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“DREAR FLIGHT AND HOMELESS WANDERING”: GENDER, ECONOMICS, AND CRISES OF IDENTITY IN MID-VICTORIAN WOMEN’S FICTION

by

Katherine Frances Montgomery

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree in English
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2014

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Florence S. Boos

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Graduate College
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Iowa City, Iowa

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Katherine Frances Montgomery

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy
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To Florence

They give us its history; they give us its philosophy; but we want its *picture*.

Harriet Martineau
Illustrations of Political Economy, Vol. 1, "Life in the Wilds"

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INTRODUCTION

In a central passage of *Jane Eyre*, after Jane has left Thornfield following the debacle of her failed marriage ceremony, she wanders the moors, starving, cold, and uncertain both of herself and of her future, asking "What was I to do? Where to go? Oh, intolerable questions, when I could do nothing and go nowhere!" (275). Jane spends the night outdoors, and the next day can find no work for herself in the nearest town. She is starving, utterly alone, unable to support herself, and unable to find any place for herself in any economic or social structure, until St. John Rivers intervenes when she is at the brink of death.

While some economic literary criticism on *Jane Eyre* explores Jane-as-governess or Jane-as-bride, strikingly little notice has been taken of Jane's "homeless wandering" as one of the novel's major events, either in economic criticism or in the historical context of nineteenth-century women's homelessness. In fact, homelessness and its attendant anxieties is mentioned fairly infrequently in Victorian literary criticism; when the subject comes up, it is generally in the context of a few specific writers or characters: Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy; the child Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights,* perhaps, or the child Tom of Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies.* Murray Baumgarten and H. M. Daleski's *Homes and Homelessness in the Victorian Imagination* takes on just such instances in Victorian literature, with an entire section dedicated to Dickens. I broaden this conversation by suggesting that anxieties about destitution are not found only in texts that portray homelessness directly, but that anxieties of homelessness, particularly women's anxieties, are central to a tremendous amount of nineteenth-century women's literature. This literature does not always show homeless women, but it is nonetheless

obsessed with the economic vulnerability of middle-class women who may never have had to support themselves, and have never been homeless, but are one failed marriage or one family death away from penury. *Jane Eyre*'s homeless wandering is but the tip of an iceberg of economic anxieties in women's literature, and if critics have not seen the visible part of the iceberg—a central passage in what is arguably Victorian literature's most famous text—what remains below the water is almost entirely unmapped. I argue here that an awareness of economic helplessness and its attendant, sometimes unspoken fear of homelessness and penury is one of nineteenth-century women's literature's most central concerns and driving anxieties.

I examine Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette;* Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh;* sensation fiction, with a focus on Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd* and Ellen Price Wood's short nautical fiction; and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda.* While not all of these texts deal directly with homelessness in the same way that *Jane Eyre* does, they all negotiate the same set of anxieties about middle-class women's economic positions—a set of anxieties that culminates and is rooted in the fear of losing one's home, and are reflected in how women move through economic landscapes in varying states of desperation and destitution. I propose a series of modes for understanding how women's movement through the such landscapes reflects anxieties about their economic identities. In this texts, women move 1) in a mode of economic or psychological desperation that points to the instability and vulnerability of their economic position (*Jane Eyre* and *Villette*); 2) in a mode of learning to better comprehend their own relative economic privilege compared to others, and therefore better understand women's vulnerability in general (*Aurora*

Leigh); 3) in a potentially risky mode of self-reinvention that challenges conventional gender-based economic hierarchies (*Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*; Wood's short fiction); and 4) in a realist mode of revelation that points to their own perpetual state of powerless dependence, with little opportunity for sensational reinventions (*Daniel Deronda* and *Middlemarch*). Desperation, comprehension, self-invention, revelation: these texts consistently point to, through the movement of the woman's body, the ways that the woman is an economic subject, perhaps before she is anything else.

Gender and Economics in Romantic Literature and Criticism

In *The Wanderer, or, Female Difficulties* (1814), begun in the 1790s and written by Frances Burney between 1802 and 1812, the titular character has a moment in which:

> Deeply hurt and strongly affected, how insufficient, she exclaimed, is a FEMALE to herself! How utterly dependent upon situation—connexions—circumstance! how nameless, how for ever fresh-springing are her DIFFICULTIES, when she would owe her existence to her own exertions! Her conduct is criticized, not scrutinized; her character is censured, not examined; her labours are unhonoured, and her qualifications are but lures to ill will! Calumny hovers over her head, and slander follows her footsteps! (275)

All this in the face of an unsympathetic attitude entirely summed up by a character earlier in the novel: "I beg, how a female, who is young, beautiful, and accomplished, can suffer from pecuniary distress, if her character be not unimpeachable?" (149) It is this prejudice, as well as a lack of education and economic opportunities, that constitutes the specific "female difficulties" that Burney's novel references. Perhaps because of this kind of explicit statement, Romantic literary criticism has a relatively established line of inquiry examining women's economic powerlessness. Their difficulties are explored at length by Edward Copeland in *Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790-*

1820 (2004). Drawing on texts by Burney and a range of other writers, Copeland notes that:

> Money, like the weather, is the one topic on which every novel has an opinion. Whatever the political argument, whatever the social agenda, whatever the romantic entanglement in women's fiction, women can be heard talking about money, the lack of it, how to spend it, or how to get it. (7)

Such anxieties are flow throughout Charlotte Smith's poetry and novels of the 1780s and 1790s, which Copeland notes feature "an unmitigated series of economic disasters for genteel women who are long on claims to station, but short on funds" (5). They also crop up in a series of major Romantic texts, including Elizabeth Inchbald's *Lover's Vows* (1798); Jane Austen's novels of the 1810s; Maria Edgeworth's *Helen* (1834), and much Gothic literature. Copeland writes of 1790's Gothic fiction that "Always at the center of the story there is the bereft, penniless, and wandering woman, victim of an unforgiving economy" (7).

But while Copeland and other critics have explored these economic fears as central to Romantic women's literature, this critical thread wavers after about 1820. Instead, the critical focus on gender, economics, and literature turns to the growing Women's Movement, and its debates about marriage rights, women's education, and women moving into professional spaces. But although she largely disappears from post-1820s literary criticism, the destitute, wandering woman of Romantic literature remains a constant ghost lingering at the edges of consciousness for much Victorian women's writing. The figure of the unemployed, unconnected, and respectable woman haunts and drives Victorian heroines' fears and anxieties, and often their actions, even while the critical focus shifts to more concrete representations of women entering the public sphere.

The Women's Movement and Women's Work

Recent critics and historians have argued that public discourse on women and the public sphere came into prominence starting in the 1840s. In *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England* (1998), Barbara Leah Harman identifies the 1840 World Antislavery Convention in London as a jumping-off point for the discussion of women in public spaces. At this ten-day convention, women delegates from Massachusetts and Pennsylvania were not allowed to be seated with the men or to participate in discussion; in protest, American antislavery movement founder William Lloyd Garrison refused to take his own seat and instead sat with the screened-off women, unable to participate in the discussion. The result of the ensuing public debate, Harman writes, was that in the 1840s and 1850s the existence of women's public life "begins to emerge as a dangerously real possibility," along with marriage, property, and education reforms (2). Ellen Jordan's history *The Women's Movement and Women's Employment in Nineteenth Century Britain* (1999) argues that 1840s political advocacy for bluestockings, philanthropy, education and nursing did much to open up new economic possibilities to women beginning in the 1850s, with work in professions that included medicine, pharmacy, librarianship, civil service, clerical work, retail work, and primary school teaching.

In "Victorian Liberal Feminism and the 'Idea' of Work," Joyce Senders Pedersen describes how Victorian understandings of work and professionalism "[fed] into the formation of professional identities and the concept of a career," and indeed most histories of women's work focus on career-by-career approaches (28). Wanda F. Neff's 1929 *Victorian Working Women: An Historical and Literary Study of Women in British Industries and Professions 1832-1850* set the standard for this kind of history, later

expanded in Lee Holcombe's 1973 survey *Victorian Ladies at Work: Middle-class Working Women in England and Wales 1850-1914*. Both examine the women's movement, women and education, then move to examine the specific jobs opening up for women in teaching, nursing, office work, and later in the century, state and civil servant positions. [1] In general, these examinations of work look forward to the future, as the mid-nineteenth century discourses surrounding women's work, public and private spheres, and the concept of the "career" evolved into their recognizable contemporary forms.[2]

But even while the possibilities for women's employment become more visible in Victorian literature, the same threads of anxieties that ran through Romantic literature regarding women's economic impotence remain. The very concept of the "surplus" woman reflects such powerlessness: women are economic objects, subject to surplus (or, presumably, shortage); they are not economic drivers in their own right. By picking up the threads of Romantic anxieties about women, economic helplessness, and homelessness, and tracing them into Victorian literature, I recover, under these forward-looking examinations of women's growing place in the public sphere, a profound anxiety underlying it that remains extent today. While most histories examine Victorian political, social, economic advancements for women, the emotional drive behind such advances derived from a real, grinding terror of homelessness and loss, and a desperate sense that things must change.

Recovering this fear and anxiety accomplishes several things. It helps us better

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[1] There is also a body of criticism on another form of available work for Victorian women: writing. Texts include Patricia Zakreski's *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890* (2006); Julia Swindells's *Victorian Writing and Working Women: The Other Side of Silence* (1985), or *Women Writing and Writing About Women* (ed. Jacobus, 1979).

[2] The impact of industrialization on this development is broadly covered from 1700 to 1950 by Joan W. Scott and Louise A. Tilly in *Women, Work, and Family* (1978).

interpret texts that are not generally thought of as economic, and in doing so, helps us better understand the lived experiences of Victorian women that drove the Women's Movement. It provides us with a new perspective on the history of women in the workplace today, and on public discourse surrounding women in the workplace (Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* comes to mind, along with the various feminist responses to it.) It helps us link together multiple texts across genres and authors that are not frequently paired or grouped (Braddon and Eliot, for example), enabling us to read them as responding to each other. It helps us examine fiction as a means by which Victorian women participated in contemporary economic discourse. And finally, this work helps us think about the ways in which narrative and literature can challenge the usefulness and seeming objectivity of what has become a "science" of statistics (economics) by legitimizing the experience of the individual who has very little economic or social power. These texts challenge the dominant "narrative" of economics by producing counternarratives of their own.

Economic Criticism

In his foundational *The Economy of Literature* (1978), Marc Shell argued that "literary works are composed of small tropic exchanges or metaphors, some of which can be analyzed in terms of signified economic content and all of which can be analyzed in terms of economic form" (qtd. in Woodmansee and Osteen 5). Mark Osteen and Martha Woodmansee expand on this in their introduction to *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics* (1999), where they describe the "new economic criticism" as not simply noticing economic principles at work in literature, but suggesting that certain forms of literature (the Victorian novel, for instance)

and the discipline of economics evolved at the same time, and out of same organizational impulse: to make sense of the nineteenth-century rise of capitalism and professionalism, separate spheres, urbanization, and more (5).

However, economic criticism, new or old, has a striking lack of consideration of gender. Catherine Gallagher's *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (2006) barely touches on gender at all. In Woodmansee and Osteen's 1999 collection, only three essays out of twenty-three deal with women writers or concerns about gender, and of those three, two (one on Harriet Martineau, and one on *Homo economicus)* are placed in the category of "Economics of the irrational." Deanna K. Kreisel also writes about the ways that women's economics are strange or irrational; in *Economic Woman: Demand, Gender, and Narrative Closure in Eliot and Hardy* (2012) she argues that:

> While the association of monstrous femininity and social disorder generally (and economic malfeasance specifically) is certainly not new to the Victorians, it took on a particular urgency during this period: the association between moribund demand, resultant gluts, and female economic management articulates anxieties about the possible stagnation of the capitalist economy and its inability to sustain growth without intervention. It is during the nineteenth century that circulation became markedly more importunate, an intensification we can trace in the insistent repetition of images of hoarding, self-denial and undue thrift in the Victorian novel—particularly on the part of female or feminized characters. (6)

I would not deny that economics, irrationality, femininity, and monstrosity were conflated in the Victorian era, but there are far more fundamental questions about economic woman in Victorian literature that still need to be examined, and there is a risk that focusing on feminine irrationalities and monstrosities plays into already-problematic and still-standing constructions of women and economics as unrelated or illogical rather than undermining or reexamining such assumptions.

Lana Dalley and Jill Rappoport's 2013 essay collection *Economic Women: Essays on Desire and Dispossession in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* seeks to fill this gap. Dalley and Rappoport observe that Economic Woman "remains at best a liminal figure" and that "Writing the history of nineteenth-century Economic Woman requires new modes of conceptualization that take into account her carefully circumscribed socioeconomic position and the behavior it elected; she cannot simply be modeled on Economic Man" (1, 2). The wide-ranging essays in Dalley and Rappoport's collection are broadly sorted into themes of exchange, political economy, family, and business concerns, from Kathryn Gleadle's "Gentry, Gender, and the Moral Economy during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in Provincial England" to Deanna K. Kreisel's "Demand and Desire in *Dracula.*" Dalley and Rappoport's collection is an important beginning to the study of gender and economics, and I hope very much that it prompts further work in this area.

Further reexamination of the relationship between gender, Victorian economics and literature could have useful effects not only for literary criticism, but for feminist economics today. I had intended to offer a brief critical overview of how gender is treated in contemporary economics, and found that the overview would be brief whether I intended it to be so or not. In short: economics as an academic discipline has astoundingly little consideration of gender. Julie A. Nelson is one of only a few scholars working to address the masculine bias in contemporary economics, and has, with Marianne A. Ferber, edited two collections on the subject: *Feminist Economics Today: Beyond Economic Man* (1993) and *Beyond Economic Man: Feminist Theory and Economics* (2006). The 2006 followup volume begins with a basic definition of gender

vs. biological sex, suggesting how very foreign considerations of gender are to the discipline. Nelson points out in *Beyond Economic Man* that, out of 1,000 economists in Mark Blaug's historical and contemporary survey *Who's Who in Economics*, only 31 economists are women (2). A similar proportion is reflected in the distribution of economics prizes, fellowships, and disciplinary leadership. In a 2003 essay—the only essay focused on gender in an essay collection titled *The Consequences of Economic Rhetoric: Ideology and Gender in Economic Theory*—Nancy Folbre and Heidi Hartmann note that their goal is to "argue that certain assumptions embodied in the rhetoric of economics have deafened most economists to the possibility that economic motives help explain inequality between the sexes" (185). To reiterate: *A 2003 essay* in a scholarly essay collection is trying to explain why most economists refuse to consider "the possibility that economic motives help explain inequality between the sexes."

Nelson argues that:

> What is needed to overcome the masculine biases of the profession is a richer conception of human understanding and human identity. These less biased conceptions would broaden and improve the field of economics for both female and male practitioners, and for research on all issues. (Introduction, *Feminism, Objectivity, and Economics,* xi).

Tempting as it is, I do not intend to use these literary texts primarily as an addendum to economic history. (It's worth pointing out, however, that a bit of interdisciplinary work could certainly help out feminist economics.) But this interdisciplinary angle does lend a new perspective to the field of nineteenth-century economic writing, when women writing on economics were, for a time, among the most prominent and popular writers in this still-evolving discipline. It also brings into focus the advantages of narrative over

statistics when it comes to understanding and qualifying the human experience—an advantage that nineteenth-century women economists fully understood.

Victorian Women, Economics and Narrative

Jane Haldimand Marcet wrote her economic treatises in Socratic dialogue, including her *Conversations on Political Economy, in which the Elements of that Science are Familiarly Explained* (1816), which is framed as a discussion between a pupil and teacher, both women. Later, she wrote *John Hopkins's Notions on Political Economy* (1833) in the form of short stories for children. Such texts were effective at making economics accessible to a wide audience; in 1822, Maria Edgeworth described how "It has now become high fashion with blue ladies to talk political economy . . . fine ladies now require that their daughters' governesses should teach political economy" (qtd. in Thomson, 24). One such reader was the young Harriet Martineau, who acknowledged the influence of Marcet's work on her own 25-part, highly successful *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-4), in which a series of stories illustrate economic principles. These were tremendously influential: Lana L. Dalley writes that in "In the 1830s, the *Illustrations* were a key source of knowledge about political economy for much of the Victorian population" ("On Martineau"). Martineau influenced Millicent Garrett Fawcett's *Tales in Political Economy* (1874), also narrative fictions. The goal and the effect of such economic narratives was to turn economics into a widely accessible discipline. In the preface to Vol. 1 of her *Illustrations*, Martineau offers to give her readers "the science in a familiar, practical form. [Political economists] give us its history; they give us its philosophy; but we want its *picture*" (I:1:xiii). She explained her approach:

> We trust we shall not be supposed to countenance the practice of making use of narrative as a trap to catch idle readers, and make them learn something they are afraid of. We detest the practice, and feel ourselves insulted whenever a book of the *trap* kind is put into our hands. It is many years since we grew sick of works that pretend to be stories, and turn out to be catechisms of some kind of knowledge which we had much rather become acquainted with in its undisguised form. The reason why we choose the form of narrative is, that we really think it the best in which Political Economy can be taught, as we should say of nearly every kind of moral science. ("Life in the Wilds" I:1:xiii.)

Martineau understood how economics could be turned into something accessible and interesting to readers by illustrating its principles as they affected everyday people—including women.

Dalley writes about Martineau's approach successfully incorporated women's lives into her economic narratives:

> By bringing the topic of domestic economy to bear on political economy, Martineau places women more centrally within economic theory and practice. In this context, women—as readers of the *Illustrations* and as characters within the tales—are not only rendered a part of larger-scale economics but also (because of their participation) encouraged to learn the principles of political economy. ("On Martineau")

The effects of this kind of economic discourse is frequently visible in Victorian's women's literature. Martineau's influential work may well explain a scene in *Jane Eyre* in which Mrs. Fairfax is able to enter an otherwise-puzzling conversation between Rochester and Jane when the subject turns to domestic economy. In describing her childhood, Jane tells Rochester that:

> "I disliked Mr. Brocklehurst; and I was not alone in the feeling. He is a harsh man; at once pompous and meddling; he cut off our hair; and for economy's sake bought us bad needles and thread, with which we could hardly sew."
>
> "That was very false economy," remarked Mrs. Fairfax, who now again caught the drift of the dialogue. (105)

Mrs. Fairfax can jump in when the discussion *turns* to economics, which seems rather counterintuitive without the context of Martineau's work. Victorian literature is full of

this kind of discourse: in *Middlemarch*, set in the early 1830s, the young Dorothea Brooke is annoyed at being "twitted with her ignorance of political economy, that never-explained science which was thrust as an extinguisher over all her lights" and she is, near the novel's end, still trying to educate herself with a "particular little heap of books on political economy and kindred matters" (19, 890).

Not only were women writers reading women economists, but vice versa. A back-and-forth between economics and literature is visible in Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon's 1857 tract *Women and Work*, which begins with a quote from Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*—a quote on the subject of men, women, and work:

> Be sure, no earnest work
> Of any honest creature, howbeit weak,
> Imperfect, ill-adapted, fails so much,
> It is not gathered as a grain of sand
> To enlarge the sum of human action used
> For carrying out God's end. No creature works
> So ill, observe, that therefore he's cashiered.
> The honest earnest man must stand and work:
> The woman also; otherwise she drops
> At once below the dignity of man,
> Accepting serfdom. Free men freely work:
> Whoever fears God, fears to sit at ease. (8.705-16)

These sorts of exchanges between women economists and writers of fiction and poetry deserve further attention. Here, however, I focus on close reading—or re-reading—a series of major women writer's texts, and arguing that they are in conversation with each other as part of a broader discourse about women, work, and economics in mid-Victorian culture.

Victorian Women Wanderers

One term that comes up regularly in economics is the idea of "Economic Man," a term coined by critics of John Stuart Mill (Persky 222). Mill never used the term himself, but

described the concept in one of his 1844 *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy*:

> Geometry presupposes an arbitrary definition of a line, "that which has length but not breadth." Just in the same manner does Political Economy presuppose an arbitrary definition of man, as a being who invariably does that by which he may obtain the greatest amount of necessaries, conveniences, and luxuries, with the smallest quantity of labour and physical self-denial with which they can be obtained in the existing state of knowledge. (*Essay V*)

Mill derives the idea from eighteenth-century conceptions of individuals acting in their own monetary interest, as described by Adam Smith and other classical economists. Nelson, in *Feminism, Objectivity and Economics* (1996) describes some of the problems of this still-dominant economic figure:

> *Homo economicus* (Economic Man) is the personification of individuality run wild. "Economic man," the "agent" of the prototypical economic model, springs up fully formed, with preferences fully developed, and is fully active and self-contained. He has no childhood or old age; no dependence on anyone; no responsibility for anyone but himself. The environment has no effect on him, but rather is merely the passive material, presented as "constraints," over which his rationality has play. He interacts in society without being influenced by society: his mode of interaction is through an ideal market in which prices form the only, and only necessary, form of communication. *Homo economicus* is the central character in a romance of individuality without connection to nature or to society.
>
> Yet humans do not simply spring out of the earth. Humans are born of women, nurtured and cared for as dependent children, socialized into family and community groups, and are perpetually dependence on nourishment and shelter to sustain their lives. These aspects of human life, whose neglect is often justified by the argument that they are unimportant or intellectually uninteresting or merely "natural," are, not just coincidentally, the areas of life through of as "women's work." (31)

One striking element of Nelson's description of the modern economic man is how stnragely literary it sounds:

> *Homo economicus* is the personification of individuality run wild. "Economic man," the "agent" of the prototypical economic model, springs up fully formed, with preferences fully developed, and is fully active and self-contained. He has no childhood or old age; no dependence on anyone; no responsibility for anyone but himself.

Such a description of a man—a young, healthy man—sounds very much like the subject of the standard *Bildungsroman*, particularly the eighteenth-century English narratives such as *Roderick Random* and *Tom Jones*. Such young men "run wild" both metaphorically and literally, and their movements reflect their independence and responsibility only for themselves. Melodie Monahan, in arguing for the difference between the male and female *Bildungsroman* (if, as she points out, the female *Bildungsroman* can even exist) is that English men can consider themselves reasonably well "at home" anywhere they travel in England. Women, on the other hand, are only safely "at home" when they are quite literally at home (589-90). In their privileging of male agency and freedom, *Homo economicus* and the subject of the *Bildungsroman* are eighteenth-century literary-economic brothers, who evolved out of the same broad social impulse: to make sense of the place of an individual in a rapidly developing capitalist-industrial society. But this individual is almost always a man. The works that I examine here by Brontë, Barrett Browning, Braddon, Wood, and Eliot all ask, more or else explicitly: what can women do?

Romantic wandering, too, is an activity that tends to privilege men. Margaret Anne Doody, in her introduction to Burney's *The Wanderer*, observes that:

> *The Wanderer* is a Romantic novel, declaring its Romanticism in its title, for wandering is a Romantic activity, and wanderers are favourite Romantic characters, from Rousseau's portrait of himself as a 'solitary walker' through a host of female vagrants, gipsies, and old men travelling. One of Wordsworth's central characters is referred to as 'The Wanderer' and this character supplies the title of the first book of *The Excursion*, published in August 1814, a few months after Burney's novel. 'Wandering' is the quintessential Romantic activity, as it represents erratic and personal energy expended outside a structure, and without progressing to a set objective. Impelled either by the harshness of a rejecting society or by some inner spiritual quest, the Wanderer leaves the herd and moves to or through some form of symbolic wilderness or wildness, seeing a world very

> different from that perceived by those who think that are at the centre. Alien and alienated, yet potentially bearing a new compassion or a new wisdom, the Wanderer draws a different map. (vii)

Most often, being impelled by an "inner spiritual quest" tends to be a primarily male privilege. Wordsworth can "wander lonely, as a cloud" and achieve a meditation of poetic inspiration that for year after can fill his heart with pleasure. Written at the same time as Wordsworth's wanderer, however, Burney's wanderer is desperate and friendless, moving from place to place trying to find work and support herself. Similarly, the gypsy Meg Merrilies, whose "bed it was the brown heath turf, / And her house was out of doors" (3-4) dies "somewhere" (29), even while her death provides an opportunity for Keats's romantic view of a life spent in nature. Years later, Jane Eyre almost dies of exposure while wandering over the same hills and dales.

In *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (1995), Celeste Langan writes that:

> Romantic vagrancy is the Romantic representation of vagrancy, a representational practice particularly concerned with those aspects of vagrancy susceptible to analogy and subsequent idealization: first, the mobility that appears to guarantee to the vagrant a residual economic freedom, despite his or her entire impoverishment; second, the speech-acts that appear to consolidate a residual political identity. The poet and the vagrant together constitute a society based on the twin principles of freedom of speech and freedom of movement. (17)

Both of these markers of identity in Langan's construction of the Romantic vagrant—economic and political—are markers that are inaccessible to women. Women have very little power over their economic place, and therefore leaving it brings no economic "freedom"; for most of the nineteenth century, they also have no political identity separate from their husband's. Powerless as they are, their wandering has little to do with the construction of a new society based on a reformation of social values. When women

wander, they lose the markers of identity—their homes—that give them their identities in their first place. When they leave the sphere of the domestic, they encounter real peril: to their security, livelihoods, and reputations. It is no coincidence that women who lose their reputations are described as "wayward" or having "gone astray."

Perhaps because of this focus on wayward women in the Victorian period (see Deborah Epstein Nord's *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City*, 1995), the middle-class women wanderers of Victorian literature have been passed over. But they are everywhere. Their movements can be purely episodic and are often short, desperate, marking a real crisis. This wandering is marked by alone-ness that is either terribly isolating or near-fatal; by circumstances out of the heroine's control; by attacks on her respectability; by losses or shifts of identity often marked by namelessness or name changes; and finally, by a geographical movement that may range from crossing the street to crossing the sea. All of these narratives markers are affiliated with a woman's inability to be economically independent.

Brontë, Barrett Browning, Braddon, Wood, and Eliot are not generally considered economic writers, certainly not in the way that Trollope, Dickens, or Thackeray are characterized as writers of capitalism.[3] But the discourses about economics, work, and

[3] As opposed to, for example, Elizabeth Gaskell, who advocates for the "dumb people" of the working class in her 1848 preface to *Mary Barton*, even while claiming to know "nothing of Political Economy":

> The more I reflected on this unhappy state of things between those so bound to each other by common interests, as the employers and the employed must ever be, the more anxious I became to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people; the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy, or of erroneously believing that such is the case. If it be an error, that the woes, which come with ever-returning tide-like flood to overwhelm the workmen in our manufacturing towns, pass unregarded by all but the sufferers, it is at any rate an error so bitter in its consequences to all parties, that whatever public effort can do in the way of legislation, or private effort in the way of merciful deeds, or helpless love in the way of "widow's mites," should be done, and that speedily, to disabuse the work-people of so miserable a misapprehension. At present they seem to me to be left in a state, wherein lamentations and tears are thrown aside as useless, but in which the lips are compressed for curses, and the hands clenched and ready to smite. (30)

women in their literature suggest that they are participants in a cross-genre conversation about women's economic vulnerability. Further, the way that their economic discourse is so frequently related to women's movement and wandering suggest that these women can be read as a re-exploration of the related economic-literary tropes of *Homo economicus* and the male wanderers of the *Bildungsroman* and Romantic literature. Mid-Victorian women writers portray alternate, female versions of these wanderers, whose narratives are revelations not of adult maturation or natural contemplation, but of their own desperate powerlessness and placelessness.

Overview of Chapters

In my first chapter, I address Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Villette.* Both novels portray young, respectable, educated women who find themselves homeless and without money or connections. For both, economic placelessness is enacted and emphasized through the heroine's desperate wandering. These novels lay out the basic economic problem for women struggling to maintain a middle-class status: they simply cannot be self-dependent without either aid from friends or a good deal of luck; without either, they are doomed. *Villette* further suggests that even economic security is not enough to guarantee happiness, and that a woman forced to stay in a place for economic reasons is not necessarily happy, even if she has a modicum of hard-earned security. For both heroines, wandering becomes an act of psychological or economic desperation, reflecting the impossibility of reconciling happiness, independence, and economic security through their own work and effort alone.

Jennifer Foster notes that Gaskell's claim to ignorance is "too modest," noting that Gaskell had read Adam Smith and knew Martineau's work. Foster suggests that Gaskell claimed ignorance in order to "distance herself from unbecoming partisanship." (Gaskell, 30).

My second chapter addresses Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, which is also concerned with independence: in this case, the freedom of the woman artist to invent herself. As a young woman, Aurora asserts her independence by walking and journeying away from her home, and eventually moving to London, and then to Italy. But is also through walking that she learns about her own privilege: during a stopover in France, she wanders Paris and encounters Marian Erle, a woman who had left Aurora's cousin Romney at the altar. Seeing Marian holding a child, Aurora thinks her guilty of promiscuity; Marian counters with the story of her own forced journey to France, in which she was drugged, raped, and left pregnant. The novel thus juxtaposes the journeys of these two women: Aurora, trying to be a self-made artist, has sacrificed a comfortable life for the artistic one—but next to Marian, it becomes evident that Aurora's self-invention is true privilege. The way in which a woman moves through the world, then, reflects her privilege and class, and in paying attention to this, Aurora comes to better comprehend how her own independence is largely a reflection of her economic class. What had been a narrative of privileged feminism comes to be one of greater inclusion; through comparing the journeys of these two women, *Aurora Leigh* advocates for a feminism that must include working-class women in its advocacy.

My third chapter addresses sensation fiction, with a focus on two novels by Mary Elizabeth Braddon: *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*. Lady Audley's secret is that of her own history: she has a past with parts missing. Similarly, the tension at the center of *Aurora Floyd* is the question of what, precisely, happened for a month in which the eponymous 18-year-old heroine entirely disappeared for a month in France. These periods of uncertainty drive both narratives—periods of mysterious absence that

presumably hold the key to both women's characters as innocent or guilty, good or bad. These two novels reveal profound anxieties about the very idea of women's self-determination and economic self-fashioning: women who assert themselves through choosing to move economically (ascendant for Lady Audley; descendant for Aurora Floyd) are portrayed as a threat to domestic and social stability. These heroines' self-invention through a period of disappearance marks the woman's moving body as a point of economic change and social instability. In contrast, Ellen Price Wood's short nautical fiction explores how a respectable women can move and reinvent herself successfully in the social and economic space of a ship—a possibility, her fiction suggests, that is largely dependent not on women's behavior but on that of men. Wood's fiction anticipates New Woman fiction, with a forward-looking outlook on the possibilities of women's economic self-determination.

In George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, such possibilities for self-invention are closed down. *Middlemarch*'s Dorothea and *Daniel Deronda*'s Gwendolen both come to moments of profound self-realization about the terrible marriages they made while they are traveling abroad to Italy. What should have been journeys of discovery and greater freedom instead teach these women how little freedom they have. In Eliot, the basic normalcy of these bad marriages makes the idea of reinvention—of escape or real change—strangely absurd, as impossible as Maggie's infant attempt to run away and join the gypsies in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). As Gwendolen articulates, sensational escape fantasies are the stuff of childhood, and both Gwendolen and Dorothea struggle to give their lives purpose in the absence of independence and economic self-

determination. Eliot's novels show a bleak alternative to narratives of attempted self-sufficiency, which are dismissed as only possible in childhood dreams and fiction.

CHAPTER I

"WHENCE DID I COME? WHITHER SHOULD I GO? WHAT SHOULD I DO?": HOMELESS WANDERING IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S *JANE EYRE* AND *VILLETTE*

Through sending her women walking through economically-coded landscapes, Charlotte Brontë emphasizes the economic situations of her female characters in their varying degrees of independence or dependency, joblessness, isolation, or anxiety. Brontë's women wander when they find themselves in a series of subject positions that are psychologically, economically, or socially irreconcilable, the only possible response to which appears to be keeping the body itself in motion. These wanderers are seldom the triumphant or contemplative male wanderers of the romantic generation; instead, they are more often desperately isolated and lonely. The economic landscapes in which Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe in particular find themselves wandering at crucial narrative junctures emphasize their economic situations.

For both Jane and Lucy, the precise definition of this "economic situation" is difficult to pin down. In an essay that challenges prior critical work as too frequently labeling *Jane Eyre* as participating in and producing a middle-class, bourgeois subject ideology, Chris R. Vanden Bossche writes:

> Rather than assume that the novel seeks to interpellate a "middle-class subject," we should explore the range of subject positions readers can produce by examining the ways in which the novel deploys such discursive fields as the language of class. At the same time, we can see this range as finite—delimited by the horizons of contemporary discursivities—even as it offers up multiple possibilities within this finite range. (55)

Vanden Bossche writes that Jane's behavior and class vary throughout the text depending on her circumstances; the seeming contradiction between the rebellious language

throughout her journey and the conventional ending does not necessarily mean, in the end, a failure of rebellion or a triumphant bourgeois sensibility: Jane herself is defined as either or neither at different points in the novel, and this flexibility is central to her identity from the start. I suggest that for a significant part of the text, and particularly around her time in Whitcross, Jane's wandering helps to emphasize the multiple, fundamentally irreconcilable subject positions in which she finds herself: middle-class but without money; respectable but without resources; recognizable as a lady but without connections; a woman who values her individualism while living in a patriarchy that devalues it. Her resulting homelessness is reflected in her wandering the English countryside in a passage that reflects the effects of all of these contradictory positions.

Brontë is by no means the first writer to explore female identity in terms of homelessness and the economics attached to such desperate situations; Frances Burney's last novel, *The Wanderer*; *or, Female Difficulties* (1814) shows its heroine desperately working—and largely failing—to support herself based on the skills of her upper-class education. Along the way, *The Wanderer* does present a pointed critique of women's working conditions: Margaret Anne Doody writes that "Burney is the first novelist seriously to express sympathy for the working women in their normal conditions of work—and to see how the system of employment, not merely individual bad employers, creates conditions of impossible monotony" (xxxi). (For this, Burney was criticized, with reviews so negative that they contributed to the novel's poor sales; William Hazlitt sniped that "The difficulties in which [Burney] involves her heroines are indeed, 'Female Difficulties;' – they are difficulties created out of nothing" [Thompson 965].) The subject of *The Wanderer* is partially its intrigue: throughout the text the reader waits for the

woman's identity to be revealed, an identity that will presumably restore her to her former social status, or something near it. In contrast, Brontë's heroines already have identities: Jane Eyre, and Lucy Snowe. There is no crucial intrigue to their histories that might save them, no keys to their identities—even in the case of Lucy Snowe, who resolutely conceals the details of her own history to the end of the novel. While Burney's novel shows a woman supporting herself as a last resort due to extraordinary circumstances—circumstances so strange that she must conceal her identity and suffer for it—Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe support themselves as first resorts, under very ordinary circumstances, a change in plot that suggests that the rhetoric surrounding women's work had changed between the 1814 publication of Burney's *Wanderer* and the 1848 publication of *Jane Eyre*. (Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* features a similar dynamic, with a woman fleeing a history and identity that are both tragic and very ordinary.) The shift in her heroines' status suggests that Brontë, at least, was confident in making heroines out of ordinary women, and portraying their struggles not as exceptional but as everyday and heroic at once.

Both Jane and Lucy are explicit about this ordinariness. As Jane points out, after describing her psychological discontent at Thornfield:

> Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel… (93)

Lucy Snowe has a strikingly similar statement in *Villette*:

> I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather in a harbor still as glass… A great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives something in that fashion; why not I with the rest? (99)

Brontë's novels work to explore the ordinary experience of struggling women, and to debunk the mythology of the "calm" woman who doesn't suffer. In both novels, Brontë undercuts the mythology of how women are "supposed to" experience life, and "supposed" has a double sense: "supposed" as in how they are popularly "imagined" to spend their lives, but also with a sense of "ought." In both novels, both "supposeds" are impossible.

After the publication of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë wrote to her publisher W.S. Williams:

> I often wish to say something about the "condition of women" question, but it is one respecting which so much "cant" has been talked, that one feels a sort of repugnance to approach it. It is true enough that the present market for female labour is quite overstocked, but where or how could another be opened? Many say that the professions now filled only by men should be open to women also; but are not their present occupants and candidates more than numerous enough to answer every demand? Is there any room for female lawyers, female doctors, female engravers, for more female artists, more authoresses? One can see where the evil lies, but who can point out the remedy? When a woman has a little family to rear and educate and a household to conduct, her hands are full, her vocation is evident; when her destiny isolates her, I suppose she must do what she can, live as she can, complain as little, bear as much, work as well as possible. This is not high theory, but I believe it is sound practice, good to put into execution while philosophers and legislators ponder over the better ordering of the social system. At the same time, I conceive that when patience has done its utmost and industry its best, whether in the case of women or operatives, and when both are baffled, and pain and want triumph, the sufferer is free, is entitled, at last to send up to Heaven any piercing cry for relief, if by that cry he can hope to obtain succour. (Shorter, 379-380)

Brontë herself is at a loss to describe exactly what a woman must do with herself, other than "do what she can, live as she can, complain as little, bear as much, work as well as possible." Brontë's suggestions are responses to circumstances over which women have no control, and her "suppose" reflects her acknowledgement of the inadequacy of this response. When Brontë articulates a criticism of what women are "supposed" to do but cannot, she is clear; but when she tries to suppose for herself what a woman *can* do in

response to this, she can only suggest that women "send up to Heaven any piercing cry for relief."

Carol Ohmann writes that Brontë "was concerned always to move her heroines (and her heroes) toward satisfaction and to figure forth for them what that might mean, even though the working out of solutions was for her the more difficult effort of imagination" (758). No coincidence that Ohmann writes "moves": when in doubt, Brontë sends her women on long walks and wanderings, sometimes in movements that are not particularly self-directed: Jane is placed in carriages with no idea where she is going; Lucy embarks on a sea voyage with no destination in mind. These are not journeys of choice or agency; they are born of desperation, either physical or psychological.

Wandering as a trope is established in the very second line of *Jane Eyre*:

> There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner (Mrs. Reed, when there was no company, dined early) the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating, that further out-door exercise was now out of the question. (5)

The novel begins by eschewing the possibilities of aimless wandering out of doors, but Jane will end up wandering in the very chill outdoors that she begins the novel by rejecting. In both novels, Brontë uses these heroines' movement to show their economic, social, and resulting psychological instability.

"I never liked long walks": Gender, Nature, and Jane Eyre's Rural Wandering

Although Jane Eyre begins by proclaiming that she "never liked long walks," one of the most peculiar and memorable episodes of *Jane Eyre* (1847) finds the novel's heroine fleeing Thornfield to wander the English countryside, nearly perishing of exposure and hunger (5). This episode is notable not only for its drama, or for the irony of the once-

indoorsy Jane's situation, but in that Jane nearly dies in the midst of the very natural world that has been strongly and repeatedly used to characterize her as something more (or less) than human herself. Throughout the novel Jane shows an innate sensitivity to and association with the natural world, and particularly in the interviews with Rochester that immediately precede her crisis, Jane is described in terms that are far more wild and nature-based than human. Her flight from Thornfield and her subsequent wandering, however, throw this natural characterization into a deadly crisis. Jane nearly dies of exposure; the poetic language that had turned her into a creature of nature is swiftly undermined, and any romance in Rochester's characterization of Jane as a bird is undone when, starving, she eats porridge meant for a pig.

Jane's affiliation with nature is not simply a romantic fantasy imposed by Rochester: entwined throughout Jane's turn to nature and her traumatic experience in it are practical questions of her own economic status. It is Jane's vulnerable position as a dependent that first encourages her escapist reimagining of nature, and later drives her ill-equipped and friendless into the rural wild, where she enters a landscape heavily coded in terms of women's economic struggles. Within this context, Jane's realization that "I was a human being, and had a human being's wants: I must not linger where there was nothing to supply them" becomes not simply a commentary on her hunger, but a more profound realization that she must learn to reconcile her own drive for independence with her social condition as a dependent young woman, scraping to hold on to a marginally middle-class position (277). The similarly vulnerable positions of Mary and Diana Rivers, and the other women that Jane meets in the countryside, suggest that this vulnerability is not unique to Jane, but a common condition for women. After setting up

nature as Jane's imaginative escape from reality, the novel shows the danger of this romanticization: Jane loses her place in any social or economic structure, turns to nature instead, and as a direct result almost dies. Her long walk is at the heart of the novel's questions about her individual and social identity, self-creation, and self-understanding; following it, she must learn to reconcile her tendency toward individualism with a realistic understanding of her situation and prospects.

Yet the novel is not simply the story of Jane's reeducation about the unfeasibility of an escapist fantasy of nature. There are moments in the text where nature becomes more than a fantasy, but an almost-supernatural, Gothic consciousness of its own, undeniable and powerful, intervening in the text at decisive moments. Nature embodied comes to Jane in the form of the celestial mother who appears to her on the night she leaves Rochester, and later in an aural hallucination of Rochester's voice calling to her just as she is on the verge of agreeing to go to India with St. John Rivers. Even within a text that emphasizes Jane's fundamental inability to be free, and which shows that a fantasy of nature is an imperfect solution to the repressive conditions in which she finds herself, a sublime nature still breaks through the narrative as a powerful force. This force eventually destabilizes the very essence of Jane's work to integrate herself into society: the sublime nature at the heart of *Jane Eyre*, which is wrapped up in Jane's own individualist nature, cannot integrate or compromise for mere economic considerations, and at moments of crisis—when Jane is on the verge of making some compromise—it fights back. Even while Jane works to integrate herself into human society, the novel asks whether her effort is worth the sacrifice. At the very least, any integration must be

consistent with Jane's inner self, and it seems unclear, for much of the novel, whether this is even possible.

