

From the Philosophical Wanton to the Respectable Lady: Rewriting the Female Intellectual's  
Moral, Sexual, and Political Identities in the Courtship Novel, 1790-1850

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**Abstract**

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Despite the proliferation of conduct manuals highlighting the domestic woman's manifold virtues and the abundant caricatures of the vulgar learned woman's masculine antics, there remained, perhaps surprisingly, positive representations of the intellectual woman in courtship novels during the late-eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century. My dissertation argues that, in spite of the historical stereotype of intellectual women as masculine perversions of the gentler sex, there are still counter-representations of this figure as a potentially desirable wife and a progressive figure that crosses the public and private realms to promote social change. This project explores how the courtship novels by Mary Wollstonecraft, Sydney Owenson, Jane Austen, and Elizabeth Gaskell promote the figure of the female intellectual as an attractive companion; specifically, these novels examine how the versions of this figure—a female philosopher, a woman of natural learning, a rational woman, and an educated lady—work to undermine assumptions inherent in late-eighteenth century conduct manuals and novels that women belonged solely in the domestic realm and that intellectual women would be unfit for domesticity.

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## Introduction:

From the Philosophical Wanton to the Respectable Lady: Rewriting the Female Intellectual's Moral, Sexual, and Political Identities in the Courtship Novel, 1790-1850

### **Reshaping the Female Intellect: Writing Feminine, Virtuous—and Intellectual Heroines**

Despite the proliferation of conduct manuals highlighting the domestic woman's manifold virtues and the abundant caricatures of the vulgar learned woman's masculine antics, there remained, perhaps surprisingly, positive representations of the intellectual woman in courtship novels during the late-eighteenth century through the mid-nineteenth century. My dissertation argues that, in spite of the historical stereotype of intellectual women as masculine perversions of the gentler sex, there are still counter-representations of this figure as a potentially desirable wife and a progressive figure that crosses the public and private realms to promote social change. This project explores how the courtship novels by Mary Wollstonecraft, Sydney Owenson, Jane Austen, and Elizabeth Gaskell promote the figure of the female intellectual as an attractive companion; specifically, these novels examine how the versions of this figure—a female philosopher, a woman of natural learning, a rational woman, and an educated lady—work to undermine assumptions inherent in late-eighteenth century conduct manuals and novels that women belonged solely in the domestic realm and that intellectual women would be unfit for domesticity. Not all the novels I discuss here successfully portray the female intellectual in a positive light, nor do all of them favor women's education over women's domestic status and role in the marriage market. Regardless, Wollstonecraft's *Maria: Or Wrongs of Woman*, Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl*, Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, and Gaskell's *North and South* are all novels that represent particularly candid versions of the female intellectual and her struggle to reconcile her cerebral tendencies with her femininity, and her domestic profession

with her entrance into the public realm. I begin my study during the French Revolution in order to highlight how the political events of the turn of the eighteenth century ushered in a changing relationship between the intellectual woman and the marriage market for the coming century. I then end my study in the 1850s, when the class struggle brought on by the Industrial Revolution reached its height, because it marks another important historical moment in which the push for social reform allowed for a breakdown not only of traditional class hierarchy, but also of conventional separate spheres ideology, which in turn laid the groundwork for the development of the New Woman at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of this project, the female intellectual is defined as a woman who “thinks.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this term as “expressing internal mental activity, excluding the simple perception of external things or passive reception of ideas.” As late as 1889, “think” was also used “with [the] implication of purpose or intention,” or in other words, to plan or think on a proposed action.<sup>2</sup> These two definitions of “to think” are central to my reading of the female intellectual because they reflect both her analytical mind that does not just “perceive” or “passively” accept what she views around her, but reflects, analyzes, and grapples with it. The second part of this definition reflects the intellectual woman’s desire to act on her reflections, be it the push for women’s equality in *Wrongs of Women*, cultural tolerance in *The Wild Irish Girl*, domestic security in *Sense and Sensibility*, or class and gender equality in *North and South*. This desire for the female intellectual to be moved to purpose is also apparent

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<sup>1</sup> The term “New Woman” was coined by Sarah Grand in her 1894 “The New Aspect of the Woman Question.” According to Carolyn Christensen Nelson, “The New Woman, arguing that the separate spheres ideology as a construct of society and cultural rather than a biological mandate, demanded that a women be given the same rights as men” (ix).

<sup>2</sup> The *OED* cites the following examples of the use of the latter definition: In 1778, Burney’s *Evelina* records, “A thinking what he should do” (38). In the *Cavaliers of England* (1852), H. W. Herbert writes, “It seems to me it were my first essay to *get* a husband, not to think how to lose one” (391).

in many of the heroines' desire to cultivate self-awareness, such as Maria in *Wrongs of Woman* or Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*. In short, the female intellectual does not just process the world around her and how her own actions affect her, but is moved to engage with both the public and private spheres and often has a clear purpose with which she then applies her mind, from attempting to free herself from the bonds of a bad marriage, to applying her intelligence to navigating the marriage market, to focusing her intentions on surviving after being uprooted from her childhood home and thrown into urban society. The authors of these narratives themselves likewise "thought" or focused their intention on reshaping their image as women writers in the public sphere. Thus, both the authors and the heroines they wrote about were female intellectuals because they thought, regardless of their level of actual education.

Still, central to my discussion of the female intellectual is the role women's education plays in the formation of her character and how her education then shapes the question of her virtue, specifically whether or not a woman educated like a man would still have the same moral compass as a woman solely trained to be a wife and mother. In other words, deviation from one gender norm—in this case, the standard education of women—might lay the groundwork for more radical forms of deviation, including illicit sexual and moral behavior. In essence, the question of women's education changes how women are evaluated by social standards; their virtue and chastity typically secure their respectability and yet, to change the standard of their respectability and social usefulness by bringing in the question of education then calls into question how women's virtue then relates to her intellectual status. My dissertation documents a general shift from the Wollstonecraftian argument that a woman's intellectual identity should be considered separate from her private, sexual and moral life, towards a Gaskellian reading of the female intellectual as someone who can use her education to reconcile her often conflicting

moral and sexual selves. My reading of the female intellectual also explores how women writers themselves navigated the precarious division between their domestic status as respectable ladies and their public role as authors. In many ways more self-consciously than their heroines, these authors carefully constructed a public self that attempted to reconcile their female graces with their masculine profession—again, with varying degrees of success. Their acceptance by the public depended on how well they could foreground their feminine, domestic identities, and thus, downplay any potential for their intellectual, masculine identities to overshadow their invocation of traditional gender norms.

### **“Against Masculine Women”: Women, Education, and Gender Ideology**

In Frances Burney’s *Evelina* (1778), the heroine analyzes the vulgar Mrs. Selwyn. She notes,

Mrs. Selwyn is very kind and attentive to me. She is extremely clever; her understanding, indeed, may be called *masculine*; but, unfortunately, her manners deserve the same epithet; for, in studying to acquire the knowledge of the other sex, she has lost all the softness of her own...I have never been personally hurt at her want of gentleness; a virtue which, nevertheless, seems so essential a part of the female character, that I find myself more awkward, and less at ease, with a woman that wants it, than I do with a man (Burney 268).

