occasionally, [middle-class] women were able to turn [their formidable organizational skills] and energy into publicly recognized philanthropy using organizing techniques and business routines picked up from their close association with the family business and various male relatives and friends”. As Davidoff and Hall put it, there was a “hidden world” of charity affairs women were involved in (313).

¹⁵⁸ Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair Public Lives: Women, Family and Society in Victorian Britain (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003) 167.

¹⁵⁹ Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) 33-34.

¹⁶⁰ Kelly Boyd and Rohan McWilliam, “Introduction: Rethinking the Victorians,” The Victorian Studies Reader, eds. Kelly Boyd and Rohan McWilliam, Routledge Readers in History (London: Routledge, 2007) 3.

¹⁶¹ Robin Gilmour, The Novel in the Victorian Age: A Modern Introduction (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd, 1986) 4.

¹⁶² Boyd and McWilliam 3; Gilmour 4.

¹⁶³ Boyd and McWilliam 3.

¹⁶⁴ Gilmour 4. Stickney Ellis described in 1839 the middle-class as “the pillar of our nation’s strength”. The nobility were the country’s “rich and highly ornamental capital,” the poor “important” and “laborious” (Ellis, Women of England 14). But, it was “the minor morals of domestic life which give the tone to English character; [...] over this sphere of duty it is [the woman’s] peculiar province to preside” (Ellis, Women of England 39).

¹⁶⁵ Boyd and McWilliam 3; for example Charles Darwin’s Origin of Species and Mill’s On Liberty.

¹⁶⁶ Barbara Caine, English Feminism 1780-1980 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 88.

of the middle-class was consistently domestic”¹⁶⁷. It is my purpose to examine thoughts on women’s sexuality before patriarchy was overtly and outspokenly challenged, before the crumbling of “[t]raditional social, political and gendered hierarchies,”¹⁶⁸ before the advent of the New Women who, “[s]moking, cycling, defiant and desiring” were studied and satirized, and took many forms, but were nonetheless “united in their belief in the autonomy of women and in the need for social and political reform”¹⁶⁹.

Though the Harper’s Bazaar illustration discussed above is a later work, I have used it specifically because it seemed to me to gather into itself a number of elements discussed in this thesis, and can be very well described as a pictorial/ visual exposition of the function of coquetry as discussed here. Other than that, the specific Victorian period I am looking into is the mid-Victorian period.

Chapter Outline

I have divided this thesis into five main chapters, each of which examines a different aspect of the coquette’s function in investigating Victorian gender arrangements.

I begin, in Chapter 1, with Charlotte Brontë’s Villette, to argue that the figure of Ginevra Fanshawe links woman’s beauty, talent in music and love of fashion with an irreverence of men and a questioning of Victorian gender codes. The chapter on Villette shows how coquetry highlights the prejudicial way women had to learn to interpret a woman’s beauty, music and questioning as invalid, inferior, and dismissible. Playful beauty in Villette, argues the first chapter, is a method of juxtaposing antithetical explanations of the female experience so that, ultimately, it becomes a discourse of its own. Beauty’s body re-inserts into the text elements which dominant gender ideology would expel, or render invisible.

¹⁶⁷ Tosh 78.

¹⁶⁸ Angelique Richardson, Love and Eugenics: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) vii.

¹⁶⁹ Angelique Richardson, introduction, Women Who Did: Stories By Men and Women 1890-1914, (London: Penguin Books, 2005) xxxiii. In 1888 Mona Caird was able to protest “against the careless use of the words ‘human nature’ and especially ‘woman’s nature’. History will show us, if anything will, that human nature has an apparently limitless adaptability, and that therefore no conclusions can be built upon special manifestations which may at any time be developed”. Mona Caird, “Marriage (1888)”, “Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors”: Victorian Writing by Women on Women, ed. Susan Hamilton (Ontario, Can.: broadview press Ltd, 1995) 271. Caird believed that even the quality of virtue did not arise “from a sense of self-respect in woman, but from the fact of the subjection to man”. It has attained its present authority, she said, through man’s “monopolizing jealousy”, his desire to consider woman as his “exclusive property”. Caird 278.

Chapter 2, on Anne Brontë's Agnes Grey, gives a darker picture of the fate of playful womanhood within rigid domestic ideals. That is, Agnes Grey foregrounds domestic ideology's capacity of annihilating everything that is erotic, self-loving and spirited in woman. In Villette, the erotic and the more conventionally-minded are capable of existing side by side. In Agnes Grey conventionality can exist only if it silences female eroticism. The novel suggests that domesticity can triumph only if it ignores a woman's plight within an abusive marriage, only if spectacular beauty is subjected to a relentless patriarchal stare and buried within layers of narration and ideology. Anne Brontë, the chapter argues, uses coquetry to express her concern over the prejudicial, forceful and inadequate manner in which the abuse of women is made invisible by domesticity.

The thesis turns, in Chapter 3, to David Copperfield. This chapter suggests that what is achieved through the female author's strategies in the Brontë novels (i.e. a subversive, female-centred interrogation of Victorian gender ideology) is achieved by Charles Dickens in his depiction of a female community in David Copperfield. The novel is an instance of how female sensuality can be disciplined into conformity; yet, an alternative, female-centred story develops through the spectacular woman's story, creating a space where women can exist in society surmounting categories, labels and accepted patterns of behaviour

Chapter 4 is similar to the third chapter, suggesting that George Eliot in Middlemarch imagines an affinity between women, which allows them to exit the cul-de-sac of strict convention. In doing so, the subtle third-person narrator examines the essence/otherness dialectic. It is the relationship between the spectacular woman and the novel's female protagonist which achieves this. While the Brontë novels show the prejudicial way in which certain forms of female existence were labelled as otherness, and express concern over this, Eliot shows that essence and otherness are proximate when it comes to women, and can be used to construct a critical, and positive, view of women's lives.

Chapter 5, on Great Expectations, is exceptional in this thesis, because it concerns itself with a spectacular woman who is the novel's protagonist (though she exists within a network of other women characters) rather than a secondary figure, and who does not enjoy her own sensuality, beauty, and appeal. Yet, I have decided to include this novel, because I believe that in Pip a form of masculinity is developed that accepts a woman's sensual power and is therefore also subversive of strict domestic ideals. Great Expectations is a feminist novel, not only in foregrounding the woman's story (the tracing

of Estella's troubled adulthood to her childhood in the hands of Miss Havisham, her plight as an orphan narrated by Mr Jagger) but also in depicting a male hero who refuses to construct female sexual power as anything other than potent and appealing. This gives the thesis a wider perspective, as it includes the instance of a liberating male stare, which is worth exploring.

The thesis sees coquettish beauty as a forum for discussion and reads coquettish figures not as examples of female frivolity, but as a way for authors to engage seriously with assumptions, limitations and stereotypes that beset Victorian definitions of womanhood. Coquettes in Victorian literature are read in this thesis as features of a discursive exploration of female belonging and experience.

Chapter 1

Ginevra Fanshawe in Charlotte Brontë's Villette.

Initially, Ginevra Fanshawe was seen by critics as frivolous and silly¹⁷⁰, a source of fascination for Lucy, which soon fades from the narrative¹⁷¹. In fact, Ginevra is with Lucy from the start of her Villette adventure (it is Ginevra who actually suggests Mme Beck's pensionnat as a possible destination for Lucy) and remains Lucy's friend until the end of the novel. Therefore, it was also possible for critics to see Ginevra as an aspect of Lucy¹⁷², and one way for the text to illuminate the repression Lucy performs upon her

¹⁷⁰ The epithet Tony Tanner uses repeatedly for Ginevra is "empty": she is "empty" (Tony Tanner, introduction, Villette, by Charlotte Brontë (London: Penguin Books, 1979) 21), also "physically substantial but empty", "satiated but empty", with "no real feelings for people (Tanner 17-18). For Helene Moglen, Ginevra is a "thoughtless doll". Helene Moglen, "Villette: the Romantic Experience as Psychoanalysis," New Casebooks: Villette, ed. Pauline Nestor, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992) 25. Kate Millett calls her an "idiotic beauty" (Kate Millett, "Sexual Politics in Villette," New Casebooks: Villette, ed. Pauline Nestor, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992) 33) who is "too silly" to be loved by anyone (Millett 34). For Terry Eagleton, she is a "coquette," and thereby an "empty-headed Society flirt". Terry Eagleton, "Myths of Power in Villette," New Casebooks: Villette, ed. Pauline Nestor, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992) 115. The writer of an unsigned review published in The Eclectic Review in March 1853, saw Ginevra as "a sort of Cleopatra in her way, selfish and sensuous and equally destitute of faith and feeling". Unsigned review, "Eclectic Review, March 1853," The Brontës: The Critical Heritage, ed. Miriam Allott, The Critical Heritage Series (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) 195-96.

¹⁷¹ Lucy transcends her relationship with Ginevra, says Millett; Ginevra herself "fades into the mere butterfly that she is and disappears from the book". Millett 34.

¹⁷² She is a conduit through which Lucy releases "some hidden androgynous aspect of her personality". Moglen 17-18. Through the other women in the text, Lucy both defines and fails to recognize herself, says Mary Jacobus. Lucy is an "alien, ex-centric self which no image can mirror". Mary Jacobus, "Feminism and Romanticism in Villette," New Casebooks: Villette, ed. Pauline Nestor, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992) 130-31. Ginevra "best embodies Lucy's attraction to self-indulgence and freedom". Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000) 409-10. Lucy is, at once, Polly and Ginevra, the nun and Madame Beck. Ginevra is Lucy's "potential gaiety". Gilbert and Gubar 412-13. Characters echo each other in Villette, and Lucy and Ginevra are identified in several respects. Lucy masters Ginevra by feigning indifference; this rivets Ginevra's desires on her. Rivalry becomes a contagion which cannot be controlled, as Lucy competes with Dr John for Ginevra, sees Ginevra as a rival, but also uses her intimacy with Ginevra to make Dr John jealous. John Kucich, Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Charles Dickens (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987) 107-08.

feelings and desires¹⁷³. A recent critical work on Ginevra is that of Anna Krugovoy Silver, who has seen her as an embodiment of vital womanhood¹⁷⁴, which is used to criticize Victorian gender codes, and to show Lucy's partial acceptance of sensuality. Further, Ginevra is seen as part of the text's critique of Victorian conventional attitudes. In relation to Dr John, "Ginevra rejects [his] tendency to idealize her, on the one hand, and restrain her, on the other. Though no rebel against Victorian gender discourse, she nevertheless finds those codes stifling"¹⁷⁵.

This chapter shall argue that there is an additional feature to the critique of Victorian gender codes effected by Ginevra; Brontë uses her to fabricate a space which shows the forceful way in which discipline is imposed upon woman's sensuality, love of display, and artistic talent; a space which keeps all those elements alive inside the narrative, albeit in a clandestine manner. Treatment of Ginevra by the author and the other characters reveals that the drawbacks to Victorian gender ideology which she highlights are drawbacks women had to learn to translate into personal, or gender-related, failings, and which they had to learn not to see as drawbacks to dominant ideals. Ginevra becomes a contested site involving contradictory discourses, for she is also a way for the author to acknowledge the failure of societal/ conventional morality norms to cater adequately for the female experience.

¹⁷³Lucy and repression is an often discussed topic. For example, Athena Vrettos has seen the containers Lucy uses (boxes, drawers, etc.) as spaces which embody her "systematic acts of sexual, emotional and physical repression", but which also allow her to "organize and corporealize her psyche when it is threatened by nervous disorder". Athena Vrettos, "From Neurosis to Narrative: The Private Life of the Nerves in *Villette* and *Daniel Deronda*," *Victorian Studies* 33 (1990): 563. Further, the burying of Dr John's letters is called by Joseph A. Boone, a "symbolic act of self-repression". Lucy feels "the necessity of disciplining her own wayward and perhaps sinful desires; hence her decision to bury her treasured letters from Dr John on the very spot where the nun was interred, "for a sin against her vow; a sexual punishment". Joseph A. Boone, "Depolicing *Villette*: Surveillance, Invisibility and the Female Erotics of 'Heretic Narrative'," *NOVEL: A Forum in Fiction* 26 (1992): 27. In *Villette*, says Sally Shuttleworth, Brontë focuses on the "subtle area" of "neurosis". Lucy evades and withholds. She is subject to hallucinations, and undergoes a total nervous collapse. Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth Century Literature and Culture Ser. 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 219. On the subject of Ginevra and Lucy's repressive tendencies, Millett says that Lucy has a masculine lust for Ginevra, which she manages to outgrow. Millett 34. At the same time, the school-play gives Lucy an opportunity to experience some of those desires she learns to repress. During the performance, with its confusion of sex roles, Lucy "brilliantly enacts the initiative, the competitiveness, the courtship, the wit and the power which are denied her by her social status and gender". Silver 92-93.

¹⁷⁴ Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 110.

¹⁷⁵ Krugovoy Silver 115.

Charlotte Brontë in this chapter is not constructed as Lucy Snowe, one of her creations she would criticize, and would not seem to identify with¹⁷⁶. Rather than claiming that Lucy Snowe “is” Charlotte Brontë, and therefore that Lucy’s viewpoint is definitive and the authoritative viewpoint inside the text, it might be more fruitful to ask why is Lucy constructed as she is – observant, yet often prejudiced; her vision inclusive¹⁷⁷, yet distorted. We might try and examine the various characters and how they interact with each other; and the way the text explains, comments on, reveals or conceals this interaction. Also, we might like to consider what the characters say for themselves, and how the text posits what they are saying.

This chapter shall first explain the form of social criticism contained in the figure of Ginevra Fanshawe, and the ways this criticism is upheld by the text. Then, it shall focus on one of those ways –the Ginevra/Lucy dialectic—to indicate the subtle exposition of disciplining and resistance it embodies. The chapter closes with a section explaining the ways Ginevra’s resistance to disciplining is constituted as a valid and integral part of Villette.

Artistic Talent

Ginevra Fanshawe is the belle of the ball on the night of the fete; she lives “her full life in a ballroom¹⁷⁸” (212). Apart from being an excellent actress, she is also a talented musician, continuing her music lessons until the end of her school career. However, Lucy consistently views Ginevra’s artistic skills with contempt and scorn, methodically presenting Ginevra as unfit for the demands of domesticity so that, by the end of the novel, we need no hint from Lucy to interpret the description of Ginevra as an “accomplished and promising” music pupil (572) ironically and pejoratively.

Conversely, Josef Emanuel (M. Paul’s brother) is praised for his talent for and devotion to music and becomes a music master, to whom Lucy scornfully compares Ginevra (400). This is clearly an illustration of the common Victorian belief that a woman’s musical skill was inferior to that of a man¹⁷⁹. Possibilities of a career in music

¹⁷⁶ For details on the Lucy Snowe/ Charlotte Brontë relationship see page 60 and footnote 24.

¹⁷⁷ Millett has called her “a pair of eyes watching society: weighing, ridiculing, judging”. Millett 33.

¹⁷⁸ All quotations from Villette are taken from Charlotte Brontë, Villette, ed. Mark Lilly (London: Penguin Books, 1979).

¹⁷⁹ “Women might pursue music as an accomplishment, but it was taken for granted that they were incapable of any serious attainment, particularly as composers”.

were small for women,¹⁸⁰ and women performers were generally disapproved of¹⁸¹. By regarding Ginevra—the talented music pupil—as silly and indolent, Lucy lends these notions moral authority.

However, Villette goes further than echoing a condemnation of a woman's artistic skill. This is only the surface reading of Ginevra and the way Lucy perceives her musical talents. Villette uses this form of condemnation to posit a woman's perception of female art as fractured and problematic, and sets out an idea of a woman's art as an exuberant expression of the female self. There is enough evidence in the text to show that Ginevra's

Nicholas Temperley, "The Lost Chord," Victorian Studies 30 (1986):17. There were widening educational opportunities, and "the Royal Academy of Music, chartered in 1839, became a haven for women musicians, who were admitted in certain classes, if not all". Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, "Introduction," Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition 1150-1950, eds. Jane Bower and Judith Tick (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1986) 7. However, traditional opposition to women musicians was strong, and musical creativity was seen as a masculine prerogative. Bowers and Tick 8. Distinguished women musicians were "too few to change the general societal view of the woman as amateur" Jane A. Bernstein, "'Shout, Shout, Up with Your Song!' Dame Ethel Smyth and the Changing Role of the British Woman Composer," Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition 1150-1950, eds. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1986) 307. An outstanding exception to this was composer Ethel Smyth who, nevertheless, "throughout her life struggled" against the dictum that "her status as a woman [meant that she remain] an amateur performer or composer of parlour music". Bernstein 307.

¹⁸⁰ Newspapers and music journals refused to credit women musicians with the ability of creating anything of any importance. Sophie Fuller, "'Cribbed, cabin'd and confined': Female Musical Creativity in Victorian Fiction", The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction, eds. Sophie Fuller and Nicky Losseff (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004) 29-30. If those real-life women musicians turned to fiction, they would find a similar message. Contemporary fiction reinforced the belief that women's musical creativity was necessarily limited, and that women were unable to work with "conscious artistic deliberation" Fuller 54.

¹⁸¹ This would involve a career in drama, as well as in music. "For the middle classes, an acting career [for their daughters] was a version of The Fall from virtue. Daughters were forced to hide their dramatic inclinations from their families, and in many cases to sever all familial connections when they embarked on an acting career". Tracy C. Davis, Actresses as Working Women: their Social Identity in Victorian Culture, Gender in Performance (London: Routledge, 1991) 72. Throughout the nineteenth century, the popular association between actresses and prostitutes endured. Davis 100. The stage was "the least acceptable" of the artistic professions. Christopher Kent, "Image and Reality: the Actress in Society," A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977) 95. When Mrs Kendall remarked, as late as 1884, that an actor could now be considered a gentleman, while young women could turn with relief from the position of governess to an honourable career on the stage, her claims "were scornfully dismissed by F.C. Burnard, the old Etonian editor of *Punch*, and a successful burlesque playwright. 'Would any of us wish our daughters to go on the stage?' he asked. 'There can be but one answer to this. No!'" For Burnard, the well-brought up girl either recoils with disgust at the thought of an acting career, or else succumbs to its corruption. Kent 108-09.

silliness is a question of perception¹⁸², and a closer examination reveals that what makes Ginevra's talent reprehensible in Lucy's eyes is that this talent is associated with playfulness, eroticism, and love of display. Ginevra renders eroticism and artistic skill two sides of the same coin, which cannot be told apart. Ginevra is simultaneously artistic and erotic, fashion-loving and playful. Art and eroticism are inextricably intertwined to highlight one aspect of Victorian gender ideology: that the condemnation of a woman's art depended in large part on the way women themselves perceived female performers. Lucy is unable to make a form of reverse reasoning, and consider that Ginevra's insistent practice of music could be a sign of worth and of an ability to work hard for a purpose. M. Josef Emanuel earns only admiration for his musical talent, Ginevra earns only scorn. Her talent in music prompts a severe consideration of her lack of domestic attributes and skills.

Ginevra's eroticism accentuates Lucy's scorn for her music; further, it aligns a woman's art with the joyful and the erotic. Woman's art becomes female-centred; it is no longer an accomplishment, existing and cultivated to make the family circle merrier, and it is no longer an (albeit severely limited) career option either. It is an expression of the fullness of the female being, and adjacent to woman's beauty and ability to enjoy youth. Ginevra's contains a feminocentric view of art—an art which illuminates and expresses the erotic and sexual aspects of womanhood. In this Ginevra becomes truly subversive to patriarchal ideology. Vashti, whom Lucy admires and patriarchy condemns, is larger-than-life; Ginevra is average, a school-pupil, with no further hopes than marriage in her head. In short, she is domesticated danger. We shall later see how Charlotte Brontë expressed her concern over the forces of discipline directed at female erotic and artistic

¹⁸² For instance, she speaks several languages, and is familiar with classic mythology, as her names for Lucy (Diogenes, Timon) show. She is good with the needle (151), and has an eye for fashion and tasteful clothing (314). Her speeches on marriage are a welcome change from the idealization of marriage that was part of the culture of domesticity, and are expressive of a young girl's anxieties (e.g. "I don't want to be married. I am too young", 150). Ginevra perceives the failings of Dr John and Paulina accurately, and obviously sees something extraordinary to Lucy which others do not, otherwise she would not have befriended her. Further, Ginevra will agree with Lucy that she is "silly" (155), and say that this makes her feel at ease in Lucy's company. However, an awareness of your own inadequacies is not silliness at all. Socrates believed that, to admit your own ignorance, is actually a sign of cleverness, and declared that he was "conscious that [he] was not wise either much or little". Upon conversing with a man who was considered to be very wise, Socrates left thinking to himself: "I am wiser than this man; for neither of us really knows anything fine and good, but this man thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, as I do not know anything, do not think I do either". Plato, *I- Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1953) 81, 83.

potential (during the scene at Hotel Crecy). At the moment, it suffices to say that Ginevra concentrates upon herself a form of condemnation of woman's art which is dependent on female initiative; she further highlights the de-personalization of women involved in this form of female initiative in the area of flirtation and marriage.

Flirtation and Marriage

Ginevra's story subverts dominant ideals on female proper demeanour during flirtation and marriage in two ways; first, by criticizing the fact that women themselves were conditioned to perceive their choices in marriage as curtailed and limited and, second, by proposing a form of marriage which is shown as successful though quite different from domestic ideals. The story of Ginevra's union with Alfred de Hamal registers all the patriarchal objections against it, but nevertheless produces a version of the marital state which endures in large part because it concentrates on woman's power and erotic identity.

Flirtation, as conduct-book writer Sarah Stickney Ellis explained, had to be discreet, with a strong motive behind it, and reserved by a girl for the man she wished to marry¹⁸³ -- "an innocent girlish wile to lure on the true lover", as Dr John would (patronisingly) describe it (302). Stickney Ellis's idea of flirtation is male-centred, and assumes the right of the man to a woman's innocence and exclusive attention. The conduct-book picture of flirtation perfectly coincides with that of Dr John. Conversely, Ginevra is an aggressive flirt, and gains much enjoyment from attracting men's attention and making them jealous of each other (215); she reserves the right not to be attracted herself by a seemingly perfect man -- "an exemplary Victorian if ever there was one," Sara T. Bernstein calls Dr John¹⁸⁴. Lucy, who would have "followed [Dr John's] frank tread, through continual night, to the world's end" (125), is unable to comprehend Ginevra's cold demeanour towards him. Yet Ginevra explains it well -- Graham always coddles, admonishes, and harasses her "with depths, and heights, and passions, and talents for which I have no taste [...]" (218-19). But Lucy will reply, "[h]e with his great advantages, *he* to love in vain!" (222). Ginevra's stance asserts the right to be allowed to judge for herself whether she and a suitor are compatible. "Ginevra does not want a

¹⁸³ Sarah Stickney Ellis, The daughters of England: their position in society, character and responsibilities (London, 1842) 302-04.

¹⁸⁴ Sara T. Bernstein, "'In this Same Gown of Shadow': Functions of Fashion in *Villette*," The Brontës in the World of the Arts, eds. Sandra Hagan and Juliette Wells, *The Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008) 156.

father-figure for a husband, even one who pampers her,” says Krugovoy Silver¹⁸⁵. Graham’s stereotypical view of women annoys Ginevra, who realises that he is incapable of reading women correctly.

Though Lucy will also realize this,¹⁸⁶ her reaction to Ginevra’s contempt for Dr John shows that even rebellious women had internalized the ideal of male supremacy in the erotic and marital relationship. A woman’s deviation from that ideal had to be interpreted as a personal and moral failing, and not as a call for a reconsideration of the accepted power dynamics of courtship and marriage or as a suggestion that generalizations make reality seem falsely simplistic.

This might seem an odd thing to say, since Villette is generally considered to be an unconventional exposition of marriage. Yet, the bulk of critics are concentrating on the marriage of Dr John and Paulina, and on the implications of the ambiguous ending for Lucy’s quest to gain independence. While the marriage of Paulina and Dr John is considered as an exemplary Victorian marriage, it is also acknowledged that Paulina is a child-bride who fears the physicality of her husband; in turn, Dr John is the type of man who would reject a woman evincing “active sexual desires”¹⁸⁷. Their relationship is Charlotte Brontë’s “comment on sexual convention”, says Lucy Hughes-Hallett. “To win the love of an ordinary hero a woman has to forswear her own maturity”¹⁸⁸.

As for the ambiguous ending, it is normally read as a form of liberation from the conventional marriage plot, and an expression of Lucy’s effort to remain independent¹⁸⁹. On the subject of a suggested union between Lucy and M. Paul, critics seem to fall into two groups: the first group sees the Lucy-M. Paul relationship as a mature relationship¹⁹⁰, and the second sees the relationship as restricting, which is what makes a marriage between Lucy and M. Paul impossible¹⁹¹. In short, critics agree that Lucy rejects the sanitized union of Dr John and Paulina to turn to a mature relationship, and it is a

¹⁸⁵ Krugovoy Silver 114.

¹⁸⁶ Krugovoy Silver 115.

¹⁸⁷ See Lucy Hughes Hallett, introduction, Villette, by Charlotte Brontë (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1992) xx.

¹⁸⁸ Hughes-Hallett xx.

¹⁸⁹ For instance, Helena Michie believes that Lucy refuses transparency; she frames other women, but resists becoming a painting herself. Ultimately, Lucy will resist M. Paul’s reading; she “manipulates [his] destiny and displays the power of her own language”. Helena Michie, The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 116-17.

¹⁹⁰ So for Boone, Lucy bides her time in her gown of shadow, and herself chooses the moment when she is to be seen (by M. Paul). Boone 28-29. John Maynard argues that M. Paul never threatens Lucy’s independence or desire for a career. Their story combines positive love and sexual force. John Maynard, Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 208.

question of interpretation whether this relationship is endorsed, or whether (through the ambiguous ending) Lucy gains independence of destiny.

However, criticism along these lines fails to realize that the polarities are not absolute. Lucy herself fully endorses the union of Dr John and Paulina: “[it] was so [blessed], for God saw that it was good” (533). Rather than liking Paulina “from time to time”, as Kate Millett would have it¹⁹², this is what Lucy herself says about Paulina: “I liked her. It is not a declaration I have often made concerning my acquaintance in the course of this book; the reader will bear with it for once. Intimate intercourse, close inspection, disclosed in Paulina only what was delicate, intelligent and sincere; therefore my regard for her lay deep” (461). Paulina’s perfection provokes a reverential attitude from Lucy, who calls her “Nature’s elect” (532), cultured and protected by Providence (467). M. Paul is only Lucy’s second choice; she will turn to him because she feels she cannot have Dr John. Most importantly perhaps, Brontë herself seems to have precluded a marriage between M. Paul and Lucy because it seemed to her that this would be an evil thing for M. Paul, and not the other way round¹⁹³.

¹⁹¹ Hughes-Hallett believes that M. Paul would not have made a good husband for Lucy, since he feels uncomfortable with intellectual women. Their marriage would not have been a consummation. Hughes-Hallett xxvi. M. Paul, writes Lucie Armitt, procures for Lucy “a doll’s house”. At this point, Lucy comes close to resembling Paulina – a miniature. Lucie Armitt, “Haunted Childhood in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*,” *Children in Literature, The Yearbook of English Studies* 32 (2002): 223. M. Paul threatens to overwhelm Lucy. Paradoxically, she is nourished by, and flourishes during, his absence. Karen Lawrence, “The Cypher: Disclosure and Reticence in *Villette*,” *Nineteenth Century Literature* 42 (1988):465-66. For Kate Millett, Lucy does not plan to compromise in society, like Mrs. Bretton (stale and selfless maternity) and Madame Beck (European sexual inhibition). Millett 34. Overall, Lucy is free in the end, and “free is alone”. Millett 40.

¹⁹² Millett believes that, though Lucy is fond of Paulina “from time to time, she is also appalled that society’s perfect woman must be a cute pre-adolescent”. Millett 35.

¹⁹³ As Brontë stated in a letter to George Smith, the merciful reader of the book would allow M. Paul to die rather than marry Lucy, while “the cruel-hearted will, on the contrary, pitilessly impale him on the second horn of the dilemma, marrying him without ruth or compunction to that-person-that-that-individual- ‘Lucy Snowe’”. Charlotte Brontë, “To George Smith,” 26 March 1853, letter 837 of *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*, ed. Thomas James Wise, vol. IV (Oxford: The Shakespeare Head Press, 1980): 56. I have quoted from that letter at length, to show that it would be erroneous to identify Charlotte Brontë with Lucy, and to assume that Lucy’s viewpoint is the definitive interpretation for the whole of the text. Rather, we are meant to examine her approach to other characters as an approach, and not as absolute truth, yielding of objectivity and impartiality As R.B. Martin has pointed out, the viewpoints of the narrator and of the author are not meant to coincide. We are expected to evaluate Lucy’s perceptions rather than accept them unconditionally. R.B. Martin, “*Villette* and the acceptance of suffering (1966),” *Charlotte Brontë: Jane Eyre and Villette: a Casebook*, ed. Miriam Allott, Casebook Series (Houndmills, UK: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1973) 220.

Additionally, Villette proposes that Lucy does not welcome her friendless and unmarried position; this is particularly evident not only in her reverence for Paulina, and in her reaction when she finds out that it is Ginevra who is Dr John's love-interest, but also in her reaction when Ginevra explains that she cannot return Dr John's love. This is how Lucy responds:

Is it possible that fine generous gentleman – handsome as a vision- offers you his honourable hand and gallant heart, and promises to protect your flimsy person and wretched mind through the storms and struggles of life --and you hang back-- you scorn, you sting, you torture him! [...] Who gave you that power? (218).

Even if we trace some sort of admiration for Ginevra's "power" in Lucy's speech (and even if we bear in mind that Lucy herself will recognize that Dr John is not a suitable partner for her, despite the attraction and sympathy she feels for him) we sense in her words a denial to women in general of the right to choose to reject a man, even if he is the personification of a sum total of ideals. We will note that Dr John's stifling conception of marriage as a paternalistic relationship where he will admonish and mould¹⁹⁴, is seen by Lucy as benevolent protection and gallantry towards the undeserving female. The woman's point of view, "[what I want is] a man quite in my way" (219) is not taken into any consideration, and is interpreted as empty-headedness and selfishness by Lucy. Norms of masculinity held the wife as dependent, comforting and responsive, the man independent and strong¹⁹⁵. Through Lucy's reaction to Ginevra's rejection of Dr John, we see that these ideals were particularly strict when it came to a woman's sexual power and allure and, especially in that case, any deviation had to be interpreted as a woman's personal failing.

Ginevra's marriage to de Hamal is not ideal, because he is an unworthy husband. However, it is shown as successful, in a way which validates Ginevra's claim of compatibility as an important part of marriage. There is a sexual element in Ginevra's marriage, absent in the other unions, which contributes to Ginevra's beauty and health. When Lucy sees her after the marriage has taken place, she will report that Ginevra looks "blooming and beautiful [...] her cheeks rosier than ever". Lucy will soon complain that

¹⁹⁴ Ginevra complains that he is given to admonishing her, and he will later tell Lucy that he had hoped to mould Ginevra into something "better" (302).

¹⁹⁵ Lynda Nead, "The Magdalen in Modern Times: the Mythology of the Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting," Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media, ed. Rosemary Betterton (London: Pandora Press, 1987) 77.

Ginevra suffocated her with “her unrestrained spirits”¹⁹⁶(576). Ginevra’s physical description and manner here do suggest sexual happiness.

Even in her choice of man, Ginevra is unconventional. Alfred is what most people would call effeminate – he is a dandy, fashionable, pretty like a woman. “... pretty and smooth, and as trim as a doll,” Lucy describes him (216). In contrast to Paulina, Ginevra rejects Graham’s paternalistic treatment, and the patriarchal family. She dislikes the Homes, and Graham’s cool demeanour; her husband is mischievous and feminine¹⁹⁷. Unlike the typical Victorian wife, who went through yearly pregnancies¹⁹⁸, Ginevra has only one child. She calls Alfred from Madame Beck’s office to her, and then sends him back, so that she can take Lucy “to herself” (576). There is here a suggestion of harmony between husband and wife. Ginevra is humorous about her husband’s misadventures during their clandestine affair. “One night, by the way, he fell out of this tree, tore down some of the branches [and] nearly broke his own neck [...]” (573). Ginevra has none of the swooning “femininity” which, according to Sandra Gilbert, would identify all energies with the charisma of fathers/ lovers/ husbands and which was indoctrinated into the young ladies of the time¹⁹⁹. Even when she is tearful and sentimental, to win her uncle’s approval of her marriage, Ginevra acknowledges this as a performance: “he was so abominably in earnest (i.e. in persecuting de Hamal) that I found myself forced to do a little bit of the melodramatic – go down on my knees, sob, cry, drench three pocket handkerchiefs” (574).

Significantly, Ginevra remains loyal and faithful to her husband, though he fails to provide a secure life for her. Her refusal to adopt the angel role is not endorsed by Lucy, but it is, notably, endorsed by the text. When Catherine Earnshaw saw what she had become in the world’s terms, she lost her sanity²⁰⁰. Dr John would like to “mould” Ginevra into something “better” than what she is, society giving him the authority and the means to do so; yet eventually Ginevra does not become someone else. She has a voice

¹⁹⁶ Yet Ginevra is mature enough not to (a) be insulted by Lucy’s behaviour, and (b) expect compliments.

¹⁹⁷ Krugovoy Silver 114.

¹⁹⁸ The “treadmill of yearly pregnancy,” Robin Gilmour calls it. Robin Gilmour, The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890 (London: Longman Group UK Limited, 1993) 190.

¹⁹⁹ Sandra Gilbert, “Looking Oppositely: Emily Brontë’s Bible of Hell,” New Casebooks: Wuthering Heights, ed. Patsy Stoneman, Contemporary Critical Essays (London: The Macmillan Press, 1993) 144.

²⁰⁰ In the famous mad scene, as Gilbert has shown. Gilbert 147. Ginevra does not, of course, lose her sanity; the plot surrounding her is light and perhaps closer to a comedy of manners, as against Catherine Earnshaw’s dire and tragic circumstances in Wuthering Heights.

of her own, and she is nobody's angel: "... he expects something more of me than I find it convenient to be. He thinks I am perfect: furnished with all sorts of sterling qualities and solid virtues, such as I never had, nor intend to have" (155). Luann McCracken Fletcher notes that Ginevra resents being expected to act a role which does not conform to her notion of who she is. More specifically, she rejects Dr John's ability to make her perform the role of the angel²⁰¹.

In sum, when it comes to marriage, Ginevra in *Villette* does not merely indicate shortcomings in the domestic ideal of marriage – this is clearly done by Paulina's story as well. Ginevra's story reveals that marriage choice could involve little real respect for the woman's point of view, and closely allies feminine principles with eroticism. The masculine principle comes out as severe and restraining, and even M. Paul (the novel's most exuberant male character) has to die if Lucy is to develop personally and professionally. Nina Auerbach has also noticed that Lucy fully develops only within a female community. This is the school Lucy creates on her own, says Auerbach²⁰². But Ginevra is also active in establishing and maintaining female community; she marries and has a family, but never distances herself from Lucy. The author is expressly using Ginevra to depict an alternative form of (successful) marital union, where the authority and power of the male has been usurped by the female.

There are more subtle ways in which the author intervenes to confirm Ginevra's story as a critical perspective on the other stories in the novel. The first of these ways is the sub-plot of Mr Home's marriage to Ginevra's aunt, an earlier Ginevra, who was Paulina's mother.

Ginevra and Ginevra

This sub-plot, though minor, contains in miniature key issues concerning marriage raised by the larger plots of Dr John's romance with Ginevra, and by Lucy's and Ginevra's relationship. Also, it comments on those issues in a manner which has implications for the larger plots.

For the Ginevra Home sub-plot shows what would have happened had the younger Ginevra married Dr John, as the two sets of couples are identical. Ginevra is the double for the Ginevra Home who had been Paulina's mother. "I am the picture of Aunt

²⁰¹ Luann McCracken Fletcher, "Manufactured Marvels, Heretic Narratives, and the Process of Interpretation in *Villette*," *Studies in English Literature* 32 (1992): 730.

²⁰² Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: an Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998) 113.

Ginevra. Mama often declares the likeness is quite ridiculous”, Ginevra will say (351). Both women are flirty, spectacular, playful. Mr Home, though not a medical doctor, is scientific, serious, and conventionally-minded, precisely like Dr John. His marriage to the earlier Ginevra is the marriage which does not happen between Ginevra and Dr John.

Ending in failure and the death of the wife, this marriage allows Charlotte Brontë to do two things: first, to show that the argument of incompatibility (which was the younger Ginevra’s argument against wishing to marry Dr John, and which Lucy can only translate as silliness on Ginevra’s part) is a serious objection to an impending marriage. Second, to show the prejudice in favour of the husband which existed in the minds of women in a case of marriage failure. Mr Home’s choice of wife was a weakness deplored by grave matrons such as Mrs Bretton: she was “as silly and frivolous a little flirt as ever sensible man was weak enough to marry” (63). However, even Mr Home, who raises a daughter who is patriarchy’s perfect woman, admits that some “over-severity” on his part may have hastened his wife’s end (63). Though Mrs Bretton will confess that she herself would not have endured Mr Home’s extreme devotion to science, it is the wife who is still considered unsuitable for marriage; marrying her was a weakness, and hopefully Paulina will grow up to be “more sensible” than her mother, says Mrs Bretton (63).

Nevertheless, the younger Ginevra gives a different account of the Home marriage failure. “Mama detests [Mr Home]; she says he killed Aunt Ginevra with unkindness” (351). Tellingly, it is Ginevra who grants Mrs Home a proper name; in Mrs Bretton’s account she is nameless, mentioned only with her husband’s surname, the failed and dead wife. This change of focus is not only an alternative version of the story, but also reveals the callousness which necessarily accompanied domestic ideals. The child Paulina had lost her mother, but because Mrs Home was playful and flirty, she was a neglectful mother; “indeed, Mrs Bretton ere long subjoined, the loss was not so great as might at first appear” (62).

This form of closure is forcefully imposed on the marriage of the Homes, and completely ignores the wife’s side of the story. In the spectacular woman (Ginevra and, in this case, her double Ginevra Home) Brontë consolidates two discourses: the discourse of domesticity, and a female-centred, alternative discourse on the norms and attitudes surrounding marriage. This female-centred discourse is articulated through the coquette; the coquette’s story also shows how this discourse would be killed and silenced by patriarchy. Mrs Home had to die, so that Paulina could be raised by Mr Home to become patriarchy’s angel. The coquette reveals this process to be violent, one-sided, bloody: the

coquette here functions as an outlet for a woman's anxiety over marriage and angelic wifeness. Beauty becomes constitutive of a female voice.

Dr John

A second way in which the author intervenes to give credit to Ginevra's story and outlook, is treatment of Dr John. Though Lucy will consider him to be too good for Ginevra (151) he is not posed as a standard of perfection, against whom all other characters and their choices are measured. Ginevra's critique of him is part of an overall critique of the form of masculinity he embodies – strict, self-absorbed, dependent on woman's passivity for confirmation. Women are decorative objects to Dr John, mothers, angels or fallen – as Millett has noted²⁰³. Sally Shuttleworth considers that Dr John comes out as an unfair judge of womanhood; his response to women is “determined entirely by predefined categories of suitable female behaviour”²⁰⁴

Despite being handsome, educated and honourable, Dr John is not an appealing character. Maynard argues that it is Dr John who is in fact inappropriate for Lucy, and not the other way round: “Images repeatedly compare him to a sun-god of external balance and brightness, but Lucy finds little real warmth in his beams. His kindness to her is professional, doctoring, but not heartfelt”. Dr John is close to St John Rivers. “Before Cleopatra, Vashti, or even Lucy's warm feelings for him, he is cool and unmoved. He overreacts to what he considers Ginevra's wanton glance at de Hamal”²⁰⁵.

Both Lucy and Ginevra will ultimately reject a union with Dr John; this is only one of a chain of links the novel forges between the two women. A third way through which Ginevra's story becomes an important part of a subversive, female-centred outlook in *Villette*, is Ginevra's similarity to Lucy.

Lucy and Ginevra

Ginevra has often been read as a source of attraction for Lucy, and a part of her personality. Lucy is fascinated by Ginevra's abilities; during the school-play, she actually competes with Dr John for her²⁰⁶. There is a masculine side to rebellious Lucy, as her attraction to Ginevra demonstrates, says Christina Crosby. Lucy sees her pretty

²⁰³ Millett 33.

²⁰⁴ Shuttleworth 342.

²⁰⁵ Maynard 191.

²⁰⁶ Kucich 108.

companion with male eyes²⁰⁷. The text oscillates between male and female, and displaces identities and definitions. There is no singular truth about woman²⁰⁸. Kucich mentions further instances of identification. “Both [Lucy and Ginevra] resent being fettered; both disdain the complacency of the bourgeois marriage; both sustain romantic relationships to two men at once; both are linked through their relationship to John Graham; both are excellent actresses”. Their relationship is combative and “reversible, with each character alternately controlled and controlling”²⁰⁹.

On the night of the fete, Lucy will make a curious identification between herself and Ginevra, saying that the doctor “was looking out for me, or rather for her who had been with me” (220). De Hamal’s love-note, addressed to the grey dress, is thrown to Lucy, who is mistaken for Ginevra from afar (177-78). Ginevra functions in some respects as Lucy’s double and, I argue, this association is fraught with meaning in two scenes: the mirror scene on the night of the fete, and a party at the Hotel Crecy, where Lucy is comparing Ginevra unfavourably to Paulina. In-between, there is Vashti’s performance, which re-introduces Paulina into the narrative.

These two episodes (with the performance in-between) are paradigmatic of how the coquette expresses the contest of writing the female self; treatment of Ginevra records the fluctuations, disciplining and resistance happening during a woman’s effort to understand woman’s place vis-à-vis strict domestic ideals and broader demands and expressions of the self. The figure of Ginevra Fanshawe shows that Victorian ideals of womanhood were the result of discipline; because Ginevra remains a friend to Lucy, refusing to sever their bond, she also functions actively to allow elements of womanhood which were not considered ideal (artistry, sexuality, spirited irreverence of men) to remain inside the narrative. Consequently, spectacular beauty is instrumental in yielding an

²⁰⁷ Christina Crosby, “Charlotte Brontë’s Haunted Text,” Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 24 (1984): 707.

²⁰⁸ Crosby 708. Kucich mentions many instances of identification between Lucy and Ginevra.

²⁰⁹ Kucich 107. . There is more; one description of Lucy’s for Ginevra, could equally apply to Lucy herself. “She likes her own way too well to submit readily to control” (210), Lucy will tell Dr John. Lucy also would have her “own way”; marry if she can, own a school. The two women share some disadvantages also: “From society’s perspective [...] Lucy has no being,” says Brenda Silver; Brenda Silver, “The Reflecting Reader in *Villette*,” New Casebooks: *Villette*, ed. Pauline Nestor, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992) 87. to Lucy being “[a]n orphan, an outsider, a woman without family or country, an ‘inoffensive shadow’ [...]”. Krugovoy Silver 83. Ginevra is in a state not dissimilar to that. She is strong only in the visual sense. Otherwise, she is poor, dependent on a rich uncle, an actress and a dancer, a butterfly and a flirt, judged to be talentless and indolent – at least as much a shadow as Lucy herself, in some respects.

understanding of womanhood which is aware of, and willing to engage with, its differing, multiple and undisciplined potential.

The Mirror Scene

The mirror-scene between Lucy and Ginevra after the school-play²¹⁰ and the ball is often read as an example of Lucy's identification with Ginevra²¹¹. For Richard A. Kaye, the two women are "mirror images" of each other²¹²; Lyndall Gordon has commented, enigmatically, that the mirror has shown that Lucy and Ginevra are

²¹⁰ Anne W. Jackson has related the mirror scene with the school play, and has argued that play-acting in *Villette* offers Lucy "clarity of vision and purpose". Anne W. Jackson, "It Might Gift Me With a World of Delight": Charlotte Brontë and the Pleasures of Acting," *The Brontës in the World of the Arts*, eds. Sandra Hagan and Juliette Wells, The Nineteenth Century (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008) 133. Acting makes Lucy willing to take risks, and leave her spectator's place so that, for example, she encourages Ginevra to boast, and speaks passionately herself, so that we understand her true feelings for Dr John. Nevertheless, during the play, she and Ginevra had acted in "near-perfect accord", which contained a generous measure of love. Jackson 136-37. I believe that the accord between Lucy and Ginevra extends to the mirror scene, and does not end with the play, as Jackson's reading would suggest. The mirror-scene is not there only to reveal Lucy's true feelings for Dr John, but also to elaborate on her link with Ginevra, and on the subject of female eroticism in general.