This dynamic is the essence of what Robert B. Heilman first identified in Brontë's novels as the New Gothic, which takes the Gothic tropes of Ann Radcliffe or Monk Lewis—wild landscapes and mad, hidden wives—and while acknowledging their conventions (sometimes by undercutting them with humor), uses them to explore the effects of repressive social institutions on the individual. Since Heilman, *Jane Eyre*'s Gothic elements have been the subject of much critical inquiry, from the first appearance of the supernatural gytrash to Jane's double in Bertha Rochester; Christine Alexander, Patrick Brantlinger, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Alison Milbank have all explored the novel's Gothic elements. However, Jane's engagement with and movement through the novel's sublime nature has received less attention. The novel's landscapes are classic Gothic sublimity, with a Burke-inspired understanding of the effects of striking and dangerous landscapes upon the individual's imagination: Jane's reaction to the novel's nature is powerful, individual, and not quite controllable. For much of the novel, Jane courts this sublime nature as a way of reveling in her individuality: her reactions to it are her own and no one else's; even the analytic Rochester is baffled by the nature paintings that she completed at Lowood, asking "who taught you to paint wind?" (108). This movement toward a romantic nature is undercut, however, and what had seemed like Jane's opportunity to assert her individualism is neatly inverted, when her physical movement into nature results in the near-annihilation of her physical self.

This account runs counter to other critical analyses of the power dynamics of Jane's narration. Doris Y. Kadish argues that Jane's first-person narration shows her

taking control of her story through her descriptions of landscapes, with which Jane can both revolt against entrenched powers and define herself as she likes. Kadish writes that through the power of her narrative, Jane "with nature can replace masters with a beneficent, comforting mother," and that "[n]ot only is she free as a bird, she is free to conceive of the symbolic values of objects in nature such as birds as she chooses, regardless of whether they have been used and interpreted by others before her in different ways" (173, 179). While I agree that Jane's nature descriptions are a bid for psychological independence, I suggest that Jane's subsequent physical sufferings in nature do much to overturn this narrative of freedom-through-description. Although Jane goes to sleep in the arms of a beneficent natural mother, she awakes to "pale and bare" want, and the sure knowledge that she is no bird (277). Jane's near-death in a real, hostile landscape challenges her naturalist self-construction, suggesting that there can be no durable identity granted by a sublime landscape when one is dying of exposure to the elements.

Further complicating this landscape narrative is that the novel's sublime landscape is not simply overturned, but turned into something else: a rural economic landscape. Most critical work on the economics of *Jane Eyre* focus on Jane's work as a governess, and her ascension from governess to Rochester's wife (Dupras, Godfrey, Pell, Roy, Schlossberg). However, even the sublime landscape, as it turns out, is not exempt from the powerful social institutions of wealth and gender. Jacqueline M. Labbe has written on the gendering of the sublime landscape in Romantic literature, noting that the concept of gazing out over a landscape implies a privileged, masculine viewpoint, with some sense of ownership or control over the prospect. Women, with their lack of power and

proprietorship, are more likely to be part of a landscape than observers of it—more likely to be observed than observers (xii-xiii). In *Jane Eyre*, it is Jane's very destitution that turns the landscape from a sublime one into an economic one, and her poverty is particularly gendered: her inability to find work is due to suspicions attached to her as a young, isolated woman. The sublime landscape on which she hoped to build an identity turns out to be a social, economic landscape, and the real threat to her well-being is not the icy shores or dark forests of her imagination, but something much more banal: her inability to find work in or near the rural town of Whitcross.

Such a reading of the landscape might also usefully complicate criticism of *Jane Eyre* as *Bildungsroman*, another major area of critical inquiry. Critical consensus suggests that if a Victorian female *Bildungsroman* were possible, *Jane Eyre* would be it; as to how whether it can be called a true *Bildungsroman*—especially given its concerns with romance and its home-going conclusion—critics differ. Sharon Locy notes that Jane's journey fits neatly into the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, but that this narrative is paired with Jane's consistent movement back to Rochester, making the novel a split between masculine and feminine narratives (107). Melodie Monahan notes a similar split between what she identifies in the novel as a quest narrative and a romance narrative, writing that the novel's romance narrative does not call for the same agency as its quest narrative, and that the 'heading out' narrative of the quest therefore comes into conflict with the home-going narrative of the romance (605). While I am not as concerned with questions of genre, I would suggest that if the typical young man of the *Bildungsroman* nearly died of exposure three days after first walking out the door alone, the genre would presumably have a very different cast to it. Jane's time in Whitcross moves swiftly from

Jane's sublime fantasy of nature to the real nature of the moors to a social, economic landscape—and in all three, Jane fails to find a place for herself. In facing her with three equally inhospitable versions of the English landscape, the novel literalizes Jane's impossible situation in trying to assert her independence as a woman in 1840s England.

I begin at the novel's beginning, examining how Jane's limited options as a dependent young woman cause her to search for sublimity and individuality in a sublime nature. This theme culminates in her romance with Rochester, whose repeated characterizations of Jane as an elf or bird reinforce both her affiliation with nature and her individuality, but also troublingly characterize her as inhuman. In the second part of the essay, I examine how Jane's flight from Thornfield and subsequent wanderings through a rural economic landscape undercut her affiliation with nature, and emphasize that she must find some way to compromise her instincts for the sublime with a more practical need to support herself; here, she finds a potential model in St. John Rivers, who works to accommodate his own restlessness by dedicating his life to God. But while St. John is free to seek the sublime in India while maintaining his independence and sense of self, Jane, as a woman, is not. Although the novel ends with Jane's happy marriage to Rochester, the traces of sublimity in the text all but drop out, leaving the reader with the uneasy sense that Jane's happy ending may have come at a cost: as she no longer seeks to assert her selfhood through the sublime, it is unclear whether she is asserting her selfhood at all.

"Of these death-white realms
I formed an idea of my own":
Sublime Nature and Jane's Individualism

The novel opens with Jane avoiding the chilly assessment of her Aunt Reed and the open physical abuse of her cousin John Reed by tucking herself into a window seat with *Bewick's History of British Birds*, and it is evident that Jane's association with the natural world is partially the result of her exclusion from society. Her first description of nature, which opens the novel, is removed and cool:

> There was no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering, indeed, in the leafless shrubbery an hour in the morning; but since dinner … the cold winter wind had brought with it clouds so sombre, and a rain so penetrating, that further outdoor exercise was now out of the question. (5)

For a heroine who is to become so famously affiliated with birds and elves, it comes as something as a surprise to realize that the first movement in the novel is one away from nature—away from the "cold winter wind," "somber" clouds and "penetrating" rain. The subsequent first appearance of Jane's "I" reiterates this position: "I was glad of it: I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes…" (5). The description anticipates Jane's near-death of exposure later in the story, and emphasizes that all romantic views aside, nature itself is something to be avoided. Jane is more than happy to be indoors.

And yet the idea of nature, and not nature itself, swiftly becomes preferable to the chilly assessment of her Aunt Reed, who criticizes her disposition, and to the more open physical abuse of her cousin John Reed. To avoid both, Jane tucks herself into a window seat with *Bewick's History of British Birds*, which she describes as an account of "the haunts of sea-fowl; of 'the solitary rocks and promontories' by them only inhabited; of the coast of Norway, studded with isles from its southern extremity, the Lindeness, or

Naze, to the North Cape" and farther, to "the vast sweep of the Arctic Zone" (6). Tucked behind a curtain that separates her from the rest of the house while looking out "at intervals" on the rainy English landscape that she is glad to avoid, Jane has found a space that neatly splits the difference between interior and exterior, between the coldness of the weather and the coldness of her family. Her alcove is at once both a shrine and a hiding-place; a place for communion and a place for escape. Her choice of reading matters reflects a similar combined communion and escape: she escapes her situation by reading of faraway landscapes that are both familiar in their somber coldness and quite sublimely foreign. This combination of familiarity and foreignness extends to Jane herself, who describes herself as sitting "like a Turk" (5). Jane is thus established as both part of and foreign to her own environment (later, Lucy Snowe will literalize this foreign feeling and become a foreigner herself).

Despite her position and her choice of naturalist reading material, actual British birds are not Jane's focus, nor is the "pale blank of mist and cloud" visible through the window (6). Her reading is not a passive intake of the words or images on the page; rather, it is a process of reimagining the images and descriptions of nature in the book:

> Of these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own: shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children's brains, but strangely impressive. The words in these introductory pages connected themselves with the succeeding vignettes, and gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray; to the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; to the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking. (6)

Jane chooses the vignettes here—not of birds, but of the book's more Gothic elements, which she supplements with her imagination. Nature itself is not an escape or refuge; Jane remains cozily tucked in her window seat, skipping over the birds in her book. But

as an "idea of [her] own" or as a set of "half-comprehended notions," *Berwick*'s nature offers a sublime escape:

> The two ships becalmed on a torpid sea, I believed to be marine phantoms.
> The fiend pinning down the thief's pack behind him, I passed over quickly: it was an object of terror.
> So was the black horned thing seated aloof on a rock, surveying a distant crowd surrounding a gallows.
> Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting… (6-7)

There is a mixture of partial comprehension, imagination, and emotion that imbues nature with a Burkean sublimity, with a combined sense of terror and power. At the moment of the greatest sense of inequality between Jane and her cousins, the idea of nature offers an idea greater than herself—sublime, dark, powerful—to which she can attach her imagination, and which, in turn, grants her a legitimized individuality, and something that is uniquely hers: the imagined images are "[her] own" and no one else's, while nature is a "pale blank" to be imbued with personal meaning (6). The opening of the novel enacts a relationship between Jane, nature, and escape that will become a motif. Jane will continually seek refuge in a reimagined, sublime nature, until the crisis of her near-death on the moor, which returns her to the all-too-real "raw twilight" that as a child she had been so glad to avoid (5).

As she grows, Jane continues to prefer her own imaginative, sublime visions of nature. She describes one episode in retrospect, when she shows Rochester the paintings that she completed during her last two vacations at Lowood. She tells Rochester how she "sat at them from morning till noon, and from noon till night: the length of the midsummer days favoured my inclination to apply" (108). Surely this is peculiar: Jane is spending her midsummer days—the very days when Lowood is, according to her earlier

descriptions, at its best—drawing indoors, reimagining nature into a sublime hypernature. Unlike the novel's opening scene, Jane is turning to her imagination as a first choice rather than a secondary one, and turning her back on a fine day rather than a frigid one. Strikingly, she expresses herself with paintings that mirror the images from *Bewick's Book of Birds*, with shipwrecks and lonely artic scenes, cormorants and crowns. In these paintings, critics have identified Miltonic imagery; found indications of Jane's personality and mentality; and even traced her history (St. John Conover; Moser 279; Langford 229). Jane Kromm suggests that these interpretations vary widely because the paintings themselves "are characterized by an inability among the parts to cohere readily into explicable wholes, each work instead seeming to be resistant to narrative closure" (379). Even Rochester is affected by the paintings's insistent uncertainty: while initially confident in his ability to judge art ("I can recognise patchwork"), Rochester's assessment devolves into a series of questions:

> These eyes in the Evening Star you must have seen in a dream. How could you make them look so clear, and yet not at all brilliant? … And what meaning is that in their solemn depth? And who taught you to paint wind? There is a high gale in that sky, and on this hill-top. Where did you see Latmos? For that is Latmos. There! put the drawings away! (108)

However they are interpreted, Jane's drawings can be understood to reflect herself. In describing nature, Jane is describing herself—her emotional state, her character, her fascinations, her loneliness, perhaps her own history, perhaps her hopes or fears for her own future. These paintings's very resistance to interpretation may reflect Jane's own knowledge of her character—with traces of something deeply felt, sincere, sublime, and natural, but as yet impossible to read. The natural scenes that began as Jane's reading

material have become a ciphered production of her self and proof of her individuality: Rochester says that they "are, for a schoolgirl, peculiar" (108).

In her first weeks at Thornfield, too, Jane turns to her imagination acting on nature as a method of psychological escape. While her position as a governess gives her more freedom than she had at Lowood, it is clear that she still finds it stifling. Although Bertha Mason has received more critical attention for her imprisoned existence, Jane, too, is fairly closeted. She describes how during her first weeks at Thornfield, she would climb to Thornfield's roof and look:

> Out afar over sequestered field and hill, and along dim sky-line … I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen … (93)

But rather than go for a walk herself, Jane describes how:

> … my sole relief was to walk along the corridor of the third storey, backwards and forwards, safe in the silence and solitude of the spot and allow my mind's eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it … to let my heart be heaved by the exultant movement … (93)

Jane makes it increasingly clear that this sense of being unable to "overpass that limit" is not due to any failure of her own. At this point, the narrative voice of the older Jane intervenes to comment on her situation:

> Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. (93)

In this remarkable statement, Jane links her experience to the masses of repressed, to human beings in general, and to political rebellion—but in the end, she identifies women

as being particularly victimized by "too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation." The older Jane is aware that these limitations on young women are not limited to herself, perhaps referring to her later experiences with Diana and Mary Rivers and the other women that she has encountered.

On the evening that she first meets Rochester in the lane, she says that she "did not like re-entering Thornfield. To pass its threshold was to return to stagnation… to slip again over my faculties the viewless fetters of an uniform and too still existence" (99). This sense of limitation pushes Jane toward nature again; she paces outside of Thornfield, and describes the sky:

> [A] blue sea absolved from taint of cloud; the moon ascending it in solemn march; her orb seeming to look up as she left the hilltops, from behind which she had come, far and farther below her, and aspired to the zenith, midnight-dark in its fathomless depth and measureless distance: and for those trembling stars that followed her course; they made my heart tremble, my veins glow when I viewed them. (99)

As when she enshrined herself in the window seat as a child, Jane turns to her imagination acting on the natural world around her as a source for sublimity, for "fathomless depth and measureless distance," and for a response that borders on the physical: her heart heaves and trembles, and her "veins glow". That she projects femininity onto the moon also suggests the beginnings of an identification with it, and anticipates her later embracing the moon as a mother figure.

Jane's romance with Rochester reinforces her affiliation with nature, as he repeatedly reimagines Jane as a supernatural creature herself. In her actual encounter with Rochester, however, Jane is able to separate the natural from the human. She describes how, upon first hearing hoofbeats, she pictured the supernatural Gytrash, a fancy based on a nursery story. But when Rochester arrives, she says that:

> The man, the human being, broke the spell at once. Nothing ever rode the Gytrash: it was always alone; and goblins, to my notions, though they might tenant the dumb carcasses of beasts, could scarce covet shelter in the commonplace human form. No Gytrash was this,–only a traveller taking the short cut to Millcote. (96)

She does not dismiss her supernatural ideas here: to say that "Nothing ever rode the Gytrash" is to simultaneously imply that it exists, even if Rochester is not it. But Rochester himself is "only a traveler"; Jane's fantasies of a sublime nature do not extend to reimagining reality in the presence of others.

Rochester, however, takes precisely this tack: he repeatedly reimagines her. He tells her that she has "rather the look of another world … When you came on me in Hay Lane last night, I thought unaccountably of fairy tales, and had half a mind to demand whether you had bewitched my horse" (104). When she tells him that she has no parents, rather than pushing for details of her human history, he returns to the idea that she is a fairy: "And so you were waiting for your people when you sat on the stile?" (104). She is also, at intervals and repeatedly, an "elf," "sprite," "changeling," and "curious sort of bird" (208, 220, 234, 267 [she is also "elfish," 108, 222]; 223, 234; 234; 118). Part of the appeal of this characterization for Jane is that it elides her own powerlessness; if she is a fairy, sprite, or bird, then she is not at the mercy or the goodwill of others. A vision of herself as an independent spirit is appealing, even as (or perhaps because) it is being envisioned by Rochester, in whose house she lives, and who pays her salary. At moments, Jane does become participatory in this fantasy; when Rochester suggests that she is a fairy, her denial also helps to build a fantasy world:

> "The men in green all forsook England a hundred years ago," said I, speaking as seriously as he had done. "And not even in Hay Lane, or the fields about it, could you find a trace of them. I don't think either summer or harvest, or winter moon, will ever shine on their revels more." (104)

This idea, then, of Jane as a semi-supernatural individual, as a pixie or fairy, is a construction between both Jane and Rochester, and Jane's established tendency to turn towards nature is reinforced by the collective fantasy. Jane Millgate writes that "The responsibility for the evasion inherent in the creation and continuation of this dream-world thus rests jointly with Jane and with Rochester, both of them burdened with pasts whose surviving effects they have not yet seriously confronted" (318). Jane's fantasizing is also part of an already-developing trajectory in which an imaginative fantasy of nature takes the place of real nature.

As Millgate suggests, Jane is more resistant to this narrative than Rochester, who seems engaged in an effort to use fantasy as a genuine substitute for reality. When he explains his and Jane's planned marriage to Adèle, he rewrites their meeting in Hay Lane:

> It was a fairy, and come from Elf-land, it said; and its errand was to make me happy: I must go with it out of the common world to a lonely place–such as the moon, for instance–and it nodded its head towards her horn, rising over Hay-hill: it told me of the alabaster cave and silver vale where we might live. (228)

That this is a fundamentally dehumanizing characterization is evident in that Rochester repeatedly refers to this fairy-version of Jane as an "it," and the problem with this dehumanization is never clearer than at an early climax of the novel, when Jane stirringly proclaims her equality to Rochester:

> Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton?–a machine without feelings? … You think wrong!–I have as much soul as you,–and full as much heart! … I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh–it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal,–as we are! (216)

This remarkable speech is as telling for what Jane does not include as for what she does: she skips entirely over any natural imagery in arguing for her humanity. Rochester's reply, however, attempts to reassert the trope of Jane-as-natural-creature: "Jane, be still; don't struggle so, like a wild frantic bird that is rending its own plumage in its desperation" (216). Her reply, in turn, explicitly rejects this imagery: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you" (216). At the moment at which it is most crucial, Jane is aware that there is a problem with this natural imagery in that it robs her of her own humanity—and that even as she is rejecting humanity's "custom" and "conventionalities" in proclaiming her love for Rochester, she is still fundamentally "a free human being" herself, with soul and heart—the very thing that pixies, fairies, and birds lack. Jane has long used sublime nature as an imaginative escape from her position of inequality and powerlessness, but with Rochester, she wants real equality.

Vexing this particular proclamation of freedom is that even if she has an "independent will," Jane is really not free to throw herself on the whims of fate; she has neither money nor connections. In her speech to Rochester, she points out that "some beauty and much wealth" would have changed her position (216). In calling her a bird or fairy, Rochester denies these considerations, producing a self-flattering fantasy of her independence rather than acknowledging his position of power and responsibility for her well-being. And it is in this mode that he proposes to her, using language that still insists that there is something inhuman about her: "You–you strange–you almost unearthly thing!–I love as my own flesh" (217). Rochester's fundamental misperception of Jane is

clear the next morning, when, even as she stands directly in front of him, he misidentifies the color of her eyes, asking:

> "Is this my mustard-seed? This little sunny-faced girl with the dimpled cheek and rosy lips; the satin-smooth hazel hair, and the radiant hazel eyes?" (I had green eyes, reader; but you must excuse the mistake: for him they were new-dyed, I suppose.) (220)

And after the wedding debacle, when she says that she will leave him, his last appeal to her continue in this same vein of misperception, evoking something inhuman about her: "Consider that eye: consider the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of it, defying me, with more than courage–with a stern triumph. Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it–the savage, beautiful creature" (271). There is something sublime in the idea that Jane's value as an individual can transcend her situation and her mortal body, but even while Rochester addresses her spirit, he still repeats the "it," and then wraps it in the fantastical bird-images that continue to deny Jane her humanity: "Of yourself you could come with soft flight and nestle against my heart, if you would …" (271). Where Jane immediately identified Rochester as non-Gytrash, and was the only guest to recognize him in his gypsy costume, Rochester is determined to move Jane in the opposite direction, back into the realm of fantasy and the supernatural. Jane's final rejection of Rochester's appeals suggests that she is not willing to be his object of mere fantasy.

Ironically, it is this utter rejection of Rochester's naturalist fantasy that drives Jane into nature itself, suggesting the impossibility of her position in trying to assert herself as an individual human being while in a position of absolute economic powerlessness. In a "trance-like dream" the evening after the revelations of Rochester's marriage, Jane sees the roof of Thornfield—the house that would have been hers—literally dissolve into clouds, leaving her with no protection (272). With no humans to intervene in Jane's

crisis—she had earlier reflected that "no message had been sent to ask how I was, or to invite me to come down: not even little Adèle had tapped at the door; not even Mrs. Fairfax had sought me" (254), her subconscious produces a maternal spirit of nature:

> … the roof resolved to clouds, high and dim; the gleam was such as the moon imparts to vapours she is about to sever … She broke forth as never moon yet burst from cloud: a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure, inclining a glorious brow earthward. It gazed and gazed on me. It spoke to my spirit: immeasurably distant was the tone, yet so near, it whispered in my heart–"My daughter, flee temptation."
>
> "Mother, I will."
>
> So I answered after I had waked from the trance-like dream. (272)

Jane's reality and fantasy become intertwined; she answers aloud the white human form after awakening, and acts on its words. The fantastical form in the sky, so similar to that which Jane had drawn in her youth at Lowood, and a transformation of the moon that she had earlier looked to in her restlessness, now claims Jane as her daughter. Jane, failed by the patriarchal structure of society, chooses to accept. While the dream of nature may have begun in Jane's dream, her choice to flee, and to accept nature as a mother, are both conscious decisions, made after she awakens. Further entwining this reality and fantasy, the next time Jane sees Thornfield its roof will literally have "resolved to clouds," having been burned in the fire that destroyed it.

But what does it mean to be the daughter of nature? Gaining a mother should grant Jane a clearer sense of identity, but instead, Jane's sense of identity, already in a crisis, continues to fall apart. After the scene at the church, she had asked "where was the Jane Eyre of yesterday? – where was her life? – where were her prospects?" (252). Soon, alone on the moor, she hardly knows what it means to be human at all: "Birds began singing in brake and copse: birds were faithful to their mates; birds were emblems of

love. What was I?" (274). Jane is no longer Rochester's bird, but she has no identity to replace that which she lost.

After leaving Thornfield, Jane's first reaction looks like freedom: "A mile off, beyond the fields, lay a road which stretched in the contrary direction to Millcote; a road I had never travelled, but often noticed, and wondered where it led: thither I bent my steps" (273). Jane has precious little in the world—only a small packet—but freedom, now, to explore. It is hard to imagine that after so many months at Thornfield, she could not have explored a road that was a mere mile away. This emphasizes a sense of claustrophobia with Thornfield and the freedom that she has immediately after closing the wicket in the great gates. And for a time, she can continue to think of nature as maternal. As she spends her first night alone on the moor, she decides that "Not a tie holds me to human society at this moment–not a charm or hope calls me where my fellow-creatures are … I have no relative but the universal mother, Nature" (275). She continues:

> Nature seemed to me benign and good; I thought she loved me, outcast as I was; and I, who from man could anticipate only mistrust, rejection, insult, clung to her with filial fondness. To-night, at least, I would be her guest, as I was her child: my mother would lodge me without money and without price. (276)

But while the poetry of Jane-as-nature's-daughter may be lovely, this too-romantic identity swiftly crumbles in the face of real nature—a force that for much of the text has simply dropped out. The next morning, Jane describes how "Want came to me, pale and bare," followed swiftly by her realization that "I was a human being, and had a human being's wants: I must not linger where there was nothing to supply them" (277). The brief fantasy of Jane-as-nature's-daughter has been tested and swiftly found impossible. The account of her sufferings—she is soon starving, wet, cold, and desperate—shows that

Jane has no real choice: she must seek a way to keep herself, even if it will require a return to dependence.

"And what do the women do?": Gender and the Rural Economic Landscape

Emphasizing both her isolated condition and the importance of finding work, Jane's first encounter with human life is with its economic activity:

> Recalled by the rumbling of wheels to the road before me, I saw a heavily-laden waggon labouring up the hill, and not far beyond were two cows and their drover. Human life and human labour were near. I must struggle on: strive to live and bend to toil like the rest. (277)

To be human is to labour; Jane must join the rest of humanity, and she is recalled to herself by the sound of the hard labor of trade and the sight of agriculture. Humans must "strive to live and bend to toil"; Jane, in turn, must bear her own load. But what load can Jane bear? The loaded wagon is not only a symbol of human toil, but also a literal representation of the local rural economy around Whitcross, where the work available is inaccessible to Jane. She cannot get work as a driver or a drover, and she is too ill-equipped and unconnected to do any labour available to women in such a place.

Ellen Jordan writes that the two main careers open to middle-class women in 1840s England were dressmaking and teaching (3). Jane has lost her position as a governess, and her very first inquiry of the shopkeeper upon entering Whitcross is whether there is work available for a dressmaker; there is not (278). Her time in the countryside consistently demonstrates her particular economic vulnerability: as a young, middle-class woman, she simply cannot find work. Her conversation with a shopkeeper indicates her basic ignorance about rural life and work:

> "What was the chief trade in this place? What did most of the people do?"
> "Some were farm labourers; a good deal worked at Mr. Oliver's needle-factory, and at the foundry."
> "Did Mr. Oliver employ women?"
> "Nay; it was men's work."
> "And what do the women do?"
> "I knawn't," was the answer. "Some does one thing, and some another. Poor folk mun get on as they can." (278)

Although this exchange begins by showing Jane's ignorance of the local economy, it swiftly shows that she is not the only woman to struggle: "Some does one thing, and some another. Poor folk mun get on as they can." Jane encounters evidence of this struggle throughout her sojourn in this rural town, during which she primarily interacts with women: the shopkeeper, the young woman who tells her that they "do not keep a servant," the housekeeper at the parsonage, a girl throwing porridge to a pig (and, more distantly, the mother who grants her permission to give it to Jane), Mary and Diana Rivers (seen through the window of their parlor), and finally their servant Hannah (279). With the exception of the shopkeeper, all of these women are in positions of dependence, with their livings dependent on their places in a household: they are servants, wives, daughter, cousins. Jane's inability to find work is not due to a fault of her own, but there is simply no work available for her.

Just as this situation is not unique to Jane, Brontë also suggests that this situation is not limited to any one small town. Whitcross is a small hamlet, but its diverse economy includes several varieties of work: there is a rural economy of farming; a small industrial economy, with both a needle-factory (small consumer goods) and a foundry (presumably indicating production on a somewhat larger scale), and a service economy of shopkeepers and servants. St. John describes Jane's students as "cottagers' children – at the best, farmer's daughters" (303). This slippage between economies suggests that Whitcross can

be read as an amalgamation of different types of small towns in 1840's England: some more industrialized, and some less so. Whitcross might be any small town in England, or all of them. Tellingly, Jane can find no position in any of its trades or industries, suggesting that the entire economy—not just of Whitcross, but of England—is profoundly unsupportive to women who must support themselves. Jane's movement through this landscape reflects this position: she says that she "drew near houses; I left them, and came back again, and again I wandered away," a back-and-forth movement reflecting the limbo that she is caught in, between the need to support herself and the impossibility of doing so, as well as her more psychological tension between her propensity for independence and her need for human aid (279).

However, the support that other women can offer is almost nonexistent: after the cold reality of nature, Jane is thrown into the equally-cold reality of rural women's lives, which consist of struggle with only small margins of security. The economy in which Jane finds herself is one of survival and little comfort, without the luxury of aiding others, and the women to whom she applies have no power to admit her back into society, being relatively powerless themselves, and hampered by a patriarchy that requires them to be suspicious of a single and unattached young woman looking for work. Jane has internalized these strictures: of the shopwoman, she asks "what claim had I to importune her?" and of another young woman, she says "it was not her business to think for me, or to seek a place for me: besides, in her eyes, how doubtful must have appeared my character, position, tale" (278, 279). After Hannah bars her from the door of Moor House and Jane collapses outside, St. John tells Hannah that she has "done [her] duty in excluding" (286)! Jane's strength fails her swiftly, but it only requires an hour or two to

establish that she cannot gain entry to this economy on her own, nor can other women admit her. Not only are they powerless themselves, but her wandering makes her a figure of suspicion in ways that men's wandering would not. As she grows weaker, Jane says "far better that crows and ravens … should pick my flesh from my bones, than that they should be prisoned in a workhouse coffin and moulder in a pauper's grave" (281). The formerly-romanticized birds, onetime "emblems of love," will soon come to pick her starved bones (274). That this image is wrapped in the language of class—Jane would prefer this death to the "workhouse coffin" and the "pauper's grave" —suggests that the economic narrative of poverty and starvation has won out over the romantic or sublime one.

Jane's wandering in nature and her experience in Whitcross show that she must learn how to reconcile her self with what has been revealed all-too-clearly to be a man's world. Most pressingly, she needs a vocation, one that is not entirely dependent on the goodwill of others. In the cold light of day, Jane's imaginative agency is shown to be as unreal as the scenes which she imagined as a child, and the only agency that matters is one that she does not have: the ability to find work. Unfortunately, as Ellen Jordan and Carol Margaret Davison have both explored, the public discourse on the possibilities of respectable middle-class jobs for women was still in its early stages in the 1840s (Jordan 125, Davison 3-5). In the end, only St. John Rivers has the power to rescue her, both by admitting her to Moor House and by telling her that he will find her a position "in [his] own time and way" (297). When St. John eventually finds her a job, it is teaching again, while working at a charity school—consistent with dominant 1840s discourse that doing charity work was respectable for middle-class women, while working to supportive

oneself was not. The process of Jane's readmission into society is further confirmation of her powerlessness. If Jane is to survive, she must learn to compromise—if possible—her propensities for the sublime and the individualism she finds in it. Here, she finds a surprising potential model in St. John Rivers.

"Propensities and principles must be reconciled by some means": St. John Rivers and the Gendered Sublime

St. John is practical, critical, and cold; while Jane is described as a bird, he is repeatedly described as stone (304, 313, 316, 322, 319, 327, 334, 339, 345, 350). At a certain level, his pragmatism is helpful for Jane: he takes a practical view of her reinsertion into society by coolly assessing her skills and arranging for her a position with salary and housing. Despite their differences, St. John and Jane share a fundamental similarity in their need to reconcile everyday life with a yearning for the sublime, and his description of restlessness echoes her earlier account of pacing Thornfield's upper galleries: he tells her that:

> I, who preached contentment with a humble lot, and justified the vocation even of hewers of wood and drawers of water in God's service–I, His ordained minister, almost rave in my restlessness. Well, propensities and principles must be reconciled by some means. (304)

St. John and Jane both yearn for something larger and sublime to which to attach their energies, and each has an inclination to seek the sublime in a different direction: Jane in nature, and St. John in Christ. Jane's movement toward nature is imagistic rather than narrative, individualistic rather than doctrinal, ambiguous rather than certain, and personal rather than ambitious. Even after her experience in nature showed her the dangers of romanticizing it, nature's sublimity remains resonant for Jane. In contrast, Jane says of St. John that "Nature was not to him that treasury of delight it was to his sisters" (229). Rather, St. John says that one of the chief appeals of Christianity is that it

redirects his natural tendencies into advocating the doctrine of Christ. He argues that one's nature can be controlled with work and discipline, telling Jane that:

> It is hard work to control the workings of inclination and turn the bent of nature: but that it may be done, I know from experience. God has given us, in a measure, the power to make our own fate; and when our energies seem to demand a sustenance they cannot get–when our will strains after a path we may not follow–we need neither starve from inanition, nor stand still in despair: we have but to seek another nourishment… (308)

His comment that "when our will strains after a path we may not follow–we need [not] starve from inanition" is rather a pointed comment on Jane's situation, but St. John is also speaking for himself, in denying himself the "sustenance" of Rosamond Oliver's love. For St. John, nature is something to be tamed, and eventually eradicated:

> So much has religion done for me; turning the original materials to the best account; pruning and training nature. But she could not eradicate nature: nor will it be eradicated "till this mortal shall put on immortality." (320)

St. John's alternate vision of sublimity appeals to Jane despite this rejection of nature, because his approach is consistent with her principles of service. She is almost persuaded to travel to India with him, reasoning that:

> I must seek another interest in life to replace the one lost: is not the occupation he now offers me truly the most glorious man can adopt or God assign? Is it not, by its noble cares and sublime results, the one best calculated to fill the void left by uptorn affections and demolished hopes? (344)

The chief appeal of the life she is offered is its "most glorious" and "sublime" possibilities. For these, she would be willing to compromise some of her own propensities for independence: "my body would be under rather a stringent yoke, but my heart and mind would be free. I should still have my unblighted self to turn to: my natural unenslaved feelings with which to communicate in moments of loneliness" (347). The imagery of the yoke evokes her earlier realization at rural Whitcross, that she must "strive

to live and bend to toil like the rest" (277). While her body might be toiling at a particular work, her mind and self would still be free; Jane could endure.

However, it soon becomes clear that Jane is not in the same position as St. John, free to travel to India to devote herself to service. As a woman, she would have to go as his wife, give up all traces of her self, mind and body, and be "at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked – forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry … *this* would be unendurable" (347). Jane is willing to make some compromises: to teach in the village school; even to go to India with St. John. Both are consistent with her principles. But through St. John's offer she learns what propensity she cannot compromise at any cost: it is on the topic of love that she and St. John diverge most strongly, on a marriage that would requires her to "keep the fire of [her] nature continually low". And St. John also portrays the choice as one between work and love, telling her that she is "formed for labour, not for love" (343). When he tries to persuade her to marry him, she tells him:

> "I scorn your idea of love," I could not help saying, as I rose up and stood before him, leaning my back against the rock. "I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St. John, and I scorn you when you offer it." (348)

As she once rejected Rochester on principle, here she rejects St. John on propensity.

However, it is suggestive of her desperation that even this rejection is a close decision: her anxiety over it stretches out over the six-week span between St. John's proposal and departure. At the last moment, when her inquiries about Rochester have received no reply, and when St. John is at his most "sublime," he can almost overcome her objections:

> I stood motionless under my hierophant's touch. My refusals were forgotten – my fears overcome – my wrestlings paralysed. The impossible – *i.e.* my marriage

> with St. John – was fast becoming the Possible. All was changing utterly, with a sudden sweep. Religion called – Angels beckoned – God commanded – life rolled together like a scroll – death's gates opening, showed eternity beyond: it seemed, that for safety and bliss there, all here might be sacrificed in a second. The dim room was full of visions. (356-7)

Jane's vision here is as overwhelmingly sublime as any that nature has provided her with, possibly even more so: her absolute paralysis indicates that she is in the sway of a sublime force greater than herself. But unlike the sublime maternal nature that guided her to leave Thornfield, this paternal religious sublimity is destructive: it totally paralyses Jane, demanding total forgetfulness of her self, the opposite of the legitimizing sense of individuality that she had originally found in sublime nature.

In the face of this destructive, masculine sublimity, Jane's nature refuses to compromise: her own individuality resurfaces with a hallucination of Rochester's voice calling "Jane! Jane! Jane!" (357). Jane identifies the voice as "the work of nature. She was roused, and did – no miracle – but her best" (358). Nature can only provide a series of uncertainties; Jane can only list the places where the voice "did not seem" to originate, with a series of negatives:

> it did not seem in the room – nor in the house – nor in the garden: it did not come out of the air – nor from under the earth – nor from overhead. I had heard it – where, or whence, for ever impossible to know! (357)

Nature's work is dark, compared to the clarity of her vision in which "Angels beckoned – God commanded – life rolled together like a scroll – death's gates opening, showed eternity beyond". Nonetheless, Jane's sublime nature roils back to the surface of the text for the last time. As her body fought against starvation, now her spirit resists a similar death.

And yet there is not the least question that Jane will accept this call. Unlike the voice of St. John, nature calls to Jane with a human voice, speaking directly to Jane in "the voice of a human being–a known, loved, well-remembered voice–that of Edward Fairfax Rochester; and it spoke in pain and woe, wildly, eerily, urgently" (357). Jane's nature—her own nature, the same thread that has always resonated with the sublime natural world—has broken through: "I broke from St. John, who had followed, and would have detained me. It was *my* time to assume ascendancy. *My* powers were in play, and in force" (358). Jane is the strongest she has ever been, "unscared, enlightened," and fully self-aware (358). She has learned what she is able to compromise (her labor, her newfound family, even her life), and what she cannot: an understanding of love that is deeply tied to her own nature, and to Rochester.

In Rochester, it seems possible that Jane can combine her propensity for sublime nature and her need to find a place for herself. Upon Jane's return to him, Rochester is described in natural terms rather than human ones. Jane says that "his hair was still raven black," but that his countenance "reminded me of some wronged and fettered wild beast or bird, dangerous to approach in his sullen woe. The caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished, might look as looked that sightless Samson" (367). The bird imagery is repeated when Jane approaches, telling him that "[i]t is time some one undertook to rehumanise you … your hair reminds me of eagles" feathers; whether your nails are grown like birds" claws or not, I have not yet noticed" (371). With this imagery, Rochester has become more accessible to Jane, who has finally found her own British bird.

In turn, Rochester's characterizations of Jane are far less troubling than they once were; his former romantic dream that she was an unreal spirit of nature is now his nightmare: "You are altogether a human being, Jane? You are certain of that?" Jane's evidence that she is human reflects her recent experiences: she describes her humanity and her independence entirely in economic terms:

> "I am an independent woman now."
> "Independent! What do you mean, Jane?"
> "My uncle in Madeira is dead, and he left me five thousand pounds."
> "Ah! this is practical – this is real!" he cried: "I should never dream that … What, Janet! Are you an independent woman? A rich woman?"
> "Quite rich, sir …"
> "But as you are rich, Jane, you have now, no doubt, friends who will look after you…?"
> "I told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress." (370)

The emphasis on Jane's independence, as his reaction to her account of her suffering, suggests that Rochester now fully understands that Jane is human, and that he has no interest in turning her back into a fantasy; his happiness is dependent on the reality of the situation. Happily, not all traces of romance have dropped out; he still returns to some of his former bird-imagery, greeting her with "Oh, you are indeed there, my skylark! Come to me" (374). But this is swiftly followed with an acknowledgement of his dependence, and with a clearer separation of Jane from the actual skylarks: "You are not gone: not vanished? I heard one of your kind an hour ago, singing high over the wood: but its song had no music for me" (374). This romantic natural language is now entwined with the practical, and the knowledge of the reality of their situation. Rochester wants Jane herself, not a fantasy. Although he had once incorrectly described Jane's eyes, he can see the color of his child's: "brilliant, and black" (385).

The novel's conclusion, with Jane returning to live in seclusion with Rochester, has received mixed responses from readers, who point out that Jane has become a caretaker, living in a house to which Rochester had once declined to send even Bertha (256). Jane seldom interacts with any other society, and sees Mary and Diana only once per year. I suggest two possibilities for reading the conclusion. In the context of Jane's movement through the English rural landscape, and her former characterization as inhuman rather than human, this conclusion can be read as a small victory: her struggle was never to triumph in human society, but to partake in it at all; and by those standards, she has found a quiet success. Jane says that she is happy with Rochester, and that she loves him, and this should count for much. Her life might be read as the successful reconciliation of her "propensities and principles," and if it is not quite everything a feminist reader might desire, it is at least in a mode of realism that is more sustainable than Jane's initial romanticism. Jane's movement toward nature, while deeply-felt, often crossed into the realm of fantasy rather than reality, and when Jane found that this movement toward nature and fantasy was unsustainable, her task was to re-learn what it meant to be human. In this context, her marriage with Rochester, despite their seclusion, nonetheless becomes a happy conclusion of integration between her impulse toward the natural and her need for human society and security. Jane has got what Brontë herself described as a comparatively happy woman's life: she has "a little family to rear and educate and a household to conduct… her hands are full, her vocation is evident" (Shorter 380).

Yet I agree with Sharon Locy, who writes that there is "something sad" in Jane's new position as Rochester's helpmate (119). We are left with a strange taste of dissatisfaction, and I suggest that it is because the text's glimpses of sublimity have all

but dropped out. The once-triumphant, transcendent insistence on Jane's individuality is gone; instead, Jane has found a quiet space between society and the natural world. But can what is sublime in her nature—her independence, her very humanity—be successfully comprised, or can it only be repressed? Can we believe that she is no longer restless, and that her former ardent wishes to see the world have simply evaporated? And even if they have, can this be read as a happy ending? In describing her new life with Rochester, Jane says that "I described to him how brilliantly green they were; how the flowers and hedges looked refreshed; how sparklingly blue was the sky" (374). It is hard to compare this description to her once-passionate description of "those trembling stars that followed [the moon's] course; they made my heart tremble, my veins glow when I viewed them" without some sense of loss (99).

That Jane so evocatively describes her restlessness in retrospect, after ten years in Ferndean, suggests that traces remain. When she describes her early days at Thornfield, much earlier in the narrative, Jane changes to an unusual use of the present tense:

> Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer…. (93)

Jane links her experience to the masses of repressed, to human beings in general, and to political rebellion—but in the end, she identifies women as being particularly victimized by "too rigid a restraint." The older Jane is aware that these limitations on young women are not limited to herself, perhaps referring to her later experiences with Diana and Mary Rivers and the other women that she encountered. But is she also writing of herself? Is

the "stiller doom" referring only to her experience at Thornfield as a young governess, or is the switch to present tense suggest an unacknowledged restlessness breaking through the narrative? Jane's happy ending is about as happy as it could realistically be, but our sense of dissatisfaction may reflect the awareness that there can be no entirely happy ending for a young woman who, like millions of others, must compromise at least one of her basic propensities (in her case, a sense of sublimity) in order to satisfy others (love, or a need for security). That she can even attain one of these makes Jane lucky—but the simple act of acknowledging the luckiness of such a half-victory makes for an uneasy ending.