Evelina’s unease with Ms. Selwyn, though the older woman is never explicitly cruel to her, lies in Mrs. Selwyn’s lack of “softness” and “gentleness,” which is produced out of her “*masculine*” understanding and “extremely clever” mind. The young lady’s remark that she would feel more “at ease” with a man than a “*masculine*” woman reflects the growing concern of the intellectual woman’s gender-deviant status by the late eighteenth century. The potential threat Mrs. Selwyn poses to social order is magnified by the fact that she is a widow—a figure long associated with sexual deviance, as she, no longer bound to the role of wife and mother, is free to pursue her own sexual fulfillment (Fletcher 7-20). It may seem ironic that Burney—herself a celebrated

Bluestocking, or female intellectual—would use Mrs. Selwyn as a foil for her more appropriately feminine heroine, if not for the knowledge that for Bluestockings like Burney, “learning and virtue were held in a carefully controlled and elegant balance,” as Elizabeth Eger notes in *Bluestockings: Women of Reason from Enlightenment to Romanticism* (203). Thus, her heroine’s foil is also her own; by setting up the caricature of the female intellectual her novel, she differentiates herself from that figure, emphasizing her female “virtue” as equivalent to her “learning,” in order to undermine any criticism she may have received for her “*masculine*” mind. Burney’s caricature in fact underscores how problematic the Bluestockings’ success was in the public sphere in contrast with their limited legal rights. As scholars like Anne Mellor, Marlon Ross and Elizabeth Eggers have shown, their growing visibility eventually provoked an antagonistic relationship from male Romantic writers, who used the term “Bluestocking” in an increasingly derisive way to contain their female counterparts in the public realm, and which women writers later used to assert their difference from the caricature of the Bluestocking or female intellectual (Egers 203; Mellor 8-9; Ross 190).

Mary Wollstonecraft attacks the hysteria surrounding the masculine or thinking woman in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), writing,

[F]rom every quarter I have heard exclamations against masculine women; but where are they to be found? If by this appellation men mean to inveigh against their ardour in hunting, shooting, and gaming, I shall most cordially join in the cry; but if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, and which raise females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind;—all those who view them with a philosophic eye must, I should think, wish with me, that they may every day grow more and more masculine (110).

Here she distinguishes between a physically (and implicitly sexually) masculine woman—one who loves “hunting, shooting, and gaming”—from a mentally masculine woman—one who strives for “manly virtues,” long held to be those of rational thought—in order to argue that the

development of a woman's mental faculty doesn't make her less feminine or promote a woman's enjoyment of male sports. The conflation between a woman's mental and physical selves, and male perceptions of those parts of her, are what Wollstonecraft then specifically attacks, which acts at the foundation for future attempts by female authors to separate a woman's intellectual and physical (inherently sexual) life. Wollstonecraft, then, promoted the education of woman and decried the fear that the educated woman would then embrace other masculine pursuits that would call her virtue into question—as all discussions of woman's physicality (here, her supposed enjoyment of “hunting, shooting, and gaming”) euphemistically address.

The female intellectual was typically educated beyond the traditional scope of female learning which was meant to prepare a woman for her future as a wife and mother. Thus this figure represented a departure from the average woman who was only taught “religion; belle-lettres (some history, geography, biography, natural history, astronomy, poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, [and] travel stories” (Stock qtd. Sobba Green 112). The more educated woman was also schooled beyond the average female “accomplishments,” such as “needlework, embroidery, drawing, music, dancing, dress, politeness,” and “training in manners” (Stock qtd. Sobba Green 112). Even as late as 1851, J. W. Hudson described the “liberal and comprehensive scheme of female education” as schooling women in “the accomplishments now considered necessary to her position, including the French language, drawing, vocal and instrumental music, dancing, modeling, with the useful arts of millinery and dress-making” (135). The purpose of this instruction was to “make them better wives, sisters, mothers” (Hudson 135). Katherine Sobba Green succinctly explains that this “trivializing of female education was directly related to the objectification of women within the marriage market” (112). Sobba Green's reading of women's education naturally emphasizes the bourgeois nature of this debate; only middle-class,

respectable women at this time were prepared for the marriage market through a “trivializing” education, while lower class women were prepared for a much different life. Elizabeth Brophy Bergen corroborates this when she writes, “The emphasis in the education of girls was on competence in the skills necessary to run a household, and on mediocrity in a limited number of accomplishments thought suitable for women” (42). Both scholars rightly point to women’s status as future wives and mothers as the key that predetermined the type of education they received; they were schooled in the art of household management and the more artistic accomplishments that would help them soothe their husbands and pleasantly pass away leisure time. A large part of these accomplishments, as Sobba Green points out, were likewise meant to help a woman secure a husband (and so “trivialized” her potential to develop her mind). The female intellectual’s learning, in contrast, was much more akin to her male counterparts, who were taught the classics, philosophy, and science—two subjects conduct manuals typically warn against teaching women, for fear they would outgrow their wifely roles (Chapone 170-174). While the female intellectual was not always as well taught as men, it was assumed her active mind would resonate more with masculine rational conversation over domestic concerns.

Much of the danger the female intellectual represented was in her deviation from the strict gender norms that insisted that women were subordinate to men. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile, or On Education* (1762) asserts the fundamental assumption underlying English writing on women’s education and conduct: that there is a necessary inequality between men and women. This foundational text was responsible in large part for reforming Europe’s conceptions of education. In his chapter on female conduct, “Sophie: Or the Woman,” he writes, “One ought to be active and strong, and the other passive and weak” (358). He explains that woman is “made to please and to be subjugated” (358). Essentially, the “whole education of women ought

to relate to men” (365). James Fordyce, in *Sermons for Young Women* (1766), corroborates Rousseau’s assertions that women are creatures of domesticity, whose role is to influence the moral nature of husband and children. He condemns boarding schools that produce “accomplished” women who “think of nothing that is domestic or rational” (23). “Rational” in this context affirms the separation of spheres that maintains social order through domestic harmony, rather than the cultivation of the male virtue of rational, logical thought. More often than not, conduct manual writers conflated the intellectual or thinking woman with a highly educated woman, regardless of the level of her actual education, because her intellectual bent was considered to be something that was cultivated by learning, rather than an innate womanly proclivity. In *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* (1766), Dr. John Gregory cautions female readers against the impertinence of revealing rational thought acquired by education, lest the fair sex appear indelicate, and thus, unattractive to marriageable men. He writes, “[I]f you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding” (32). Dr. Gregory’s insistence that a woman’s learning be a “profound” secret underscores the belief that cerebral women made unfit wives. Rather, they made men “jealous,” because they were seen as masculine, and thus rivals to their manly counterparts, not prospective wives. His remarks are centered on women who have “any learning”—here meant to be read as “any learning” beyond their feminine accomplishments—and yet his comments extend to the female intellectual, who is more analytical than a traditional woman. The role of woman depicted in these conduct manuals is clearly secondary to man, so much so that the thinking woman then becomes an anomaly that is neither definitively subordinate to man nor completely working in the service of his needs.