²¹¹ The ability of the mirror to hold together the structure of two selves has been discussed by Kathy Alexis Psomiades in *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 108. The mirror allows repressed or secret aspects of the self to be acknowledged.

²¹² Richard A. Kaye, *The Flirt's Tragedy: Desire Without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2002) 81. Kaye believes that coquettes in 19th century literature become "synonymous with the female eroticism that cannot be contained or repressed". They serve as "*idealized* versions of a repressed self" (64, italics original). Therefore, Ginevra is "the projection of Lucy's fantasy life", an "unconscious force made corporeal" (62). She allows Lucy Snowe to recognize flirting as a means of "asserting female interests (140)", so that, for example, she gives Lucy "the opportunity to recognize Dr John's emotional aloofness and thus his unsuitability as a husband" (66). However, coquettish desire signifies "an unmentionable female eroticism" (51) so that Ginevra "fades" from *Villette*, "as if she had become a ghostly presence and a spectral force of nature" (67). This thesis, however, demonstrates how coquettes do not fade from narratives, but rather remain in them, sometimes in a less-than-official manner. The reason for this is twofold. First, because coquettes indicate a desire from the implied author to express an awareness of the arbitrary manner in which the questions raised by coquettes can be expelled by dominant ideology. Second, because the coquette does not only embody female eroticism; she is also a way for eroticism to be related to the legal, social as well as moral background to Victorian womanhood. Kaye argues that the risks involved in flirtation have no legal consequences, and therefore "cannot be discussed in the terms of the state's apparatus of laws and surveillance [...]" (13). Conversely, this thesis shows that the state's apparatuses are vital in understanding the function of coquetry, because the coquette is a feminist perspective on how disciplining works forcefully upon women as a group.

simultaneously different and comparable, though none “is what she appears”²¹³. The ability of the mirror in literature to approach items invisible to the eye has been acknowledged by Franoise Frontisi-Ducroux²¹⁴, who has also noted that, inside the mirror, self and other blend²¹⁵. Colby correctly asserts that, in the mirror scene, “Ginevra’s image *is* the real Lucy Snowe”²¹⁶.

Indeed, Lucy is unable to see herself when standing next to Ginevra; however, Lucy’s image seems to recede from the mirror without effort and without complaint on Lucy’s part. Lucy seems to acquiesce to Ginevra’s admiration of her own beauty. An important feature of this scene is, therefore, that it acknowledges the power of erotic beauty and self-love. The large looking-glass is a mirror of abundance, in the manner of the mirror in the bedroom in *La Terasse*, where Lucy wakes after her long illness; as Isobel Armstrong has recently pointed out, the bedroom mirror is “plenitude and experience remade”²¹⁷. Lucy does not dispute Ginevra’s painful remarks about her (Lucy’s) lack of beauty and lack of prospects. What is notable is the ability of the two women to claim each other despite their differences. Ginevra seeks Lucy out, embracing her in a manner which is half-hysterical (214), and Lucy is unable to see anyone but Ginevra in the mirror, though both are standing in front of it (214-15).

Kate Millett believes that the artificial standards of beauty by which she is judged render Lucy “subject to a compulsive mirror obsession, whereby each time she looks in the glass she denies her existence – she does not appear in the mirror”²¹⁸. This may be true of the great glass in the musical society “salle” where Lucy feels that she does not belong in the reflection together with the comfortable and emotionally secure Brettons (286). In the mirror-scene after the fete, however, the two women remain in close physical proximity and, by seeing only Ginevra, Lucy does not deny her own existence.

²¹³ Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: a Passionate Life* (London: Vintage, 1995) 256.

²¹⁴ Franoise Frontisi-Ducroux and Jean Pierre Vernant, *Dans l’oeil du miroir*, trans. Vaso Mentzou (Athens, GR: Olkos, 2001) 216. Jane Kromm has seen the ability of the mirror in *Villette* to disclose, and has described mirror reflections in *Villette* as “fleeting yet revelatory mimicry”. Jane Kromm, “Visual Culture and Scopic Custom in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26 (1998):369. Kromm argues that *Villette* contains a feminist critique of spectatorship and representation, “scopic custom” being the “customary, gendered patterns of looking and being looked at which dominated Victorian society”. Kromm 369.

²¹⁵ Frontisi-Ducroux 142.

²¹⁶ Colby 712-13. Italics original.

²¹⁷ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) 239.

²¹⁸ Millett 39.

Conversely, she augments that existence, by allowing the reader to see her basic erotic core.

Notably, the harsh words exchanged by Lucy and Ginevra²¹⁹ do not break the unity between the two women. Those words are patriarchy speaking; however, the visual image of erotic womanhood proves more powerful than judgmental comments. Lucy and Ginevra leave the mirror together, in complete accord, Ginevra complimenting Lucy: “There’s a dear creature!” (216).

What causes discord is patriarchy’s reappearance in the person of Dr John. Lucy realizes that the doctor is in love with Ginevra and is angered, not only by jealousy, but also by Ginevra’s inability to reciprocate (218-19). Yet Lucy cannot deny Ginevra, even in front of the doctor; she covers the younger woman carefully with a warm shawl (218) and will say to Dr John that, “[t]o me [Ginevra] is an enigma” (220). What the mirror scene makes clear is the bond between erotic and more conventionally-minded womanhood which, in the manner of Ginevra, “shifts and changes like the wind” (221), but is always present and ineradicable. It is Ginevra’s figure which allows Brontë to register these changes, and the essential perseverance of erotic playfulness.

All the same, there is another aspect in the Ginevra/ Lucy relationship; this is to show that erotic womanhood is prejudicially, rather than rightfully, subjected to discipline. It is for this purpose that Paulina re-enters the narrative, appearing under dramatic circumstances during Vashti’s performance.

Vashti

The Vashti episode is where fracture between Lucy and Ginevra starts to deepen.

Vashti’s figure consolidates the rebellious instincts portrayed in Lucy. She is a “satanic rebel”, a “fallen angel”²²⁰. Vashti’s art is “a feminist reaction to patriarchal aesthetics”, the performance so inflammatory, and so subversive to the social order, “that it actually seems to set the theatre on fire”. Vashti’s drama defines “the revengeful power of female rebellion”²²¹. This rebellion is “decidedly futile for women,” Sandra Gilbert

²¹⁹ Lucy is as harsh to Ginevra as Ginevra has just been; telling the younger woman that she has neither love nor concern for her (215).

²²⁰ Jacobus 127.

²²¹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination, 2nd ed. (New York: Yale Nota Bene, 2000) 424.

and Susan Gubar have noted²²² and, indeed, the fire which ruins Vashti's performance produces Paulina, patriarchy's perfect woman.

Vashti is actually the famous French actress Rachel, whose performance Charlotte Brontë had witnessed in the summer of 1851. Both Brontë and Lucy felt simultaneously attracted and repulsed by the spectacle²²³. In *Villette*, Vashti functions as a form of warning against rebellion, and signals the beginning of Lucy's movement towards Paulina and away from Ginevra. Before Paulina, Lucy would defend Ginevra to Dr John, so that he would exclaim, "You are becoming her advocate" (302). After Paulina, Lucy's contempt for Ginevra becomes stronger, and more vociferously expressed. Armstrong also notices the shift in tone when Paulina reappears. With Paulina at La Terrasse, Lucy can no longer image herself through the Brettons and their things; "after Pauline has re-entered the text, the passional experience is deleted [...]"²²⁴. From the fire on, Lucy begins a movement towards the accepted standards of modest as opposed to sensual female behaviour, the former personified by Paulina.

In short, Vashti is a crossroads in the search for female identity in *Villette*. Next comes Hotel Crecy, an episode in which the work of discipline, and the decisive action women need to take to exorcise rebellion, eroticism and the general questioning of the male order from their actions and thoughts is more clearly evident. In this episode, Lucy opts for the form of womanhood embodied in Paulina. This is not to say that Lucy turns into a compliant domestic angel; *Villette* shows that, in a thinking woman, the erotic and deviant element can never be entirely denied. What the episode does show, however, is that Lucy embraces the angelic form of womanhood as ideal, and that she has to do this in a violent and prejudicial way.

²²² Gilbert and Gubar 423.

²²³ For Brontë, see Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Elisabeth Jay (London: Penguin Books, 1997) 373. For Lucy see, for instance, *Villette* 339.

²²⁴ Armstrong 240.

Hotel Crecy: the Crimson-Dress Scene

This is an extraordinary scene, where Ginevra —playing at the piano by herself in a crimson dress-- is framed by two patriarchal stares; Lucy's and Mr Home's /Dr John's. Ginevra is set up as a third space, between the two framing disciplinary gazes. Lucy observes, records Ginevra's spirit at the piano and her isolation, and judges her as inferior to the timid Paulina, who converses complacently with the men. Thus, Ginevra belongs to a female, isolated space, while Paulina belongs to the circle comprised of the old men, her father and her suitor; a circle which presumably forms the standard by which Ginevra is judged and found wanting. Dr John also observes, and judges that it is Paulina who is actually the girlish fairy he had thought Ginevra to be.

In Lucy's observation and judgment, there is the implication that, for Ginevra's spirit and energy to be judged as inferior, woman's art must be judged as inferior also; it must, additionally, be acknowledged that men have the right to pass judgments on women – it is a source of satisfaction to Lucy that the old men and Dr John approve of Paulina. “Ginevra and Paulina were now opposite to [Dr John]: he could gaze his fill: he surveyed both forms – studied both faces” (401).

Why would Brontë align Lucy so expressly with Dr John and Victorian patriarchy here, since she has taken such pains to distinguish her from both?²²⁵ The answer is, to show that, in the area of gender relations and the woman's role during courtship and marriage, certain attitudes of women towards other women were imposed prejudicially; the way Ginevra stands alone with her piano and her music against a circle of conventionally-minded individuals, shows Brontë's concern for women's endorsement of these attitudes.

In this episode, Charlotte Brontë pits Ginevra in direct opposition to male patriarchal rules, which Lucy fully adopts. Paulina is vindicated by being admired not only by Dr John, but also by a group of old, wise men, who hear her conversation with approval. The conversation is not recorded, but it is easy to guess its content, since it pleases an audience of aged patriarchs. In *Villette*, Paulina enacts the contents of the triptych “La vie d' une femme”. The woman in the triptych is described by Gilbert and

²²⁵ In general, Lucy is supposed to revolt against anything that would assign her to an inferior role; she is supposed to reject orthodoxy for an independent heterodoxy. Lucy prefers a contemplative, heterodox aesthetic experience, says Kromm. She wishes to exercise her own thinking capabilities, independent of the cultural establishment's pre-set standards. Kromm 385. Kromm suggests that Lucy is disdainful of male-authored representations of women. She expresses this disdain in the museum scene, where she condemns the Cleopatra. Kromm 387. However, this is often not true. In the area of female sensuality and playfulness, Lucy is often as conventional as any male patriarchal figure.

Gubar as “the completely desexed, exemplary girl-wife-mother-widow”²²⁶. Paulina does not become a widow but, like the woman in “La vie d’ une femme,” like the woman in George Elgar Hicks’s triptych called “Woman’s Mission,” she is defined through her relationships with men. Paulina will not mature; it is man’s life-cycle (child-husband-father) which structures the narrative of her life²²⁷. Lucy admires her for this.

Clothing also distinguishes the two young women, and once more shows the coincidence between the patriarchal, disciplinary stare and Lucy’s. Ginevra wears a dress of crimson red, against Paulina’s white – or, rather, “clear white” (398), which is white made purer than pure. Elsewhere, Ginevra has been scolded by Lucy for her love of finery (“Take yourself away. I have no pleasure in looking at you or your parure”, 153). Women’s periodicals held love of fashion and concern for beauty as acceptable parts of a woman’s life; however, another line of thought associated love of finery with immorality. Mariana Valverde has written that a “key semiotic distinction in Victorian fashion was that between ‘honest dress’ and ‘finery’. ‘Finery’ sometimes referred nonjudgmentally to ‘fine clothes’ [...]. A more common meaning, however, connoted moral flaws on the part of the wearer”²²⁸. The phrase “‘love of finery’ and the related argument that woman’s sartorial vanity caused moral and financial decline frequently occur in literary and religious discussions of female vanity [...]”²²⁹. Valverde examines how the connection between the two myths of “finery” and “the fallen woman” were constructed in the nineteenth century. Love of fashion and loss of virtue were strongly connected²³⁰. Love of finery was supposed to reveal a potential for becoming fallen²³¹ and was linked to vanity, a specifically female vice, subversive of Victorian thrift²³². Ginevra accommodates the discourse relating finery to female immorality (her crimson dress against the white approved by the old men, Dr John and Lucy) but she also functions here to indicate that finery equals spirit, and is judged as a sign of immorality (or, as in the

²²⁶ Gilbert and Gubar 420.

²²⁷ In the way the woman’s role in Hicks’s triptych has been described by Lynda Nead. Nead 79.

²²⁸ Mariana Valverde, “The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth Century Social Discourse,” *Victorian Studies* 32 (1989): 169.

²²⁹ Valverde 169.

²³⁰ Valverde 170.

²³¹ Valverde 184.

²³² Valverde 178. For Bernstein, fashion in *Villette* aids Lucy in seeking recognition while evading characterization. So, for example, her transgression in wearing a suit which is both masculine and feminine for the school-play, enables her to create a space where she defines herself as belonging to both sexes; Lucy searches for an acceptable gender identity. Bernstein 163-64. Through fashion, I would add, *Villette* ponders at gender identity, specifically the relation between gender identity and cultural ideologies.

case here, as vanity and emptiness) only after being subjected to severe and strict discipline.

This is a scene fraught with signification; visual description of the coquette becomes a strong instrument for cultural criticism. After fashion, the next area which is shown as severely disciplined, is the area of woman's art. "Conscious of her own charms"²³³, Ginevra plays music by herself at the piano, a performance which Lucy will later unfavourably compare to the one given by an educated and practised (male) master. Once more, Lucy fully identifies with the male patriarchal way of seeing. She can rebel when it comes to work opportunities, class distinctions, and beauty standards: notably, she cannot rebel when it comes to sensuality, female expression through art, and gender relations. Her gaze objectifies Ginevra, and renders her an object of scorn. The Villette society is a modern disciplinary society, which "maintains its power not by sovereign rule but by making each of its citizens an agent of surveillance and regulation"²³⁴. Boone believes that the question for Lucy is one of "how to represent the female as *subject* without risking her immediate objectification by the privileged male gaze, the ubiquitous instrument of surveillance in a patriarchal society"²³⁵. Yet, in the areas mentioned above, there is no distinction between the disciplinary male gaze and Lucy's. The coquette in Villette clarifies the extent to which middle-class femininity had internalized repression.

During the party, both Lucy and Mr Home compare Paulina's French to Ginevra's. Mr Home is "gratified" that Paulina speaks so well, while Lucy points out that Ginevra could not speak with any "real accuracy and purity". Paulina may be seen as the

²³³ Lucy's own description of Ginevra, one evening the latter is dressed to go out (152).

²³⁴ Boone 21. Michel Foucault's panopticon disciplinarian scheme originated in Victorian legal philosopher Jeremy Bentham's panopticon Prison, a circular building, where the keeper is concealed from the observation of the prisoners. Jeremy Bentham, "Panopticon Papers," A Bentham Reader, ed. Mary Peter Mack (New York: Pegasus, 1969) 194. This gives the prisoners "the sentiment of an invisible omnipresence". The Panopticon society comes out as one where power is light and subtle, a whole discipline mechanism Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1977) 209. The two images of discipline are the "discipline blockade", such as punishments and arrests, and panopticism, the "discipline mechanism". Here discipline is exercised by a "generalized surveillance". Foucault 209. Antiquity has been "a civilization of the spectacle"; power was exhibited. "Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance". Foucault 216-17. This happened from the eighteenth century onwards. Michel Foucault, "On Power: Interview to Pierre Boncenne," Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984, ed. Laurance D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan et al. (New York: Routledge, 1988) 105. Power is unseen and used to impose a particular form of behaviour on a multiplicity of individuals. Foucault, Discipline and Punish 205.

²³⁵ Boone 31.

manufactured woman who pleases the disciplinarians. Mr Home had been the death of the earlier Ginevra, the younger Ginevra's aunt, to whom she bears an uncanny resemblance. On the Ginevra/Paulina antithesis, Lucy's opinion is indistinguishable from Mr Home's. The sensual and spectacular woman must be ridiculed; she must be ostracized from middle-class sobriety and thrift. The use of the epithet "pure" is insistent in this passage. Paulina's "correct", "pure" French, her "purity" of discourse, charm "a polite Frenchman", M. Z-, a "very learned, but quite a courtly man, who had drawn her into discourse" (398). Patriarchy has indeed "drawn" Paulina in the image of its "discourse". There is only one "right" way in which to behave – the "pure" way. Women are de-individualized, and Ginevra is very much the odd one out.

It has been observed by Boone that Lucy begins her narrative by focusing on Paulina "as if she were the novel's true subject"²³⁶. It is my view that the focus on Paulina signifies that *she is*, to an extent, the novel's true subject. The aim of Victorian discipline was to produce women like Paulina; to make every woman a Paulina. Contemporary reviews extolled Paulina²³⁷. It is no accident that Ginevra Home has to die so that Mr Home can raise Paulina by himself. Charlotte Brontë shows the process by which women are disciplined so as to reject their Ginevra side and embrace their Paulina side. It is a violent process, but often women participate in it. The more Lucy becomes involved with Paulina, the more she scorns Ginevra; ultimately, she will speak devoutly of Paulina's

²³⁶ Boone 30 (emphasis mine). Boone argues that Lucy's "deliberate self-effacement" is a "strategic psychological mechanism designed to shelter Lucy from greater oppression and discrimination". Lucy bides her time and chooses the moment she is to see and be seen. Boone 29.

²³⁷ "Perhaps Pauline and her father are the best drawn characters in the book," wrote Harriet Martineau. Harriet Martineau, "From an Unsigned Review, *Daily News*, 3 February 1853," The Brontës: the Critical Heritage, ed. Miriam Allott, The Critical Heritage Series (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) 174. Charlotte Brontë herself had admitted that Paulina was "the weakest character in the book". Charlotte Brontë, "To George Smith," 6 December 1852, letter 803 of The Brontës: their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence, ed. Thomas James Wise, Vol. 4 (Oxford: The Shakespeare Head Press, 1933) 23. However, reviewers opted for an idealised version of womanhood as the more appropriate subject for a novel. Paulina, wrote the Athenaeum, is a "character in truth and not a caricature [...]". Unsigned review, *Athenaeum*, 12 February 1853," The Brontës: the Critical Heritage ed. Miriam Allott, The Critical Heritage Series (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) 188. We had hoped, said this anonymous writer, to find the heroine of the novel in Paulina, "and not in the ill-looking and impassioned narrator" *Athenaeum* 190. It is Paulina who deserves to be heroine, and not Lucy, argued Putnam's Monthly Magazine. She is "disproportionately interesting" "Unsigned review, *Villette and Ruth*, *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, May 1853," The Brontës: the Critical Heritage ed. Miriam Allott, The Critical Heritage Series (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) 214. Therefore, the proper fiction heroine must be compliant, graceful, tender, without passion. Woman must be a servant, never an active participant, like Paulina, with what Carlisle has described as her "servile and tender doting on the men". Carlisle 272.

future union with Graham, a man Lucy herself has desired. The scene where Ginevra dashes at the piano while Paulina converses with the wise (French) men is an important scene where patriarchy is shown to choose and discipline. It is Lucy, a woman, who pays attention to both girls and rejects crimson red sensuality to embrace white, manufactured eloquence.

Ginevra wears crimson red, a colour symbolically linked with fire, power and importance²³⁸. It was an uncommon colour for a young woman to wear throughout the Victorian period²³⁹. Ginevra is the raw material; she is “essential” woman, and female energy. To the best of my knowledge, the one critic who seems to have noted this is Krugovoy Silver, who has described Ginevra as sensual and certainly no angel in the house²⁴⁰; for her name, “Brontë may have been playing with the prefix “gyn”, signifying not only woman but, more technically, the female reproductive organs”²⁴¹. Paulina, on the other hand, personifies the Victorian obsession with spiritual qualities and virginal timidity, which she illustrates in this scene by wearing bridal/virginal white. White is also a cold and dead colour. Conversely, “Ginevra’s dress of deep crimson relieved well her light curls, and harmonized with her rose-like bloom” (398). Ginevra is the natural and blooming beauty, Paulina is the manufactured and sexless one.

Eva Badowska comments that persons in *Villette* are “entrenched in the public empire of things”²⁴². Commodities are fundamental to the constitution of persons²⁴³. In the crimson-dress scene at Hotel Crecy, Brontë uses coquetry to indulge in visuality; Ginevra’s crimson, isolated space is a loud, notable exception to the white rule. Values circulate through commodities, and Ginevra becomes her crimson dress, to explain how she is observed, analyzed and measured by conventional Victorian attitudes on women and their place in society.

Regrettably, this is a case of either/or and woman must observe and choose. Woman chooses “character” (400) and sensuality is check-mated. Ginevra’s music is

²³⁸ “The Color Crimson”, *Elizabethan Era*, 27 July 2007 <<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/color-crimson.htm>>.

²³⁹ Bold colours started becoming common only during the 1890s. Joan Nunn, “Fabrics and Color,” *Victorian Web* 27 July 2007 <<http://www.victorianweb.org/art/costume/num13.html>>. Steele says that light and delicate shades of silk were used through the 1850s and early 1860s, though richness of colour increased. “Bright colours dominated the 1860s and 1870s”; it was the 1890s which featured dresses deep and rich in colour. Steele 92.

²⁴⁰ Krugovoy Silver 114.

²⁴¹ Krugovoy Silver 110.

²⁴² Eva Badowska, “Choseville: Brontë’s *Villette* and the Art of Bourgeois Interiority”, *PMLA* 120 (2005): 1510.

²⁴³ Badowska 1513.

silenced when she is succeeded at the piano by music master Josef Emmanuel. The sensual woman's music is condemned and off-handedly dismissed. "What a master-touch succeeded her school-girl jingle!" (400). Ginevra is compared to an older man, a learned musician with years of practice behind him (288). She has been transgressive of Victorian ideology through the whole scene (and indeed through the whole book). Music was seen as "a trivial pursuit, an unworthy distraction from the vocation of managing the home"²⁴⁴. Taking the spotlight upon herself in a performance was problematic also professionals like ballet dancers and actresses were symbolically "construed as prostitutes because they displayed themselves in public using their bodies as commodities"²⁴⁵. This scene at the Hotel Crecy is tragic in its prejudice and off-handedness. It shows women pushed towards conformity to male standards of decorum and acceptable behaviour. Spontaneity, joy and sensuality are rejected. Worst of all, in the figure of Lucy Snowe we see women policing each other and themselves. The sensual and artistic woman is duly exorcized and denied access to the "magic circle" (400) of patriarchs, disciplinarians and compliant women.

To sum up, patriarchal discourse would repudiate Ginevra, but the crimson-dress scene weaves around her a discourse of her own. Coquettish beauty permits Brontë to articulate the disciplining of woman into compliancy as a repression of female art, energy and female difference, and as a prejudicially imposed, alien and alienating mode of thought for women.

Beauty's Body

Significantly, Lucy's rejection of Ginevra is never complete. Though she uses Hotel Crecy as an example of Paulina's triumph over the other girl, and though she continues to scorn Ginevra, Lucy does not end their friendship; even after Hotel Crecy, the two keep company (for example, they sit apart during the excursion to the dairy farm, 472) and their friendship continues beyond the limits of the Villette story. Further, Lucy realises that the most suitable partner for her is M. Paul, the man who reads her as "a

²⁴⁴ Mary Burgan, "Heroines at the Piano: Women and Music in Nineteenth Century Fiction," *Victorian Studies* 30 (1986): 62. Lucy expresses the revulsion of many of her contemporaries against a woman publicly performing music. The public's revulsion against and horror at the thought of either women as professional music performers, or of women performing in any way outside the domestic sphere has been noted by Delia da Sousa Correa; Delia da Sousa Correa, *George Eliot, Music and Victorian Culture* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 82.

²⁴⁵ Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, "Spectacular Women: *The Mysteries of London* and the Female Body," *Victorian Studies* 40 (1996): 43.

fashion-loving coquette”²⁴⁶; in other words, the man who reads her as if she were another Ginevra. Lucy’s attitude to Ginevra, and thus to female artistry, sensuality, and sexual potential, remains notoriously ambivalent²⁴⁷.

As a result, Ginevra is the space on which sensuality and woman’s art gain validity; because Lucy does not reject her and Ginevra herself refuses to end her relationship with Lucy, the younger woman remains an integral part of the text. It is the part which includes conventional attitudes towards women (the standards Ginevra is judged by) but is not superseded by them. On Ginevra’s beauty, the two discourses on womanhood co-exist, and are uneasily accommodated. Ginevra bears the burden of Lucy’s scorn and contempt; through Lucy’s surveillance, Ginevra’s energy and music are translated into silliness. At the same time, because she succeeds as a wife and mother, and proves a loyal friend to Lucy²⁴⁸, Ginevra is an active agent in the story. The letters Lucy receives from her – the letters which Lucy will continue to represent and interpret for us – testify to a female form of achieving harmony which will remain integrated though ambiguous.

Ginevra aids Brontë in expressing female eroticism, female playfulness and female art as a specific form of female quest²⁴⁹. “She rushed into my arms laughing,”

²⁴⁶ Bernstein 166.

²⁴⁷ See, for example, Gilbert and Gubar (there is “a notable lack of specificity in Lucy’s account”, 416) and Jacobus (“Lucy lies to us”, 122).

²⁴⁸ As Krugovoy Silver has also noted, Krugovoy Silver 115.

²⁴⁹ Brontë certainly did not identify with the happy and idealized (if insipid) romance exemplified by Paulina and Dr John. Her life-experience was radically different, and it seems that it was also a concern for the life-like and the real which made her determine that Paulina would be paired with Dr John, while Lucy with M. Paul. “The spirit of romance would have indicated another course, far more flowery and inviting. [...] [B]ut this would have been unlike real life – inconsistent with truth – at variance with probability”. Charlotte Brontë, “To George Smith,” 6 December 1852, letter 803 of The Brontës: their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence, ed. Thomas James Wise, vol. 4 (Oxford: The Shakespeare Head Press, 1933) 22-23. “[M]y palette affords no brighter tints [...]”. Charlotte wrote about Villette. Charlotte Brontë, “To W.S. Williams,” 6 November 1852, letter 797 of The Brontës: their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence, ed. Thomas James Wise, vol. 4 (Oxford: The Shakespeare Head Press, 1933) 17. Happy Dr John and Paulina, and their wedded bliss, should not be used as guides for interpreting all the other men and women and their experience in the novel. As Winifred Gerin explains, Villette was written in a period in which Charlotte had realized “beyond doubt that the spirit of romance was a phantom – and a fake phantom at that, like the ‘Nun’ in her tale”. Winifred Gerin, Charlotte Brontë: the Evolution of Genius, Oxford Lives (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967) 511. James Taylor, explains Gerin, a man Brontë did not love, but whom she considered a friend (Gerin 503) stopped writing (Gerin 507). Then, “[s]omehow, during the summer of 1852 Charlotte learned that George Smith would never be more to her in real life than her publisher” (Gerin 511). The fantasies of her romantic girlhood were being eradicated; Charlotte was learning to accept the degrees of common existence (Gerin 508). The main part of Villette was written when Charlotte was

Lucy will say when she and Ginevra meet at Madame Beck's salon soon after Ginevra's marriage (575). Though Ginevra knows Lucy "too well to look for compliments" (576) Lucy will say, eventually, "I thought she would forget me [once she went abroad] but she did not" (576). By giving Ginevra the initiative in maintaining the relationship, Brontë uses beauty to express an aspect of womanhood which, though subjected to severe discipline, remains compelling and untouched by discipline.

However, Ginevra is not imagined in this thesis as a utopian form of liberated womanhood. She, too, is constrained by her society and culture. Both men and women interpret her negatively because of her evident sexuality; and the only way for her to gain social advancement is through marriage. The freedom she does represent must exist in the text in a clandestine manner – to the end, Lucy will be as harsh to her as ever, and refuse to credit her for being a more faithful friend than Paulina.

Ultimately, Lucy eliminates the nun, read by critics as the symbol of her repression²⁵⁰. It is Ginevra, however, who first conquered the nun, and who is in reality the reason for the nun's presence in the attic and school-grounds. And it is Ginevra who leaves the remnants of the nun for Lucy to find eventually²⁵¹.

in a "very low mood" because of George Smith. Lucy Snowe is made "to relive the agony when [Charlotte] realised that George Smith's letters, his friendship, would lead no further than that". Rebecca Fraser, *Charlotte Brontë* (London: Methuen, 1988) 423. Consequently, even Brontë's own description of Paulina as the character she intended to be "the most beautiful" in the novel (Charlotte Brontë, "To George Smith," 6 December 1852, 23) would not invalidate any reading which does not endorse what Paulina stands for. Charlotte herself saw Paulina as a "purely imaginary" character: Charlotte Brontë, "To George Smith," 6 December 1852, letter 803 of *The Brontës: their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*, ed. Thomas James Wise, vol. 4 (Oxford: The Shakespeare Head Press, 1933) 23.

²⁵⁰ Repression "returns vengefully on the heroine, in the form of a ghostly nun", says Jacobus. Jacobus 121. Vrettos believes that the nun is a metaphor "for all acts of displacement in *Villette*, a liminal figure that reveals the dual structure underlying Lucy's malady" (i.e. hysteria as form of spiritual expression and repression"). Vrettos 568. Shuttleworth notes that Lucy's sightings of the nun occur at moments of heightened sexual tension. Sally Shuttleworth, "'The Surveillance of a Sleepless Eye': the Constitution of Neurosis in *Villette*," *New Casebooks: Villette*, ed. Pauline Nestor (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992) 48-49. The nun will appear "whenever Lucy is struggling to keep her sexual desires in check, and represents the cloistered celibacy her life is coming to resemble". Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago Press, 1987) 70. Like the nun, Lucy has been buried alive: the spectre is the dread shape of the sterile self of the future. Moglen 20. Like the nun, Lucy revolts against constraints. Gilbert and Gubar 411.

²⁵¹ Having destroyed the nun, does Lucy gain freedom? As in the case of M. Paul's fate, critical opinion is divided. For Hughes-Hallett, Lucy is a passionate and fully grown-up woman in a society which can not accommodate this type of womanhood. She is displaced and a misfit, and will live disappointed. Hughes-Hallett xxvii. The only thing she can do is endure. Hughes-Hallett xxviii. Maynard, however, believes that Lucy

In addition, it is Ginevra's determination not to see things Lucy's way which is the reason why their bond is never severed. On Lucy's side of the story, there is fissure together with unity; on Ginevra's side, there is only unity. The impulse towards constraint does not preclude a bond from being formed and maintained. By preserving her viewpoint, and her link to the protagonist, Ginevra serves as a pattern going from un-discipline to discipline, and then back to un-discipline. Coquetry permits the undisciplined, artistic and erotic elements to exist, and ensures their survival inside the narrative. Therefore, the coquette refigures these discourses in their entirety; the disciplining discourse remains intact, but is made to co-exist with a vital un-disciplining discourse.

Lucy interprets a life where Ginevra stood by her unworthy husband as a life lived "by proxy" (577), refuses to explain why she will not break her friendship with Ginevra, and describes their long and, as far as we know, uninterrupted, correspondence, as "fitful" (576). She introduces the account of what happened to Ginevra thus: "the reader will no doubt expect to hear that she came to bitter expiation of her youthful levities. Of course, a large share of suffering lies in reserve for her future" (575).

Indeed, a "large share" of vindictiveness is placed upon the reader. Ginevra is given a story which proves wrong all of Lucy's assumptions about her. If judged only in terms of her esteem for Lucy, Paulina's actions are reprehensible; she makes Lucy read Dr John's love-letters even after realising that Lucy has feelings for the doctor herself (521), and asks Lucy to become her companion (520), which is another word for a life-long servant²⁵². Yet Lucy stubbornly clings to the version of womanhood exemplified by Paulina.

achieves emotional and sexual maturity in the end, in a warm and assertive relationship with M. Paul. Maynard 199. For Boone, Lucy outwits the police in the end, she remains both "seen and unseen". Lucy occupies a place which is both public and private, the school; a space which disempowers the very language of "in" and "out" upon which "the power of male-dominated disciplinary order depends". Boone 41-42. Kate Flint has seen Lucy's mode of writing as an attempt to make whole through mourning. Kate Flint, "Women Writers, Women's Issues," The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 189-90. Armstrong notes that Lucy's "survival depends on resisting being made a mere trace in the bourgeois mirror". She encounters the grotesque in mirrors and glass artefacts, but she also realizes that these items are only glass. Armstrong 245-46. . For Jackson, Lucy reframes her role in life and compels her audience to give her full value. She earns her place in the world's wider stage. Jackson 147. Heather Glen is less hopeful: Villette, she argues, is a "narrative of isolation". Heather Glen, "*Shirley and Villette*," The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 135. It is not Lucy, but others, who act and decide. She does not control the cluttered world of Villette; Lucy is dislocated. Glen 143. The novel portrays the pain of those dislocated from nineteenth-century England's official narratives of happiness. Glen 145.

The space in which the three women's stories combine, but fail to explain, each other, has been contrived by the author to express an anxiety about the conventional and prejudicial way in which Victorian gender ideology often required women not to notice, and not to see. The coquette is pivotal in examining Victorian gender ideology in this way, for not only is she defined by this space, she is also active in re-defining it.

Despite her unconventionality²⁵³, Lucy is unable to speak against accepted standards of female behaviour in the areas of flirtation, marriage, and artistic talent. This

²⁵² The role of spinster ladies in a married couple's household is set out by Fireside Magazine. These women were little more than servants, and unpaid ones at that. "Where shall we find the woman with leisure enough [...] to minister in the sick chamber? Instantly, all hearts turn to the one woman in the family who is free [...]. Who can sit up with the sufferer at night like them, and come down fresh as a blooming rose in the morning? [...] These are the women that make our English homes what they are". G.F.W. Munby, "Maidens Unattached", Fireside Magazine – Pictorial Annual 1893: 137. Beneath the veneer of romanticism and gratitude, is a blunt and cold request for a woman to sacrifice herself for the sake of a family that is not even her own. It is, like Paulina's request to Lucy, for a woman to become a life-long servant. The whole article encourages women to remain unmarried, something which (according to the article) will guarantee them life-long freshness. Oddly enough, Lucy – usually easily insulted- feels not at all demeaned by Paulina's offer to make her a companion. She does say that she was "no bright lady's shadow," but does not grudge Paulina the offer. It was simply not in her nature, Lucy says, to be companion, because she loved "peace and independence" (382).

²⁵³ In general, Lucy is seen as an uncompromising, rebellious character. For example, she breaks "a series of gender, class and narrative conventions: by gazing at Dr John, she has acted like a man and an equal, not like a woman who inhabits the nursery; by keeping quiet, she has broken her covenant with us". Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, "'Faithful Narrator' or 'Partial Eulogist': First Person Narration in Brontë's *Villette*," New Casebooks: *Villette*, ed. Pauline Nestor, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992) 72. Her narrative is "the non-traditional story of a woman's life and a text in which she is not an invisible outsider but the informing presence". Silver 96. Lucy's words to Madame Beck, the night she hires Lucy as a nursery teacher, sound very much like a feminist manifesto: "I told her a plain tale, which [a maitresse] translated. I told her how I had left my own country, intent on extending my knowledge, and gaining my bread; how I was ready to turn my hand to any useful thing, provided it was not wrong or degrading [...]" (127). Further, she violates social conventions of femininity because she supports herself. Linda C. Hunt, "Sustenance and Balm: The Question of Female Friendship in *Shirley* and *Villette*," Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature 1 (1982): 55. What Lucy is doing is refusing to devalue herself as society would devalue her. Lucy defies a whole dehumanizing social system. Tanner 30-31. Receiving no support from either family or husband, Lucy "fails to fit even the most mundane prescription for a woman's place in the nineteenth century [...]" Fletcher 727. Lucy's rebelliousness was so notable for those reading the book in the Victorian period, as to alarm contemporary critics. Currer Bell's women "can never be accepted as real ladies," said an unsigned notice in the *Guardian* from February 1853. Unsigned notice, "*Guardian* February 1853," The Brontës: the Critical Heritage, ed. Miriam Allott, The Critical Heritage Series (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) 194. "Why is *Villette* disagreeable?" asked Matthew Arnold in his 14 April 1853 letter to Mrs Forster. It seemed to him that *Villette* was a book full of "hunger, rebellion and rage" Matthew

is a problematic Ginevra functions to expose and address. Beauty, then, is not an abstraction, or metaphor, or a method of calling attention to the female figure by means of visual description, though it is, of course, all these; beauty is a concrete engagement with the discourses surrounding woman.

The search for a female belonging is the search for unity through fracture, and the discovery of a female determination (on the part of the author) to formulate the disciplining and silencing of woman's beauty and art as a new way to see, to express, and to speak.

Arnold, "Hunger, rebellion and rage," Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, ed. Miriam Allott, Casebook Series (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1973) 93. All the same, the book's difference from contemporary standards was also seen as refreshing. G.H. Lewes, in an unsigned review in the *Leader*, noted that *Villette* was "an *original* book. Every page, every paragraph, is sharp with *individuality*". G.H. Lewes, "From an unsigned review in the *Leader*, 12 February 1853," The Brontës: the Critical Heritage, ed. Miriam Allott, The Critical Heritage Series (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) 185." Lewes also praised the author of *Villette*, for possessing a mind of "independent originality", from which springs "[c]ontempt of conventions in all things, in style, in thought, even in the art of storytelling [...]" G.H. Lewes, "'Ruth' and 'Villette'", *Westminster Review*, April 1853," The Brontës: the Critical Heritage, ed. Miriam Allott, The Critical Heritage Series (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) 210.

Chapter 2

Rosalie Murray's plight in Anne Brontë's Agnes Grey.

Coquettish beauty functions in Agnes Grey as the all-embracing term for the sacrifice and denial woman has to perform upon her own self and desires in order to become fit to enter the heaven of domesticity. Much more than Villette, Agnes Grey uses the coquette to expose the powerful ideological work through which women were disciplined towards domesticity and ideas of angelic womanhood. Much more than Villette, Anne Brontë's text reveals this process to be violent, and dependent on the women themselves learning not to see incongruities, injustices, and even cruelty in the code of domesticity. The method which Anne Brontë uses to express her anxiety over this silencing, is Rosalie Murray, the novel's playful coquette, and her relationship to Agnes Grey, who is Rosalie's governess and the novel's protagonist.

Lamenting Mr Weston's attraction to Rosalie²⁵⁴, Agnes will say melodramatically that "my only consolation was in thinking that, though he knew it not, I was more worthy of his love than Rosalie Murray [...] for I could appreciate his excellence, which she could not; I would devote my life to the promotion of his happiness [...]" (199). The Angel in the House is in this passage contemplating Lady Lilith. Anne Brontë has placed Agnes and Rosalie in marvellous juxtaposition but not, it seems to me, in order to glorify the former and vilify the other. Through Agnes, we witness the violent way in which the Angel in the House myth established itself through exorcising any elements relating to female eroticism, rebellion and to the abuse of the female by the male of the species. The erotic woman is a monstrous and evil thing, any abuse she might suffer is surely deserved. "... if he could but know her hollowness, her worthless, heartless frivolity – he would then be safe"²⁵⁵ (199).

²⁵⁴ It is not at all improbable that there was attraction from Mr Weston's side. When he sees Agnes and Matilda after Rosalie's marriage, Mr Weston asks first about Rosalie, giving only a "brief salutation" to the two young women (207). He goes on to say that it is "a pity that one so young, and gay, and ... and *interesting*, to express many things by one [...] should be thrown away on such a man. It was her mother's wish I suppose?" Agnes has fully sensed the hidden concern in his words, for she retorts, "Yes; and her own too, I think, for she always laughed at my attempts to dissuade her from the step" (208). In fact, Mr Weston is much more understanding than Agnes concerning Rosalie's marriage to Sir Thomas.

²⁵⁵ All the references to Agnes Grey in this chapter come from Anne Brontë, Agnes Grey, ed. Angeline Goreau (London: Penguin Books, 1988).

At the novel's end, Agnes counts her money and her blessings. Nevertheless, domesticity and devoutness triumph *only* if the tough issues relating to women are ignored; only if the abuse of women *is made invisible*. There were reactions to the dominant ideology on women and marriage during the Victorian period; however, Agnes's narrative is not one of them. Rosalie is generally seen as degenerate and unprincipled²⁵⁶; yet, this is only Agnes's view of her, repeatedly unexamined by critics. As we shall see, there are grounds to regard her otherwise. Her problematic marriage situation must not be left to be explained solely by Agnes as a personal failure to be a good wife and a devout woman; it must be seen in the Victorian framework of divorce and domestic abuse.

Marriage and Domestic Abuse in the Victorian Era

Rosalie is not so clearly an example of wifely failure equalling personal immorality; rather, she finds herself in a plight not uncommon to women in the Victorian era, a plight overlooked by Victorian patriarchy, and a cause for concern for more enlightened thinkers. Rejecting the playful and erotic womanhood Rosalie represents becomes in Agnes Grey rejecting a woman's plea for rights against her neglectful and abusive husband. The easeful manner in which this is done is a cause of anxiety for the author, who uses the coquette's story and her attachment to the protagonist to fully express the dire consequences for women when important women's issues are dismissed in this way.

In Agnes Grey, first-person narration ensures that a set of norms which are socially constructed (domesticity as the only proper way of life) appear as normalcy, as common-sense, as obvious and true. However, the incongruence between what is happening (domestic abuse inside Ashby Park) and what Agnes sees to be happening (failure of wifely duty on the part of Rosalie Ashby) hits back on the idea of normalcy itself. Normalcy operates in a Procrustean fashion, to discipline all instances of abnormality, sin, disease.

²⁵⁶ Rosalie is described as an "unprincipled flirt" in the Oxford Companion to the Brontës: Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith eds., The Oxford Companion to the Brontës (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) 329. She is grouped by Terry Eagleton with "the indolent offspring of the rich (Terry Eagleton, Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës, 2nd ed. (London: The Macmillan Press, 1988) 67) the "insufferable Murrays" (Eagleton 122) and the "vain, shallow, egoistic upper class" (Eagleton 126). Agnes herself speaks of Rosalie's "heartless coquetry" (195) her "bad use" of beauty, her vanity and heartlessness (180).

Coquetry, however, shifts the focus upon the female experience. “It is too bad to feel life, health and beauty wasting away, unfelt and unenjoyed, for such a brute as that!” exclaims Rosalie, bursting into tears (237). Nineteenth-century patriarchal society lamed young women for life, says Sandra Gilbert²⁵⁷. Inside her gilded cage, Rosalie is no more a living, breathing woman than one of the “graceful figures” carved in marble, which she bought and brought from Italy (231). In her own words, she is “a prisoner and a slave” (237). The allusion Rosalie makes to slavery is notably topical. As Mary Poovey explains, “[a]fter the abolition of slavery in 1833, women became the paradigmatic case of human property in Britain”²⁵⁸.

Rosalie’s tragic words provoke only a lukewarm and prudish response from Agnes. “Of course, I pitied her exceedingly, as well as for her false idea of happiness and disregard of duty, as for the wretched partner with whom her fate was linked” (237). Prudishness and Christian self-righteousness make Agnes actually *pity Sir Thomas* for the wife he has chosen. Agnes takes no notice whatsoever of Sir Thomas’s faults as listed by Rosalie: “his betting-book, and his gaming table, and his Lady this and Mrs that – and his bottle of wine, and glasses of brandy” (237). Agnes exemplifies what Frances Power Cobbe has called “the indifference of the public on the subject [of wifely abuse]”²⁵⁹.