There is one last moment of the sublime before the novel's close, and it is not Jane's. She concludes what is supposed to be her own autobiography with a sublime image of St. John, zealous and uncompromising:

> [H]is glorious sun hastens to its setting. The last letter I received from him drew from my eyes human tears, and yet filled my heart with Divine joy: he anticipated his sure reward, his incorruptible crown … No fear of death will darken St. John's last hour: his mind will be unclouded; his heart will be undaunted; his hope will be sure; his faith steadfast. His own words are a pledge of this: – "My Master," he says, "has forewarned me. Daily he announces more distinctly, – "Surely I come quickly!" and hourly I more eagerly respond, – "Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus!" (385)

There is a trace of wistfulness in Jane's description that "No fear of death will darken St. John's last hour," and in the "divine joy" she takes in his letter. The sublime has broken through the text for a final time—but now, the only place that this sublimity can resonate is through St. John's story, not Jane's. With this conclusion Jane ends her own narrative. Only by proxy, and by ending her narrative with his, can she access the sublimity that she once took so much pleasure in deriving from nature. While Brontë herself described Jane's situation as the happiest life a woman could ask for, the conclusion to *Jane Eyre*

reads more ambiguously, suggesting that even this happy domestic life comes with a sense of limitation.

"A goad thrust me on, a fever forbade me to rest": Walking, Isolation, and Freedom in *Villette*

Lucy and Jane are roughly the same age when they are first called upon to support themselves (Lucy after describing her family's shipwreck, and Jane after coming of age at Lowood). But Lucy's situation is even bleaker than Jane's: Lucy has not been trained to teach, and the family crisis that left her alone was unanticipated. Like Jane, Lucy has evidently had some education befitting a respectable middle-class young woman, but without connections or help, it proves almost impossible for her to use this background to advantage. Jane, at least, was able to find a position at Thornfield; Lucy evidently has no such opportunity. Instead, Lucy's situation more closely mirrors Jane's wandering on the moors, trying to find anything she can do. *Villette* might be said to begin at the equivalent of Jane's lowest point, with a friendless and unconnected young woman desperately trying to find any form of work.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gilbert identify a progression in Brontë's works, and claim that *Villette* is the bleakest of them all:

> A progressive deteriorization in spirit and exuberance from [*The Professor*'s] Frances Henri and Jane Eyre, who demand equality and life, to [*Shirley*'s] Caroline Helstone, who rarely voices her protest, is completed by Lucy's submission and silence, as if Charlotte Brontë equates maturity with an aging process that brings women only a stifling sense of despair. Indeed the movement of the novels suggests that escape becomes increasingly difficult as women internalize the destructive strictures of patriarchy. (400)

Carol Ohmann takes this "stifling sense of despair" even farther, writing that while Brontë's early novels "[imply] that the conditions governing life in this world should and perhaps could alter; she moved toward a radical critique of the English society she

knew," in *Villette*, Brontë "reassigned the causes of injustice and unhappiness, locating them in an austere cosmic scheme rather than a temporal and changeable order" (757). According to Ohmann, it is not simply that "escape becomes increasingly difficult," but that it becomes impossible.

Subsequent critics have done much to recover a more positive feminist reading—or at least a more ambiguous one—of *Villette*, pointing out that Lucy did find love with M. Paul; that she learned to assert herself against Madame Beck; and that she does conclude the novel as the director of her own school. In the novel's narrative inconsistences—in Lucy's tendency to withhold information from the reader, most notably the identity of John Bretton as the English doctor, and of her relationship with M. Paul—feminist critics have also suggested that Lucy's withholding of information grants her power over her own story. In this vein, Mary Jacobus writes that *Villette* calls the critic "not to explain away, but to explain—to theorize—the incoherencies and compromises, inconsistencies and dislocations" (58) of Lucy's story. Patricia E. Johnson responds to this call, particularly in theorizing the split between the work narrative and love narrative of *Villette*. She writes that:

> …critics have tended to interpret the split simply as a problem that needs resolving, a negative tension, a conflict. Certainly there are many marks of stress in the text; the position of heretic is not a comfortable one. But I am suggesting that we see this split and the maintenance of it as a necessary strategy on Lucy's part, a refusal to be placed, to be absorbed into any system. Lucy oscillates between the two sides; and in this movement, in the gap between the two sides, she finds her own voice. To see this strategy as either compromise or a sickness is to ignore the creative aspects of the tension and the movement between the two sides. (622)

Johnson suggests using the feminist critical model of "female fetishism" or "undecidability"—as explored by critics and theorists such as Sarah Kofman, Naomi

Schor, and Elizabeth Berg—to suggest that this oscillation is a female narrative strategy, and that in Lucy's refusal to choose between love and work, or a quest and romance narrative, or reason and imagination, or other similar binary models of understanding the novel, she is refusing to be defined (or defined against) standard male narrative structures. To read *Villette* novel in either/or terms, or Lucy's story and its conclusion in terms of success or failure as defined by these genres, is to oversimplify the novel, which borrows from many genres but fit neatly into none—just as Lucy fits neatly into no clear social position, as an intrigued Ginevra Fanshawe points out several times.

As in *Jane Eyre*, Lucy's social and economic placelessness is made literal in the movement of her body. She moves between country and city, day and night, and between wandering as an unhappy temporary escape from dependence and as a triumphant discovery of independence. And while Jane's wandering is a result of and reflects her desperate circumstances, Lucy's wandering, like so many elements of her narrative, resists easy definition or categorization. Her very wanderings themselves wander in import and meaning, from "a still ecstasy of freedom and enjoyment" to a more compelled movement in which a "a goad thrust me on, a fever forbade me to rest" (113, 227). Lucy's happiest moments early in the novel are when she wanders both the rural and the urban landscape alone, and without an economic future; but her wanders after she has a situation at Madame Beck's take on a more desperate, trapped feel, emphasizing a tension between economic stability and individual freedom. Even a stable economic position is not the key to happiness in *Villette*, and this may help to explain the disparity of critical readings of the text: read in terms of Lucy's economic independence, the ending is relatively happy; read in terms of her isolation and loneliness, the ending is

unhappy. Lucy may have attained a place in the world by midway through the novel, but this is no guarantee of actual happiness; economic stability is transformed into trapped domesticism. Examining Lucy's wandering and associated happiness and unhappiness in the context of her economic advancement shows Brontë questioning and complicating the more straightforward economic rise (and accompanying happiness) of *Jane Eyre*. Lucy is not always happy when she is secure, nor is she unhappy when insecure, and her extremes of happiness and unhappiness seem to accompany her movement through a rural or urban landscape, as if her extremes of emotion cannot be produced or contained by a still, unmoving body.

Understanding these passages also helps to further trace a shift in Brontë's focus between *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. Jane Eyre's crisis of identity comes halfway through the novel, after it appears that she has lost everything. Upon her return to Thornfield after the marriage debacle, Jane asks "where was the Jane Eyre of yesterday? – where was her life? – where were her prospects?" (252). Not long after, she hardly knows what it means to be human at all: "What was I?" (274). These questions, however, come more than halfway through the novel, and Jane has clearly had an identity established for the reader. She has, for a time, lost her position in the world, but the reader has already heard her bravely assert her humanity and equality to Rochester. But if Jane finds herself at a low point, at least there had been high points, and although she must figure out how to compromise or meld her individuality with society, at least she has a clear identity. In contrast, Lucy Snowe more or less begins her story at what had been Jane's lowest point: without a home, and additionally, without a history. Her identity for the reader is dependent largely on her circumstances as the novel advances, and produces a tension:

can Lucy support herself while maintaining a sense of freedom? After pointing to this irreconcilability, Brontë leaves Lucy suspended at the novel's end. The traces of dissatisfaction with the conclusion of *Jane Eyre* are made clearer here, as the loss of M. Paul denies Lucy any consolation of love to make this domestic conclusion more palatable. In her refusal to end *Villette* with a romantic success, Brontë maintains the tensions between freedom, isolation, independence, and dependency that Lucy's wandering encapsulates throughout the novel.

"Because he is a boy and you are a girl": Economic and Psychological Dependency in *Villette*

Lucy begins in the same position as Jane (and as many other Victorian middle-class women): they are both young, dependent women living in others' houses. Unlike Jane, however, Lucy is not the only dependent in her household, and although Lucy is largely stoic in regards to her circumstances and feelings, the suffering of Polly emphasizes the dependency and vulnerability of both women's positions. Polly "wish[es] this was Papa's house!" (76) and Lucy describes how she:

> moped: no grown person could have performed that uncheering business better; no furrowed face of adult exile, longing for Europe at Europe's antipodes, ever bore more legibly the signs of home sickness than did her infant visage. She seemed growing old and unearthly. (77)

Polly is a child, but her homelessness and her homesickness establish a tone of loneliness from the start. She has been left by her father and has no control over her position; her hopeless, unreturned devotion to him and then to Graham Bretton epitomize emotional and physical dependence and vulnerability. Lucy identifies this as a gender dynamic from the start, telling Polly that "you should not grieve that Graham does not care for you so much as you care for him. It must be so" (97). The first reason that Lucy gives Polly for

this dynamic—before mentioning their differences in age or nature—is "Because he is a boy and you are a girl" (97). Loneliness, unreturned devotion, vulnerability: these are, for Lucy, the conditions of womanhood, and if these are revealed through Polly instead of through self-reflection, it must be seen as Lucy's self-repressive response to this vulnerability. A similar sense of vulnerability repeats itself in the story of Miss Marchmont, who has spent her life in mourning and still thinks "of Frank more than of God," in an extreme dependence that is psychological, although not economic. According to the start of *Villette*, the lives of women both young and old revolve around men (106).

It comes as little surprise, then, that when Lucy finally elaborates (barely) on her own circumstances, they are similarly desperate, and she places them in the context of women's experience in general:

> It will be conjectured that I was of course glad to return to the bosom of my kindred. Well! the amiable conjecture does no harm, and may therefore be safely left uncontradicted. Far from saying nay, indeed, I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather in a harbor still as glass… A great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives something in that fashion; why not I with the rest? (99)

That these eight years were not at all smooth sailing is evident from Lucy's tone; while she says that she will not contradict the reader's assumptions, it is clear that she could do so if she chose. And her experience of her shipwreck is a gendered one: "A great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives something in that fashion"—Lucy is comparing herself to what is supposed to be a female experience of the world: floating, not in control, and trusting to a fate that is itself blind or uncaring: in the care of a "steersman stretched on the little deck, his face up to heaven, his eyes closed: buried, if

you will, in a long prayer" (99). Lucy's "a great many women and girls are supposed" evokes Jane Eyre's claim that

> It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility: they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts… (93)

Early in *Villette*, then, there is established a dynamic similar to that of *Jane Eyre*: a contradiction between the expectation of a quiet, steady, tedious life for women, and a reality that is far more unstable. Both novels also emphasize a conflict between what is desired (some outlet for action and thought, and a way to give a life meaning) and the positions in which these heroines find themselves: in too-extreme difficulty, requiring too much self-reliance. This self-reliance—how it can be attained, and at what cost—is the central question of *Villette*.

While *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* both criticize the expectation of women living a quiet, undirected, stagnant life, both heroines are pushed into the opposite extreme: a life that asks too much of them. Neither is a case, however, of being "careful what you wish for"; both women face a contradiction between how they have been prepared for the world, and the actual world in which they find themselves. Lucy Snowe early on marks this contradiction: "A great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives something in that fashion" (99). Lucy's "are supposed" could be read as a claim that Lucy herself is unfamiliar with such women; there are many out there who "are supposed" to live in this way, but she has no personal experience of it.

But Lucy herself does have a great deal of experience of the world: she has lived with and worked alongside many women, of different cultures and ages. "[A]re supposed," then, cannot be read as an earnest claim of inexperience. Instead, it carries with it an unsaid corollary: they are "supposed to pass their lives something in that fashion," *but they do not*. This cultural narrative of what women are "supposed" to do is a fiction. And yet it is an active fiction that influences even Lucy's telling of the story: she goes on to say "why not I with the rest?," which carries with it a hint of bitterness; Lucy feels cheated of an experience even as she acknowledges that it is a fiction. Even as Lucy acknowledges the dubious existence of "the rest," the question introduces her narrative. Why should she—a woman like "the rest"—*not* have a peaceful life?

In the deliberate vagueness that follows this claim, Lucy's story might be the story of any woman who has encountered a social fall. She says only that:

> [I]t cannot be concealed that…I must somehow have fallen over-board or that there must have been a wreck at last. To this hour, when I have the nightmare it repeats the rush and saltiness of briny waves in my throat, and there icy pressure on my lungs. I even know there was a storm, and that not of one hour nor one day. (99)

The only thing that is clear is that Lucy was a passenger on this ship, not in control or in any position to assist either herself or others (much as it will be impossible for her to help M. Paul in his own literal shipwreck near the novel's end). Whether she fell overboard or the ship wrecked, it is clear that the storm was a force of nature well beyond anyone's aid: "In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished," and Lucy is left alone: "Thus, there remained no possibility of dependence on others; to myself alone could I look" (100). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar write that Lucy Snowe is "from first to last a woman without—outside society, without parents or friends, without physical or mental

attractions, without money or confidence or health—and her story is perhaps the most moving and terrifying account of female deprivation ever written" (400). But according to the novel, Lucy's experience is not unique; through Polly and Miss Marchmont, the reader has already encountered several female experiences with this vulnerability in common.

"[A] still ecstasy of freedom and enjoyment": Unlinking Happiness and Economic Security

During her time with Miss Marchmont, Lucy describes how

> Two hot, close rooms thus became my world … I forgot that there were fields, woods, rivers, seas, an ever-changing sky outside the steam-dimmed lattice of this sick-chamber; I was almost content to forget it. All within me became narrowed to my lot. Tame and still by habit, disciplined by destiny, I demanded no walks in the fresh air… (102)

Although Lucy claims to be "almost content" with her circumstances as they are, when they abruptly change and become uncertain she swiftly recovers a revivifying sense of the wider world, suggesting that it was more her circumstances than Lucy's actual nature that prompted her acceptance of her cloistered existence. Upon returning from an advice-seeking visit to a family friend after Miss Marchmont's death, she says that:

> Still all inward darkness, I left her about twilight; a walk of two miles lay before me; it was a clear, frosty night. In spite of my solitude, my poverty, and my perplexity, my heart, nourished and nerved with the vigour of a youth that had not yet counted twenty-three summers, beat light and not feebly. Not feebly, I am sure, or I should have trembled in that lonely walk, which lay through still fields, and passed neither village nor farmhouse, nor cottage: I should have quailed in the absence of moonlight, for it was by the leading of stars only I traced the dim path; I should have quailed still more in the unwonted presence of that which to-night shone in the north, a moving mystery--the Aurora Borealis. But this solemn stranger influenced me otherwise than through my fears. Some new power it seemed to bring. I drew in energy with the keen, low breeze that blew on its path. A bold thought was sent to my mind; my mind was made strong to receive it.
>
> "Leave this wilderness," it was said to me, "and go out hence."
>
> "Where?" was the query.

> I had not very far to look; gazing from this country parish in that flat, rich middle of England—I mentally saw within reach what I had never yet beheld with my bodily eyes: I saw London. (107-8)

After having had been cabined in Miss Marchmont's room, a time during which she says that she did not left to walk or exercise, Lucy now feels energy, and a new physical capacity, in simply walking. In walking, too, she can again escape the trap of what she is supposed to have experienced: she says that she "should have quailed in the absence of moonlight" and "should have quailed still more" in the presence of the northern lights. But why "should" she have been frightened of the dark, or the Aurora borealis? Dark nights were dangerous in Victorian England, but the starlit scene she describes is nonetheless beautiful. Does Lucy really believe that she "should have quailed," or is she simply paying lip service to an oppressive social convention? The result is the same: even if she doesn't believe she should have been frightened, her acknowledgement that she "should" have been frightened suggests that the end result is the same. However, here, solitary and unconfined, Lucy can move on from these "should"s with "[s]ome new power." The sense of freedom and independence gained here through walking hearkens back to a Wordsworthian peripatetic; Lucy travels, just for a moment, as a young man might: free, independent, and confident. Even here, though, there are indications that she is not at the point of self-direction; she says that the thought to go to London "was sent to my mind," which was "made strong" to receive the idea that was "said to [her]." There is a sense of independence here, but no sense of ownership of it.

Her limited grasp on a sense of independence evaporates quickly when Lucy feels the weight of her circumstances—and strikingly, this happens when she is again "shut" indoors. On arriving in London, she says that:

> I kept up well till I had partaken of some refreshment, warmed myself by a fire, and was fairly shut into my own room; but, as I sat down by the bed and rested my head and arms on the pillow, a terrible oppression overcame me. All at once my position rose on me like a ghost. Anomalous, desolate, almost blank of hope, it stood. What was I doing here alone in great London? What should I do on the morrow? What prospects had I in life? What friends had I on earth? Whence did I come? Whither should I go? What should I do? (111)

Lucy's desperate, urgent questioning feels like it has no end—beginning with asking what she was doing, she soon must question her very identity: "Whence did I come?" Lucy's questions fine themselves down to the practical: "What should I do?" She asks this twice—"What should I do on the morrow?" and then "What should I do?"—suggesting that the first is a question of immediate practically, but the second is a broader question—the ultimate question, that sums up all of the previous. What should she do—to support herself, to gain an identity and a place in the world? What vocation, which would both give her life a narrative and a meaning, and grant her other sorts of identities (friends, prospects, and more?) This pressure only comes once she has been "fairly shut into [her] own room"—a situation that Lucy is all too familiar with, from her time with Miss Marchmont. The next morning, this anxiety evaporates as soon as she looks out the window at the dome of St. Paul's. It is being shut in a closed-up room that brings out this terribly anxiety in Lucy, because it was being shut in closed-up rooms that robbed her of her identity in the first place, and Lucy faces the prospect of spending the rest of her life in closed-up rooms.

This explains why, the next morning, when Lucy looks at the dome of St. Paul's outside of the window of her London room, she has such an abrupt shift in mood:

> … my inner self moved; my spirit shook its always-fettered wings half loose; I had a sudden feeling as if I, who never yet truly lived, were at last about to taste life: in that morning my soul grew as fast as Jonah's gourd. (111)

On going out, she describes how "Elation and pleasure were in my heart: to walk alone in London seemed of itself an adventure…":

> Descending, I went wandering whither chance might lead, in a still ecstasy of freedom and enjoyment; and I got--I know not how--I got into the heart of city life. I saw and felt London at last: I got into the Strand; I went up Cornhill; I mixed with the life passing along; I dared the perils of crossings. To do this, and to do it utterly alone, gave me, perhaps an irrational, but a real pleasure. Since those days, I have seen the West End, the parks, the fine squares; but I love the city far better. The city seems so much more in earnest: its business, its rush, its roar, and such serious things, sights, and sounds. The city is getting its living—the West-end but enjoying its pleasure. At the West-end you may be amused, but in the city you are deeply excited. (113)

To walk London's streets is to participate in life, to be assured of one's capacities; Lucy is a sort of flaneuse, but without the alienation of her later modernist counterparts. Rather, she enters "into the heart of city life" as no longer an outsider, but as a participant who "mixed with the life passing along" and "dared the perils of crossings". Part of the pleasure, too, is that Lucy feels this independence while "utterly alone"—truly independent; at once independent but part of society and human life at the same time. The anonymity of the city means that she could be anyone; she is briefly separated from her own circumstances and is granted a psychological freedom—an "ecstasy of freedom and enjoyment." And another part of the pleasure for Lucy—that which differentiates the city from the West-end—is that the city is "getting its living," and in being present on its streets Lucy is also a participant in this economic endeavor and purposefulness. The walk leaves her with a "healthy hunger" and "[d]elightfully tired," more aware of herself and her body than she has been in years (113).

It is in this mode of independence that she decides to go to France:

> My state of mind, and all accompanying circumstances, were just now such as most to favour the adoption of a new, resolute, and daring—perhaps desperate—line of action. I had nothing to lose. Unutterable loathing of a desolate existence

> past, forbade return. If I failed in what I now designed to undertake, who, save myself, would suffer? If I died far away from—home, I was going to say, but I had no home—from England, then, who would weep? (113)

In such a mood of freedom, Lucy's isolation becomes nearly an asset, as it allows her to maintain her freedom without owing anything to others. She is not doomed to repeat her "desolate existence past" because she has some degree of choice and no obligation to others—a situation that may be unusual or unique to her; one can imagine that most young women of her age would have some family or relations who might indeed "suffer" if they knew what she risked. In this independence, Lucy continues to be happy on board the ship, and to relate this happiness to her sense of freedom:

> When I recall the tranquil, and even happy mood in which I passed those hours, and remember, at the same time, the position in which I was placed; its hazardous—some would have said its hopeless—character; I feel that, as—
>
> Stone walls do not a prison make,
> Nor iron bars—a cage,
>
> so peril, loneliness, an uncertain future, are not oppressive evils, so long as the frame is healthy and the faculties are employed; so long, especially, as Liberty lends us her wings, and Hope guides us by her star. (120-1)

Lucy's moments of wandering and emigration constitute her greatest happiness yet found in the novel, and although she emigrates in order to find a better situation for herself, and anxiety accompanies this journey, her sense of freedom and self-direction gives her a genuine pleasure even during very tedious travel. Of her journey from Boue-Marine to Villette, Lucy says that:

> Of an artistic temperament, I deny that I am; yet I must possess something of the artist's faculty of making the most of present pleasure: that is to say, when it is of the kind to my taste. I enjoyed that day, though we travelled slowly, though it was cold, though it rained. Somewhat bare, flat, and treeless was the route along which our journey lay; and slimy canals crept, like half-torpid green snakes, beside the road; and formal pollard willows edged level fields, tilled like kitchen-garden beds. The sky, too, was monotonously gray; the atmosphere was stagnant and humid; yet amidst all these deadening influences, my fancy budded fresh and my heart basked in sunshine. (125)

As stone walls and iron bars make neither prisons nor cages, "slimy canals…like half-torpid green snakes" and a "monotonously gray" sky do not make for an unhappy journey; Lucy's "fancy budded fresh" and her "heart basked in sunshine." Lucy's emigration is happy and anxious at the same moment: not simply content, but really happy. And this is even while the text continually points to her economic condition: as Kate Lawson points out, she "has her economic status as a poor middle-class woman immediately recognized and finely calculated by the most ordinary people she encounters," from the waiters and chambermaids at her London inn to the ship-stewardess (21). But even in the face of this unending assessment, Lucy is happy.

Villette thus unlinks the direct correlation of economic security and happiness, even while retaining the terrible anxiety of placelessness. It thus produces another series of the inherent contradictions and irreconcilables that Johnson and other critics have identified. Lucy faces tensions between the anxiety of placelessness and the pleasure of freedom, and between the oppression of the "desolate existence" of a domestic situation and the necessity of a place in the world.

"In catalepsy and a dead trance,
I studiously held the quick of my nature":
Isolation and Immobility at Madame Beck's

The unlinking of a situation and happiness is made particularly clear when Lucy has established herself at Madame Beck's school: while Jane Eyre's wandering only becomes really desperate after Jane has lost her place in the world, Lucy's becomes desperate after she has an established place. At the school, Lucy's only opportunity to walk alone is in the confined, narrow alley alongside the school, a walk that Madame Beck soon acknowledges that Lucy can treat as her own: " 'C'est juste,' cried she with an air of

bonté; and she kindly recommended me to confine myself to it as much as I chose" (174). The walk is the one place that Lucy can find solitude, but it is a place of confinement. Immediately after Madame Beck assigns the walk to Lucy, Lucy immediately contemplates her sense of oppression:

> On the night in question, I was sitting on the hidden seat reclaimed from fungi and mould, listening to what seemed the far-off sounds of the city. Far off, in truth, they were not: this school was in the city's centre; hence, it was but five minutes' walk to the park, scarce ten to buildings of palatial splendour. Quite near were wide streets brightly lit, teeming at this moment with life: carriages were rolling through them to balls or to the opera. The same hour which tolled curfew for our convent, which extinguished each lamp, and dropped the curtain round each couch, rang for the gay city about us the summons to festal enjoyment. Of this contrast I thought not, however: gay instincts my nature had few; ball or opera I had never seen; and though often I had heard them described, and even wished to see them, it was not the wish of one who hopes to partake a pleasure if she could only reach it—who feels fitted to shine in some bright distant sphere, could she but thither win her way; it was no yearning to attain, no hunger to taste; only the calm desire to look on a new thing.
> …
> Oh, my childhood! I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of past days, I *could* feel. About the present, it was better to be stoical; about the future—such a future as mine—to be dead. And in catalepsy and a dead trance, I studiously held the quick of my nature. (175)

There is a direct correlation between Madame Beck formally assigning Lucy to her narrow walk, and the sense of oppression that follows. This is made worse by the emphatic knowledge that Lucy is not ambitious, or yearning for any "festal enjoyment," but has "only the calm desire to look on a new thing," which can hardly be called unreasonable or strange. (If anything, the opposite is true, and Lucy's desire is notable for how limited its scope is.) But even this small desire is so apparently unattainable that Lucy is instead driven to "be stoical," and to hold "the quick of [her] nature" in "catalepsy and a dead trance." Lucy describes her position in terms of total physical paralysis, in opposition to the walks she took earlier.

Lucy becomes even more trapped over the school's holiday, when she is left alone with a single servant and a disabled student whom she could not take even "out beyond the garden" (226). Lucy is really trapped in isolation in this house, where she says that her "mental pain was far more wasting and wearing" than the physical problem. When an aunt picks up the girl, and Lucy is at last "free to walk out," the lasting effects of her imprisonment, and the knowledge that she must return at day's end, make it impossible to enjoy her half-freedom:

> At first I lacked courage to venture very far from the Rue Fossette, but by degrees I sought the city gates, and passed them, and then went wandering away far along chaussées, through fields, beyond cemeteries, Catholic and Protestant, beyond farmsteads, to lanes and little woods, and I know not where. A goad thrust me on, a fever forbade me to rest; a want of companionship maintained in my soul the cravings of a most deadly famine. I often walked all day, through the burning noon and the arid afternoon, and the dusk evening, and came back with moonrise. (227)

Lucy's walks in London came with an air of freedom and possibility, and she says that she took particular pleasure in encountering the city alone. Here, though, her she says that a "want of companionship" is one of the problems driving her walks, despite her—or probably made worse by—Lucy's having an economic place that leaves her isolated but without the benefits of freedom. Here, she moves through city and country, through Catholic and Protestant areas, over both chausses (paved highways) and unpaved lanes, through settled farmsteads and unsettled woods, from morning until moonrise. As the social and rural geography around *Jane Eyre*'s Whitcross was a microcosm for England, so Lucy here wanders through a microcosm of Belgium—or even of a larger Europe, given the presence of both Catholic and Protestant cemeteries.

While Jane's homelessness can be attributed to her lack of work—she wanders in search of work and a place to live, only to be rebuffed—Lucy's cannot. She has a place to

work, and live, with room and board and a vocation all provided. In fact, on the whole, Lucy has been remarkably successful in finding a place for herself; later, she describes herself to Ginevra Fanshawe as "a rising character: once an old lady's companion, then a nursery-governess, now a school-teacher," and she will end the novel as proprietress of her own school, with a relative degree of autonomy (380). But *Villette* suggests that even this success is profoundly inadequate for happiness; Lucy's repression of her own feelings in order to survive—even when she has found an income and vocation—comes at too great a personal cost, and she finds herself wandering the countryside just as desperately as Jane did.

Her subsequent illness concludes the first volume. Lucy has a position in Madame Beck's, but she is still lonely, feeling a desperate "want of companionship." The wandering that had once implied physical capability and independence now implies an almost-physical psychological desperation, and a forced isolation from others.

"The whole woman was in my power" / "To be still was not in my power": Lucy's Night Walk

Lucy's lengthy wander through Villette's night festival has been treated as central to the novel by critics, who read the episode as Lucy gaining a sense of agency over her life, or alternately as a decided decision to *not* resolve (and in that refusal to resolve, gain a sort of agency over) the novel's dualities and tensions of gender, narrative, and power. Joseph A. Boone writes that the episode works to resolve the tensions between Lucy's role as "heretic" narrator and her search for agency in society:

> Not only in Lucy's imagined quest for that "rushy basin," that circular mirror, which will quench her "passionate thirst," but in her "heretic" role as narrator, she defiantly becomes the questing hero, the desiring actor, who also becomes the

> motive force, indeed the subject in both senses of the word, of her own narrative and its quest for meaning.
>
> What happens as Lucy ventures into the spectacular realm of the festival reigning throughout the park, moreover, confirms this sense of her new-found agency and subjectivity. (38)

In what is perhaps the most influential or archetypal critical reading of the passage, Gilbert and Gubar write that "the sequence of events in this dreamy midsummer *Walpurgisnacht* furnishes a microcosm of the novel, as Lucy's imagination summons up before her the spirits that have haunted her past and present life" (435). They write:

> Ultimately, indeed, the entire distinction between imagination and reason breaks down in the park scenes because Lucy realizes that what she has called "Reason" is really a repressive witchcraft or image magic that would transform her into a nun. Although Lucy leaves the park thinking that the calm, white, stainless moon triumphs—a witness of "truth all regnant"—the next day she cannot accept the truth. And though she views it as a weakness, this very inability to acquiesce in silence is a sign of her freedom from the old internal struggle, for Lucy has emerged from the park a more integrated person, able to express herself in the most threatening circumstances. Now she can even defy Madame Beck to catch at a last chance to speak with Paul, detaining him with her cry: "My heart will break!" (436-7)

Gilbert and Gubar write of Lucy's "inability to acquiesce in silence is a sign of her freedom from the old internal struggle"—to this, I would add "stillness," as well as silence, as her defiance of Madame Beck is literalized in her refusal (or inability) to allow the drug to work as intended: instead of becoming quiet and calm, Lucy becomes agitated.

My reading of this episode focuses more on its circumstances than its content: Lucy defied Madame Beck *before* the episode, calling her a "Dog in the manger," and the walk itself was already described very much in terms of escape before she went on it. The walk, examined in the context of her previous walks, becomes as much a symptom of her circumstances as a cause of her freedom—just as when she walked alone through

the English fields, or the London hubbub, or around Villette and its countryside. What happens on the actual walk is important, of course, and critics are entirely right to identify and analyze the implications of her encounters with her friends, with the park, with the night. But there is another dimension to Lucy's walk: the factors that drove her to go on this walk in the first place. Lucy's situation at the school and her relationship with Madame Beck changed before she ever walked out. Reading the walk as symptom rather than entirely as cause of her newfound agency changes the focus of the episode, taking some pressure off of it by making it slightly less determinative of the novel's conclusion.

Lucy gains this freedom in walking out—this agency, this reconciliation, etc.—only *after* it has become clear that her relationship with Madame Beck has already reached a new stage. Earlier that same day, Lucy called her a "Dog in the manger!" (520) in regards to her marriage with M. Paul; and came to the realization that "she must ever be a rival. She was *my* rival, heart and soul though secretly, under the smoothest bearing, and utterly unknown to all save her and myself" (520):

> Two minutes I stood over Madame, feeling that the whole woman was in my power… She quietly retreated from me; meek and self-possessed, though very uneasy… This was the sole flash-eliciting, truth-extorting, rencontre which ever occurred between me and Madame Beck; this short night scene was never repeated. (520)

"[N]ever repeated," and yet it has occurred; Lucy is not on the same dependent terms as she had been. A dependent can hardly be a true rival, and yet here Lucy is ascendant as such, "feeling that the whole woman within my power." This rivalry is recommenced and confirmed later that evening, when Madame Beck drugs Lucy without her knowledge: "I was to be held quiet for one night" (522). In drugging Lucy, Madame Beck has

confirmed to Lucy and the reader that she, also, views Lucy as a rival and a threat. The rivalry and competition between the two has been made profoundly clear. Lucy—no longer dependent on Madame Beck, but her equal and rival—has a new, truer freedom when she walks forth from Madame Beck's that night.

That she walks out in a new way is made clear by the amount of text devoted to describing Lucy's departure from the school. The section is much more extensive than her former walk out of the school, and it is described entirely in terms of an escape. When Lucy decides to go, she says that:

> As for hindrance to this step, there offered not so much as a creaking hinge or a creaking latch. On these hot July nights, close air could not be tolerated, and the chamber-door stood wide open. Will the dormitory-planks sustain my weight untraitorous? Yes. I know wherever a board is loose, and will avoid it. (523)

This is a new kind of escape from Madame Beck's, quite unlike her former walking away from it. And unlike her former walks away from Madame Beck's, in encountering the festival in the park, Lucy again tastes the kind of freedom in movement that she once felt in London:

> To be still was not in my power, nor quietly to observe. I took a revel of the scene; I drank the elastic night-air—the swell of sound, the dubious night, now flashing, now fading. As to Happiness and Hope, they and I had shaken hands, but just now—I scorned Despair. (526)

Lucy has said goodbye to both "Happiness and Hope"—the words that might have described her previous walk in London. If anything, she does not allow herself to enter the same totally happy state that she felt in London and in the English countryside; this episode, despite its dreamy state, may be more realistic than her previous episodes. She has reached a balance between utter despair and unrealistic optimism.

Lucy's sense of freedom is now portrayed as permanent rather than transient. On returning to the school, she says that "Nothing remained now but to take my freedom to my chamber, to carry it with me to my bed and see what I could make of it" (541); later, she asks the reader: "Must I, ere I close, render some account of that Freedom and Renovation which I won on the fete-night? Must I tell how I and the two stalwart companions I brought home from the illuminated park bore the test of intimate acquaintance?" (551). The walk confirmed and solidified her freedom, and enabled her to taste it for the first time since she found the position at Madame Beck's. But the "Freedom and Renovation which [she] won on the fete-night" might well refer to her encounter with Madame Beck earlier in the evening, as well as the walk itself. She certainly brings them home from the park and from her walk, for the first time, but perhaps they had started to accompany her before the walk.

What remains is to "see what [she] could make of it." What she makes of it, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, is the cry "My heart will break!" to M. Paul before he leaves, which signifies so much: her agency, her acknowledgement of feeling, her reaching out to others, her taking a risk. But in reading her night walk as symptomatic as well as causal of her newfound freedom suggests that Lucy's economic position—which abruptly changed earlier that evening, with her claiming social equality of Madame Beck—is as defining to her sense of freedom and agency as anything that happened on the actual walk itself. The walk is still crucial: it is where Lucy attempts to literally find a place for herself near or among her friends within this whirling social scene. But by grouping this walk with her previous, critically underconsidered walks, one can see that this walk is not as strange and unprecedented as it may seem. Rather, it is a final setpiece

in a series of walks in which Lucy progressively learns to accommodate her individual impulses, economic status, and social position.

Conclusions on *Villette*

If *Jane Eyre* required a series of coincidences and luck to bring its heroine to a happy ending, *Villette* explores a life without those happy accidents. Granted, there are some small happy accidents (finding Graham and Polly again; an unexpected 100 pounds from a guilty Mr. Marchmont), but in the end, these external things have little to do with Lucy's actual happiness. Rather, she says that the two years of waiting for M. Paul to return were the "three happiest of [her] life" (565). She says that:

> The secret of my success did not lie so much in myself, in any endowment, any power of mine, as in a new state of circumstances, a wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart… At parting, I had been left a legacy; such a thought for the present, such a hope for the future, such a motive for a persevering, a laborious, an enterprising, a patient and a brave course—I *could* not flag. (565-6)

Lucy says emphatically that none of the happy things that have come to her—her own happiness—are due to herself, or have anything to do with herself, her endowments or any power of her own. Apart from acknowledging her extraordinary power to endure and suffer, the reader must agree: Lucy's happiness and luck are due to circumstance, and largely to M. Paul. Her cry of "My heart will break!" can be read as a moment of assertion, but her happiness is not due to that moment in itself.

Lucy's powerlessness over her own happiness is confirmed at the book's ending, with M. Paul's death, in a shipwreck that echoes the original financial shipwreck of Lucy's youth. Lucy's narrative abruptly ends with this, as if faced with the end of her hope and happiness, and a return to the bleak loneliness of her youth, Lucy cannot endure to write anything beyond a single sentence about the futures of Madames Beck and

Walravens and Pere Silas, and then bid the reader "Farewell" (568). Lucy's story is told some years in retrospect (we learn that Madame Walravens reached ninety years of age before her death), but Lucy still organized her biography as a narrative leading up to her three years of happiness, about which she cannot write in detail; and then ends with the end of those three years. Without "such a hope for the future, such a motive for a persevering," Lucy's life has presumably returned to its formal dismal, powerless condition, and while she could write up to the end of those three years of happiness, she has no reason to write beyond them.

Both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* can be read as economic histories, with walking becoming the motion of an unreconciled female body trying to find its place—social, economic, personal—in a world particularly unaccommodating to women's individualism. But between these novels, there is also an increased emphasis on what is psychologically as well as economically necessary for survival. Walking, with its alternate implications of freedom and distress, happy contemplation and distraught movement, becomes the mode through which this uneven ground—the tensions, inconsistencies and impossibilities of women's lives—is explored.

CHAPTER II

"RICH AND FREE TO CHOOSE A WAY TO WALK":

COMPREHENSION, PRIVILEGE AND MOVEMENT IN *AURORA LEIGH*

> Therefore, this same world
> Uncomprehended by you, must remain
> Uninfluenced by you.
>
> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*

In a central passage of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh,* Aurora describes her encounter with the long-lost Marian Erle, a young working-class woman who mysteriously disappeared on the day of her wedding to Aurora's cousin Romney, and whom Aurora has been seeking for some time. After discovering her in Paris, Aurora directs Marian to follow her home, so that she can hear Marian's story at length. Aurora describes how Marian followed:

> As if I led her by a narrow plank
> Across devouring waters, step by step;
> And so in silence we walked on a mile. (6.482-4)

Soon, however, Marian becomes anxious and stops; she has someone waiting for her at home. They agree to go to Marian's home instead, and Aurora follows Marian in a precise reversal of their former roles:

> Then she led
> The way, and I, as by a narrow plank
> Across devouring waters, followed her,
> Stepping by her footsteps, breathing by her breath,
> And holding her with eyes that would not slip;
> And so, without a word, we walked a mile,
> And so, another mile, without a word. (6.500-6)

Aurora's suspicion that the unmarried Marian has a child waiting at home produces some of the heightened tension of the reverse journey. When faced with the child, Aurora

immediately blames Marian for sinning, then, after hearing her story of kidnap and rape, repents her too-quick judgment. The following scene of apology and explanation is the first time that Aurora allows Marian to tell her story for long stretches of the narrative, instead of allowing her own class-based prejudices to influence her understanding and description of Marian's character. This shift in Aurora's understanding is both anticipated and enacted through Aurora's learning how to physically follow Marian instead of leading the way herself. Only after Aurora has followed Marian through the winding streets of Paris to her home, walking behind her for miles, is she finally in a position to understand her experience, to grant her a voice of her own, and to appreciate the extent to which her own assumptions about class, gender, and virtue have influenced her opinion of Marian. While *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* explore walking's potential to help an individual better understand herself and where she stands in the world, *Aurora Leigh* presents mobility as a mode through which to better understand the economic and social positions both of the self and of others.

Barrett Browning began work on *Aurora Leigh* in 1853, and her letters show that she conceived of the work at least nine years earlier. She took three years to write the nine-book epic, which she described in a February 1856 letter to her friend Anna Brownell Jameson as "a sort of poetic art-novel" (*Letters*, 228). When she wrote *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning was not new to portraying questions of class and oppression in her poetry; her "Cry of the Children" (1842) calls for attention to child labor in factories, which it does by channeling their voices. "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrims Point" (1848) channels a slave mother's voice, and "Casa Guidi Windows" (1851), too, begins with the poet overhearing a child in the street singing about Italy, and from this extrapolating an

elaborate consideration of Italian independence. In *Aurora Leigh*, however, Barrett Browning explores the question of poetic voice and ventriloquism of the disenfranchised at greater length. Through the inclusion of Marian Erle and through making its heroine a relatively privileged woman, *Aurora Leigh* both applauds and criticizes Victorian feminism, pointing out that those women who are best-positioned to speak out against oppression may be those least-positioned to understand the oppression of the destitute. Such a sentiment is explicitly stated by Romney, who early in the poem groups Aurora with sentimental poets and accuses her of a privileged ignorance, telling her:

> You weep for what you know. A red-haired child
> Sick in a fever, if you touch him once,
> Though but so little as with a finger-tip,
> Will set you weeping; but a million sick . .
> You could as soon weep for the rule of three
> Or compound fractions. Therefore, this same world
> Uncomprehended by you, must remain
> Uninfluenced by you. (2.213-220)

But *Aurora Leigh* goes on to show that one can also learn to comprehend the oppression of others, and presumably, therefore, learn how to influence it for the better. Early in the narrative, Aurora learns of Marian's story and then repeats it, but this is shown to be inadequate; she cannot understand Marian until she has literally walked in Marian's footsteps and allowed Marian, for once, to lead her. After she has done so, she gives over a relatively large section of her narrative to Marian, suggesting a model for how a middle-class feminism can work alongside or with less-privileged women: by making space to listen to their narratives and by making these narratives central to their own feminist discourse.