### **The “Weaker Vessel”: Women in the Marriage Market and Separate Spheres Ideology**

Much of the fear surrounding the female intellectual—and the promise of a classical (male) education for the women she represented—lies in the common European understanding of women’s status as the “weaker vessel,” incapable of strenuous intellectual or physical activity, and how the female intellectual subverted this long-held assumption of women’s frailty. The term “weaker vessel” derived from William Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament in 1526, and became the standard way of describing women in the centuries to follow (Fletcher 60). As Anthony Fletcher writes, in *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England 1500-1800*, the religious foundation of the subjugation of women made it so that “women’s protected and conservative role in the household and society was justified by arguments from her naturally preordained function. Indeed her ethical and legal status depended upon this function” (61). In essence, women were meant to be protected from the world at large, focusing their energies on the “naturally,” religiously “preordained function” of child bearing and rearing. Fletcher rightly asserts that in fact her “ethical and legal status” hinges on her ability to fulfill her role as wife and mother—including, and most especially, in her ability to preserve her sexual virtue. That is, at its basest level, a woman’s virtue secured her future as a wife and mother to be looked after by her husband, her chastity acting as proof that her husband’s children were in fact his, and not products of previous sexual activity; it also provided evidence for her moral character, which, as the first educator of her children, was essential to producing decent social citizens. A woman’s virtue then was one of her chief assets in the marriage market (along with her “accomplishments”), proving that, even though she was the “weaker vessel,” she knew how to avoid deviant behavior or situations that would compromise her virtue. And yet, even as this title was meant to protect women, it likewise validates, as Ian Maclean argues, “her exclusion from public life” (68). As the female intellectual became increasingly visible in the public

sphere, she called into question the validity of her status as a “weaker vessel.”

Equally at stake in the acceptance of the female intellectual as a productive member of society was the threat her intellect posed to her feminine virtue—to overload the “weaker vessel” mentally or physically was to enable licentiousness, which, as the weaker sex, she was already more susceptible to. Fletcher addresses the hysteria surrounding women’s sexual and intellectual identities when he writes, “Men’s reading of women’s bodies...attributed to them a voracious sexuality; their reading of their minds left them without the reason to control it” (74). In other words, women were considered highly sexual—which is why the emphasis on female chastity was so important in the marriage market—and yet, unable to control those bodily desires with their irrational minds. While many writers, including Wollstonecraft, advocated that the proper education of women would teach them to curb their more voluptuous feelings, the equally compelling argument against the education of women (as discussed above) insisted that a woman with a more masculine mind would be more likely to reject her domestic status in favor of a life of wanton behavior. Thus, the education of women, and the increasingly public figure of a female intellectual knowledgeable beyond her domestic counterpart, represented both a solution to female mental and physical weakness, and an enabler of deviant behavior.

My dissertation also examines the threat the female intellectual poses to separate spheres ideology by her deviance from traditional gender norms, as well as her constant navigation of the public and private realm, to varying degrees of success. Richard Price, in *British Society, 1680-1880: Dynamism, Containment, and Change*, best explains the complex concept of separate spheres ideology, or the gendered separation between the public and private realms. He writes,

At its simplest level the public and private spheres were a binary formation: the public sphere was male and the private sphere female...Women were not necessarily confined by separate spheres ideology; but they did have to reckon with it. Equally, it is important to recognize that domesticity and separate spheres were never stable constructions.

Indeed, the tensions and ambiguities within the arrangement of separate spheres created a profound instability to the public-private division in civil society (205).

Janet Wolff notes that although these “ambiguities” and “tensions” were there, “the ‘separation of spheres’ of male and female, public and private, was on the whole reinforced and maintained by cultural ideologies, practices, and instructions” (12). Price’s explanation of separate spheres ideology is essential to my work because he emphasizes the “profound instability” of this binary and how women must constantly “reckon with it,” or negotiate their relationship to their domestic status in the private realm, and, as in the case of women writers I examine and the heroines they write about, their tenuous masculine identities in the public realm.

### **Courtship Novels: Women Writing Women**

The novel form became the ideal medium to depict the female intellectual’s complex relationship to separate spheres ideology because of its potential to graphically illustrate the struggle women face as they navigate the separate spheres, and so allow its readers to empathize more deeply with the characters. The novel developed in the middle of the eighteenth century as a political or didactic tool that contributed to the various human rights movements spanning from the Jacobin political novels of the 1790s to the Victorian social novel of the 1850s. Lynn Hunt writes that “new kinds of reading...created new individual experiences (empathy), which in turn made possible new social and political concepts (human rights)” (33-34). Put another way, Hunt argues that the personal bond readers formed with novel characters—and the writer’s ability to make her readers *empathize* with these characters—planted the seeds of reform, allowing the individual character’s struggles to mirror wider social and political concerns. Thus, Jacobin reformist writers, in particular, used the novel form’s emotional resonance to “work gradually toward reform by converting each individual reader to a new way of thinking about particular

social and political problems” (Markley 18). Thus, turn of the century authors like Wollstonecraft, Owenson, and to a certain extent Austen, used the empathy-inducing abilities of the novel to promote social reform. The novel’s political potential continued to grow beyond the reformist movement of the 1790s, developing into the social novel by the mid-Victorian era. This novel genre was used by mid-century writers to critique the sharp class divide brought on by the Industrial Revolution and the economic depression of the 1830s and 1840s. James G. Nelson describes this social narrative, used by authors like Gaskell, as one that depicts “the most dangerous problem facing the nation,” of “the growing division between the rich and the poor, between master and men” (208). Writers of these novels argued that only class (and in the case of women writers, gender) equality could solve this problem (Nelson 208). The social novel, in other words, was meant to “define and redefine imagined possibilities for social thought, action and change” (Bodenheimer 3).

The particular genre of the courtship novel, and all its various manifestations (the novel of sensibility, the national tale, the social problem novel), specifically became a political tool during this time frame to articulate a positive redefinition of the intellectual woman, specifically because it “define[d] and redefine[d] imagined possibilities” for gender and education reform. That is, these novels could depict not only progressive gender politics in actions, but also the struggles women faced in achieving intellectual and sexual autonomy. Traditionally thought of as written “for, by, and about” women, the courtship novel has been considered by many scholars as a subversive tool, safe in its seeming frivolity, to undermine social conventions, in particular gender norms, by constructing narratives that played out the difficulties of incompatible marriages and the benefits of companionable ones (Armstrong 4). Thus, the courtship novel became an ideal medium for women writers to focus on the reformation of

women's education and to separate themselves from male conceptions of womanhood (Sobba Green 14-16). Unlike potentially overbearing or preachy conduct manuals and political treatises, the courtship novel could subtly critique gender inequality under the guise of offering an entertaining story to the reader. Nancy Armstrong, in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, argues that the courtship novel became an outlet for exploring the role the domestic woman played in the development of new ideologies at the turn of the century. Her work critiques Ian Watt, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, who, she argues, "virtually ignore" the historical climate in which women lived and wrote, and thus neglect to document the role women's writing plays in history and the development of gender ideology (15). She further distinguishes her work by studying women not in relation to male culture, as Gilbert and Gubar do, but rather, within their own distinct culture of domesticity. What Armstrong's foundational work posits is that the courtship novel—or the domestic novel, in her terms—defined what it meant to be a domestic woman (lacking in masculine worldly ambitions and schooled in prudent domestic practices) and how the desirability of that figure worked to reinforce bourgeois ideology, simply because, according to Armstrong, desire is a product of one's social and political values.