It should be mentioned here that, despite the general indifference, there was, between the 1820s and the 1870s, increased awareness and revulsion against wife-beating and “other forms of physical-force patriarchy”²⁶⁰; a revulsion which Agnes notably does not even consider plausible, let alone share. The Divorce Court, thought Frances Power Cobbe, had righted “the most appalling wrongs to which members of a civilized community could be subjected”; and had revealed marital secrets “which must tend to modify immensely our ideas of English domestic felicity”. Not only working-class men, not only gentry, but also middle-class gentlemen were violent and brutal to their wives²⁶¹.

²⁵⁷ Sandra Gilbert, “Looking Oppositely: Emily Brontë’s Bible of Hell,” New Casebooks: *Wuthering Heights*, ed. Patsy Stoneman, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1993) 141.

²⁵⁸ Mary Poovey, Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England, Women in Culture and Society (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) 75.

²⁵⁹ Frances Power Cobbe, *Wife-torture In England (1878)*, “Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors”: Victorian Writing by Women on Women, ed. Susan Hamilton (Ontario, Can.: broadview press, 1995) 132. Though we are not told whether Sir Thomas physically abuses Rosalie, we are told that he is a drunkard and adulterous; she has been losing weight and her looks, and is not allowed to follow him to London, but is confined to the country-estate.

²⁶⁰ John Tosh, A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England (New Haven, Yale UP, 1999) 61.

²⁶¹ Frances Power Cobbe, “*Celibacy v. Marriage (1862)*”, “Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors”: Victorian Writing by Women on Women, ed. Susan Hamilton

In her astonishing capacity to actually pity the reprobate husband for the wife he has chosen, Agnes fully embodies not only patriarchal precepts²⁶², but also the most conservative version of those precepts. She indeed reacts against an education system which privileges males²⁶³, but this is the only patriarchal premise she reacts against.

Though it is obvious that Sir Thomas is a failed husband, Agnes can only think of *Rosalie's* disregard of duty. She looks "shocked" when Rosalie speaks of how Harry Meltham followed her up to London (232). This reaction further shows the extent to which Agnes is identified with patriarchal norms and modes of thought. In the Victorian era, adultery "was frequently defined as the most transgressive form of sexual deviancy," says Lynda Nead.²⁶⁴ For a man, marital infidelity was defined as:

regrettable but unavoidable; for a woman, however, it was the betrayal of her father, her husband, her home, and her family. In other words, whilst male infidelity received a limited sanction, female purity and monogamy were regarded as essential features of the patriarchal family.

An act of adultery was, for a woman, "unnatural and irrevocable"²⁶⁵. It violated her femininity and the fall from virtue was final. Furthermore, female adultery was "represented as a consequence of abnormal and excessive sexual feelings; desires which [were] defined as commonplace in man [were] treated as a form of madness in woman"²⁶⁶. This is reminiscent of Agnes's comparison of Rosalie's flirtation with Mr Weston to dogs gorging themselves with food. None of Sir Thomas's failings as a husband moves Agnes as much as the idea that Rosalie met Harry Meltham in London. Hearing Rosalie whisper "I detest that man," for the man passing on horseback (236) Agnes is "unwilling to suppose that she should so speak of her husband" (237). "If the mistress be a wife, never let an account of her husband's failings pass her lips," was Mrs Beeton's decree²⁶⁷.

(Ontario, Can.: broadview press Ltd, 1995) 81-82.

²⁶² Tosh believes that marital cruelty was not seen as evidence that patriarchy was "rotten to the core", but as an aberration from benign patriarchal rule. Tosh 62. Agnes will not even grant the possibility that there were aberrations from a generally benign patriarchal system; the system is, in her eyes, *absolutely* benign.

²⁶³ As Stevie Davies suggests. Stevie Davies, "'Three distinct and unconnected tales': *The Professor, Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights*", *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 87.

²⁶⁴ Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1988) 48.

²⁶⁵ Nead, *Myths* 49.

²⁶⁶ Nead, *Myths* 50.

²⁶⁷ Mrs Beeton, *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*, ed. Nicola Humble (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 10.

In this scene, the wife's considerable distress is taken into no account; the husband's "blotchy" face, "the sinister expression about the mouth and the dull, soulless eyes" (237) noticed by Agnes, can not be interpreted in any negative manner against him. The rule remains unchanged and is inflexible. Responsibility for the success of the marriage lies solely on the wife. If the man was not leading a noble life, the wife had to ennoble him. One reason for the indifference on the subject of wife abuse, said Cobbe, was "the prevalent idea [...] that the woman [...] generally deserve[s] the blows that she receives"²⁶⁸. Another piece of advice Agnes gave Rosalie was this: "But could you not try to occupy his mind with something better; and engage him to give up such habits? I'm sure you have powers of persuasion, and qualifications for amusing a gentleman, which many ladies would be glad to possess" (235). This is the proper wifely duty, set out by Agnes, patriarchy's Angel in the House.

However, the novel is an exposition of the dangers lurking in angelic womanhood ideals; a further way this is achieved is by commenting on the lack of sex education for women, and the consequences this had on their marriage options and choices. Agnes Grey uses Rosalie to speak for the necessity of a sex education for women. "[B]ut it's too late to regret that now," says Rosalie, recognizing that she should have listened to Agnes initially and not married Sir Thomas. "[B]esides, mamma ought to have known better than either of us; and she never said anything against it – quite the contrary [...]" (237). I do not agree with Elizabeth Langland who says that Rosalie lacked the understanding to have concern for her own future with such a man²⁶⁹. It is preferable to say that she lacked the education to appreciate the full consequences of her actions. Women were not educated about sex, because this would imperil their innocence. However, "innocence" was just a courteous term for ignorance, argued Mary Wollstonecraft²⁷⁰. Rosalie laments

²⁶⁸ Cobbe 134. The machinery of the law was so slow to deal with this problem that, as late as 1891, Millicent Garrett Fawcett could write: "It is not the women who have no husbands, but the women who have bad husbands, who are most deserving of compassion – women, whose stories appear week by week in the newspapers, who are driven to suicide by the nameless and hideous brutalities they have been subjected [...]" . Millicent Garrett Fawcett, "The Emancipation of Women (1891)", 'Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors': Victorian Writing by Women on Women, ed. Susan Hamilton (Ontario, Can.: broadview press, 1995) 263.

²⁶⁹ Langland 103.

²⁷⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, ed. Miriam Brody (London: Penguin Books, 2004) 58. On Anne Brontë's relationship to Mary Wollstonecraft's work, Langland believes that Wollstonecraft's Vindication expresses Anne beliefs succinctly. Anne Brontë's emphasis on educating women to develop their capacities for reason links her with the Enlightenment feminism of the late eighteenth century. "[Anne] Brontë's position on the moral nature and status of women and on female education bears striking similarities to those expressed by Wollstonecraft. At the

that ignorance; there were things which both she and Agnes could not have known, young and inexperienced as they were²⁷¹. It was a cause of alarm for Anne Brontë that women were kept ignorant of the facts of life. She revisited this theme in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall²⁷² (1848), specifically stating that it was her wish to educate girls and boys alike with her book. In her Preface to the second edition of Tenant, Brontë will say: "... I know that such characters [as may be found in the novel] do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain"²⁷³.

Anne Brontë's concern with sex education for women became pressing later in the nineteenth century. Angelique Richardson draws attention to Florence in George Egerton's Virgin Soil (1894), who berates her mother for delivering her body and soul into the hands of a profligate man²⁷⁴. Florence will say, "[y]ou gave me to a man [...] knowing that the meaning of marriage was a sealed book to me, that I had no real idea of what union with a man meant [...]"²⁷⁵. This could have been Rosalie speaking, instead of Egerton's Florence. Still, Terry Eagleton sees Rosalie at Ashby Park "almost as morally unregenerate as ever"²⁷⁶. Is this because she turned her eyes on a man who was not her excellent husband? Or is this because Agnes has taken care, even before she arrived at Ashby Park, to say that by accepting Rosalie's invitation "[I] did violence to my

heart of both writers is the conviction that, if women have immortal souls, then they must be educated in the proper and rational exercise of virtue. Langland 39. In 1843, Anne had purchased a copy of Hannah More's Moral Sketches of Prevailing Opinions and Manners. More was not a feminist, but she had read and was influenced by Wollstonecraft's Vindication. Langland 40.

²⁷¹ Rosalie was strongly attached to her mother. "I really was [charming]— or so mamma said" (134); "mamma told me [that] the most transcendent beauties [at the ball] were nothing to me" (134); "mamma says I should not mind [that Sir Thomas is ugly] after a few months' acquaintance" (135); "I wish [Mr Hatfield would propose to me tomorrow] [...] that I might just shew [mamma] how mistaken she is in supposing that I could ever [marry below my station]" (172).

²⁷² Called Tenant from now on.

²⁷³ Winifred Gerin, Anne Brontë: A Biography (London: Allen Lane; Penguin Books Ltd, 1959) 277. Gerin cites the Preface in full, 276-77. The epithet "thoughtless" is precisely what Mr Weston, much kinder than Agnes, uses to characterize Rosalie Murray (208). In Tenant, Helen Huntingdon voices concerns that could refer to either herself or Rosalie Murray from Agnes Grey. Girls are "tenderly and delicately nurtured, [...] taught to cling to others for direction and support" (33-34). Girls grow up to be like hothouse plants (34), but Helen declares that she "would not send a poor girl into the world, unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path [...]" (34).

²⁷⁴ Angelique Richardson, introduction, Women Who Did: Stories By Men and Women 1890-1914, (London: Penguin Books, 2005) liii.

²⁷⁵ George Egerton, "Virgin Soil," Women Who Did: Stories By Men and Women 1890-1914, (London: Penguin Books, 2005) 111.

²⁷⁶ Eagleton 128.

feelings”? “I made a great sacrifice for her,” says Agnes and goes on to interpret everything that happens at Ashby Park as indeed a great sacrifice on her part; she prefers to wait without breakfast or a candle, and does not ring the bell to be serviced. “[Y]ou must ring for everything you want, just as you would in an inn, and make yourself comfortable”, were Rosalie’s precise words (235).

Agnes’s parting advice to Rosalie is as follows: “I exhorted her to seek consolation in doing her duty to God and man, to put her trust In Heaven, and solace herself with the care and nurture of her little daughter” (238). Anxious “lady-like self-denial” Gilbert would call it²⁷⁷. Griselda Pollock believes that femininity is a “social role” and “psychic condition” which, in the Victorian era, meant “silence, pleasant appearance, deferential manners, self-sacrifice”²⁷⁸. The powerful ideology surrounding women’s roles meant that women “were expected to find the commands of duty and the delights of service sufficient, in fact ennobling, boundaries for their lives”²⁷⁹.

This is Agnes’s belief, which she is trying to enforce on Rosalie and which, through dominance of the point of view, has made sure the reader shares. It is one of the functions of the spectacular woman to upset the dominant point of view, by belonging to an-other discourse – the discourse of beauty which centres on and involves the beautiful woman’s own point of view. Coquetry in *Agnes Grey* is an account of all the obstacles patriarchy places in the path of woman; an account of the various ways in which Victorian society disempowered women and made them invisible.

Bettina L. Knapp does point out that *Agnes Grey* is “a feminist novel” which speaks out against, inter alia,

the legal status of married women who had to give over their dowries and fortunes to their husbands, thereby reducing them to slave status and keeping them virtual prisoners of their own homes. In *Agnes Grey*, [Anne] Brontë pleaded for self-fulfilment for women and equality of the sexes²⁸⁰.

²⁷⁷ Gilbert 143.

²⁷⁸ Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2003) 148. Pollock is speaking of the programme of “drastic re-education” models like Jane Burden(Morris) and Elizabeth Siddall underwent before marrying into the middle class.

²⁷⁹ Hilary M. Schor, “Gender Politics and Women’s Rights,” *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, eds. Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing (Madden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005)172.

²⁸⁰ Bettina L. Knapp, “Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey*: The Feminist; ‘I must stand alone’,” *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, eds. Julie Nash and Barbara

However, Knapp does not fully grasp the extent of Agnes's implication in patriarchal mores, and the consequences this has for our reading of the novel. Knapp will only say that the failure of Rosalie's marriage "was, to Agnes's mind, an example of Divine intervention"²⁸¹. This is probably true as far as Agnes is concerned; yet, it would be simplistic to believe that the novel suggests that Providence is using marriage as punishment or reward for women. I believe that Anne Brontë is showing that the convention which required an abused wife to perform her marital duties, all the while praying silently and piously for patience and strength, was a tragically inadequate and insufficient guide to life. An anonymous contemporary reviewer could contentedly point out that "Agnes Grey teaches us to put every trust in a supreme wisdom and goodness"²⁸²; Langland believes that, in Agnes Grey, Anne Brontë furthers our instruction through the protagonist's, and cites Agnes's advice to Rosalie as an example²⁸³. Contrariwise, it seems to me that Agnes Grey is pointing out that, to expect God to provide a solution to marital abuse and domestic violence, is to choose to remain ignorant of the realities of life, and to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to human pain and despair

Rosalie's words invariably fail to move Agnes. Rosalie becomes the space where two discourses meet: the cult of domesticity, and a discourse concentrating on the woman's plight. The silencing the former performs on the latter leaves so many questions unanswered, that it makes the voice of discontent all the louder. "The best way to enjoy yourself is to do what is right, and hate nobody. The end of Religion is not to teach us how to die but how to live; and the earlier you become wise and good, the more happiness you secure" (238). Rosalie's enclosed life and powerlessness in the hands of her husband clearly show that Agnes's advice fails to address the harsh realities of problematic situations. "What is right" is a heavily connoted term, and is usually determined in a society by those in a position of domination over a weaker group: the men over the women, the white population over a black population, the heterosexual group over the homosexual group, and so on and so forth. Who is "wise" and "good" in such circumstances? The person who embraces the dominant orthodoxy, no doubt. In On Liberty, Mill spoke against the tyranny of public opinion, and the violence done on

A. Suess, *The Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001) 63.

²⁸¹ Knapp 70.

²⁸² Unsigned Notice, "*New Monthly Magazine*, January 1848, lxxxii, 140," The Brontës: the Critical Heritage, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974) 229.

²⁸³ Langland 116-17.

someone's existence when he or she is forced to live in a way the others in society approve²⁸⁴.

What is required to rectify problematic and wrongful situations is not appeal to providence, or to an orthodoxy which justifies the dominant ideology. Often, what is required is legal, social and institutional reform. The common law rule which provided that a man could not rape his own wife was abolished only in 1991²⁸⁵. Sadly, prayer and a life of religious virtue could not protect the wife in a marital rape situation; and a husband could not be convicted of rape if the victim was his own wife (the wife was considered unable to withdraw the consent to sexual intercourse which she had given at the time of the marriage). To resist the devouring force that was patriarchy²⁸⁶, a woman needed the support of the law and social institutions, not pious self-negation. Agnes is simply shown to be incapable of comprehending the exact meaning of Rosalie's plight.

Rosalie Murray is used to chart an examination of marriage which is unconventional, but continuous with contemporary critiques of the constraints marriage and marriage laws imposed upon women. In Agnes's prudish response to Rosalie's plight, Anne Brontë laments the failure of domestic religiosity to either address or redress problematic issues within marriage in any satisfactory manner. What Rosalie's story makes clear is the inability of Agnes's religious and domestic beliefs to offer answers and solutions to the potential abuse of women inside marriage. It would be a mistake to read Agnes as a reliable narrator, who is giving us the authoritative and only possible interpretation of the text. Agnes is a fallible and unreliable narrator, and seeing her as such allows for a wide and controversial interpretation of female experience in the text.

Agnes as Narrator

Any credible discussion of the coquette in Agnes Grey must examine Agnes as narrator, because not only does she perform specific ideological work, she also has complete mastery over point of view. Nothing comes to the reader except as seen, censored, and (mis)interpreted by her. Only a thorough examination of Agnes as narrator affords us with a clear view of the text's rhetoric on women, beauty and sexuality.

²⁸⁴ John Stuart Mill, On Liberty (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1897) 3.

²⁸⁵ In 1991, in *R* [1991] 4 All ER 481, the courts decided that there was no rule that a husband cannot be guilty of rape of his wife: Smith and Hogan's Criminal Law, ed. John Smith (London: Butterworths LexisNexis, 1992) 472.

²⁸⁶ Gilbert 146.

All in all, Agnes has been considered as a clear-sighted narrator with remarkable powers of objectivity. She gives us events from a coolly objective distance, says Angeline Goreau²⁸⁷. Dara Rossman Regaignon speaks of Agnes as a “reliable first-person narrator,” who offers “a fairly transparent account of events [...]”²⁸⁸. Eagleton commends Agnes for her “moral excellence” and “unruffled objectivity”²⁸⁹. Agnes’s judgment of Rosalie has been accepted so unconditionally, that *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës* describes Rosalie as follows: “Rosalie [is] a slender, fair beauty with *some* talent for music and languages [...] she encourages her admirer Harry Meltham *even after* her marriage to [Sir Thomas] Ashby”²⁹⁰. Rosalie’s talent for languages and music is viewed with suspicion and is qualified; further, it is assumed that encouraging Harry Meltham was wrong, despite Sir Thomas’s abusive behaviour towards his wife, which has become invisible, because of Agnes’s regard for marriage placing an absolute and irrevocable duty upon the wife. Agnes’s judgment of Rosalie goes completely unexamined, and is taken as absolute fact – as “truth”.

However, this chapter argues that Agnes is an unreliable narrator, capable of mistaken assumptions, and with an unclear view of events. An unreliable narrator is defined by the *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* as a narrator whose account is partial, ill-informed, or otherwise misleading²⁹¹. A close examination of the way Agnes presents events, and of her own behaviour in the context of her family, i.e. in a context away from the Murrays, will suggest exactly this: that her account is partial, and that she is in no way constructed by Anne Brontë without failings herself.

In constructing Agnes Grey, Brontë has created an example of virtue pridefully inflated to the extent of approaching conceit. During her first days with the Murrays, Agnes tells us that the Murray girls actually began to esteem her at a later stage, and reverts to the third person, speaking from the position of Rosalie and Matilda, to catalogue her own sterling qualities for us readers. Let us examine what is her opinion of her own self, while she is imagining that it is Rosalie and Matilda who are speaking:

²⁸⁷ Angeline Goreau, introduction, *Agnes Grey*, by Anne Brontë (London: Penguin Books, 1988) 46.

²⁸⁸ Dara Rossman Regaignon, “Instructive Sufficiency: Re-reading the Governess through *Agnes Grey*,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 29 (2001):96.

²⁸⁹ Eagleton, 124.

²⁹⁰ Italics mine. Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) 329-30.

²⁹¹ The same dictionary notes that most third-person narrators are reliable, but some first-person narrators are unreliable: Chris Baldick, “Narrator”, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford Paperback Reference (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004) 166.

[Miss Grey] never flattered, and would [...] be very agreeable and amusing sometimes, in her way, which was quite different from mamma's, but still very well for a change. She had *her own opinions on every subject and kept steadily to them* – very tiresome opinions they often were, as *she was always thinking of what was right and what was wrong*, and had a strange reverence for matters connected with religion and an unaccountable liking to good people²⁹² (129).

Suggestively, it is quite odd that Agnes has been seen as a character committed to self-examination²⁹³, when she herself makes an express admission of her unwillingness to examine any of her beliefs. Agnes's belief that she is right in "every subject" is shown in the novel to be easily transformed into a belief that one is capable of being every person's moral judge.

Moreover, upon closer inspection, the vices Agnes condemns in others seem to be her own vices as well. She strongly condemns Mr Murray's treatment of his "hapless dependants" (119) and the Murray girls for their snobbish behaviour towards the poor cottagers in their father's estate. For Agnes, the Murray girls were uncivil and scornful towards the cottagers (144).

Let us now turn first towards Agnes's own attitude towards the Murray servants. The maid is a "mincing damsel" (116); the lady's maid spoke "with the air of conferring an unusual favour". Agnes's luggage was brought into the room by "a rough-looking maid and a man, neither of them very respectful in their demeanour to me" (117). This is what she thinks of the servants as a class. "[T]he domestics in general [are] being ignorant and little accustomed to reason and reflection". As for the *Murray* servants, they "were not of the best order to begin with" (128). Agnes views the servants as chattels, or goods²⁹⁴.

²⁹² Italics mine.

²⁹³ By Davies, see Davies, *Unconnected Tales* 84. Also, Larry H. Peer notes that in *Agnes Grey*, Anne Brontë portrays Agnes "in the act of growth". Larry H. Peer, "The First Chapter of *Agnes Grey*: An Analysis of the Sympathetic Narrator," *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, eds. Julie Nash and Barbara A. Suess, The Nineteenth Century (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001) 16. Peer believes that *Agnes Grey* is a "true bildungsroman" (22). This is a characteristic of the novel I am unable to see. Agnes does go out into the world, and she does marry, but fails to develop in any way, or change the view she holds most dearly, i.e. that she can give an infallible judgment on every circumstance and in relation to any person.

Agnes's religiosity is of the kind which is strict and self-congratulatory, to the extent that it approaches bigotry and conceit. This is accompanied with a desire for martyrdom, which can not be satisfied by the actual events of her life. Thus, events are bent to satisfy this desire. For example, she refuses to be comfortable, and relishes every circumstance which will give her an opportunity to express complaints and dissatisfaction. She is even willing to risk her own health, if this will allow her to complain further. Agnes would sit on the damp grass with her pupils, "foolishly choosing to risk the consequences, rather than trouble them for my convenience" (128). Yet, she has troubled the reader to a great extent with how her "convenience" was constantly overlooked²⁹⁵. Once in a while, she thought of resigning, feeling "ashamed of submitting to so many indignities" (128). But she soon wonders why she cannot endure, and considers that Christian humility requires her to show forbearance (129). Agnes wishes to be a Christian martyr, carry a torch, wear a crown of thorns. She will refuse Mr Weston's invitation to come sit by the fire, though she is cold (159), and his offer for an umbrella, though she is being drenched by the rain (189).

There is a whole web of circumstances which Agnes interprets mistakenly; a whole web of relationships, causes and effects upon which she forces her own fallible interpretation. Importantly, this extends to her own family's need of aid and support. On the point of resigning, she adds melodramatically, "but for *their sakes* at home, I smothered my pride and suppressed my indignation" (126: italics mine). If this little passage is read on its own, it will be supposed that Agnes was the breadwinner in the family and that, upon her meagre salary alone, depended the family's very survival. Indeed, critics uphold Agnes's version of events, and picture her as a young woman who must work for her own survival and her family's. For Goreau, Agnes is "motivated" to

²⁹⁴ Patricia Ingham believes that Agnes's "hostility is a means for keeping the servants at a distance without which she will lose caste. With the local villagers, or 'the cottagers' as she calls them, the case is different: since she comes from the local grand house, she can act the lady bountiful and assert her rank". Patricia Ingham, *The Brontës, Authors in Context* (Oxford: OxfordUP, 2006) 109. In fact, Ingham is among the few critics willing to concede a fault to angelic Agnes and to her aforementioned comment must be added that the "lady bountiful role" suggests that Agnes treats the cottagers in a manner which is not much different from that of the Murrays. Like Rosalie and Matilda, Agnes is condescending, patronizing, and relishes the gratefulness, admiration and servility shown to her during those visits. See, for example, her patronizing and dismissive attitude to a widow called Brown in 145-46, 150, 153.

²⁹⁵ For example, Agnes is quick to underline that Mrs Murray was worried about the comfort of the children, "but never once mentioned mine" (121); and engages in strong complaints of how she did not take her meals at regular times, and how the servants did not respect her (128). Her "convenience" is quite important in the text, but it can be overlooked when it affords a nice excuse for complaining.

seek employment by her father's "narrow income"²⁹⁶. She wants to "contribute" to the family's "dwindling finances"²⁹⁷. Regaignon notes that, in the novel's end, the Westons enjoy a happily married life, and "we also learn that the next generation of Westons will be financially secure and, consequently, that small Agnes and Mary will not face their mother's trials"²⁹⁸. Yet this is what *Agnes herself* has already told us:

[N]o one would touch a shilling of what I had [...] earned [from the Bloomfield position] [...]. By dint of pinching here, and scraping there, our debts already were nearly paid. Mary had good success with her drawings, but our father insisted upon *her* likewise keeping all the produce of her industry to herself (109).

The girls had put their earnings into "the savings bank" (109). In fact, Agnes's mother, Alice, objects to Agnes seeking another position even immediately after the financial disaster. Alice Grey firmly declares that, "There is no necessity, whatever, for such a step [i.e. for Agnes to become a governess]" (169). Agnes is no Lucy Snowe, left alone in the world, without friends, funds, or sources of income. There is a marked disparity between what Agnes thinks or sees, or thinks she sees, and what seems to be the "reality" of the story.

This is part of who Agnes Grey is – we are urged to take her as inexperienced – perhaps pity her inexperience, and be concerned by it. Her mistakes are to be read through, not taken as infallibility and unmediated truth. Rather the novel comments on the mistakes a young woman is likely to make once she considers herself incapable of making mistakes. The picture which emerges if we look at Agnes *inside her own home* is of an immature and obstinate young girl. To her father, for example, who is not in favour of the governess plan, Agnes will say, insolently, "don't *you* say anything against it" (68: italics original), earning a rebuke from her mother: "you must hold your tongue, you naughty girl" (69). Anne Brontë is showing us the dangers lurking once an immature young girl takes a role for which maturity and knowledge of life and of other people is required, as well as the blunders she is bound to fall in. Significantly, all of Mrs Grey's fears about Agnes's unfitness to be a governess materialize in the course of the book.

Far from being a clear mirror of characters and events, Agnes is but an angle from which to see things, a chosen point of view. Ada Harrison and Derek Stanford admire

²⁹⁶ Goreau 37.

²⁹⁷ Goreau 39.

²⁹⁸ Regaignon 101.

Anne Brontë for allowing Agnes “the reality of ordinary brown hair”²⁹⁹. However, creating a heroine with brown hair does not automatically mean that Anne Brontë is giving us unmediated reality in Agnes Grey. To choose an “ordinary” heroine is as much a strategy as to choose a beautiful one. Objectivity is ultimately the sign of objectivity³⁰⁰. As Pollock argues, “no one writes without inscribing a point of view on that which is written: language is an ideological practice of representation”. Truths are produced, and knowledge is enmeshed into the workings of power.³⁰¹ The realist mode of signification has been noted for the way it compellingly makes *inscription* pass as mere *description*³⁰².

Agnes Grey subtly constructs an inscription which very much resembles description, by having an ordinary-looking young woman recount her story; nevertheless, this is precisely the point. Ordinarity in the Victorian age involved a male-centred order, structure and explanation of experience. Agnes Grey is an effect of the text, a product of her age and time, and a specific way for the story to be presented, not an objective account of events, and a mouthpiece for the author. Anne Brontë can not easily be identified with Agnes Grey. This is a very important point for the theme of women’s sexual beauty and rights within marriage. For, if Anne Brontë is Agnes Grey, we would merely have been able to say that the message of the text is that women who make a bad choice in marriage must simply suffer and be still, for ultimately the failure is personally theirs; and that sexuality and one’s erotic identity becomes, in a woman, something which is excessive, slothful and a sin.

Anne Brontë and Agnes Grey

Consequently, to be able to discuss beauty and the female experience in any fruitful way, we must separate Anne Brontë from Agnes Grey³⁰³. If the two were

²⁹⁹ Ada Harrison and Derek Stanford, Anne Brontë – Her Life and Work (Essex, UK: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1959) 229.

³⁰⁰ Roland Barthes, Image-Music-Text, trans. Stephen Heath (Glasgow, UK: Fontana, 1977) 18. Besides, as has been argued, the account is not objective, it merely presents itself as such.

³⁰¹ Pollock 141-142.

³⁰² Pollock 171. Italics original. Pollock makes this argument in the context of her investigation into how the misspelling “Siddal”, as against the historical personage Elizabeth Siddall, has been used as a sign for the genius of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (131). Pollock believes that even William Rossetti’s first-hand accounts of Lizzie Siddall can function ideologically (141).

³⁰³ The *Oxford Companion to the Brontës* lists many qualities Agnes Grey shares with her creator (such as courage and determination, 227) and Goreau maintains that “Anne Brontë herself insisted on the autobiographical ‘truth’ of her novel. The first line of Agnes Grey establishes the novel as a ‘true history’” (Goreau 37). Nevertheless, it is

identical, the text would have very little to say about women's rights and the abuse of those rights within Victorian patriarchy. This chapter argues that the author and her creation are two separate entities, and grounds the argument on biographical data, and Tenant, Anne Brontë's later work which, in its revolutionary treatment of women's issues, could not have been the work of a woman sharing any characteristics with Agnes Grey.

For Winifred Gerin, Anne Brontë was a woman of "great integrity," whose suffering had left her "not self-righteous, but overwhelmed with a sense of failure, defeat and humiliation"³⁰⁴. This is quite far from Agnes's voice, whose doctrinaire and self-satisfied tone produces a suffocating effect on the reader. Moreover, I have earlier noted Agnes's religiosity and strict devotion to duty, which produces a need to be affirmed through a compulsive list of complaints and discomforts. From a letter of Charlotte's, we learn of Anne's "admirable quality of enduring acute asthma without complaint. Anne bore her suffering, said Charlotte, 'as she does all affliction, without one complaint,'"³⁰⁵. Further, Anne Brontë seems to have been self-deprecating, and spoke about having a "bad hand" at writing and talking³⁰⁶. In a letter to Reverend David Thom, she spoke about a cause close to her heart – her faith in the doctrine of Universal Salvation. "... I have cherished it from my very childhood [...]. I drew it secretly from my own heart and from the word of God before I knew that any other held it. And since then it has ever been a source of true delight for me"³⁰⁷. Anne wrote delicately and kindly. Trying to persuade Ellen Nussey to accompany her for a period to Scarborough, where she thought she had a chance of recovery, she would say, "I see however that your friends are unwilling that you

the autobiography and true history of Agnes, not necessarily Anne's; it is true as far as Agnes is concerned. As Goreau herself notes, "[t]he author's assertion that the novel is a true history was of course a convention that originated with the novel-form itself more than a century before" (Goreau 38). It is not Anne who is "insisting", in the cited passage, but Agnes; and that she must do so is a strategy on the part of Anne. I believe that the exact relationship between the two figures (Anne as she comes out of biographical materials and her works, and Agnes Grey) is a subject to be investigated, and that the two women (Anne as far as we can know her and the fictional Agnes Grey) can not be conflated.

³⁰⁴ Gerin 249.

³⁰⁵ Michael Armitage, comment on Anne Brontë's letter to Ellen Nussey of January 1848. "Letter to Ellen Nussey, 26 Jan. 1848," The Letters of Anne Brontë, ed. Michael Armitage, Anne Brontë – The Scarborough Connection, 24 Nov 2007 <http://www.mich-armitage.staff.shef.ac.uk/anne/letters.html>.

³⁰⁶ "Letter to Ellen Nussey, 26 Jan. 1848," The Letters of Anne Brontë, ed. Michael Armitage, Anne Brontë – The Scarborough Connection, 24 Nov 2007 <<http://www.mich-armitage.staff.shef.ac.uk/anne/letters.html>>.

³⁰⁷ "Letter to Reverend David Thom, 30 Dec. 1848," The Letters of Anne Brontë, ed. Michael Armitage, Anne Brontë – The Scarborough Connection, 24 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.mich-armitage.staff.shef.ac.uk/anne/letters.html>>.

should undertake the responsibility of accompanying me under present circumstances. But I don't think there would be any great responsibility in the matter"³⁰⁸. In the same letter, Anne was contemplating the possibility of death, and seemed remarkably critical of her own life, an approach which is absent from Agnes's contemplations: in telling her story, she shows a remarkable inability for self-examination. Anne would write: "... still I should not like [my future plans] to come to nothing, and myself to have lived to so little purpose"³⁰⁹. Anne's was a "deeply thoughtful nature"³¹⁰. I would agree with Gerin that *Agnes Grey* is "part autobiographical and part fictional,"³¹¹ which allows an analysis to consider the text as authentic and true to lived experience, without reducing it to "an obsessive reiteration of personal events"³¹².

Anne Brontë was not even plain, which further distances her from Agnes Grey: according to Langland, she was "the pretty one of the Brontës"³¹³. This is Ellen Nussey's description: "[h]er hair was a very pretty, light brown, and fell on her neck in graceful curls. She had lovely violet-blue eyes [...]"³¹⁴. Additionally, Anne Brontë seems to have had a different relationship with her pupils than Agnes did. "[D]uring her last few years she wrote many counselling letters to her former charges at Thorp Green, who turned to their former governess, rather than their mother, in times of trouble"³¹⁵. Anne was approached by her Robinson pupils, and was made the confidante of their family divisions³¹⁶. According to Charlotte, Anne was doing her best to cheer and counsel one of the girls, who had gotten engaged to a man her mother had chosen for her and to whom

³⁰⁸ "Letter to Ellen Nussey, 5 Apr. 1848," *The Letters of Anne Brontë*, ed. Michael Armitage, Anne Brontë – The Scarborough Connection, 24 Nov 2007 <<http://www.mich-armitage.staff.shef.ac.uk/anne/letters.htm>>.

³⁰⁹ "Letter to Ellen Nussey, 5 April 1848".

³¹⁰ Gerin 222.

³¹¹ Gerin 231.

³¹² This is the term Lee A. Talley (note 9, 147) uses to describe the effect Charlotte Brontë's idea that *Tenant* was a detailed reproduction from Anne's life is having on the novel itself. A novel is a "deliberately designed work of fiction". Lee A. Talley, "Anne Brontë's Method of Social Protest in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, eds. Julie Nash and Barbara A. Suess, The Nineteenth Century (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001) 147 –see note 9. An example of biographical claims taken to extreme lengths is when *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës* considers "the handsome, flirtatious" Reverend William Weightman (to whom Anne Brontë is said to have been attracted) to have been the real-life model for "the plain, serious Edward Weston" (69).

³¹³ Langland 11.

³¹⁴ The description is cited in Langland 10-11.

³¹⁵ As Armitage points out. "The Letters," *The Letters of Anne Brontë*, ed. Michael Armitage, Anne Brontë – The Scarborough Connection, 24 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.mich-armitage.staff.shef.ac.uk/anne/letters.htm>>.

³¹⁶ Gerin 241.

she was utterly indifferent. This girl clung to her former governess as if she were her only true friend³¹⁷. “[F]or the rest of her life [Anne] remained the valued friend of the Robinson girls”³¹⁸. I do not draw parallels between this real-life story and Rosalie Murray’s, as it came after the writing of *Agnes Grey*³¹⁹. I am merely suggesting that Anne Brontë must not have been so repelled by governessing as Agnes Grey had been and, if not anything else, that she seemed to have shown a willingness to understand a young privileged woman’s problems. Anne Brontë had an unhappy governessing experience at Blake Hall in 1839³²⁰ and was also unhappy at Thorp Green, writing in her diary paper of 30 July 1845 that she had “just escaped” from it, and that “during my stay [there] I have had some very unpleasant and undreamt of experience of human nature”³²¹. However, Langland believes that those negative comments possibly refer to Branwell, and his affair with Mrs Robinson. According to Langland, “Anne held her position at Thorp Green for five years [...]. Anne was so successful as governess³²² that, when the family decided it

³¹⁷ Gerin 243.

³¹⁸ Langland 16.

³¹⁹ Anne mentions beginning the third volume of *Agnes Grey* in her diary paper of 30 July 1845. “Anne’s Diary”, *The Shakespeare Head Brontë*, ed. Thomas James Wise and John Alexander Symington, vol. 2 (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press-Basil Blackwell, mcmxxxii) 52. Gerin believes she began *Agnes Grey* most likely “in her second year at Thorp Green, in 1842” (231). The novel was published together with *Wuthering Heights* in December 1847. Anne’s correspondence with the Robinson girls happened in 1848 (Gerin 242).

³²⁰ Langland 14.

³²¹ Anne Brontë, *Diary* 52.

³²² Juxtaposing Brontë’s reported success at her profession with Agnes’s failures, we may wonder whether Agnes’s example is used as a caution, to outline the reasons why a young woman with Agnes’s attributes would be unfit for the governessing profession. Agnes’s family find her decision to go work as a governess astonishing (68). Agnes confesses that she and her sister know little of society (62) but Agnes does not worry, because she feels that she is “fond” of children (68). Many “young women of all classes and all degrees of capability rush into governessing,” Dinah Muloch Craik noted with dissatisfaction. There are “not two out of that number [that] are fit to be governesses”. Does any one pause to reflect “what a little child is?”. Dinah Muloch Craik, *A Woman’s Thoughts About Women* (London, 1858) 43-44. Agnes’s decision is rash and unwise. Jane Eyre worked for two years as a teacher at Lowood before deciding to apply for a position as governess (98). (References to *Jane Eyre* are from: Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Michael Mason (London: Penguin Books, 1996)). She was well aware that this new position would be another “servitude” (99, 100) and exhibited common sense enough in deciding to request a position where she would be teaching children under fourteen: “I thought that as I was barely eighteen it would not do to undertake the guidance of pupils nearer my own age” (101). Instead of Agnes’s flights of fancy, Jane experiences “doubts and fears” (108) and does not fail to ponder the possibility that she may not get along with her charge: nevertheless, she will say, “I will do my best” (109). James R. Simmons Jr and Regaignon have noted certain of Agnes’s shortcomings as governess, but have not considered the implications Agnes’s fallibility may have for the validity of her judgments on other people. (See James R. Simmons Jr, “Class, Matriarchy and Power:

was time to locate a tutor for their son, Anne was able to successfully recommend Branwell". The Robinsons so "well valued" Anne and Branwell, that they invited Mr Brontë to visit Thorp Green in April of 1843. Anne would purchase teaching materials, "which indicate the commitment she felt to her charges and her growing competence to instruct them"³²³.

Rosalie Murray, Helen Huntingdon and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

It is important to note that Anne Brontë did not dismiss the problem issues contained in Rosalie Murray's story in the same off-hand manner Agnes Grey did. Tenant, Brontë's more mature and well-crafted novel³²⁴ addresses these issues in detail. In this novel, Brontë depicts a woman who defies social and legal conventions to leave her abusive husband and set up an independent living as an artist. Langland states that Tenant "rewrites the story of the Fallen Woman as a story of female excellence. In so doing, it takes on a radical feminist dimension"³²⁵. Unlike Agnes Grey, Anne Brontë did not turn a blind eye to the plight of woman in her culture. Quite the contrary; she

Contextualizing the Governess in *Agnes Grey*," New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë, eds. Julie Nash and Barbara A. Suess, *The Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001) 37, 26 and Regaignon 89. Being a governess was a highly complex profession (Poovey 128). Being busy all day with the supervision of pupils was a common enough duty (M. Jeanne Peterson, "The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society", Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1972) 8). Rather than a cause for shock and dismay, it should have been anticipated by Agnes. It was important for the governess herself to "possess some fortitude and strength of mind to render herself tranquil or happy [...]". Nelly Weeton Stock, "The trials of an English governess: Nelly Weeton Stock," Victorian Women: a Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States, eds. Edna Olafson Hellestein, Leslie Parker Hume and Karen M. Offen (Brighton, UK: The Harvester Press Ltd, 1981) 346. This was because she would normally find herself isolated inside the household; neither a servant, nor an equal with the family. Agnes's dreams of glory while on her way to her prospective employers, are countered by her unwillingness to deal with problematic situations at her work in any constructive manner.

³²³ Langland 16-17.

³²⁴ Elizabeth Langland says: "In writing *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Anne Brontë achieved a dramatic narrative and philosophical advance from *Agnes Grey*". Style, technique, character and development of themes differ substantially. "There is also a new thematic depth, an increasingly mature handling of theme, and a deepening grasp of the ways in which form and subject interpenetrate". Elizabeth Langland, Anne Brontë: The Other One (London: Macmillan, 1989) 118.

³²⁵ Langland 119.

continued to work on this theme in the novel which followed Agnes Grey, and came up with “a feminist manifesto of revolutionary power and intelligence”³²⁶.

Unlike Rosalie Murray, Helen Huntingdon is sober and religious-minded. However, she is physically attracted to her husband, and is neither prudish nor priggish when it comes to flirting and relationships. “This woman, a devout Christian, is also passionate”³²⁷. Helen gladly dances with Arthur Huntingdon, and admires his “graceful ease and freedom” (135) and his “laughing blue eyes” (136). When Arthur tells Helen that he adores her, she is excited physically, so that her Aunt Peggy, who comes to interrupt the conversation, will say “but please to stay here a little till that shocking colour is somewhat abated, and your eyes have recovered something of their natural expression. I should be ashamed for anyone to see you in your present state” (147). Davies explains that “the shocking colour” is “the blush of sexual arousal, complicated by rage”³²⁸.

Both Rosalie Murray and Helen Huntingdon in part fall victim to the common belief that the woman possessed the power to redeem her husband through marriage. Rosalie is unhappy with the idea of marrying rakish Sir Thomas, but takes comfort in the thought that a rakish man can be reformed through marriage: “reformed rakes make the best husbands, *everybody* knows”. Besides, her mother has guaranteed that “he’ll be alright when he’s married” (172). The “virtuous woman who will reform a rake” myth, which Davies calls “a favourite female myth of the mid-nineteenth century”³²⁹ is another trap into which Rosalie falls.

This is a concern to which Anne Brontë returned in Tenant. In Agnes Grey, as in Tenant, Anne Brontë shows how easy it was for a young girl to be fascinated with the idea of marrying a reprobate in the belief that he would make an excellent (reformed) husband. Rosalie is led into the trap by her mother; Helen Huntingdon, cleverer and maturer, is led into the trap despite being warned by her Aunt Peggy against marrying rakish Arthur Huntingdon. “Oh, Helen, Helen! You little know the misery of uniting your fortunes to such a man!” (150). Helen’s aunt often repeated this advice (132, 135). As if referring to Mrs Murray in Agnes Grey, Aunt Peggy will say that mothers who are anxious to catch a young man of fortune without reference to his character are “unprincipled” (150).

Had Anne Brontë been Agnes Grey, she would not have been able to conceive of such a mature yet adaptable character as Helen Huntingdon. Helen seems able to

³²⁶ Stevie Davies, introduction, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, by Anne Brontë (London: Penguin Books, 1996) xi.

³²⁷ Talley 132.

³²⁸ Davies, introduction 506 (n.8 to chapter 17).

³²⁹ Davies, introduction xvii. The myth, says Davies, was used to great effect in Samuel Richardson’s Pamela (1740).

consider the female point of view; Agnes was unable to consider it. To Esther Hargrave, who is pressed by her mother to make a marriage for wealth, Helen will not only say to stand firm against it, but also that “remember that you have a right to the protection and support of your mother and brother, however they may seem to grudge it” (374-75). Though Helen returns to tend to her ill husband, Anne Brontë appreciates that it is impossible for her to fulfil all her wifely duties. Helen feels that she can no longer return the fondness her husband expresses occasionally (433). For Agnes, duty to husband is supreme, monolithic and absolute; Anne Brontë’s conception is different, for she appreciates the complexities and intricacies of duty.