It is striking, then, how much criticism on *Aurora Leigh* seeks to ground it in the inward-looking terms of Barrett Browning's biography, sometimes to the exclusion of

other angles. The 1980s saw a flourishing of critical work on *Aurora Leigh* which helped to canonize it as Barrett Browning's greatest work, and the impulse towards a biographical reading is the starting-point of much productive work on the text: *Aurora Leigh* is, after all, a *Kunstlerroman* about a woman poet by a prominent woman poet, and Aurora spends much time meditating on poetry, art, and gender. Helen Cooper writes that "*Aurora Leigh* suggests that as long as poetry is imagined as a predominantly male endeavor, a female poet enacts her liberation by transforming herself from being the object of male narrative to being the subject of her own story," and critics have a tendency to extend this subjecthood from Aurora to Barrett Browning herself (145). Critics have noted that not only is Aurora breaking literary convention by making herself, as a woman, the subject of the novel-poem, but that in doing so she also breaks various literary conventions related to genre: the "art-novel" overleaps generic expectations as a hybridized poem / novel that plays with the conventions of the epic, romance, *Kunstlerroman*, autobiography, and quest narrative. This genrebending was a particularly fruitful area of critical inquiry in the 1990s, with Dorothy Mermin, Susan Friedman, Marjorie Stone, Alison Case, and Helen Cooper all exploring how the genre-crossing novel-poem explores the tensions of being both a woman and artist through the poem's form. SueAnn Schatz describes the work as "the most prominent, if not the first, example of nineteenth-century domestic-professional fiction" (110, see also Bailey, Houston, Laird, and Tasker). Few critics argue that the tensions of genre necessarily resolve themselves neatly by the work's end, but instead suggest that the work's mixture of genres should be understood as part of the process of working out what it means to be a woman poet and, in doing so, rewriting generic conventions. Alison Case writes that:

> As many feminist critics have argued, Barrett Browning's novel-poem enacts a triumphant reconciliation of "woman" and "artist," which necessarily rejects many aspects of the conventional Victorian dichotomy between femininity and artistic power. But its blissful denouement does not resolve all of the tensions between love-heroine and artist-heroine which it lays to rest. I would suggest that Barrett Browning's juggling of narrative modes does not so much reconcile these conflicting roles and impulses as allow them an uneasy coexistence. (18)

While I am persuaded by these fascinating connections between gender and genre, they tend to elide the way that *Aurora Leigh* also emphasizes, within itself, the very privilege of these kinds of problems. Not only was Barrett Browning juggling narrative modes between Aurora as "love-heroine and artist-heroine," but she was also asking how a poet can speak for the oppressed as a social heroine, while producing work in a mode—an epic poem—that necessarily requires the privileges of time (more than a decade) and mental space to produce.

In her introduction to her 1992 critical edition of *Aurora Leigh*, Margaret Reynolds sums up the impulse to read the work in terms of Barrett Browning's biography:

> That *Aurora Leigh* is a poem concerning a woman poet and written by a woman poet has always been perceived as the verse-novel's single most important characteristic, whether in the view of contemporary nineteenth-century reviewers or twentieth-century feminist critics. I would not challenge the significance of that observation, but I would suggest that to describe the poem as either effusive autobiography or the recovering expression of universal female experience of oppression is to reduce the strength and interest of the work. (11)

Tricia Lootens and Marjorie Stone expanded upon this point, and argue that Barrett Browning's canonization over the twentieth century has come to overshadow other concerns of the poem itself. In this vein of reexamination, I argue that *Aurora Leigh* itself challenges the idea that there is a single "universal female experience of oppression" at all—and that this is, in fact, the main lesson that Aurora must learn from Marian. That

this lesson was important to Barrett Browning is indicated in a letter from February 1857, in which Barrett Browning writes:

> What has given most offense in the book, more than the story of Marian—far more!—has been the reference to the condition of women in our cities, which a woman oughtn't to refer to, by any manner of means, says the conventional tradition. Now I have thought deeply otherwise. If a woman ignores these wrongs, then may women as a sex continue to suffer them; there is no hope for any of us—let us be dumb and die. (Barrett Browning, *Letters*, 2:254).

Barrett Browning's reponse to critics suggests that the situation of "women as a sex" should transcend questions of class, and that for any woman to remain in willful ignorance of the condition of others is the essence of inhumanity.

Marian Erle has not gone unnoticed by critics—nor by Barrett Browning's contemporaries: a twenty-five-year-old Louisa May Alcott responded to the character with a short sensation story "Marion Earle; or, Only an Actress!" (1858) published in the *American Union*. Madeleine B. Stern writes that the story picks up on many of the same themes as that of *Aurora Leigh*, including "feminism in the form of sisterhood and the compassion due to unwed mothers," and these themes are indeed the focus of much criticism that looks at Marian (91). Angela Leighton, Eve Rosenblum, and Helen Cooper have all explored the relationship between Marian and Aurora, and how Marian serves as a crucial figure for Aurora's better understanding of women's experiences. Leighton notes that the "triple female speaker of this poem—Barrett Browning, Aurora and Marian—is a sure and unsubtle ruse by which to break 'the conventional tradition' that 'a woman oughtn't to refer to' these things" (144). Joyce Zonana goes on to examine how the figure of Marian works both as a woman and a type of poetic muse for Aurora, and notes that "If Marian teaches anything to Aurora, it is that all individuals must be perceived as subjects, never as objects in other people's social schemes or literary

representations" (243). Certainly Aurora learns to see Marian as an individual subject rather than as an object, but this is not necessarily despite her class: rather, Aurora learns to better understand Marian in the context of her particular economic subjecthood, which, if it does not necessarily define her and Aurora as individuals, nonetheless has a definitive effect on their experiences.

Most economic criticism on the novel focuses on Aurora's effort to support herself independently through writing poetry and on Marian's work as a seamstress (Wallace). Lana L. Dalley has explored on the novel's broader discourse on women and economics at greatest length, arguing that "Like the 'economists' Aurora alludes to, EBB critiques paternalistic dependence, pauperism, and over-legislation; unlike the economists, she situates women and morality at the center of her critiques" (526). In building on Cora Kaplan's reading of *Aurora Leigh* as a response to Charles Kingsley's economic vision in *Alton Locke*, Dalley writes that Aurora:

> …does not subscribe to a system of feminine self-sacrifice. Rather, she critiques the symbolic nature of women's work (arguing instead for a woman's right to participate in the labor market) and the laws and customs (including philanthropic self-sacrifice) that sustain it. (530)

Such a feminist reading is consistent with Julie Nelson's criticisms of economic discourse as tending to devalue or undervalue forms of women's work. Dalley goes on to suggest that Aurora's work to support herself produces a moral autonomy, and goes on to note how frequently the poem was cited in nineteenth-century feminist essays, in which:

> … the figure of Aurora Leigh shifts the focus from economic theory to personal narrative and, in so doing, draws on that aspect of literary representation that converts a story of individual (economic) experience into a project of universal identification. The heritage of *Aurora Leigh*—the fact that Aurora Leigh was considered a "universal" symbol of women's economic liberation—underscores the contributions of women writers, like EBB, to economic thought and change

> and, like Aurora herself, emphasizes the revolutionary potential of a solitary poetic vision. (539)

To build on Dalley, I suggest that *Aurora Leigh* might be considered "universal" not only because of its portrayal of the figure of Aurora Leigh, but through Marian's portrayal as well—and through the comparisons drawn between them. As Barrett Browning suggested in her letters and through *Aurora Leigh*, the experience of any woman should be the concern of all women, and while there is no "universal female experience of oppression," as Leighton puts it, Barrett Browning makes any female experience of oppression a universal concern. *Aurora Leigh* draws explicit parallels between Marian and Aurora's movements through the world, using the universal modes of walking and travel as a mode for comparison, contrast, and comprehension between these two women.

The novel's walking has received very limited critical attention, although critics are prone to pointing out Aurora's assertion that she chooses "to walk at all risks" (2.106) as a claim of her artistic, social, and economic independence. Helen Cooper begins her chapter on *Aurora Leigh* using the quote as an epigram, and Anne D. Wallace also picks up on the quote, using it as a title for the fifth chapter of her book on the nineteenth-century peripatetic in which she explores how peripatetic episodes in later Victorian works become more concerned with individual development than social development (*Walking, Literature, and English Culture).* Wallace further explores walking in *Aurora Leigh* with her 1997 essay " 'Nor in Fading Silks Compose: Sewing, Walking, and Poetic Labor in *Aurora Leigh,*" in which she explores the complex relationship established in the text between walking and writing as types of gendered labor. She suggests that the text's sewing imagery becomes an adapted version of the "sowing" of fields in the eighteenth-century Georgic, and that this "sowing" can be linked to the Aurora's

walking: "walking coincides with the writing of poetry; both walking and writing are figured as labor, materially and economically productive; and both traditionally are identified with the masculine" (237-238). She suggests that:

> A reading of these genres, made available for us in *Aurora Leigh*'s linked representations of sewing and walking, foregrounds the relationships between the poem's shifting valuations of "women's work" and its accompanying efforts to regender poetic labor. Georgic and peripatetic valorize common, materially productive labors, and metaphorically associated these labors with the work of the poet, firmly attaching the characteristics of "good labor" to poetic composition. Any poem that invokes these genres in representing a woman poet necessarily undertakes a larger task: since georgic and peripatetic have already gendered "labor" and "writing" as masculine, the poem must now re-define the relations among women, work and writing, selecting for its celebration a material labor commonly practiced by women. (225)

For Marian, Wallace writes that "sewing functions as a salvation from walking" (245); her walking is an unproductive labor, one that "leads not to greater moral wisdom, nor to the [Wordsworthian] Wanderer's economic self-sufficiency, but to continued dependence and endangered virtue. … What saves Marian, the figure that replaces walking as a generator of moral and economic value" is sewing, further confirming the moral and economic virtues of work (247). Wallace explores the parallels between Aurora's work stitching poetry and Marian's work stitching fabric, and shows how the poem reclaims women's work: not by showing that women are capable of doing men's work, but by reclaiming sewing and stitching together language as valuable work that women have done for generations. In the same way that Marian is able to establish herself by sewing, as have generations of women before her, Aurora looks to earlier women writers to reclaim poetry as a women's art as well. In the end, Wallace suggests that because walking almost entirely drops out of the narrative in the poem's last two books, "*Aurora Leigh* resists a conclusive reading of its attitudes toward the crucial relations among

women, work and writing" (224). She writes that "Satisfying though the poem's last books may be in other ways, their appeal to divine and transcendent human love simply passes over the questions of gendered labor set out in its beginning, leaving us with what I have come to regard as an unresolvable textual ambivalence" (250).

I suggest that some of this unresolvability might be addressed by shifting the pressures of what Marian and Aurora's walking is supposed to accomplish. We must not lose the literal image of walking itself while drawing a comparison between walking and sewing/sowing: in the end, Marian cannot walk as Aurora does, and sews fabric instead of language, a difference that reflects the tremendous privilege of Aurora's class. Wallace acknowledges this briefly: "That Marian's walking should lead toward a possible loss of virtue matches the traditional association of women's walking and sexual straying, an association not significantly altered by the masculinist constructions of the peripatetic" (247). But to refer to a "possible lack of virtue" is to understate Marian's situation, in which she is kidnapped and raped, in a series of desperate situations that Aurora herself, who is privileged enough to walk in an entirely different mode, never needs to face. As Charlotte Mathieson observes, middle-class women were much freer to walk than their working-class counterparts:

> Women's walking could … carry positive connotations as a feminine pursuit, 'the country lady's amusement', as Dorothy Wordsworth wrote. …It is also often a space of female companionship, providing a space for friendships to form: in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, for example, walking in the woodland solidifies women's connections to one another and to the natural environment. (90)

Mathieson also quotes Rebecca Solnit, who notes that in novels such as *Pride and Prejudice*, walking is:

> …both socially and spacially the widest latitude available to the women contained within these social strictures, the activity in which they find a chance to exert body and imagination. (13)

Aurora's walking seems to fall into just this mode of independence and physical and imaginative exertion. However, as Mathieson goes on to note, for the laboring classes, walking was simply "a necessary form of mobility" (90). A "necessary form of mobility" or worse: while Aurora strolls and wanders in a state of contemplation, Marian flees and wanders in a mode of desperation and madness. There are comparisons to be drawn between both women's walking and sewing (of both fabrics and language), but there are also crucial class differences.

That walking in the novel remains underexamined is perhaps best exemplified by a reexamination of Aurora's famous claim that she chooses "to walk at all risks," which, in context, becomes less a self-aware, triumphant feminist positioning than the cry of a spoiled young woman, made in a state of privilege and naiveté. In context, the "risks" that Aurora refers to include having a headache on her birthday—not quite the "all risks" that the quote, taken out of context, seems to imply. Even if such a headache can be read as vaguely metaphoric or symbolic, it is nonetheless couched in terms—a headache on one's birthday!—that emphasize Aurora's privilege. Looking more closely at Aurora and Marian's walking and movement does provide, in the end, some more closure to the novel's construction of women's walking and work: once Aurora understands the relative privilege of her work, perhaps it is no coincidence that the walking as a theme drops out of the novel—it has accomplished its purpose in providing a mode of comparison and comprehension between the two women.

"Rich and free to choose a way to walk": Privilege, Poetry, and Walking

After being orphaned at age thirteen, Aurora, who has spent her youth in her mother's country of Italy, is shipped to her aunt's house in England, where she chafes against the repressive atmosphere and criticizes her girls' education as amounting only to preparation for marriage. She turns to her father's library for solace and self-education, and later rejects her rich cousin Romney Leigh's marriage proposal partially because of his condescending assessment of her artistic potential as a woman. Early in her story, she describes herself establishing her first inklings of agency by escaping the oppressive domestic atmosphere of her aunt's house:

> It seemed, next, worth while
> To dodge the sharp sword set against my life;
> To slip down stairs through all the sleepy house,
> As mute as any dream there, and escape
> As a soul from the body, out of doors,
> Glide through the shrubberies, drop into the lane,
> And wander on the hills an hour or two,
> Then back again before the house should stir. (1.690-7)

In walking out of the house alone, Aurora manages to briefly escape her aunt and the "sharp sword" of oppression. Immediately after this, she goes on to describe at length her early involvement with books, and includes the first of several lengthy descriptions and defenses of ways of reading, different types of literature, and her own growing understanding of the world of literature and art. Establishing a separate physical space for herself outside of the house sets her up for this psychological independence, an association between landscape and literature which soon becomes further developed. Her wanders through the landscape soon become more directly affiliated with literature and a literary worldview. She describes how:

> I learnt to love that England. Very oft,
> Before the day was born, or otherwise
> Through secret windings of the afternoons,
> I threw my hunters off and plunged myself
> Among the deep hills, as a hunted stag
> Will take the waters, shivering with the fear
> And passion of the course. And when at last
> Escaped, so many a green slope built on slope
> Betwixt me and the enemy's house behind,
> I dared to rest, or wander, in a rest
> Made sweeter for the step upon the grass
> ……
> I thought my father's land was worthy too
> Of being my Shakspeare's. (1.1067-92)

For Aurora, the English landscape becomes intertwined with her own literary understanding of the world, reflecting her resistance of her conventional education in favor of her own self-guided reading. Nonetheless, there is something perhaps overdramatic about her descriptions of her wandering, in which she slips out of the house "[a]s a soul from a body," fleeing "as a hunted stag" from "the enemy's house behind." Perhaps here we start to see a sense of naiveté: her aunt's house is not truly that of "the enemy's house," and Aurora faces no real danger in these explorations, other than, presumably, her aunt's chastisements.

Aurora's oppression is real, but the context of other types of oppression—and willfully so. Aurora refuses to hear her cousin Romney speak of poverty or other unfortunate realities outside of Leigh Hall, and when he tries to speak, she cuts him off:

> … I turned, and held my finger up,
> And bade him mark that, howsoe'er the world
> Went ill, as he related, certainly
> The thrushes still sang in it.
> …….
> … 'See', I said,
> 'And see! is God not with us on the earth?
> And shall we put Him down by aught we do?
> Who says there's nothing for the poor and vile

> Save poverty and wickedness? behold!'
> And ankle-deep in English grass I leaped
> And clapped my hands, and called all very fair. (1.1112-40)

Aurora's early walking is wrapped up in an innocence or willful ignorance that the older Aurora comments on by relating this childhood to an Edenic state:

> In the beginning when God called all good,
> Even then was evil near us, it is writ;
> But we indeed who call things good and fair,
> The evil is upon us while we speak;
> Deliver us from evil, let us pray. (1.1141-5)

The older Aurora's use of Edenic imagery suggests that she now has a greater perspective on her experience and early ambitions, and that she will indeed come to better understand the world and the nature of evil.

The association between Aurora's walking, her poetic ambition, and her Edenic ignorance is established again at the start of Book II, when, on one of these walks, she crowns herself with ivy, meets Romney and firmly asserts her poetic ambitions to him. To his informing her that she should leave poetry to men, she responds:

> … I would rather take my part
> With God's Dead, who afford to walk in white
> Yet spread His glory, than keep quiet here
> And gather up my feet from even a step
> For fear to soil my gown in so much dust.
> I choose to walk at all risks. (2.101-6)

One of the most quoted lines of *Aurora Leigh* is her proclamation that "I choose to walk at all risks" (2.106). But even this line has a privilege and a context attached to it that has not been critically addressed, not least of which is that Aurora is in a position to *choose* to walk, unlike Marian or other women who must wander to find work or simply because they have no place of their own. Even within the context of the verse-novel at this point early in the second volume, the older Aurora has already made it clear that the younger

Aurora doesn't understand the nature of the "all risks" to which she aspires. Aurora's innocence does not make her statement less of a noble sentiment, but it does suggest that Aurora's "all risks" are not quite as unlimited as the "risks" that a woman such as Marian will encounter while she wanders the countryside: real poverty or violence. While Romney's condescension may be grating, and his attribution of her naiveté entirely to her gender wrong, he is correct in that she has no knowledge of real heartache; the "so much dust" that she embraces has no real meaning for her at this prelapsarian point in the text. A soiled gown, to Aurora, is simply a soiled gown, without the implications of sexual violence that it would hold for a more worldly reader. Aurora's risks, in comparison, seem fairly limited: she faces a sort of genteel poverty that requires her to sell her father's books; she would certainly never consider selling her physical self.

Similarly, after saying that she chooses to "walk at all risks," Aurora goes on to say:

> Here, if heads
> That hold a rhythmic thought, must ache perforce,
> For my part I choose headaches—and to-day's
> My birthday. (2.106-109)

The most cited-feminist claim within *Aurora Leigh* refers to, in the end, a headache on her birthday. The actual headache is, of course, a metaphor for broader troubles, which Aurora and Romney go on to discuss, but at the same time, that Aurora and Romney speak of headaches instead of more desperate and specific problems reflects a privilege in itself. Aurora's choice to "walk at all risks" is a decision made within the confines of a sheltered world—a sheltering that, to her credit, she chafes against, but largely on her own behalf, while refusing to discuss real world problems with Romney.

Walking both reflects privilege and suggests a process of maturation. As Aurora becomes increasingly aware of the limitations of her own experience when speaking with Romney in the pages that follow, she points out to him that:

> A woman's always younger than a man
> At equal years, because she is disallowed
> Maturing by the outdoor sun and air,
> And kept in long-clothes past the age to walk. (2.329-32).

That she has not been allowed to mature in any meaningful way is described again in terms of walking. Walking is a process of discovery and maturation, and even Aurora's aunt, when provoked by Aurora's rejection of Romney, uses this imagery. When Aurora confirms that she has rejected Romney, her aunt says:

> "What stuff!" she answered; "are they queens, these girls?
> They must have mantles, stitched with twenty silks,
> Spread out upon the ground, before they'll step
> One footstep for the noblest lover born." (2.576-79)

Aurora's response again portrays walking as a sort of noble poetic endeavor: " 'But I am born,' I said with firmness, 'I, / To walk another way than his, dear aunt' " (2.580-1). Her aunt's response points again to Aurora's naiveté:

> "You walk, you walk! A babe at thirteen months
> Will walk as well as you," she cried in haste,
> "Without a steadying finger. Why, you child,
> God help you, you are groping in the dark,
> For all this sunlight. You suppose, perhaps,
> That you, sole offspring of an opulent man,
> Are rich and free to choose a way to walk? (2.580-88)

Romney and her aunt both misattribute the nature of Aurora's ignorance to nature rather than education: Romney to her sex; her aunt to her age. But in her echoing of Aurora's "I choose to walk at all costs" with a denial that she is "rich and free to choose a way to walk," Aurora's aunt does get at something important. Aurora *is* inexperienced. There is

a privilege inherent her ignorance, even if she herself is not responsible for it. At her age, Marian had been sold by her mother for sex; Aurora has had no possible experience to give her a similar context for suffering. This is not to say that she has no capacity to understand this, or that she desires to remain in ignorance. To Aurora's credit, she does "chose a way to walk"; and she chooses to end her innocence and leave Eden; walking, learning the nature of the wilderness, and becoming a poet are all wrapped up in each other. She says that she will go "To London, to the gathering-place of souls" (2.1182). But Aurora will require a reeducation if she wishes to become the understanding, large-minded poet that she aspires to be. So far in the novel, the walking that critics have so firmly associated with Aurora's early self-emancipation is primarily associated with her privilege, not only by Romney and her aunt but also by Aurora herself.

"She told me all her story out, / Which I'll re-tell with fuller utterance": Marian Erle and the Problems of Ventriloquism

After moving to London and managing to support herself as a writer, Aurora soon hears of Romney, and of his intention to marry a virtuous, working-class young woman named Marian Erle. Aurora goes to see Marian, and then recounts her story to the reader. In it, Marian moves through a very different kind of English landscape than Aurora does in her youth: Marian always lived in a postlapsarian world, which is emphasized in the long wanderings of her family during her childhood.

Marian's story is embedded *within* Aurora's, a structure that brings another element to Marian's inclusion beyond her simple presence, a subtler force faced through *Aurora Leigh*'s heroine: the way that a middle-class, privileged feminism (which was and still is the main source of popular feminist discourse) may fail to understand or represent,

and even misrepresent, the situations and concerns of working-class women. This failure is enacted through Aurora Leigh herself, who, despite her best efforts, misjudges and misrepresents Marian even while telling her story. This misreading is most obvious later in the narrative, when Aurora sees Marian's child—conceived through rape—and thinks Marian guilty of sin. But the seeds of this misunderstanding are evident from the very first time Aurora describes Marian.

When she first meets Marian, all Aurora knows is that the latter is a virtuous, working class woman to whom Romney is engaged. In their first moment of meeting, Aurora describes how "an ineffable face / Met mine upon the threshold" (III:798-99), and immediately describes Marian purely in terms of her class, saying:

> This daughter of the people. Such soft flowers
> From such rough roots? The people, under there,
> Can sin so, curse so, look so, smell so . . . faugh!
> Yet have such daughters? (III:806-9)

Aurora describes Marian in the vaguest terms of class—and with a sense of real disgust for this class: "sin so, curse so, look so, small so … faugh!" Words apparently fail her, in the midst of the very work that shows her growth as an artist—as a poet, no less. For Aurora, the whole working class, then, is a realm that she hardly knows how to address, name, or describe. She can describe an English landscape at length and in highly poetic language, but faced with the English working class, words and vision both apparently fail her.

Aurora's first descriptions of Marian continue in the same vein as the "ineffable face" that she first saw, reflecting her apparent difficulty in describing or even seeing a member of this class. Aurora says that Marian:

> … was not white nor brown,
> But could look either, like a mist that changed
> According to being shone on more or less:
> The hair, too, ran its opulence of curls
> In doubt ‘twixt dark and bright, nor left you clear
> To name the colour. (III:810-15)

Marian is a strange blank here—no wonder Aurora began by calling her “ineffable”; Marian seems very blurry. But can this blurriness be attributed to Marian, or to Aurora? The few specific details that Aurora does manage to provide portray Marian as childlike, with one dimple in her check, “milky little teeth” and an “infantine” smile (III:821-3). Aurora here reads (or misreads) Marian’s mouth as childlike and infantine—when this childlike mouth will reveal some very unchildlike experiences very soon.

In introducing Marian’s story a few lines later, Aurora describes how:

> We talked. She told me all her story out,
> Which I’ll re-tell with fuller utterance,
> As coloured and confirmed in aftertimes
> By others, and herself too. (III:827-30)

Already the text suggests a problem: how can Aurora “re-tell with fuller utterance, as coloured and confirmed by others,” when some fifteen lines earlier, Aurora herself couldn’t even tell the color of Marian’s skin or hair? How is Aurora qualified to “colour” in the details? And why will she tell Marian’s story here as confirmed “by others” first, and “herself too” after? Marian, as a young, working-class woman, is evidently not credible as a source of her story, and Aurora, who herself chafed against Romney and her aunt’s doubting her ability to shape her life’s narrative, in turn doubts Marian.

A note here on the narrative structure of *Aurora Leigh*: the first five books are told in retrospect; in the fifth book the reader catches up to Aurora writing her story as she goes. From then on—books five through nine—the books are written almost as diary

entries, composed part-by-part as Aurora experiences what is happening. So when Aurora says that she is re-telling Marian's story, at this point in the narrative she is not telling it with the knowledge that she will attains by the end of the entire work. At this point, Aurora's account of Marian's biography is colored by her knowledge that Marian never showed up for her wedding to Aurora's cousin Romney—she apparently left him at the altar—but at this point, Aurora has no knowledge of the real reason why (Marian was kidnapped and trafficked to France). So while Aurora is claiming that her biography of Marian has been verified and crafted, she is missing crucial information, and her narrative—and perhaps her willingness to trust Marian's credibility—is colored by Marian's disappearance.

To Aurora's credit, there are places where she indicates her awareness of the difference between her own narrative and Marian's version of events, and she conscientiously acknowledges at least one such difference to the reader. As she begins, she says that

> I tell her story and grow passionate.
> She, Marian, did not tell it so, but used
> Meek words that made no wonder of herself
> For being so sad a creature. (III:847-50)

Already, the text points to two conflicting voices: Aurora's "passionate" and Marian's "meek" one. Aurora's telling of it may be a way to reclaim the proper response—horror and sympathy, and a call for social change, even if Marian herself is sadly accustomed to her situation. Still, Aurora's "passionate" response might also be read as the performance of a middle-class moral outrage that gives her credibility and an implicit permission to give her perspective on events, rather than Marian's. In being shocked by Marian's story, Aurora demonstrates her moral credibility.

But just as Aurora was unaware of the real extent of her naiveté as a young woman, she is also apparently unaware of the extent of her misrepresentations of Marian's story to the reader. Such a misrepresentation is indicated almost as soon as she starts narrating Marian's story: within a few lines of introducing her, she twice refers to Marian as a flower, describing her as a "soft flower" (III:806) and "a full-blown rose" (III:818). She continues this flower imagery later, despite the fact that in the *very first* quote from Marian, Marian describes herself as explicitly not a flower. Marian says that:

> 'There's none can like a nettle as a pink,
> '… We're nettles, some of us,
> 'And give offence by the act of springing up;
> And, if we leave the damp side of the wall,
> The hoes, of course, are on us.' … (III:853-7)

Marian's metaphor suggests that she is accustomed to casual violence and rootlessness, and that she is tired and perhaps resigned to this—and all of this is indicative of a particular class experience that may get lost in Aurora's passion. The reader is left with only a faint taste of what Marian's narrative might have been. The problem isn't that Aurora's a bad storyteller, but that she *can't* tell Marian's story for her, or as her, because she doesn't have the background or the experience.

> Instead, Aurora romanticizes Marian, telling how:
> She told the tale with simple, rustic turns, -
> Strong leaps of meaning in her sudden eyes
> That took the gaps of any imperfect phrase
> Of the unschooled speaker: I have rather writ
> The thing I understood so, than the thing
> I heard so. (4.151-6)

The reader must trust that Aurora has "understood" correctly, and here it is possible that even the poem's readers become complicit in this rewriting. Aurora describes the "imperfect phrase / Of the unschooled speaker"; meanwhile, the reader is reading this

novel in verse because of its gorgeous language and its descriptive power. Would the same reader be reading Marian's account if it were published on its own—if it weren't mediated through an epic work like *Aurora Leigh*? The fact that the reader is reading *Aurora Leigh*—a complex, multilayed, multigeneric novel in verse—may suggest that readers read *this* sort of text, and so Marian's tale must be layered into it to be made respectable, or palatable, or readable. Without this transposition, would the reader be reading a "simple," "rustic," "unschooled" text? Contemporary critical reaction suggests perhaps not: *The Spectator* complained that "The bar of the Old Bailey is the only place where we wish to hear of such things!" (David 118).

With this reception in mind, is Aurora giving Marian a voice in telling her story, or taking her voice away by telling it for her? Aurora acknowledges her limitations, and says that she:

> ...cannot render right
> Her quick gesticulation, wild yet soft,
> Self-startled from the habitual mood she used,
> Half sad, half languid, - like dumb creatures (now
> A rustling bird, and now a wandering deer,
> Or squirrel against the oak-gloom flashing up
> His sidelong burnished head, in just her way
> Of savage spontaneity,) that stir
> Abruptly the green silence of the woods,
> And make it stranger, holier, more profound… (IV:156-65)

Aurora acknowledges that there is something here that she cannot capture, but certainly the description of "savage spontaneity" and the comparisons of Marian to a series of "dumb creatures" suggest that she may not be seeing Marian as even entirely human, and certainly not as anything comparable to Aurora herself. So is there an ironic failure of self-awareness in Aurora's comparison of Marian to a "dumb creature," when it is Aurora herself who is speaking for her, or over her, instead of providing her with a voice of her

own? Or is Aurora, in fact, giving a voice to someone who would *otherwise* have been rendered entirely mute?

Aurora is the most careful kind of translator, and is aware of some of her own limitations. In telling this story, she partakes of a Victorian tradition of working-class autobiographies being told orally to literate middle-class writers, who then recorded and preserved them, providing a high proportion of the only extant autobiographies of the members of the working classes. Mary Prince's 1831 autobiography, told to Susanna Strickland, remains the only extant autobiography we have today of a Caribbean slave; Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* remains a valuable resource for understanding working-class Victorian lives. Marian Erle's memoir comes across as consistent with such accounts, suggesting that Barrett Browning was familiar with these types of working-class memoirs and testimonies. However, the problems with such ventriloquism are also visible in *Aurora Leigh*, and these dynamics remain in tension as long as Aurora is recounting Marian's story for her.

"In which long wanderings, Marian lived and learned, / Endured and learned": Marian's Postlapsarian Wanderings

No critics have yet pointed out the extent to which major episodes of Marian and Aurora's childhoods mirror each other. Despite their tremendous differences of class experience, both are marked with a series of walks and wanders through an English landscape, a self-education from any accessible books, and a final flight from the oppression of family. That their experiences of each are so different points to a tremendous difference of class, but the episodes are nonetheless directly comparable, encouraging the reader to compare the two women as similar, and suggesting that

Aurora's inability to relate to Marian suggests a problematic class-based blindness.

While Aurora chose to walk alone as a way of asserting herself, Marian learned to walk alone at a very young age because she literally had no one to support her:

> … the outcast child,
> For whom the very mother's face forewent
> The mother's special patience, lived and grew;
> Learnt early to cry low, and walk alone,
> With that pathetic vacillating roll
> Of the infant body on the uncertain feet,
> (The earth being felt unstable ground so soon)
> At which most women's arms unclose at once
> With irrepressive instinct. (3.873-81)

The image of Marian learning to walk alone echoes that evoked by Aurora's aunt, when she mocks Aurora's aspirations to walk alone:

> "You walk, you walk! A babe at thirteen months
> Will walk as well as you," she cried in haste,
> "Without a steadying finger. (2.580-2)

For those in Aurora's circle, the idea of a child learning to walk alone is unthinkable even deployed as metaphor; for Marian, it is reality. That a young Aurora can walk out on her own as a choice, and that this very choice can be exercised as a type of rebellion, reflects an entirely foreign situation to that of Marian, whose life is entirely characterized, and whose experience can be summarized, by her and her family's non-stop, compelled walking in search of work.

The rest of Marian's childhood, in fact, is summed up by an account of her family's movements:

> And so passed Marian's life from year to year.
> Her parents took her with them when they tramped,
> Dodged lanes and heaths, frequented towns and fairs,
> And once went farther and saw Manchester,
> And once the sea, that blue end of the world,
> That fair scroll-finis of a wicked book, -

> And twice a prison, - back at intervals,
> Returning to the hills.
> ……
> In which long wanderings, Marian lived and learned,
> Endured and learned. (3.947-61)

Marian's family, on the tramp, moves through England—from Manchester to the sea, from the hills to prison. Like Aurora's first walks, this account is followed by that of Marian's literary self-education, gleaned from parts of books given to her by a pedlar (Marian's innate impulse towards a literary self-education again belies Aurora's judgment that she is unsophisticated).

Later, Marian's flight from her mother and the squire who intends to rape her mirrors the language of Aurora's escape from Leigh Hall, but with a far more pressing sense of desperation:

> And, with force
> As passionate as fear, she tore her hands
> Like lilies from the rocks, from hers and his,
> And sprang down, bounded headlong down the steep,
> Away from both - away, if possible,
> As far as God, - away! They yelled at her,
> As famished hounds at a hare. She heard them yell;
> She felt her name hiss after her from the hills,
> Like shot from guns. On, on. (3.1064-72)

Aurora had described the last of her own childhood wanderings also in terms of hunting, describing herself as "a hunted stag, / …shivering with the fear / And passion of the course" (1.1073-75). Here, it is Marian who is a genuinely hunted creature, and the length of her chase, its desperation and exertion are reflected in the urgent tone of the episode, which is told very much in terms of Marian's movement through this landscape. Roads curl away as if burnt, fields melt, and trees fall back away from Marian, who becomes the epicenter of this landscape, so different from the embracing, gentle landscape which

Aurora had experienced as "worthy too / Of being my Shakspeare's" (1.1091-2). Instead, Marian's landscape becomes increasingly violent and hallucinatory; rather than Marian moving through the landscape, the landscape starts to move around her:

> Then her head grew vexed;
> Trees, fields, turned on her and ran after her;
> She heard the quick pants of the hills behind,
> Their keen air pricked her neck: she had lost her feet,
> Could run no more, yet somehow went as fast,
> The horizon red 'twixt steeples in the east
> So sucked her forward, forward, while her heart
> Kept swelling, swelling, till it swelled so big
> It seemed to fill her body, - when it burst,
> And overflowed the world and swamped the light;
> 'And now I am dead and safe,' thought Marian Erle -
> She had dropped, she had fainted. (3.1077-88)

Unlike Aurora's, Marian's flight really is one of life and death, of real pursuit. Instead of coming to a peaceful rest in a hollow where she can contemplate Shakespeare, Marian faints in the midst of a hostile landscape. The hills that Aurora had so recently idealized as wholesome now run after her, panting like the hounds to which her pursuers are also compared. As in *Jane Eyre*, there is no neutral or simply natural landscape; the landscape itself and Marian's movement through it reflect her situation, in which it would be better to be "dead and safe" than living and threatened.

Earlier I suggested that the similarities between Marian and Aurora point to Aurora's class-based obliviousness to their similarities as women. There is another possibility for reading these similarities: that in telling Marian's story, Aurora is simply projecting her own story, and her own way of organizing an autobiography in terms of walking and literary education, onto Marian. However, it seems that there is enough unique to Marian's story—particularly the history of her family on the tramp—that it is indeed her story, even if Aurora has organized it according to her own narrative

principles, and even though Aurora's influence must run throughout the narrative in ways that are both clear and unclear.

What remains striking is that even after hearing this narrative from Marian, it is evident that Aurora is still insensitive to the way in which she herself moves through the world in a privileged way, emphasizing further her failure to see the similarities between herself and Marian. When Aurora leaves Marian's London apartment in Book IV, Romney points out her naiveté in coming to Marian's neighborhood alone, as a woman:

> "At least
> You'll suffer me to walk with you beyond
> These hideous streets, these graves, where men alive,
> Packed close with earthworms, burr unconsciously
> About the plague that slew them; let me go.
> The very women pelt their souls in mud
> At any woman who walks here alone.
> How came you here alone? - you are ignorant." (4.385-92)

For Aurora, not needing to recognize the nature of a walk—of how and where she walks—is the very image of her privilege. The privilege of privilege is that she can remain unaware of it, and this moves from an ethical problem to a more concrete misunderstanding when it means that Aurora cannot understand the risks that Marian faces later, after Marian has mysteriously vanished from sight. Aurora tries to reassure Romney that:

> As I'm a woman and know womanhood,
> That Marian Erle, however lured from place,
> Deceived in way, keeps pure in aim and heart
> As snow that's drifted from the garden-bank
> To the open road. (4.1067-71)

Aurora's failure of understanding is reflected in this image, and Romney openly laughs at her:

> 'Twas hard to hear him laugh.
> 'The figure's happy. Well - a dozen carts
> And trampers will secure you presently
> A fine white snow-drift. Leave it there, your snow!
> 'Twill pass for soot ere sunset…' (4.1071-75)

The fundamental flaw in Aurora's metaphor is made difficult to dismiss because Aurora introduced her image with the claim that "As I'm a woman and know womanhood." Aurora may know her own version of womanhood, but not the kind that Marian possesses, wherein reputation can be so quickly smeared and violence so quickly done so that the "fine white snow-drift" will "pass for soot ere sunset." That even Romney is so quick to assume that Marian's virtue will soon "pass for soot" suggests how little the nature of an individual matters: no matter how virtuous Marian is, she will soon be tainted. It becomes evident that Aurora's own experience as a woman does not, in fact, give her knowledge over "womanhood" as a category in general, and that in fact, she does not "know womanhood" at all.

Alison Case groups Aurora's problematic metaphor with another metaphor in which Aurora describes herself and Romney in terms of mismatched clocks. Case describes, in both cases:

> …a comparison which seems curiously at odds with her intention, as each points to an end—reunion with Romney, defilement for Marian—which is the direct opposite of the situation it is intended to illuminate. Interesting, the "mistake" in each metaphor lies not in the initial comparison but in the ending assigned to its implicit "plot": the clocks which should align themselves remain discrepant; the snow remains pure in a place where in fact it would be defiled. What is most significant about these mistaken metaphors is not simply the unconscious desires they presumably reveal (desires which the novel goes on to fulfill), but the fact that such desires should reveal themselves precisely in a lapse of artistic control—of the poet's power to make metaphors.
>
> The metaphors hence provide brief hints of a narrator [Aurora Leigh] not fully conscious of her own ends. (27-28)

Case's account is perhaps more sympathetic in reading Aurora's error as a failure of artistic control rather than as a display of ignorance, but in either case, Aurora is on the hook for a mistake that, given stage of her artistic and life experience, comes as a surprise. However, the scene mediates the introduction of what Barrett Browning acknowledged was a controversial subject in Victorian literature—women like Marian—by making Aurora herself fit into a more conventional narratives of female propriety, in which such subjects remain entirely unknown. By including both Aurora's ignorance and Romney's criticism of it, Barrett Browning can present Aurora herself as virtuous but also criticize the social definition of such "virtue."

Aurora does seem to sympathize with Marian by calling her "sister," but this is in primarily a romantic mode, coming after she has learned (wrongly) that Romney is set to marry Lady Waldemar, having got over his loves for both Aurora and Marian. Aurora mourns for herself and for "Poor Marian Erle, my sister Marian Erle, / My woodland sister, sweet Maid Marian," calling her "my Marian," as if Marian's experiences could be directly compared to those of Aurora's or even Lady Waldemar's (5.1095-96). Even as Aurora decides that Romney "loved not Marian, more than once he loved Aurora," she does not recognize that she herself, at that very moment, is similarly failing to recognize Marian herself as an individual, but rather sees her as a figure or an object (5.1108-10). Instead, the misty language that she previously used to describe Marian is again evoked as Aurora calls Marian an "embodied ghost," and she repeats her previous association of Marian with birds, deer, and squirrels by calling her "My woodland sister" (5.1100, 5.1096). However, there is no suggestion that any part of Marian's biography should associate her with any sort of woodland; such imagery is entirely Aurora's. It is telling

that Marian remains as unreadable as to Aurora as a ghost—a not-quite-human entity living a kind of half-life, doomed to wander the earth waiting for something, or someone, to recognize them and hear their story. But it is Aurora herself who is turning the still-living Marian into this ghost, by failing to recognize her or understand her, even while she believes that she loves and sympathizes with her as a sister.

"Then she led / The way, and I, as by a narrow plank / Across devouring waters, followed her": Marian and Aurora in France

This dynamic changes, finally, when Marian and Aurora meet in France. Aurora has sold her father's books to finance her trip to France, where she awaits the money from the sale of her first major work to get to Italy. In the meantime, she spends her time strolling Paris's streets and boulevards and contemplating French vs. English national character, the French government, Napoleon, the place of art and government in a democracy, and more. Aurora writes how:

> So, I mused
> Up and down, up and down, the terraced streets,
> The glittering boulevards, the white colonnades
> Of fair fantastic Paris who wears trees
> Like plumes … (6.78-82)

For Aurora, walking creates space for the contemplation, and her thoughts soon move to the place of art in France:

> Art's here too artful, - conscious as a maid
> Who leans to mark her shadow on the wall
> Until she lose a 'vantage in her step. (6.99-101)

Aurora's description of French art as "too artful" might well refer to the consciously stylized lines of the neoclassical architecture that Aurora has just been describing, which found a counterpart in the paintings of David and Ingres. That Aurora is thinking along

classical lines is further suggested by her evocation of Pliny's "Invention of Painting," a popular subject for nineteenth-century artists. In Book XXXV of his *Natural History*, Pliny includes an origin story of painting, describing it as being invented by a young woman who traced the fire-cast outline of her lover's shadow on the wall before he departed on a journey. Here, however, Aurora reverses this image: it is not her lover's image that the maid seeks to preserve, but her own. Aurora provides a cautionary image: should the young artist lean in to the wall too far, to catch the sharpest shadow, she may find herself at a precarious angle, ready to lose her footing. Art and the artist—here conflated—risk becoming self-centered, to the point of losing a sense of reality. Again, Aurora describes this problem of self-awareness in terms of walking and movement.