Other scholars, such as Katherine Sobba Green and Gary Kelly, develop Armstrong's stance that the courtship novel was a political tool that questioned gender norms. Both Sobba Green and Kelly assert that Romantic women writers were in a precarious position of writing novels that both questioned patriarchal ideology and yet appeared to reinforce it; they point to the struggle of a woman author to write beyond the confines of domestic values. In *Women, Writing, and Revolution, 1790-1827*, Gary Kelly records the social reforms many women writers at this time attempted to promote. He argues that women writers worked to reform society by

extending the traditionally feminine virtues of empathy, modesty, and passivity to society in general. This led to the feminization of society during the last half of the eighteenth century and established women as the arbiters of social order. Katherine Sobba Green further corroborates their arguments when she asserts that the courtship novel could be read as a subversive tool that offered women anonymity in subtle, yet still powerful, ways. The depiction of women's freedom to choose their own husbands in the marriage plot—including the struggle to overcome various obstacles in order to do so—was in fact a feminist move, given the political and social constraints on women at this time according to Sobba Green. What these scholars point to is the importance of the courtship novel as a venue for articulating women's changing role in relation to men at the end of the eighteenth century through the early nineteenth century.

I want to add to this conversation by exploring how the courtship novel can be read as an outlet for depicting not just the domestic woman as a prominent political tool during this time as Armstrong posits, but as a place to highlight the desirability of the intellectual woman as a wife and how her desirability can be linked to social and political change. Armstrong describes the rise of the domestic woman as a “major event in political history” and argues that this figure provided a productive paradox: she was meant to be confined to the domestic realm and yet her actions shaped gender politics beyond her sphere by blurring the boundaries of traditional gender norms (12). Like Armstrong's domestic woman, the intellectual woman emerged as a new type of female at the turn of the eighteenth century who occupied the liminal space between domesticity and the public male realm. Mary Poovey articulates this conflict by analyzing how the woman writer—Poovey's label for a subset of the intellectual woman—negotiated her relationship to the “Proper Lady” at the end of the eighteenth century, and later, the “Angel in the House” of the nineteenth century in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as*

*Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen.* Drawing on conduct manuals, novels, magazines, memoirs and diaries, Poovey traces the evolution of depictions of the female figure as her identity related to man—she was siphoned into the set roles of mother, whore, daughter, virgin, sister, wife, or spinster. The development of the domestic woman, or the Proper Lady as Poovey terms her, complicated these set identities, especially when this figure conflicted with the less-than-feminine lives the women writers she writes about pursued. Poovey argues that the Proper Lady both restrained and fueled the woman writer, citing the careers of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen as evidence, and eventually concludes that the ideal femininity represented in the Proper Lady was a social, economic, and political construct. So the emerging figure of the woman writer—a type of female intellectual—worked to negotiate a new identity for women that was both appropriately domestic and yet went beyond the confines of female stereotypes. While both Armstrong and Poovey discuss the changing nature of femininity at this time by focusing on how the domestic woman or Proper Lady impacted the identities of women and women writers—and shaped the social and political values of the new century—less work has been done on how the intellectual woman herself became not just an object of scrutiny in the shifting roles of women but also a potentially desirable object domestically, sexually, or, in some cases, both.

What my work hopes to contribute to their discussion is a closer look at female figures who combine both domestic and intellectual virtues during this time period and how these figures are portrayed in an attractive light by women writers in courtship novels and, moreover how their perceived “attractiveness,” both in terms of their sexual appeal and potential value as a rational wife, either works in tandem with their intellectual identities, or places these cerebral characteristics in a subordinate position to women’s attractiveness in the marriage market; none

of the novels discussed address these complex issues in the same way, nor do their authors, while still in conversation with one another, uniformly shape their public personas to fit the same mold.

### **Representations of the Female Intellectual: Women Writers and Their Heroines**

Each chapter focuses on a different type of female intellect, from the “female philosopher” of the late-eighteenth century to the “educated lady” of the mid-nineteenth century, in order to better analyze the various ways in which women writers portrayed various manifestations of the intellectual woman and how successfully they were able to promote their gender reformist agendas. Each chapter likewise explores how the women writers themselves developed their writing personas to embody their politics, and how that then shaped their critical receptions. Central to my dissertation is how women writers after Wollstonecraft were both influenced by her progressive politics outlined in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and yet, at the same time, modified their writing personas and use of genre conventions to more subtly critique gender norms; in short, they portrayed the female intellectual in a positive light by pushing the boundaries of separate spheres ideology, rather than overtly trying to rupture them like Wollstonecraft did. As Eleanor Rose Ty argues, “[T]o avoid being labeled as a follower of Wollstonecraft...many of these writers developed narrative techniques and methods of presentation which enabled them to explore highly charged political topics without censure” (20).

I begin my study with Wollstonecraft, arguably the first radical feminist and most vocal advocate for the education of women. Wollstonecraft is foundational to my dissertation because her work documents the transition between the fading grandeur of the Bluestocking women (the pioneering celebrators of the female intellect who were later satirized as masculine brutes) and the development of the intellectual woman’s identity at the dawn of the new century. Drawing

on Wollstonecraft's personal romantic history, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), and her unfinished novel, *Maria: Or the Wrongs of Woman* (1796), I consider how the unstable, unfinished Romantic text parallels the unstable burgeoning of the thinking woman's identity. I read both Wollstonecraft and her final heroine Maria as "philosophical women," a term that not only denotes their intelligence, but also at this time serves as a derogatory phrase for overly masculine, politically radical women. After William Godwin published the shocking memoirs of Wollstonecraft, her early political treatises on the education of women lost their credibility in the face of her illicit love life; the educated woman became synonymous with sexual and political transgression. Just as Wollstonecraft occupied the liminal space between the public male sphere and the private female realm, so too does her heroine attempt to break through the restraints of gender norms and claim the right to have the same sexual, intellectual, and legal freedom as a man. Wollstonecraft's final novel is essential to my discussion of the thinking woman, not because it is necessarily a successful attempt at positively depicting this figure, but because it marks the moment in which Wollstonecraft ruptures traditional narratives about women. In many ways, *Wrongs of Women* reads as a cautionary tale about the dangers of miseducating women—Maria is a female thinker with progressive ideas, but lacks the strong foundation of a solid education beyond the typical female accomplishments, and so suffers for it as she repeats the romantic mistakes that ruin her life. This novel suggests that, for Wollstonecraft, the intellectual woman is an unstable character that cannot be reconciled to the domestic life, the courtship novel, or even the world of men. She is always a victim and an outsider. Wollstonecraft's potential solution for creating a space for the philosophical woman is to dissolve the narratives which she inhabits.