Significantly, Helen escapes an abusive husband, defying social conventions and norms of accepted feminine behaviour. Almost all of the analysis of Helen Huntingdon and her actions in *Tenant* could equally apply to Rosalie Murray’s case in *Agnes Grey*. “[Arthur] Huntingdon’s behaviour is not an isolated instance; it belongs to a social norm for elite males,” says Davies³³⁰, and Sir Thomas Ashby could have belonged to Huntingdon’s group of friends. “Helen’s diary builds a case against the marriage laws of Anne Brontë’s day [...]. Helen has no redress against her husband’s raids on decency. She cannot obtain a divorce when his adultery [...] is detected [...]”. The husband of one of Huntingdon’s mistresses can and does obtain a divorce, because he is “a male and a peer”. Helen has no legal right to her possessions, and must even steal her child from her husband. “It is important to recognize that the tenant of Wildfell Hall lives outside the law; is an outlaw [...].”³³¹ In the diary’s radical disruption of the more comfortable narrative layer of Gilbert Markham’s diegesis, *Tenant* shows us “how badly Markham, his family and the community desire to remain ignorant of the truth, preferring instead to believe an easier story³³², and constantly circle around the truth”³³³. This is also Agnes’s stance to the realities of abusive husbands and female desires and needs. In *Agnes Grey*, Rosalie’s marriage to Sir Thomas works to explode “the myth of domestic heaven, and exposes the domestic hell [...].”³³⁴ Helen Huntingdon provides the answers to Rosalie’s questions, the answers which Agnes was unable and unwilling to give. Prayer, devotion and piety – Agnes’s answers – would not have helped Helen Huntingdon; what is required is action, and illegal, clandestine action at that.

³³⁰ Davies, introduction xxv.

³³¹ Davies, introduction xviii.

³³² The community is divided among those who believe Helen to have been a widow, and those who believe her to have been Frederick Lawrence’s mistress and mother of his illegitimate son.

³³³ Talley 136.

³³⁴ Words Langland uses to describe *Tenant*. Langland 24-25.

Beauty's Punishment

Agnes rather exemplifies the damage caused by narrow, moralistic ideals upon a woman's soul; in fact, she shows the self-effacement and self-sacrificing, redemptive female ideal in an extreme form, with her evinced desire to present herself the suffering victim of reprobate people, and her professed ability to pass judgment on those surrounding her.

Sadly, and perhaps appropriately, it is Rosalie who enacts Agnes's desire for martyrdom. For it is Rosalie who is condemned in the end to remain the neglected wife of an abusive husband, and it is she who embodies all the attributes a woman has to learn to eliminate if she will become an angel. Agnes Grey is a clear example of how the angelic woman, methodically and determinedly, must explain all erotic and self-centred desires as sinful and deviant. Coquetry is the means by which this process is illuminated. Coquetry is a chart of the process by which erotic and desiring womanhood is exorcised, rendered invisible and made redundant.

In her treatment of Rosalie Murray, Anne Brontë has produced an intriguing instance of a female voice speaking for a woman's right to an erotic life, through the medium of a female voice committed to patriarchal values. Agnes is fully identified with male-dominated views of female sensuality, in a manner graver than Lucy Snowe. In *Agnes Grey*, Agnes is the medium through which Rosalie's story is not only inscribed, but also annihilated. From the start, Agnes gives us a self-proclaimed prejudicial account of Rosalie; the younger girl's beauty is immediately established as a cause for distraction and misrepresentation. When the two first meet, Agnes's partial judgment on Rosalie is ambiguously qualified by Agnes herself. After giving us a lovely visual description of Rosalie³³⁵, Agnes says, "I wish I could say as much for her mind and disposition as I can for her form and face" (121). Given that the form satisfied the highest standards of beauty, the surmise is that Rosalie's mind must be twisted and her disposition immoral. The reader is given the impression that Rosalie is some monster of perversity and depravity. As if to mock the reader, Agnes is quick to add, "Yet think not I have any dreadful disclosures to make" (121). Indeed, the reader knows "not" what to "think". From that point onwards, Agnes embarks on presenting Rosalie in a very negative light. What makes Rosalie a special target, is that she shows an ability and desire to enjoy life, beauty and youth; Agnes will scornfully note that she looked forward to the dance with "the most extravagant anticipations of delight" (130). Yet the reality consistently seems

³³⁵ "[S]he was positively beautiful; and that in no common degree". Rosalie was "tall and slender, perfectly formed, exquisitely fair, but not without a brilliant, healthy bloom [...]" (121).

to be much better than Agnes actually thought possible. After the wedding Rosalie embraced Agnes “with more affection than I thought her capable of evincing” (203).

Rosalie’s playfulness looks dangerous and sinful in Agnes’s eyes. Rosalie is a destroyer of men, a Lady Lilith. Flirting is described by Agnes as “mischief” (194). Had Agnes read of Rosalie’s behaviour in a novel, she would have considered it “unnatural” (196). Thus, Rosalie “deserves” Sir Thomas, and “the sooner she is incapacitated from deceiving and injuring others the better” (195). Flirtation places blame upon the woman only. A flirtatious woman has to be “incapacitated”; her power is illegitimate; she has to be contained. In Agnes’s eyes, Rosalie possesses demonic beauty.³³⁶

Rosalie’s beauty is subjected to continuous translation by Agnes, and is given the meaning of gluttony, perversion and bestiality. The guiding principle in Agnes’s thoughts is the well-being of men. Rosalie’s is the “destructive power”³³⁷ that leads men to their doom (187). Observing Rosalie’s flirtation with Mr Weston, Agnes compares Rosalie to dogs which, “when gorged to the throat, will yet gloat over what they cannot devour, and grudge the smallest morsel to a starving brother” (196). Rosalie has blonde luxurious hair,³³⁸ often associated with sexual lust and lust for power in Victorian culture³³⁹. The thought of a woman having erotic power must be exorcised and shown as perverse. Agnes methodically translates a woman’s consciousness of and ease with her own sensuality into filth, ugliness and sin.

In this manner, Agnes can say that Rosalie spoke of Harry Meltham’s interest in her, at the same time “smiling *slyly* at her own fair image in the glass” (139. Emphasis mine). It is an offence for a woman to admire her own beauty. The word “slyly” is supposed to refer to Rosalie looking at her reflection and appraising her own power in a sinister way. Most probably, it means that consciousness of power on the part of a woman

³³⁶ In the nineteenth century, female beauty was either angelic or demonic, and this belief remained unaltered by ideas of evolution. Male beauty could be regarded as healthy animalism, but the healthy woman was an ugly beast of sexuality: Lori Hope Lefkowitz, The Character of Beauty in the Victorian Novel (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987) 33, 38.

³³⁷ Virginia M. Allen, “‘One Strangling Golden Hair’: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Lady Lilith”, The Art Bulletin 66 (1984): 286.

³³⁸ “[H]er hair was of a very light brown, strongly inclining to yellow” (121); “her bright ringlets escap[ed] profusely from her little bonnet (170)”.

³³⁹ Elisabeth G. Gitter, “The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination”, PMLA 99 (1984) 936, 943.

is *itself* sinister. She is danger³⁴⁰. Like Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*³⁴¹, Rosalie is seen by Agnes to contemplate her features in the mirror with voluptuousness and self-applause³⁴².

Beauty marks the presence of the woman, but also the annihilation of that presence by a female gaze (Agnes's) which has been conditioned to look at things in a certain way. The text never directly gives us Rosalie's own thoughts or facial expressions in the scene opposite the mirror. We are given only Agnes's interpretation of them. Agnes steps in front of Rosalie's image in the mirror, precluding us from seeing anything but her own interpretation of the meaning of Rosalie's stare. According to Michael Ferber, the symbolism of a mirror to a large extent depends on what one sees in it – oneself, the truth, the ideal, illusion³⁴³. In this instance, Rosalie is precluded from seeing anything in the mirror. It is Agnes who is seeing, and subjects Rosalie to what Mieke Bal calls “the colonizing mastery” of the agent who is doing the looking, the voyeur³⁴⁴. Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*, in Kathy Alexis Psomiades's interpretation, is not objectified in the eyes of a male viewer. The viewer is subjected to her, because he cannot see her face in the mirror. The woman's stare remains mysterious³⁴⁵. “Lilith has a second self she knows but the viewer does not”. This is an inner, deeper self³⁴⁶. In the *Agnes Grey* mirror scene, it does not matter what Rosalie knows but what Agnes, blocking the image for us readers, will let us know. Rather than being a powerful Lady Lilith, Rosalie suffers her image – and therefore her second, deeper self—to be eroded. According to Mieke Bal, the questions, “whom is being seen,” and “who is not seeing” are important. Bal sees

³⁴⁰ The word “slyly” occurs once more in relation to Rosalie, and is used while Rosalie is escorted in her walk by Mr Hatfield. According to Agnes, “Rosalie's fair cheek [was] flushed with gratified vanity, her smiling blue eyes, now slyly glancing towards her admirer” (170). When a woman takes the initiative and flirts, she is being sly. Rosalie is absorbed by Agnes, who witnesses her actions, and who masters her “fair image”. The way the flirty woman is being interpreted by Agnes performs the work of ideology, and consolidates views about “proper” feminine behaviour and sphere of activity.

³⁴¹ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, Delaware Art Museum. Wellington, Delaware.

³⁴² This is Pollock's description of the woman pictured as *Lady Lilith*, Pollock 196-7.

³⁴³ Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) 124.

³⁴⁴ Mieke Bal, *Looking In: The Art of Viewing* (Amsterdam, Neth.: G + B Arts International, 2001) 62.

³⁴⁵ Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) 128.

³⁴⁶ Psomiades 129.

visuality as a motor of narrative, especially in focalization³⁴⁷. Under Agnes's severe and disciplinary stare, Rosalie is being seen, while unseeing³⁴⁸.

Coquetry expresses, therefore, the image woman must learn not to see, in her quest to write herself as domesticity's angel in the house. Coquetry reveals this process to be a powerful form of purge; and to make playful womanhood invisible, Agnes uses the powerfully visible images of gluttony and bestiality. In Agnes's eyes, playful beauty possesses attributes of the demonic.

Demonic Beauty

Actually, Agnes's ruminations on female beauty are an excellent example of a specific form of female reaction to female erotic beauty, to which Anne Brontë draws attention, and expresses concern about.

In Agnes's reality, the sensual woman's beauty is the ugliness of the demon. In the chapter titled "Confessions" (192-202), Agnes considers the subject of beauty. She describes herself as ordinary, and bitterly imagines Grecian features and beautiful eyes which, though deemed preferable, are actually "devoid of sentiment" (192). The "angel [whose] form conceals a vicious heart," will always shed "a false, deceitful charm over defects and foibles" (193)³⁴⁹.

However, it is Agnes who is the true angel, with spiritual love in her heart. Indeed, Agnes tries to purge her own erotic feelings towards Mr Weston; she goes to church in order to see him, but this makes her feel that she was "mocking God with the service of a heart more bent upon the creature than the Creator". She quiets her thoughts by telling herself, "It is not *the man*, it is *his goodness* that I love" (188. Italics mine). Sexual love is exorcised from her thoughts. Playfulness and female sensuality are repellent to Agnes. She is close to the "sexless ideal" which, says Q.D. Leavis, was often

³⁴⁷ Bal, 61-2. Focalization is the term Bal prefers over "perspective" and "point of view" because, (1) the other terms indicate both the narrator and the vision, and (2) in a practical sense, no noun can be derived from the word "perspective" that can indicate the subject of the action; Bal, 44.

³⁴⁸ Pollock 210.

³⁴⁹ Then, Agnes moves to the nonsensical and the bathetic, describing Mr Weston as "her winged darling [fly]", who burrs looking for her; but she has "no power to make her presence known, no voice to call him, no wings to follow his flight"; so she, poor "worm", must "live and die alone". The beautiful woman, by contrast, is a "glow-worm", with the power of "giving light" (193). So beauty is only useful for attracting a mate. Not that far from Rosalie's ideas, or at least Rosalie's ideas as Agnes presents them.

used in the representation of marriage in Victorian fiction³⁵⁰. William Acton's exemplary mother, wife, and manager of household, who knows "little or nothing about sexual indulgences," and whose modesty means that she "seldom desires any sexual gratification"³⁵¹, is another conventional ideal Agnes seems to come close to. She condemns Rosalie for liking the company of the two servicemen "Such a party was highly agreeable to Rosalie; but not finding it equally suitable to my taste I presently fell back" (162). Earlier on, we may observe that not only is her statement that she did not notice Harry Meltham an express lie,³⁵² but was also followed by a condemnation of Rosalie and Matilda for noticing him themselves (142). Admiring a young man and being gratified by his attention, comes out as wrongful behaviour for a young woman. Agnes also has noticed Harry's looks and words (141-42). However, when the girls talk about him, Agnes is happy that their journey ends and the conversation stops (142). An illustration in a 1969 edition of Agnes Grey depicts the scene between Harry Meltham and the girls outside their carriage. One of them (it cannot be distinguished whether it is Rosalie or Matilda) is shown to look at Harry with goggling eyes, as if he is some sort of sweet-candy; the other girl has her mouth hanging stupidly open, as if she is talking to thin air or to herself³⁵³. What the picture suggests is in line with Agnes's perception of female-initiated flirting as gluttony, gorging and self-indulgence.

Thus, Agnes is the medium through which coquettish and erotic beauty (Rosalie) must be filtered in order to seem sinful and degenerate. We are able to distinguish a Rosalie who is different from the version Agnes (misre)presents to the readers, because Anne Brontë has given her a story which raises questions Agnes is unable to answer. Through Brontë's narrative technique, the coquette embodies not only the pleasure involved in being a beautiful woman, but also the tragedy this pleasure entails for a woman who finds herself in a religious and narrow social framework; she is used by the author as a site which exposes the disciplining of women into conformity with accepted standards as forceful and tragic. In Rosalie Murray, Anne Brontë has written the story

³⁵⁰ Q.D. Leavis, introduction, Jane Eyre, by Charlotte Brontë (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1985) 23.

³⁵¹ William Acton, "Want of Sexual Feeling in the Female," Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts 1830-1890, eds. Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: OxfordUP, 1998) 180.

³⁵² She notices that Harry's looks had improved since she last saw him (141) and describes Harry's actions in considerable detail, even adding her own bitter, "he had stood smirking and chatting with [the girls] and then lifted his hat and departed to his own abode (141-2).

³⁵³ Anthony Moore, lithograph, Agnes Grey (The Folio Society) 1969. between pages 80 and 81.

which must be deleted, if the story of domesticity is to write itself as dominant and triumphant.

Closure in Agnes Grey

The conclusion of *Agnes Grey* is a purging stronger than any Agnes has tried to effect on her own erotic feelings. Rosalie has faded into misery and obscurity, while middle-class ideals have been confirmed as the absolute key to happiness. The Angel in the House has “never found cause to repent [her marriage] and I am certain that I never shall” (250). The melodramatic is never absent, however, as Agnes is already lamenting “the final separation” (251). “[T]he glorious heaven beyond,” however, provides consolation. Actually, God the father is defined as a fountain of endless rewards for the worthy. He has “scattered” the gifts in the path of Agnes and Mr Weston. In turn, Mr Weston “has worked surprising reforms in his parish, and is esteemed and loved by its inhabitants – as he deserves”. Though Agnes fleetingly considers that her Edward has faults, she suddenly turns militant: “I defy anybody to blame him as pastor, a husband, or a father”. Edward and Agnes is another pair that may be seen as patriarchy’s Adam and Eve³⁵⁴. Their children “promise well”. They will never want for love or affection. Their education is “chiefly committed” to Agnes; she will ensure that patriarchal ideas will be transmitted to the next generation. Significantly, the first two children are themselves called Agnes and Edward, suggesting the continuum that will exist in values and attitudes between parents and children. The self-congratulatory tone is accented by the way Agnes describes their living circumstances: income which is “modest”, yet “amply sufficient”, a life of “comfort and contentment”, “something” every year to “lay by” for the children and the needy; one can only imagine Agnes and Weston carefully counting their money-coins to calculate how much is “amply sufficient” for the children, and then smugly saving something for those who are less lucky than themselves. The conclusion confirms an absolute happiness which is a type of existence remote from life as we know it; this costs the novel’s realistic claims.

Another problem with Agnes’s didacticism in the end is that perfection, or heaven, fits only one type of man or woman. To succeed in life, women must learn to see female sensuality as the sign of emptiness, and recognize any erotic feelings in themselves as sinful and improper. Agnes carries the torch of patriarchy, and ends the novel in the heaven of domesticity. However, there is a side of female experience which is left dark,

³⁵⁴ In the manner of *Villette*’s Dr John and Paulina.

despite the light of patriarchy's heaven. In Agnes Grey, the erotic side of woman drifts away, her questions unanswered and her needs unprovided for, while the Angel prospers and triumphs.

This is the function Rosalie's beauty has to fulfil in Agnes Grey. Beauty is the blood-price Rosalie has to pay for being flirty, artistic, exuberant, and independent-minded. In Villette, Ginevra Fanshawe managed to escape the clutches of patriarchy (even for Ginevra, the only way to have a fulfilled life was through marriage). Rosalie Murray does not escape. Agnes Grey shows that the sensual and beautiful woman must inevitably be destroyed, because there was no other possible way of accommodating her within existing ideologies. In the Agnes/Rosalie relationship, Anne Brontë dramatizes the dilemmas facing woman in Victorian culture and suggests that, when a woman chooses Agnes, as she must of necessity, she also turns a blind eye to crucial issues which directly influenced women.

Agnes's narrative silences Rosalie with method and care. Agnes's is the framing ideological narrative which contains Rosalie's story. Rosalie is a character worthy of attention because she develops through her own story. She is able to identify her mistakes, and is afforded *some clarity of vision* which is perhaps the only consolation to be had. "[A]nd finally, you shall see my new home – the splendid house and grounds I used to covet so greatly," she tells Agnes in her letter (227). Inside her drawing room, she will "frown vindictively upon the fair domain she had once so coveted to call her own" (232). To Agnes's inability of examining the mandates surrounding woman's nature and role, Rosalie opposes a form of critical judgment. "I would give ten thousand worlds to be Miss Murray again!" (237). But this cannot be; Rosalie functions to illustrate female belonging as an agonized search, which may offer no results.

Silencing does not necessarily mean that Rosalie's story lacks validity. What are we to make of Rosalie's story? Barbara Hernstein Smith, who notes that there is no single basic story in a narrative; there are multiple stories, and basic-ness is arrived at in accord with some set of principles that reflect some set of interests³⁵⁵. According to Bal, the responsibility for which meanings win the game is entirely social and political³⁵⁶. Domesticity wins, not because God is shown to sanction it, but through a violent stepping over woman and her interests. Though Rosalie recognizes what she has done, she does not humbly embrace Agnes's ideas. She still finds the notion that she has a duty to amuse Sir Thomas appalling and demeaning (235). Notably, Rosalie does not find a pious sort

³⁵⁵ Barbara Hernstein Smith, "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories," The Narrative Reader, ed. Martin Mcquillan (London: Routledge, 2004) 144.

³⁵⁶ Bal 73.

of happiness, and refuses to devote herself to motherhood. “But supposing I could be so generous as to take delight in [raising the child] still it is *only* a child; and I can’t centre all my hopes on a child; that is only one degree better than devoting oneself to a dog” (238). Though these words may sound callous, they do show the damage done to women when they are made to raise the offspring of a loveless marriage. Earlier, Rosalie expressed fear that the child “may grow so intolerably like its father that I shall hate it” (238).

Additionally, Rosalie never considers flirtation and enjoyment to be erroneous. In fact, she even speaks of Harry Meltham with affection, adding, “Poor fellow! He was not my only worshipper but he was certainly the most devoted among them all” (232). These are tender words, words Rosalie had never voiced before. Previously, she would speak only of Harry’s good looks, or deplore his younger-son status (139, 142). Rosalie’s story seems present in the text to cast doubt on patriarchy’s victorious narrative which is Agnes’s narrative. It is difficult to see Agnes’s narrative as a journey of development; the conviction of being right on each subject characterizes Agnes from the beginning of the novel to the end.

Nevertheless, her beliefs are shown victorious, not flawless. *Agnes Grey* entombs female eroticism in almost every conceivable way - literally, metaphorically, and in terms of narrative voice. Throughout the novel, Rosalie Murray is subjected to Agnes Grey’s cold, severe and relentless patriarchal stare. Closure is intriguing in *Agnes Grey*, because Agnes’s story does not answer in any way the terrible questions Rosalie’s story poses. Montgomery et al. define narrative closure as “the ‘tying up’ of the narrative, whereby loose ends are dealt with, problems are solved, and questions answered”³⁵⁷. In relation to women’s issues, *Agnes Grey* spectacularly *fails* to achieve closure, save for Agnes’s pious idea that devotion to God will help one overcome all difficulties. Sadly, prayer is completely irrelevant when it comes to marital infidelity, domestic violence and a woman’s rights to divorce. The dominant ideology fails to contain the embedded story, and this is part of the narrative’s poetics, which must be understood for the narrative to be “fully appreciated”³⁵⁸.

Rosalie’s story is an angle from which to view the dominant narrative so as to propose a reading of the novel that focuses on issues of female sexuality and

³⁵⁷ Martin Montgomery et al., *Ways of Reading: Advanced Reading Skills for Students of English Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992) 179.

³⁵⁸ According to Mieke Bal, texts embedded in a primary text (such as Rosalie Murray’s story embedded in the main story of *Agnes Grey*) are never mere story-telling devices, but part of the narrative’s poetics, and of the meaning of the text as a whole. Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, Can.: U of Toronto P Incorporated, 1997) 54.

independence; issues which the society could not accommodate in its structures and power-relations except by condemnation, containment and exclusion. Rosalie's blonde, shining beauty is transformed into emptiness by the premises of patriarchal culture and Agnes's determining narrative. Rosalie's story is there to suggest instances where an individual is separated from her/his society and is tragically afforded no viable ways of existing as a social being.

Thus, Agnes Grey is a darker novel than Villette. Like Ginevra Fanshawe, Rosalie Murray is talented in music. But whilst Ginevra is never absolutely silenced by Lucy, Rosalie's music is silenced in Agnes's numb reiteration of monolithic patriarchal values. For Mary Burgan, early Victorian novels had used the piano to "illustrate the foibles of social climbing and feminine artifice". Later fiction illustrated the meagreness of women's opportunities. "And eventually the possibility that music might become an instrument for feminine rebellion presented itself to the Victorian imagination [...]"³⁵⁹. However, music could never be a reliable means of escape³⁶⁰. Indeed, for Rosalie Murray music, far from being a means of escape, actually marks her as a woman who is merely decorative – a coquette-- and seals her doom³⁶¹.

For disciplinary society is all about concrete placement, and not possible choices which subvert placement. Panopticism means that "each individual is fixed in his [or her] own place"³⁶². One of the aims of disciplinary society is "automatic docility"³⁶³. The Panopticon machine is "a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole"³⁶⁴. The societal stare is Agnes's, and Anne Brontë is suggesting that the process through which Rosalie Murray is fixed in her place is a violent one. Agnes's happiness within the disciplinary society is total and complete. However, she can be happy only because she has turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to Rosalie's plight, only because she has chosen to answer Rosalie's questions in a way that gives no answer at all. The spectacular woman functions to place the female point of view at the centre of the reader's attention and show that a female-orientated concept of beauty as pleasure, with beauty as a search for belonging, is incompatible with thoughts of woman's mission. However, it is perfectly compatible with thoughts of woman as an individual,

³⁵⁹ Mary Burgan, "Heroines at the Piano: Women and Music in Nineteenth-Century Fiction," Victorian Studies 30 (1986): 76.

³⁶⁰ Burgan 76.

³⁶¹ Further, as in Villette, the condemnation of Rosalie's eroticism lends moral authority to the condemnation of her talent for music, languages and dance. She is the domesticated danger that must be contained.

³⁶² Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991) 195.

³⁶³ Foucault 169.

³⁶⁴ Foucault 207.

who may or may not perform the role society has chosen for her. Rosalie Murray denies the importance of motherhood and duty, and suggests that there are women who cannot be fulfilled through either marriage or child-bearing. For this reason, she stands to lose her individuality, her beauty and her art. The figure of the spectacular and frivolous woman inextricably links beauty, sensuality and art. In Villette, Ginevra remains attached to Lucy, and teasingly mirrors what Lucy stands for. Frivolous beauty survives very well in Villette, while at the same time proposing an essential relation between the woman's playful and dutiful sides. It does not survive in Agnes Grey. Still, it can point at cracks in the mirror patriarchy held up to nature –and can do so in a tragic, and thus powerful, manner. The dutiful side destroys the playful side, in order to triumph: but it is a triumph in which the winner is the loser, and the victory is thus ambiguous, contradictory, and insufficient.

Chapter 3

Frivolous Beauty in Charles Dickens's David Copperfield.

David Copperfield is an instance of how female eroticism can be disciplined to conform to acceptable narratives or stories, or versions of stories. However, alongside David's official version of his life's story, it is possible to read a story centred on the women, and the manner these women see each other. In this, less-than-official story, what is striking is not Dora Spenlow's difference from Agnes Wickfield, but their affinity, and the bond both women are able to form with Betsey Trotwood. Charlotte and Anne Brontë used the coquette to focus on the interior struggle through which women discipline themselves, and teach themselves not to see gaps in patriarchy's official narratives. In David Copperfield as indeed in Great Expectations, the focus is on the interiority of the male hero; however, Dickens in David Copperfield is also creating an example of a femininity which forms itself outside official narratives and existing dichotomies. As in the Brontë novels, coquettish beauty is a key element in reading this alternative, female-orientated, discourse.

David Copperfield records a group of women who refuse to see each other through male categories and male-defined lists of abilities. Aunt Betsey and Agnes appreciate Dora and look past her alluring appearance. Dora is given a position in a community of women solely on the basis of her affectionate nature, her goodness, tender feelings and musical talents. Neither Agnes nor Aunt Betsey is concerned whether Dora can shop for meat, or cook Irish stew, or manage the servants. Aunt Betsey refuses to teach housekeeping to Dora, because she values Dora's love more than a well-served meal; and tells David that it is his duty as a husband to accept his wife as she is, having chosen her freely for himself⁶⁵ (645).

This chapter argues that the novel records a division between a masculine-orientated and a female orientated world. In this scheme, Dora's characterization and interaction with the other characters is a way with which the female world can interrogate the male-centred world. The chapter begins with a brief examination of the characteristics of the male world, centring on how it seeks to define the female world; then it turns to the female world, the way it defines and makes itself a powerful and elemental presence in the novel.

⁶⁵ All references to the text of Daivid Copperfield come from the following edition: Charles Dickens, David Copperfield, ed. Jeremy Tambling (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

The male-centred world

The male-centred world is the world where women are defined in accordance with their relation to men, and for their usefulness to men; the world where men struggle in the public sphere, and wives are house-bound and angelic³⁶⁶. The true woman of Victorian patriarchal ideology is pure, nurturing, a mother-wife³⁶⁷. The “right choice” for wife is not the lively, dazzling woman, the coquette, but the unspectacular woman dictated by moral sentiment³⁶⁸. Dora threatens to undermine David’s rise to middle-class status, and must be removed³⁶⁹. Dora’s ineptitude at housekeeping makes her dangerous; what is at stake is not simply the finances of a single household, but the well-being of the society as a whole. Lynda Nead explains: “The establishment and maintenance of the domestic unit was the basis for social stability and order. Society was seen to be composed of a community of homes, and each of these units was a microcosm of society”³⁷⁰. In David Copperfield, the middle-class triumphs³⁷¹. Consequently, Dora’s function is seen by Kate Flint as “a moral warning to those young men who may be lured by empty-headed prettiness”³⁷².

In this tight network of male interests and concerns, the principal agent of discipline is David Copperfield himself. Gareth Cordery has called the novel David’s “panoptic prison”³⁷³. David exercises systematic control over the narration of his own experience and that of others. David’s own self-discipline consists in the chastening of his undisciplined heart³⁷⁴. While Uriah Heep is eventually guarded by the prison

³⁶⁶ Sean Purchase, “Domesticity”, Key Concepts in Victorian Literature, Palgrave Key Concepts (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 44-46.

³⁶⁷ Peter T. Cominos, “Innocent Femina Sensualis in Unconscious Conflict”, Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1972) 168.

³⁶⁸ Beth Newman, Subjects on Display: Psychoanalysis, Social Expectation and Victorian Femininity (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2004) 73.

³⁶⁹ As Eric Berlatsky has observed. Eric Berlatsky, “Dickens’s Favourite Child: Malthusian Sexual Economy and the Anxiety Over Reproduction in *David Copperfield*”, Dickens Studies Annual 31 (2002) 109.

³⁷⁰ Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1988) 33.

³⁷¹ Chris R. Vanden Bossche, “Cookery not Rookery: Family and Class in *David Copperfield*,” New Casebooks: David Copperfield and Hard Times, ed. John Peck, Contemporary Critical Essays (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995) 32.

³⁷² Kate Flint, Dickens (Sussex, UK: Harvester Press, 1986) 118.

³⁷³ Gareth Cordery, “Foucault, Dickens and *David Copperfield*”, Victorian Literature and Culture 26 (1998): 81.

³⁷⁴ D.A. Miller, The Novel and the Police (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988) 216.

authorities, David is gently guided at home; the difference between the liberal subject and his carceral double³⁷⁵ being that David constitutes himself against discipline, by assuming that discipline in his own name³⁷⁶. David records in his story his own disciplining into social norms and regulations³⁷⁷. His “panoptical position as central character gives him total control and omniscience. All characters are subject to David’s disciplinary gaze: he controls, observes, and allocates roles in the prison that is his novel within which his characters (and himself) are trapped”³⁷⁸. For example, David fixes Agnes in the role of Angel; he always sees her in the context in which she appeared to him that first time -- a figure in a stained glass window -- and refuses to release her from that context³⁷⁹. Agnes is David’s ultimate haven³⁸⁰. “Agnes, my good Angel! Always my good Angel!” (374).

The disciplining and positioning of women comes out as an essential part of the cult of domesticity and Victorian patriarchal ideology. Dora Spenlow and Agnes Wickfield, David’s first and second wives, are special targets of this disciplining. Alongside David’s story of Agnes, which is the story of a figure in a stained glass window, there are elements of another story. Even as a child, Agnes is haunted by the idea that she has done injury to her father. From a very early age, she bears an immense amount of guilt. “In [Agnes’s] suffering and dedication to her father, Dickens suggests a part of the reality of Agnes,” notes Jackson³⁸¹. Despite being her father’s constant companion as a young woman, Agnes will tell David that she fears she has been her father’s “enemy”, because he concentrated his mind on her (377). A guilt which appertains to the father (Mr Wickfield has taken to wine and brooding) is felt by the child, thrown into adult responsibility from a small age. Though it is true what Camille Colatosti says, that Dickens shows his heroines to be willing slaves³⁸², and there is no

³⁷⁵ Miller 219.

³⁷⁶ Miller 220.

³⁷⁷ Cordery 71.

³⁷⁸ Cordery 80. Cordery believes that the text “positions” the reader so as to make her or him comply with its ideological underpinnings. However, he does point out that the reader “of the 1990s” can resist “such demands; the reader of the 1850s was less able to do so” (81).

³⁷⁹ It may be argued that David made the association because of the circumstances he was in back then. He had just come out of a terrible ordeal; he had just found happiness and peace after a period of acute misery. The setting was also important. The house was clean, polished and quiet like a monastery, and Agnes was a polite and calm girl.

³⁸⁰ Robert R. Garnett, “Why Not Sophy? Desire and Agnes in *David Copperfield*,” *Dickens Quarterly* 4 (1997): 226.

³⁸¹ Arlene M. Jackson, “Agnes Wickfield and the Church Leitmotif in *David Copperfield*,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 8 (1978) 64.

³⁸² Camille Colatosti, “Male versus Female Self-Denial: The Subversive Potential of the Feminine Ideal in the Fiction of Charles Dickens,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 19

shade of self in the “secular Madonna” who is Agnes³⁸³, Dickens examines how such kind of woman could have come about. Agnes has never been a child³⁸⁴.

Naomi Wolf has described the life of Victorian women as a form of domestic bondage³⁸⁵. Before we meet Agnes herself, we learn of the clean, wholesome house (228) and we have a look at her mother’s portrait. The portrait indicates the position mother and daughter occupy in real life; it is the portrait next to that of the patriarch of the house, it is “the other” portrait (229). We are not told whether the lady depicted is engaged in any activity; we only learn about her “sweet” and “placid” face (229). Conversely, the man in the portrait (Mr. Wickfield) is associated with power and action. He is “looking over some papers tied together with red tape”; what Sandra Gilbert calls “all the paraphernalia by which patriarchal culture is transmitted from one generation to the next”³⁸⁶. Woman is a painted facial expression; woman is placidity and sweetness; a portrait hanging next to the figure of an active man. And small Agnes is, in David’s narrative, already the woman in the portrait; the only action she is engaged in is the action patriarchy is training her for – namely, housekeeping. “[C]ome and see my little housekeeper,” says Mr. Wickfield (232). Agnes has the basket of keys hanging from her waist; she is a girl patriarchy would make a portrait of, to set up an as an example – in fact, she is a girl patriarchy has *already* made a portrait of.

When it comes to coquettish, playful Dora, David himself will try to form her mind, acting in a way which is reminiscent of Edward Murdstone’s treatment of Clara Copperfield. When Dora insists that it is “dreadful” for her to think that she is engaged to a poor man, David insists that she endeavour to learn “accounts” and read a “little Cookery book”. He insists so strongly, and Dora is becoming by degrees so upset, that eventually he is forced to say, “I thought I had killed her, this time [...]. I denounced myself as a remorseless brute and a ruthless beast” (548). This description fits David only slightly, and Edward Murdstone exactly. Forming a wife’s mind is a phrase which has a “promising sound,” for David; it is a “common phrase,” too (700). All David’s words to describe his actions in relation to forming Dora’s mind bespeak of oppression and arbitrary exercise of power. “I found myself in the condition of a schoolmaster [...] of always playing spider to Dora’s fly [...]”. David perseveres, “even for months” (701).

(1990): 9.

³⁸³ Slater 252.

³⁸⁴ Garnett 228.

³⁸⁵ Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women (London: Vintage, 1990) 62.

³⁸⁶ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the 19th Century Imagination, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000) 81.

The spider simile is quite telling. In this instance, David is being a saner version of Edward Murdstone. His aim is to form Dora's mind to his "entire satisfaction", and seems to quit only because he finds that all this time, "I had effected nothing" (701). According to Margaret Flanders Darby, "David kills Dora just as surely as Murdstone killed Clara: the resemblance between the two women, and of both deaths, through a bullying rhetoric, through "forming", is stressed. "Child-wives", in all their sexy littleness, are murdered by marriage"³⁸⁷. Clara is killed by deliberate cruelty, while Dora is killed by kindly neglect³⁸⁸. Both women fall ill and die in consequence of pregnancy, which is one link the novel makes between sexuality, marriage and death³⁸⁹.

Indeed, the beautiful, playful and erotic form of womanhood embodied by Dora Spenlow and Clara Copperfield is shown as deathly in the novel. This is reflected, in an extreme form, in the Steerforth and Little Em'ly plot, where the young woman's sexuality and erotic appeal cause not only the death of her two suitors, but of her own sexuality as well; in Australia, little Em'ly devotes herself to a life of celibacy. As the narrative unfolds, David attempts to "recover the irrevocable mother"³⁹⁰, whose death was caused by marriage to Murdstone and childbirth, i.e. by active sexuality. S.D. Powell reads David Copperfield as the record of David's serial attempts to find suitable substitutes for his parents"³⁹¹. Back in his mother's arms after absence from school, David will say enigmatically, "I wish I had died. I wish I had died then, with that feeling in my heart!" (121). Clara's beautiful presence is the end (both goal and ending) of existence. The days when his mother and himself were "all in all to one another" were "like a dream I could never dream again," David will say. If you cannot dream a dream again, maybe you can try to live it. The moment he first sees Dora Spenlow, David recognizes her³⁹². Dora's appearance and behaviour identify her with Clara Copperfield³⁹³. As Mary Poovey puts it,

³⁸⁷ Margaret Flanders Darby, "Dora and Doady," Dickens Studies Annual 22 (1993): 165-6.

³⁸⁸ Christopher Mulvey, "David Copperfield: The Folk-Story Structure," Dickens Studies Annual 5 (1980): 91.

³⁸⁹ David even sees Dora's miscarriage in terms of his own needs. He speaks of the miscarriage by relating it to his own desire for a housekeeper wife. "I had hoped that lighter hands than mine would help to mould [Dora's] character [...]" (704).

³⁹⁰ Virginia Carmichael, "In Search of *Beein'*: *Nom/Non Du Pere* in *David Copperfield*," New Casebooks: David Copperfield and Hard Times, ed. John Peck (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995) 129, 131.

³⁹¹ S.D. Powell, "The Subject of David Copperfield's Renaming and the Limits of Fiction," Dickens Studies Annual 31 (2002) 50.

³⁹² Carmichael 139, 133.

³⁹³ Mulvey 89.

“Dora is explicitly presented as another version of Clara Copperfield³⁹⁴. First sight of Dora represents the lost unity with the mother³⁹⁵.

Dora Spenlow is Clara Copperfield’s double. Their beauty is both coquettish and deadly. David Copperfield dramatizes the dangers the Victorian age termed to be inherent in female sexuality as literal and real. Victorian medicine, says Wolf, treated menstruation as a chronic disorder. Menarche was the first stage of mortal danger, as it was possible that the woman would prove unable to resist the weakness of her female nature³⁹⁶, and thus experience sexual desire. “The desire for sexual love [in the novel] ends in death,” says Virginia Carmichael³⁹⁷. Dora is overtly sexual in a novel which tends to discipline all sexuality³⁹⁸. The reality of sex is denied, nullified, negated³⁹⁹. What remains is the reality of the mortal danger. David sometimes seems to assign playful beauty to the deep recesses of the past. Clara’s beauty is linked to the twilight and the passage of time. “A great wind rises, and the summer is gone in a moment. We are playing in the winter twilight [...]. When my mother is out of breath [...] I watch her winding her bright curls around her fingers, and straitening her waist [...]” (28). Clara often stands at the garden gate, a location associated with parting in the text (“So I lost her. So I saw her afterwards [...]” (133)). And one of the final ways David imagines Dora addressing him from the “crowd” in his “memory” is, “Stop to think of me – turn to look upon the little blossom, as it flutters to the ground!” (769).

Agnes as David sees her is not only a guide and a monitor, but also an Angel of Death. Agnes is the great example in Dickens’s work of the woman whose angelic qualities help to ease man’s passage from earth to heaven; David prays to her at the end of the novel⁴⁰⁰. Their house belongs to a “mythologized domestic pastoral” tradition⁴⁰¹. In David’s imagination alluringly beautiful women have been associated with death, so Agnes must of necessity be seen as an angel. Agnes is the angelic part of his beloved mother, faraway from sexual love and death. Fearful of the death which surrounds pretty,

³⁹⁴ Mary Poovey, “The Man of Letters Hero: *David Copperfield* and the Professional Writer,” New Casebooks: *David Copperfield* and *Hard Times*, ed. John Peck, Contemporary Critical Essays (London Macmillan Press, Ltd) 85.

³⁹⁵ Newman 70.

³⁹⁶ Wolf 222-3.

³⁹⁷ Carmichael 138.

³⁹⁸ Berlatsky 121.

³⁹⁹ Another attempt is through the womb-like, secure and delightful boat at Yarmouth, where David sees a family that is no family. Mulvey 81.

⁴⁰⁰ Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1983) 307.

⁴⁰¹ Berlatsky 117.

playful women, David constructs a narrative around Agnes by which he purges her of physical or sexual elements, and thus of death.

Therefore, erotic female beauty in David Copperfield may be seen from the masculine point of view as fatal, and destructive of narratives of home, angelic wifehood, saintly motherhood and middle-class prosperity. However, alongside the masculine, disciplinarian world, the novel develops an alternative world of women, which is a transformative reflection of the masculine world. In the female community of David Copperfield, societal judgments and classifications surrounding women are shown as inadequate descriptions of the female experience. Coquetry and beauty are constitutive elements of this world, and depict a form of (erotic) womanhood which, rather than being deathly, is actually vital and life-giving.

The Coquette a Key Figure in the Female Community

What makes Dora Spenslow a key figure in the female community of David Copperfield is the marked antithesis between how David interprets her and her actions after she becomes his wife, and the way Aunt Betsey and Agnes interpret her or, rather, refuse to interpret her. The love, acceptance and understanding with which Dora is regarded and surrounded by in this community of females, speaks of a female capacity to appreciate and comprehend other women, which is far wider than the system of Victorian categorization of women would allow.

Dora's coquetry, and the antithesis with which this is perceived by men and women, alerts us to a whole framework of female relationships in the novel, and to a female-based way of understanding experience. In its depiction of women, David Copperfield seems to me to be a very good example of the interplay between regulation and resistance exhibited by most texts⁴⁰², and the female outlook exists in the novel as a serious challenge to Victorian totalizing narratives. Aunt Betsey, Dora and Agnes exhibit a strong appreciation of each other's character and abilities. It is possible that Dickens did not intend to insert this suggestive association between women inside the text; I do

⁴⁰² Stuart Hall spoke of representation as "a site of regulation"; this is what the dominating male voice of David Copperfield is trying to accomplish, in relation to women in general, and beautiful women in particular. At the same time, Hall points out that a text is also a "site of resistance". There is always the shadow and imprint of other formations in textuality. Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001) 1906.

not an attempt to present Dickens as a feminist⁴⁰³. A subtext may exist in a text without the author's being aware of its existence⁴⁰⁴. While incorporating the polyphonic voices from culture inside his work, Dickens also incorporated the voices of women speaking for themselves, and women speaking to each other⁴⁰⁵.

The affinity between Dora, Agnes and Miss Betsey, as well as the novel's refusal to judge either Dora or Clara Copperfield⁴⁰⁶ makes womanhood in David Copperfield emerge as something beyond categories and judgments. Womanhood works to be defined

⁴⁰³ Conversely, Dickens thought that women were fit only for "the quiet domestic life"; any other preoccupation was destructive of this. Slater 315-6, 324.

⁴⁰⁴ Pam Morris, Literature and Feminism: An Introduction (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000) 16.

⁴⁰⁵ The accuracy, truthfulness and liveliness with which Dickens portrayed the culture he lived in cannot be doubted. Regenia Gagnier has called Dickens "the acknowledged spokesperson of middle-class domesticity". Regenia Gagnier, Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public (Stanford, Stanford UP, 1986) 76. For Judith Flanders, Dickens is "the great chronicler of domestic life in all its shades". Judith Flanders, The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed (London: Harper Perennial, 2003) xxiii. Peter Ackroyd has spoken of Dickens's genius being "to remove his private concerns into a larger symbolic world so that they became the very image of his own time". Peter Ackroyd, Dickens, abr. ed. (London: Vintage, 2002) 308. Dickens's identification with the middle class was also seen by his contemporaries. For Matthew Arnold, Dickens knew the middle-class "intimately"; he was "bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh". Matthew Arnold, "from 'The Incompatibles', *Nineteenth Century* June 1881, ix, 1034-42," Dickens: the Critical Heritage, ed. Philip Collins (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1971) 267. David Copperfield, said Arnold, is an "all-containing treasure-house". Arnold 269. *Fraser's Magazine* wrote that there was not "a single fireside in the kingdom where the cunning fellow [i.e. Dickens] has not contrived to secure a corner for himself as one of the dearest, and, by this time one of the oldest friends of the family". The same article praised Dickens's comprehension of "the national character and manners". "From an unsigned article, 'Charles Dickens and *David Copperfield*,' *Fraser's Magazine*, December 1850, xliii, 698-710," Dickens: the Critical Heritage, ed. Philip Collins (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1971) 244. At the same time, Dickens is seen as a serious critic of the middle-class world. Dickens was aware that the middle-class (and its underlying) ideology was liable to limitations and extremes, writes Alan P. Barr. In David Copperfield, Dickens laments "the lack of a sensible, intelligent compromise or via media," one that avoided greed and emotional stultification ". Alan P. Barr, "Masters of Class and the Middle-Class Artist in *David Copperfield*," Dickens Studies Annual 38 (2007) 66. For William T. Lankford, Dickens makes David discover irrational depths within things which are hidden and, "without fully understanding gives them voice". Experience is genuinely disordered, and human emotions remain a mystery. William T. Lankford, "'The Deep of Time': Narrative Order in *David Copperfield*," ELH (1979): 466. Cordery has seen "tensions, contradictions, and silences" inside the novel, which challenge "the complacency of middle-class readers". Cordery 81. Gagnier traces an affinity between Dickens's "gray men", characters who cannot be assimilated either among "the foolish bourgeois [or] among the [...] villains [or] into the saccharine domestic havens of the heroines" (77), and the older Dickens, and eventually Dandyism. "From Richard Carstone and Sidney Carton to Wilkie Collins and the older Dickens it is but a small step to the disillusion, the

beyond ownership and discipline. Viewed in the context of a female community, womanhood refuses to be assimilated by dominant discourses. Instead, it registers these discourses, and alters their meaning and effect. Rather than be defined by specific categories, women combine antithetical elements – Aunt Betsey is both “masculine” and “feminine”, Dora is both a tender wife and a coquette, Agnes has both passion and restraint. They also act in a manner which does not acknowledge strict divisions between male and female (Aunt Betsey) or between thrifty and self-effacing as against spectacular womanhood. As a wife, Dora often behaves selflessly, and Agnes looks beautiful and is admired for her beauty. If any person inside the novel behaves like a proper husband should to Dora, this is Aunt Betsey. She:

courted Jip [...] never attacked the Incapables [...] went wonderful distances on foot to purchase, as surprises, any trifles that she found out Dora wanted; and never came by the garden [...] but she would call out, at the foot of the stairs, in a voice that sounded cheerfully all over the house: “Where’s Little Blossom!” (656).