And yet the pursuit of art is a worthy goal, as Aurora goes on to assure herself:

> Yet Art walks forward, and knows where to walk:
> The artists also are idealists,
> Too absolute for nature, logical
> To austerity in the application of
> The special theory - not a soul content
> To paint a crooked pollard and an ass,
> As the English will because they find it so
> And like it somehow. (6.100-110)

If French neoclassical art risks much in creating an idealized or stylized image, at least it aspires to something higher or nobler than reality, unlike English art, which Aurora describes as too obsessed with reality and the insistence on enjoying it. In France, there is a place for idealism to help visionaries "[walk] forward."

In comparing art to a young woman who may stumble, Aurora creates an implicit comparison between herself—walking Paris's streets—and art itself, suggesting that it is perhaps not only French art that risks becoming too inward-looking. This comparison

also develops the image of Aurora painting her own portrait with which she began *Aurora Leigh*:

> OF writing many books there is no end;
> And I who have written much in prose and verse
> For others' uses, will write now for mine,-
> Will write my story for my better self
> As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
> Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
> Long after he has ceased to love you, just
> To hold together what he was and is. (1.1-8)

Aurora began her epic by describing a young woman painting her own portrait, conscious of how she casts her image for the future. Now, deep into the work, Aurora's rewriting of the "Invention of Painting" myth here suggests that even if *Aurora Leigh* (and Aurora herself) might be accused of being too self-centered, such art can still "walks forward," as French art does, as there is value in refusing to be content with the ugliness of an English realism. A artistic sensibility, then, that rejects stability in order to preserve the clearest aesthetic may lead to a stumble, but it at least avoids the mistake of portraying an ugly reality and then learning to "like it somehow." If art fails here, at least it fails in the name of beauty and ambition; there is no reason to remain content with an ugly reality.

What would be even better, of course, would be an idealistic but also sophisticated artistic sensibility that knows the details of the ugly realism that it goes on to reject. The image of art walking forward is consistent with the novel's use of walking so far: Aurora has learned to be an artist and an individual through walking the English landscape; here, she gains an element of self-reflection as well, reflecting back on the nature of this career and its goals and risks. But still, these walking contemplations allow her to remain removed from the crowds, even while she is among them. Aurora described how she "walked the day out" (6.128):

These crowds are very good
For meditation (when we are very strong)
Though love of beauty makes us timorous,
And draws us backward from the coarse town-sights
……
… I would be bold and bear
To look into the swarthiest face of things,
For God's sake who has made them. (6.137-149)

Supposedly, Aurora walks in the crowd as an opportunity to actually look into "the swarthiest face of things" instead of allowing the "love of beauty" to make her "timorous". But she still walks in a mode of meditation that removes her from the reality of poverty, and the "coarse town-sights" and "swarthiest face of things" are still distasteful to her sensibilities. In lieu of looking at them, she theorizes how art might help them:

I walked on, musing with myself
On life and art, and whether after all
A larger metaphysics might not help
Our physics, a completer poetry
Adjust our daily life and vulgar wants
More fully than the special outside plans,
Phalansteries, material institutes,
The civil conscriptions and lay monasteries
Preferred by modern thinkers…
……
…plant a poet's word even, deep enough
In any man's breast, looking presently
For offshoots, you have done more for the man,
Than if you dressed him in a broad-cloth coat
And warmed his Sunday potage at your fire. (6.204-225)

Again, Aurora's claims is one of staggering obliviousness; it is too easy for her contemplate how poetry might do more for a man than a coat and a warm meal—she who has not actually faced starvation or the real threat of cold. She does claim that to prefer artistic subjects to that of "ugly, human dust" is "weakness, - strength by no means," but there is also something self-congratulatory in her claim that she would instead prefer to

portray "all the changes of the moon / Among the mountain-peaks of Thessaly" than less artistic subjects (6.167-171).

Were Aurora to travel outside of these more rarified streets, she might gain a different perspective—and indeed, once she moves to a different part of town, she almost immediately has a transformative experience:

> God! what face is that?
> O Romney, O Marian!
> Walking on the quays
> And pulling thoughts to pieces leisurely,
> As if I caught at grasses in a field
> And bit them slow between my absent lips
> And shred them with my hands ..
> What face is that?
> What a face, what a look, what a likeness! Full on mine
> The sudden blow of it came down, till all
> My blood swam, my eyes dazzled. Then I sprang … (6.226-34)

Aurora's happy, contemplative walk, and her meditations on the interaction between life and art are abruptly interrupted by an encounter with a face: not quite the "swarthiest face" imaginable, but definitely a face "of things" with which Aurora herself has never really engaged. Marian interrupts Aurora's "leisurely," indulgent wander through Paris with her actual physical presence, and Aurora's theoretical musings about "daily life and vulgar wants" are here faced with a real life of struggle.

In directly facing Aurora with a figure of real want, *Aurora Leigh* works to engage with the problems of poverty more seriously, less theoretically, by staging the encounter of a privileged feminism with a real woman in need. And if Aurora had formerly condemned Marian to a misty ghosthood by not seeing her properly, she is now punished for it: Marian disappears, ghostlike, when Aurora is unable to keep her eyes on

her. Aurora's frantic search for Marian ends in something of a pratfall; she is run against by:

> A gentleman abstracted as myself
> Came full against me, then resolved the clash
> In voluble excuses, - obviously
> Some learned member of the Institute
> Upon his way there, walking, for his health,
> While meditating on the last 'Discourse;' (6.261-6)

In the face of Aurora's frantic search, this gentleman is made to seem somewhat ridiculous, but he is distracted by just the sort of philosophical abstraction that she had been engaged in before she saw Marian—as an abstracted, "learned member" of some institution, able to walk through a crowd in a meditative haze, walking for health rather than necessity.

Aurora herself does not return to such a state herself: just as Aurora's wanderings through Paris were interrupted by Marian's face, now Marian's image comes to haunt Aurora, interrupting her from her plan to go to Italy and disrupting her musings about art. She describes how:

> That face persists.
> It floats up, it turns over in my mind,
> As like to Marian, as one dead is like
> That same alive. In very deed a face
> And not a fancy, though it vanished so;
> The small fair face between the darks of hair,
> I used to liken, when I saw her first,
> To a point of moonlit water down a well:
> The low brow, the frank space between the eyes,
> Which always had the brown pathetic look
> Of a dumb creature who had been beaten once,
> And never since was easy with the world. (6.308-19)

Finally, Aurora gives a specific description of Marian: she has a "low brow," a "small fair face," dark hair, and brown eyes. Compare this to Aurora's first description of Marian as:

> … was not white nor brown,
> But could look either, like a mist that changed
> According to being shone on more or less:
> The hair, too, ran its opulence of curls
> In doubt 'twixt dark and bright, nor left you clear
> To name the colour. (3:810-15)

Despite her far more specific description, Aurora now says that the face that persists in her mind is "as like to Marian, as one dead is like / That same alive." How much likeness is really implied here? At once, Marian must be the very same, the identical Marian; but at the same time has undergone a sort of sea-change, now that Aurora is paying attention. And it is in Marian's eyes that Aurora finally acknowledges a real sense of Marian's selfhood:

> And those eyes,
> To-day, I do remember, saw me too,
> As I saw them, with conscious lids astrain
> In recognition. Now a fantasy,
> A simple shade or image of the brain,
> Is merely passive, does not retro-act,
> Is seen, but sees not.
> 'Twas a real face,
> Perhaps a real Marian. (6.325-32)

Marian is finally transformed here into a seeing human being. The proof that the face is real, rather than a fantasy, shade or image, is that Marian can see: the eyes that haunt Aurora are seeing eyes. With Marian returning Aurora's gaze, and with Aurora finally noticing and acknowledging this returned gaze, Aurora can acknowledge the how "real" this face is—even if she is not quite able to understand the reality of Marian herself: "Perhaps a real Marian." In this image of Marian's face and the particularly her returned

gaze, Marian at last starts to gain some agency in the poem. Aurora cannot leave France or continue on her own journey until she has come to understand and resolve Marian's situation.

But Aurora's privilege still comes out: Aurora sees Marian across a crowd, and loses her—but she had time to see that Marian was holding a child. Aurora tries desperately to justify the existence of this baby; sooner than believe that the child is Marian's, she supposes that the child is a neighbor's (6.371-3); later still, she hopes that Marian has kidnapped the child rather than borne him herself (6.631-644). While Aurora may have freed herself from some conventional assumptions about women and art, when it comes to sex, sexuality, and violence against women, she is dealing with problems that she herself has managed to avoid understanding, never having been faced with them. When Aurora at last finds Marian, she has a simple proposition: she asks Marian to join her in her journey to Italy, and to come live with her:

> 'I lost my sister Marian many days,
> And sought her ever in my walks and prayers,
> And now I find her . . . do we throw away
> The bread we worked and prayed for, - crumble it
> And drop it, .. to do even so by thee
> Whom still I've hungered after more than bread,
> My sister Marian? - can I hurt thee, dear?
> Then why distrust me? Never tremble so.
> Come with me rather, where we'll talk and live,
> And none shall vex us. I've a home for you
> And me and no one else' . . . (6.449-59)

Aurora's please "can I hurt thee, dear? / Then why distrust me?" is still as ironically naïve as her metaphor of pure snow on the road; Aurora hurts Marian in her very next breath, making her offer of a home (consciously or subconsciously) in terms that would immediately not include Marian's child: "I've a home for you / And me and no one else."

Aurora seems to be in a position of benevolent feminism, in offering to open her home to Marian, and calling her sister. But her vision of classlessness and equality between the two is only possible here because of her very ignorance of Marian's class experience.

Aurora has previously thought of Marian in her "walks and prayers"—something of a cliché—but here she will go on a final long walk with her, in which Marian will show Aurora the reality of her life. As mentioned above, while at first Aurora leads Marian, with Marian following:

> As if I led her by a narrow plank
> Across devouring waters, step by step;
> And so in silence we walked on a mile. (6.482-4)

Soon, Marian pauses and says that she needs to go home, where someone awaits her. Aurora agrees to go to Marian's home instead, and Aurora, for the first time, follows Marian:

> Then she led
> The way, and I, as by a narrow plank
> Across devouring waters, followed her,
> Stepping by her footsteps, breathing by her breath,
> And holding her with eyes that would not slip;
> And so, without a word, we walked a mile,
> And so, another mile, without a word. (6.500-6)

Aurora follows an almost Christlike Marian, following her across waters, stepping in her footsteps, breathing the same air, saying nothing, and watching her "with eyes that would not slip"—intently, carefully, nonstop. There is slippage, too, between the "Eyes that would not slip" and the act of walking; to stop looking at Marian would be to slip and stumble or fall, to disrupt the walk and movement between the two that becomes, at least, a kind of communion. Aurora had thought of Marian in her "walks and prayers"; here, the act of walking alongside Marian (or rather, a bit behind her) becomes a holy act in

herself, a moment of communion with her. Aurora moves with Marian, rather than thinking of her while strolling meditatively on her own terms.

Aurora describes this walk as being over "devouring waters"—what is the danger here, in Aurora following Marian to her home? What is the risk, in waters that threaten not simply to drown, but to devour—to annihilate, to consume, to make disappear? The threat here is that Marian will pull Aurora down into these waters with her; that in following Marian, Aurora must necessarily walk the same "narrow plank" that threatens to destroy Marian every time she goes for a walk, and that in walking it, Aurora risks becoming the same as Marian, with a lost identity, drowned without aid, every trace of her wiped away in the experience of the vast, invisible underclass that has been until now unseen by Aurora herself. But in walking this plank, it is her "eyes that would not slip" rather than her feet. Learning to see carefully and properly resembles learning how to walk for the first time; and seeing correctly is itself a dangerous endeavor. Aurora earlier wrote that "Whoever lives true life, will love true love. / I learnt to love that England." As when Aurora learned to love and understand England on her walks through the English landscape as a child, here she learns how to love and understand Marian through walking after her, and learning of her "true life."

The silence of the walk, too, may be the only way that Aurora can experience this communion: when she opens her mouth, she becomes the mouthpiece for a condemnatory patriarchy, particularly at the walk's end when Marian shows her the child. Unable to deny that the child could be Marian's, Aurora blames Marian for sinning. And perhaps it's because of this—because in the end Aurora doesn't know how to combat patriarchal assumptions about women's virtue, and can't articulate an all-embracing

feminist position—that Marian herself is finally given a voice. When Aurora accuses her of complicity in her "fall," Marian attacks her language, saying:

> … What, 'seduced' 's your word?
> Do wolves seduce a wandering fawn in France?
> Do eagles, who have pinched a lamb with claws,
> Seduce it into carrion? So with me.
> I was not ever, as you say, seduced,
> But simply, murdered. (VI: 767-771)

It's clear that Marian can speak for herself, despite Aurora's imagery of her as a natural, mute, unschooled creature, and also that Marian is sensitive to language, how it is used, and who is using it. " 'seduced' 's your word? … I was not ever, as you say, seduced": Marian removes herself from the word, overturns it entirely, and makes it clear that this language is Aurora's, and not her own.

The image of Marian's face has finally turned into the meaningfulness of an articulate voice, and here *Aurora Leigh* suggests a resolution for this haunting face of women's lack of agency: by turning the image into an actor, the mute into a speaker. Marian says "You feel? / You understand? - no, do not look at me, / But understand" (6.1203-5).

One of Marian's most wrenching assertions is that "They say there's help in heaven / For all such cries. But if one cries from hell … / What then? – the heavens are deaf upon that side. (VI: 1179-81). There is an echo here of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "An infant crying in the night: / An infant crying for the light: / And with no language but a cry" (*In Memoriam,* 54:18-20). Marian produces this poetry, despite Aurora's having called her unschooled earlier in the text. Marian shows that she's capable of participating and contributing at the same level of discourse as Aurora. Marian is not mute, but no one has been listening; Aurora first described Marian's "milky little teeth" and "infantine

smile." It's clear now that Marian's apparent muteness was simply Aurora's projection. Aurora's real privilege, at last, may be that she has access to a platform through which she can broadcast Marian's voice.

In comparing herself to a "wandering fawn," Marian continues to mark the way that movement becomes wrapped up with identity. Similarly, in telling her story, she emphasizes the journey to France, telling Aurora of:

> The blank, blind, weary way,
> Which led, where'er it led, away at least;
> That shifted ship, to Sydney or to France,
> Still bound, wherever else, to another land;
> The swooning sickness on the dismal sea,
> The foreign shore, the shameful house, the night,
> The feeble blood, the heavy-headed grief, … (1203-11)

Marian's journey to France encapsulates her class experience: she is not in control of her journey or of her destination; her only work is to survive and try to maintain her sense of self and sanity. That she seeks Aurora's understanding through narrating her journey is key, especially as it comes close upon Aurora's own contemplative, self-centered wanders through Paris.

For Marian, all she can do is live. After escaping her captors, she says:

> And so I lived: the weeks passed on, - I lived.
> 'Twas living my old tramp-life o'er again,
> But, this time, in a dream, and hunted round
> By some prodigious Dream-fear at my back … (6.1264-7)

In this way the sixth book ends with Marian telling of the journey that has come to define her life.

In deference, perhaps, to finally understanding her story, Aurora does not interrupt Marian's narrative, but gives over the start of the seventh book to Marian as

well. Marian speaks not only for herself but to educate Aurora, who swiftly becomes ashamed of her prior assumptions, and the language she had used:

> … 'Defiled'
> I wrote? 'defiled' I thought her? Stoop,
> Stoop lower, Aurora! get the angels' leave
> To creep in somewhere, humbly, on your knees,
> Within this round of sequestration quite
> In which they have wrapt earth's foundlings, heaven's elect. (7.389-94)

The story is still filtered through Aurora's middle-class framing narrative. But now, Aurora is modeling a reaction for the reader, not shaping the reaction by crafting the entire story herself, and when Aurora interrupts with a comment, she documents both the moments of interruption and Marian's response to it (7.87). Of course, even once Aurora-as-translator is removed, the same tension or dilemma of transcription is still retained on a larger scale: Marian speaks within the context of *Aurora Leigh*, and of course the entire poem is written by Barrett Browning, and so Marian's account of working-class womanhood remains fed through the language of a more privileged poet. But the key here is that this has becomes a self-aware inclusion. By modeling and acknowledging Aurora's error, Barrett Browning acknowledges the limitations of the sort of privileged viewpoint of which she herself—like Aurora—cannot help but be is part of.

In addition to their parallel journeys, there are several other ways in which Marian and Aurora become paired: they are both in love with Romney, they raise Marian's child together, and they advocate for themselves as women from within this patriarchal society, even if from very separate starting-points. I suggest that Aurora's initial rejection of Marian may have to do with a subconscious recognition of this very similarity, and a fear that things can fall apart so easily, and that she herself could become Marian—poor and itinerant, not in control of her fate—quite quickly, within the space of a few rejected

manuscripts. So when Aurora embraces Marian as a sister and partner at the novel's end, she has also learned to embrace the very embodiment of her fears and anxieties about her own potential downward class mobility. In embracing Marian, Aurora is finally able to separate this fear of destitution—which is based in a patriarchal economic system—from its representative, herself a victim of this system. *Aurora Leigh* thus demonstrates that feminism is not simply straightforward rebellion against the status quo on one's own behalf, which is where Aurora begins the poem, but also an ongoing process of learning to recognize one's own internalized patriarchal discourse and privilege. Aurora does this by learning to listen carefully to the experience of another woman, suggesting that listening to working-class voices is not an act of charity or of benevolence, but an absolute necessity to understanding the conditions of all women.

Much of the important work here is framed through moments of walking, particularly through Aurora and Marian's walk together through Paris that leads to the beginning of Aurora's enlightenment. After hearing her, Aurora reiterates her offer to Marian to come live with her, but now extending it to her child:

> …in my Tuscan home I'll find a niche
> And set thee there, my saint, the child and thee,
> And burn the lights of love before thy face,
> And ever at thy sweet look cross myself
> From mixing with the world's prosperities;
> That so, in gravity and holy calm,
> We two my live on toward the truer life.' (7.125-132).

Marian, who has spent her life in a postlapsarian world, now comes to function as a Mary-like figure, whose child has come to educate and redeem Aurora. Aurora's offer also echoes her earlier claim that "Whoever lives true life, will love true love." Her life in England was also a kind of "true life," but now, having walked behind Marian, Aurora

has gained, and will continue to work toward, a new sense of truth.

Anne Wallace points out that walking as a trope is more or less abandoned midway through the poem, which in her view results in a failure to resolve questions of women's work and writing (224). But if walking is read as a way to mediate the relationship between Marian and Aurora, in addition to the advancement of Aurora's poetic awareness, then its dropping out of the narrative suggests that its work has been done, and is completed once they start journeying together (7.395-6). The Romney plot must still be concluded, but in traveling to Paris, reconciling with Marian, and then journeying with her to Italy, Aurora has learned to assert herself as a woman and an artist.

Margaret Reynolds writes that:

> Even if the ending of Aurora Leigh can be read as a triumph, it cannot be read as mature perfected development—but neither does it need to be resolved within that cumulative process, for the strengths of the verse-novel lie in its process rather than in its resolution…. All the techniques… which Barrett Browning and Aurora bring to their writings are suggestive of the disruptive and fluid forms which feminist theory recognizes as the characteristic (and, in some cases, valuable) elements of a female discourse constructed on the margins of conventional literary expectation. The success of Aurora Leigh lies not with its resolving, which given the poem's historical context must always be a negotiated compromise, but with the challenge which its 'lived' techniques of fragmentation and disruption present in the process. (11-12)

Part of this fragmentation, as other critics have noted, is the way that *Aurora Leigh* is both a quest and a romance narrative; one requires self-growth and understanding; the other the love of another. But the self-growth part of the narrative—the quest—revolves around Marian and Aurora. What Wallace sees as the loss of the walking/wandering trope drop out is the culmination of novel's growth/quest element.

Reading Marian and Aurora's evolving relationship as the novel's quest narrative elevates this relationship between women to one of the novel's central concerns, equal, at

least, to that of Aurora and Romney. If anything, it is the more unusual and interesting narrative, revolving around two women, and it is the resolution of this narrative that helps Aurora resolve her relationship with Romney. The Romney conclusion may read as a "negotiated compromise" as Reynolds suggests, but the process that her gets there is the the elevation of women's self-knowledge as central to the novel's narrative of knowledge. In Marian Erle, Barrett Browning produces a speaker for working-class women, and in tracing and comparing the journeys of Aurora and Marian, Barrett Browning uses the walking and wandering of Aurora and Marian to explore questions of privilege and feminism. Aurora begins, perhaps somewhat obliviously, "Rich and free to choose a way to walk," but by the novel's end this walking has been productive and formative in ways that she herself could not have anticipated.

Daniel Karlin reads Aurora's interactions with Marian in a different light. He writes that:

> The organizing intelligence which conducts Aurora to the "threshold" of her encounter with working-class innocence and purity also determines the details of squalor and vice which surround it. These details are like prose which "make[s] a space to sphere [the] living verse"; or, to put another way, a negotiation with social and economic reality allows the poet to gain her real object by sleight of hand. (120)

Karlin points to how Aurora describes the poor in the church at the scene of Marian's wedding, as well, as if "the entire lower class of London except Marian Erle is ugly, diseased, deformed, and malignant" (122), before noting:

> I doubt if Barrett Browning knew how priggish, condescending, and self-serving Aurora sounds when she blesses the prostitute in St. Margaret's Court or wrinkles her nose at the smell of the wretched, but I also doubt whether she would have seen the point of the criticism. Romney Leigh, the representative of social responsibility and material progress, is left blinded and humble at the end of the poem; what remains is not the real city and the task of its representation, but an ideal city and the task of prophesying it. (122)

But as Thorne-Murphy points out, Romney with all of his practical knowledge had still failed to rescue Marian, despite his practical philanthropic intentions. His placement of women like Marian into houses of needlework was perhaps the best available option—but this was a profession with such low wages that many young women turned to prostitution to supplement their wages, as Thorne-Murphy discusses. Romney's ultimate solution to save Marian by marrying her is also clearly an unsustainable philanthropic practice. The reality that Romney has always been so attuned to is simply too limited to deal with the social problems that *Aurora Leigh* presents, particularly regarding women and work, and therefore the novel needs to conclude with Aurora's artistic vision. Like the French painters who might be accused of overstylization, Aurora refuses to be content with the ugliness of reality. But I also suggest that Aurora has overcome what Karlin calls her "priggishness" and "condescension," and that her better comprehension of Marian's situation is central to her ability, at the novel's end, to prophecy the new city. Helen Cooper argues that "Marian Erle can only finally be conceived in middle-class rhetoric, so Aurora Leigh is limited by Barrett Browning's 'traditional humanism [which is] part of patriarchal ideology' a" (187). But the poem itself is aware of and represents some of the limitations of this ideology. Aurora's "ideal city" will now no doubt accommodate more people than it might have at the start of her story.

Barrett Browning's plan was to write a poem about "the practical & the ideal," and her conclusion enacts a new philosophical reconciliation between the ideal Aurora and the practical Romney (*Aurora Leigh*, Norton, 331). Romney still maintains that men must work for good, but has come around to understanding the necessity of Aurora's vision. He says that:

> … men who work can only work for men,
> And, not to work in vain, must comprehend
> Humanity and so work humanly,
> And raise men's bodies still by raising souls,
> As God did first. (9.850-4)

Importantly, it is Aurora, now, who interrupts Romney's vision to add that men must "stand upon the earth / … to raise them" (9.854-5). Aurora now understands, fully, the significance of where she chooses to place her feet, and how to walk forward. Throughout the text, Aurora's artistic maturation has been discussed in terms of walking and movement, and this image is maintained at the last, as Romney describes souls "lightened to redemption" through art's vision, climbing to:

> What height we know not, - but the way we know,
> And how by mounting ever, we attain,
> And so climb on. (9.937-9)

It is her better understanding of movement and privilege, enabled by and enacted through her relationship with Marian, that now allows Aurora to reconcile with Romney, and to acknowledge both the individual privilege and the social importance of artistic vision.

CHAPTER III

"I DETERMINED TO RUN AWAY FROM THIS WRETCHED HOME": SENSATIONAL SELF-INVENTION IN MARY ELIZABETH BRADDON AND ELLEN PRICE WOOD

Both sensation fiction and the theatrical melodrama that frequently adapted it are full of wandering women who elope with lovers, abandon their children, and escape their parents or husbands. Their decisions to do so are typically framed as either the much-regretted mistakes of young women led astray, as in Ellen Price Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Aurora Floyd* (1863), or, more problematically, as indications of formerly unrevealed immorality or insanity on the part of the wanderer, as in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). These women turn their dissatisfactions and misunderstandings with their families, husbands, or social situations into serious challenges to the domestic happiness of both themselves and those around them, and seem to be consistently at the center of narratives that revolve around what Mary Elizabeth Braddon, in a December 1862 letter to her friend and mentor Edward Bulwer-Lytton, dolefully described as appealing to the tastes of her readers for "crime, treachery, murder, slow poisoning, & general infamy" (qtd. in Mangham, 111). Yet even in a genre that portrays the dangers of rash actions, these women are not entirely condemned for their dissatisfactions. In *Aurora Floyd* and *East Lynne*, there is a strong undercurrent of sympathy for both young women's unhappiness, which in both novels results from their sense of lack of control over their own lives. Even if Isabel Vane and Aurora Floyd make bad decisions, the circumstances that prompt these decisions are, in the end, mitigating.

(There is even some sympathy retained for Lady Audley—bigamist, arsonist and attempted murderess though she is.)

What makes these heroines particularly interesting within the context of wandering Victorian women—and the threat they pose particularly anxiety-inducing—is that they have *chosen* to move physically and economically, to wander away from themselves, to leave, and to escape, even when they have moral (or legal) obligations to children, husbands and fathers. While Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe are left to fend for themselves, and therefore must reinvent and rediscover themselves, and Aurora Leigh is free to move to London having rejected Romney's marriage proposal, both Aurora Floyd and Lady Audley choose to make themselves mobile in circumstances that, while they may invite sympathy, also offered them the alternative of continuing their lives as they had been—lives of struggle and probably unhappiness, but not looming fatality; discontent but not danger.

No wonder Margaret Oliphant is anxious. Oliphant identifies these women's discontent as inherent not only to sensation fiction, but to popular fiction that would now be considered more literary. In an 1867 essay in *Blackwood's*, she traces a lineage from Braddon's novels back to Charlotte Brontë, writing that:

> [T]here can be no doubt that a singular change has passed upon our light literature. It is not that its power has failed or its popularity diminished—much the reverse; it is because a new impulse has been given and new current set in the flood of contemporary story-telling. We will not ask whence or from whom the influence is derived. It has been brought into being by society, and it naturally reacts upon society. The change perhaps began at the time when Jane Eyre made what advanced critics call her "protest" in which the world clothes itself. We have had many "protests" since that time, but it is to be doubted how far they have been to our advantage. The point to which we have now arrived in certainly very far from satisfactory. ("Novels" 258)

"The point to which we have now arrived" includes stories of "women who marry their grooms in fits of passion" (259), a direct reference to *Aurora Floyd*; Jane's "protest" refers to the moment where she asserts her equality with Rochester. Oliphant goes on to ask why women writers portray young women as "pant[ing] for indiscriminate kisses, or go[ing] mad for unattainable men" (260). What is striking about Oliphant's complaint is how her examples—Jane Eyre's protest, "women who marry their grooms" or "go mad for unattainable men" are all framed in terms of economic status: a woman marrying below her, or protesting her equality to her better. The stability at stake here is not only that of individual women's dignity or virtue, but how their dignity and virtue is wrapped up in their contentedly staying in their economic place.

This economic issue is not explicitly raised as a point of criticism in Oliphant's extensive essay, although it remains an undercurrent throughout, hinted at again when Oliphant writes unsympathetically that:

> When the curate's daughter in 'Shirley' burst forth into passionate lamentation over her own position and the absence of any man whom she could marry, it was a new sensation to the world in general.... But things have gone very much further since the days of 'Shirley.' We have grown accustomed to the reproduction, not only of wails over female loneliness and the impossibility of finding anybody to marry, but to the narrative of many thrills of feeling much more practical and conclusive. (259)

The "curate's daughter" need only be identified by her economic position, not by her name; "women who marry their grooms" likewise. Oliphant's criticisms strike, perhaps inadvertently, at the issue of economic as well as personal discontent. Although Oliphant doesn't explicitly say it, her language suggests that while her conscious focus is women's sexuality, there is an undercurrent threat to this: that women's discontent with their personal lives is partially derived from their economic, as well as romantic,

circumstances. Curates's daughters complaining, women marrying their grooms: the threat here is not only women's liberation, but what it means for a social ideology that requires them to be content with their lot, not only in love, but in economic class and expected behavior.

The same undercurrent of economic anxiety underlines the moving bodies of Aurora Floyd and Lady Audley. Braddon's novels are particularly concerned with the movements of women who are "supposed" to be centers of domestic stability, not just for themselves but for others. In their movements between the domestic spaces for which they are responsible, and the freedom and responsibility that mark self-invention, these women explore fantasies of the possibilities of real self-invention. Strikingly, neither is successful—Aurora Floyd is reabsorbed into her life as a wife and mother; Lady Audley is consigned to an asylum. Their self-inventions are failures. But the challenge that these women pose to the ideal of domesticity, and the appealing (if illicit) idea of these self-invention both linger. Even while their reinventions are unsuccessful, Aurora and Audley undermine the Victorian feminine ideal. Lyn Pykett observes of Braddon and Wood's writing that:

> The fallen woman... is, on occasions, represented as more pure than the socially accepted woman who stays carefully (and, sometimes, cynically) within the bounds of convention. The heroine who conforms most closely to the feminine ideal is not idealized; she is portrayed as a victim, and the childlike innocence and clinging dependence which constitute the domestic feminine ideal are exposed as the sources of her victimhood. The women sensationalists thus engage in a complex process of negotiating, and, in the end, of revising and rewriting, that feminine tradition of submission and renunciation which was a powerful fact of both literature and life. (*Sensation Novel*, 50)

The question of negotiating, revising and rewriting could not be more apt for these two paired novels, with their similar plots and concerns with women's dissatisfaction, attempts at self-creation, secrecy, independence, and domesticism.

In Ellen Price Wood's short fiction, women's mobility and self-invention is cast in a far more positive, less problematic light. Wood's *East Lynne* has received much of the focus of Wood's criticism, whereas her short fiction has received almost none. But this short fiction does much to undermine the seemingly inherently conservative attitude of sensation fiction towards women's mobility and professional self-invention. Wood's nautical short fiction, in particular, functions as a counterpoint to the narratives of the impossibility of women's self-invention in the sensation novel, and I suggest that Wood used these stories as a chance to explore how respectable women could function in a professional space, and reinvent themselves successfully by traveling abroad and embracing the greater social freedom that comes with travel. With these stories, I draw a connection between the journeys of sensation fiction and the urban New Women of the 1890, and suggest that 1860s sensation fiction, in its exploration of how women might move and attempt to reinvent themselves—even in unsuccessful or problematic reinventions—laid the groundwork for the more liberal short fiction of the 1870s, and then eventually for New Woman fiction, in which professional self-inventions might be truly successful and respectable. New Woman fiction is widely studied as being primarily concerned with women's economic independence, and here, I trace its concerns with self-reliance, independence, and mobility directly back to the sensation fiction that preceded it.

"When a good woman wanders away from herself": Transgression and Reinvention in *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*

Lady Audley's Secret (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863) constituted the two biggest hits of Braddon's career, and established her as a popular sensation novelist and editor. The separate years of their publication, however, belie their composition history. While *Lady Audley* was released as a novel for the first time in October 1862 and *Aurora Floyd* in January 1863, they overlapped significantly in their composition and original serial publication. Braddon began *Lady Audley* for the magazine *Robin Goodfellow* in July 1861; when the magazine folded in September of that year, she put it on hold and began *Aurora Floyd*. She then picked *Lady Audley* up again for the *Sixpenny Magazine*, which continued it between January and December of 1862. *Aurora Floyd* was serialized in *Temple Bar* between January 1862 and January 1863. Braddon described them as her "pair of Bigamy novels" and moved back and forth between them as she wrote (Edwards, xv).

These novels' content reflects their contemporaneity: both feature young heroines who marry well after hiding the fact of their first, poorer marriages from their new husbands and families. Both women also come to be suspected of the murders of their first husbands upon the latter's inconvenient reappearances and subsequent disappearances. And in both novels, the reader is kept in narrative uncertainty as to their guilt, along with the rest of the characters within the novel, and must assess for themselves the character and potential guilt of each woman. It is this opportunity for assessment that made these novels so objectionable for contemporary reviewers, who pointed out that as both women are portrayed as potentially sympathetic, a well-meaning

reader might find themselves sympathizing with them despite their morally dangerous behavior. Similar criticism was leveled at sensation fiction as a whole, and the genre's balance between condemning, justifying, and even taking pleasure in women's transgressive behaviors has been a subject of much commentary since the reclamation of sensation fiction as a subject of academic inquiry in the 1970s and 1980s, a project that continues today (see Elaine Showalter, Sally Mitchell, Jessica Cox, and Lyn Pykett).

However, little of this criticism examines these novels in close comparison. In pairing these novels, it becomes apparent that Braddon has produced two heroines that might be read as thought experiments in how the very same set of circumstances could be revealed either to a woman's detriment (*Lady Audley*) or, in the case of *Aurora Floyd*, not quite to her credit, but to the end of making her an object of readerly sympathy. While many critics have written about themes that come up in both novels (see Schraeder on eroticism and self-expression in Braddon's works, or Jeanne Fahnestock on the theme of bigamy), no one has yet explicitly paired these two heroines/anti-heroines as two variations on the same theme: what happens when a young woman seeks to reinvent herself socially and economically. I suggest that both novels take pleasure in portraying and exploring what is at stake when young women transgress social conventions, attempt to re-invent themselves, and then attempt to hide that reinvention, and that Braddon is interested in if, how and when such reinvention might be considered "justified" or portrayed sympathetically. In both novels, there is something deeply unsettling in the possibility of a woman choosing to leave her husband, father and child to begin a new life—and here, even in the first moment of leaving is the potential seed of future murder, or an indication of insanity. In the case of *Lady Audley*, all of those suspicions turn out to

be well-founded, but the trouble is that a heroine's movements can only ever be an ambiguous indicator of terrible possibilities: in *Aurora Floyd*, the heroine's movements turn out to herald nothing more than a moment of poor decision. A comparison of how women move in *Lady Audley's Secret* and in *Aurora Floyd* suggests a common source of anxiety in both novels: the way that women's movements of virtue and profound evil can become virtually indistinguishable from each other. Everything is safest, apparently, when women do not move at all; at the same time, pure immobility is also shown to be impossible.

Even while there is really no successful resolution to this problem, the moral stakes of the problem are evidently high. Both women are marked as objects of suspicion by the periods of absence in their histories, and by the nature of their movements during both those periods and subsequent travels, which include secret meetings, unexplained journeys, and brief disappearances. Lady Audley and Aurora transgress social mores that require that women's bodies be the carefully guarded physical centers of their moral virtue—and by proxy, the moral virtue of the Victorian household, the heart of Victorian middle-class society. When these women remove themselves from the watchful eyes of others, and re-invent themselves, they threaten the pyramid (Ponzi scheme?) of social values that rely on women's virtue as the cornerstone of Victorian morality. These periods of unaccountability—a few months for Aurora, years for Lady Audley—therefore become monstrously important, not simply to the virtue of each woman, but to the virtue of their households and worlds. In their attempts to take control of their lives and re-invent themselves by rejecting or sacrificing the rhetoric of virtue surrounding women's bodies, Aurora and Audley come to symbolize the potential for a self-sought women's

liberation that threatens (or perhaps reveals the sham of) the idealized domestic tableau of the Victorian imagination.

Lady Audley's Secret

The anti-heroine at the center of *Lady Audley's Secret* reinvents herself so many times that her very name becomes uncertain. Born Helen Maldon, she marries George Talboys to become Helen Talboys; after he abandons her and their child, she reinvents herself as Lucy Graham, governess; upon marrying Lord Audley, Lucy Graham becomes Lady Audley. Which is she?

To decide upon a name is to pin her down, and to commit to a particular narrative of her character. The reader never meets her as Helen Malden; it is a name she has left behind her, with her father. To call her Helen Talboys is to assert that she belonged to the husband that abandoned her and, according to her, drove her to her subsequent mad actions. To call her Lucy Graham is to implicitly assert the validity of her self-invention, even though it is an entirely invented name; and the novel's entire mystery centers on Robert Audley's work to undermine her status as Lady Audley. That this woman has no "real" name is to suggest that she was successful at least in undermining her former identities (Helen Maldon and Helen Talboys), but also that she was unsuccessful in firmly fixing her new, self-sought identities (Lucy Graham, Lady Audley).

That even naming this character becomes a critical decision suggests how fundamentally unstable her identity is, and this uncertainty extends well into how the character is supposed to be understood by readers. Overshadowing her compelling pleas for sympathy is the problem that she really is evil: she attempts murder more than once, sometimes with no concern for collateral damage. She has her reasons, of course, and a

sad history that does something to explain her desperation—but to explain her background is by no means to justify her actions. Nancy Knowles and Katherine Hill note that:

> Since the 1970s, feminist scholars have interpreted *Lady Audley's Secret* as censuring the horrors of women's domestic lives by treating the title character as subversive. The problem with these feminist readings of Braddon's novel is that, in re-envisioning Lady Audley as a sympathetic character, scholars suggest that Lady Audley's actions are praiseworthy and that her primary antagonist, step-nephew Robert Audley, embodies the oppressive circumstances she resists. This kind of interpretation oversimplifies the complexity of patriarchy by assuming that the patriarchal victim cannot also commit reprehensible deeds and that the man who benefits by and defends patriarchal norms does not also suffer from them. (38)

To trace a direct lineage from *Jane Eyre* to *Aurora Leigh* to *Lady Audley* is to similarly risk making Lady Audley too much an object of sympathy. Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe both are compelled to become governesses to support themselves; neither eventually sinks to murder.

And yet, when seen as both a simultaneous mirroring and inversion of the stories of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, *Lady Audley's Secret* can productively be examined as a response to such quest-like narratives of women's economic and individual self-invention. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, the same actions that previous heroines are forced into—travel, searching for work, even renaming oneself—are made deeply suspicious, and the same compelled wandering that, in earlier narratives, indicates unhappiness and suffering on the part of the wanderer—the forced movements of women with no other options—is turned into a horror story, with the wanderer as the main threat. While Brontë and Barrett Browning's works make the journey the point of each story, with their heroines participants in modified quest narratives, Lucy Graham's movements are secretive, the subject of a mystery. In Braddon's novel, women's movements are made

illicit, uncertain, problematic, and dangerous to the stability of those around her. However, moments of narrative sympathy for Lucy, and some implicit criticisms of the over-monitoring of women's movements, suggest that Lucy's desperate movements are as much the result of and a response to an oppressive social structure as they are a challenge to it.

The problem of how to read women's movements in the context of an oppressive society is enacted in the very opening of *Lady Audley's Secret*. The novel begins with the image of women walking: in describing Audley Court, the narrator describes "a broad gravelled walk, down which, years ago, when the place had been a convent, the quiet nuns had walked hand in hand" (1). Quiet, a little subdued: the image of nuns walking reflects the way that they live. As does their walk: these nuns walk alongside "a wall bordered with espaliers, and shadowed on one side by goodly oaks, which shut out the flat landscape, and circled in the house and gardens with a darkening shelter" (1). Architecturally and horticulturally, the oaks and the espalier-covered wall should serve to protect the house, walk, and walkers. But in practice, the narrator's description suggests something rather more oppressive: the "darkening shelter" that "shut out the flat landscape" makes the house and walk sound rather more like a stronghold under siege than a shelter, its inhabitants walled inside. The idea of domesticity under siege, threatened by broad, obscure outside forces embodied by boundary-crossing, too-emancipated women, might be a metaphor for sensation fiction. Tabitha Sparks writes of this scene that:

> The country-house in Victorian England provides a living symbol of an earlier England, a nation unpolluted by the commotion and green of industrial society, and one organized by the ancient code of the aristocratic order. As country-houses typically are passed from generation to generation, they mark the endurance and

> supremacy of old families. The longevity of the country house signifies the stability of a past world. (20)

But Braddon's opening image of the femininity being embodied by nuns complicates this reading; nuns have moved away from families and marriage; these ideal, "quiet" women are married to Christ. Women who are willing to marry, however, by virtue of not having chosen to be nuns, must walk a much finer line between self-exclusion from the world and willingness to enter into it. The decay of the onetime convent—the overgrown ivy, the "broken ruin of a wall," and the now-stagnant well—suggests that that time has moved on, leaving the well-kept and ordered world of convents behind, and that modern femininity must walk a different, riskier path (1).