The next chapter documents the effects the return of conservative values in post-revolution Britain and Ireland has on the development of what I call the “woman of natural learning.” Both Sydney Owenson and her heroine Glorvina in *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) are clearly feminine women—dressed in attractive attire and full of sentimental effusions—and their intelligence is nourished by their natural proclivity to exercise their minds through their independent study of art, music, and literature; thus Owenson attempts to show women’s intelligence as compatible with attractive female qualities, like musical accomplishments and flattering dress, and inherently natural, making her and her heroine, as I have dubbed them, “women of natural learning.” Owenson marks a departure from the overt tactics of Wollstonecraft, because she strategically invoked separate spheres ideology and consistently portrayed herself and her heroine as second to man, in order to make her gender and national politics more palatable to her primarily male audience. In essence, she sacrificed overt revisions of gender norms—her heroine eventually folds back into English separate spheres ideology with her marriage to the English Horatio—in order to suggest that a female intellectual has the potential to not only be a better wife but, in the public arena, promote tolerance between nations and genders. What makes Glorvina and Owenson less threatening to social order than Wollstonecraft and Maria is their inherent femininity, to which Owenson constantly draws attention. Their learning is likewise sanitized by their outsider status; although both women were still considered somewhat transgressive, the fact that they were Irish, and not English, limited their potential political impact to the social margins, like Ireland, rather than the national center, and so minimized any threat to social order they may have been perceived to pose.

The third chapter marks a dramatic shift from Owenson and Wollstonecraft, who flaunted their boundary-crossing public roles as writers, by exploring how Jane Austen resisted being

labeled as a woman author and instead emphasized her status as a lady and a “rational woman.”<sup>3</sup> If Wollstonecraft wanted to shatter separate spheres ideology, and Owenson performed female virtues inherent in that ideology so as to emphasize how intelligent women can still be feminine (and not masculine monsters), then Austen eschewed the question of women in the public sphere altogether, and instead focused her agenda on showing how the intellectual woman is inherently domestic. She turned away from overt notions of education reform, and instead constructed a woman who is educated by normal standards for women, yet possesses a strong, analytical mind. In essence, Austen took the female intellectual out of the public realm and firmly established her as a proper, valuable player in the domestic one. She likewise reframed discussions of the attractiveness of the female intellectual; no longer was her attractiveness weighted by her beauty or gentleness, but rather it lay in her ability to be rational and even witty. In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Austen resisted explicitly advocating for the education of women or for the revision of gender norms. Instead, Austen portrays a rational domestic woman in Elinor Dashwood, who uses her critical thinking skills to navigate the marriage market and domestic world around her. She contrasts her rational heroine with the vulgar antics of the uneducated Lucy Steele in order to highlight the value of a self-composed, analytical wife. The love triangle between Lucy, Elinor, and Edward suggests that for Edward to mature as a man, he must learn the value of a thinking wife. I then read Marianne Dashwood's story as a positive retelling of Maria's fate in *Wrongs of Woman* and argue that her seemingly thoughtless actions fueled by sensibility are in fact her attempts at questioning the validity of gender norms and claiming the same courtship rights as a man. Marianne serves as an intermediary between the rational Elinor

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<sup>3</sup> The *OED* defines “rational” as “having sound judgment; (in extended use) sensible, sane, lucid. Also: characterized by reasoning, as opposed to emotion, intuition, etc.”

and the flawed Maria, as a female intellectual who has the capacity to grow out of emotional excess and self-damaging action through self-reflection. Austen marks a turning point in my reading of the intellectual woman because she deftly established that a domestic woman could be rational, and thus, subtly subverted traditional gender ideology.

My final chapter argues that Elizabeth Gaskell is the woman writer who most successfully resolved the conflict between the female intellectual and separate spheres ideology laid out by the previous authors, because she was able to illustrate how a woman's education enables her to strengthen her moral character and curb untoward action in the face of sexual desire, just as Wollstonecraft once advocated in *Vindication*. Gaskell's success in promoting the female intellectual as a valuable, moral member of society was rooted in the fact that she advocated for the reform of male gender norms as the only way to ensure the same reform for women, thus ultimately rejecting the platform of separate spheres ideology as nothing more than an outdated social construct that limited social progress. This last chapter then, drawing on Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (published in weekly installments from 1854 to 1855), looks at a woman who has received a classical education superior to those of her fellow females and is thus better able to navigate both the public and private spheres—here dubbed as an “educated lady.” This chapter represents the culmination of my study because it unites the virtues of the previous chapters and ultimately shows that an educated woman, by the middle of the nineteenth century, could be domestic and politically active, educated and female, sexual and moral. Gaskell addressed the various threads previous authors tried to pull together—from Wollstonecraft's early assertions that the education of women helps them to sustain their morality, to Owenson's argument that an intellectual woman can still be feminine and act as a national educator in the public sphere, to Austen's subtle portrayal of the intellectual woman as a

rational, respectable, domestic figure—to show how a female intellectual could use her educated mind to reconcile her sexual self with her moral one, and become a national educator because of her very propriety. I argue that in order for this new type of woman to find a respectable place in society, a redefinition of manhood is required because it aids in the dissolution of the boundaries between separate spheres. This novel shows that education does not inevitably produce sexual or political transgression in women, but helps them better navigate their sexual feelings and become productive members of society. Margaret Hale, the heroine of *North and South*, uses her education to adapt to her new life in Milton and understand her feelings for John Thornton. Yet despite her education, she remains a domestic and staunchly moral woman; even her femininity cannot be called into question, as evidenced by Thornton's frequent gaze on her soft figure. Gaskell, like Austen, consciously invoked the persona of a lady, specifically, a wife and mother, in order to downplay her public persona as an author. Gaskell asserted, then, through her life and novels that a woman could be both a public and private figure and, in *North and South*, establishes that the breakdown of separate spheres ideology is necessary for gender equality.

## Chapter One:

Female Philosophers: Re-writing Mary Wollstonecraft and *Wrongs of Woman's* Maria

### **Introduction: A Female Philosopher and the Wrongs Inflicted on Woman**

Mary Wollstonecraft is perhaps one of the most infamous women writers of the eighteenth century. She was no less remembered for her seemingly radical politics in works like *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* than she was for her scandalous personal life, riddled with tumultuous love affairs, illegitimate children, and suicide attempts. What is less well known, however, is the fact that she was not always synonymous with militant feminism. It wasn't until the publication of Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and her unfinished novel *Maria: Or the Wrongs of Woman* in 1798 that Wollstonecraft's identity, both as a writer and as a woman, was cemented as what Claudia Johnson terms a "female philosopher," or a female caricature who embodied the dangers of overt radical feminism and the threat it posed to social order. This philosophical woman was associated with sexual deviance, political transgression, and inappropriately masculine intelligence, all of which the details of Godwin's candid memoir of Wollstonecraft and the gothic plot of her novel appeared to support (Johnson *Women, Politics, Novel* 19). This caricature served as a sharp contrast to the female ideals of passivity, domesticity, modesty, and virtue, and yet Wollstonecraft attempted to create positive representations of this philosophical woman in her final novel in an effort to make female intelligence synonymous with womanly virtue, rather than sexual and political transgression; her philosophical woman would moreover combine the ideal traits of both genders (male reason and female virtue and feeling) to better act as society's moral compass and motherly educator—two roles long ascribed to woman by the public. During a time in which woman's deviation from her socially prescribed gender role was likened to a loss of virtue,