Aunt Betsey straddles all categories, both male and female. Yet Forster described her as “a gnarled and knotted piece of female timber, sound to the core [...]”. She is “perfect womanhood. Dickens has done nothing better, for solidness and truth all round, than Betsey Trotwood”⁴⁰⁷. Both nurturing and authoritative, tender and decisive, Aunt Betsey is head of a household, and has a man and a boy under her protection.

Dickens put the female timber to good use when constructing David Copperfield. To read from the text to the culture it represented is to appreciate *this female narrative, or narrative of females*. Within this female community, Dora’s beauty is no longer a means of interpretation. In the context of the female triad formed by Dora herself, Agnes and Aunt Betsey, frivolity is not a grave offence. To the strictures of household and conduct

impotence, and the fatalism of the tragic generation” (77-78).

⁴⁰⁶ Though David and Murdstone respectively are judging them, the novel clearly records their pain, suffering and the wasteful nature of their deaths. Murdstone is a villainous character readers are meant to learn to condemn; as for David’s mistakes respecting Dora, they have been very well recorded by critics.

⁴⁰⁷ John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens (London: 1893) 429.

manuals⁴⁰⁸ and even medical writers⁴⁰⁹, the female community opposes an appreciation of woman based on individuality and a recognition of the right to be appreciated on the grounds of that individuality. David's viewpoint is not the only conceivable one⁴¹⁰ and Dora, one of Dickens's favourite characters⁴¹¹, notably has abilities and virtues her husband himself both lacks and refuses to credit her with⁴¹².

The world of masculine values inevitably records the feminine principle, because the feminine principle ensures the survival of masculine values, through home-making

⁴⁰⁸ The objects the "true wife [...] will not rest satisfied without endeavouring to attain" are, for Mrs Stickney Ellis, "[t]o make that husband happy, to raise his character, to give dignity to his house, and to train up his children in the path of wisdom". Sarah Stickney Ellis, The Wives of England: their relative duties, domestic influence and social obligations (London, 1843) 59. The mistress of the home must endeavour to make those under her roof happy, but no mention is made to her own right to happiness. Mrs Beeton, Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management, ed. Nicola Humble (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007) 11; and Sarah Stickney Ellis, The Women of England: their social duties and domestic habits (London, 1839) for instance, 45, 63, 73.

⁴⁰⁹ Strongly upholding that women were inferior to men in intellectual power, Thomas Laycock wrote that education is offered to a woman "partly with a view to fit her for the better performance of the duties of wife and mother". Thomas Laycock, "Mind and Brain (1860)," Embodied Selves: an Anthology of Psychological Texts, 1830-1890, eds. Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1998) 176-77. A woman's position is advanced by whatever "teaches her that the domestic virtues and acquirements are her best recommendation, and the true sources of her power". Laycock 178.

⁴¹⁰ Cordery believes that "the narrative which emerges from the surface bildungsroman is very different from the story of David who learns that there can be no disparity in marriage like unsuitability of mind and purpose". Cordery 71. Janet H. Brown comments: "[N]owhere are we asked to adopt David's perspective as the only conceivable one. The imperfections of David's self-knowledge are not disallowed if we choose to look for them [...]". Janet H. Brown, "The Narrator's Role in *David Copperfield*," Dickens Studies Annual 2 (1972): 207. A study of "this sort," says Brown, might scrutinize David's evasions, and see, for example, "Dora's last speeches as horribly pitiable, not a release from one's own guilt". Brown 207.

⁴¹¹ According to Nina Burgis, "Dickens grew so attached to Dora that he was reluctant to kill her off and allow David's story to reach its planned resolution in a second marriage [...]". Nina Burgis, introduction, David Copperfield, by Charles Dickens (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982) xiii. Ackroyd has seen associations in Dora which are related to positive elements from Dickens's own life. In David's romance with Dora, "there are shades of Dickens's love for his mother and his sister, as if the novelist was looking helplessly back at the time of his own infancy. Back towards his dream of a girl or young woman; young, beautiful and good". Ackroyd 323.

⁴¹² Dora has an accurate perception of their marriage situation: "after more years, you never could have loved your child-wife better than you do [...]" (773). As Carl Bandelin says, "poor, giddy stupid Dora has powers of perception that David never suspects". She sees through his attempts to change her, and also "she sees the futility of the marriage itself - more clearly even than David [...]". Carl Bandelin, "David Copperfield: a Third Interesting Penitent," Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 16 (1976): 608. Yet, why call Dora stupid, because of her ineptitude? Dora's talents for

and child-rearing⁴¹³. At the same time, the world of masculine values itself ensures the survival of the feminine principle. The ways this is done will be the concern of the remainder of the chapter.

The Memories of Dora's Sexual Allure

An important reason why the female-centred world survives inside disciplinarian, male-centred society, is Dora's sexual allure, which remains strong in David's memory. Coquetry and eroticism survive discipline, because they are constituted as an indelible part of experience. David the narrator (happily married to Agnes) has not erased Dora's sexual allure from his mind and thoughts. Dora, even as a memory, continues to excite in him sensations which Agnes never does. He still remembers in sexual terms their encounter in the garden the first day they met. "I had not been walking long [...] when I met her. I tingle again from head to foot as my recollection turns that corner, and my pen

music and decorating are perhaps useless for the middle class, or in relation to certain middle-class caveats. Dora has "every reason to expect to remain the gentlewoman she has been raised to be, decorating china and singing songs", says Darby. Darby 162 Dickens focuses on the plight of child-wives, she rightly points out. Darby 155. Though insisting on Dora's "empty-headed prettiness," Flint will underline that David is in command as both husband and narrator. Consequently, Dora "is denied a position from which to speak". Flint 120-21. Dora is feisty enough not to be intimidated by Miss Murdstone (402) and is brave in the face of death (706). It must not be forgotten that David is immature as a husband also. Dora is never as childish as David. Darby 158. David admits being "a boyish husband" and "inexperienced" (653) but constructs the same qualities in Dora as accusations against her. As for the servants, asks Darby, why should their incompetence and dishonesty be Dora's fault, when they have been taking advantage of David since childhood? Darby 64. Lankford believes that David's moral growth is doubtful. David's statement that if he did any wrong towards Dora he did it in mistaken love, is "self-vindication", and not "an admission of guilt or acceptance of responsibility". David "never approaches any suggestion that he was responsible for Dora's premature death". He represses knowledge, and abdicates responsibility. As a result, "his supposed discipline remains hollow; he is incapable of moral growth because he refuses to be culpable of moral wrong". Lankford 465.

⁴¹³ The power given to women in a household (abstract, rather than real, for married women had no existence as legal persons, and the life-choices of unmarried women were limited) has been registered by Elizabeth Langland, who has pointed out that the middle-class home and the signs of middle-class status depended on competent female management. Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995) 8-9, 21. Mrs Beeton likened the mistress of a household to the commander of an army, upon whom depended the happiness, and the bodily and moral health of the household. Mrs Beeton 7. On the middle-class rested the moral power of the country and the nation's strength. Stickney Ellis, *Women* 14. The "adventurous sons" of Britain brought to all parts of "the habitable globe" all those sound values and the moral courage they gained "from the female influence of their native country". Stickney Ellis, *Women* 54.

shakes in my hand” (402). It seems that David has never experienced the love he has had with Dora, despite the happy union with Agnes. Following Dora’s phaeton on horseback, the narrator David says: “I shall never have such a ride again. I have never had such another” (489). Recollecting their first romantic walk (491) why does the narrator wish that Dora and himself would have “strayed among the trees forever”? David has not stopped loving Dora in a sexual manner. His first gift to her as a young lover was a ring made of Forget-me-nots, “a pretty little toy [...] so associated in my remembrance with Dora’s hand, that yesterday, when I saw such another [...] on the finger of my own daughter, there was a momentary stirring in my heart, like pain!” (495).

Notably, David’s and Agnes’s daughter is also called Dora. The repetition of the name has the double function of renewing Dora’s presence inside the narrative and, second, of establishing the continuity between Dora and Agnes. The similarities between the two women are a firm indication that the figure of the coquette is an inclusive site, which accumulates versions of womanhood, to examine them in a female-centred manner. These values and concerns are exchanged between the women of the text, and can not be contained by the Victorian patriarchal world; rather, they mark an alternative definition of womanhood which exists within that world. Coquetry emerges as a tool for feminist analysis, by bringing to the surface an aspect of womanhood which speaks powerfully within disempowering discourse.

Dora Spenlow and Agnes Wickfield

For it is not only Aunt Betsey’s notable association with Dora and Agnes and appreciation of Dora on the basis of her goodness and ability to love which draws attention to the community of women in David Copperfield; it is also the association between Dora and Agnes themselves. Competent household management aside, what makes the two women seem so different from each other is merely David’s often erroneous perception (angel/coquette).

In fact, Dora’s thought that she might have learnt from Agnes what she cannot learn from David (651) hints at David’s inability to see the two women clearly. It also shows the female community as a world where relationships between women are established over the gaps opened by the male-centred world. Dora “states a desire she shares with her husband: to have chosen Agnes as her first spouse”, says Sharon Marcus.

Each of the two women claims the other as her own⁴¹⁴. True; Agnes shares characteristics with patriarchy's perfect woman, "the supreme woman in earnest"⁴¹⁵ and she could only train other women in the skills patriarchy demanded of them. Nonetheless, the forming of a woman's mind is now re-imagined by Dora as fruitful and productive, if a competent and intelligent woman like Agnes was going to undertake the effort.

Suggestively, Dora and Agnes are forming a unit in the manner of the Claras Copperfield and Peggotty⁴¹⁶. Slater also notices this link when he says that between them Agnes and Dora combine everything Dickens found lovable in a woman⁴¹⁷. Beth Newman points out that the contrast between them is not clear-cut in all areas. Both are beautiful; both are modest; both sing and play music in front of an audience of family or friends⁴¹⁸. The little we learn of Dora's behaviour during hers and David's wedding ceremony has to do with Agnes. Dora is "always clasping Agnes by the hand" – in fact, Dora clasps Agnes even while kneeling at the altar (637-8). As they leave the church, Dora is "so fond of Agnes that she will not be separated from her, but still keeps her hand" (639). Indeed, even as she goes away with David, Dora is "hurrying to Agnes, and giving Agnes, above all the others, her last kisses and farewells" (640).

Dickens, then, closely associates Dora and Agnes. This cannot be accidental, meaningless or fortuitous, in a novel where, as Jeremy Tambling indicates, "identities are

⁴¹⁴ Sharon Marcus, Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007) 89. Sharon Marcus believes that "our contemporary opposition between hetero- and homosexuality did not exist for Victorians, and that Victorians were thus able to see relationships between women as central to lives also organised around men" (19). Intimate bonds between women were praised as those did not function "as the antithesis of heterosexual relations" (19).

⁴¹⁵ Lucas 64.

⁴¹⁶ Peggotty is their companion at Rookery, and Peggotty's own given name, Clara, is the same as David's mother, suggesting that the two of them are "one as mothers to David", says Richard Lettis. Richard Lettis, "The Names of *David Copperfield*," Dickens Studies Annual 31 (2002): 78. The mother of the Copperfield household has split herself in two. Clara Copperfield is mainly softness and sentiment, Clara Peggotty is mainly industriousness and expert housekeeping. Both love and raise David, while he sees them inextricably intertwined. "I believe I can remember [my mother and Peggotty] at a little distance apart [...] and I going unsteadily from the one to the other" (24). David's happiness is constructed on the basis of "the homosocial representation of his two mothers", says Berlatsky. Berlatsky 99. For Mulvey, it is a prelapsarian vision of beauty, love and trust. Mulvey 78. Notably, beauty is a defining feature of this community. David is impressed by his mother's comely figure, and her "luxuriant and beautiful" hair (17). He even finds Peggotty beautiful. "I thought her in a different style from my mother, certainly; but of another school of beauty, I considered her a perfect example" (29). Clara Copperfield "is made the archetype of the beautiful and sexually attractive woman". Mulvey 79.

⁴¹⁷ Slater 371.

⁴¹⁸ Newman 62-3.

made to flow into each other⁴¹⁹. In fact, Dickens himself had insisted on the meticulousness of the composition of David Copperfield. Writing to the Reverend James White (writer and contributor to Household Words) he expresses his pleasure that it was being received so well, and adds: “I have carefully planned out the story, for some time past, to the end, and am making out my purposes with great care”⁴²⁰.

Marcus has also seen the link between Agnes and Dora in terms of identity formation and character attributes: “each woman’s femininity is established as a matter of same-sex relations. Agnes’s kindness to Dora is one more proof of her womanly virtue, and Dora’s receptiveness to Agnes another manifestation of her girlish potential for improvement [...]”⁴²¹. What is more, each woman’s femininity is a version of the other. The elements which David acknowledges in Dora are those he fails to acknowledge in Agnes, and vice versa. That is, the playful elements of Agnes go unnoticed by David, and it is the same with the nurturing elements in Dora.

Thus, Dora’s efforts at housekeeping are repudiated by David, so that her tender attempts to take care of him are usually unacknowledged. When David said would have liked some fish, Dora says, “I went out myself, miles and miles, and ordered it, to surprise you” (644). David admits that this was very kind, so that he did not “mention” on that day that she bought more salmon than they could afford (however, he does mention it, albeit on a later day). During dinner with Traddles, David is obsessed with housekeeping, while the more mature Traddles implies that it is the company (and not the keeping of forms) which matters. Dora tries to learn, and is always at David’s side, happy even to hold his pens. David constantly and systematically misreads Dora’s abilities as wife, saying that she is “as merry as if we had been keeping a baby-house, for a joke” (655).

This is David’s view of things, not Dora’s; for Dora’s interpretation of events seems quite different, as the love she has for David is constant and sincere. Dora knows that David is disappointed with her. It is a part of the complexity of Dora’s characterization, and one of the ways in which it becomes possible to free her from David’s dominating gaze, that her behaviour exhibits self-knowledge, and an ability to

⁴¹⁹ Jeremy Tambling, introduction, David Copperfield, by Charles Dickens (London: Penguin Books, 2004) xxxii.

⁴²⁰ Charles Dickens, letter to Rev. James White, 13 July 1850, “The Letters of Charles Dickens”, The Dickens Page, 2 Aug. 2008 <<http://www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/Dickens.html>>.

⁴²¹ Marcus 89. Below, I will be discussing Dora’s link to Clara Copperfield. However, Jackson believes that Agnes, too, is linked to Clara: Dora is helplessly feminine and graceful, like Clara; and Agnes is stable and protective, again like Clara (62-63). This seems to increase the similarity between Dora and Agnes, as they seem to revolve around the same female matrix.

evaluate a situation with accuracy. Dora feels that her upbringing has damaged her, Slater observes⁴²²; she comes to appreciate that she is a relative creature. The term “child-wife” (651) is an oxymoronic term, reflecting perhaps that it is only through an oxymoron that the couple can establish some harmony between them. Thus, to call herself “child-wife” is not an expression of silliness or a whim on Dora’s part; it is a form of solution, and a peace offering.

Dora even warns David beforehand about his choice in marriage⁴²³. She clearly tells David that she is unfit to be the wife of a professional man; hers has been a life of leisure. The dialogue between them in this scene is fraught with misunderstanding. Dora’s “don’t talk about being poor,” is answered by David’s “the crust well-earned”; her “please don’t be practical! [...] Because it frightens me so!” by his “there is nothing to alarm you” (547). Dora’s words are plain. “I haven’t got any strength at all” (547).

Moreover, Dora understands that David needs a wife like Agnes (618). I cannot agree with John Lucas that Dora is regarded as “a pretty toy or plaything” because “there is nothing else she can be”⁴²⁴. Dora’s characterization is part of the dialectic which unites women in the novel.

In fact, the ease with which Dora fits in the community of women in the novel, refutes Lucas’s claim, and suggests that there are alternative ways of belonging, even within tight patriarchal positioning. Dora indeed reveals what Darby calls a self which is “beyond her narrator’s understanding”⁴²⁵. Alongside the placement or interpellation of women effected by the male protagonist and narrator, the novel forms an initiative towards understanding women which is effected by the women themselves.

It is not only Dora’s nurturing (Agnes) side which is unnoticed by David and the majority of critics; so is Agnes’s erotic and passionate (Dora) side. Notably, Mr. Wickfield testifies to Agnes’s passionate side when he identifies her with the mother she so closely resembles. The mother’s story—marrying for love against her family’s wish, dying of a broken heart—negates the placid exterior given through her portrait. “She was

⁴²² Slater 248.

⁴²³ Margaret Myers, “The Lost Self: Gender in *David Copperfield*,” *New Casebooks: David Copperfield and Hard Times*, ed. John Peck, Contemporary Critical Essays (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995) 116.

⁴²⁴ John Lucas, *Charles Dickens: the Major Novels*, Penguin Critical Studies (London: Penguin Books, 1992) 62.

⁴²⁵ Darby 155. Dora’s character has also been praised for its truth to life. Jackson has called Dora “one of Dickens’s greatest successes: she is so brought to life that we suffer with her as, in one awful moment revealing her missed potential, she realizes her own inadequacy. The alternate hilarity and tragedy of Dora’s housekeeping catastrophes, even allowing for the exaggeration of caricature make her very real indeed”. Jackson 55.

always labouring in secret, under this distress”, her husband will say. Eventually, she “pined away and died”. About Agnes, Mr. Wickfield will say, “I have always read something of her poor mother’s story, in her character” (847). Agnes is an image of perfected internal conflict, says John Kucich, who sees this self-conflict as a shifting relation between passion and repression⁴²⁶. For Garnett, asexuality is not an inherent quality in Agnes. Uriah Heep certainly lusts for her in a sexual way⁴²⁷.

Though Slater believes that it would take a bold critic to redeem Agnes as a character, he does admit that the story narrated from Agnes’s point of view might give us an insight into the struggle going on inside her heart⁴²⁸. As it is, we only see Agnes through David’s eyes. He subjects her to what Simon Edwards calls “the dazzlingly persuasive power of narration”⁴²⁹. “[W]e see everything through David’s eyes,” says Brown. “Everything [...] has been filtered through David’s ability or inability to see”. It is a severely limited world, as David presents it, “and we may struggle in the grip of David’s fixed grasp of things; but we are required [...] to recognize it willingly, or put the book down”⁴³⁰. Thus, Agnes is presented entirely from David’s often unperceptive point of view⁴³¹.

This is not to say that Agnes was even intended by Dickens to have been as sexually exciting as Dora or Clara Copperfield; however, her manner can be flirtily and emotional, even playful at times. Hilary Schor alerts us to this feature of David Copperfield: “Women’s stories throughout the novel carry a special emotional significance [...] and cast a sceptical gaze over David’s [...] narrative powers”⁴³². Only David sees Agnes without passion, interest or desire⁴³³. “If [Agnes] is an ideal, it is because [David] has made her so”, notes Jackson⁴³⁴. Is Agnes really a legless angel? Asks Peter Gay⁴³⁵. To David, Agnes is “an icon, a superhuman superego”. But, as Gay rightly

⁴²⁶ John Kucich, “Self-Conflict in *David Copperfield*,” New Casebooks: David Copperfield and Hard Times, ed. John Peck, Contemporary Critical Essays (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995) 146.

⁴²⁷ Garnett 221.

⁴²⁸ Slater 250.

⁴²⁹ Simon Edwards, “David Copperfield: the Decomposing Self,” New Casebooks: David Copperfield and Hard Times, ed. John Peck, Contemporary Critical Essays (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995) 72.

⁴³⁰ Brown 203.

⁴³¹ Myers 120.

⁴³² Hilary Schor, Dickens and the Daughter of the House (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 10.

⁴³³ Schor 12.

⁴³⁴ Jackson 64. Agnes is an example of “the Victorian male’s tendency to idealize women – at least, the woman who will share his hearth” (64).

⁴³⁵ The term “legless angel” was first used to describe Agnes by Henry James

has rightly pointed out, this is, after all, “his problem, not hers”⁴³⁶. Agnes smiles “rather sadly” when David tells her that she is “always” his good Angel (374) and makes an attempt at flirtation soon after. She asks David if anyone has “succeeded” Miss Larkins to his affection, and he answers that “no-one” has. Agnes laughs and says “Some one Trotwood” (375). In the exchanges between herself and David, we catch a glimpse of an Agnes who is a more flesh-and-blood woman than David’s narration would allow. According to Schor, Agnes’s admission that she has loved David all her life revises David’s narrative and shows him to have been a “lousy narrator”⁴³⁷. John Carey is more colourful:

Agnes has perfectly normal instincts, in fact, and is pointing not upwards but towards the bedroom. The inadequacy lies in David, not her. He is unable to associate maturity with sex. He can stomach it as a childish game, but not otherwise. Perhaps we are to blame Murdstone for this. [...] Readers who come away thinking Agnes a sexless saint miss the point. David sees her as that, but only because his own fear of a mature woman forces him to turn her into something untouchable⁴³⁸.

Importantly, it is because Agnes has a passionate and amorous side that she is able to wait for so many years for David to reciprocate her love. The marriage between David and Agnes happens not only because now David can look clearly inside his heart, but also because Agnes is capable of strong and powerful feeling. This marriage is often seen by critics as a dead marriage; the novel, says Edwards, offers a repulsively coy treatment of sexuality and marriage⁴³⁹. For Barr, the home of David and Agnes is “etherealized beyond earthly warmth and passion”⁴⁴⁰. The marriage to Agnes who is, thematically the “right” wife is “hollow and unconvincing”. Alexander Welsh believes that Agnes

⁴³⁶ Peter Gay, “The Legless Angel of *David Copperfield*: There’s More to Her Than Victorian Piety,” *New York Times on the Web* 22 Jan. 1995, 2 Mar. 2008 <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/25/specials/gay-legless.html>>.

⁴³⁷ Schor 12. Nevertheless, as has already been pointed out, it is possible that David needs to see Agnes as an angel who will master even death, because of his quest to re-create Blunderstone as it was before Murdstone married Clara Copperfield.

⁴³⁸ John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens’s Imagination*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1991) 171-72. Seeing his beautiful mother “couple” with a “monster” such as Murdstone has created this fear of sex in David, Carey believes (171).

⁴³⁹ Edwards 67.

⁴⁴⁰ Barr 66.

Wickfield is a “familiar of death”⁴⁴¹. Garnett calls the David/Agnes marriage an eternally kindergarten marriage⁴⁴². David himself, during marriage to Dora, expresses desire for a wife who will be more like a mother to him – a counsellor who would improve him (653).

On the other hand, we have what Berlatsky calls Agnes’s “remarkable fecundity”⁴⁴³. Agnes marries the man she has loved all her life, and bears him healthy children, while remaining healthy and active herself. David’s narration is incomplete on the subject of Agnes. All narratives are a way of not saying things, notes Martin McQuillan⁴⁴⁴. There are always multiple stories inside a narrative⁴⁴⁵. Both Agnes and Dora have their own stories to tell, and these stories are more accurately expressed once we read through the inadequacies of male narration, and place the two women in relationship to each other and Betsey Trotwood; in short, once we place them in the context of a female community.

⁴⁴¹ Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986) 181. Memories of her come to David like spectres of the dead; he will come to her like a tired traveller forrest; she attends the death of Dora and, praying to her at the end of the novel, David imagines her performing this final office for him also (181). Welsh notes that a heroine with the power to save the hero ought to be feared as well as worshipped. “The power of the angel implies, even while it denies, the eventuality of death. Agnes cannot invite the hero to join her in the sky without at the same time inviting him to die” (182).

⁴⁴² Garnett 229.

⁴⁴³ Berlatsky 110.

⁴⁴⁴ Martin McQuillan, “Introduction: Aporias of Writing: Narrative and Subjectivity,” *The Narrative Reader*, ed. Martin McQuillan (London: Routledge, 2004) 25.

⁴⁴⁵ Instead of a single basic story: Barbara Hernstein Smith, “Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories,” *The Narrative Reader*, ed. Martin McQuillan (London: Routledge, 2004) 144.

Woman's Own: Dora, Agnes and the Victorian Women's Magazines

In her study of communities of women in eighteenth and nineteenth century fiction, Nina Auerbach pointed out that, “[a]s a recurrent literary image, a community of women is a rebuke to the conventional ideal of a solitary woman living for and through men [...]. [...] The communities of women which have haunted our literary imagination from the beginning are emblems of female self-sufficiency”⁴⁴⁶. Female communities “are united by their necessary oddity as well as by their corporate strength”⁴⁴⁷. They are units which sometimes consist of virtues considered as female⁴⁴⁸, sometimes evoke fears⁴⁴⁹, are usually defined suggestively and obliquely rather than expressly⁴⁵⁰, but finally they evolve as a literary myth “that sweeps across official cultural images of female submission, subservience, and fulfilment in a bounded world”⁴⁵¹.

The female community in David Copperfield not only sweeps across cultural images of women; it positively suggests that it is the women themselves who are better fit to understand the complexities of female belonging in the Victorian patriarchal world. Though not exactly self-sufficient, the female community shows a capacity to endure within the masculine, disciplinarian world.

In that world, Dora is an “other”. She is educated in Paris (394), which could run counter to British anti-French ideology⁴⁵². Her talent in music and dance had little currency, unless it was used for the entertainment of her husband, family or guests⁴⁵³.

⁴⁴⁶ Nina Auerbach, Communities of Women: an Idea in Fiction (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998) 5.

⁴⁴⁷ Auerbach 32.

⁴⁴⁸ Such as disinterestedness. Auerbach 22.

⁴⁴⁹ Such as the dormant horror of female sexuality. Auerbach 14.

⁴⁵⁰ Auerbach 10.

⁴⁵¹ Auerbach 6.

⁴⁵² In Vanity Fair, religious Pitt Crawley is “scandalized” to find Becky Sharp reading “French plays” with his sister Rose (the reference comes from William Makepeace Thackeray, Vanity Fair, ed. John Carey (London: Penguin Books, 2006) 101). Jane Eyre will remark that, as little Adele grew up, “a sound English education corrected in a great measure her French faults”. Adele became a young woman that was “docile, good-tempered, and well principled” (500). The reference comes from Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, ed. Michael Mason (London: Penguin Books, 1996). French literature was associated with sensuality and free love, and was feared, as Walter E. Houghton has observed. Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind 1830-1870 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1957) 359, 363-64. Nevertheless, almost everyones was reading George Sand: “her name was for many years a word of fear in British households”. Houghton 364.

⁴⁵³ As Mrs. Beeton put it: “Unless the means of the mistress be very circumscribed, and she be obliged to devote a great deal of her time to the making of her children’s clothes, and other economical pursuits, it is right that she should give some time to the pleasures of literature [...] and the improvement of any special abilities for music, painting, and other elegant arts, which she may, happily, possess”. Mrs Beeton 17. The mistress’s artistic talents were to be exercised only if the demands of the home

David has a choice between the values of the aristocracy (Rookery, the country gentleman) and the values of the middle-class (Cookery) and chooses the latter⁴⁵⁴. For Dora, who comes from the upper-class, and has never known anything except polite education, there is never a choice; she must follow and model herself on her husband's lifestyle⁴⁵⁵. Interestingly, her final words to David are words of self-reproach. "I know I was too young and foolish. It is much better as it is!" (773). Dora Spenslow faces the void, a void which is at least as real as the one David claimed to have felt. Dora cannot be a housekeeper or her husband's mentor and guide; further, she fails to become a mother in an age of "ovarian determinism",⁴⁵⁶ with motherhood being the culmination of a woman's life⁴⁵⁷. For Lawrence Grossberg, a community-defined place people can belong to is an important element of identity⁴⁵⁸.

However, Dora is not reduced to what Wolf has called "beauty's silence".⁴⁵⁹

Inside the female community, Dora's belonging is secure. The harmony inside the female allowed it, and under no other circumstances. Tellingly, Vanden Bossche refers to these talents as "leisure talents," and notes that, in the Victorian age, such talents were employed for display only, to show that one did not have to economize. Vanden Bossche 41. In fact, the whole concept of "leisure time" had been, in the Victorian period, for the first time extended to the middle-class. Peter Bailey, "A mingled mass of perfectly legitimate pleasures': the Victorian middle-class and the problem of leisure," Victorian Studies 21 (1977): 8. Delight in the new leisure was not unalloyed. Bailey 11. One reason for this was moral: which amusements were respectable and proper? Bailey 18. But another reason was that "in a work-orientated value system it represented an invitation to indolence and prodigality", prodigality being a vice attributed both to the "animalistic" working-class and the "vicious and unduly privileged" aristocracy. To be morally upright, was to be thrifty. Judith Flanders, The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed (London: Harper Perennial, 2004) 84. Dora belongs to an aristocratic model of living, which was not attractive to the middle-class. Bailey 15.

⁴⁵⁴ Vanden Bossche 45.

⁴⁵⁵ As happens usually within patriarchy. See Michael D.A. Freeman's essay on law as the cultural underpinning of patriarchy, which points out that a wife's "status [...] standard of living, her expectations, life-style, and much of her identity" were and, to a great extent, still are, governed by her husband. Michael D.A. Freeman, "Legal ideologies, patriarchal precedents and domestic violence," The State, the Law, and the Family: Critical Perspectives, ed. Michael D.A. Freeman (London: Sweet and Maxwell Ltd, 1984) 57.

⁴⁵⁶ Wolf 222. Dora is an "infliction", wrote contemporary reviewer Samuel Philips in *The Times* of 11 June 1851 (261). She is simply "not a fact" (262). Conversely, he sees Agnes and Aunt Betsey as eminent women characters. The reference comes from Samuel Philips, "from 'David Copperfield and Arthur Pendennis,' *The Times* 11 June 1851, 8", Dickens: the Critical Heritage, ed. Philip Collins (London: UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1971).

⁴⁵⁷ Roberts 53.

⁴⁵⁸ Lawrence Grossberg, "Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is?," Questions of Cultural Identity, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 2005) 104-5.

⁴⁵⁹ Wolf 59.

community is not grounded on disciplining, silencing and crime, as happens in the male-dominated community. The novel suggests that the wider form of understanding, exhibited by the women, is more conducive to happiness and well-being. While the masculine world of middle-class professionalism is perhaps productive of stability, it is a carceral, disciplinarian world, as the Uriah Heep plot clearly shows⁴⁶⁰. The novel suggests that, at least as far as woman is concerned, what works better is not categorization, typecasting, and the allocating of roles, but a community (shown in the novel) capable of subsisting and functioning without the obstacles imposed by categories⁴⁶¹.

Within this woman-to-woman logic, Dora and Agnes do not merely illuminate aspects of each other; they are confirmed as aspects of womanhood which are equally valid. Dora survives in Agnes's passionate side, and in Agnes's daughter. Woman is a relational being not only to man (as wife, daughter, sister) but also quite importantly to other women. To belong to a female community involves, as in the Harper's Bazaar Illustration discussed in the Introduction, a confirmation of identity.

A similar accommodation of differing types of womanhood with beauty as a central element was also achieved, to a large extent, in the Victorian women's magazines⁴⁶². In the Victorian era, magazines both consolidated and contested bourgeois gender ideology⁴⁶³, and even a journal with an autocratic male editor and publisher, like Samuel Beeton in the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (hereby called *EDM*) reflected and promoted "the many-faceted ideal of female culture"⁴⁶⁴. According to one point of

⁴⁶⁰ Heep carries the work ethic to an extreme that shows its potential for criminality.

⁴⁶¹ Importantly, the household established by the Claras Peggotty and Copperfield also functioned well and is remembered by David as a haven of happiness and nurture. What destroyed this household was perhaps not sexuality per se, but Murdstone's sadistic form of disciplining.

⁴⁶² The ability of the woman's magazine to form a community is still being noted today. Despite reflecting (and even reinforcing) the impossible demands made on women by society, women's magazines speak also with a voice which "gives women an invisible female authority to admire and obey [...] which women are rarely offered anywhere else but in their glossy magazines. The voice [...] has evolved a tone of allegiance to the reader, of being on your side with superior know-how and resources, like a woman-run social service". Thus, the magazine functions like an "extended family", an "interest group," and "a club". Woolf 74.

⁴⁶³ Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green and Judith Johnston, Gender and the Victorian Periodical, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003) 74.

⁴⁶⁴ Fraser et al. 73.

view, middle-class wives had to be plain, modest, neat – dedicated homemakers⁴⁶⁵. Fashion was a false value⁴⁶⁶, and an inconvenience to those around the woman⁴⁶⁷.

Yet the picture of the plain-clad middle-class housewife is not the complete picture of Victorian middle-class women; if Victorian periodicals are any evidence, interest in fashion and coquetry was widespread and a source of pleasure. Some of *The Queen's* articles on fashion were responses to queries from the readers: "several of our correspondents have written to inquire the newest form of hats for summer wear"⁴⁶⁸, "several inquiries have been made recently concerning the new forms of hats, and what style is likely to be fashionable for travelling and the seaside"⁴⁶⁹. In the regular column, "The Englishwoman's Conversazione," the *EDM* addressed queries referring to subjects as diverse as ladies' colleges and flirtation⁴⁷⁰, as well as queries on fashion, which the magazine viewed as an acceptable common activity and concern for young women⁴⁷¹. The woman reader of magazines like *The Queen* and the *EDM* is both a fashion-loving coquette, and an angel in the house. The two categories are by no means mutually exclusive, and happily co-exist in the many aspects of a woman's life.

⁴⁶⁵ In the manner of the wife in George Elgar Hicks's painting *Woman's Mission: Companion of Manhood*, which Helene E. Roberts analyzes in her discussion on how Victorian paintings upheld a woman's domestic role and tied her to the hearthside. See Helene E. Roberts, "Marriage, Redundancy or Sin: The Painter's View of Women in the First Twenty-Five Years of Victoria's Reign," *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1972) 47-8.

⁴⁶⁶ Roberts 58.

⁴⁶⁷ This is what Eliza Lynn Linton points out in "The Girl of the Period," her famous attack on feminism. See Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Girl of the Period," *The Saturday Review* 14 Mar. 1868: 340.

⁴⁶⁸ Eliane de Marsy, "Description of Our Illustrations," *The Queen: the Lady's Newspaper* 26 May 1866: 407.

⁴⁶⁹ Eliane de Marsy, "The Parisian Fashions," *The Queen: the Lady's Newspaper* 9 June 1866: 444. The minute and lavish descriptions of everything from toilettes to gloves, from bonnets to bodices, and from new toiletries to hair-styles, as well as the regular column "The Newest Things in the Shops," address themselves to a society where women took considerable interest in, and pleasure from, fashion. These articles existed alongside articles on Domestic Economy (another permanent featured subject) which gave detailed advice on household thrift, and the permanent column "The Work Table", with articles on crafts, stitching and embroidery.

⁴⁷⁰ "The Englishwoman's Conversazione," *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, July 1860: 144.

⁴⁷¹ "You like, of course, to be 'in the fashion'", replies the magazine to a reader calling herself Emma E. "No young lady of sense and position wishes to be unlike her sisters and her cousins. It isn't in human nature that she should". "The Englishwoman's Conversazione," *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, May 1860: 48.

We have seen how qualities in David Copperfield are dispersed among Dora and Agnes, so that each woman does not belong absolutely to any one category⁴⁷². The text takes the accommodation of differing categories of womanhood effected by women's periodicals one step further, by demonstrating how a female-centred viewpoint can survive within strict codes of patriarchy and domesticity. What ensures the survival of that viewpoint is the strength and inclusiveness of the female community, which lies in its refusal to define itself according to the masculinist code, and in its ability to exist in narratives which, though less than official, are integrated into the main narrative; the narratives of memory, friendship, and the varying, sometimes silenced, sides of the women characters.

The women's periodicals suggest that female belonging could be inclusive; they could teach the Victorian woman to recognize herself in a number of categories – coquette, housekeeper, a fashion follower with skills in cooking, embroidery and dress-making. David Copperfield indicates that such categorizations are constantly under negotiation. Thinking in terms of those categories, Dora is afraid that Agnes will not approve of her; Agnes wins Dora over by means of expression (Dora is attracted by Agnes's goodness, shown in her face), physical proximity and emotion (the two women embrace and thus begin to love each other, 616-17). Agnes's love for David, as far as Agnes herself is concerned, is neither angelic (i.e. other-worldly and totally spiritual) nor cold. For Agnes, these definitions have no meaning – she loves David in an erotic manner, which is what enables her to wait all those years. Not allowed to love in this manner, but pushed instead into artificial definitions, Dora withers and dies.

Therefore, erotic womanhood is not deadly in David Copperfield, but life-giving. Its true significance is understood only when we examine the way the women bond with each other, and the way they perceive each other and themselves. So Agnes and Dora show no signs of rivalry and find it hard to be separated from each other; so Aunt Betsey considers that Dora has a rightful claim to her husband's loyalty and love; so Agnes has a daughter called Dora, who wears jewellery similar to that worn by the earlier Dora.

In sum, the resistance of the female principle to patriarchy's disciplining is successful. A focus on the coquette registers a female world which is adjacent to the patriarchal world. The relationship is both co-operative and antagonistic, but never

⁴⁷² Here, it should be noted that, even on David's preferred subject of household thrift, Dora's behaviour is not downright improper. As Vanden Bossche points out, Dora is not economically profligate: she "does not make extravagant purchases, except perhaps the pagoda, and her housekeeping never seems to endanger their overall budget. Rather, David feels 'uncomfortable' because she is inefficient". Vanden Bossche 40.

destructive. A focus on the coquette shows that Dickens has recorded the formation of female identity as an activity which happens within a collective of women. These women define themselves through their ability to love, accept and understand each other. These abilities are not only a means for creating a peaceful family circle (the patriarchal ideal); they are also a means for the women themselves to override the dominant definitions which (mis)interpret and constrain them.

Chapter 4

Rosamond Vincy in George Eliot's Middlemarch.

This chapter examines the character of coquettish Rosamond Vincy in George Eliot's Middlemarch and suggests that she is a multi-faceted character, which is used to examine the limits and possibilities surrounding the female experience. Middlemarch is a novel of multiple plots and multiple perspectives, which does not restrict itself to, and is not restricted by, stereotypes⁴⁷³. Treatment of Rosamond is no exception to this. To trace the effect of a female-centred beauty discourse in a novel is to use the spectacular woman as an angle from which to look at the text, and determine how it changes when considered from that angle. Middlemarch reveals a proximity between essence and otherness when it comes to women, and a female essence which is inclusive and more complete than the ideal figure constructed by official or dominant narratives.

This chapter shall briefly consider Rosamond's critical history—which ranges from condemnation to approval—and shall then explain how her figure is problematized alongside that of Dorothea in the context of women's occupations and opportunities. Then, the chapter shall elaborate on how Rosamond's figure combines antithetical discourses on womanhood in a manner which refuses to reduce female identity and belonging to a list of categories, and which posits female identity as a matter of a female effort at understanding.

Rosamond and the Critics

Rosamond Vincy is generally considered as selfish, the reason for Lydgate's failure and the snare which entraps him. The wondrous plaits which crown her head have been associated with the chain-work of her hands; Rosamond is Lydgate's "basil plant"⁴⁷⁴. For Delia da Sousa Correa, Rosamond's music makes her a siren, a Lorelei, who charms

⁴⁷³ Hugh Witemeyer, for example, has called it a novel of "incomplete insights". Hugh Witemeyer, George Eliot and the Visual Arts (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 87. Kerry McSweeney has noted that, "[t]he fundamental epistemological tenet in Middlemarch is the relativity of truth to point of view, and the subjectivity, partiality and fallibility of human perception". Kerry Mc Sweeney, "Middlemarch: Art, Ideas, Aesthetics," New Casebooks: Middlemarch, ed. John Peck, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1992) 20.

⁴⁷⁴ A phrase he uses himself to describe Rosamond (782). All references to Middlemarch come from George Eliot, Middlemarch, ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996).

Lydgate. He falls under the enchantment of her music⁴⁷⁵. Phyllis Weliver has also seen Rosamond as a siren, a type of Victorian female demon⁴⁷⁶: she bewitches Lydgate⁴⁷⁷ and deceives through her music⁴⁷⁸. Rosamond fascinates Lydgate like a snake fascinates the bird, says Leslie Stephen⁴⁷⁹. Stupidity and selfishness thwart the idealist individual⁴⁸⁰. Rosamond is incapable of understanding the man Lydgate could have become, says Arnold Kettle⁴⁸¹, while Quentin Anderson speaks of Rosamond's "awful insularity," which resists Lydgate's "earnest and even ... desperate attempts to penetrate it"⁴⁸². Thus, in Lori Hope Lefkowitz's words, Rosamond is "the artful woman par excellence," whose "schooled manipulations ensnare Lydgate"⁴⁸³.

As mentioned in the Agnes Grey chapter, the golden-haired woman was often seen as dangerous in Victorian literature, her gleaming hair perceived as a weapon, a web, or a trap⁴⁸⁴, and Rosamond has been ascribed to this stereotype. David Carroll regards Lydgate as a martyr⁴⁸⁵, while Andrew H. Miller laments that Lydgate's work has to be sacrificed, "so that Rosamond's desires can be met"⁴⁸⁶. Similarly, contemporary reviewer

⁴⁷⁵ Delia da Sousa Correa, George Eliot, Music and Victorian Culture (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 95. A talent in music was desirable, in that the wife and mother could use it to draw "the devout family circle together". Correa 67. But the role of the public musician was siren-like; talent was perverted if it led woman away from domestic limits. Correa 66-68. At the same time, there was anxiety that a siren lurked within ordinary wives and mothers. Correa 84. Rosamond is such a siren, argues Correa, her musical execution "pernicious". Correa 98. Correa ignores the extent to which Rosamond is ensnared herself by conceptions of romance and proper feminine behaviour

⁴⁷⁶ Phyllis Weliver, Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860-1900: Representations of Music, Science and Gender in the Leisured Home (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2000) 6.

⁴⁷⁷ Weliver 207.

⁴⁷⁸ Weliver 209.

⁴⁷⁹ Leslie Stephen, "A Satire on the Modern World," George Eliot: Middlemarch, A Casebook, ed. Patrick Swinden, Casebook Series (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1972) 98.

⁴⁸⁰ Stephen 99.

⁴⁸¹ Arnold Kettle, "Middlemarch (1951)," George Eliot: Middlemarch, A Casebook, ed. Patrick Swinden, Casebook Series (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1972) 151.

⁴⁸² Quentin Anderson, "George Eliot in *Middlemarch*," George Eliot: Middlemarch, A Casebook, ed. Patrick Swinden, Casebook Series (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1972) 175.

⁴⁸³ Lori Hope Lefkowitz, The Character of Beauty in the Victorian Novel (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987) 64, 104.

⁴⁸⁴ Elizabeth G. Gitter, "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination," PMLA 99 (1984): 943.

⁴⁸⁵ David Carroll, George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Reading of the Novels (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 263.

⁴⁸⁶ Andrew H. Miller, Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative, Literature, Culture, Theory 17 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 207.