In contrast to these nuns, who apparently limit themselves to the convent, Lady Audley (then Lucy Graham) is first characterized by her movement through the village, a social, economic space:

> Miss Graham seemed perfectly well satisfied with her situation, and she taught the girls to play sonatas by Beethoven, and to paint from Nature after Creswick, and walked through the full, out-of-the-way village to the humble little church three times on Sunday, as contendedly as if she had no higher aspiration in the world than to do so all the rest of her life.
> People who observed this accounted for it by saying that it was part of her amiable and gentle nature always to be light-hearted, happy, and contented under any circumstances. (5)

Even allowing for their three opportunities to observe Lucy Graham walk each Sunday (presumably six opportunities total, if she walks both ways), the people who watch Lucy Graham walk seem highly literate in noticing and interpreting how a young woman walks. Lucy walks "as if she had no higher aspiration in the world," and this alone is enough to signify "her amiable and gentle nature, always ... light-hearted, happy, and contented under any circumstances." Evidently, where and how a woman moves can be

treated as a reliable indicator of her social circumstances, character, emotional condition, and aspirations. And ideally, according to these first few pages, the ideal walking woman is either a nun or is on her way to and from church.

In Lucy's case, there may be some justification for a careful reading of any hint as to her character, as there is little other information about her available. The reader is told that "No one knew anything of her except that she came in answer to an advertisement which Mr. Dawson, the surgeon, had inserted in the *Times*. She came from London; and the only reference she gave was to a lady at a school at Brompton, where she had once been a teacher. But this reference was so satisfactory that none other was needed..." (5) The history of a woman's movements is central to understanding and assessing who she is, her place in the world, and her respectability. When this history is missing, as in Lucy's case, any available information on how she moves must substitute for a broader history.

A similar close analysis of women's movements is performed by Lord Audley's nephew Robert Audley, who becomes suspicious of Lady Audley's history. After he departs the home of George Talboy's father and sister, having decided to abandon his search for George, George's sister Clara chases down Robert's carriage and urges him to continue. When Robert first sees her, he sees her only as a running woman, a "singular apparition" that first stupefies him, then prompts him to reflect wryly that "It is an age of eccentricity, an abnormal era of the world's history" (196). But the explanation that follows—her concern on behalf of her brother, and her inability to escape her father—soon accounts for her seemingly eccentric behavior, and Robert reflects that "She was different to all other women that he had ever seen. His cousin was pretty, his uncle's wife

was lovely, but Clara Talboys was beautiful. Niobe's face, sublimated by sorrow, could scarcely have been more purely classical than hers" (200). Once Robert can account for her reasons, her strange movements can be explained. Clara, too, is aware of how her movements will be read by others, telling Robert that

> I ran out of the house by the back way. Papa must not see me talking to you, Mr. Audley, and he must not see the fly standing at the gate. Will you go into the high-road and tell the man to drive on a little way? I will come out of the plantation by a little gate further on, and meet you in the road. (198)

Her father would see her movements as suspicious and seek to control her; and she must justify, explain, and then calculatedly coordinate her movements with those of Robert. Robert, having agreed to pursue his inquiry into the disappearance of George Talboys, comes to reflect on the nature of women's walking, speculating how:

> Man might lie in the sunshine, and eat lotuses, and fancy it 'always afternoon,' if his wife would let him! But she won't, bless her impulsive heart and active mind! She knows better than that. Whoever heard of a woman taking life as it ought to be taken? Instead of supporting it as an unavoidable nuisance, only redeemable by its brevity, she goes through it as if it were a pageant or a procession. She dresses for it, and simpers, and grins, and gesticulates for it. She pushes her neighbors, and struggles for a good place in the dismal march; she elbows, and writes, and tramples, and prances, to the one end of making the most of the misery. (206-207)

It's striking that it is Clara Talboys that has prompted this rant by urging Robert to uncover the mystery of her brother's disappearance, and not Lady Audley, to whom it is far more applicable. Here, the actions of Clara Talboys—who acts out of love for her brother—are apparently hardly separable from those of a woman like Lady Audley, who has actually attempted to kill George, and who is characterized by her "[struggle] for a good place in the dismal march; she elbows, and writes, and tramples, and prances." It is Lady Audley that has, done, by far, the most trampling and elbowing, but it is at Clara

that this screed is directed. Similarly, it is Clara that sneaks out of her father's house for an illicit meeting with a man, and it is she that is entirely virtuous.

Apparently, the safest thing for a respectable woman is to simply not move from her home at all—but if a woman must move, the next best thing is evidently for all of her movements to be meticulously catalogued. When Robert continues to uncover Lady Audley's history, he is surprised by encountering Clara in the Audley church. She gives him a strikingly detailed account of her reason for being there:

> "I told you that I was coming to Essex. I left home the day before yesterday. I was leaving home when I received your telegraphic message. The friend with whom I am staying is Mrs. Martyn, the wife of the new rector of Mount Stanning. I came down this morning to see the village and church, and as Mrs. Martyn had to pay a visit to the schools with the curate and his wife, I stopped here and amused myself by trying the old organ. I was not aware till I came here that there was a village called Audley."
> ...
> "Are you going to wait here for your friends, Miss Talboys?"
> "Yes; they are to return here for me after they have finished their rounds."
> "And you go back to Mount Stanning with them this afternoon?"
> "Yes." (257-258)

Even allowing for a somewhat stilted conversation between a man and woman who have something undefined between them, the sheer detail in Clara's explanation is striking—specific names, schedules, motivations, and people that would support her account. A respectable woman, evidently, should have nothing to hide, and can apparently never err too far in documenting her movements.

That such an accounting of women's movements is important is evident in that this is the precise kind of schedule that Robert is working to assemble of a few days in Lady Audley's history, and her refusal to aid him drives the entire novel. In confronting her, Robert Audley tells Lady Audley that:

> You say to me, "I am Lucy Graham, and I have nothing whatever to do with Helen Talboys." In that case, you can produce witnesses who will declare your antecedents. Where had you been living prior to your appearance at Crescent Villas? You must have friends, relations, connections, who can come forward to prove as much as this for you. If you were the most desolate creature upon this earth, you would be able to point to someone who could identify you with the past. (273)

Instead of a history, or the support of friends or acquaintances, Robert Audley instead must rely on the evidence of the labels on a box that Lucy left behind at Acacia Cottage:

> Mr. Audley knelt down to examine the scraps of railway labels and addresses which were pasted here and there upon the box. It had been battered upon a great many different lines of railway, and had evidently travelled considerably. Many of the labels had been torn off, but fragments of some of them remained, and upon one yellow scrap of paper Robert read the letters TURI.
>
> "The box has been to Italy," he thought. "Those are the first four letters of the word Turin, and the label is a foreign one."
>
> The only direction which had not been either defaced or torn away was the last, which bore the name of Miss Graham, passenger to London. Looking very closely at this label, Mr. Audley discovered that it had been pasted over another. (237-8)

Peeling back the layers of railway labels is the same as peeling back the layers of Lady Audley's history: in lieu of any other, the travels *are* the history of her movements, and to the extent that movement confers identity, her travels are her identity. When Robert confronts her with this history, he has a specific timeline to present to her:

> Helen Talboys deserted her infant son—she went away from Wildernsea with the predetermination of sinking her identity. She disappeared as Helen Talboys upon the 16th of August, 1854, and upon the 17th of that month she reappeared as Lucy Graham, the friendless girl who undertook a profitless duty in consideration of a home in which she was asked no questions. (271)

It comes as no surprise to the reader that Lady Audley is Lucy Graham. The question, however, is whether the details can be assembled adequately—and it is only in such details, evidently, that the difference between virtue and evil, and, at worst, the difference between women like Lucy and women like Clara can be discovered or confirmed. It also becomes clear that there is something of a double-standard for men and women's

movements. Needless to say, Robert Audley has no need to report his own movements across England to anyone, and George Talboys, although he clearly repents his own decision to abandon his wife and child without writing, is not held to the same level of accountability to which his wife is held.

Charlotte Mathieson argues that all of the railway travel—this "modern mobility" in *Lady Audley*, both that of men and women, is closely tied into a relatively new "capitalist modernity" against which the secluded Audley Court is contrasted ("Whirling Through"). Daniel Martin examines gender and train travel more closely, and argues that both Robert and Lady Audley's bodies move in "railway" time, connecting the novel to contemporary anxieties about the effect of railway travel on the modern body. He writes that:

> *Lady Audley's Secret* situates the mobilization of women as a threat in need of fixing not because of the visibility of women's bodies in the new public spaces of the railway station and train compartment but rather because of the discreet and hidden circulations of women during the formative years of rail-way expansion…This tension between the novel's two primary railway bodies—Robert's and Lady Audley's—corresponds to contemporary cultural narratives about the democratization of the railway lines in the second "railway mania" of the 1860S. A stock sensational narrative portraying an extraordinarily beautiful woman intent on upward mobility at all costs, Braddon's novel reveals cultural tensions at virtually every point of its narrative of railway bodies. Moreover, it asserts that Lady Audley's secret past is really not so much a personal history that speaks for the social advancement of women as a secret mobility at the heart of women's roles in the public sphere. (132)

Such a "secret mobility" would certainly come to the fore when Robert unexpectedly encounters Clara at a church in Essex; even after she has explained herself, the shock of encountering her there, while he is trying to document the movements of another woman, would linger. If Lady Audley can move, and Clara can move, and Robert's cousin Alicia—noted for her horsebackriding—can move, then there are only degrees of

movement in a modern world, rather than the stillness of the cloistered nuns that open the novel. And it is apparently only through careful documentation that the difference between virtuous moving femininity and evil moving femininity can be ascertained.

But even this difference, according to Martin, starts to become meaningless in a world where everyone, increasingly, moves:

> [Lady Audley's] cunning use of railway travel throughout the novel, as she attempts to remain one step ahead of Robert's investigation, consistently remains a key component of Braddon's narrative. Braddon's deliberate highlighting of Lady Audley's physical mobility (which in turn enables her class mobility) exposes Robert's detective work as ultimately futile. He may eventually be able to arrest Lady Audley's movements, but her body itself functions as a synecdoche of a larger dispersal of mobile women riding the rails in search of upward mobility throughout the early to middle years of the Victorian era. (140)

That Lady Audley is potentially one of many such women also strikes at the question of readerly sympathy for her: while hers is presumanly a worst-case scenario, her explanation of her background and motivations is universal enough that one could imagine many such women in existence. Ostensibly, the only thing that Lucy inherited from her mother was madness. But it is clear that she has inherited a broader female experience from her, an example of and a knowledge of what women's lives can be: misery and sacrifice to no purpose; loss and unhappiness. When Robert Audley offers her the opportunity to flee, she thinks:

> Perhaps it would be wiser in me to run away, to take this man's warning, and escape out of his power forever. If I were to run away and disappear—as George Talboys disappeared. But where could I go? What would become of me? I have no money; my jewels are not worth a couple of hundred pounds, now that I have got rid of the best part of them. What could I do? I must go back to the old life, the old, hard, cruel, wretched life—the life of poverty, and humiliation, and vexation, and discontent. I should have to go back and wear myself out in that long struggle, and die—as my mother died, perhaps. (316)

Lucy Graham asks "But where could I go? What would become of me?... What could I do?" just as Lucy Snowe asked, a few years earlier, "What was I doing here alone in great London? What should I do on the morrow? What prospects had I in life? What friends had I on, earth? Whence did I come? Whither should I go? What should I do?" Helen Talboy's situation is not so very different from that of various heroines of Victorian literature: the motivations, the desperation, and the initial actions are all identical, and the practical difference between her behavior and that of heroines is narrow enough to be alarming. This is echoed, too, in how she describes her initial flight to London. She explains that after George Talboys left her:

> [My] fits of desperation resolved themselves into a desperate purpose. I determined to run away from this wretched home which my slavery supported. I determined to desert this father who had more fear of me than love for me. I determined to go to London and lose myself in that great chaos of humanity. (353)

Lucy Graham's description again sounds like that of Lucy Snowe, choosing to escape her servitude and go to London; Lucy Snowe also very much enjoys losing herself in what Audley describes as "that great chaos of humanity." (Lucy Graham's chosen pseudonym, too, echoes the names of both Lucy Snowe and the objection of her affection, Dr. John Graham Bretton, who has ties both to Lucy's childhood and to her reinvented life in Villette.). Jane Eyre, too, expresses something very similar: "I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing… 'Then,' I cried, half desperate, 'grant me at least a new servitude!' " (72). Helen Talboys / Lucy Graham's plan is originally the same as those of Jane and Lucy Snowe: she becomes a governess—like Lucy Snowe, appearing on the doorstep of a school with no references and no connections.

It is only when Lucy Graham is tempted by the offer of marriage with a rich man that she chooses to accept—and before accepting his offer, she tells Lord Audley to:

> Remember what my life has been; only remember that. From my very babyhood I have never seen anything but poverty. My father was a gentleman: clever, accomplished, generous, handsome—but poor. My mother—But do not let me speak of her. Poverty, poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations! *You* cannot tell; you, who are among those for whom life is so smooth and easy, you can never guess what is endured by such as we. Do not ask too much of me, then. I *cannot* be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance. I cannot, I cannot! (10-11)

Instead of fully contenting herself with "a new servitude," Lucy Graham comes to aspire for more. But is asking for more than "a new servitude" so unreasonable? And at the moment of her decision to engage in bigamy—the first profound, irreversible error that she makes—she tells Lord Audley that "*You* cannot tell; you, who are among those for whom life is so smooth and easy, you can never guess what is endured by such as we." Such a screed may as well be directed at the reader. We can judge her, of course, but she makes it clear at the start that privilege cannot really understand the decisions of poverty.

Lady Audley's explanations do not leave an impression of any real madness on the reader, but only of misery and desperation so intense that they prompted desperate action. While her titular "secret" is ostensibly the madness that runs in her family, this madness is not central to the plot at all, and her narrative would make just as much sense without it. As the doctor says, "She ran away from her home, because her home was not a pleasant one, and she left it in the hope of finding a better. There is no madness in that" (377), and indeed, Elaine Showalter writes that "Lady Audley's real secret is that she is *sane*, and, moreover, representative" ("Desperate Remedies" 4). This is the frightening part of the book: not her madness, but her sanity. The titular secret is a narrative red herring—but without the excuse of madness to "explain" her actions, the idea that a

logical, desperate woman might go to such lengths to avoid a return to poverty is frightening indeed.

In writing of Lady Audley and also of Louisa May Alcott's Jean Muir, from "Behind a Mask," Grace Wetzel observes that:

> Both Jean and Helen suffer unstable environments as a result of oppressive patriarchal mores. When fragmented relationships erode the women's domestic space, they are dispossessed, stigmatized and left socially adrift. Rather than submit to their homelessness, both women act their way into new abodes, hiding the marital wreckage they leave behind. Yet it is not clear that their new roles bring relief, or that the replacements spaces provide adequate shelter. Not only are their identities structured on a facade, they are enacted in a space that is not their own - a space they have won through their husbands' misinterpretation and misidentification of their characters. Beleaguered by the breakdown of space and identity, the women suffer a homelessness of the mind that instigates mental illness. It is my suggestion that unstable domestic spaces and their subsequent dissolution produce an ultimate breakdown of the female mind. (76)

Wetzel concludes that "In the end, there exists no stable space or community for the nineteenth-century homeless woman, who lives staging and seeking identity with little realization or deliverance" (91).

Lady Audley is delivered into an asylum, of course—a Gothic trope that further complicates the victim/villain narrative, and which evokes unfairly imprisoned, inconvenient men and women who are placed in asylums to get them out of the way, as in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or, the Wrongs of Women,* or Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*. As in those cases, the doctor acknowledges that she is not mad, but places her in an asylum as a way to minimize scandal and inconvenience for the others involved. Once she is in the asylum, she will never move again without supervision, and dies not long after of a "*maladie de langueur*"—certainly a vague cause, but one that implies a physical and moral decline, depression, and a lack of movement. While the novel began with the idea of cloistered nuns, Helen Talboys concludes in a similarly cloistered,

walled-in institution, evidently the safest place for a woman to be monitored—but certainly not a solution for the broader problem of unhappy, desperate women who might well use the new technologies of modern mobility, as Martin describes, to attempt similar reinventions.

Aurora Floyd

Aurora Floyd's plot closely parallels that of *Lady Audley*: its driving force is a problematic, unexplainable gap in its titular character's history, which—again—turns out to have included a hidden marriage to a man she thought dead, but who inconveniently turns up after she has remarried, making her guilty of bigamy. And as in *Lady Audley*, the man soon turns up murdered, and Aurora becomes a suspect. In both novels, it is when the female body becomes suspect—untrackable or untraceable, or moves in uncontrolled or unpredictable ways—that these women become dangerous to domestic stability.

But these parallels only go so far. *Lady Audley's Secret* is the story of Robert Audley, who spends much of the novel researching and uncovering Lady Audley's uncertain movements as a key to her identity and character, and Lady Audley is an object of suspicion throughout. *Aurora Floyd* features the opposite: her novel is the story of how her husband John Mellish loves her, knows that she has a secret, and chooses to trust her despite all circumstances, rejecting those who would make trouble for her. For trusting her, John Mellish is not a fool or a cuckold, but instead a good man who knows how to love and value Aurora as she should be loved and valued, and is later rewarded for it. This is not to give too little credit to questions of character—Aurora made one mistake as a young woman, and she does not scheme or plot, or hurt others in attempting to conceal her past; she is perhaps too impulsive and passionate, but certainly not duplicitous.

Further, she marries her second husband after seeing an erroneous notice in a newspaper that her first husband was killed, so it was more of a genuine error than that of Helen Talboys. Nonetheless, that the two novels have such similar plots, and such opposite sympathies, is remarkable, and suggests almost an experiment in making the same circumstances with one woman as victim, one as villain, in very similar circumstances.

Aurora Floyd, however, sets up a less rigid structure for the relationship between women's bodies and virtue. While *Lady Audley's Secret* opens with walking women as nuns or churchgoers, *Aurora* begins with the image of the working-class Eliza Prodder deciding that she is not made for artificial flower-making, and begins an acting career "walking on" stage:

> Being a daring and energetic young person, she left her aunt's house one day, walked straight to the stage-manager of one of the minor theatres, and asked him to let her appear as Lady Macbeth. The man laughed at her, but told her that, in consideration of her fine figure and black eyes, he would give her fifteen shillings a week to "walk on," as he technically called the business of the ladies who wander on to the stage, sometimes dressed as villagers, sometimes in court costume of calico trimmed with gold, and stare vaguely at whatever may be taking place in the scene. From "walking on" Eliza came to play minor parts, indignantly refused by her superiors; from these she plunged ambitiously into the tragic lead,—and thus for nine years pursued the even tenour of her way; until, close upon her nine-and-twentieth birthday, Fate threw the wealthy banker across her pathway, and in the parish church of a small town in the Potteries the black-eyed actress exchanged the name of Prodder for that of Floyd. (14)[4]

As Lord Audley elevated Lucy Graham from governess to Lady; Archibald Floyd elevates Eliza Prodder. After Archibald Floyd marries her, Eliza becomes a generous and diplomatic lady of the house; her being an actress, then, and her movements to and on the stage, are no indication of her virtue. Instead, Eliza's movements characterize her as "daring and energetic," and her lack of contentment with flower-making no indication of

[4] Unless otherwise specified, all citations of *Aurora Floyd* refer to the 1996 Oxford UP edition, edited by P.D. Edwards.

a problem. Discontent and movement, then, is already framed in a different way than it was in *Lady Audley*, in which apparent contentment, as in the image of Lucy Graham at the novel's beginning, is no guarantee of reality. Here, virtue is allowed to be honestly discontent. The novel is careful to specify that Eliza is still virtuous—Archibald Floyd learns that her story is one of "Temptations resisted; insidious proffers of jewels and gewgaws indignantly declined; graceful acts of gentle womanly charity done in secret; independence preserved through all poverty and trial…" (13). But this is a sensation novel that begins with a woman who seeks to do what she wants to do with her life. Her marriage to Floyd was unexpected and never her primarily goal, but her initial movements are part of what make her a vivacious and active person. As the narrator notes:

> Is a star less bright because it shines on a gutter as well as upon the purple bosom of the midnight sea? Is a virtuous and generous-hearted woman less worthy because you find her making a scanty living out of the only industry she can exercise, and acting Juliet to an audience of factory hands, who gave threepence apiece for the privilege of admiring and applauding her? (11)

After Eliza's death, her daughter Aurora is also characterized by her movement cross-country, but by a slightly more vexed version of it: a love of horses and horseback riding. The reader learns that:

> [Aurora] said what she pleased; thought, spoke, acted as she pleased; learned what she pleased; and she grew into a bright, impetuous being, affectionate and generous-hearted as her mother, but with some touch of native fire blended in her mould that stamped her as original... (20)
> …
> The truth of the matter is, that before Miss Floyd emerged from the nursery she evinced a very decided tendency to become what is called "fast." (21)
> ... The young lady spent half her time on horseback, scouring the shady lanes round Beckenham, attended only by her groom... (22)

If Aurora's youthful movements are treated with some ambivalence, they at least also indicate a passionate nature, health, enthusiasm, and vivacity; her being "fast" is accompanied by her being "bright, impetuous being, affectionate and generous-hearted"; an "original."

In their introduction to the novel, Richard Nemesvari and Lisa Surridge note that such riding would have been understood in the context of contemporary debates about women on horseback which arose in the 1850s and 1860s. They write that "Aurora's love of riding… acts as a kind of shorthand for her rejection of the drawing-room world of chaperoned Victorian femininity, and for her passionate and impulsive (unfeminine) character" (20). However, this in itself is not necessarily an entirely bad thing. In comparing Aurora to her cousin Lucy, they note that:

> Lucy represents the perfection of conventional womanhood: her education and manners are faultless; her emotions are impeccably controlled; she is beautiful, loving, submissive, protected by her mother and ready for the protection of a husband. The text does not criticize Lucy, but undercuts the ideal itself as infantilized, ignorant, hemmed in, and—most damning of all—boring: "There are so many Lucys but so few Auroras." (22)

P.D. Edwards notes another side to Aurora's love of horses, and identifies Aurora as being a recognizable literary relation to Catherine "Skittles" Walters, "the most notorious of the high-class courtesans who began to frequent Hyde Park in the late 1850s, flaunting their seductive charms as they drove their stylish and expensive pony carriages along the Lady's Mile" (xi). Skittles was the mistress of Lord Hartington, son of the Duke of Devonshire, and the subject of a Landseer painting that became known as "The Pretty Horsebreaker," which, Edwards writes, "quickly became a euphemism not only for Walters herself but for her profession" (xi). This painting, presented at the 1861 Royal Academy Exhibition and titled *The Shrew Tamed*, shows a young woman relaxing, eyes

half-closed, against the side of a powerful, quiet horse. (The young woman bears a resemblance to Braddon's descriptions of Aurora, and the painting has been used for the past several editions of the Oxford World's Classics edition of the novel).

And it is these problematic connotations of riding that prompt Aurora's father to send her to France. After Aurora spends an inappropriately long afternoon out riding with a groom, her father sends her to a finishing school in France. But when she returns, "A year had changed the girl to a woman—a woman with great hollow black eyes, and pale, haggard cheeks. The course of study at the Parisian finishing school had evidently been too hard for the spoiled heiress" (24). When Aurora is sent to a finishing school, and her movement shut down, she comes back ill and unhappy. (Granted, the reader does not yet know that she did not spend the year at school, but instead spent it illicitly travelling with her abusive husband.) The point still holds, however, that *Aurora Floyd* establishes a complicated relationship between women's movements, happiness, health, and virtue: although her father tries to reign in Aurora's movements by sending her to France, she returns unhappy and unhealthy.

However, *Aurora Floyd* presents more perspectives on Aurora's movements than are portrayed in *Lady Audley's Secret*, in which Robert Audley alone is chiefly responsible for tracking and opining on her. At one extreme is Talbot Bulstrode, her first love, who represents a very old-fashioned moral austerity toward women, and finds himself drawn to Aurora despite his initial disgust at her interest in horseracing. He learns of her missing year in France from his mother, who writes to him that:

> … a Miss Floyd was brought to the Demoiselles Lespard by her father last June twelvemonth, and that less than a fortnight after arriving at the school she disappeared; her disappearance of course causing a great sensation and an immense deal of talk among the other pupils, as it was said she had *run away*. The

> matter was hushed up as much as possible; but you know that girls will talk, and from what Constance tells me, I imagine that very unpleasant things were said about Miss Floyd. Now you say that the banker's daughter only returned to Felden Woods in September last. *Where was she in the interval*?" (101)

When Talbot confronts Aurora, she tells him that she cannot tell him what happened during those sixteen months, and he therefore rejects her:

> "You cannot tell me! There is upward of a year missing from your life; and you cannot tell me, your betrothed husband, what you did with that year?"
> "I cannot."
> "Then, Aurora Floyd, you can never be my wife." (104)

When she asks him for pity, he tells her "Pity! … *Pity*! Why do you not ask me for *justice*?", and goes on to tell her that "the past life of my wife must be a white unblemished page, which all the world may be free to read" (104-5). Soon after, when Aurora falls ill, he blames himself and suffers, but he does not return to her, or consider renewing their engagement. Bulstrode is later perfectly matched with the domestic, quiet, and spotless Lucy, although there is no question why he would have been more attracted to Aurora at the start: she is fascinating in a way that Lucy could never be. Bulstrode's position, though certainly that of any respectable society, here is portrayed as a flaw, a product of his misplaced pride that costs him the possibility of happiness with Aurora. He is unable to see past his prejudice about appropriate behavior for women, and therefore becomes—not quite a villain, but certain an object of little sympathy and some disdain. Later, when Aurora goes to his wife (her cousin) Lucy for advice, she asks him:

> "Is it wrong of Aurora to come alone, Talbot, dear?" Lucy asked, meekly.
> "Is it wrong?" repeated Mr. Bulstrode, fiercely. "Would it be wrong for you to go tearing from here to Cornwall, child?"
> He was irritated by the mere imagination of such an outrage, and he looked at Lucy as if he half suspected her of some such intention. (349-50)

Bulstrode's rigidity is made ridiculous here, his fierceness and irritation over-the-top and misplaced.

While Bulstrode's strict position on women's respectability is portrayed as too lofty and cold, the novel also shows men who support and love her, and these are the heroes of the novel. Aurora's father embraces her on her return to him, knowing the history of her marriage. John Mellish, too, is a wonderfully warm character who trusts her. The scene of their engagement is in direct contrast to the break between Aurora and Bullstrode, and comes only two chapters later:

> She told him of the missing year in her young life; how Talbot had called upon her for an explanation, and how she had refused to give it. John listened to her with a thoughtful face, which broke out into sunshine as she turned to him and said—
>
> "How would you have acted in such a case, Mr. Mellish?"
>
> "How should I have acted, Aurora? I should have trusted you. But I can give you a better answer to your question, Aurora. I can answer it by a renewal of the prayer I made you five minutes ago. Be my wife."
>
> "In spite of this secret?"
>
> "In spite of a hundred secrets. I could not love you as I do, Aurora, if I did not believe you to be all that is best and purest in woman. I cannot believe this one moment, and doubt you the next. I give my life and honor into your hands. I would not confide them to the woman whom I could insult by a doubt." (126)

From this point onwards, the tension of the novel is partially whether Aurora is guilty, and of what, but also of whether Mellish's moving trust in her is well-placed, and whether it will endure.

His trust endures despite Aurora's continuing suspicious movements, which sound so much like those of Lady Audley: she goes out at night; she walks unsupervised. The nosy companion Mrs. Powell spies on her, and when Aurora walks out of the house at night, asks "What, in the name of all that was darkly mysterious, could Mrs Mellish have to do between nine and ten o'clock on the north side of the Park—the wildly kept,

deserted north side, in which, from year's end to year's end, no one but the keepers ever walked?" (204) John Mellish, too, notes these movements and wonders at them. When Aurora insists they go to see her father without giving a reason, he marvels: "She goes out late last night, and roams about the garden, and comes in wet through and through, and says she must come to London about money matters. What should she want with money matters?" (222) Aurora's movements around the park, and to and from London, mirror those much more troubling movements of Lady Audley; her moving, uncertain body comes to embody her own history and secrets: those of illicit movements and uncertainty.

> But in the end, John Mellish chooses to trust her, telling Mrs. Powell that:
>
> > Whatever directions Mrs Mellish has given are sure to be right; I won't interfere with them... I should be very sorry to say anything likely to offend you, in your character of—of a guest beneath my roof; but I shall take it as a favor to myself if you will be so good as to remember that I require no information respecting my wife's movements from you, or from any one. Whatever Mrs Mellish does, she does with my full consent, my perfect approbation. Cæsar's wife must not be suspected, and, by Jove, ma'am!—you'll pardon the expression,—John Mellish's wife must not be watched. (269)

John Mellish tellingly misdeploys the phrase "Caesar's wife must not be suspected": Caesar *did* divorce his wife, Pompeia, after her conduct came under a shadow of doubt; and the phrase derives from his explanation of his decision to divorce her, and his reasoning that any woman who places herself in circumstances that might give rise to speculation or suspicion is unfit to be his wife. Here, Mellish inverts the phrase to suggest that Aurora should not be suspected or watched *because* she is his wife; it is not the behavior that is at fault, but the watcher. The coldness of the austere Talbot Bulstrode is, in fact, very much like that of Caesar; both broke off a marriage because of a suspicion only. John Mellish is presented as an alternative—and a more admirable one. His lack of

awareness of classical history is overshadowed by the moving trust that he places in Aurora, who, it seems, can and should be trusted with her secrets.

Of course, Aurora is no ordinary woman, and this sort of classical history is regularly evoked in descriptions of her. She is compared to Cleopatra no fewer than seven times over the course of the novel; to Semirade twice; she is called "an Eastern empress," and in one passage Bulstrode reflects on how:

> She is like Mrs. Nisbett in her zenith of fame and beauty; she is like Cleopatra sailing down the Cydnus; she is like Nell Gwynne selling oranges; she is like Lola Montez giving battle to the Bavarian students; she is like Charlotte Corday with the knife in her hand, standing behind the friend of the people in his bath; she is like everything that is beautiful, and strange, and wicked, and unwomanly, and bewitching; and she is just the sort of creature that many a fool would fall in love with. (47)

Such exceptionalism is very much at the root of Aurora's story; the narrator notes that "There are so many Lucys but so few Auroras" (48). The things that make Aurora special and compelling are the same things that produce a turbulent—but notable and extraordinary—life.

At the end, the narrator, in analyzing her case, writes that:

> …it had been her fate always to take the wrong step, always to be misled by the vague finger-posts upon life's high-road, and to choose the longest, and the crookedest, and hardest way towards the goals she sought to reach.
>
> Had she, upon the discovery of the first husband's infidelity, called the law to her aid—she was rich enough to command its utmost help—she might have freed herself from the hateful chains so foolishly linked together, and might have defied this dead man to torment or assail her.
>
> But she had chosen to follow the counsel of expediency, and it had led her into thorny and crooked ways. Her own hands had sown the dragon's teeth, from whose evil seed had sprung up armed men, strong enough to rend and devour her. But then, if she had been faultless, she could not have been the heroine of this story; for has not some wise man of old remarked, that the perfect women are those who leave no histories behind them, but who go through life upon such a tranquil course of quiet well-doing as leaves no footprints on the sands of time; only mute records hidden here and there, deep in the grateful hearts of those who had been blest by them. (393-4)

The walking imagery here is notable, beginning with Aurora's fated tendency to "be misled" from the "high-road." Instead, Aurora is like those women whose names *have* been written in history: Cleopatra, Semirade, Mrs. Nisbitt, Nell Gynne, Lola Montez, and Charlotte Corday. All of these women move in extraordinary ways, in places that are considered unusual or not-respectable for women: Marat's bath; the stage; the throne of Egypt. (Incidentally, after Caesar's death, Cleopatra and Marc Antony challenged Caesar's son for the throne of Egypt. Just as Cleopatra outlived and undermined her first husband, Aurora ultimately surpasses her fiancée Bulstrode.)

Strikingly, the above text reflecting on Aurora's fate and her place in history is not quite the text that Braddon originally wrote. At some point between the 1862 *Temple Bar* original publication and the 1886 Stereotyped version on which the current Oxford World's Classics edition is based, Braddon made a few adjustments. In the original, she wrote that "Had she, upon the discovery of her first husband's infidelity, called the law to her aid, —she was rich enough to command its utmost help, through Sir Cresswell Cresswell did not then keep the turnpike upon such a royal rode to divorce as he does now, —she might have freed herself…" (*Temple Bar*, 535) In the later edition, Braddon eliminates the timely reference to Cresswell Cresswell, a politician and judge who was doing much to modernize divorce proceedings in England just as Braddon was writing in 1862. The acknowledgement that Aurora would have had difficulty in obtaining a divorce in the late 1850s, and further that class and wealth would also have something to do with the availability of such a divorce, is later elided, a decision that places more of the blame on her rather than on her circumstances.

The question of explanation and blame comes up most clearly when Braddon erases a complete sentence from the second paragraph. After "But she had chosen to follow the counsel of expediency, and it had led her into thorny and crooked ways" the text originally reads: "I feel that there is much need of apology for her. Her own hands had sown the dragon's teeth…" (535). The changes fit with Braddon's efforts, over the course of her 1860s and 1870s editorship of both *Temple Bar* and *Belgravia*, to defend sensation fiction as a respectable and morally helpful genre. Perhaps, went she went back to re-edit *Aurora Floyd*, she softened its original sympathies for Aurora in the novel's concluding pages, tacitly acknowledging that they were perhaps too apologetic for her behavior. (An 1863 two-volume German edition maintains the earlier *Temple Bar* text, as does the English 1863 three-volume edition published by Tinsley Brothers. The changes, therefore, were not immediate upon the novel's republication from serial to novel, but came later.)

In the same pages, Braddon also originally wrote that "the perfect women were those who left no histories behind them, but went through life upon such a tranquil course of quiet well-doing as left no footprints on the sands of time" (*Temple Bar,* 535). Later, she changed this to present tense: "the perfect women are those who leave no histories behind them, but who go through life upon such a tranquil course of quiet well-doing as leaves no footprints…" (393). The original evokes a historical past, in which women could live quietly and leave behind no trace. Once, those were "perfect" women; now, such perfection is impossible. And in any case, it is clear that Aurora could never have been such a woman; from her first appearances in the novel, she is admiringly compared to such prominent women in history such as Cleopatra or Semirade. Obscurity is not a

standard, clearly, by which Aurora should ever have been judged, and Braddon's original past-tense suggests that this idea was always rather obsolete; it is the idea of "some wise man of old," not of any modern thinker. But when Braddon shifts this to present tense—to "the perfect women *are* those who leave no histories behind them"—she removes much of the implied criticism from the idea, and shifts the idea of modern femininity back into a more traditional age, making it sound rather more as if she were on board with the sentiment.

Why would Braddon bother with making such small tweaks to the text? Because these changes *are* important: they direct the reader's sympathies for Aurora, and suggest much about how the reader should feel about traditional and modern femininity, extraordinary women, and Aurora's own secret history. This feminism, at least in these particular passages, is very much based in the narrator's defense, both explicit and implicit through imagery, of how Aurora moves, why she moves, and whether her movements should be trusted.

That Braddon subtly changed them later suggests that she later thought better of this overt feminism, particularly as she later worked to establish her own credibility and respectability in a genre that was often attacked on the basis of both. However, the unchanged ending, in which Mellish's moving and ultimately rewarded faith in her suggests, still retains the original message. In the end, Aurora is acquitted of the murder of James Conyers, and John Mellish legitimizes their marriage by marrying her again. At the novel's end, the narrator notes that:

> … we leave Aurora, a little changed, a shade less defiantly bright, perhaps, but unspeakably beautiful and tender, bending over the cradle of her first-born; and though there are alterations being made at Mellish, and loose-boxes for brood mares building upon the site of the north lodge, and a subscription tan-gallop

> being laid across Harper's Common, I doubt if my heroine will ever again care so much for horseflesh, or take quite so keen an interest in weight-for-age races as compared to handicaps, as she has done in days that are gone. (459)

Aurora's love of horses may have been mediated, but her mobility is not as cut off as that of Lady Audley. While Aurora is married and now leans over a cradle instead of over a manger, she still travels: Aurora and Mellish travel to and around France in order to recover from their experiences, and their child is born in Nice. While Aurora has learned a hard lesson about the moving wisely, she nonetheless ends the novel with access to horses and travels back to France, and the same disastrous terrain that began her marriage to Conyers is transformed into the terrain of a healthy marriage.

The prospect of women creating respectable, independent identities for themselves outside of the home and separate from marriage is not yet visible in these two novels. However, Ellen Price Wood's short fiction suggests a bridge between the discontent and optionless women of Braddon's sensation fiction and the motivated professional women that characterize New Woman novels later in the century.

Ladies Who Launch: *The Argosy* Magazine and Ellen Price Wood's Perilous Voyages[5]

Despite a literary career that spanned more than three decades, Ellen Price Wood is recognized chiefly as the author of the 1861 novel *East Lynne*, in which the Lady Isabel Vane abandons her husband and children to elope. Abandoned in her turn, unrecognizable due to a terrible injury from a train crash (the same engine of modernity that enabled Lady Audley's movements), and thought to be dead, she returns to her remarried husband in disguise as governess to her own children. Along with Wilkie

[5] A version of this section has been published as an essay titled "Ladies Who Launch: The *Argosy* Magazine and Ellen Price Wood's Perilous Voyages" in the journal *Women's Writing.* This material is included here with the permission of Taylor & Francis Group.

Collins's *The Moonstone* of 1860 and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* of 1862, *East Lynne* is widely considered to mark the beginnings of sensation fiction. It was also a smash hit, selling, according to Wood's publishers, 430,000 copies by the end of the century (Altick 385). But if *East Lynne* was so fantastically successful and remains (in various transfigurations) culturally relevant today, critical consensus is less certain what to make of Wood's final say on gender and domesticity. Deborah Wynne describes how *East Lynne* works to reinforce Victorian middle-class domestic ideals, while Sally Mitchell suggests that it both reinforces and questions them (Wynne 62; Mitchell 42). Given Wood's prominent position in the genre (according to her publishers, she sold two and a half million copies of more than 25 books between 1860 and 1898), the question of how she treats gender become important to understanding both Wood herself and sensation fiction as a genre (Altick 385).

Coming at these questions of genre via *East Lynne* is complicated by its status as one of Wood's earliest novels. I argue here that *East Lynne* should not necessarily be considered representative of Wood's fiction, or of her long-term attitudes regarding gender. Six years after publishing the novel, Wood became owner and editor of *The Argosy*: *A Magazine of Tales, Travels, Essays, and Poems*. The short fiction published within *Argosy* features heroines who manage to be entirely respectable while willing to transgress what are portrayed as too-strict social codes. If *East Lynne* critiques unfair marriage laws and structures of power, it is largely through emotional appeals to the reader on behalf of the regretful and miserable Isabel Vane—a tactic that Margaret Oliphant critiqued as "dangerous and foolish" (*Sensation Novels*, 567). In contrast, the heroines of the *Argosy*'s short fiction crisply articulate their moral and social positions

while behaving properly, winning the reader's good opinion through appealing to logic and moral approbation—and also inviting the reader to question some of the too-strict social codes that makes these women's lives difficult. I suggest that these stories, some published more than a decade after *East Lynne*, show a strongly progressive attitude in their portrayal of women in a professional sphere, and even anticipate the New Woman fiction that wouldn't fully emerge for another twenty years. While they are not seldom travelling for overtly economic reasons (with the potential exception of Louisa Bellamy, who is "Going to India for a Rich Husband"), Wood's women's entrance into the public and economic space of the ship—a vessel of global trade and the workplace of its captain and sailors—further emphasized that woman can enter into economic sphere successfully, if they are only given the opportunity and treated reasonably by the people around them.

To begin, I provide an overview of Wood's life, the details of her editorship, and current criticism on her works. I then move to several of the short nautical stories published in *Argosy* during her tenure—some signed by Wood, some by other writers, and some unsigned. While looking at these stories, I examine how the ship functioned in the Victorian popular imagination, the often-troubled position of women on board, and how women's movements in and through the private/professional space of the ship reflects the potential for women's respectable self-invention. Finally, I return to the question of genre, and the relation between these progressive stories and the New Woman literature that was to follow.

Wood had a personal stake in exploring the place of women in areas of professional authority. When she took over the editorship of the family magazine *Argosy*

in 1867, she was fifty-three, and had been writing to support herself and her family for more than years (her husband's business had failed around 1856, and he died in 1866). She had longstanding health problems, one symptom of which was "curvature of the spine," the result of which was that stood under five feet tall and had little physical strength (C.W. Wood 36-37). She completed most of her writing while sitting in a reclining chair (42). Nor was her professional life an easy one: *Argosy* had a particularly and recently troubled editorial past when Wood purchased it. Its first editor, Isa Craig, was replaced after serializing Charles Reade's *Griffith Gaunt*, a sensation novel featuring bigamy. Publisher Alexander Strahan, worried that a contaminated reputation might spread to his other family magazines, sold the *Argosy* to Wood in October of 1867. December 1867's issue seems to be the first that shows Wood's influence, and the magazine's bound volume gained an unsubtle inscription on its title page: "Laden with Golden Grain." (I have been unable to ascertain whether this inscription also appeared on the covers of the *Argosy*'s individual issues; the texts available in online databases have been bound into volumes without their covers. The only original cover I have been able to find is from the July 1891 issue, and it does feature the motto "Laden with Golden Grain" [Payne].)