Wollstonecraft attempted to extricate the thinking woman from the double bind she found herself in: she was at once resisting gender norms and yet still evaluated by those norms, so that her excess in learning was inevitably likened to sexual excess. In other words, a woman's status as the "weaker vessel," as outlined in the introduction, made it so that a woman was thought to be naturally more inclined towards sexual excess and yet incapable of controlling her amorous impulses with her mind. Although educating woman would seem like the ideal way to teach her how to curb her baser instincts, educating her beyond her socially prescribed sphere was seen as something that enabled her deviant behavior across mental, physical, and moral boundaries, because the knowledge she gained from her studies would overwhelm her weaker mind and body, and thus, make her more prone to vice. Thus a woman's deviation from one form of gender norms—in this case her rejection of women's learning in favor of masculine subjects like politics—implied that a thinking woman was more likely to eschew all sense of feminine propriety, especially her sexual virtue, which at this time was one of a woman's chief assets in the marriage market and the foundation of her respectable character. Wollstonecraft then worked to tie these two conflicting views of womanhood together, hoping to illustrate that a woman could be intellectual like a man and still virtuous like a woman should be; this figure could then, because of her very deviance from gender norms, promote gender reform because she embodied the merits of both genders. Yet in the end, her failure to create an obviously respectable heroine in *Wrongs of Woman* and the sordid details of her personal history ultimately undermined her endeavors to make the philosophical woman a positive figure.

This chapter argues that the re-writing of Wollstonecraft's life after the publication of her memoir, along with the controversial plot of *Wrongs of Woman* that attempted to depict a new type of sexual, intellectual, and yet still moral heroine, point to a moment in which writers

envisioned that the traditional heroine could be rewritten and patriarchal narrative could be revised to create a new way of writing—and reading—the philosophical woman. No longer would she be a caricature of feminism, but a moral, sexual, intellectual—if flawed—autonomous individual equal to man. Yet Wollstonecraft's life and work is important to the discussion of depictions of the female intellectual in courtship novels, not because she was necessarily able to successfully create a new narrative—her inability to complete *Wrongs of Woman* suggests she struggled to write outside the confines of the courtship genre conventions—but because she disrupted patriarchal representations of female philosophers so violently with her final novel that she opened up a liminal space for the intellectual woman in novels at the end of the eighteenth century. She promised, in essence, a new way of writing about women, even if she herself could not yet figure out how to completely write beyond traditionally problematic representations of the philosophical woman as too susceptible to the charms of sensibility and taste, and too ready to compromise her virtue. Her final novel revised her earlier claims that a solid education helped women reign in their sexual desires that she outlined in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and instead suggested that a woman may be sexual and intellectual—conflicted, even, about these two warring forces in her—yet still as moral as a traditional woman. Although her inability to fully grapple with the maxims set forth in *Vindication* in her final novel might be attributed to the latter genre's demand of a central conflict (and thus, plot twists that would complicate one's reading of Wollstonecraft's early philosophy), it becomes clear in narratives like those of Elinor Dashwood's in *Sense and Sensibility*, that the female ideals in *Vindication* can be successfully outlined in a novel. Thus, Wollstonecraft deliberately rewrites many of her early assertions on women in education in her final novel in order to reflect her more complex understanding of these issues later in her life. Her personal history and critics' attempts to alternately vilify or

sanctify her since her death likewise call into question traditional narratives on femaleness in which a woman must be either a harlot or a saint, simply because it is difficult in all these retellings of Wollstonecraft's life to cast her convincingly as either stock character, as both versions of her life use the same basic facts to weave two distinct stories of her life. In essence, retellings of Wollstonecraft's life complicate how we read and write about women in the eighteenth century, making it so that a woman could no longer be set up as inherently virtuous by following oppressive gender norms or as easily vilified through her struggle to free herself from the more abusive aspects of patriarchy. Instead, Wollstonecraft becomes a type of female hero—or figure who is allowed to make mistakes but learn through them—rather than a stock heroine, so that a woman's deviant actions could be blamed, not on her lack of morality, but on the oppressive nature of separate spheres ideology, which only social reform could mitigate. However, before Wollstonecraft could ultimately revise how we read and write about women, the two-pronged reading of her life, depicting her as either a saint or whore, tainted the figure of the philosophical woman for a significant period of time because Wollstonecraft, as the new embodiment of that figure, made sexual transgression synonymous with her radical politics through her tumultuous personal history. Thus, Wollstonecraft's life and writing, while attempting to revise social expectations of women, inadvertently reinforced rigid gender norms in her immediate time by acting as concrete evidence for the dangers inherent in women's deviation from gender norms.

Typically, most contemporary scholars argue that while the Bluestockings of the mid- to late-eighteenth century found their success in a careful balance between rational thought and feminine virtues, Wollstonecraft, in contrast, represented a threat to social order by her very masculine autonomy expressed through her overt political agenda to secure that autonomy for all

women. As Elizabeth Eger posits in *Bluestockings: Women of Reason from Enlightenment to Romanticism*, “[I]t was only Mary Wollstonecraft who made an explicit and uncompromising claim for the right of women to full citizenship, and her life and writing proved too radical for many of her contemporaries, who recoiled from her notorious personal scandals and her courageous politics” (205). Wollstonecraft was then considered to have shed the femininities of more passive, ornamental conversation that made gender equality palatable to the public, in favor of direct language and yet, in using more direct language, made people fearful of social change. Here though, as Eger rightly points out, what was most shocking about Wollstonecraft was not just her assertion of gender equality through her stylistic and rhetorical aggression in her writing, but the facts of how her “too radical” life undermined her political agenda. Nevertheless, this reading of Wollstonecraft, while accurate, holds true only after the sordid details of her private life were made public. Before that, she was fairly well respected and her writing managed to avoid being read as “too radical” or synonymous with her private life.

The current trend in contemporary scholarship is to reclaim Wollstonecraft from history’s tainted interpretation of her life and resituate her writing in its original context, before Godwin’s memoir set her up as a cautionary tale of female autonomy. Authors like Gary Kelly, Janet Todd, and Barbara Taylor instead depict Wollstonecraft as a victim of an increasingly conservative political climate, a climate that edged out political radicals—especially those that threatened separate spheres ideology—in favor of preserving social order. The various incarnations of her life—Godwin’s tale of the social injustices inflicted upon her, the cautionary tale warning against being a philosophical woman critics later produce, and the reclaiming of her history as the life of a radical feminist by scholars today—are not history, but variations of “her story” that serve to support the political agendas of her biographers (from Jacobins and Anti-

Jacobins, to feminists then and now). While it would take many more pages—easily a whole book—to address thoroughly how Wollstonecraft’s story is used as a political tool, that is not the purpose, nor the focus, of this chapter. Instead, my primary concern is to underscore the fact that changing perceptions of Wollstonecraft point to the historical process of reception that led to the decreasing respectability of the philosophical woman. So the socially perceived negative traits of this figure—sexual licentiousness and political radicalism—began to outweigh the positive potential of the philosophical woman to promote gender reform through her embodiment of both female virtue and masculine thinking.