Th. Bentzon was distressed that Lydgate became “the plaything and victim of a woman without heart or intelligence, ignorant of the harm she does [...]”⁴⁸⁷. Henry James saw Rosamond as “gracefully vicious”⁴⁸⁸. She is Lydgate’s “miserable little wife”⁴⁸⁹. Enthusiastic editor John Blackwood⁴⁹⁰, observed that “Lydgate had very great merit in not taking a stick to Rosamond”, who was a “heartless [...] obstinate devil”.⁴⁹¹ Miller concludes that Eliot is completely critical of Rosamond⁴⁹². For Felicia Bonaparte, Lydgate is given a chance to choose between Dorothea and Rosamond, in a re-enactment of a common pattern in medieval allegory. Two paths open before him, the way of the spirit, and the way of the flesh, represented by two women. Dorothea is virtue, Rosamond is vice⁴⁹³. She exists inside the novel to be contrasted with the saintly Dorothea. For Rosemary Ashton, Rosamond and Dorothea “are opposites in their expectations of marriage and their responses to marriage troubles”⁴⁹⁴. Ashton says that Dorothea learns to pity the man who has disappointed her, while Rosamond never rises above her “risible preparation for adult life”⁴⁹⁵. According to Claudia Moscovici, Rosamond is portrayed as Dorothea’s foil: “Rosamond lives for all that which Dorothea considers superficial: decorum, luxury, and romantic flirtation”⁴⁹⁶. In their meeting towards the end of the novel, the contrast becomes momentous. They are self-

⁴⁸⁷ Th. Bentzon, “*Revue des Deux Mondes*, February 1873”, George Eliot: Middlemarch, A Casebook, ed. Patrick Swinden, Casebook Series (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1972) 58-59.

⁴⁸⁸ Henry James, “*Galaxy* March 1873,” George Eliot: Middlemarch, A Casebook, ed. Patrick Swinden, Casebook Series (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1972) 66.

⁴⁸⁹ James 65.

⁴⁹⁰ See for example his letter to George Eliot of 2 June 1872. “The excellent baronet [i.e. Sir James] could not be more angry with Mr. Casaubon or sorry for Dorothea than I am. How she will fare when she awakens to real life is a source of great anxiety to me. [...] [T]here is an overpowering interest in such a picture of human nature and I am much deceived if you are not about to repeat if not excel all your previous triumphs”. John Blackwood, “To George Eliot,” 2 June 1871, The Letters of George Eliot, ed. Gordon S. Haight, vol. 5 (London: Oxford UP, 1956) 149.

⁴⁹¹ John Blackwood, “To George Eliot,” 29 July 1872, The Letters of George Eliot, ed. Gordon S. Haight, vol. 5 (London: Oxford UP, 1956) 293.

⁴⁹² Miller 198.

⁴⁹³ Felicia Bonaparte, introduction, Middlemarch, by George Eliot (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) xvi.

⁴⁹⁴ Rosemary Ashton, introduction, Middlemarch, by George Eliot (London: Penguin Books, 1994) viii.

⁴⁹⁵ Ashton xv.

⁴⁹⁶ Claudia Moscovici, “Allusive Mischaracterization in *Middlemarch*,” Nineteenth Century Literature 49 (1995): 524-5.

forgetfulness and selfishness⁴⁹⁷. Dorothea and Rosamond are Rebecca and Delilah, Virgin and Magdalen⁴⁹⁸.

However, there is a line of criticism which has defended Rosamond in terms of her position as a woman in a particularly constricting world. "I think a case can be made for some sympathy with Rosamond," says Kathleen Blake, "even while we respond to the pathos of Lydgate's losing struggle with Middlemarch [...]"⁴⁹⁹. In her encounter with Dorothea, we see Rosamond behaving honourably by telling Dorothea that Will has not been unfaithful. I would disagree with Carroll, who sees Rosamond's action as almost involuntary⁵⁰⁰. Rosamond speaks with determination when she says that, if Dorothea would think ill of Ladislaw, "it shall not be through me" (750). Though influenced by Dorothea's emotion, she speaks in an "eager half-whisper," and had been oppressed by what she knew to be the truth (749). As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar put it: "[w]hile Dorothea goes to save Rosamond by an act of self-sacrifice, Rosamond actually makes the sacrifice and thereby saves Dorothea"⁵⁰¹. Anne E. Patrick is correct to point out that readers ignore that "Rosamond's decision to inform Dorothea that Will Ladislaw has not been unfaithful is the action upon which the happiness of Dorothea and Will depends"⁵⁰². I would conclude with Blake that the wrong Rosamond does "proceeds from her position as a woman. Her petty manoeuvres seem less blameworthy when we consider how little else she has to do"⁵⁰³.

Therefore, I would suggest that the idea that "Eliot is cautious about any neat encapsulation of character,"⁵⁰⁴ applies to the representation of Rosamond as well. Eliot never sinks into stereotypes, being a "true psychological novelist"⁵⁰⁵. A particular narrative quality in Middlemarch, argues Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, is the reversibility of almost every generalization it sponsors⁵⁰⁶. There is no one way by which to see

⁴⁹⁷ Elizabeth Langland, Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995) 191.

⁴⁹⁸ Lefkowitz 66.

⁴⁹⁹ Kathleen Blake, "Middlemarch and the Woman Question," Nineteenth Century Fiction 31 (1976) 302.

⁵⁰⁰ Carroll 253.

⁵⁰¹ Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000) 518.

⁵⁰² Anne E. Patrick, "Rosamond Rescued: George Eliot's Critique of Sexism in *Middlemarch*," The Journal of Religion 67 (1987): 223.

⁵⁰³ Blake, "Woman Question" 302.

⁵⁰⁴ Carroll 24.

⁵⁰⁵ Bonaparte xv, xiii.

⁵⁰⁶ Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, "Negotiating *Middlemarch*," Middlemarch in the 21st Century, ed. Karen Chase (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006) 109.

Rosamond, or her marriage to Lydgate. Fred Vincy, who would never side with the “general consent [that Rosamond] was a rare compound of beauty, cleverness and amiability” (252), is an untrustworthy character; spoilt and given to gambling, he nearly brings the Garths to financial ruin. As noted earlier, the narrator does say that Rosamond’s beauty would appeal to a “doomed man,” but she then becomes lenient, saying, “[t]hink no unfair evil of her, pray: she had no wicked plots, nothing sordid or mercenary [...]” (252). After the Bulstrode scandal, Lydgate thinks grandly of himself as a long-suffering husband (“because [Rosamond] came short in her sympathy he must give more,” 713) while in fact recognising that he is at fault: “a deeper-lying consciousness that he was at fault made him restless,” adds the narrator⁵⁰⁷ (712).

It is also possible to disagree with Rosamond’s association with vice, since she never acts in a way which is evil or sinful⁵⁰⁸. Carroll likens Rosamond to an anencephalous monster who aspires to the aristocracy. Such a comparison is suggestive of the double standard which is sometimes employed with Lydgate and Rosamond. Lydgate’s dreams of entering the aristocracy of medicine are laudable; Rosamond’s dreams of entering the class aristocracy—the class for which her upbringing had made her suitable—makes her of course a monster and unencephalous at that⁵⁰⁹. Though Patricia Beer believes that Rosamond provides a “chilling picture of the education provided for young women”⁵¹⁰, she will defend her in terms of marriage failure. “When Lydgate lets their affairs become so desperate that [Rosamond] has to be told, it is a shock for which she has not been allowed to prepare herself”. Lydgate accuses Rosamond for treating him like a fool, but “that is exactly how he treats her”. There is something “admirable” in Rosamond’s refusal to allow Lydgate’s decisions to be final. “Lydgate could have done with some of her obstinacy in his career, only he would have then called

⁵⁰⁷ The narrator has been commended by J. Hillis Miller for her objectivity. J. Hillis Miller, “Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*,” *New Casebooks: Middlemarch*, ed. John Peck, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1992) 77. Isobel Armstrong commends Eliot for her tone of “generous compassionateness,” and remarks that “[w]hen there is anything harsh to be said, somebody else in the novel says it”. Eliot is “fair-minded”. Isobel Armstrong, “*Middlemarch*: A Note on George Eliot’s ‘Wisdom’”, *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, ed. Barbara Hardy (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) 119.

⁵⁰⁸ Unlike her brother Fred. Even her infatuation with Will Ladislaw is justified by circumstances, as we shall see below.

⁵⁰⁹ Carroll 269-70.

⁵¹⁰ Patricia Beer, *Reader, I Married Him: A Study of the Women Characters of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1974) 181.

it perseverance”⁵¹¹. If Rosamond kills Lydgate, Dorothea kills Casaubon, says Beer⁵¹² — and George Eliot can depict murderesses “as being basically nice women [...]”⁵¹³.

Rosamond and Lydgate’s Failure

Thus, critics who see Rosamond as vice concentrate on her part in Lydgate’s fall, while critics with favourable opinions recognize that she articulates the wife’s point of view in a marriage of difficulty. Indeed, the text makes clear that Lydgate himself is largely to blame for the failure of his scientific ambitions.

For Gilbert and Gubar, Lydgate represents “the moral mediocrity of the sciences”⁵¹⁴. It is not the selfishness of his wife Rosamond that is the chief reason for the failure of the idealistic young doctor in Middlemarch, says Patrick:

It is the connection with Bulstrode, not Rosamond, that strains [the relationship] between the doctor and the town community to the breaking point [...]. If [Lydgate] had been willing to accept [Dorothea’s] offer of a salary for his work at the hospital (which would have involved recognizing the validity of her judgment as well as Rosamond’s), perhaps [he] might have been able eventually to achieve some of his professional goals⁵¹⁵.

Instead, Patrick concludes, Lydgate “uses Rosamond’s weakness as an excuse for not dealing with his own limitations”⁵¹⁶. Sally Shuttleworth has also seen Lydgate’s downfall as the result of his “intrinsic moral flaws,” his “lack of innate greatness”⁵¹⁷. It is notable that Lydgate’s ideal wife does not have a scientific interest of any sort. Lydgate “judges women by androcentric ideals”⁵¹⁸ and does not regard woman “as an equal companion”⁵¹⁹. He dreams of a wife who would venerate his “momentous labours” but “would never interfere with them” (331). Bonaparte concedes that the men in

⁵¹¹ Beer 188-89.

⁵¹² Beer 196-98.

⁵¹³ Beer 196.

⁵¹⁴ Gilbert and Gubar 508.

⁵¹⁵ Patrick 223.

⁵¹⁶ Patrick 235.

⁵¹⁷ Sally Shuttleworth, “*Middlemarch: An Experiment in Time*,” New Casebooks: Middlemarch, ed. John Peck, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1992) 117.

⁵¹⁸ Moscovici 531.

⁵¹⁹ Patrick 232.

Middlemarch view woman as a “shallow, trivial being”⁵²⁰. Dorothea is dismissed by Lydgate as an unfit wife, because she “did not look at things from the proper feminine angle” (88). Conversely, Rosamond would be a desirable match, because she “had just the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman” (153). Lydgate is never shown to share his professional thoughts or plans with his wife. It is the music played by his wife which is helpful to his meditations (616). Consequently, Rosamond’s lack of interest in medicine and science does not remove her from Lydgate’s ideal; on the contrary, it brings her closer to it. Rosamond functions in Middlemarch to problematize the concept of “the proper feminine angle”, and clearly reveal male-centred and female-centred conceptions of womanhood as an antithesis which cannot be easily reconciled.

Rosamond and Dorothea: Marriage and Woman’s Lot

In fact, it is the dynamics involved in defining “the proper feminine angle” which give Middlemarch a lot of its force. A focus on Rosamond makes clear that her part is interwoven with, rather than antithetical to, that of Dorothea Brooke. Though Dorothea represents modest, saintly beauty, while Rosamond is a coquette (fashion loving, and playful with men) the two women are not polar opposites. Rather, they negotiate between themselves a definition of womanhood which is a strong critique of accepted, dominant ideas on woman’s education, opportunities and role in marriage. Marriage is specifically revealed as being often the substitute for fulfilment rather than fulfilment itself. Historical information and critical opinion suggest that Rosamond’s case is indeed far from an instance of a selfish wife ruining an excellent husband; it is a case study of a marriage ruined by traditional conceptions of womanhood and by the limited opportunities comprising the female experience.

In this, the marriages of Rosamond and Dorothea are not unlike. The marriage choices of the two women result from a perception of the world which is less than informed. Rosamond was fascinated by Lydgate because she believed that he was indeed the right man for her; i.e. the man who could give her the sort of life she desired for herself. In this, she is neither too different from, nor less misguided than, Dorothea herself. If Rosamond is saturated in romance, Dorothea is saturated in intellectual and religious fervour. She kneels down and prays by the side of the sick, and cannot even enjoy a leisure activity or a hobby without thinking of religion (9). Both Dorothea and Rosamond weave a tale out of life. Both women feel a lack, and find their current state

⁵²⁰ Bonaparte ix.

unsatisfactory. Dorothea is trapped within the confines of Middlemarch society, says Sally Shuttleworth⁵²¹. She struggles “in the bonds of a narrow teaching” (27) and in the limitations of social life. Rosamond longs for the life of the upper-class. She has been given a refined education, and consequently Middlemarch provincial life does not suit her. Lydgate possessed connections, and Rosamond hoped that he would free her from what she called “the disagreeables of her father’s house” (621)⁵²². For many young women marriage was a means. Gilbert and Gubar put it well when they say: “Dorothea and Rosamond can only express their dissatisfaction with provincial life by choosing suitors who seem to be possible means of escaping confinement and ennui”⁵²³.

Through marriage, Dorothea wishes to gain knowledge and intellectual fulfilment. “The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it” (10). With Mr Casaubon, Dorothea believes she will find purpose and truth. As Kate Flint puts it, Dorothea “falls for the sexually and emotionally unsuitable Casaubon in large part because of his scholarly attributes”⁵²⁴. Casaubon is “beyond the shalows of ladies’ school literature” (23). Dorothea hopes that “he will liberate her from her shallow learning”⁵²⁵. A desire for learning is confused, in Dorothea’s case, with love for Casaubon. In Rosamond’s case, social aspirations are confused with love for Lydgate⁵²⁶.

As Eliot herself has put it, social life was (for women) “a labyrinth of petty courses, a maze of small paths that led no whither [...]” (27). Girls are given “practically no choice between marriage and a life of perpetual childhood”, Millicent Garrett Fawcett

⁵²¹ Sally Shuttleworth, George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Science: The Make Believe of a Beginning (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 162.

⁵²² Marriage to Lydgate does this, as Rosamond admits. But marriage itself was not what she had “wished and hoped” (621-22).

⁵²³ Gilbert and Gubar 515.

⁵²⁴ Kate Flint, “George Eliot and Gender,” The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot, ed. George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 162.

⁵²⁵ Pauline Nestor, Female Friendships and Communities: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) 187. Harriet Martineau had argued in 1855 that the only way to advancement was the self-reliance which resulted from self-discipline. Woman’s education had to cultivate her powers, like a man’s education. Harriet Martineau, “The Woman Question”, Harriet Martineau on Women, ed. Gayle Graham Yates, The Douglass Series on Women’s Lives and the Meaning of Gender (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1985) 81-82. In Middlemarch we witness the damaging effects of an incomplete education, the resulting absence of motivation, and the consequences of life-choices taken confusedly.

⁵²⁶ Jennifer Uglow, George Eliot (London: Virago Press Limited, 1987) 204.

observed⁵²⁷. Middlemarch is about “woman’s lot”⁵²⁸. The underlying subjects of the book are “the education of women”⁵²⁹ and “the question of society’s responsibility for women’s difficulties”⁵³⁰. Gilbert and Gubar consider both Dorothea and Rosamond to be “victims of a miseducation”⁵³¹. Middlemarch is a careful examination of how the so-called “feminine” education damaged women. Women were taught to exist in a fancy world, and were fed sentimental literature. “Gentleness, silence and ignorance were almost synonymous as desirable ladylike traits,” notes Judith Flanders. Knowledge was thought to contaminate women⁵³². A learned woman lost “the very essence of her femininity”⁵³³. Woman had to remain innocent and intuitive so as to be able to be content with domestic virtues⁵³⁴. Gilbert and Gubar argue that Rosamond seems childish because she has been denied full maturity by her femininity⁵³⁵.

⁵²⁷ Ruined marriages were often caused by the wife having no real vocation for marriage, or because she had no affection for her husband but married him to settle herself. This, says Fawcett, is a type of marriage George Eliot portrayed in the marriage of Rosamond and Lydgate. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, “The Emancipation of Women, 1891,” ‘Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors’: Victorian Writing by Women on Women, ed. Susan Hamilton (Ontario, Can.: broadview press ltd, 1995) 261.

⁵²⁸ Laurence Lerner, “Dorothea and the Theresa-Complex (1967),” George Eliot: Middlemarch, A Casebook, ed. Patrick Swinden, Casebook Series (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1972) 243.

⁵²⁹ Lefkowitz 103.

⁵³⁰ Beer 147.

⁵³¹ Gilbert and Gubar 514.

⁵³² Judith Flanders, The Victorian House: Domestic Life from Childbirth to Deathbed (London: Harper Perennial, 2003) 276.

⁵³³ Joan N. Burstyn, Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood (London: Croom Helm, 1980) 37.

⁵³⁴ The press encouraged women in this, says Joan Burstyn, women’s magazines filled their columns with moral tales, poetry and advice on etiquette. Burstyn 34. Women’s novels were highly emotional, even revealing the deficiencies of female education in grammar and style. Sally Mitchell, “Sentiment and Suffering: Women’s Recreational Reading in the 1860s”, Victorian Studies 21 (1977): 31.

⁵³⁵ And the same is true for Dorothea. Gilbert and Gubar 518. Women in Middlemarch are shown to have “no meaningful sphere for social action. Langland 196. Langland in fact believes that women were in a better position in Victorian society than Eliot would allow. According to Langland, women “controlled the signifiers of social status and managed the family’s household and position”. Eliot, however, “continually erases the place of woman in domestic management and thus in the political life of Victorian England”. Langland 207. Nevertheless, there is significant evidence to support Eliot’s outlook. The staple occupations for women were, “[t]hroughout the [Victorian] period education and dress-making”. Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, Public Lives: Women, Family and Society in Victorian Britain (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003) 181. Occupations such as hairdressing, midwifery and pharmacy-keeping would declass them. “As ideas about who and what was genteel began to harden from the beginning of the century, the range of work open to middle-class women dwindled to almost nothing”. Kathryn Hughes, The Victorian Governess (London: Hambledon and London, 2001) 34. Married middle-class women could not work, because the non-

Let us put it “at its crudest,” says Lerner. “If Dorothea [...] could have become a doctor or a teacher, she wouldn’t have needed Sir James Chettam’s help to build the cottages; and she wouldn’t have married Casaubon”⁵³⁶. The same can well apply to Rosamond⁵³⁷. If Rosamond could have become a musician or could have had a wider social life, she would not have married Lydgate. Mrs Lemon was proud that Rosamond’s “musical execution was quite exceptional” (89). As Rosamond tells Lydgate, “our organist at St Peter’s is a good musician, and I go on studying with him” (149). The narrator verifies that this organist was indeed “excellent” (150), and Rosamond cultivated her talent with care. “Rosamond played admirably [...]. A hidden soul seemed to be flowing forth from her fingers [...].” (150). Lydgate comes to the point where he sees his wife as a water-nixie with no soul; it is music that brings out the soul in Rosamond, not marriage. Weliver argues that it is only Lydgate who hears a “hidden soul” in Rosamond’s music: in reality, Rosamond is imitating the performance of her music teacher⁵³⁸. However, the “hidden soul” comment seems to belong to the narrator, and not Lydgate; and it is placed inside a paragraph on Rosamond’s musical abilities.

Middlemarch suggests that a woman’s talent in the arts did not offer her any possibility for self-development. It merely provided her with “feminine” accomplishments, and faded with marriage, or was at least limited, to be exercised of an evening, when the man

employment of women was a defining characteristic of the middle-class family. Burstyn 18. “[W]omen of the middle-classes could not be employed at all if the status of their families were to be maintained. [...] Leisured women were symbols of the economic success of their male relatives”. Burstyn 19, 30. It is true that women could, in exceptional circumstances, follow a vocation or, at least, pursue a career other than marriage and housekeeping. As has already been mentioned in the Villette chapter, there were instances of Victorian women artists and musicians. Patricia Zakreski has argued that female artists representing themselves while presiding over the domestic sphere paved the way for artistic endeavour and related forms of employment (such as designing domestic goods) to be gradually seen as compatible with woman’s domestic identity. Patricia Zakreski, Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890: Refining Work for the Middle-Class Woman (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006) 90-91. However, marriage emphatically prevented women from gaining work and independence. Gordon and Nair note that, given the loss of independence and uncertainty which accompanied marriage, some women in the Victorian period “chose not to marry”. Gordon and Nair 174. Emphasis original. The unmarried woman who was head of a household “had real social independence”. Gordon and Nair 175.

⁵³⁶ Lerner 243-44.

⁵³⁷ For Gillian Beer, the theme of the unfit preparation of women for life’s opportunities is “as crucial for understanding Rosamond as it is for understanding Dorothea”. Gillian Beer, “*Middlemarch* and ‘The Woman Question’,” New Casebooks: Middlemarch, ed. John Peck, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1992) 159.

⁵³⁸ Weliver 208. Thus, Lydgate has a share of blame in the marriage failure, because he has an “undiscerning ear”. Weliver 209.

of the house needed diversion and rest. “Is that enough for you, my lord?” Rosamond asks Lydgate as she finishes playing the piano (429). “Some aim [women] must have,” Harriet Martineau declared⁵³⁹. Florence Nightingale vociferously complained against this state of affairs: “We constantly hear it said, ‘So and so has given up all her music since she married, or her drawing --what a pity such a first-rate artist as she was’. A married woman cannot follow up anything which requires exercise [...]”⁵⁴⁰.

Rosamond, Dorothea and Male Interpretations of Women

The story which surrounds Rosamond is that of a young woman with a trained talent for music; however, *Middlemarch* plainly suggests that this story must remain untold, and is unnarratable in female terms. Unlike Lydgate, Rosamond has never been to Paris to listen to “the best singers. I have heard very little: I have only once been to London” (149). Yet Rosamond stubbornly practises her music until the end of the novel proper, and music forms a refuge as marital troubles deepen. What *Middlemarch* shows is that the story of her musical talent lacks a core of meaning – it is a story that cannot become meaningful in terms of Rosamond herself. In the case of Dorothea, this lack of a meaningful core to which the story can refer is exacerbated. Rosamond has a calling, music; Dorothea has none. Despite her abilities, kindness and eagerness, Dorothea can find no real outlets. If Rosamond’s narrative of a failed marriage is built against a narrative of a woman gifted with musical and social skills, Dorothea’s is built upon the ghostly narrative of an absent calling.

Thus, the two women begin in *Middlemarch* by having no woman-orientated explanation for their lives and experiences. This continues with marriage. Dorothea and Rosamond both face what Eliot calls “the stifling oppression of [the] gentlewoman’s world” (257). Both Dorothea and Rosamond are subjected to men’s interpretation and domination. Blake wonders whether Will Ladislaw differs from Casaubon to any considerable extent. Will is a limited character; he carries certain assumptions about

⁵³⁹ Martineau 89. I will not include Dinah Muloch Craik’s statement that “the chief canker at the root of women’s lives is the want of something to do”. Dinah Muloch Craik, *A Woman’s Thoughts About Women* (London, 1858) 3. This is because Craik makes it clear from the first page of her book that her thoughts “do not concern married women, as they usually have plenty to do and think about [...]”. Craik 1. Eliot would have disagreed. After her marriage, we are told, Dorothea lives in a world “where everything was done for her and none asked her aid” (257). Rosamond also has little to do except knit and sew, and wait for Lydgate to return home.

⁵⁴⁰ Florence Nightingale, *Cassandra and Other Selections from Suggestions for Thought*, ed. Mary Poovey (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1991) 72-73.

women – “resemblance to Mr Brooke, Sir James, Lydgate, and Casaubon sometimes becomes uncomfortable. He can be as put off by [Dorothea’s] power and eloquence as any of them”. The qualities he seems to love most about her are her “innocent shortsightedness and her inaccessibility”. As a result, “Will is not exempt from some of the attitudes that contribute to the meanness of a woman’s opportunity”⁵⁴¹. A glimpse of greatness in Dorothea, for example, makes him feel “a chilling sense of remoteness. A man is seldom ashamed of feeling that he cannot love a woman so well when he sees a certain greatness in her: nature having intended greatness for men” (365).

Like Lydgate, Will drapes Dorothea in fancy and fantasy. He will fall at her feet, knock down Naumann for touching her arm (202); she is his sovereign, he is a worshipper (204). When Dorothea remarks that she is sure she could never produce a poem, Ladislav’s reply seems inevitable: “You are a poem [...]” (209). Dorothea’s weak reference to a vocation is immediately thwarted; from the potential position of subject she is immediately assigned the position of object, and Ladislav’s product. The stories which centre on the women themselves fade as the stories their partners write for them take priority.

Further, the women’s stories are seen by the men as trivial and unimportant. John Tosh explained that the daily experiences of husband and wife diverged sharply in the Victorian period; as a result, the husband would often consider that his wife’s activities were not worth thinking about. Together with the gulf in education, this made married life often unsatisfactory⁵⁴². Rosamond, in moments of despair, can only pace from one end of the room to the other. Dorothea experiences the “dreary oppression” of her boudoir (258), a space which is described in terms reminiscent of a death – Dorothea’s hopes are now “transient and departed” (258), the trees outside the window are white and motionless, “the stag in the tapestry looked more like a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world” (256). A family crypt indeed, for “a new Antigone” (785), who has again aligned herself with death. According to Gilbert and Gubar, Rosamond is similarly imprisoned by marriage, and enacts Dorothea’s anger against a marriage of death⁵⁴³:

⁵⁴¹ Blake 308.

⁵⁴² John Tosh, A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999) 26.

⁵⁴³ Gilbert and Gubar 516. Rosamond’s actions express her anger at the control she is not allowed to have. Helena Michie has observed that novelists of the period presented the leisure-class heroine as “participating in a violent struggle with time”. Helena Michie, The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 39. The leisured woman’s work in the home, because it involves the body, and usually also implies the absence of the man, “functions as a displacement of sexual desire”. Michie 40. One of the forms such work may take is sewing; Rosamond’s

Critics have neglected the clues that align [Eliot] with her blonde temptress. Like Madame Laure, Rosamond is a brilliant strategist [...]. [She] is clever with that sort of cleverness which catches every tone [...]. And she is constantly plotting, devising futures for herself which she sometimes manages to actualize. In short, like Eliot, she is a spinner of yarns, a weaver of fictions⁵⁴⁴.

Eliot, like Rosamond, works for the female community, and entangles the representatives of patriarchal culture (such as Lydgate and Casaubon) to call their authority into question⁵⁴⁵.

“exquisite sewing” in *Middlemarch* is a reflection of a feminine desire to control the text and the man she has ensnared. Michie 41. Harriet Martineau warned about the dangers inherent in this powerlessness and inactivity of the middle-class woman. “After the duties of home are performed, “an active mind will feel a dismal vacuity, a craving after something nobler and better to employ the thoughts in the intervals of idleness which must occur when these calls of duty are answered [...]”. The idle mind “will waste its energies in the pursuit of folly, if not of vice [...]”. Harriet Martineau, “On Female Education, 1822”, *Harriet Martineau on Women*, ed. Gayle Graham Yates, The Douglass Series on Women’s Lives and the Meaning of Gender (New Brunswick, Rutgers UP, 1985) 91. Add to this Lydgate’s inconsiderate behaviour and failure to provide his wife with a secure home, and it is little wonder if Rosamond shows inconsiderateness or selfishness on her part.

⁵⁴⁴ Gilbert and Gubar 520.

⁵⁴⁵ Gilbert and Gubar 520. The question of Eliot’s own relationship to feminism is not straightforward, but appears to be settled. A life of confinement seems to have been the fate Eliot had narrowly escaped herself. After the death of her father, she was left with enough money “to consider living independently. She might have gone to live with her married brother Isaac, resigning herself to a life of plain sewing, playing the piano, and reading to her nephews and nieces in a household of conventional religious and social observance which was to her stiflingly narrow. But she knew that she and Isaac disagreed about everything [...]. [And] she had no wish to settle with [her sister] Chrissey’s family either” Rosemary Ashton, “Evans, Marian [pseudo. George Eliot],” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 18 March 2008 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/printable/6794>> 6. Instead, Eliot opted for a journalistic career in London, and an entry “into the world of radical politics, [...] of free thinking, and in some cases of free loving too”. Ashton 7. Eliot started the story she meant to call “Miss Brooke” noting in her *Journal* that, “[i]n my private lot I am unspeakably happy, loving and beloved” George Eliot, “Journal, London, 31 December 1870”, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, vol. 5 (London; Oxford UP, 1956) 127. Although it is impossible to think of Eliot as a radical feminist, *Middlemarch* is in sympathy with the women’s movement. Gillian Beer 165. There was an obvious tactical reason, says Beer, why Eliot might have remained a counsellor and a friend behind the scenes to the feminists: her “‘irregular’ life might jeopardise more than it gained for the movement if she were an open and active supporter. This reason may not suffice, but it should not be discounted. It is very easy from our point of vantage to underestimate the enormous step George Eliot took in committing herself to a relationship which put her outside society. [...] Law-breaking may make us

Middlemarch is a “great feminist work,” Blake points out⁵⁴⁶. Eliot shares some of the feminist views of her period⁵⁴⁷. “A woman’s life offers a paradigm of the novel’s theme – lack of vocation as tenuousness of identity”⁵⁴⁸. Men are “just about all the work women have”⁵⁴⁹. Should these men prove impervious, a life void of meaning and a devastation of self may follow. “This last point is most explicitly presented in Rosamond’s case,” says Blake⁵⁵⁰.

Middlemarch is a feminist novel in the additional sense that it traces the development of a female-centred narrative amidst the confusion created by male-centred narratives. Masculinist discourse brings women to a deadlock, which Rosamond and her relationship to Dorothea are central in dissolving. In a plot line which courageously probes and links the ideal to the non-ideal, Dorothea and Rosamond find a way to move on and put a closure in the narrative of their tough domestic situations.

Rosamond and the Perfect Wife Ideal

Notably, the ideal of wife and woman which Rosamond strives for, and the ideal Lydgate bases his marriage choice on, are similar in many fundamental ways. Eliot juxtaposes the wife Rosamond has become (an obstacle and a burden, in Lydgate’s thoughts) and the wife Lydgate dreamed of, to suggest that they are not dissimilar figures. Both are beautiful in a feminine, angelic way⁵⁵¹; both consider their husband to be their lord, both are musical and entertaining, prettifying the home by doing considerable embroidery work.

Interestingly, Rosamond’s tireless sewing and knitting have been read as a sign of either rebellion⁵⁵² or submission⁵⁵³, and as a demonstration of her sinister attributes⁵⁵⁴. Recently, Elaine Freedgood has argued that, in general, items in Middlemarch show the law-abiding”. Gillian Beer 167.

⁵⁴⁶ Blake 285.

⁵⁴⁷ Blake 287.

⁵⁴⁸ Blake 289.

⁵⁴⁹ Blake 300.

⁵⁵⁰ Blake 303.

⁵⁵¹ Rosamond is a combination of correct sentiments, correct accomplishments and correct physical appearance. To a certain extent she is, as Elizabeth Langland says, “compounded of society’s discursive practices”. Elizabeth Langland, Nobody’s Angels: Middle-class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996) 189. Seemingly at least, Rosamond fits what Patrick calls “a stereotypical feminine ideal”. Patrick 227. She combines physical beauty with uninterest in “masculine” concerns. This is what mostly attracts Lydgate to her. He assumes that her conventionality “assures a socially prescribed feminine subservience to him and his profession”. Moscovici 525.

“alienability of all meaning”⁵⁵⁵. This has potentially dangerous implications in Rosamond’s case, for her capacity to embody the meaning of opposite ideals comes, as I shall be arguing, uncomfortably close to resembling non-meaning.

In many important respects, Rosamond is the perfect wife Lydgate dreamed of. However, Lydgate’s ideal wife is a non-entity, for she has no self: he pictures marriage as a heaven of soft music, where an adoring woman will make a cushion of his life⁵⁵⁶. Lydgate believes that the society of women should be relaxing; an important wifely

⁵⁵² For Hilary Franklin, Rosamond’s deftness is evidence of power, and demonstrates her “embrace of activities that reflect her personal interests”. Rosamond uses the work of her fingers to communicate rejection of society’s will to interpellate her as an exemplary subject. Hilary Franklin, “Self-(Un)Conscious Narrative of the Female Body: Dorothea’s and Rosamond’s ‘Finger Rhetoric’ in Eliot’s *Middlemarch*,” The Haverford Journal 2 (2006): 32-33. Franklin says that the same also applies to Dorothea. The work of her hands, such as the sketching of plans for the new cottages for the poor, signifies her rejection of the idealized woman’s role. Franklin 32.

⁵⁵³ For Gilbert and Gubar, Rosamond’s sewing is “in some ways a sign of her acceptance of her role as female [...]. [S]ewing signals women’s domestic confinement and diminishment”. Gilbert and Gubar 520. Flanders has also aligned women’s crafts to domestic confinement. The middle-class woman filled her empty hours with “endless fancy work” (Flanders 160) and produced items no-one would want to buy. In fact, “[m]any items recommended by ladies’ journals smacked of desperation”. Flanders cites, inter alia, “a guitar made from cardboard and silk scraps,” and “a Turkish slipper made from [...] old visiting cards”. Flanders 158. Talia Schaffer has offered a counter-interpretation of the craft’s meaning in relation to the market economy. Rather than signifying the woman’s domestic confinement, domestic handiwork allowed the “women’s sphere [to produce] an alternative, rival version of the dominant economy”. Crafts “could articulate [this critique of mid-Victorian economy] by emulating industrial production and consumption while adding emotional meaningfulness”. Talia Schaffer, “Craft, Authorial Anxiety, and ‘The Cranford Papers’”, Victorian Periodicals Review 38 (2005): 223. The craft carried sentimental value, and was thus, in some ways “an antidote to the mass-produced commodity”. Schaffer 222. However, Schaffer has recently observed that, in Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) the craft paradigm is fragmented, perhaps beyond repair; to be in the craft realm is to be dead. The financial industry is life. Although Dickens criticizes the institutions of capitalism and consumerism, he also records the decline of the craft. Talia Schaffer, “Salvaging Craft, Crafting Salvage: Aesthetic Labour in *Our Mutual Friend*,” keynote address, Artistry and Industry: Representations of Creative Labour in Literature and the Visual Arts c. 1830-1900, Conference, University of Exeter, Exeter UK, 20 July 2008.

⁵⁵⁴ Langland speaks of Rosamond’s “ensnaring artifice, symbolized by the chains she is crafting and the plaits in which she braids her hair”. Langland 189.

⁵⁵⁵ Elaine Freedgood, The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2006) 130. So, for example, Dorothea can not organize a scheme of value for her jewels (Freedgood 126) and is also unable to assign them “the most obvious uncommercial value of the heirloom”. Fictional things become “capable of meaning or not meaning on what might be roughly described as demand” (Freedgood 130).

⁵⁵⁶ Darwin’s list of the pros and cons of marriage, listed in full by Flanders, is eerily reminiscent of Lydgate’s ideas. The pros include the woman’s being an “object to

function being to make the man feel as if he is “reclining in a paradise with sweet laughs for bird notes, and blue eyes for a heaven” (88).

This perfectly coincides with conduct-book advice⁵⁵⁷, which advocated self-effacement as the prime quality of the wife. However, Rosamond’s story debunks conduct-book advice on two grounds: first, by showing that self-effacement is an impossibility (and this is where Lydgate’s model of wifedom and Rosamond’s basically differ) and, second, by showing that the prosperity of the home depended, in very practical and real terms, not so much on the wife as on the husband. Langland has argued that the Angel in the House, rather than being powerless, was important as domestic manager; she “actually performed a more significant and extensive economic and political function than is usually perceived [...] women had the important task of managing [the] funds toward the acquisition of social and political status”⁵⁵⁸. However, the wife’s function and importance in this respect collapsed altogether if there were *no funds* to manage. If anything, Middlemarch makes clear the extent to which the wife was disabled from contributing to the household income and, in Lydgate’s refusal to allow his wife to participate in decision-making⁵⁵⁹, the wife’s inability to influence decisions also.

be beloved and played with. Better than a dog anyhow”. Like Lydgate, Darwin contemplates the “chams of music & female chit-chat,” and pictures “a nice soft wife on a sofa with good fire, & books and music perhaps”. Among the cons of marriage is that it will make the husband miss the conversation “of clever men at clubs”. Flanders 214 (emphasis original). Woman’s intellectual inferiority is both a source of delight and of displeasure. But inferiority is a pre-condition, since the wife is an object existing for the convenience of the husband.

⁵⁵⁷ The wife, said Sarah Stickney Ellis, had to set aside “all selfish considerations [...] all low calculations, all caprice, all vanity, all spite” (243), so that she would be able to maintain “general cheerfulness” (245); she had to put aside “all her own little ailments for the more important consideration of those of her husband” (251). Sarah Stickney Ellis, The Wives of England: their relative duties, domestic influence and social obligations (London, 1843).

⁵⁵⁸ Langland 8. Auerbach has also argued that the angel in the house “is too strong and interesting a creature”. Nina Auerbach, Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982) 12. The character types used to describe Victorian womanhood “infuse[d] social categories with the energy of the uncanny. ... The very rigidity of the categories of victim and queen, domestic angel and demonic outcast ... concentrates itself into a myth of transfiguration that glorified the women it seemed to suppress”. Auerbach 9. However, might it not be possible to argue that domestic ideology had the ability to suppress the powerful, mythological aspect of these character types? In Middlemarch, it is obvious that the men do not anticipate the angel, or even the mermaid—a far more dangerous creature—to exhibit any form of mystifying power; and when the angel does prove to be powerful, she is deemed to be a failure, and a basil plant.

⁵⁵⁹ Lydgate’s stubborn refusal to consult his wife on any matter is notorious. The excuse is that Rosamond must not interfere in matters she does not understand (559). The manner in which Lydgate relates to his wife inhibits mutual love, says Patrick. Patrick

Rosamond and the Home

In cases of serious misfortune, such as the scandal with Bulstrode, the home becomes a true prison for the wife. “Of late [Rosamond] had never gone beyond her own house and garden, except to church, and once to see her papa [...]” (724). This Rosamond is very different from the Rosamond who was happily riding to Stone Court to see Mary Garth, and considered a turn to religion as a disappointing consolation when one has no prospects (105)⁵⁶⁰. Jacques Derrida has commented on the linguistic similarity in Ancient Greek between home (oikos) and family crypt (oikesis). For Derrida, the tomb shelters life from death, because it attests to the perseverance of life⁵⁶¹. However, Sophocles’s Antigone was punished for her hubris against Aphrodite (she aligned herself with the dead rather than the living, and longed for death) by being buried alive. A tomb became, literally, her home. For the Victorians, the home was a place of “peace, seclusion

227. What is behind Lydgate’s touching idea that “there are things which husband and wife must think of together” (557), is a great deal of hypocrisy, because it comes after he has placed the furniture and jewels under security; a decision he took entirely by himself. His “bitter moody state [...] continually widen[s] Rosamond’s alienation from him” (609). Lydgate will not mention that he wanted to write to his uncle for money, because he did not want to admit what would appear to Rosamond a concession to her wishes (623) and then condemns Rosamond for acting secretly by writing to his uncle herself (624). When Rosamond tries to help “by appealing to her father (which she has a right to do and Lydgate has little right to forbid her) and by approaching his relations, her actions seem stupid because they fail; but they might have succeeded?” Beer 188. Lydgate’s total silence over important household affairs actually pushes Rosamond towards his thought of her as a wife who “does not understand”. He mentions nothing about suspicions surrounding him on the Bulstrode scandal, and then accuses Rosamond of being secretive, for the trivial reason of planning a party without telling him (710). Finally, the true meaning of Lydgate’s thought that he wants to discuss plans with his wife, is that he wants to announce his plans, and hear his wife voice her approval. As a result, he becomes disillusioned with her for having a will of her own. Daniel Karlin, “Having the Whip-Hand in *Middlemarch*,” *Rereading Victorian Fiction*, eds. Alice Jenkins and Juliet John (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000) 36. In a “prejudicial arrangement of roles within the marriage [...] Rosamond is expected to yield her judgment entirely to her husband’s and to do nothing without his approval, while he can make decisions that concern them both without consulting her”. Patrick 234.

⁵⁶⁰ Rosamond is speaking of a Miss Morgan, and not of Mary, with whom they are close. In fact, Rosamond shows faithfulness as a friend when she asks Mary, “Am I to repeat what you have said?” (108). Mary had told Rosamond that Featherstone wastold that Fred was unsteady (106).

⁵⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton, UK: The Harvester Press, 1982) 82.

and refuge,⁵⁶² and Victorian novels often seem to criticise the extent to which the seclusion of the home could restrict the woman's horizons so severely as to make domestic life resemble a form of death.

Though Lydgate recognizes that domestic troubles are more difficult for Rosamond than they are for him, because he had a life away from home (628) he wonders why a woman would care so much about house and furniture (617). The answer is that, sadly, Rosamond, as Gilbert and Gubar put it, "has been given nothing else to care about"⁵⁶³.

It has been argued that Rosamond's interest in commodities such as clothes and jewellery has made her a commodity herself, and shows her shallowness⁵⁶⁴. In other words, Rosamond is a beautiful object, much like the "serene and lovely image" who listens silently to Lydgate's "little language of affection" while he is fastening up her plaits (619). It is my view that, if Rosamond's beauty is to an extent the beauty of a silent object of art, Middlemarch is showing the process by which she is being objectified; she is often treated as an object by her husband and by the social structure in which she is living. If jewellery, a commodity carrying "political and economic significance", was also "well-suited to interpretations of women's role because of its nearly exclusive use by women in the Victorian age"⁵⁶⁵, what might Rosamond's return of the jewels to her husband mean? Rosamond returns the amethyst jewellery Lydgate had given her, when he announces that some of their property is to be confiscated, while also forbidding her to try to prevent this by appealing to her father for help (558-60). This gesture, it seems to me, signifies that Rosamond feels what it means to have no value. Rosamond bids Lydgate to return the jewels to the market, where they can be exchanged for money's worth. On her, the jewels have no value, because her wifely function has rendered her without value either. The narrator even hints that what Lydgate thought was Rosamond's empty soul had a charm for him: "The shallowness of a waternixie's soul may have a charm until she becomes didactic" (611). Twice while Rosamond hears bad news from Lydgate she is described as silently turning to look at "the large vase on the mantelpiece" (557, 612). The vase seems to express Rosamond's objectification and immobility⁵⁶⁶.

⁵⁶² John Tosh, A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999) 13.

⁵⁶³ Gilbert and Gubar 516.

⁵⁶⁴ Miller 197.

⁵⁶⁵ Jean Arnold, "Cameo Appearances: The Discourse of Jewellery in Middlemarch," Victorian Literature and Culture 30 (2002) 266-67.

⁵⁶⁶ Similarly, the text likens Dorothea to a work of sculpture, to signify her lack of personal freedom. "[I]n playing her culturally assigned role as mistress of Lowick, Dorothea becomes as immobilized as a work of sculpture, and equally removed from the

Rosamond collapses not because she is empty or “anencephalous”⁵⁶⁷. What happens to her does not reveal that she is empty or a monstrosity; it reveals that she has been consigned to an emptiness which is a monstrosity. According to Anderson, Rosamond aspires “ignorantly” to the world outside Middlemarch⁵⁶⁸. Yet why should it be that she aspires “ignorantly”? Lydgate, being a qualified and gifted medical man, could legitimately aspire to the world outside conventional medicine. Rosamond, however, being a qualified and gifted musician, could not aspire to anything beyond ordinariness and provinciality. When she does so, she is called a monster, murderous, and a basil plant.