After Wood's takeover, *Argosy* became a somewhat different magazine. The November 1867 issue—the last before Wood's influence began—included three stories, two poems, two essays, one travel narrative, and the conclusion of a six-part story: nine pieces, by nine different contributors. It was a magazine with diverse content, many contributors, and a family-oriented aesthetic; previous issues had included material that seems to have been aimed at children (George MacDonald's "A Journey Rejourneyed,"

from *Argosy*'s first issue, is narrated by a child). The next issue, Wood's first, from December 1967, included the beginning of her novel *Anne Hereford*; an essay by Hesba Stretton; a story (unattributed) by Thomas Wilkinson; three essays and one story, all anonymous; and a short poem by "T." (William Makepeace Thackeray). Two of the unattributed pieces can certainly be credited to Wood ("Past Sensationalists" and "Our Log-Book"), and according to her son, she regularly contributed a substantial amount of unsigned fiction to the *Argosy* (C. W. Wood 255). With Wood's arrival, *Argosy* had become a one-woman show. Later issues did feature more contributors, but *Argosy*'s roster of regular writers never reached the same diversity that it had prior to Wood's editorship. Instead, the popular new contributor "Johnny Ludlow" was added in January 1868—a masculine pen name for Wood herself.

Wood was successful: Jennifer Phegley notes that under Wood's editorship, *Argosy* reached an average monthly circulation of 20,000; in comparison, *Belgravia*'s average was 16,000 (*Domesticating* 186). But despite her long-term editorship, Wood maintained a public image that was closer to that of a passenger on than captain of the *Argosy*. Her creation of her public image has been well-documented and explored by Jennifer Phegley, Beth Palmer, and Deborah Wynne. To briefly reiterate, Wood wrote under the name "Mrs. Henry Wood," conducting her professional activities under the aegis of her husband's name, even long after his death. She constantly emphasized that her work as editor did not come at the cost of her family life, a wifely image reinforced by her son Charles W. Wood in her 1894 biography, published seven years after her death. He wrote that:

> It has been said of many literary people that they are not domesticated. It was not so with Mrs. Henry Wood. … The happiness of those about her was ever her first

> thought and consideration. Her house was carefully ruled, and order and system reigned. (227)

Wood and her son, then, positioned her squarely in the domestic sphere; supposedly, the only real authority she wielded was over her household. And yet *Argosy* must have been significantly intertwined with her home life, to say the least, given the amount of writing she was doing.

Much of this writing had a specific goal: Jennifer Phegley examines Wood's letters, editorials, and *Argosy*-serialized novel *Anne Hereford* to reveal the careful and self-conscious construction of a respectable literary persona. She writes that Wood "used her editorial power to separate herself from the discredited throng of scandalous sensation novelists with whom she was sometimes identified, and instead defined herself as a purveyor of a more respectable genre of fiction that I call domesticated sensationalism" (*Domesticating* 184). Phegley suggests that Wood should not be dismissed as the most domestic of the sensation novelists, but rather understood as an impressive professional woman very much aware of and participatory in the process of creating a respectable public persona, even while writing in what was widely regarded as a less-than-respectable genre. Beth Palmer, in *Women's Authorship and Editorship in Victorian Culture: Sensational Strategies*, also addresses the topic of respectability and sensation fiction, and suggests that this process of creating a public persona was in fact typical for the small group of women editors (such as Wood, Braddon, and Florence Marryat) that:

> [saw] sensation as a series of performances and its authorship as a performative activity. Their work as authors and editors in the periodical press allowed women sensationalists to home their skills for sensational performance. The press was their stage, and imagining it as such allowed them to exert authority in a male-dominated magazine market. (1)

It may seem counterintuitive, but according to this account Wood's performance as a respectable and explicitly domestic woman aided her authority in her chosen professional sphere, a reading that is consistent with my reading of her short fiction.

Perhaps it is due to the strength of Wood's authorial persona that critical analysis of her fiction tends to focus on and draw conclusions about her life. My own contribution will follow a similar path: through an examination of *Argosy*'s nautical stories, I provide another perspective on Wood's editorial achievements. While Phegley and Palmer use Wood's letters, essays, and fiction to show her mastery of her public image, her nautical fiction shows the difficulties underlying this process.

After Wood's takeover, the *Argosy* continued to run argosy-themed fiction, although travel fiction was perhaps less prominent than it once was. In the early 1870s *Argosy* usually ran a nautically-themed story every month or two. The 1872 sensation of the ghost ship *Mary Celeste,* found sailing in the Atlantic without crew, passengers, or discoverable damage, may have stirred public appetite for nautical fiction, but *Argosy* was running short nautical fiction even before the *Mary Celeste* was discovered. This nautical fiction features an array of sensational hazards, including shipwrecks, hurricanes, and mutiny. But the most pernicious threat often comes from an unexpected, interior source: having women on board. They threaten the officers' composure and their very sanity, interfere with their ability to do their jobs, and put their ships and passengers at risk of fatal wrecks. In what seems like a contradictory impulse, several of these sensational stories are also romantic tales that conclude happily in marriage. While mortal peril, madness, and confessions of love are all hallmarks of sensation fiction, these stories are striking for the way that they consistently position respectable women as

sources of potentially fatal trouble in a masculine professional space. A sense of immediacy and sometimes-desperate struggle pervades these stories: one captain is driven insane by his love for a passenger and almost destroys his ship and all his passengers; another is made too distraught by his wife's suffering to navigate through a terrible storm. These stories consistently return to the problems of misplaced femininity, failures of professional judgment, and resultant disasters: wrecks, insanity, loss of control. They form a darker counterpart to Wood's confident public persona and remind us that Wood's accomplishment—which, a century and a half later, may seem not particularly unusual—was both extraordinary and extraordinarily hard-won.

This unusual theme is in part the result of a combination of genres: *Argosy* sailed between the generic seas of sensation and travel fiction, and its nautical stories in particular reflect the collision of Ellen Price Wood's sensation fiction specialty with the *Argosy*'s original travel theme, one which Wood inherited with her purchase of the magazine. This combination moves the standard domestic trappings and concerns of sensation fiction (gender, respectability, domesticity) literally and literarily out to sea, resulting in the genre's intriguing engagement with new concerns of professional spaces and masculine authority. These concerns mirror those of Wood herself: captain of her own *Argosy* and working to establish both authority and respectability in editorial seas sailed mostly by men. The increasing visibility of other women editors (Braddon, Marryat, Mary Ann Evans) gave Wood fellow female captains, but made questions of gender, authority, and respectability no less pressing.

Moreover, this fiction tends to come down on the side of these dangerous heroines: the potential disasters are not their fault, but that of the men who are unable to

handle their presence. *A*rgosy's women form an early bridge between sensation fiction and New Woman fiction, in their placing respectable women in a professional sphere, and also proposing an alternative to the mid-Victorian domestic ideal. These stories portray a different model of healthy relationships between men and women. These are ladies who launch: respectable, social women who have moved outside the domestic sphere of the home. Wood's necessity in arguing for the respectability of her literature was all the more pressing because the material she was published in *Argosy* was, in fact, boundary-crossing.

The position of these women on board ship was, however, often dangerous: they risk damaged reputations and the risk of shipwreck. Similarly, Wood had, in the very existence of her own editorship, a constant reminder of the risk of failed judgment in a professional capacity, in the specter of the female editor that had come before her. Isa Craig was replaced after a failed professional judgment, which itself had to do with the domestic question of bigamy. In taking on, then, the most argonautically-themed stories, Wood was engaging with the specific legacy of a magazine with a troubled professional reputation, one in which a misstep—particularly one related to themes of unconventional relationships—could be fatal.

Misplaced femininity coming in dangerous contact with a professional sphere is the precise plot of Wood's "A Perilous Voyage: A True Narrative." This short story ran in October 1870, just under three years into her editorship, and describes a voyage of a ship engaged in coastal trade off New Zealand. Captain Murray is "a fine sailor" (301) and his well-managed ship has recently become a domestic space: he has his new wife living on board. Although the voyage begins well, a severe storm strikes the ship,

threatening to crush it against a rocky coastline. The ship moves inexorably and agonizingly slowly towards its doom, a process that takes hours. At first, Murray's conduct is unimpeachable: "One could not but admire Captain Murray's bearing through that trying night. There was no doubting his sterling courage and fearlessness of danger for himself. You felt certain that when the crisis came, he would be perfectly cool, and equal to the emergency" (310). However, when Murray's wife cracks, he threatens to do the same:

> …rising up, she clasped her arms about his neck, and fell upon his breast in a paroxysm of weeping. Poor Murray! And she had been so calm during the last few hours! The sight of her great misery completely overcame him. He could only beg her in faltering tones to cease crying and strive for calmness: when he was scarcely able, himself, to keep calm. (311)

Murray is "plunged in a grief which, though silent, perhaps equaled her own" and is "for the moment perfectly unhinged and undecided how to act for her" (311). "Undecided" when he must be absolutely decisive, and with his former calm and clear voice transformed to "faltering tones," Murray is able to recover his composure only by abandoning his wife, passing her off to the narrator, who is a passenger on board: "Wilson, my good fellow, I am particularly wanted on deck, will you kindly attend to Mrs. Murray? She will be all right again soon, but has been a little excited" (311). Within the hour, decisive action is called for, at which point "Captain Murray saw one resource, and decided upon it, quick as lightning"; the ship finds the harbor, and all are saved (312). But it is the presence of his wife impinging upon Murray's professional sphere, the mixture of the professional and the private, the masculine and the feminine, that is a threat, with the occupations and lives of many men at stake. Mrs. Murray is a misplaced invasion of the feminine and domestic into the masculine and professional, and Murray is

barely able to separate them in time to save the ship. The stakes are quite literally life-or-death, and Mrs. Murray's presence is an unequivocal failure. Is there, then, any place for women in or near a professional sphere?

An even more complete failure of captainly compartmentalization is found in May 1871's "Captain Powell," with the author given as S.R.A. (Three of the stories I will examine, including this one, were either not written by Wood or are unsigned; I nonetheless treat them as constitutive of Wood's editorial persona. As Phegley suggests, Wood's persona was carefully curated, and her control of *Argosy* seems to have been absolute. With this context, I believe that it is reasonable to treat any of the stories published in *Argosy* as evidence of part of her self-curated image, even if she did not supply the byline.) Here, the good Captain Powell's unrequited love for his passenger Kate Ellis drives him clinically insane. On a passage from New York to Liverpool, after Ellis rejects the captain's advances, Powell turns the ship north, and it is only once the ill first mate recovers and finds that the ship is among icebergs that anyone dares to interfere. Although the ship manages to limp into Liverpool, Powell never recovers his sanity: "His passionate love of the young lady, combined with rejection, acting on a not well-balanced mind, had indeed driven him mad. He died in an asylum not long afterwards" (400). Powell may have not had "a not well-balanced mind," but he had nonetheless been a successful captain with a long career and no previous indications of madness. In fact, Ellis had rejected Powell on land before the voyage, and Powell seems to have been fine; it is only when she becomes a constant presence in his place of work that he goes insane. (In contrast, she arrives in England to meet her fiancé.) Powell's end is in stark contrast to Murray's, but their situations are similar. But while Murray is able

to successfully compartmentalize, Powell is not, and in the case of a ship's captain, this kind of separation is crucial. In both of these stories, the woman is a foreign presence aboard ship. She threatens Captain Murray's composure; she destroys Captain Powell's sanity. A competent captain would certainly be able to handle the sea, but with women on board, all bets are apparently off.

The space of a ship becomes a particularly important proving-ground for masculine authority partly due to its claustrophobic architecture, which puts professional and domestic spheres in uncomfortably close quarters, as in the case of captains Murray and Powell. There is also a powerful tradition of the all-male captain and crew. If ever there was an all-men's club, the ship would be that space: one in which, according to longstanding nautical superstition, having a woman on board at all is bad luck (*Popular Beliefs and Superstitions* 1:793). If women are infiltrating this space, then male authority in one of its purest, most traditional forms has been compromised. Looked at another way, if ever there was a battle ground for the space of women's presence, the ship might well be that arena: one in which women have no traditional authority or assigned physical place at all. That Wood places these stories aboard ships is perhaps naturally suggested by the magazine's nautical theme, but it is also suggestive of an intimidating professional experience for a female editor aboard the *Argosy*, one with high stakes and little room for error.

These two stories, however, also suggest a shift in responsibility for the failure of integration. Mrs. Murray is aggressively distracting—but then, Murray is her husband, and so she does have a legitimate claim on him for emotional support, however ill-timed (a problem when his crew and passengers have claims on him for their safety). In

contrast, Kate Ellis has no claims on Captain Powell; the difficulty is that he has no claim on her either. While it may have proven unwise for Mrs. Murray to be present alongside her husband, the same can hardly be said of Ellis, who is simply a passenger, behaves with the utmost respectability, and has every right to take passage. The failure in "Captain Powell" is entirely the captain's, and Captain Murray is partially at fault as well. The difference between "A Perilous Voyage" and "Captain Powell" hints at a progression, and a possible way to reconcile the presences of men and women in a professional sphere: by keeping things professional. Further, the responsibility for this professionalism falls on both men and women.

The question of professionalism is returned to explicitly in several stories that end in marriage rather than near-disaster (depending on how you define one or the other). Wood's story "Going to India for a Rich Husband" (March 1871) features an onboard romance between Louisa Bellamy, travelling to India to marry well, and George Armstrong, a poor but promising young Lieutenant in the Army, also traveling as a passenger. The story is told by a benevolent first officer, who describes a remarkably domestic shipboard tableau: "During the day the ladies read, sewed, practiced music, played with the children, and found various other pastimes… There was a rubber in the evenings for those who cared about it… Chess also: singing: music: once or twice a week dancing" (215). Life goes on as it would in England; the women and children have made the space of the ship very domestic indeed.

The ship, then, can provide a functional domestic arena. As indeed it has to do: both officers and passengers would have spent weeks or months living on board, so the ship is by necessity both a domestic and professional space. By the 1870s, a steamer

voyage from Liverpool to New York could be completed in an average of eleven days (*Picturesque Tourist* 9); a voyage to San Francisco (stopping at New York, then overland at Panama) in slightly over a month (Otis 161); to India around the Cape of Good Hope in three or four months ("Our Ocean Mail-Steamers" 610).[6] And the domestic/professional space of the ship usually did function properly (otherwise everyone might have gone insane, like Captain Powell). But it works well provided that the women and officers remain separate. In "Going to India," the first mate distances himself and the other offices from the women and children immediately following his description of life on board. He says that some of the young ladies were "going out to their friends in the hope of getting well married. It is a kind of institution with us, you know, this going out. Nearly all were under the captain's charge, and he looked after them pretty well" (215). His bluff dismissal of these young women to his captain's charge is echoed in his perspective on the romance between George and Louisa: he says of George that "In short, it was, with him, the old story: he had played with edged tools, and cut his fingers" (215). George, spending time as a passenger, can afford to cut his fingers; the men responsible for life aboard ship cannot.

The importance of separate professional and domestic priorities is emphasized in the moment of crisis, when the first mate acts quickly to save the ship. In contrast, George runs to Louisa, and it is only after he secures their engagement that he moves to

[6] *The Picturesque Tourist* suggests that another route to San Francisco would have been to take a steamer to New York, after which a transcontinental railway journey could be completed in about nine days—although presumably the tourist would want to spend more time touring on the continent (13). In "Jenny Morris's Voyage," Jenny is horrified to learn that a journey from England to San Francisco that should have taken weeks might instead require "four—five—ay, six months before they reached San Francisco!" due to Mr. Bumble's misplaced thriftiness in purchasing passage on a clipper ship going around Cape Horn rather than a steamer to Panama (218). The story serves as a useful reminder that poorer passengers would have faced much longer passages than those who could afford better accommodations. In Wood's "Going to India," it takes Louisa and George's ship two months to reach the Cape of Good Hope (216). Evidently, neither is rich enough to afford travelling overland or via the recently-opened Suez Canal.

help: “Armstrong fell-to with his great strength: doing more than any two in the crowd” (221). But he could have helped save the ship sooner, especially if he was worth two of the other men. Romance may be permissible among passengers, but George’s behavior, like that of Captain Powell, suggests that men can’t necessarily be trusted among women when there is important work to be done. Once again, the man’s imprudent behavior is entirely his responsibility: it is George that runs to Louisa, not Louisa that runs to George.

Why would women want to invade this space? It is clear that, provided the men around them don’t lose their heads, the ship can provide both exciting possibilities of danger and relaxed social norms. Armstrong was not the sort of marriage material Louisa Bellamy had been looking for, but the near-wreck late at night prompts her to be honest about her feelings for him:

> She was dreadfully agitated. And in that moment, each one believing it to be the last, reticence was thrown away. With the fear of death before us, we dare not persist in a lie; and George Armstrong heard how passionately she loved him. (221)

The oath, made in the enclosed space of a cabin, epitomizes the romance: a product of limited space and relaxed social conventions, in which it is natural that George and Louisa would spend so much time together.

But romance alone, although it signifies a happy conclusion, is not the main achievement of these women. The point of these stories, clichés aside, is in the journeys, not the destinations. Beth Palmer writes that:

> Publishing sensation in Victorian magazines offered women writers a set of discursive strategies that they could transfer outwards, into other cultural discourses and performances. With these strategies they could explore, enact, and re-work contemporary notions of female agency and autonomy. (*Women’s Authorship*, 1-2)

I suggest here that these stories invite the female reader to participate in narratives of female agency: in the very act of consuming these periodicals, *Argosy*'s woman reader was inserting herself into the imaginative place of the ship, where she found a proxy in these women on board, who behave with consistent and admirable propriety. In taking pleasure in the excitement and novelty of life on board (seeing new parts of the world, romantic excitement, seasickness, or life-or-death situations), the woman is taking on a role of importance and potential influence. That some of these narratives are life-or-death suggest the stakes of this invasion of the feminine into places of authority, but there is, either way, pleasure in reading these stories. And perhaps, given the possibility of literal shipwrecks, marriage takes its place as not necessarily the most important consideration in a woman's life.

Such a narrative is found in "Jenny Morris's Voyage" (no author indicated) from September 1874. As with Louisa and George, the enclosed space of the ship and a long voyage from England to California puts pressure on personal relationships, resulting in the first meeting, close friendship and onboard marriage between Jenny and Mr. Dacey, all within a few weeks. On her arrival in California, Jenny finds that her sister, thought to be ill, is healthy (having, in fact, been pregnant and now haven given birth):

> 'Oh dear, oh dear!' cried Jenny, bewildered. 'I need never have come, after all. Or done what I did do in coming.'
> 'Don't apologize, Jenny,' laughed Mr. Dacey. 'Human nature at sea is not human nature on shore.' (233)

A strange platitude to end with, given that Jenny can only hope that Mr. Dacey's good nature remains consistent on shore. However, it does suggest an easing of convention at sea that provides room for this sort of romance, one for which Jenny has no need to

apologize. Like that of George and Louisa, the romance is 'safe' in that shipboard life allows for a relatively close acquaintance and knowledge of character. At the same time, it encourages situations that might not otherwise be seen as appropriate, as when the then-unknown Mr. Dacey helps Jenny care for her companions during their seasickness, or when Louisa and George spend so much time together. For Jenny, any suggestions of impropriety are made by selfish and short-sighted characters, and so are easily dismissed. Both Louisa and Jenny find themselves, while behaving with perfect propriety, in situations that rewrite the codes of appropriate male/female behavior, and a great deal of the pleasure of these stories is exploring this new dynamic.

The resulting marriages signify not simply a successful romance, but a successful outcome of rewriting a too-strict social code, and a legitimization of socially daring (but nonetheless appropriate) behavior. If "human nature on shore" were indeed closer to "human nature at sea," at least as Wood portrays it, men and women would be better off: these marriages are based on a mutual knowledge of character, and are stronger for their partners having already weathered various storms together. Although conventional marital conclusions would not seem to signify a particularly revolutionary approach to gender dynamics, *Argosy*'s nautical marriages operate as signifiers that a new gender dynamic that grants women greater agency is in fact healthy for relations between men and women. As Mr. Dacey suggests, Jenny Morris has no need to apologize.

This approach to gender dynamics both affirms and criticizes the existing Victorian social order. Deborah Wynne, in *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (2001), writes that Wood "promoted middle-class domesticity as an ideal to be protected," and that her novels, like those of even more radical sensation novelists, close

"with a triumphant middle-class family surviving all attacks"—a theme which might be extended, as in the case of *Argosy*, to triumphant newly-formed marriages (10). And yet, Wynne notes:

> Despite such concessions to the cult of domesticity, [Wood, Collins, Braddon, and Reade] succeeded in raising readers' awareness of the fragility of the domestic ideal, highlighting the dangers which could assail family life in a modern urbanized, increasingly anonymous, society. Their depiction of a threatened social order is often ambiguous, a feature which led some Victorian critics to attach the genre because it appeared to promote 'sympathy with crime.' (10)

Wynne is referring to the crime of the "penny dreadfuls" and other unrespectable literature with which sensation fiction was associated. While it may not seem terribly criminal, the dissonance in Wood's fiction between a strong valuation of marriage itself and a nontraditional way of portraying a successful relationship does suggest, as Wynne describes, an ambiguous depiction of social conventions.

The setting of these nautical tales also suggests an ambiguous feeling about the Victorian social order. The imaginative action of these voyages takes place outside of England, beyond the domestic interiors, cities, and English country houses of sensation fiction. Rather, they take place on the sea, on the constantly-heaving decks of ships: floating pieces of England that are both English and not, imaginative and conventional, fantastic and ordinary, liminal spaces in which standard social conventions both do and don't apply. Further, these nautical settings are rife with awkward social ambiguities: is it appropriate for a women to care for a seasick stranger? To promenade the poop deck "alone" with a young man, in full view of all other passengers? To be responsible for herself in the absence of chaperones, but in the presence of an entire crew? "Jenny Morris's Voyage" repeatedly points to these moments, and Jenny demonstrates how common sense should outweigh overly fussy, formal approaches to appropriate behavior.

This is not to suggest that the space of a ship was a blank canvas on which Wood projected her own gender dynamic. If anything, the space of a ship was a particularly charged place for women, where the close quarters kept between men and women made it difficult for women to retain their modesty and respectability. In *Antipodal England: Emigration and Portable Domesticity in the Victorian Imagination*, Janet C. Myers examines the gender dynamic on board emigrant ships to Australia. She writes that female emigrants:

> had to cope with challenges to their respectability generated by the close proximity of living spaces for men and women. . . . The direct correlation … between impropriety aboard ship and ruin in the colony was a familiar narrative that the founders of the [Female Middle Class Emigration Society] circulated in an effort to deter impropriety. (53)

If ruin aboard ship was indeed a "familiar narrative," then the absolute propriety of Wood's heroines comes to seem an even greater necessity. Wood's stories insist that, close quarters aside, women are perfectly capable of retaining their respectability in such a space, and that it is the men who must be more professional. But that the ship is already a charged social space in which respectability can be easily lost gives urgency to these ambiguous questions of appropriate social behavior, and a need for their resolution. It is evident that many of the rules of appropriate behavior, so unsympathetic to women in the real world, need desperately to be rewritten.

Despite its anxieties with what a successful passage might look like (Wood's ladies who launch arrive at their destinations with respectability intact, and often with a husband to boot), in *Argosy*'s nautical fiction there is no glimpse of what success as a woman authority might look like. Granted, the main action and drama comes largely from the (un)professional men. From this angle, it hardly matters whether Wood's

women were passengers or captains, or how much authority they hold; their existence on board alone is enough to reveal that the problems with the integration of the professional and domestic are largely male ones.

But it is still tempting to ask what defines success for Wood herself, especially given that her own voyage on the *Argosy* only ended with her death in 1887. Is it maintaining an outward façade of absolute domestic respectability, while managing to question and reenvision the position of women in the public sphere? If this were her goal, she was successful, and it is an achievement that—certainly in the 1870s, in a popular and well-respected family magazine—deserves some consideration, especially given her success.

This success becomes more poignant when held up against a striking image of failure, one which suggests that the consequences of failure on these voyages were not limited simply to not successfully completing a voyage. "Overhauled by a Pirate: A Story of the South Atlantic" (1873, no author given) features a glimpse of a doomed young woman held captive on board a pirate ship. The narrator describes how the pirate ship:

> …was just coming about, and her cabin hatchway was right opposite me, when suddenly there rose half way up it the face of a young girl—beautiful exceedingly, but with a horror of utter despair in every feature that made one's flesh creep to look at. The face of Medusa was not ghastlier or more horrible; and as for her eyes—I see them sometimes in my dreams, even now. (234)

The young woman is never identified or rescued; her presence remains unexplained. She is simply a peculiar mention near the conclusion of an entirely different pirate story, one in which there are no other women at all. Unlike Jenny Morris, Kate Ellis, Louisa Bellamy, or even Mrs. Murray, all of whom gain or have recently gained new identities and names as wives, this young lady has gone to sea and entirely lost both. She becomes

less even than a threat or a victim, but simply a wraithlike creature that must disappear when seen:

> When she saw me looking at her (the pirates were all forward, and could not see that she was there), she just clasped her hands, and looked up to the sky with a gaze like a lost soul taking its last glance of heaven; and then vanished as she had come. (234)

The nameless woman has no agency, but has presumably been captured while sailing on dangerous seas. She faces doom and death with little chance of rescue. The stakes of this invasion, then, balance between triumphant entry into a male sphere and the threat of shipwreck or worse—loss of selfhood, identity, even femininity. Even worse, the nameless young woman has become horrific, as ghastly and horrible as a Medusa: a peculiar comparison for what it seems should be an object of sympathy. According to Ovid's late version of the myth, Medusa had once been a beautiful nymph that Athena turned to a monster after she was raped by the sea king Poseidon (117). Sympathy here is similarly tempered with horror, and the sea an equally dangerous place. These voyages, then, can turn a young woman into a "lost soul," even into a Medusa: unnatural, unfeminine, unidentifiable, and undeserving of pity, without even a story to communicate. In this context, Wood's consistent and strongly respectable public persona becomes not simply a performance for personal or professional status, but also, given the waters she was navigating, a matter of sheer self-preservation. Wood successfully navigated *Argosy* into safe harbor month after month after month; "Overhauled by a Pirate" suggest that these were, in fact, terribly perilous voyages.

This trapped woman also eerily anticipates Charles W. Wood's 1894 biographical descriptions of his mother as "more a beautiful shadow than a human being" (187) one that avoided "the outer world [from which] she shrank with the sensitiveness of extreme

refinement and physical helplessness" (314; both of these descriptions of Wood are quoted in Wynne 65). The young woman of "Overhauled by a Pirate" may have been socially lost while going to sea, but she might well have been lost either way: Charles W.Wood's description suggests that requiring women to use domesticity and piety as a pre-emptive defense of their social respectability can, in itself, cause a loss of identity similar to the very loss which they were hoping to avoid.

But nothing ventured, nothing gained, and Wood's venturing heroines deserve credit or their willingness to embark in the first place, and for their refusals to engage in the kind of social niceties that would confirm them in a too-conforming domesticity. Jenny ignores the judgment of her fellow-passengers, saying "I think it is all a fuss for nothing… What have I done—or what has Mr. Dacey done?" (223); Louisa Bellamy ignores her mother's insistence that she find a richer husband in India; Kate Ellis ignores Captain Powell entirely. Small gestures, perhaps, but ones that nonetheless reject a too-strict social code while showing that the social structure does not, as result, collapse: all of the ships reach safe harbor.

Wood's fiction should not be dismissed as conservative for its seemingly conventional marital conclusions. Even while portraying a domestic and respectable exterior, there is an undercurrent of sedition in this fiction, one that insists that women have every right to enter the public sphere, that it is men that must adjust their thinking when women come on board, and that their continued presence would be healthier for society and gender dynamics in general.

1890's New Woman fiction is largely defined by its willingness to be explicit about the difficulties of the "woman problem," and of the situations of women facing a

decision to enter professional fields rather than marry. The iconic new women of major "New Woman" novels like Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop* (1888) or George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) state their domestic and professional positions in the world clearly and calmly. But sensation fiction may also deserve further feminist consideration: despite a reputation for plots that revolve around threatened marriages and imperiled domestic tableaus, Wood's fiction seems more progressive than this reputation would suggest: Wood's globetrotting women enter, successfully negotiate, and triumph in public, professional spaces. And while some important work has been completed in charting the literary lineage of sensation and New Woman novels (see Phegley, Palmer, Pykett, and Wynne), this examination of relatively few stories in *Argosy* suggests that there may be a great deal of unexamined periodical sensation fiction that had a wide readership and which may help further define this literary lineage. *Argosy*'s nautical fiction suggests that these are seas that might well reward exploration, that the two genres may not have been quite as clearly separate as we tend to imagine, and that sensation fiction from periodicals may well have been among the earliest fiction to chart some of the seas that New Woman fiction could sail so confidently two decades later.

CHAPTER IV

"WHEN I WAS A CHILD I USED TO FANCY SAILING AWAY": ECONOMIC PRESSURE AND IMPOSSIBLE INDEPENDENCE IN ELIOT

In "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," an 1856 essay for the *Westminster Review*, George Eliot famously castigated the literary and moral values of bad popular literature, which, as the title of her screed suggests, she blamed particularly on women writers. Eliot was also extremely reluctant to give any opinion on the Woman Question, one of the dominant mid-Victorian cultural debates upon which, as a woman writer and public figure, she was periodically called to comment upon. Perhaps as a result of her own self-distancing from other women writers and women's political issues, criticism on Eliot tends her treat her as a sort of masculine force in Victorian literature: she is more often paired with Dickens, Hardy, Thackeray, or Trollope than alongside Braddon or the Brontës, and she is not infrequently the only woman writer in a work of Victorian literary criticism.[7]

One of the results of her own self-positioning as different from other women writers (and more problematically, the way that some of the academy has apparently taken her up on this) is a resultant lack of scholarship on Eliot as a participant in the

[7] A brief search (less than an hour) for literary criticism on Eliot reveals a score of critical texts that use Eliot as the only female writer alongside a list of male writers. From the past fifteen years alone: Vanessa L. Ryan's 2012 *Thinking Without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* features Wilkie Collins, William Carpenter, George Henry Lewes, Herbert Spencer, Henry James, George Meredith, James Sully, and George Eliot. Steven Hancock's 2005 *The Romantic Sublime and Middle-Class Subjectivity in the Victorian Novel* includes work on Kant, Burke, Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Thackeray, Dickens, Hardy, and Eliot. Daniel Hack's 2005 *The Material Interests of the Victorian Novel* covers Thackeray, Dickens, Carlyle, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Wilkie Collins, and George Eliot. Forest Pyle's 1995 *The Ideology of Imagination: Subject and Society in the Discourse of Romanticism* covers Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Eliot. Nicholas Dames's 2007 *The Physiology of the Novel*: *Reading, Neural Science, & the Form of Victorian Fiction* includes Eliot, Richard Wagner, George Meredith, and George Gissing; William A. Cohen's *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (1996) features Dickens, Eliot, Trollope, and Wilde. The title of Peter Garratt's 2010 *Victorian Empiricism: Self, Knowledge, and Reality in Ruskin, Bain, Lewes, Spencer, and George Eliot* speaks for itself.

discourses of women's writing. There is some indication that this kind of intellectual isolation is starting to change: Royce Mahawatte's 2013 *George Eliot and the Gothic Novel: Genres, Gender, Feeling* recontextualizes Eliot in a genre with a strongly feminine history, and the result is a helpful reinterpretation of many moments in her novels that resist strictly realist interpretations, including the flood in *The Mill on the Floss*. Mahawatte notes that the scene derives directly from Gothic conventions, and has more in common with the surreal ending of *The Castle of Otranto* than the Victorian realism with which Eliot is more often associated. He writes that Eliot's "realm of uncharted Victorian Gothic" has remained "[hidden] beneath the consensus of nineteenth-century Realism and so has been largely overlooked or misunderstood" (2).

Re-reading Eliot alongside sensation fiction similarly recovers a relatively unexamined literary tradition at work in Eliot. In particular, *Middlemarch* (serialized in 1871 and 1872, and first published as a novel in 1874) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) can both be read as responding to the concerns of women's self-invention that pervaded the sensation fiction of the preceding decade and a half. Lady Audley, Aurora Floyd, Isabel Vane: these heroines reinvent themselves in ways that can be read as either ominously or triumphantly challenging established domestic institutions, especially that of marriage. Marriage is also the main option for intellectual and social mobility for Dorothea Brooke and Gwendolen Harleth. (The first question asked in *Middlemarch* is "And how should Dorothea not marry?" [9]). In writing these stories, Eliot is writing the stories of these women's lives and aspirations—in a different mode from Braddon's sensation fiction, but not in total isolation from earlier women's writing. Gwendolen dreams of sailing away, just as Lucy Snowe did, and of entirely separating herself from her family and people she

didn't like, just as Lady Audley did, and economic considerations and desperation drive her marriage to Grandcourt. Like the young Aurora Leigh, Dorothea finds herself with no outside for her spiritual and intellectual aspirations. The question "What should I do?" is evoked again, and again, in both novels. However, Eliot's women are far more immobilized than any of their predecessors.

George Levine notes that critics do not tend to treat Eliot as particularly feminist or interested in women's rights; her female characters often seem to be punished for their sins in what appears to be a relatively conservative vein. He observes that feminist criticism has "long complained" that Eliot never wrote a heroine "like Marian Evans, that is, a woman who resist[s] the conventions of society and [makes] a creative original life for herself, even living outside of wedlock with moral confidence in her choice" (12). But Eliot's unhappy endings should not be read as rendering Eliot herself unfeminist. Kate Flint writes that Eliot's narrative commitment to avoiding idealism or exceptionalism, and the uncompromising endings of her novels, constitute a "breadth and even-handedness of vision" that:

> [A]llows her to see the part which conventions, both literary and social, have played in constructing the stories which cultures have been narrating about themselves, and to show how such stories are increasingly insufficient to carry the weight both of social injustice and of the stultifying effects, on both women and men, of gender-based expectations. (179)

If Eliot's women find themselves in bad marriages but do not attempt the same self-reinventions, it does not make them less worthy subjects of narrative. In making her heroines less heroic and by not making them exceptional or sensational, Eliot portrays the reality of women's everyday lives.

This lack of heroism is frequently emphasized through how her women are permitted to move—or not move. One early example of such an instance in Eliot's fiction is found in *Romola*, originally serialized in the *Cornhill Magazine* from July 1862 to August 1863. After learning of her husband's contemptible nature, Romola attempts to flee him and escape Florence disguised in religious robes. (The publication of *Romola*, incidentally, overlapped with the serializations of both *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*). She makes it to the outskirts of the city, "free and alone," but no farther: the monk Savonarola recognizes her and tells her that she must "return to [her] place" (360). He tells her that:

> You assert your freedom proudly, my daughter. But who is so base as the debtor that thinks himself free?... you are flying from your debts: the debt of a Florentine woman; the debt of a wife. You are turning your back on the lot that has been appointed for you—you are going to choose another. But can man or woman choose duties? No more than they can choose their birthplace or their father and mother. My daughter, you are fleeing from the presence of God into the wilderness. (361-2)

Savonarola tells her that in addition to abandoning her duties as a wife, she is also fleeing the duties that she owes to her fellow-citizens of Florence. When she says that she cannot bear to stay with her husband, he instructs her:

> Make your marriage-sorrows an offering too, my daughter: an offering to the great work by which sin and sorrow are being made to cease. The end is sure, and is already beginning. Here in Florence it is beginning, and the eyes of faith behold it. And it may be our blessedness to die for it: to die daily by the crucifixion of our selfish will—to die at last by laying our bodies on the altar. My daughter, you are a child of Florence; fulfil the duties of that great inheritance. Live for Florence—for your own people, whom God is preparing to bless the earth. Bear the anguish and the smart. The iron is sharp—I know, I know—it rends the tender flesh. The draught is bitterness on the lips. But there is rapture in the cup—there is the vision which makes all life below it dross for ever. Come, my daughter, come back to your place! (367)

Romola is persuaded to go back, a decision that Kate Flint calls "one of the most disheartening moments in all of Eliot's writing" (159). While Lady Audley and Aurora were able to flee their husbands fairly easily (more than once, in Aurora's case), Romola doesn't even make it out of the city before being caught back up in the social web that make it impossible for her to escape. A man that she didn't even know personally recognizes her, and tells her that she must embrace her marriage and even "die daily by the crucifixion of [her] selfish will." The possibilities of any sort of escapist self-invention are swiftly closed down.

Savonarola makes a moral argument for Romola's still and silent suffering, but it is certainly a gender-based one: he acknowledges that her brother Dino was able to reinvent himself, and this was because his situation was different: "That was a special vocation. He was constrained to depart, else he could not have attained the higher life. It would have been stifled within him" (365). But what about Romola's higher life? Why should she be selfish to leave her obligations, when he is simply following a "vocation"? Savonarola's argument is made intensely frustrating for the reader.

As in this scene, Eliot's heroines's movements or attempts to move through the world—to Europe, out of Florence, over water, to join the gypsies—reveal the real extent of their inability to escape and reinvent themselves. At the moments when these women should be closest to escape and freedom, they learn the futility of such fantasies. Instead of sensational reinventions, Eliot's women are limited to cutting self-revelations about their own powerlessness. It is during a trip to Rome, when she should have the greatest sense of an expanded intellectual understanding, that Dorothea begins to understand that Casaubon will not be able to provide her with the spiritual and intellectual guidance that

she craves. Similarly, abroad in Genoa, Gwendolyn is just close enough to independence—or at least the idea of it—to understand the extent of her oppression by Grandcourt. The dense social webs that do so much to constitute Eliot's realism also constitute an oppressive reality: it is inconceivable that one of Eliot's women characters could break free of such a web.

While Eliot's social webs extends to both men and women, women in particular seem to lose the power of self-direction. In *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), Eliot's narrator observes:

> [T]here is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life, from the time when the primeval milkmaid had to wander with the wanderings of her clan, because the cow she milked was one of a herd which had made the pastures bare. (45)

The above scenario has become familiar to ecologists and economists via Garrett Hardin's foundational 1968 essay "The Tragedy of the Commons," originally published in the journal *Science*. For the central image of overgrazing, both Hardin and Eliot drew from Williams Forster Lloyd, an economist who in 1833 published *Two Lectures on the Checks to Population*, which used the metaphor of overgrazing the shared common ground to explain how individuals' immediate economic motivations could prompt self-serving behavior, even at the cost of both community well-being and of their own long-term economic health. But it is not the cow's owner that Eliot focuses on as the ultimate victim of this kind of behavior. Instead, she focuses on the milkmaid, the young woman at the very bottom of the social ladder, and the person who is the least likely to be able to affect community grazing practices.

This kind of observation reflects Eliot's familiarity with economic discourse. Lana Dalley notes that Eliot often worked with Harriet Martineau while she edited the

Westminster Review, which she began editing in 1852. Dalley, in an essay about the connections between *Adam Bede* and Thomas Malthus, observes that Martineau was a frequent contributor to the *Westminster Review*, and that Eliot regularly cited J.S. Mill in her own essays ("The Economics of 'A Bit O' Victual'"). In addition, Dalley writes that Eliot had read and approved of Elizabeth Gaskell's novels, and argues that:

> [Eliot's] approbation of *Mary Barton* and *Alton Locke* is important because both novels engage economic theory, albeit in different ways. That Eliot was both conversant with the principles of political economy and responsive to the intentions of industrial fiction (the genre most readily identified with economics) indicates a role for economic discourse as a theoretical underpinning of her fiction. (550)

Economic language pervades the most personal moments in Eliot's fiction. Savonarola asks Romola "who is so base as the debtor that thinks himself free?... you are flying from your debts: the debt of a Florentine woman; the debt of a wife " (361). When Gwendolen admits all to Deronda, she describes how her marriage was doomed because she "wanted to make my gain out of another's loss—you remember?—it was like roulette—and the money burned into me" (760). At best, Eliot's social web is a kind of network of connections, support and moral responsibility, and a way that an individual might aid and be aided by others. At worst, one can never be free from obligations or the actions of others: debts will follow, both monetary and moral. The complex interplay between economic position, obligation and freedom often comes out in Eliot's women characters, who tend to lack economic power of their own—apart from their ability to enter into marriages. The economic conditions that drive these bad marriages suggest that despite her relative silence on the Woman Question, Eliot was very much interested in exploring and criticizing the powerless position of women, and this powerlessness comes out most strongly when her women attempt to travel.

Middlemarch and the Limitations on Women's Experience

Kathryn Schulz identifies Eliot's em-dash at the start of Chapter 29, in which she interrupts and reflects upon her narration of Dorothea's experience, to be one of "The 5 Best Punctuation Marks in Literature." The chapter begins:

> One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea — but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? … In spite of the blinking eyes and white moles objectionable to Celia, and the want of muscular curve which was morally painful to Sir James, Mr. Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us. (309-310)

Schulz writes:

> What makes this em-dash stand out is that it does formally what the rest of the book does thematically. Why always Dorothea? Why always one self? Why always one's self? Enough of that, says Eliot, and hustles us off to Casaubon's corner. That insistence on seeing beyond the self is … the alpha and omega of *Middlemarch.*

Schulz expands on this point further in her essay "What Is It About *Middlemarch*?", in which she argues that:

> Morality does not start with the self, Eliot insists; it starts when we set the self aside. "Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world?" she asks. And then: "I know no speck so troublesome as self." What a killer line, and what a memorable image. We dwell in moral myopia; literally and figuratively, we are too close to ourselves….
>
> This struggle to see others is the moral drama of *Middlemarch,* and of life. Eliot never stops resisting the autocracy of the self; what Copernicus was to geocentricity, she is to egocentricity.