My second focus in this chapter is on Wollstonecraft’s own attempt to re-write the traditional heroine. Specifically, she sought to undermine the two most common plots for women in courtship novels at this time, generally speaking: that of a woman’s descent into sexual deviance, with an ugly demise the inevitable outcome of her actions; or a moral woman’s successful navigation of the marriage market, with a good husband and home as a reward for her virtue. In both narratives, the woman’s future hinges on her ability to preserve her virtue, which suggests that for society, a woman’s actions always had sexual implications at this time.

Wollstonecraft had to then shun traditional and most often used forms of romantic narratives, which relied on a woman’s preservation of her sexual virtue to assert her social value, to carve out a space for this new type of philosophical, sexual yet moral woman in novels and society. Roxanne Eberle rightly posits that, “In response to romances structured by the conventional narrative of courtship and marriage, radical women writers turn towards yet another highly ritualized ‘heroine’s text’: ‘the harlot’s progress’” (4). Eberle contrasts the “heroine’s text” or the traditional romance plot—the modest courtship and eventual honorable marriage to a moneyed man—and the “harlot’s progress”—a Hogarthian loss of honor that begins a woman’s

descent into vice—in order to show how radical writers like Wollstonecraft collapsed the boundaries between the two seemingly disparate plot trajectories. The purpose of this plot conflation was to cultivate a space for the new heroine—the revised philosophical woman, in my terms, who was neither a caricature of feminism, nor a threat to social order, but a complex thinking woman—that existed between these two narratives, which in turn provided a more rounded depiction of womanhood. Although novels like Rousseau’s *Julie* seem to point to an intermediary narrative that allows a woman to be sexually fallen and still moral, it relies on the heroine’s ability to repent her actions and reform. In contrast, Wollstonecraft developed a narrative in which a woman could be sexually deviant and moral and, most important, not be forced to repent her actions, even if she regretted their outcomes—a huge risk for a woman writer at this time. Thus the combined narratives produced a transgressive plot line that allowed a woman to be sexually illicit, politically radical, and still morally sound; her vices were seen as products of the disparity between genders, not as symptoms of mental weakness inherent in the gentler sex, making it harder for readers to stereotype the heroine as either a whore in need of redemption or an angel. This new plot further explored why the question of woman’s rights ultimately became a question of female virtue, and whether or not a woman could be morally sound once she was no longer restrained by gender conventions. Wollstonecraft’s *Wrongs of Woman* works as an adaptation of “the harlot’s progress” by portraying a woman whose sexual transgressions are rooted in her inability to escape her abusive husband and assert her independence in a society in which a married woman had almost no political voice. Her fragmented narrative literally disrupts the traditional courtship plot with its frequent shifts in perspective, the unreliability of the narrator, the slippage between genres, and the novel’s unfinished ending, leaving room for the transgressive heroine to open up an alternative space for

herself and address social injustices inflicted on women. In this way, the prototype Maria acts as a re-writing of the philosophical woman: she is keenly aware of social inequality between genders, she is in possession of a sexual appetite that rivals her male counterparts, but she is still virtuous because of her philosophical leanings, with moral codes that transcend social conventions. Her sexual desire moreover is not meant to undermine the value of her politics. Thus, Wollstonecraft attempted to assert that her philosophical heroine could be moral outside the bounds of social norms, and yet failed for two reasons: she herself struggled to write beyond the traditional heroine stereotypes, often portraying not a philosophical woman, but a heroine of sensibility; and secondly, her readership was not yet ready to embrace a more transgressive heroine because of the threat she posed to social order, particularly because this novel was read in conjunction with her scandalous memoir. What follows is a reading of two narratives of philosophical women—one historical and one fictional—that charts the breakdown of patriarchal narrative, the attempted creation of a new type of heroine, and the ultimate failure to develop a positive perception of the philosophical woman because of the negative stereotypes of Wollstonecraft that preclude any attempts at revising the philosophical woman.

### **Wollstonecraft: Rewriting ‘The Catastrophe of the Female Philosopher’**

Wollstonecraft’s life and critical reception illustrate the difficulty the philosophical woman faced as she attempted to separate a woman’s sexuality and morality from her intellectual pursuits, or in other words, as she worked to subvert the gender norms that insisted a woman’s social value resided in her virtue (a term that, while indicating propriety of manners, was often reduced to chastity), rather than her intellectual merit. The shifting readings of Wollstonecraft’s life highlight the fact that while she tried to undermine gender norms, the negative conflation of

her private and public life ultimately reasserted the very gender ideology she wanted to overwrite. Cora Kaplan best describes current scholars' relationship to Wollstonecraft when she writes,

[U]p until the last quarter-century Wollstonecraft's life has been read much more closely than her writing, which has sometimes seemed a mere pretext for telling and retelling her personal story. Yet now that her work too has at least received the attention it deserves there is a sense in which she seems to offer the present too much – both an emotional and sexual history whose notoriety has inhibited access to the writing, and a body of work at once so discursively emphatic and elusive that it upsets the tidy categorizations and standard narratives of social, political, and cultural history (247).

Kaplan rightly draws attention to the difficulty of placing Wollstonecraft's life and writing into distinct narrative frameworks. Even her final novel cannot be safely categorized as a novel (courtship, gothic, sentimental or otherwise), nor distinctly a political treatise, nor a clear autobiography. It becomes evident that too often Wollstonecraft's life eclipses her work or is read into her literary creations (it is hard to ignore the parallels between Wollstonecraft's life and the struggle Maria faces in *Wrongs of Woman*), and her life fluctuates between reading as the tragedy of a misguided but inherently virtuous woman or as the ribald scandal of a political radical. What the reader is left with is a series of conflicting narratives that at times villainize and at times sanctify Wollstonecraft, but never leave off attempting to rewrite her comfortably back into history. Kaplan rightly reads her life in terms of excess—Wollstonecraft offers “too much” to the public, so much so that even today it is difficult to reconcile her private life with her public politics, and her conflicting narratives about women, morality, and education. The lack of a “tidy” resolution to Wollstonecraft's life suggests that at that point in time, there was no space for the philosophical woman in society; it was still unacceptable for a woman to be sexual and moral, political and feminine, and her lifestyle inevitably represented the dangers of her radical politics.

Wollstonecraft was not, however, the writer offering “too much” to her audience, as Kaplan indicates. Rather, that honor was reserved for William Godwin, her husband and fellow reformist, making him responsible for the far reaching negative impact Wollstonecraft had on making the intellectual woman respectable. Several months after her death, Godwin published *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in an attempt to cement Wollstonecraft’s political and philosophical importance. In essence, he was the first person to attempt rewriting Wollstonecraft’s history as a way to break patriarchal narrative conventions. His goal was to write a brutally candid description of her life so as to clearly expose the social injustices woman can suffer; his heroine, Wollstonecraft, would be flawed, but virtuous, rational, but forced to submit to the social barbarities of gender inequality. In the preface to the work, Godwin explained why he thought it was necessary to write an account of her life:

I cannot easily prevail on myself to doubt, that the more fully we are presented with the picture and story of such persons as the subject of the following narrative, the more generally shall we feel in ourselves an attachment to their fate and a sympathy in their excellencies. There are not many individuals with whose character the public welfare and improvement are more intimately connected than the author of a *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (3).