This is the point where (Freedgood’s) alienable meaning comes to resemble non-meaning. Rosamond’s beauty encompasses two discourses (the angel, blonde and musical, and the demon, basil plant and destroyer of men) one threatening to annihilate the other. In *Agnes Grey*, Rosalie Murray centres upon herself female eroticism and dominant ideology’s attempt to quench it. This is prevented by Anne Brontë’s specific rendition of dominant ideology, which ensures the reader realizes that dominant ideology cannot answer any of the questions female eroticism is posing. Thus, Rosalie Murray gives shape to the author’s anxiety over the silencing of women’s issues, which it exposes as arbitrary and prejudicial. In *Middlemarch*, the antithetical discourses which combine in Rosamond’s figure are those of the angelic and demonic versions of womanhood. What prevents these discourses (and the novel) from reaching a deadlock, is the pivotal meeting between Rosamond and Dorothea⁵⁶⁹. During this scene, the interaction of the women turns the tension between the two womanhood ideals (angel/demon) from potentially destructive to positively productive.

Rosamond and Dorothea

During their climactic meeting, Dorothea’s manner towards Rosamond is open, caring, maternal. “Dorothea [...] came forward and with her face full of sad yet sweet

energies of cultural life as a statue obscurely installed in a museum”. Arnold 274.

⁵⁶⁷ Carroll, *Conflict* 269-70.

⁵⁶⁸ Anderson 187.

⁵⁶⁹ Despite her basic goodness, Dorothea also fails as Casaubon’s wife. For Auerbach, the “wifely performances” of both Rosamond and Dorothea “are similarly, softly, murderous”. Auerbach 91. [...] Rosamond is an easy target of satiric censure, but Dorothea may also have a touch of basil”. Her offers of help often resemble criticism, she abrasively asks Casaubon to change his will in favour of Ladislaw, and refuses “even to try to work on [his] Key to All Mythologies after his death [...]”. Auerbach, *Dorothea’s Lost Dog* 93.

openness, put out her hand. Rosamond [...] could not avoid putting her small hand into Dorothea's, which clasped it with gentle motherliness [...]” (745). Rosamond is unmothered; she lacks female guidance, companionship and friendship. It seems that a basic question raised on the subject of otherness in relation to womanhood is this: why are otherness and essence so proximate?

Perhaps this is because of the female community's ability to straddle dominant categories. Both women have elements of the “other” –the failed wife, the basil plant—in their composition; and if prevailing social mores could not articulate this form of womanly experience, Middlemarch suggests that women themselves could and did articulate it.

Dorothea, says Blake, produces a movement of human fellowship” in Rosamond. “She understands [Rosamond's] troubles as specifically a woman's”⁵⁷⁰. The narrator is explicit about how much their encounter differs from conventionality and role-playing. “[T]here had been between them too much serious emotion for them to use the signs of it superficially”. Therefore, Dorothea and Rosamond part “without kiss or other show of effusion” (751). Rosamond will keep Dorothea's generosity “in religious remembrance”; for Dorothea “had come to her aid in the sharpest crisis of her life” (782). Sharon Marcus sees the Dorothea/Rosamond relationship as providing a hopeful glimpse “of two very different people speaking openly about what separates and unites them”⁵⁷¹; this in a novel about “community and its fissures”⁵⁷². Amity converts rivalry into a sense of connection, which also provides a model of how men and women can resolve differences⁵⁷³.

Further, exemplary fellow feeling is shown in this scene as plainly female in origin. Rosamond gives Ladislaw a note, indicating that she has told Dorothea the truth “I told her because she came to see me and was very kind” (755). Both Rosamond and Dorothea, says Franklin, express “the rejection of the idealized nineteenth century English woman's uncompromising submission”⁵⁷⁴.

Lydgate had thought that Rosamond would be a woman “who would reverence her husband's mind after the fashion of an accomplished mermaid, using her comb and looking-glass and singing her song for the relaxation of his adored wisdom alone” (547). What does the mermaid see inside the looking-glass? The man does not wish to know; the mermaid looks inside the glass and then sings a song of reverence. Perhaps it is her

⁵⁷⁰ Blake 304.

⁵⁷¹ Sharon Marcus, Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007) 86.

⁵⁷² Marcus 85.

⁵⁷³ Marcus 86.

⁵⁷⁴ Franklin 31.

husband she is seeing in the looking-glass. Perhaps she is seeing nothing. From the male point of view, the looking-glass reveals only the female's absence.

Nevertheless, this chapter is not about the male point of view; it is about the mermaid and what she might be seeing in the looking glass. Mermaids often live in communities. Dorothea becomes the medium through which Rosamond learns about feelings Lydgate experienced but never shared with her. "And he felt he had been so wrong not to pour out everything about this to you" (746). It is only through Dorothea that Lydgate can fully express himself as a husband; Dorothea takes upon her the function of the good husband, something Aunt Betsey was doing in relation to Dora in David Copperfield. The female figure is here able to straddle the husband/wife dyad, and become the mouthpiece of the husband in front of his wife. What she has to say puts things in the right, because more realistic, perspective. Rather than plague Rosamond with saccharine and idealized versions of marriage as a haven, where the wife selflessly but willingly labours to make the husband happy, Dorothea will say, "There is something awful in the nearness [marriage] brings. [...] [T]he marriage stays with us like a murder – and everything else is gone" (748-49).

Female power to heal is stronger than the male power to wound. Dorothea's arms around her make Rosamond wish "to free herself from something that oppressed her as if it were blood guiltiness" (749). As she confesses everything to Dorothea, Rosamond gathers "the sense that she was repelling Will's reproaches, which were still like a knife-wound within her" (750).

From the start, a form of expression of the relationship between the two women, prefiguring their therapeutic encounter had been physical beauty. Rosamond would declare that Dorothea "must be better than anyone, and she is very beautiful" (751). This is followed by a humorous remark on the part of Rosamond, which eases the tension between her and Lydgate. The two women had always been able to admire each other's beauty without being urged to classify it in categories, or interpret it. On their first meeting, Dorothea looks "admiringly at Lydgate's lovely bride". Rosamond also admires Dorothea, and looks upon her as a country divinity. She herself enjoys being admired by Dorothea; it is not only male attention Rosamond covets (406). Later, Rosamond will ask Ladislav about Dorothea. Ladislav, being in love with Dorothea, is unable to make any sensible comments ("When one sees a perfect woman, one never thinks of her attributes – one is conscious of her presence"). Real interest is on Rosamond's, the female's, side. "What is it that you gentlemen are thinking of when you are with Mrs Casaubon?"

Rosamond would like to know Dorothea better, not because she is gentry, but because she is clever (409).

Beauty intertwines essence with otherness; rather than say with Miller that Rosamond's love of fashion makes her a commodity⁵⁷⁵ we may argue that she functions to expose the way in which certain women are treated as near-commodities; lovely appearance and ornament is part of the strategy which allows the author to express the problematic of women's lives.

Middlemarch suggests that this problematic can be, to an extent, resolved through female agency. Dorothea's words to Rosamond re-write the narrative of marriage as female-centred. "[I]t hurts [your husband] more than anything, that his misfortunes must hurt you" (427). The husband is no longer a person with the ability to command obedience; he is weakened by love for his wife. Lydgate did not share his troubles not because he felt that Rosamond did not have a right to know, but "because he feels so much more about your happiness than anything else" (746-47). The woman now holds central place in marriage. "Your husband depends on you for comfort" (750). Dorothea transcends the essence/otherness division, the ideal and the non-ideal, explaining as she does how the husband too can be self-sacrificing (748) and how marriage, far from being a male-centred heaven of music and repose, places terrible duties upon both parties (748-49).

Importantly, Dorothea's words strengthen and comfort Rosamond (748-49). Eliot suggests that Dorothea is right to view her interference as a sort of female quest (she wants to "rescue" Rosamond, 747). Rosamond's beauty now signifies her loss of pride and her honesty in front of Dorothea. "... her eyes met Dorothea's as helplessly as if they had been blue flowers" (748). To focus on Rosamond's beauty in Middlemarch is to acknowledge the antithetical images she is able to contain, and the antithetical ways she has been interpreted; it is to investigate the shape she gives to the novelistic world—the division between male-centred ideals and a female-centred network of aspirations and opportunities which remain at the margins of male-ordered culture. Finally, it is to investigate how she works in tandem with Dorothea to propose a female-centred narrative, where coercive social structures are recycled to allow women to find hope and aspiration. Now the woman's story is able to re-write the stories of men, albeit in a still limited manner. Coquettish beauty does not only suggest that Middlemarch "attempts to imagine ways in which a woman can adjust to Victorian culture without being tied to

⁵⁷⁵ Miller 197.

normative ideologies⁵⁷⁶; the implication is also that any such adjustment must examine components and figurations of the non-ideal, and that indeed the non-ideal might be essential in the formation of a female-centred explanation of life and events that will be fruitful and productive.

⁵⁷⁶ Arnold 284.

Chapter 5

Spectacular beauty in Charles Dickens's Great Expectations.

This chapter comes last in the thesis because it is, in some respects, the odd one out. Estella, the novel's spectacular woman, fashionably dressed and adorned, does not fit easily with the enjoyment of pleasure and flirtation studied in the thesis; she is manifestly unable to enjoy her own beauty, appeal, and power over the men. Nevertheless, the presentation of her beauty and story, and her beauty's story, is done in such a manner as to prompt an inquiry into codes defining Victorian conceptions of womanhood and manhood which is consistent with this thesis and its exploration of the spectacular figure as a sum total of attitudes on female belonging in the Victorian period. In its treatment of Estella, Great Expectations can be read as a feminist novel which endorses the woman's perspective and erotic power, promoting a form of masculinity which is unambiguous in its liberation from social dictates on what acceptable feminine and masculine behaviour should be like. The way Victorian manhood was kept hostage by ideals of domestic and angelic womanhood is demonstrated in Villette's figure of Dr John, whose abhorrence of signs of sexuality in a woman provokes even Lucy, who loves him deeply, to disapprove. I believe that Great Expectations contains a version of masculinity which is mature and broad enough to include feelings of tenderness towards other men and women, and to endorse a female ideal which is positively erotic and dominating.

This chapter begins by examining the form of masculinity embodied in Pip, and the ways it reflects but at the same time differs from traditional forms. Then it explains how this difference relates to Estella and her erotic power; and what makes Estella's portrayal (and relationship to Pip) a feminist rendering of the world of the Victorian woman.

Great Expectations and Masculinity

Any form of masculinity embodied in Pip is intertwined with the figure of the gentleman, and the gentlemanly ideal. In the novel, this ideal involves moral values and moral worth as well as breeding. During his time of education in London, Pip is a gentleman in appearance only; in reality, he is cold-hearted, arrogant and a spend-thrift⁵⁷⁷.

⁵⁷⁷ Dickens reworked the gentlemanly ideal to include character, although he was not dismissive of "the gentleman born," as for example in the figures of Herbert and his father Matthew Pocket. Nevertheless, Dickens can not be called a snob. Pip does not

In Great Expectations, gentlemanliness encompasses the moral trials the protagonist must go through before reaching a level of acceptance of himself and others. For John Lucas, Pip becomes a gentleman “only when his repugnance for Magwitch has melted away”, only when he feels compassion for the hunted man, and remorse for his own behaviour towards Joe. “Pip becomes a gentleman as he loses his gentlemanly status”⁵⁷⁸. Though background and circumstance were powerful in defining a gentleman⁵⁷⁹ the novel refuses to separate the concept of the gentleman from moral worthiness, learning and manners⁵⁸⁰.

defer to rank as rank. Drummle is despicable, and so is Compeyson. The social code of gentlemanliness can be exploited as Compeyson’s trial shows. Robin Gilmour, introduction, Great Expectations, by Charles Dickens (London: Everyman, 1994) xxviii.

⁵⁷⁸ John Lucas, Charles Dickens: The Major Novels, Penguin Critical Studies (London: Penguin Books, 1992) 135-36.

⁵⁷⁹ Gentlemanliness, explains Geoffrey Best, was an idea with a moral content; however, it was “much more influential than precise; and it was loaded to support the social hierarchy. It was not enough to topple the mighty from their seats, no matter how ungentlemanly a sort of gentleman they were. A gillie who showed himself a gentleman would remain a gillie. But so would a peer who showed himself no gentleman remain a peer”. Geoffrey Best, Mid-Victorian Britain 1851-75: The History of British Society (London: Fontana Press, 1979) 269-70. Regenia Gagnier also points out that financial independence and respectability alone did not make the gentleman. “England had a tradition of elitism [...]. By the 1880s, to be a gentleman one must have attended a public school (or successfully pose as having done) [...]”. Regenia Gagnier, Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1986) 90.

⁵⁸⁰ In his 1994 Everyman introduction to Great Expectations, Gilmour felt uncertain whether Pip’s description of Joe as “this gentle Christian man” (458), meant that Dickens went so far as to define a gentleman in Joe. Gilmour xvii. Yet, Joe is a gentleman in character, if not in status; obviously, he would never be accepted by the elite, but the novel endorses his sterling worth. Because Dickens’s concept of the gentleman does not involve money or birth, but it does involve cultivation and intelligence, says Q.D. Leavis, Joe has been given a “special status”, and is called a “gentle Christian man”. F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970) 304. Gilmour himself had in 1981 pointed out that Joe, the gentle Christian man “living by the Christian ideals of love and forgiveness, is the one type of gentlemanliness which the novel at the end unequivocally affirms”. Gilmour, “Pip and the Victorian Idea of the Gentleman,” New Casebooks: Great Expectations, ed. Roger D. Sell, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press, 1994) 121. Gilmour’s contribution to the Great Expectations New Casebook came from his 1981 book The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel. The “rough blacksmith’s hands, of which Pip has started to feel ashamed in himself, are truly gentle [...]”. Gilmour, Idea of the Gentleman 114. In the above mentioned 1994 Everyman Introduction, Gilmour also pointed out that, in the 1850s, writers “were starting to canvass the possibility of an essentially classless notion of gentlemanliness [...]”. Gilmour, Introduction xxvii. This view is also endorsed by Smiles: “Riches and rank have no necessary connection with genuine gentlemanly qualities. The poor man may be a true gentleman – in spirit and in daily life. [...] The poor man with a rich spirit is in all ways superior to the rich man with a poor spirit”. Smiles 256. Perhaps Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis put it well, in his essay on the gentleman in the travelogue England, when he said that the gentleman is a democratized ideal, with an aristocratic essence. The gentleman is generous, honourable,

At first, Pip recoiled from Magwitch's proud assertion that the toil in Australia can produce a gentleman (317); yet, in the end, it is labour in Egypt that keeps his gentlemanly status. It is not manual labour, true: but Pip is a gentleman because he works for it, and lives in modesty and dignity (474, 478). He has even learnt to endorse actual physical toil, and this is important to his acquired identity as a gentleman but not a snob: "Pip's transformation from an idle and debt-ridden snob to a solvent but no less gentlemanly businessman does seem to involve a principled readiness, however fleeting, to work manually with Joe at the forge [...]"⁵⁸¹. Aaron Landau believes that Dickens envisions an alliance between a labouring class and an industrious bourgeoisie. Pip is reborn into the class he always cherished, "only without the guilt: he will be a businessman but not an exploiter; a gentleman but not a snob"⁵⁸².

The novel's examination of the idea of the gentleman is symptomatic of a general scrutiny of gender codes which is happening in the novel. Critical opinion has seen this scrutiny as a failure of Pip as a character. Kathleen Sell has argued that felt shame runs through Pip's narrative, because he realises he has failed "to fulfil the narrative of desire required of the typical Victorian hero," i.e. establish a home which is a haven with an angel at its hearth, while he toils in the public sphere"⁵⁸³.

According to Sell, Pip fails to complete the desired shift from homosocial bonds (masculine bonding and labour at the forge) to heterosexual bonds (class mobility in the form of Estella) and therefore does not establish secure masculine identity (marriage and financial independence). The marriage plot was "the approved script for bourgeois manhood," Herbert Sussman has noted. As such, it runs counter to the masculine plot. Masculine bonding was feared to be, in Sell's words⁵⁸⁴, "transgressive"⁵⁸⁵. It was

dignified and true but, at the same time, he has cultivated his individual and social skills. Nikos Kazantzakis, *Travelling: England*, 5th ed. (Athena [Athens] Gr.: Eleni Kazantzaki Publications, 1964) 171-72. Kazantzakis traces the development of the gentleman ideal from the Middle Ages to the 20th century, and notes that, in the Victorian era, the ideal solidified to its modern day equivalent. Kazantzakis 169-71.

⁵⁸¹ Aaron Landau, "Great Expectations, Romance, and Capital," *Dickens Studies Annual* 35 (2005): 163.

⁵⁸² Landau 170.

⁵⁸³ Kathleen Sell, "The Narrator's Shame: Masculine Identity in *Great Expectations*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 26 (1998): 212.

⁵⁸⁴ Sell 212.

⁵⁸⁵ Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art*, Cambridge Studies in 19th Century Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 63-64.

“impermissible” to oppose the bourgeois ideal of manhood, because of the anxiety surrounding male communities in mid-century⁵⁸⁶.

I believe that Sell’s argument overlooks the meticulousness with which Dickens charts Pip’s development from a cold-hearted snob to a man of character, and a man of action. Pip is moving closer to the self who is narrating the story gradually, and with a degree of self-knowledge acquired at each step. Upon learning that Magwitch has been his benefactor, Pip suffers a crisis of identity: “I thought how miserable I was, but hardly knew why, or how long I had been so [...]”; he feels that he is “in a sort of dream or sleep walking” (325)⁵⁸⁷. While reading to Magwitch he will feel “pursued by the creature who had made me” (335). In the hot and dirty room, the night that he cannot go home, Pip undergoes a dark night of the soul. Annihilation of the self is one of the themes in this scene; Pip remembers having read in the newspapers how “a gentleman unknown had come to the Hummums in the night” (362) and had committed suicide in one of the rooms. “It came into my head that he must have occupied this very vault of mine, and I got out of bed to assure myself that there were no red marks about [...]” (363). But then Pip translates his crisis into action. A positive consequence of Magwitch’s arrival is that it pushes Pip out of idleness and passivity, and into decisiveness and activity; he finds lodgings for Magwitch, and goes from shop to shop to buy him suitable clothes (331). He makes plans to leave England with the convict (374) and he begins his rowing training and practice with Herbert (376). Developing a critical distance from himself, he will tell Miss Havisham that he has nothing to forgive her (393) and ask Joe’s and Biddy’s forgiveness himself⁵⁸⁸ (474). Through this personal crisis, and the crisis of

⁵⁸⁶ So, for example, in Elizabeth Gaskell’s North and South (1854-55) the masculine plot (Thornton as head of a productive community of all-male factory workers) is “short-circuited” by the marriage plot. Closure comes “by entry into heterosexuality in marriage”. Sussman 66. Pip’s failure to effect closure on his story in this way, provokes the “lingering shame that motivates the narrative”. Sell 204.

⁵⁸⁷ All references to Great Expectations come from Charles Dickens, Great Expectations, ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Oxford UP 1993).

⁵⁸⁸ It is not accurate to agree with Jack Rawlins that Pip’s repentance is unnecessary. For Rawlins, Dickens convinces Pip that he (Pip) is himself responsible for the evils he sees in the community, in order to exonerate the community. Jack Rawlins, “Great Expiations: Dickens and the Betrayal of the Child,” New Casebooks: Great Expectations, ed. Roger D. Sell, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1994) 84. For Rawlins, Pip in reality has nothing to learn, so guilt does not lead him to health. Rawlins 80. In the end, the poetic Pip, the seer of unpalatable truths, dies and is survived by a clerk. Rawlins 93. However, it would seem to me that the message of the novel is that there are moral values before and beyond great expectations, and this is what Pip must learn to see. The truth of the matter is that Pip’s behaviour towards Joe *had* been shameful, and this is the main source of his guilt in the

circumstances, Pip learns self-discipline and self-assuredness which bring him close to attaining the “moral manliness” ideal prevalent in the period⁵⁸⁹. Rather than following the dictates of the marriage or the masculine plot, the novel emphasises the development of an inner and private self. The return to the forge is the final milestone on the road to moral reformation, while the thrust in the water is a metaphorical drowning of Pip’s former self. “Through giving,” says John Kucich, “Pip frees himself from the narrow hopelessness of an identity burdened by guilt”⁵⁹⁰. Gilmour has described the voice of the man talking in the novel as probing, remorseful and measured; its highest concern being honesty and precision. “This voice is not entirely new in Dickens [...] but in no other novel does it command the narrative perspective so thoroughly as it does here”⁵⁹¹.

latter part of the novel.

⁵⁸⁹ Natalie Rose, “Flogging and Fascination: Dickens and the Fragile Will,” *Victorian Studies* 47 (2005): 507-08. Even the intense rowing practice may be seen as a turn towards the ideal, which included robustness and vigour (see, for example, Brent Shannon, “ReFashioning Men: Fashion, Masculinity, and the Cultivation of the Male Consumer in Britain, 1860-1914,” *Victorian Studies* 46 (2004):602). Earlier, Pip had been languid and idle, a state he himself recognized as stagnant and negative (308).

⁵⁹⁰ John Kucich, “Action in the Dickens Ending: *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations*,” *Narrative Endings*, spec. issue of *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 33 (1978): 106.

⁵⁹¹ Gilmour, *Introduction* xxiii.

Masculinity and Femininity

Alongside with the idea of the gentleman, Dickens in Great Expectations is more broadly concerned with the idea of manhood and with the formation of a young man's character. Gilmour has called Great Expectations "arguably the best example of a bildungsroman in English"⁵⁹². Notably, some of the qualities Pip exhibits in becoming a more integrated personality are qualities that would have ordinarily been considered as feminine: care for others, tenderness, pity. In fact, it is pity for the convict that initially puts Pip on the road to moral regeneration. At first, pity is mixed with abhorrence, but abhorrence is receding (348). In the last visit to Satis House, he is also able to pity Miss Havisham (391). As for the bond with Magwitch, it soon deepens to devotion and love. "I will never stir from your side," Pip will tell the seriously ill convict (442). The friendship between Pip and Herbert is also based on love, and Pip speaks to his friend with openness of feeling: "Herbert, I shall always need you, because I shall always love you" (444).

Other men, as well as Pip, exhibit qualities that would have been labelled "feminine". The gentleness of the males is striking in Great Expectations, says Robert R. Garnett⁵⁹³. Joe is, in effect, Pip's mother⁵⁹⁴. He represents comfort and unconditional love. Joe describes the loss of Pip as "the loss of the little child" (139). Joe's touch is "the touch of a woman" (138). Twice Pip parts from Joe as he would from a mother⁵⁹⁵. After the long illness, Joe weeps from joy when Pip comes round and knows him (458). He carries Pip in his arms as he would had Pip still been a little boy (461). As for Wemmick, he nurses his elderly father (see for example how he prepares breakfast for him on a tray, and props the Aged up in the pillows to eat, 365), and maintains a pleasant

⁵⁹² Gilmour, Introduction xxv. John Forster commended Dickens's work on Pip, calling him a character "drawn with extraordinary skill". John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens (London, 1893) 568. Contemporary reviewer Edwin P. Whipple remarked that the characters in *Great Expectations* "will rank among the most original of the author's creations [...]". Edwin P. Whipple, "From a review, Atlantic Monthly, September 1861, viii, 380-82," Dickens: the Critical Heritage ed. Philip Collins (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971) 429.

⁵⁹³ Robert R. Garnett, "The Good and the Unruly in *Great Expectations* – and Estella," Dickens Quarterly 16 (1999): 26.

⁵⁹⁴ As noted by E. Pearlman: Joe is, symbolically at least, Pip's "real" mother (E. Pearlman, "Inversion in *Great Expectations*," Dickens Studies Annual 7 (1978): 194); Garnett: Sainly Joe "actually fills the role of Pip's mother" (Garnett 29); John Lucas: Joe is the mother Pip never had (John Lucas, Charles Dickens: The Major Novels, Penguin Critical Studies (London: Penguin Books, 1992) 143).

⁵⁹⁵ "I had never parted from him before", Pip thinks tearfully as he departs for Miss Havisham (52). As he leaves the village for London, Pip fancies Joe coming after him on the road (157).

household. Walworth is a masculinised version of the hearth and home: the hearth is Wemmick's, and the two men, Pip and the Aged, the young and the old, spend there a day of quiet companionship (369). Herbert tenderly nurses Pip's burns: "He was the kindest of nurses," Pip will say (399). Even the convict softens and speaks about his love for the daughter he has lost (401-02). It is chiefly the men who provide affection and warmth in Great Expectations.

In fact, the novel illustrates Nancy Armstrong's comment on gender attributes in Dombey and Son (1848): Dickens "insinuates the possibility that femininity, contrary to natural law [as had been explained by Darwin] makes one the more fit to survive in modern society"⁵⁹⁶. For Sharon Marcus, masculinity in its conventional sense is deficient in Great Expectations. A young Pip admires Estella's beauty and grace; she is what he lacks. "Estella's doll-like femininity represents a gold standard of gentility that makes masculinity as undesirable as manual labour"⁵⁹⁷. The novel "draws a man into a female world of love and ritual organized around women's aggressive objectification of femininity"⁵⁹⁸. The story concerns "a woman and her coveted, fashionable doll from the point of view of a boy who desires the doll but can never possess her. [...] Pip concludes [...] that he must doll himself up to be loved [...]"⁵⁹⁹. Both Miss Havisham and Estella hold masculinity in low regard⁶⁰⁰. To obtain a woman's love, Pip must make himself over as feminine, "embrace the path of femininity and transform himself into a female accessory"⁶⁰¹.

⁵⁹⁶ Nancy Armstrong, "Gender and the Victorian Novel," The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel, ed. Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 104. The notion that manhood might benefit by being fashioned to adopt womanly qualities may have reflected a contemporary anxiety over the brutal aspect of male behaviour as revealed by crime statistics. Valerie Sanders has observed that, "[w]ith the growing revelations of men's brutality in marriage, and recourse to prostitutes, it was less easy, as the century wore on, to preserve an untarnished, idealistic notion of men's virtues [...]" Valerie Sanders, Eve's Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Women Novelists (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996) 97-98. In 1885, shocking reports about the trade in child prostitution in the East End of London, "overturned any remaining notion that men might be the morally superior sex". Kelly Boyd and Rohan McWilliam, "Editors' Comment to Judith Walkowitz: Jack the Ripper and the Doctors," The Victorian Studies Reader, ed. Kelly Boyd and Rohan McWilliam, Routledge Readers in History (London: Routledge, 2007) 361.

⁵⁹⁷ Sharon Marcus, Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007) 172.

⁵⁹⁸ Marcus 170.

⁵⁹⁹ Marcus 171.

⁶⁰⁰ Marcus 178.

⁶⁰¹ Marcus 173.

Femininity, then, is a subversive form of defining male identity; subversive because it is a form of womanhood which is far from angelic motherhood and/or wifehood elevating the young man, while at the same time being submissive to his superior knowledge, judgment and position of power. The femininity which is required to complement manhood is sexually alluring and secular femininity.

This is an important way in which Great Expectations is a reformulation of concepts which surrounded masculinity. Pip is not only a gentleman whose moral worth encompasses female qualities; in his continuing love for Estella, he rejects angelic womanhood for a woman who is sexually powerful and dominating. Female eroticism completes male identity; it does not threaten it in any way. In this, Pip is an antithesis to Villette's Dr John, whose confirmation of identity depended on woman's compliance, submissiveness and sexual ignorance.

Erotic Power

Great Expectations refutes the assumption that masculinity, to be fully developed and expressed, requires tender and sexually frigid femininity. Paulina in Villette may have had to write, re-write and re-rewrite again the letters to her suitor, in order to appear sufficiently frosty and naïve⁶⁰² (466) and Dr Acton may have reassured young men that women rarely experienced sexual desire, if at all⁶⁰³, but the question of a woman's sexuality was fraught with ambiguity and was unsettled⁶⁰⁴. Great Expectations stands on

⁶⁰² The reference to Villette is taken from Charlotte Brontë, Villette, ed. Mark Lilly (London: Penguin Books, 1979). Paulina's dissembling in Villette (she always plays the part of little girl lost) is too powerful and engrossing for us to attempt to unearth a more mature personality beneath. Perhaps this is precisely the point; the little girl lost role, when assumed from early in life and aided by propensity and circumstances, would become completely alienating and devouring of the self.

⁶⁰³ Acton had famously (or infamously) asserted that the majority of women were "not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind". Strong sexual desire in a woman could terminate in "nymphomania, a form of insanity". William Acton, "Want of Sexual Feeling in the Female (1857)", Embodied Selves: an Anthology of Psychological Texts, 1830-1890, eds. Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1998) 179. Strong passions were indeed noticed in "low or vulgar women," but these too were, perhaps, counterfeit. Acton 180. The ideal English wife is "averse to any sensual indulgence," and sees her husband in a Platonic way. Acton 181. She will submit to her husband so as to please him, on the one hand and, on the other, so as to be able to become a mother herself. Acton 180.

⁶⁰⁴ Sexual knowledge in young women was considered dangerous, and the feminine body was analyzed "as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality"; this made it intrinsically pathological Michel Foucault, The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1978) 104. So the female body was both chaste and over-determinedly sexual. An anonymous writer from

the side of the debate which would see female sexuality as a powerful and natural element of the female self.

Biographic critics have explained Estella as Dickens's fear of sexual women⁶⁰⁵; and as a fictional expression of the passion he felt for Ellen Ternan⁶⁰⁶. This view has been rejected by Slater, who identified Estella as a version of Maria Beadnell, the beauty Dickens fell in love with as a young man, and who refused him. "Biographers have long associated Estella [...] exclusively with the great love of Dickens's last years, Ellen Ternan, and Pip's unhappy passion for her with Dickens's supposed miseries in loving

1851, cited in Jenny Bourne Taylor's and Sally Shuttleworth's Embodied Selves, wrote about the sexual reaction and longing in women, speaking about the attraction an "amorous female" might feel about a handsome, manly soldier; however, he believed that the woman is predisposed to feel this way by an "excess of reproductive energy". Anon, "Woman in Her Psychological Relations (1851)," Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts, 1830-1890, eds. Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1998) 172. Ovarian irritation could become hysteria, true monomania, and the girl who used to be the pet of the family would become erotic, malicious, irreligious and false. Anon cited in Bourne Taylor and Shuttleworth 173-74. Woman's sexuality was thus linked to insanity. Elaine Showalter, The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980 (London: Virago Press, 1987) 7, 10. However, Michael Mason has suggested that the medical understanding of (female) sexuality was not wholly consistent with the anti-sensual mentality (the widespread belief that sexual activity should be subjected to discipline) and "in neither lay nor medical circles [...] was there a significant antagonism to, or ignorance about, the sexual response in women". Michael Mason, The Making of Victorian Sexuality (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) 7-8. Mason has observed that Acton's notorious remark must be seen "for what it is: a remark, in a chapter on 'Impotence' from a book aimed at male readers". Mason 195. Mason admits that the remark was not "completely isolated" but notes that, though "it was sometimes said that women were less urgent in their sexuality than men [...] quite a number of writers recognised (and a few lamented) the effect of social convention in this, especially premaritally". Mason 196. Similarly, Lynda Nead believes that Acton's image of woman was "simply one strand in the complex production of female sexualities during the nineteenth century". Dr R.J. Culverwell, member of the Royal College of Surgeons, for instance, claimed that sexual desire in a woman was healthy and permissible within the confines of marriage. Michael Ryan, an evangelical physician, claimed that female chastity was not a gift of nature but a result of the fear of pregnancy. Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1988) 19-20. Nead's findings are compatible with those of Marcus and Vicinus, discussed in the Introduction.

⁶⁰⁵ David Holbrook, Charles Dickens and the Image of Woman (New York: New York UP, 1993) 19.

⁶⁰⁶ David Holbrook suggests that "at the time of writing Great Expectations and Our Mutual Friend, [Dickens had] a secret romantic sexual relationship [with actress Ellen Ternan] and, inevitably in Victorian society, this must have provoked in him much anxiety and guilt". The book is thus "pervaded by unconscious preoccupations with woman and murder, and with other dark shadows". Holbrook 127. For the "frigidity and indifference" of Estella, Dickens drew on Ellen Ternan, says Francoise Basch. Francoise Basch, Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel, trans. Anthony Rudolf (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1974) 151.

Helen. This is mere speculation, however [...]”⁶⁰⁷. Estella is Maria Beadnell, “making her last and most haunting appearance on the Dickens stage”⁶⁰⁸. The disagreement between biographical critics, and the difference between the ways of seeing Ellen Ternan (temptress, friend, or credible love object?) can only mean that there can be no safe conclusions on a real woman from Dickens’s life having been the model for Estella; as Peter Ackroyd has rightly pointed out, a writer whose life has been marked by abundant invention, “cannot be presumed to rely upon Ellen Ternan for his portraits of young women”⁶⁰⁹. It is not possible to answer whether Estella is Ellen or Maria, Ellen and Maria, a version of Ellen and/or Maria, or indeed whether Estella might be neither Ellen nor Maria.

Whether Dickens’s own attitude to sexual women was fear or fascination, what seems to be true is that Great Expectations depicts a male self which is affirmed by woman’s sexuality:

“You are part of my existence, part of myself. [...] The stones of which the strongest London buildings are made are not more real [...] than your presence and influence have been to me, there and everywhere, and will be. Estella, to the last hour of my life you cannot choose but remain part of my character, part of the little good in me, part of the evil [...]” (360).

Pip’s words here are reminiscent of Catherine Earnshaw’s identification with Heathcliff in the memorable speech: “my love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath [...] Nelly, I *am* Heathcliff [...]” (93)⁶¹⁰. Pip’s declaration is an express repudiation of the angel wife ideal, with the potential (and duty) to redeem and elevate her man. Great Expectations embraces a femininity which is sexual, human and fallible, and partakes of evil as well as of good.

⁶⁰⁷ Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1983) 73.

⁶⁰⁸ Slater 74.

⁶⁰⁹ Peter Ackroyd, Dickens, abbreviated ed. (London: Vintage, 2002) 494. As Slater observes, there is no hard evidence on the nature of the affair between Dickens and Ellen Ternan, “in the shape of letters from Dickens to Ellen, or from her to him”. Slater 209. The exact nature of the relationship is, for Slater, “an open question”. Slater 210. Ackroyd also believes that it is impossible to know whether Estella’s declaration that she has no heart is the echo of a real woman, i.e. an echo of Ellen Ternan. Ackroyd 493. At the time Dickens conceived of Great Expectations, Dickens was bearing “the marks of loss and separation”. His favourite daughter had married, his brother had died, and his mother was dying. Ackroyd 457.

⁶¹⁰ The reference comes from Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights, ed. Katherine Frank (London: Everyman’s Library, 1991).

The argument that Pip is attracted to Estella for her class-status (that he desires her glitter, and star-like beauty, so that his desire dies when the glitter goes⁶¹¹) seems to me to be unconvincing, for the simple reason that the novel insists on Pip's continuing love for Estella, even in the scene with Biddy towards the end. So Margaret Flanders Darby may say that "what [Pip] has loved all along is [Estella's] inaccessibility; in his fantasy she is a beautiful luxury, an object, that social climbers like himself can buy only with cash"⁶¹²; yet, this is Magwitch's idea (316) which Pip does not necessarily endorse. According to L.A. French, "To go on and claim that [Pip] never loves [Estella] for what she is [...] and that the whole relationship is clearly seen by Dickens to be merely unrealistic, is to overlook, or at any rate to slight, an important vein of feeling that runs through the whole book"⁶¹³.

Estella's initial appeal on Pip (which may have been founded on her glitter and aura of luxury) needs to be distinguished from his continuing love for her. As far as Pip is concerned, Estella's class or origins are not an issue. His discovery that Estella is Magwitch's daughter, rather than diminish his love for her, actually increases his love for Magwitch. He believes that it is quite possible that he transferred to Magwitch "some rays of the romantic interest" which had surrounded Estella (403). The reason why he wanted to find out the truth about Estella's parentage was, in Pip's own words, "that I had loved [her] dearly and long, and that, although I had lost her and must live a bereaved life, whatever concerned her was still nearer and clearer to me than anything else in the world" (407). Estella remains associated with Magwitch in Pip's thoughts, even up to the novel's end. "The moon began to rise, and I thought of the placid look at the white ceiling, which had passed away. The moon began to rise, and I thought of the pressure on my hand when I had spoken the last words he had heard on earth" (477). Pip loves an Estella who is both glitter and the daughter of criminals.

Significantly, the narrator—an older and wiser version of Pip—will not repudiate his love and desire for Estella. He will repudiate his treatment of Joe, and Magwitch, and

⁶¹¹ For Sell, the foundation of Pip's desire for Estella is her gentility. Sell 221. Alison Milbank writes that, "Estella's separation from [Pip] by birth and culture creates her appeal [...]" Alison Milbank, *Daughters of the House: Models of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan Academic and Professional Ltd, 1992) 130. With the loss of Satis House and the chains that created the need to possess Estella, goes Pip's desire for her. Milbank 138.

⁶¹² Margaret Flanders Darby, "Listening to Estella," *Dickens Quarterly* 16 (1999): 225.

⁶¹³ A.L. French, "Beating and Cringing *Great Expectations*", *New Casebooks: Great Expectations*, ed. Roger D. Sell, Contemporary Critical Essays (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1994) 45.

of nearly anyone else, but not his feelings for Estella. In retrospect, Estella is still the suitable partner; and the reason for this is not only that she is beautiful and inspiring, but also that she is erotically appealing: “The unqualified truth is, that when I loved Estella with the love of a man, I loved her simply because I found her irresistible” (228). The love of the man is distinguished from the boy’s love by the erotic element, which is precisely what made Estella “irresistible”.

Estella is sexually intense womanhood, which does not guarantee the happiness of the man, but is paradoxically vital to his well-being. “I did not [...] invest her with any attributes save those she possessed [...]” (228). Pip will love Estella against happiness and peace, and will love her nonetheless because he knew it, and this, he says, “had no more influence in restraining me, than if I had devoutly believed her to be human perfection” (229). The relationship between Pip and Estella is formed through fascination, says Rose. Estella has power over Pip – including the power to humiliate him⁶¹⁴. Estella’s figure displaces the centrality of the man’s happiness, and divorces conceptions of love and marriage from man’s moral and spiritual elevation. What would have been, from the point of view of conventionally-minded individuals, a nightmare courtship and marriage, is decisively depicted as desirable. What is more, Estella’s subversiveness is endorsed by the man who loves her. *Great Expectations* is unconventional in its depiction of gender relations because, first, it depicts and endorses a female figure which is sexually potent and dominant, second, it allows the male protagonist to continue to love this figure and does not chastise him for it and, third, because this figure is an express articulation of the erotic aspect of woman as natural, rightful and essential.

Estella, Beauty and Feminism

The implication behind Estella’s cold demeanour and her indifference to the appeal she has on the men is that this is not a natural attitude; that it has been imposed on her by external circumstances. Pip’s insistence that it is impossible for a graceful, beautiful and appealing young woman not to be able to love is correct, the novel says; Estella has been wrongfully deprived of the ability to love, and reciprocate another’s love.

Critics have spoken graphically about Miss Havisham’s damaging effect on her adopted child. Estella is female nature distorted by Miss Havisham, “an utterly heartless

⁶¹⁴ Rose 522.

woman trained from her babyhood to entrap and torture men”⁶¹⁵. Estella is Miss Havisham’s creature, and a study of how the self may be moulded by others so as to vicariously fulfil their desires⁶¹⁶. In a sense, Miss Havisham died the day Compeyson left her, and was reborn in Estella. “Break their hearts my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy!” (93). Miss Havisham, says Eichi Hara, is “the decayed Sleeping Beauty [...] replaced by a budding new one, Estella”⁶¹⁷. For Dorothy Van Ghent, “the glittering frosty girl Estella, and the decayed and false old woman, Miss Havisham, are not two characters but a single one, one essence with dual aspects, as if composed by montage – a spiritual continuum, so to speak”⁶¹⁸. Estella came as a replacement for Miss Havisham’s lost self. “I took her into this wretched breast when it was first bleeding from its stabs” (300). She is “nothing but her adoptive mother’s creation”⁶¹⁹, a “powerful extension of Miss Havisham’s witchlike forces”⁶²⁰. The mother’s story has been inscribed on the daughter’s life, says Hilary Schor⁶²¹. Between them there is a “nightmare bond”⁶²². The end of the quarrel scene between Miss Havisham and Estella is curiously like a birth. While Estella explains the effect of Miss Havisham’s schooling and upbringing, Miss Havisham lies in tatters upon the floor (302). Where does Miss Havisham end, and Estella begin? At the closing of the scene, the two sit together, Estella stitching Miss Havisham’s clothes (302).

⁶¹⁵ Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1983) 75-76.

⁶¹⁶ The other case study is Pip; both show that such manipulation may prove detrimental to the person concerned: Kate Flint, introduction, Great Expectations, by Charles Dickens (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) xiv.

⁶¹⁷ Eichi Hara, “Stories Present and Absent in *Great Expectations*”, New Casebooks: Great Expectations, ed. Roger D. Sell, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1994) 53.

⁶¹⁸ Dorothy Van Ghent, “*Great Expectations* (1953)”, Dickens: Modern Judgments, ed. A.E. Dyson (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1968) 252.

⁶¹⁹ Marcus 173.

⁶²⁰ Marcus 175.

⁶²¹ Hilary M. Schor, Dickens and the Daughter in the House, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth Century Literature and Culture 25 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 168.

⁶²² Schor 167.

If Victorians feared demonic maternal excess⁶²³, then Miss Havisham exemplifies such an excess. Her undisciplined love for her daughter has made that daughter a beautiful beast⁶²⁴, a “Frankenstein child”⁶²⁵. For Nina Auerbach, “Miss Havisham’s withering power over her ward Estella’s nature and destiny is [...] irresistible [...]: this demon mother has the power to lay waste the younger generation, remaking the future in her own deformed image”⁶²⁶.

However, Miss Havisham is not positively portrayed as evil. The tragedy of her life, as well as the pernicious effect she has had on Estella, is a critique of the confines which restricted women in a life centred on feeling. Miss Havisham is herself damaged; of all the women in the novel, she is the most mutilated, argues Lucy Frost⁶²⁷. “[M]oldering in her satin wedding dress, [Miss Havisham] suggests the corrupting power of romance, which entraps the yearning maiden in white satin, only, sometimes, to abandon her to imprisonment and death in that costume”⁶²⁸. The woman rejected by her lover was a sad figure in the Victorian age, prone to madness and depression. “Conventional wisdom decreed that her chances of marriage were slim,” as she would be

⁶²³ Sally Shuttleworth has pointed out that “[t]he mother was not an unproblematic figure in Victorian discourse”. Sally Shuttleworth, “Demonic mothers: ideologies of bourgeois motherhood in the mid-Victorian era,” Re-writing the Victorians: Theory, History and the Politics of Gender, ed. Linda M. Shires (New York: Routledge, 1992) 33. It was woman’s mission to ensure “the healthy reproduction of the race,” as well as the “moral superiority of the middle class”. Shuttleworth 32. Female weakness was blamed for a perceived decline of the middle-class. Shuttleworth 36-37. “All stages of a woman’s reproductive life were marked by potential violence,” and motherhood was associated with murderous lust. The middle-class woman was subjected to “extreme regulation” by the medical profession to ensure healthy reproduction. Shuttleworth 37. A mother had to discipline her own temper and thoughts, or else her milk would be poisoned. Shuttleworth 38-39. Excessive affection towards her offspring would make them effeminate and morally weak. Shuttleworth 43. Alison Milbank speaks of “demonic matriarchy”. In Great Expectations, “[w]omen use their domestic space either as a reformatory for punishment of male misdeeds, or as a weapon in some sexual power game”. Milbank 122. Pip “endures his sister’s cruelty, while Miss Havisham rules over the parentless Estella”. Magwitch’s father deserted him. The rule of the fathers is dismissed. Milbank 123. Therefore, “[t]he power of the tyrannical mothers is a direct result of the irresponsibility of the fathers”. Milbank 124.

⁶²⁴ Slater calls Estella a “beautiful monster [...] trained from her babyhood to entrap and torture men. Slater 75-76.

⁶²⁵ Schor 169.

⁶²⁶ Nina Auerbach, Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982) 114.

⁶²⁷ Lucy Frost, “Taming to Improve: Dickens and the Women in *Great Expectations*,” New Casebooks: Great Expectations, ed. Roger D. Sell, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1994) 71.