Despite *Middlemarch*'s consistent work to contextualize the self in a broader social and moral framework, I here focus almost exclusively on the character of Dorothea. Why always Dorothea? She is the subject of the novel's prelude, its first chapter, and the end of its finale. Her experience literally frames the novel; in turn, the novel might be read as

a kind of frame for her experience. In her prelude, Eliot frames the novel in terms of "the natures of women," writing of "later-born Theresas" that:

> Some have felt that these blundering lives are due to the inconvenient indefiniteness with which the Supreme Power has fashioned the natures of women: if there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude. Meanwhile the indefiniteness remains, and the limits of variation are really much wider than any one would imagine from the sameness of women's coiffure and the favorite love-stories in prose and verse. Here and there a cygnet is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind. Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centring in some long-recognizable deed. (4)

The subject of *Middlemarch*, framed in these terms, is the lives of women who find themselves limited by convention and small "hindrances," and the life of Dorothea—this latter-born Saint Theresa—in particular. Throughout the novel, Dorothea's quest to "[find] the living stream," and the errors that she makes in this pursuit, explain many of her decisions and her unhappiness.

Much has been made of Dorothea's spiritual quest, which prompts her to marry Casaubon. But—like Dorothea's family within *Middlemarch*—very few critics have taken seriously her more material quest: to help design and build cottages. But to Dorothea, these aspirations are very real. The first question of the novel asks:

> And how should Dorothea not marry?—a girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder it but her love of extremes, and her insistence on regulating life according to notions which might cause a wary man to hesitate before he made her an offer, or even might lead her at last to refuse all offers. … Such a wife might awaken you some fine morning with a new scheme for the application of her income which would interfere with political economy and the keeping of saddle-horses: a man would naturally think twice before he risked himself in such fellowship. Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on. (9-10)

One of the largely unexamined themes of the first few chapters, also hinted at here, is Dorothea's interest in agricultural land management for the benefit of laborers instead of the landowners. A few pages later, is Dorothea's opinion on land management that induces Casaubon to notice her for the first time:

> "A great mistake, Chettam," interposed Mr. Brooke, "going into electrifying your land and that kind of thing, and making a parlor of your cow-house. It won't do. I went into science a great deal myself at one time; but I saw it would not do. It leads to everything; you can let nothing alone. No, no—see that your tenants don't sell their straw, and that kind of thing; and give them draining-tiles, you know. But your fancy farming will not do—the most expensive sort of whistle you can buy: you may as well keep a pack of hounds."
>
> "Surely," said Dorothea, "it is better to spend money in finding out how men can make the most of the land which supports them all, than in keeping dogs and horses only to gallop over it. It is not a sin to make yourself poor in performing experiments for the good of all."
>
> …
>
> Mr. Casaubon turned his eyes very markedly on Dorothea while she was speaking, and seemed to observe her newly.
>
> "Young ladies don't understand political economy, you know," said Mr. Brooke, smiling towards Mr. Casaubon. "I remember when we were all reading Adam Smith. *There* is a book, now." (18)

This exchange with Mr. Booke prompts Dorothea to look to the possibilities of Casaubon's quest for historical and mythological knowledge as an alternate and more accessible quest for meaning. Immediately after Brooke's condescending comment, she ponders Casaubon:

> To reconstruct a past world, doubtless with a view to the highest purposes of truth—what a work to be in any way present at, to assist in, though only as a lamp-holder! This elevating thought lifted her above her annoyance at being twitted with her ignorance of political economy, that never-explained science which was thrust as an extinguisher over all her lights. (19)

Surely Dorothea would not be so bothered by "being twitted" if this were not important to her in some way. Her attempted involvement in a discussion about what would constitute "the good of all" suggests that she is fundamentally interested in the question

of land management as a method of improving other people's lives, and by extension, giving he own life a purpose.

It is not only Mr. Brooke that condescends to Dorothea about her involvement in estate management; Celia tells her that "it is your favorite *fad* to draw plans," to which she responds:

> "*Fad* to draw plans! Do you think I only care about my fellow-creatures' houses in that childish way? I may well make mistakes. How can one ever do anything nobly Christian, living among people with such petty thoughts?"
>
> No more was said; Dorothea was too much jarred to recover her temper and behave so as to show that she admitted any error in herself. She was disposed rather to accuse the intolerable narrowness and the purblind conscience of the society around her: and Celia was no longer the eternal cherub, but a thorn in her spirit, a pink-and-white nullifidian, worse than any discouraging presence in the "Pilgrim's Progress." The *fad* of drawing plans! What was life worth—what great faith was possible when the whole effect of one's actions could be withered up into such parched rubbish as that? (40)

While Celia and Mr. Brooke are both right to question Dorothea's decision to marry Casaubon, there is no indication that they have any awareness of the extent to which they themselves may have driven Dorothea towards him. Dorothea's exasperated two-time emphasis of the word *fad*, however, suggests the extent of her frustration with her situation: her hopes are dismissed as silly and unimportant.

Dorothea's reaction to receiving Casaubon's proposal also suggests that her marriage is a response to the lack of outlet for her ambitions:

> …it would be almost as if a winged messenger had suddenly stood beside her path and held out his hand towards her! For a long while she had been oppressed by the indefiniteness which hung in her mind, like a thick summer haze, over all her desire to make her life greatly effective. What could she do, what ought she to do? (30)

"What could she do, what ought she to do?" is by now a familiar refrain in Victorian women's literature, although here it is transformed from a plea of economic desperation

into a spiritual plea. That the spiritually-inclined Dorothea turns so swiftly and passionately toward Casaubon and the purity of vision that his work offers is not surprising:

> "I should learn everything then," she said to herself, still walking quickly along the bridle road through the wood. "It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Every-day things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by. And then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here—now—in England. I don't feel sure about doing good in any way now: everything seems like going on a mission to a people whose language I don't know;—unless it were building good cottages—there can be no doubt about that. Oh, I hope I should be able to get the people well housed in Lowick! I will draw plenty of plans while I have time." (31-32)

Even in the midst of the seemingly infinite possibilities of marriage with Casaubon, Dorothea returns to the questions of cottages and housing, a contrast that is made yet again when Casaubon grants that she might learn Latin and Greek characters:

> Those provinces of masculine knowledge seemed to her a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly. As it was, she constantly doubted her own conclusions, because she felt her own ignorance: how could she be confident that one-roomed cottages were not for the glory of God, when men who knew the classics appeared to conciliate indifference to the cottages with zeal for the glory? (70)

Dorothea sees the cottages at Lowick upon her first visit there, and is made melancholy by the fact that their good condition leaves little room for her to help (83-85).

The consistent evocation of these cottages, and the idea that Dorothea might have made a kind of meaning of her life through them, is a double-edged sword. The cottages represent a concrete way that Dorothea might aid others. However, the intensity of her vision—the St. Theresa-quality that Eliot evokes at the start and end of the novel—here is limited to improving cottages, and they are evoked at prominent moments of her dreaminess to contrast her latent ambitions for "a grand life here—now—in England"

with the limited outlets for her energies that she faces (31). Not only this, but these cottages—so modest an aspiration—also represent the farthest limits of what, if everything went well, Dorothea might practically hope to achieve in Middlemarch.

While Dorothea has the energy and moral ambition to help others through improving the cottages, she lacks both education and experience. Making much the same criticisms as Celia, Chinnie Ding writes that Dorothea "formulates labor as no more than an industrious, if also instructive, form of recreation" and that Dorothea's later dreams of founding "a little colony" are part of an increasingly "[extravagant] fallacy" (930). Yet Chettam seems to take her seriously, and Dorothea tells him that she has "been examining all the plans for cottages in Loudon's book, and picked out what seem the best things" (34). Later, Mr. Garth is also complimentary about her abilities. But even if both men's approval of her plans was simply chivalry, what else could a young woman in Dorothea's position do? Of course her interest in improving the cottages can be accused of being recreational. But Dorothea needs "exercise for [her] faculties," as Brontë puts it, and if her own faculties tend toward "an unattained goodness," as Eliot notes in the Prelude, then, as Brontë puts it, it is "narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags" (*Jane Eyre*, 93).

The cottages represent the edges of the world of economics, one of those "provinces of masculine knowledge" to which, as a young woman, Dorothea has little access or influence; discouraged and belittled for her ambitions, she turns to Casaubon's work for direction instead. But it is not until she arrives in Rome that she will be

positioned to understand that giving her life meaning through contributing to some grand work is not an option for a young woman like her.

"This vast wreck of ambitious ideals": Dorothea in Rome

Dorothea and Casaubon's honeymoon is a failure by any standard, but it will become a reference point throughout the rest of the novel as the beginning of Dorothea's new, less naïve understanding of the world and her place in it. That Rome in particular is the destination is significant: instead of gaining or learning a new appreciation of art and mythology, Dorothea finds that such pleasures are inaccessible to her. Her ideals are all the more unhappily undercut because she is so close to what should be "the spiritual centre and interpreter of the world" (215). Eliot's narrator describes how:

> To those who have looked at Rome with the quickening power of a knowledge which breathes a growing soul into all historic shapes, and traces out the suppressed transitions which unite all contrasts, Rome may still be the spiritual centre and interpreter of the world. But let them conceive one more historical contrast: the gigantic broken revelations of that Imperial and Papal city thrust abruptly on the notions of a girl who had been brought up in English and Swiss Puritanism, fed on meagre Protestant histories and on art chiefly of the hand-screen sort; a girl whose ardent nature turned all her small allowance of knowledge into principles, fusing her actions into their mould, and whose quick emotions gave the most abstract things the quality of a pleasure or a pain; a girl who had lately become a wife, and from the enthusiastic acceptance of untried duty found herself plunged in tumultuous preoccupation with her personal lot. The weight of unintelligible Rome might lie easily on bright nymphs to whom it formed a background for the brilliant picnic of Anglo-foreign society; but Dorothea had no such defence against deep impressions. Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi… all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion. (215-216)

Rome will provide no spiritual outlet or guidance for Dorothea's ambitions or ideals, and this realization is all the more devastating because Rome is the Western center of the

spiritual and ancient world. This kind of realization would not have been possible at home in England, where Dorothea was more sheltered from her own inability to make sense of human history and life. Her education, an "English and Swiss Puritanism, fed on meagre Protestant histories and on art chiefly of the hand-screen sort," is as unhelpful to her in making sense of Rome as her inadequate knowledge of economics or agriculture is to helping her redesign estates and cottages. And in both cases, there is nothing that she can do to improve her situation. The only thing she can do is take some solace in recognizing, perhaps, that "this vast wreck of ambitious ideals" is not unique to her.

Like Dorothea's spiritual malaise, Dorothea and Casaubon's estrangement not only begins in Rome, but because they are in Rome. That Casaubon, too, remains unhelpful to Dorothea in Rome—even though, as the narrator asks, "was not was not Rome the place in all the world to give free play to [Casaubon's] accomplishments?" (217)—shows how unhelpful he will be in helping her with any other intellectual aspirations. And later, after a small argument at the breakfast table, Eliot's narrator notes:

> If they had been at home, settled at Lowick in ordinary life among their neighbors, the clash would have been less embarrassing: but on a wedding journey, the express object of which is to isolate two people on the ground that they are all the world to each other, the sense of disagreement is, to say the least, confounding and stultifying. To have changed your longitude extensively and placed yourselves in a moral solitude in order to have small explosions, to find conversation difficult and to hand a glass of water without looking, can hardly be regarded as satisfactory fulfilment even to the toughest minds. (225)

Dorothea's time in Rome is evoked for the rest of the novel as a moment of revelation that will affect her entire life:

> [I]n certain states of dull forlornness Dorothea all her life continued to see the vastness of St. Peter's, the huge bronze canopy, the excited intention in the attitudes and garments of the prophets and evangelists in the mosaics above, and the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina. (216)

Dorothea tells Ladislaw later that "I have often felt since I have been in Rome that most of our lives would look much uglier and more bungling than the pictures, if they could be put on the wall" (245). The honeymoon to Rome has not only overturned Dorothea's expectations about the world of art and her marriage to Casaubon, but has given her a new view of life as "uglier and more bungling."

This new view extends to her life at Lowick upon the Casaubons' return:

> A light snow was falling as they descended at the door, and in the morning, when Dorothea passed from her dressing-room avenue the blue-green boudoir that we know of, she saw the long avenue of limes lifting their trunks from a white earth, and spreading white branches against the dun and motionless sky. The distant flat shrank in uniform whiteness and low-hanging uniformity of cloud. The very furniture in the room seemed to have shrunk since she saw it before: the stag in the tapestry looked more like a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world; the volumes of polite literature in the bookcase looked more like immovable imitations of books. (304)

The "uniform whiteness and low-hanging uniformity of cloud" evokes a similar image in *Jane Eyre*, when Jane looks out at "a pale blank of mist and cloud" in the novel's opening scene (6). The new sense of fewer possibilities and avenues open to her—the narrator twice describes the view as newly shrinking or having shrunk—is explicitly compared to Dorothea's sense of possibility in her marriage:

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> The duties of her married life, contemplated as so great beforehand, seemed to be shrinking with the furniture and the white vapor-walled landscape. The clear heights where she expected to walk in full communion had become difficult to see even in her imagination; the delicious repose of the soul on a complete superior had been shaken into uneasy effort and alarmed with dim presentiment…
> …
> "What shall I do?" "Whatever you please, my dear:" that had been her brief history since she had left off learning morning lessons and practising silly rhythms on the hated piano. Marriage, which was to bring guidance into worthy and imperative occupation, had not yet freed her from the gentlewoman's oppressive liberty: it had not even filled her leisure with the ruminant joy of unchecked tenderness….
> In the first minutes when Dorothea looked out she felt nothing but the dreary

> oppression; then came a keen remembrance, and turning away from the window she walked round the room. The ideas and hopes which were living in her mind when she first saw this room nearly three months before were present now only as memories: she judged them as we judge transient and departed things. (305-306)

After her journey to Rome, Dorothea is in a new position to understand her place in the world: she is less idealistic, less naïve. Without having journeyed to Rome, would she still have come to this point, in which the "ideas and hopes which were living in her mind when she first saw this room… were present now only as memories: she judged them as we judge transient and departed things"? (306) Had she remained in Lowick, near the support of her family and even her cottage-related projects, perhaps Dorothea would have muddled along for longer. Certainly she would not have reached the same level of revelation in a mere three months.

"I have delightful plans": Dorothea at Home

After Casaubon's death, Dorothea tells Ladislaw that:

> "I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more, and doing better things. I was very fond of doing as I liked, but I have almost given it up," she ended, smiling playfully. (604)

What Dorothea learned during her marriage, and what she first learned during her trip to Rome, is not applicable only to her, but to women in general. That she can smile at this situation suggests that the realization is, in fact, no longer new or shocking to her: she smiles at her own former naiveté.

Much later, after Casaubon has died, Dorothea also links her powerlessness fairly explicitly to the condition of marriage in general. When her sister asks her about what sort of man she might marry next (granted, a reasonable concern for Celia to have, given Dorothea's track record), she responds that she "shall never marry again":

> I have delightful plans. I should like to take a great deal of land, and drain it, and make a little colony, where everybody should work, and all the work should be done well. I should know every one of the people and be their friend. I am going to have great consultations with Mr. Garth: he can tell me almost everything I want to know. (610)

Dorothea returns to her original plans of land development—and they are slightly more plausible, it seems, because she is now a widow and has more freedom:

> Dorothea's confidence in Caleb Garth's knowledge, which had begun on her hearing that he approved of her cottages, had grown fast during her stay at Freshitt, Sir James having induced her to take rides over the two estates in company with himself and Caleb, who quite returned her admiration, and told his wife that Mrs. Casaubon had a head for business most uncommon in a woman. It must be remembered that by "business" Caleb never meant money transactions, but the skilful application of labor.
>
> "Most uncommon!" repeated Caleb. "She said a thing I often used to think myself when I was a lad:—'Mr. Garth, I should like to feel, if I lived to be old, that I had improved a great piece of land and built a great many good cottages, because the work is of a healthy kind while it is being done, and after it is done, men are the better for it.' Those were the very words: she sees into things in that way." (611)

The separation between "money transactions" and "the skilful application of labor" is interesting: Dorothea has still not learned the details of transactions or political economy. But I would not go so far as to agree with Ding's assessment that Dorothea "formulates labor as no more than an industrious, if also instructive, form of recreation" (930). Recreations are simply to pass idle time; Dorothea's efforts are far more of a vocation: a way to give meaning to life. Caleb Garth, a skillful estate manager himself, says that Dorothea's attitude towards the work mirrors his own feeling about it as a boy. The only difference between the two, apparently, is that Garth was able to turn his preferences into a vocation. His note that they both began with the same ideals, and his assessment of Dorothea's skill, suggests that it was circumstances, not necessarily character, that have prevented Dorothea from becoming an estate manager in her own right.

In the end, Dorothea does marry Ladislaw, and they seem to be fairly happy together. But the continued theme of the novel—Dorothea's inability to make much out of her ambitious ideals—continues. In concluding, the narrator describes how:

> Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs. (924)

Eliot articulates an ethics: if all individuals are part of a social web, then small acts of goodness can reverberate well beyond themselves, even to the point of being "incalculably diffusive." And not only this, but the entire "growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts" of the kind that Dorothea is capable of. For Dorothea, it's not exactly an unhappy ending so much as in inevitable one: what else could she have done? Her earlier query: "What could she do, what ought she to do?" remains unanswerable:

> Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done—not even Sir James Chettam, who went no further than the negative prescription that she ought not to have married Will Ladislaw. (922)

The only thing that she "could" or "ought" to do is what was able to do, and that leaves her with very limited options. Chettam can only suggest that she made a right or wrong decision with regards to marriage—but looked at from another angle, who and when to marry was always the only decision open to Dorothea. Eliot notes in her concluding paragraphs, "For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly

determined by what lies outside it"—or, in the case of Dorothea, almost entirely determined by what lies outside of it (924).

While Flint notes that this uncompromising conclusions constitutes a kind of feminist ethics for Eliot, in that there is no exceptionalism even for exceptional women like Dorothea, there is also a pointed note of criticism directed at those who have created and continue to contribute to this situation:

> …we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know. (924)

Eliot reaches out to the reader, grouping them with the rest of Middlemarch—the skeptical Mr. Brooke, and condescending Celias, and blind Mr. Casaubons, with unnotable, "daily words and acts." And in assigning a modicum of blame or responsibility for Dorothea's narrative, Eliot suggests that, despite the seeming inevitability of this narrative, this bleak situation is not quite so inevitable after all. Flint writes that "George Eliot's portrayal of gender relations demonstrates what must change and be thought afresh if new plots, in both life and literature, are to be written" (179). The responsibility, here, is for the reader to become a participant in this kind of fresh thinking.

Daniel Deronda

Dorothea's narrative shows the limited outlets for a young woman's idealism, and the way that such limitations might drive her to take advantage of the only real decision-making available to her: that of marriage. In Dorothea's case, there is a sense of impotence, both educational and economic, in her inability to become a driver of any kind of work—philosophical or agricultural—that might help her give her life purpose or direction. Yet Dorothea is also relatively lucky: the problems with her marriage to

Casaubon have to do with mutual misunderstandings and mutual expectations; despite the codicil in his will that bars Dorothea from marrying Ladislaw, Casaubon is not an evil character. The corollary to "Why always Dorothea" is "Why not Casaubon," and Casaubon is granted his own interiority. Both enter into the marriage with naiveté but not ill-will.

Gwendolen and Grandcourt's marriage, at the center of *Daniel Deronda*, is a different animal. Gwendolen marries Grandcourt because it seems to be the only viable option to her, a spoiled young woman who cannot conceive of the kind of thankless work that would be available to her. But while she believes that she goes into the marriage with open eyes, it is not until Gwendolen travels to Italy that she realizes the full, devastating extent of her error. The sense of freedom and flexibility that should come with a trip abroad instead results in the opposite: a revelation of oppression and powerlessness.

Unlike that of Dorothea, Gwendolen's story is a more overtly economic narrative; her decision to marry is driven not by ideals but by the loss of her family's fortune. From the beginning, Gwendolen's narrative is characterized by economic transactions: the reader first encounters her gambling; Deronda's first act regarding her is to redeem her pawned necklace; and the action of the story begins when Gwendolen learns that her family has lost her fortune:

> The implicit confidence that her destiny must be one of luxurious ease, where any trouble that occurred would be well clad and provided for, had been stronger in her own mind than in her mamma's, being fed there by her youthful blood and that sense of superior claims which made a large part of her consciousness. It was almost as difficult for her to believe suddenly that her position had become one of poverty and of humiliating dependence, as it would have been to get into the strong current of her blooming life the chill sense that her death would really come. (44)

The situation is very much the same as that of Lucy Snowe or Jane Eyre, but made worse in that the economic fall is, for Gwendolen, a terrible surprise, one for which she is ill-suited. Eliot's narrator describes how:

> Her ideal was to be daring in speech and reckless in braving dangers, both moral and physical; and though her practice fell far behind her ideal, this shortcoming seemed to be due to the pettiness of circumstances, the narrow theatre which life offers to a girl of twenty, who cannot conceive herself as anything else than a lady, or as in any position which would lack the tribute of respect. (94)

Gwendolen "cannot conceive of herself as anything else than a lady." For Gwendolen, the realization of her impending poverty is a long and relatively slow process, involving the first third of the novel. She certainly begins as a self-centered and vain character, but this is the result of both her upbringing and her own natural tendencies toward vanity. Gwendolen's spoiled character is as much the result of privilege as it is reflective of anything innate, and she looks to her future life of struggle and obsolescence with a particular horror.

Her shock at the strangeness of a life of struggle may reflect her character, but it is a way to gain a fresh perspective on women's thankless work. Before she fully understands the future she faces in teaching, Gwendolen can say easily enough to her mother that:

> There are hardships everywhere for a governess. And I don't see that it would be pleasanter to be looked down on in a bishop's family than in any other. Besides, you know very well I hate teaching. Fancy me shut up with three awkward girls something like Alice! I would rather emigrate than be a governess. (275)

Gwendolen can speak facetiously about emigration while the idea of teaching is still far off. But it is not until later that she starts to understand. When Herr Klesmer tells her that she has no talent for acting:

> Gwendolen had never in her life felt so miserable. No sob came, no passion of tears, to relieve her. Her eyes were burning; and the noonday only brought into more dreary clearness the absence of interest from her life. … For the first time since her consciousness began, she was having a vision of herself on the common level, and had lost the innate sense that there were reasons why she should not be slighted, elbowed, jostled—treated like a passenger with a third-class ticket, in spite of private objections on her own part. (307)

In the face of Klesmer's bluntness, she must again consider the offer to governess much more seriously:

> The recoil of her mind from the only definite prospect allowed her, was stronger than even she had imagined beforehand. The idea of presenting herself before Mrs. Mompert in the first instance, to be approved or disapproved, came as pressure on an already painful bruise; even as a governess, it appeared she was to be tested and was liable to rejection …. [She] saw the life before her as an entrance into a penitentiary. … Her rebellion against this hard necessity which had come just to her of all people in the world—to her whom all circumstances had concurred in preparing for something quite different—was exaggerated instead of diminished as one hour followed another, with the imagination of what she might have expected in her lot and what it was actually to be…. She had a world-nausea upon her, and saw no reason all through her life why she should wish to live. (315-316)

Gwendolen has been spoiled, and has not the strength of a Jane Eyre or a Lucy Snowe, but nonetheless her description of governessing as a kind of "penitentiary" is not far off the mark. She would, as she fears, spend the rest of her life being observed and assessed, tested and very possibly rejected. If a reader felt sympathy for Lucy Snowe in her first hours at Madam Beck's, in which a phrenologist was called to pass judgement on the shape of her skull, then so should a reader feel sympathy even for the spoiled Gwendolen.

Eliot's narrator makes this sort of sympathetic gesture not long after, describing how:

> [Gwendolen] was in that first crisis of passionate youthful rebellion against what is not fitly called pain, but rather the absence of joy—that first rage of disappointment in life's morning, which we whom the years have subdued are apt to remember but dimly as part of our own experience, and so to be intolerant of its self-enclosed unreasonableness and impiety. (333)

But what turns Gwendolen's situation into a full-blown tragedy is its timing with Grandcourt's approach. Her realization of her own unimportance and impending poverty—the moment of her greatest vulnerability—coincide with his courting of her, and Gwendolen is unable to resist his offer.

What makes this particularly cutting is that Gwendolen knows that Grandcourt is a bad man—she knows that there is something cruel and poisonous about him, and she even implicitly turns him down once, by avoiding him on the eve of his proposal. She has good instincts, hesitating even when her uncle presses the match:

> "You are aware that this is not a trivial occasion, and it concerns your establishment for life under circumstances which may not occur again. You have a duty here both to yourself and your family. I wish to understand whether you have any ground for hesitating as to your acceptance of Mr. Grandcourt."
>
> "I suppose I hesitate without grounds." Gwendolen spoke rather poutingly, and her uncle grew suspicious.
>
> "Then, my dear Gwendolen, I have nothing further to say than this: you hold your fortune in your own hands—a fortune such as rarely happens to a girl in your circumstances—a fortune in fact which almost takes the question out of the range of mere personal feeling, and makes your acceptance of it a duty. If Providence offers you power and position—especially when unclogged by any conditions that are repugnant to you—your course is one of responsibility, into which caprice must not enter." (178)

Gwendolen grows "pallid" listening; even while her uncle presses the match, Gwendolen knows that the capacity to make this choice—and the impending decision to accept Grandcourt—is a risk, and almost certainly a mistake (178).

Further, Gwendolen does not even need to rely on her own instincts: she actually meets Grandcourt's mistress and mother of his children, who could not be clearer on warning Gwendolen away. Mrs. Glasher tells her that:

> "You are very attractive, Miss Harleth. But when he first knew me, I too was young. Since then my life has been broken up and embittered. It is not fair that he should be happy and I miserable, and my boy thrust out of sight for another."
>
> These words were uttered with a biting accent, but with a determined abstinence

> from anything violent in tone or manner. Gwendolen, watching Mrs. Glasher's face while she spoke, felt a sort of terror: it was as if some ghastly vision had come to her in a dream and said, "I am a woman's life." (189-190)

But when Gwendolen is equipped with her own instincts and with the experience of Mrs. Glasher, Gwendolen's acceptance of Grandcourt has a curious sense of inevitability to it. The clear establishment of what a bad option Grandcourt is for Gwendolen, both according to her instincts and her very clear knowledge, shows how very little choice she has at all. She is caught between the two choices of suffering and poverty, or suffering and wealth, and wealth would at least enable her to aid her family.

In "The Economics of 'A Bit O' Victual,' or Malthus and Mothers in *Adam Bede,"* Lana Dalley writes that in *Adam Bede*:

> …marriage is described as a market in which a young girl, if she is not balked, may be able to sell her person for material gain. *Adam Bede* draws parallels between the paternalism of public support and the paternalism of marriage and suggests that, in order for marriage to be a respectable option for women, they must possess economic self-dependence before entering it. (558)

Even if no one within the narrative would say that Gwendolen's marriage is less than respectable, it entirely lacks the respectability of choice: Gwendolen has no real choice at all. Immediately after her acceptance of Grandcourt, Gwendolen can hardly know whether or not to regret what has passed:

> … was it triumph she felt most or terror? Impossible for Gwendolen not to feel some triumph in a tribute to her power at a time when she was first tasting the bitterness of insignificance: again she seemed to be getting a sort of empire over her own life. But how to use it? Here came the terror. Quick, quick, like pictures in a book beaten open with a sense of hurry, came back vividly, yet in fragments, all that she had gone through in relation to Grandcourt—the allurements, the vacillations, the resolve to accede, the final repulsion; the incisive face of that dark-eyed lady with the lovely boy: her own pledge (was it a pledge not to marry him?)—the new disbelief in the worth of men and things for which that scene of disclosure had become a symbol. That unalterable experience made a vision at which in the first agitated moment, before tempering reflections could suggest themselves, her native terror shrank.

> Where was the good of choice coming again? What did she wish? Anything different?
> No! And yet in the dark seed-growths of consciousness a new wish was forming itself—"I wish I had never known it!" Something, anything she wished for that would have saved her from the dread to let Grandcourt come. (336-37)

Did Gwendolen ever have control over her future, or could she only choose between the two options available to her—an indefinite future in the penitentiary of governessing, or marrying Grandcourt? Gwendolen can only wish for "Something, anything" to have been different.

"But what can I do?": Gwendolen's Marriage

Gwendolen's marriage is an unhappy and oppressive one, but at least she is economically secure once in it. As a result, her question "what can I do?"—which so echoes that of Jane Eyre or Lucy Snowe—instead becomes a question of self-improvement rather than self-support, just as it did for Dorothea. To Deronda, Gwendolen says:

> "I *am* selfish. I have never thought much of any one's feelings, except my mother's. I have not been fond of people. But what can I do?" she went on, more quickly. "I must get up in the morning and do what every one else does. It is all like a dance set beforehand. I seem to see all that can be—and I am tired and sick of it. And the world is all confusion to me"—she made a gesture of disgust. "You say I am ignorant. But what is the good of trying to know more, unless life were worth more?" (507)

When Gwendolen meets Deronda again, some time later, she is in very much the same place, and uses almost the same language:

> "I wanted to tell you that I have always been thinking of your advice, but is it any use?—I can't make myself different, because things about me raise bad feelings—and I must go on—I can alter nothing—it is no use." She paused an instant, with the consciousness that she was not finding the right words, but began again hurriedly, "But if I go on I shall get worse. I want not to get worse. … I am afraid of getting wicked. Tell me what I can do." (672)

On the one hand, one could argue that Gwendolen's increasing knowledge of self can only be driven by herself, and that she must learn on her own what "to do." But even if

she wishes to "not get worse," Gwendolen's sense of impotence pervades her unhappiness. One only asks what one "can do" if the current situation is insupportable in some way, as Gwendolen's is. However, it is also unchangeable. The only solution that Gwendolen can imagine is to "go away from everybody," but she can't—instead, Grandcourt takes her away to Genoa.

Later, in describing her life, Gwendolen tells Deronda that:

> The very daylight has often been a punishment to me. Because—you know—I ought not to have married. That was the beginning of it. I wronged some one else. I broke my promise. I meant to get pleasure for myself, and it all turned to misery. I wanted to make my gain out of another's loss—you remember?—it was like roulette—and the money burned into me. And I could not complain. It was as if I had prayed that another should lose and I should win. And I had won, I knew it all—I knew I was guilty. (757)

Gwendolen castigates herself for her decision to marry Grandcourt. But in describing her life in terms of the losses and gains of gambling, Gwendolen subconsciously chooses a metaphor that emphasizes her own lack of control over the situation. She chose to gamble, of course, and prayed to win—but she had no control over the actual outcome, any more than she did at the roulette table early in the novel's first scene.

It is no coincidence that Gwendolen and Dorothea both travel to Italy, along with Aurora Leigh. Italy was an object of fascination for Victorian women writers. Sandra M. Gilbert describes this feminization of Italy has initially having to do with the poetic image of Italy in decline, writing that:

> …as post-Renaissance Italy sank ever further into physical decay and political disarray, lapsing inexorably away from the grandeur that was imperial Rome and the glory that was fourteenth-century Florence, both native and tourist poets began to depict 'her' as a sort of fallen woman. (27)

By midcentury, Gilbert notes,

> … Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning revise and revitalize the dead metaphor of gender that is their literary and linguistic inheritance, using it to transform Italy from a political state to a female state of mind, from a problematic country in Europe to the problem condition of femaleness. Redeeming and redeemed by Italy, they imagine redeeming and being redeemed by themselves. (28)

When Gwendolen (and Dorothea) are denied any kind of spiritual redemption in Italy, therefore, their experience is a literary inversion of the inspiring vision of Aurora Leigh. The promise of women's literary inspiration and redemption that Italy represents is not offered in Eliot's novels. Instead, Italy becomes a place of a very different kind of revelation: that of oppression.

In Genoa, Gwendolen fully comes to understand her situation. Out on the sea—that space which should be one of freedom and independence, she is more oppressed than ever. She tells Deronda that:

> I want to tell you what it was that came over me in that boat. I was full of rage at being obliged to go—full of rage—and I could do nothing but sit there like a galley slave. And then we got away—out of the port—into the deep—and everything was still—and we never looked at each other, only he spoke to order me—and the very light about me seemed to hold me a prisoner and force me to sit as I did. It came over me that when I was a child I used to fancy sailing away into a world where people were not forced to live with any one they did not like—I did not like my father-in-law to come home. And now, I thought, just the opposite had come to me. I had stepped into a boat, and my life was a sailing and sailing away—gliding on and no help—always into solitude with *him*, away from deliverance. And because I felt more helpless than ever, my thoughts went out over worse things—I longed for worse things—I had cruel wishes—I fancied impossible ways of—I did not want to die myself; I was afraid of our being drowned together. If it had been any use I should have prayed—I should have prayed that something might befall him. I should have prayed that he might sink out of my sight and leave me alone. I knew no way of killing him there, but I did, I did kill him in my thoughts" (760)

The sea, instead of becoming an imaginative space of independence and freedom, becomes a place of oppression that only grows more and more extreme: Gwendolyn describes how "the very light about me seemed to hold me a prisoner and force me to sit

as I did" and that "I remember then letting go the tiller and saying 'God help me!' But then I was forced to take it again and go on…" It is at the moment of the deepest depths of Gwendolen's sense of entrapment and imprisonment that she remembers and evokes her childhood dreams—that they "[come] over her"—a revelation that is otherwise fairly unusual for Gwendolen, whose story largely takes place in the present-tense.[8] By beginning by evoking this dream of independence, Gwendolen can compare her childhood fantasy to the reality of what her life has become, and confront herself with her own life since: one that she describes as full of wickedness and evil.

Gwendolen is hard on herself—perhaps too hard; what passes for clarity here might also be read as a self-castigation profoundly lacking in perspective. She has certainly made mistakes, including pride, but there is much to explain, and even to excuse, these decisions. She was pressured by her family into marriage—a family that raised her to many of her own faults, including vanity—and she was faced with choices that promised suffering no matter what she decided. In such a world, it is not only the childish fantasy of sailing away that is the absurd part.[9] Instead, it is independence itself that is shown to be the fantasy, inconceivable and unreal as a childhood daydream. As Gwendolyn articulates, sensational escape fantasies are the stuff of childhood. Such escapes cannot be conceived of in the "real" world—but through evoking these fantasies, Eliot can at once compare the ideal and the real, the naïve and the world-worn. Even while Gwendolen blames herself, the mention of her childish dream reminds the reader of

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[8] Gwendolen's evocation of her childhood dreams echo a scene in *Middlemarch,* in which Dorothea tells Ladislaw that "those who have great thoughts get too much worn in working them out. I used to feel about that, even when I was a little girl; and it always seemed to me that the use I should like to make of my life would be to help some one who did great works, so that his burthen might be lighter" (404-405). Both women's revelations occurs while these women are travelling away from home, on what become ironic inverses of pilgrimages honeymoons.

[9] …Gwendolen does end up on a boat, after all.

the limitations that the adult world places on women's independence. If Gwendolen is not to blame for her childish fantasy of real independence not coming true, then she is not entirely to blame for what her life has become, either.

But what, in the end, can Gwendolen do? She again appeals to Deronda:

> "I asked you to come because I want you to tell me what I ought to do," she began, at once. "Don't be afraid of telling me what you think is right, because it seems hard. I have made up my mind to do it. I was afraid once of being poor; I could not bear to think of being under other people; and that was why I did something—why I married. I have borne worse things now. I think I could bear to be poor, if you think I ought…
> …
> I will try to bear what you think I ought to bear. I have tried to tell you the worst about myself. What ought I to do?" (836-7)

Deronda's only immediate suggestion is a practical one:

> "…In my opinion you ought simply to abide by the provisions of your husband's will, and let your remorse tell only on the use that you will make of your monetary independence."
> "I will do what you tell me," said Gwendolen, hurriedly; "but what else shall I do?" (838)

In an uncharacteristic move by Eliot, the narrator does not include Deronda's speech to Gwendolen; the reader learns only that Deronda "felt a crushing pain; but imminent consequences were visible to him, and urged him to the utmost exertion of conscience" (839).

Just as no one could say what, exactly, Dorothea "ought rather to have done" (922), there is nothing much to articulate to Gwendolen except for what seems to be general moralizing. He does go on to advise her that:

> What makes life dreary is the want of motive: but once beginning to act with that penitential, loving purpose you have in your mind, there will be unexpected satisfactions—there will be newly-opening needs—continually coming to carry you on from day to day. You will find your life growing like a plant … You can, you will, be among the best of women, such as make others glad that they were born. (839)

Deronda's advice to Gwendolen sounds rather like the narrator's assessment of Dorothea: salvation is to be found in self-effacement and in helping others.

Unlike the ethereally impractical Dorothea, Gwendolen in particular seems to be part of a literary family that includes Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe, and Lady Audley. Like Jane, Lucy, and Helen Graham, she is faced with teaching as really her only option, and like Helen Graham, she takes advantage of the one play open to her—marriage—to escape it. Like most of these women, she asks "What must I do?" repeatedly. But while Jane and Lucy both asked "What should I do?" in terms of what they could do to support themselves, Gwendolen asks it after she has already made her decision to marry Grandcourt to avoid a life of poverty. Gwendolen is the moral version of Lady Audley, one who, after she has made her bargain, realizes what she has done and is tortured by it. Eliot thus moves the question of "What should I do?" from the question of physical sustenance to a moral sustenance, portraying not only the situation of a woman who finds herself consciously making a damning decisions, but is also forced to live with the consequences. In both *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot turns "What should I do" into a spiritual plea, and shows the ultimate result of women's lack of options: their spiritual and ethical devastation, the human cost to this economic powerlessness.

Gwendolen ends her narrative by repeating to her mother that she "shall live" (879), and by writing to Deronda that "It is better—it shall be better with me because I have known you" (882). Deciding to live, and hoping to be a better person are the extent of Gwendolen's aspirations: noble, but limited, like those of Dorothea.

Writing about *Adam Bede*, Lana Dalley argues that:

> While political economy offered an orderly and systematic explanation of the principles governing a capitalist society, literature attempting to illustrate those principles generally failed to be so "tidy." Thus, the reverberations of Malthusian concerns about food, sex, family, responsibility, and dependence are more complex, or "messier," in *Adam Bede* than they are in *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (563-4).

Not only messier and more complex, but in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, they have a particular impact on young women. Just as in *Felix Holt*, where she identified the milkmaid as the last victim of the overgrazed commons, Eliot chooses two young women here to explore the question of self-determination. While Eliot's young men are liable to make mistakes and live with the consequences, her young women's options are far more characterized by limitations: Deronda can go to Israel; Gwendolen is left at home. In a world in which individuals are part of a dense social web, it is young women in particular who must learn, and learn to live with, their own unimportance and immobility. And while Eliot can recover a morality from this situation—both *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* conclude with the articulation of the moral value of the unimportant individual making others' lives better—both novels also end on a melancholy note. These women's lives could have been so much more, had they only been offered the opportunity. Eliot may have stepped away from overtly feminist political discourse, but in her commitment to realist instead of exceptional or idealist narratives, Eliot portrays and advocates for the necessity of change.

POSTSCRIPT

By the 1880s and 1890s, the figure of the New Woman becomes prominent in Victorian literature. The New Woman characteristically moves through urban landscapes, to and from work and her own residence, on buses and bicycles; her movements through urban landscapes reflect her independence, both social and economic. A few years later, the Modernist, disaffected flaneuse can wander the city streets just as well as the flaneur, enacting her alienation from society through her status as wandering observer rather than active participant. But between the hopeless wanderings of the Romantic outcasts written by Charlotte Smith and Frances Burney, and the rather more affirmative movements of the New Woman in novels by Amy Levy and George Gissing, Victorian woman writers worked to negotiate and reconcile (to the extent possible) their individual identities with their economic subjecthood. Even when reconciliation proved impossible—and it often did—these writers called attention to the problems with an economic system that largely failed women.

It continues to do so. National Equal Pay Day fell on April 8 this year: this is the date on which a woman who began work on January 1, 2013 would catch up to the money a man working the same job would have earned in 2012.[10] On April 9, 2014, the United States Senate failed to pass the Paycheck Fairness Act for the third time. A better understanding of the history of women and economic powerlessness, and the ways in which this powerlessness is fundamentally embedded in Western industrial economics, provides a stronger understanding of the challenges that women face when it comes to economic self-determination. As many feminist respondents to Sheryl Sandberg have

[10] This statistic is for white woman, who make 77 cents for every dollar a white man makes. The gap between minority women and white men is substantially larger: African American women are paid 62 cents, and Hispanic women 54 cents ("Closing the Wage Gap").

pointed out, women should not have to "lean in" to be successful, a stricture that puts the onus on the individual to be successful in the face of glass ceilings and antifeminist cultures. The problem is not the individual, but the social and economic structures—as these Victorian writers well knew.

Julie Nelson quotes James Duesenberry: "Economics is all about how people make choices. Sociology is all about why they don't have any choices to make" (*Feminism, Objectivity, and Economics*, xi). Victorian's women literature shows what happens to the individual when she is placed in such situations where there are no good choices, or any choices at all. In writing these narratives, Brontë, Barrett Browning, Braddon, Wood, and Eliot show the effects of economic inequality on the individual, both on her self-conception and on her choices, and make both implicit and explicit arguments for the necessity of change. Their argument remains profoundly relevant today.

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