⁶²⁸ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene; Yale UP, 2000) 619.

seen by other men as 'reject' merchandise. "And the notion of romantic love meant that the jilted girl [...] was expected to remain faithful to her beloved [...]"⁶²⁹. Miss Havisham embodies the cultural stereotype of the jilted woman and, in seeking revenge, devours Estella's essence and capacity to feel⁶³⁰. She will later become aware of the mutilation she has effected on Estella: "I stole her heart away and put ice in its place" (395).

Estella herself is aware of this mutilation. Great Expectations suggests that lack of erotic feeling and lack of the ability to respond to it is recorded by the woman herself to be against nature. This is a claim which beauty serves to enhance and verify; woman should be able to respond to love and passion, and her physical beauty affirms this and ties it to woman's nature. The "bitter import of her schoolroom lesson" is clear to Estella. "[L]ove is like sunshine from which she has been kept all her life, learning only untruths about it until now nothing can send her walking naturally into the daylight. [...] With painful precision Estella has seen her own deviation from what is natural"⁶³¹.

In working upon Estella, Miss Havisham has appropriated her beauty. Susan Sontag, cited in Lori Hope Lefkowitz, argued that, though (woman's) beauty is a form of power, it is a power which negates itself. It is not the power to do, but the power to attract (i.e. always conceived in relation to men)⁶³². But Estella is denied even that; she is tired of the life she has led, and does not see any triumph in her power of attraction (359). Pip

⁶²⁹ Jan Marsh, Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art (London: Book Club Associates; Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987) 138.

⁶³⁰ Miss Havisham, however, does evil, but she has also been cruelly wronged. Often, she seems like a curious reflection upon the constricting social surroundings of the village and town in which Pip grows up. As Linda Raphael argues, Miss Havisham is the victim of "a system which denies individuals full rights to self-development" Linda Raphael, "A Re-vision of Miss Havisham: Her Expectations and Our Responses," New Casebooks: Great Expectations, ed. Roger D. Sell, Contemporary Critical Essays (Houndmills, UK: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1994) 229. Actually, Miss Havisham may be seen not as an oddity inside the village-town, but as an exaggerated example of life in it. Timelessness and passivity surrounded the whole area. According to Pip, "[t]here was a bar at the Jolly Bargemen, with some alarmingly long chalk scores in it [...] which seemed to me never to be paid off. They had been there ever since I could remember [...]" (73). Match this with Pip's description of "the wooden finger on the post directing people to our village – a direction which they never accepted, for they never came there" (16). Pip is desperate at the forge, because he saw the future as sterile. It was as if "a thick curtain [had] fallen on all [life's] interest and romance" (105). Perspective is "flat and low like the marshes" (105). Mrs. Joe is so weighed down by her own ennui that she is ready to believe all sorts of nonsense about Miss Havisham and Pip's doings at Satis House (66-7). The people at the village find the spectacle of Mrs. Joe's funeral exciting, and watch with exuberance (277).

⁶³¹ Frost 67-68.

⁶³² Lori Hope Lefkowitz, The Character of Beauty in the Victorian Novel, Nineteenth Century Studies (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987) 209.

speaks of how Miss Havisham hangs upon Estella's beauty, words and gestures, and sits next to her mumbling and trembling, "as though she were devouring the beautiful creature she has reared" (298). Therefore, Estella's beauty becomes a metaphor for her alienation from herself and others⁶³³. Lucy Frost puts it well when she says that Estella, "talks about herself as though she were an instrument obedient not just to Miss Havisham's will, but to inflexible laws of her own nature, laws which she seems to have no sense of shaping, only of observing with a strangely detached curiosity"⁶³⁴. Declaring that she must be taken as she has been made, Estella will add, "[t]he success is not mine, the failure is not mine, but the two together make me" (302). Estella is distanced from herself. As Pip has noticed, "You speak of yourself as if you were someone else" (262).

At the same time, beauty is a way back to the self. It is what seals Estella's fate – it is the reason why Jaggers decided to give her to Miss Havisham to adopt, and thus rescue her from being "imprisoned, whipped, transported, neglected, cast out, qualified in all ways for the hangman, and growing up to be hanged" (408). Beauty, that is, marks the stages of Estella's life and is, ultimately, a return to her nature. For Estella resembles Molly, her gypsy and murderous mother, and the resemblance allows passion to remain a part of Estella's composition. Nancy Armstrong has also linked the figure of Estella with that of her gypsy mother. As Armstrong explains, eighteenth century fiction invented "femininity", i.e. the cultural equipment comprised of education, social acumen, emotional delicacy and refined state which was necessary to attract and select the right

⁶³³ For *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, a person is self-alienated in so far as that person cannot understand or accept herself. Estella tries to understand herself, and shows remarkable powers of self-analysis ("I begin to think [...] that I almost understand how this comes about," she will say about her inability to love, 301). However, she often speaks of herself as if she were somebody else; and as for what she wishes to have, she seems to fall within the alienation definition: "I am alienated from my desires in so far as they are not authentically my own, but assail me as it were from without". "Alienation," *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2005 ed. Estella's activity often does not seem to belong to her, and is neither free nor conscious; it may relate to one aspect of Marx's concept of alienation. In Marx's concept of alienation, the relationship of the worker to her own activity is alien and does not belong to her. Activity becomes passivity, and what is life but activity? Activity is independent of the worker, and does not belong to her. The result is self-alienation (62). Further, life itself becomes only the means of life; and the worker is alienated from the species, since a characteristic of the human species is free conscious activity (63). Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 1994). However, the concept of alienation becomes problematic when applied to Estella, and is part of the novel's overall problematization of codes and systems of meaning. Is Estella the worker, or is it Miss Havisham? For Estella is a product, and has not worked for anything; it is Miss Havisham who has worked on her. Alienation is interchangeable between the two women, and confirms the victimization of both.

⁶³⁴ Frost 65.

man. Victorian fiction invented “femaleness”; the desire pulsating within female nature, which is capable of cancelling out all signs of femininity⁶³⁵. Novels represented women’s lives in terms of this struggle between femaleness and femininity:

Desire rarely comes in its pure form, at least not in a flesh and blood Englishwoman; it takes such forms as Jane Eyre’s nemesis Bertha Mason [...] or Estella’s murderous working-class mother. [...] [T]he protagonist within each [female] couple carries on within herself a struggle between the extremes of femininity and femaleness that set her in opposition to her fallen sister or mother. There, but for having won this internal struggle, goes she. Victorian heroines can, like Jane Eyre, gratify their reproductive instincts only by triumphing over the female who lurks within⁶³⁶.

Savage or working-class bodies (Bertha, Molly) or figures who are no-bodies (Catherine Earnshaw’s ghost) represent middle-class female desire⁶³⁷; “the Victorian novel never gives female desire a fully human form”⁶³⁸.

However, Brian Cheadle has argued that, though Jagers overtly binds Molly, “Pip equally overtly unbinds her by reading Estella in her hands. Filiation is here achieved [...] by recognising that the culturally proscribed sexuality remains scandalously embodied in the elegant daughter”⁶³⁹. At the novel’s end, Pip takes Estella’s hand, which is the hand of a passionate gipsy, and the hand of a gentlewoman. Estella’s physicality unites both figures. Contrary to Dr John and his obsession with purity in woman (Villette 296) Pip can endorse a woman who straddles categories, and partakes of both gentility and sexuality. The insistence on woman’s purity, successfully portrayed in Dr John, was symptomatic of a general social attitude. On woman’s purity depended the health of the home and of society; it was little wonder that Victorian society obsessively attempted “to segregate the pure and the impure”⁶⁴⁰. Great Expectations, however, suggests that sexual

⁶³⁵ Nancy Armstrong, “Gender in the Victorian Novel,” The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel, ed. Deidre David (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 108-09.

⁶³⁶ Armstrong 110.

⁶³⁷ Armstrong 112.

⁶³⁸ Armstrong 111.

⁶³⁹ Brian Cheadle, “The late novels: *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*,” The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens, ed. John O. Jordan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 84.

⁶⁴⁰ Nead 97. Upon moral purity depended the domestic base and (by extension) social stability. “Within this set of relations, those defined as immoral threatened not only

feeling cannot easily fall into categories of “purity” and “impurity”. If anything, Miss Havisham’s teaching ensured that Estella would remain “pure” and evince no desire for “impure” sexual activity – she would either remain unmarried for some time (Miss Havisham’s wish) or begin sexuality with marriage (as happens eventually). What the novel does is formulate female sexual allure as an essential power which exists beyond the “pure” and “impure” categories.

Consequently, Estella’s beauty in Great Expectations is an organizing term for the nature that has been denied her, her adoption by Miss Havisham, Molly’s subjection, Estella’s ability to inspire love, and the sexual energy and gentility which Pip can appreciate. Estella combines varying discourses on womanhood but she also forms part of a larger discourse on masculinity. She is, literally, a composite part of Pip; Great Expectations suggests that a sexually powerful woman can very well be among the milestones of a man’s road to maturity. Female energy and power are not an obstacle to man’s development; they are necessary for it. If anything, Pip suffers because of Estella’s inability to respond to his ardour. Absence of erotic feeling in the woman has hurtful consequences and a negative impact not only on herself, but on the man also. It is not at all conducive to the happiness of either. Great Expectations endorses a woman’s sexuality⁶⁴¹. Moreover, it does so in a manner which shows female sexuality to be the

stable class relations but also national and imperial security”. Nead 91. Moral purity was widely identified with female purity. “Woman was believed to play central role in the formation of public morality; she was responsible for the purity of the home, and private morality was the source and index of public morality. The moral condition of the nation, therefore, was believed to derive from the moral standards of woman”. Nead 92. Further, purity was imagined to be innate in woman. Evangelical and medical discourse associated woman with virtue. “[M]orality was *biologized* as the basis of morality was altered from ‘duty’ or mission to ‘instinct’”. Angelique Richardson, Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003) 45. The notion of woman’s innate purity is well-illustrated by the image Victorians had of the prostitute as “an unnatural form of femininity”; prostitution was a “moral state”. The prostitute was characterized by “innate moral weakness” and “animal desire”. Nead 100-02. (Acton firmly believed that prostitutes had no sexual feelings either, they were just good at counterfeiting it. Acton 180). Accordingly, the social and economic aspects of prostitution were obscured and sidestepped. Nead 101-02.

⁶⁴¹ Masculine sexuality was (not unlike female sexuality) also an area concerning which available evidence was contradictory, and which involved considerable difference of opinion, as Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth indicate. Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth, Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts 1830-1890 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 168. Though sexual activity was condoned in men (Nead 6) the question of what constituted acceptable as against excessive, harmful or unacceptable sexual activity was far from settled (Bourne Taylor and Shuttleworth 168). Acton seemed to suggest that moderation was not only required, but that anything going against it made many men “dread and avoid marriage”. Thus he was quick to assure prospective husbands that generally women felt no sexual excitement (Acton 180). Eve

more powerful sexuality. Female sexuality, so to speak, unlocks the sexuality of a man. Importantly, this is not done in the context of what would have been termed to be illicit or deviant sex, but in the context of upper- and middle-class respectability. Further, Estella's sexual aggressiveness is intertwined with her gentility. Spectacular womanhood in Great Expectations neatly accommodates sexuality, respectability and desirability as wife. It even suggests that it is natural for all these things to co-exist; what is unnatural is Estella's inability to respond to love and demonstrations of affection.

This happens no matter which ending of the novel a reader or critic chooses to follow. In both endings, Pip does not repudiate his love and desire for Estella; in both endings this explicitly sexual form of love is considered to be durable and true – it is the right form of love, the love which should have been. Nevertheless, the second ending is, in feminist terms, the preferable of the two.

The Novel's Two Endings

Kosofsky Sedgwick maintains that “[t]he class of men about which we know most –the educated middle-class, the men who produced the novels and journalism and are the subjects of biographies—operated sexually in what seems to have been startlingly close to a cognitive vacuum”. There was “a good deal of objective sexual freedom” for men, but “no predetermined sexual trajectory”. Thus, “the sexuality of a single gentleman was silent, tentative, protean [...]”. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire, Gender and Culture (New York: Columbia UP, 1985) 173-74. Richard Dellamora has explored the Victorian (male) homosexual world, and has argued for the existence of an active community where men enjoyed sexual and emotional ties with other men, and resisted having these ties defined within the new terms of criminal and sexological definitions of homosexuality. Richard Dellamora, “Introduction”, Victorian Sexual Dissidence, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999) 7. Additionally, Elaine Showalter has pointed out that middle-class homosexual men led “a double life, in which a respectable daytime world often involving marriage and family, existed alongside a night world of homosexuality”. Elaine Showalter, “Homosexuality and Late Victorian Anxiety,” The Victorian Studies Reader, ed. Kelly Boyd and Rohan McWilliam, Routledge Readers in History (London: Routledge, 2007) 372. However, Helena Michie has recently argued that it is still possible to doubt “the sex-positive version of Victorianism”. Her survey into honeymoon accounts from biographical material and literature from the period, as well as into Victorian (and even late- or post-Victorian) popular books on sexuality such as Marie Stopes's Married Love (1918) leads her to believe that “many Victorians knew little about sex”. For many men, knowledge was limited to prostitutes; in general, men seem not to have been much more sexually sophisticated than their wives. “The privileging of ignorance extended to men as well”. Helena Michie, Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006) 112-14. Midst the richness and antithesis of interpretations of Victorian male sexuality, what can safely be said about Great Expectations is that the sexual allure and power represented by Estella is explored as an essential force, regarded by the man as part of life. Female sexuality is quickening; conversely, in Villette it made Dr John prudish, disapproving and cold.

Concerning the novel's two endings, Edgar Rosenberg, writing in 1965, summarised the position thus: "[t]he question whether Pip and Estella were in effect mated for the market has exercised Dickens scholars for nearly one hundred and ten years now, since the original ending first came to light in Forster's biography"⁶⁴². Though there does not seem to be any pressing reason why we must refuse to take Dickens's decision as final⁶⁴³, choosing one ending over the other does not make much difference in Pip's love for Estella, which is present in both endings⁶⁴⁴. Both endings promote a version of

⁶⁴² Edgar Rosenberg, "Last Words on *Great Expectations*," Essays in Criticism 15 (1965): 88.

⁶⁴³ Dickens wrote the original ending with the intention of winding up different from what happens conventionally. Robin Gilmour, appendix: the two endings, Great Expectations, by Charles Dickens (London: Everyman, 1994) 445. However, Dickens's friend and fellow novelist, Bulwer Lytton, persuaded him to change it to the ending we have now Gilmour, appendix 446. Thus, Rosenberg explains: "[f]rom any strictly textual point of view, the argument that [the revised ending] was after all the one Dickens published remains, I suppose, the single overriding argument in favour of its maintenance". Rosenberg 102-03. Replacing the ending was described by Dickens as "unwind[ing] the thread that I thought I had wound forever". Charles Dickens, "To Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton," 24 June 1861, The Letters of Charles Dickens, vol. 9 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 433. Dickens here suggests that the author has the final power and authority to mould her/his work in a specific way. As Dickens told Forster, "Bulwer, who has been, as I think you know, extraordinarily taken by the book, so strongly urged it upon me, after reading the proofs, and supported his views with such good reasons, that I resolved to make the change". Charles Dickens, "To John Forster," 1 July 1861, The Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. Graham Storey, vol. 9 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 433. What we must note here is, I believe, that Dickens considered Bulwer's reasons so good as to make him change his novel's ending and his own original intention. Rosenberg, who raised the issue of Pip and Estella being united "for the market", also noted that the public taste at the time had been for disastrous endings. "[T]here was money to be made through tears". Rosenberg 92. Q.D. Leavis felt unable to comprehend the preference of critics for the original ending; though it does have the "complete incosequentialness of life," it is "quite unsuitable for the conclusion of such a schematic novel. Dickens's second thoughts produced the right, because the logical, solution to the problem of how to end without a sentimental 'happy ending' but with a satisfactory winding up of the themes" F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970) 329. Besides, it is not impossible that many other endings of many other novels have been revised by their authors, with the public and critics being none the wiser. A revision does not by itself invalidate a novel's ending, as it is a natural part of the writing process.

⁶⁴⁴ Notably, Pip ended the original narrative by saying that now, at last and after all, Estella can understand and appreciate "what [his] own heart used to be" (482). Pip is not "cured" of his desire for Estella, says Kucich; even in the original ending, Estella is prominent. Kucich 102. Estella, and her appreciation –and thus validation-- of Pip's feelings, is the final issue that needs to be settled for the narrative to close. Whatever ending we might choose to follow, Pip's love for Estella is not invalidated. It remains part of his character – as a poor blacksmith's apprentice, a London snob, and a hard-working gentleman in the end (any one end).

masculinity which achieves a form of fulfilment despite non-conformity to Victorian dictates surrounding marriage and the establishment of a home as the key to happiness. The novel endorses a masculinity which does not affirm itself through a woman's subservience, but through the desired woman's ability to appreciate the love that had been directed at her. The revised ending, however, expands upon the theme of sexually alluring femininity, and how such femininity can eventually co-exist with the form of masculinity embodied in Pip.

In effect, the original ending pushes Estella gently but firmly outside the circle of healing and redemption which characterizes the novel. Sexual femininity, though important as experience, is not an essential part of the world of the protagonist. The revised ending brings sexual femininity back to Pip's world.

As Schor has pointed out, the revised ending "gives Estella back her voice". Estella escapes violence and self-abuse, and steps out of the mists "into [the] self she never quite owned"⁶⁴⁵. Though it is possible to say that Pip remains deluded about Estella to the end⁶⁴⁶, this is not the only way of reading the final scene in the garden of what used to be Satis House. The original illustration by Marcus Stone, which accompanied the text, is titled "With Estella After All,"⁶⁴⁷ and translates into a union the "I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and [...] I saw the shadow of no parting from her" (479). The couple depicted is sombre and sad, but also calm and leaning on each other. It is also not true to say that the only feeling that comes out of Estella is indifference; her words open up the possibility of maintaining friendship. Her years of marriage had been "wretched"; when she asks Pip if he still lives abroad, she speaks "in a voice of touching interest to a wanderer," and tells Pip that she has thought "very often" of him, describing his love as "the remembrance of what I had thrown away when I was quite ignorant of its worth". Estella has given that remembrance "a place in [her] heart" (478). Further, there are elements of hope in the description of the ruined house. "I saw that some of the old ivy had struck root anew, and was growing green on low quiet mounds of ruin. [...] [T]he stars were shining beyond the mist, and the moon was coming, and the evening was not dark" (476-77). Estella's reply may be a mark of maturity, and not necessarily a burying of hopes. In the ruined garden, the best that can be achieved is a new opening. It is the "tranquil light" among the mist which shows "the shadow of no

⁶⁴⁵ Schor 176-77.

⁶⁴⁶ "The ambiguity surrounding Pip's relationship with Estella refuses to guarantee the extent of his self-knowledge", Flint has noted. Flint xxi.

⁶⁴⁷ Marcus Stone, illustration, "With Estella After All," Charles Dickens, Great Expectations, ed. Robin Gilmour (London Everyman, 1994) 432.

parting”⁶⁴⁸. For Kucich, bachelorhood is not resigned self-knowledge, and Estella is not a lapse into further expectations. Pip posits resigned self-knowledge in Estella. “No longer a figure of aggression and amorality, Estella has also learned resignation. She has learned it better than Pip, in fact, which is the way with enigmatic images of completion”⁶⁴⁹.

Milbank has read the final scene as a final step towards liberation from the past for Pip: “[p]erhaps the most positive feature of the second ending is the fact that Pip and Estella are communicating by the ur-writing of gesture --leaving with their hands entwined-- and that they move out of the garden purposefully, where once they had aimlessly circled its perimeter”. Pip is free from the mystifying labyrinth of Satis House⁶⁵⁰.

The new ending is based on the idea of the man and the woman complementing each other, though not in the conventional way. For the first time, says Q.D. Leavis, Estella is not walking away from Pip but with him; she “has gone through a process comparable with Pip’s self-knowledge and humiliation so that they can truly come together at last”. Pip and Estella have a common history, and have been made use of; this “fits them for each other and no one else”⁶⁵¹.

If anything, Pip is deluded only when he thinks of marrying Biddy. It is then, and only then, that his conception of what a marriage should be like actually becomes unrealistic. The relationship he expects to have with Biddy can hardly be called an adult relationship. His idea of Biddy is as a sort of mother, who will receive him as a “forgiven child” and fulfil his need of a “hushing voice and a soothing hand”. Like a ministering angel, Biddy will make the world “a better world for me” (467). She will be “a guiding spirit at my side” (471). This is manifest delusion. Pip is shown here to entertain a concept of marriage which deprives the woman of flesh and blood, raises her to the realm of the spiritual, and puts the man in the role of a pilgrim, who will have to prove himself worthy of the spirit’s “simple faith and clear home-wisdom” (471). The marriage offer to Biddy comes long after Estella’s own marriage; additionally, as Q.D. Leavis has correctly observed, Pip “had thought it right to offer himself to Biddy to make amends and show his new humility, not because he really believed it would make him happy, and he has to be shown that such an escape from guilt would no more have answered than his becoming a blacksmith again to please Joe”⁶⁵².

⁶⁴⁸ Gilmour notes that the revised ending “is congruent with the fairy-tale dimension in the book”; the original ending is closer to realistic conventions, but Great Expectations is not entirely a realistic novel. Gilmour, appendix 446.

⁶⁴⁹ Kucich 103.

⁶⁵⁰ Milbank 139.

⁶⁵¹ Q.D. Leavis 330.

⁶⁵² Q.D. Leavis 329.

The offer of marriage to Bidley would have signified the end of erotic love, and not a beginning into domesticity. In the revised ending, erotic love is reborn into the narrative. Further, the initiative is back to Estella; it is up to her to make Pip's narrative the shadow of no parting. Pip is a daring version of Victorian masculinity; it is a masculinity which renders redundant all those elements which characters like David Copperfield and Tertius Lydgate considered part of ideal womanhood: housekeeping skills, angelic import, appropriate reverence for the lord and master of the house. Pip's endorsement of Estella means that the ideal of woman varies, so that an ideal woman may not be conventionally ideal at all. However, she must be a whole woman – sexual, alluring, and an adult. Dr John would despise Ginevra for being sexual, and would find affirmation only in marriage to a child-bride like Paulina. However, Great Expectations disposes with a woman's pure and angelic qualities⁶⁵³, bends with understanding over Estella and Pip, and depicts a form of masculinity which finds affirmation in its desire to find companionship and happiness with a sexually powerful woman.

Finding Affirmation

In carving out for himself a place in the novelistic world, Pip elects to be both manly and a gentleman⁶⁵⁴ -- something symbolically represented by his physical appearance, which combines the insignia of the gentleman, with the physique of the trained blacksmith. This is Pip's enduring Joe element. He is still able to understand perfectly the part of the self which remains at the hearth with Joe and Bidley.

However, Pip's place is no longer at the hearth. He opts for Egypt's exotic heat, rather than the domesticity of the hearth or the middle-class world of the city. The definition of manly, manhood and manliness which is worked out in Great Expectations is one which must remain outside dominating narratives and codes; a type of manhood

⁶⁵³ Though of course it still respects all of these qualities, in the characters of Bidley, Clara and Miss Skiffins; all laudable women, whom Garnett describes as "nest-builders, highly valued for their contributions to domestic comfort and harmony". Garnett 26.

⁶⁵⁴ John Tosh contends that "manliness and gentlemanliness were sharply distinguished in the early and mid-Victorian period," and that manliness "gained in social and political weight as the century proceeded". Manliness was socially inclusive, and available to any man who practised self-help and self-discipline; gentlemanliness was exclusive. John Tosh, Manliness and Maculinites in Nineteenth Century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family and Empire, Women and Men in History (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2005) 86. Manliness "represented the common aspiration of men in all walks of life"; the desired outcome was a solid, energetic and manly character, with gentility in manners. Tosh 98.

which is aware of society's constraints, and is determined to work hard and succeed despite those constraints. When Pip grasps the true nature of his society, he recoils from it, says Q.D. Leavis⁶⁵⁵. He saves himself "from shipwreck [...] by freeing himself from participation in that society"⁶⁵⁶. Pip exercises moral choice, in a society whose degradation Dickens felt intensely⁶⁵⁷. I would not agree with Lyn Pykett that Great Expectations is a story of "repetition and (re)containment, rather than one of liberation", whereby Pip goes from one form of imprisonment (his childhood under his sister's rule) to the prison of bourgeois masculinity⁶⁵⁸. Adoption of social dictates is not absolute but selective, in Pip's case; further, his alternative is productive of happiness, and allows him to prosper financially, while remaining a faithful friend to Joe. He can always take the road back to the forge, whereas during his time in London he would not, and could not. If Joe is the moral yardstick in the novel, then Pip's life in the end is morally healthy. Self-help must come from within⁶⁵⁹, and not from without (Magwitch's inheritance).

In the Victorian period, masculinity had meant power, ambition, action; at the same time, Victorian literature reflected anxieties about gender⁶⁶⁰. In Goblin Market, female sexuality signified, inter alia, by woman's beauty, is positively life-giving and life-saving, a woman's right and part of her nature. Similarly, Great Expectations regards sexuality and a life of love and sexual fulfilment among the rights of woman: Estella's inability to feel love is not only seen as unnaturally imposed upon her, but also leads her to the loveless and abusive marriage with Bentley Drummle.

Great Expectations is a bold revision of masculinity and femininity ideals. Masculinity is not threatened or made indignant by female sexual power; it thrives because of it and feels the absence of it. Ginevra's sexuality provoked a cold and prudish response from Dr John; for Pip, Estella's sexuality opens up a world of feeling and (what he thinks is) the only way to happiness. There are no certainties in the revised ending; Great Expectations is not a fairy-tale novel. It is, however, a novel where a woman's beauty and erotic appeal are demonstrated to be part of her nature; a novel where the love

⁶⁵⁵ Q.D. Leavis 290.

⁶⁵⁶ Q.D. Leavis 282.

⁶⁵⁷ Q.D. Leavis 330.

⁶⁵⁸ Lyn Pykett, Charles Dickens, Critical Issues (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2002) 172.

⁶⁵⁹ This is in accord with the idea of "self-culture", a valid nineteenth century attitude. Gilmour, Idea of the Gentleman 112. The idea of self-help did not refer to material possessions at all, but to character: "[t]hough a man have comparatively little culture, slender abilities, and but small wealth, yet, if his character be of sterling worth, he will always command an influence, whether it be in the workshop, the counting-house, the mart, or the senate". Samuel Smiles, Self-Help (London, 1859) 246.

⁶⁶⁰ Purchase 75.

of the man must clearly involve an acceptance of and affirmation in the woman's power; it is, in other words, a feminist novel.

Conclusion

Beauty, mirrors, fashion: the coquette in Victorian literature

In this thesis, I have argued that the coquette in Victorian literature is a site where discourses on womanhood are placed, contested and discussed; that she is a way of comprehending the female experience in (mid-) Victorian culture which raises grave women's issues and juxtaposes them with dominant womanhood ideals, to show how these dominant ideals operated to make controversial issues seem invisible and redundant. However, this process of making invisible has the opposite effect, and results in illustrating, rather than erasing, the gravity of women's issues. The reason for this, I have argued, is the way the coquette has been constructed: she is a multi-faceted, vociferous figure, whose dialectic with the female protagonist is rarely severed, and never on the initiative of the coquette herself.

In fact, this enduring bond is an essential element of the research question, which had been, why do we find in Victorian novels all these secondary playful figures, who see an affinity between themselves and the female protagonist, even when the protagonist does not? There are, of course, instances where the protagonist does see the affinity, as in David Copperfield and Middlemarch. This slightly modifies, but does not radically change, the question -- why this bond? Why does the text maintain it, sometimes in a clandestine manner? Given the ideal of domestic, inconspicuous womanhood, should it not be that the text worked to reject the coquette, or contain her by death or some sort of reforming process? Even in Agnes Grey where the coquette is made to suffer explicitly because of her eroticism, Agnes Grey can read the domestic code as the absolute guide to happiness only because she answers Rosalie's questions (on the issues of divorce, marriage failure and domestic abuse) by telling her that there are, effectively, no answers at all.

The reason why the coquette is constructed and treated in the manner I have described is, I have argued, that the coquette participates in a peculiar narrative strategy, and is a form of signal, prompting further investigation in her role in the narrative and in her relation to the other characters. As we have seen, existing criticism of individual novels and characters either dismisses the coquette, or investigates her as an aspect of the protagonist: she raises feminist issues relating to the protagonist – for example, Rosamond

Vincy's marriage to Lydgate highlights certain aspects of Dorothea Brooke's marriage to Casaubon, and Ginevra Fanshawe's exuberance further highlights the repression Lucy Snowe exercises upon her feelings, and so on. This second form of criticism has been very useful, and has been applied throughout the thesis. What I have added to this type of criticism is a focus on the coquette as a point of entry into the text, and as a way of examining what happens to the feminist issues when these are seen in relation to the coquette. Indeed, this thesis asked if there were any feminist issues raised solely by the coquette, and the consequences this might have for the meaning of the text.

This examination has yielded a number of interesting insights, which I will proceed to summarize. For one thing, it has become evident that, often, the coquette raises certain controversial issues pertaining to feminism, which are denied and silenced by the protagonist, existing inside the text only as they surround the figure of the coquette. This is particularly so in the cases of Charlotte and Anne Brontë. Ginevra Fanshawe in Villette examines the nature of the marriage choice, the woman's right to choose according to her own, and not society's, predilections; the instance of marriage failure, in the failure of her double, Ginevra Home; the instance of a marriage which is happy though not ideal by society's standards; and the question of female eroticism and how women themselves must learn to discipline it. Lucy Snowe tries to dismiss all of these issues in varying degrees; however, they all remain inside the text, in the form of Ginevra's friendship with Lucy, maintained on the initiative of Ginevra. Agnes Grey is different. The coquette here does not survive; she will wither inside her mansion, in the shadow of an abusive husband. However, the novel suggests that this is a specific form of entombment, performed by the protagonist, who will attempt to silence Rosalie Murray's voice by offering solutions to her plight which are no solutions at all. Rosalie, however, will try to maintain a friendship with Agnes; her unwillingness to see herself as radically different from Agnes allows Anne Brontë to suggest the artificiality and enforced nature of divisions between women.

Thus, a second important insight yielded by the two Brontë novels relates to narrative strategy, and the way the women's stories are made to interrogate each other as the narrative unfolds. Condemnation of female eroticism and coquetry seems to win the game; nevertheless, this is explicitly shown as an ideological version of reality. Furthermore, it is a version of reality which is gender-related and gender-specific, i.e. it is directed at the women, with specific purposes in mind. The protagonist's treatment of the

coquette is an argument⁶⁶¹, directed at the women, and depends upon the women learning to displace grave or controversial women's issues in the area of female triviality and woman's personal failure. However, the (implied) author intervenes in the sense that the protagonist's story is manifestly unable to contain the coquette's story. In Agnes Grey, Agnes can only ignore but not erase it; in Villette, Lucy does not wish to erase Ginevra's story, though she tries to contain it.

The coquette upsets the neat equation by which her playfulness must mean that all the serious women's issues she helps to address are trivialized. In Villette and Agnes Grey, the gaze of the female narrator coincides with the male gaze. However, it is eventually subordinated to the gaze of the implied author, who is more sympathetic towards the intricacies surrounding female identity, female sexual feeling, and female predatory power. For Charlotte and Anne Brontë, the spectacular woman is a site for the anger of the narrator for elements of life she knows not how to deal with; for themselves as authors, or as author-presences inside the text, she seems to have been a site for negotiating a response to controversial women's issues. The authors raised these issues, to show that they were rejected, and to comment on the means of their rejection.

In David Copperfield and Middlemarch, the author's ability to appreciate the problems women were facing is explicitly transferred in the female community formed around the coquette (David Copperfield) and in the relationship between Rosamond Vincy and Dorothea Brooke (Middlemarch). In the Dickens novel, the differences David – powerful first-person narrator of his story—sees between the two women, the coquette and the angel, are not essential. In George Eliot's Middlemarch, Dorothea intervenes to explain in humane terms the terrible failure (of marriage) for which Rosamond is being blamed; and it is the female's (Dorothea's) version of the male's (Lydgate's) words which bridges the gap between husband and wife.

The coquette is, therefore, a potent term for analyzing the subtleties of narrative technique, and the intricacies of woman-to-woman relations. A focus on the coquette as an angle from which to view the text formulates female belonging in Victorian culture as an intense probing, not only into roles imposed upon the women, but also into how women

⁶⁶¹ An act of producing meaning, an exposition, is always also an argument, says Mieke Bal. Mieke Bal, "Introduction", The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation, ed. Mieke Bal (Stanford: StanfordUP, 1999) 5. This thesis has looked at the coquette as an argument inside the novel's overall argument(s) on woman and womanhood.

themselves saw these roles, and the fracture this caused in women's perception of experience.

Coquettish beauty in this thesis does not so much relate to abstract concepts of beauty, or to male treatises on the perception of (female) beauty, as to beauty as a form of female expression; beauty as an aspect of narrative and a method of narrativizing the self. The Victorian coquette is a volatile combination of the discourses which surrounded and defined womanhood and proper female behaviour; if the subject of woman is a "culturally produced sign"⁶⁶² the coquette is a commentary on the legal rules, social mores and cultural attitudes which defined woman's rights, duties and place in society. In addition, she is a commentary on the particular way women saw themselves vis-à-vis the framework of rules and practices, and a site through which to articulate the conflicting feelings women experienced in attempting to position themselves within this framework. The coquette is the organizing term for those elements women were asked to discipline, for the failure of the sociolegal system to adequately protect women, and for a female subjectivity which is aware of the disciplining and the failure. Current research on Victorian coquetry interprets it as revelatory of the erotic and playful aspect of the Victorian woman, or examines the coquette in terms of the mechanisms of plot. However, this thesis has demonstrated that this is only one part of the story. For the story to be completed, we need to recognize the way the coquette expands to the social, legal and cultural framework, and generates feminocentric questions about this framework. The coquette in Victorian literature makes the problematic position of woman visible and persistent within the text. Therefore, while Agnes Grey attempts to make the reader blind to the issue of wifely abuse, Anne Brontë is

⁶⁶² Nanette Salomon, "Vermeer's Women: Shifting Paradigms in Mid-Career", The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation, ed. Mieke Bal (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999) 45. Salomon examines pictorial narrative (certain Vermeer paintings of women). However, both verbal and pictorial narratives can be read as constructions informed by motives, purpose, history, ideology. As Roland Barthes explains, narrative can be carried both by "articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images [...] – as though any material were fit to receive [men's and women's] stories". Roland Barthes, Image-Music-Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) 79. For Maureen Daly Goggin, the privileging of the written word is an historical phenomenon, while both can be equally well used to produce a narrative. There is no "clear-cut division between the rhetoric of the word and the rhetoric of the image". Maureen Daly Goggin, "Visual Rhetoric in Pens of Steel and Inks of Silk: Challenging the Great Visual/Verbal Divide," Defining Visual Rhetorics, ed. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2004) 103, 106.

pointing out that domestic ideals cannot explain, let alone remedy, the abuse of women – except by recourse to religious piety and personal failure explanations. This is why Agnes must go to Ashby Park before she returns home to be reunited with Mr Weston; to pass a final test, and learn not to see, so that she can move on to confirm the heaven of domesticity. And while Lucy Snowe tries to write a story of failure for Ginevra, Charlotte Brontë has written a different story; one in which the erotic woman with the unconventional marriage is a wife who remains loyal through hardship, and a friend who remains faithful to the more conventionally-minded protagonist.

At the same time, the coquette is not only a specific form of female commentary on the sum total of legal rules, statutes, medical treatises, conduct books and societal beliefs which described and prescribed the female experience. Usually she is surrounded by art – music, dancing, elaborate needlework. In Ginevra Fanshawe and Rosalie Murray, talent in music is constructed by Lucy Snowe and Agnes Grey respectively as a moral failing on the woman's part. Charles Dickens and George Eliot do not see musical talent as necessarily a moral flaw, but use it to suggest the lack of aspiration and lack of motivation which seems to have characterized women's lives within Victorian patriarchy. Therefore, the coquette is a way of looking at dominant womanhood ideals through the lens of female eroticism, music and art. The general suspicion with which women musicians, artists and performers were viewed⁶⁶³, the potential subversive quality of her art, together with the trivialization of that art (music and drawing were considered to be mere accomplishments) allows the coquette to be both a possibly dangerous figure, while simultaneously retaining her association with triviality. As we have seen, the association with triviality is important; in the Victorian era it could operate as a smokescreen for a number of issues which beset and curtailed a woman's life.

⁶⁶³ This issue has been discussed in the individual chapters, especially chapter one on *Villette*; however, see also Dinah Muloch Craik's notion that a woman artist would be, in pursuing a career, turning her back on happiness; it may be more natural, and more conducive to happiness, she explained, if a woman became a mother (or devoted herself to a family, if unmarried) than if she became an artist. But happiness was not the only thing on earth, so a woman of artistic genius would not be wrong if she followed her calling. Dinah Muloch Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* (London, 1858) 54-59. The tone of the whole section is prohibiting. The egoism of the artist is lamented (60); her deviation from what is natural (i.e. the home) is made express (63); she quits the shelter of the private sphere, but should nevertheless be warned that she ought to be "the woman first, the artiste afterwards" (61).

Furthermore, art and all the paraphernalia of coquetry (fashion accessories, bonnets, hairstyles and gowns) render the coquette a figure which is able to transgress the distinction between the ideal (the positive) and the non-ideal (the other). She can be easily seen as angelic –she is lovely, and has all the right accomplishments. Yet she can also be frivolous, and appropriate her erotic appeal to achieve her own purposes (rather than use it for the sole purpose of pleasing the man and gratifying his vanity). Thus she can exercise power over the men, while her marriage may end in failure. The simultaneous presence in the coquette of the ideal and the non-ideal, and the way the female protagonist responds to this, make the coquette a collective and inclusive figure of womanhood. She is a site on which various aspects of womanhood meet and are being negotiated between the women themselves (including, in the case of female authorship, the writer herself). The search for identity and belonging is, therefore, a female effort which is collective, with coquettish beauty as its unifying term.

Lawrence Grossberg has spoken of “the other” existing in its own place, in its own positivity⁶⁶⁴. The coquette is the charting of such a place. It is a common denominator for the discourse(s) punishing and denying female frivolity and eroticism, while at the same time betraying these discourses as inadequate, forcefully and prejudicially imposed upon a woman. Woman is not a victim in this thesis, because she is able to question and examine the conceptual frameworks which defined her life. Seen in this light, coquetry is a discourse of its own, a discourse of writing woman and her experience within the social, cultural and legal systems of rules.

The coquette as a term which captures the nuances of female identity is less painfully developed in the women’s journals and magazines. The pages of The Queen and The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine show the coquette to have been Everywoman; spectacular and fashion-loving, but also an eager and competent housekeeper. The women’s journals and magazines have been used in this thesis as complementary to the reading of the novels, i.e. as evidence that a love of fashion and display, and a pleasure in one’s own beauty, were not as reprehensible as Agnes Grey and Lucy Snowe would have us think (even Lucy Snowe will eventually start to like dressing fashionably).

⁶⁶⁴ Lawrence Grossberg, “Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is?”, Questions of Cultural Identity, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, rep. 2005 (London: Sage Publications, 1996) 94.

The chapter on Great Expectations has been a departure from the other chapters, and the definition of the coquette as used in this thesis. Estella is the protagonist and not a secondary character, and is neither frivolous nor capable of enjoying her erotic appeal (though there is hope for her in the end). However, the novel suggests that if she is not playful, then she should be, and she would have been, had she not been subjected to Miss Havisham's pernicious influence. Further, in Pip's ability to love and desire a woman who is sexually attractive and dominant, the novel examines erotic womanhood in relation to manhood, and counters Victorian ideals of manhood as embodied in Villette's Dr John. Even in Charlotte Brontë's novel, Dr John is criticized as an ideal; Lucy will realize that he can not love or appreciate an adult and whole woman. His type of manhood requires a child-bride to be affirmed. Nevertheless, much of the criticism Lucy brings against Ginevra is such as Dr John would approve of; Lucy in large part gazes at other women through Dr John's eyes.

A theme which appears in many parts of the thesis is the extent to which woman is precluded from fully seeing herself in the mirror. Ginevra and Lucy vie with each other in front of a large looking-glass; Agnes Grey interprets what Rosalie Murray sees in the mirror, hiding from the reader the younger woman's true image; Lydgate imagines the perfect woman as a mermaid who looks in the mirror and sings a song of reverence for her lord; significantly, Estella never seems to look at herself in the mirror. It has been a task of this thesis to examine what is oppressive about the mirror, and what this might mean for the text; this thesis has demonstrated that it is not only the assumptions of the male order (Middlemarch) but also a specific form of conditioning applied to the women themselves (Villette, Agnes Grey). Further, this thesis has suggested how the figure of the coquette indicates that women were aware of, and concerned about, this appropriation of their image.

One way for women to remedy this state of affairs might be to turn away from the mirror completely. Diana Tietjens Meyers has said that she would like to see "[n]ew woman-with-mirror imagery [which will] authorize women to turn their backs on mirrors. Likewise, new woman-with-mirror imagery must terminate beauty's monopoly on the spectral ideal image in women's mirrors and authorize women to define their own

attractiveness”⁶⁶⁵. She correctly points out that, “[n]o woman’s mirror is a blank glass. Every mirror is culturally inscribed [...]”⁶⁶⁶.

However, women need not turn their backs even on culturally inscribed mirrors. As the figure of the coquette suggests, women can recognize, question and even appropriate what is oppressive about the mirror. Women can replace the voice of patriarchy which is dominating their mirrors⁶⁶⁷. Lucy and Ginevra begin the mirror-scene in Villette by repeating complacencies the patriarchal voice has taught them to say about each other. Lucy is plain and poor, and will never have a suitor, says Ginevra; Ginevra is a silly butterfly, and can never be of interest to serious women like myself, says Lucy. But they proceed to find some common ground, and leave the mirror together to go spy on the men (216)⁶⁶⁸. Even after Hotel Crecy, where Lucy explicitly (mis)interprets Ginevra in a patriarchal pejorative manner, we have the scene in the fam, in which Ginevra and Lucy walk arm-in-arm and sit apart from the other girls and M. Paul (470, 472). Coquetry is an exposition of the obstacles the Victorian patriarchal culture placed in the path of woman, so that she could not stare at herself freely and frankly in the mirror. The coquette is an empowering figure, because she carries the suggestion that women have the means to define a space in which they can exist despite these obstacles, a space where they can work to transcend them. So, for example, Lizzie in Goblin Market makes clear that woman must embrace the erotic aspect of herself; men have defined it in a constricting way, but it can be reclaimed and redefined in a female-centred way. Anne Brontë in Agnes Grey emerges as a presence which has thought deeply about, and analyzed the intricacies of, female belonging in her culture, and is concerned about the failings of the legal system (in relation to women’s rights) which she is using the figure of Rosalie Murray to expose. The female community in David Copperfield and the Rosamond-Dorothea link in Middlemarch suggest that women can construct a female-centred narrative which will aid them in the search for fulfilment. The coquette is, in short, a discourse addressing female belonging, and the search for belonging.

⁶⁶⁵ Diana Tietjens Meyers, Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women’s Agency, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 147.

⁶⁶⁶ Tietjens Meyers 133.

⁶⁶⁷ As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have suggested. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene; Yale UP, 2000) 38.

⁶⁶⁸ References to Villette come from Charlotte Brontë, Villette, ed. Mark Lilly (London: Penguin Books, 1979).

Coquettish beauty has been employed in this thesis as a practical tool for a feminist analysis of the chosen texts. It has not been seen as an abstract investigation into the qualities that make something beautiful, or into the act of perceiving a beautiful object. This thesis is about recognizing that the beautiful object—the pretty coquette—can be placed in the position of subject, and might have something to speak of. Coquetry in Victorian literature is a political statement. The coquette's story is the woman's story, seen from the subversive angle of female eroticism and joy at being beautiful. It is the story where beauty can be victimized yet remain powerful; it is the suggestion that playful and erotic beauty can draw women in a circle of inclusion, where female belonging is no longer a matter of patriarchal categorization, but of an affinity and understanding between women.

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