Godwin’s self-assurance that his readers would empathize with Wollstonecraft and see in her life an example of someone who attempted to promote “public welfare”—and moreover, someone who suffered the pangs of social injustice—was rooted in his belief that his readers, as products of the Enlightenment, would rationally engage with this material and would view it as a moral lesson on “improving” society. He goes so far as to “intimately” connect Wollstonecraft’s “fate” with that of the greater public’s. This was, in retrospect, overly-optimistic. The candid memoir recounts to readers Wollstonecraft’s love affairs with Gilbert Imlay and later Godwin himself, as well as her love of the already married Henry Fuseli, her illegitimate children, and her two

attempted suicides. Thus Godwin did solidify Wollstonecraft's name in history, not as a great philosopher, but as a straw man for conservative thinkers to tear down the more radical political ideas of Wollstonecraft and her circle; for conservatives, to indulge in her politics was to condone her sordid life. Readers of all ranges on the political spectrum were unable to recognize Wollstonecraft's life beyond the lens of social conventions. So Godwin may have wanted to create a valorous philosophical heroine, but his audience was not yet ready to accept the actions of such a woman as anything more than symptoms of a radical lifestyle. Many reviewers wished the memoir had remained unpublished; it was read alternately as a tasteless ode to a misguided woman or the radical antics of a sexual deviant.<sup>4</sup> Either reading was fodder for the Anti-Jacobins to attack the progressive agendas of the Jacobins. Even so, the real horror behind her story was arguably not in the shocking details of her life, but in the readers' inability to accurately understand the memoir as a treatise on the wrongs patriarchy inflicted on woman, as Godwin intended. This memoir also undermined Wollstonecraft's uncompromising assertions on the necessity of female education—and the dangers of overweening sensibility—in her most successful philosophical treatise, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which were then read against her multiple affairs and illegitimate children.

Before exploring the varied responses to first Wollstonecraft's death and later Godwin's explicit memoir, a discussion of the critical reception of her work prior to this radical rewriting of her life is necessary to help the reader understand how Wollstonecraft went from being the representation of a virtuous intellectual to a "philosophical wanton," as one critic later declared her (qtd. Pennell 4). Traditionally, when we think of Wollstonecraft and her critical reception, we assume she was perceived by all her peers as "that hyena in petticoats," when it was only

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, *Wrongs of Woman* was read in the same way.

Horace Walpole labeling her as such (Walpole 379). Even his brash label, often considered an assault on her for her radical politics exhibited in works like *Vindication*, was only applied to her after she attacked Marie Antoinette in her *Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794). Walpole, confiding his thoughts in a letter to Hannah More (a fellow Anti-Jacobin), felt it was undignified to persecute the queen who had suffered so much during the French Revolution. Prior to this, Wollstonecraft had received primarily favorable reviews, especially for *Vindication*. In fact, the only negative review of the treatise was from the conservative *Critical Review*, which wrote,

On the whole, we cannot praise this work...If Miss Wollstonecraft meant it as a trial of the skill with the stronger sex, she has wholly failed: she has betrayed her own cause by defending it, and has lost the credit which female authors have sometimes claimed...We call on men therefore to speak, if they would wish the woman to be public of this new school! We call on the women to declare, whether they would sacrifice their pleasing qualities for the severity of reason, the bold unabashed dignity of speaking what they feel, of rising superior to the vulgar prejudices of decency and propriety. We may easily anticipate the answer, and shall leave Miss Wollstonecraft at least to oblivion, her best friends can never wish that her work should be remembered (qtd. *Vindications* 447).

Here the writer ridicules Wollstonecraft for her failure to perform to the standards of the “stronger sex.” He feels she discredited not only her cause but also her fellow women writers with her failed attempts at manly rhetoric. Through this, the writer juxtaposes social order and female virtue with the dangers of “severity of reason” in women. He then ridicules her by mimicking her supposed claims that women must favor “severity of reason” over “the vulgar prejudices of decency and propriety,” gives a proverbial call to arms, asking men and women to denounce this “new school,” and confidently claims that they “may easily anticipate” society’s rejection of Wollstonecraft’s maxims. It is perhaps easier to read the above excerpt in the light of Wollstonecraft’s future infamy because it corroborates the clash between Wollstonecraft’s history and an outraged public. In reality, the *Critical Review*’s attack on *Vindication* represents

an extreme interpretation of what many readers initially perceived as a fairly conventional text. *Vindication* appeared to reject “decency and propriety” to this conservative newspaper because it advocated educating women. The criticism from this magazine, however, proved to be an anomaly in a sea of complimentary receptions of her treatise, primarily because *Vindication*, while progressive in its gender politics, wasn’t as radical as we now deem it; it certainly pushed the boundaries of gender norms, but it still founded its argument on the notions that educated women make better wives and mothers, thus acknowledging the importance of women’s domestic roles.

Wollstonecraft is legendary for advocating for the education of women beyond their traditional schooling in accomplishments like drawing and music, and basic literacy, and yet she was not alone in asserting these rights for women. Many women writers of various political leanings (including Hannah Moore, Mary Hays, and Frances Burney to name a few) promoted the education of women during the 1790s as a way to counteract women’s supposed emotional fragility and mental weakness that made them secondary to man.<sup>5</sup> What made Wollstonecraft’s work different from that of her fellow women writers’ was the fact that *Vindication* was the first political treatise by a woman that dealt with women’s rights at length. It was so popular that it quickly went into a second edition within the year. Wollstonecraft argued more explicitly than her fellow female authors for women’s education reform so that women could then better shape the minds of their children and be more ideal companions to their husbands. She wrote,

“Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if

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<sup>5</sup> Catharine Macaulay, in *Letters of Education* (1790), argues that the miseducation of women was the cause of their mental and emotional weakness, and the Bluestocking Hester Chapone advocated the proper education of women in *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773), which was originally written to her niece, and later published for the benefit of society. Hannah More, who agreed with Walpole’s description of Wollstonecraft, argued that Christian values were the foundation of a rational, stable society, just as Wollstonecraft did in *Vindication*.

she not be prepared by education to become the companion of men, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue” (*Vindication* 102). She likens education to the tool that will reinforce “virtue” and continue “the progress of knowledge” in both men and women. Her educated “companion of men” implicitly becomes a type of national, domestic educator that produces well-learned children that will uphold society in the future. In the end, she highlights the fact that women’s education benefits men by then stressing that “the peace of mind of a worthy man would not be interrupted by the idle vanity of his wife” (*Vindication* 288). Her second pertinent criticism is that the cultivation of excessive sensibility in women causes them to behave irrationally and indulge in dangerously voluptuous thoughts. She writes,

Novels, music, poetry, and gallantry, all tend to make women the creatures of sensation, and their character is thus formed in the mould of folly during the time they are acquiring accomplishments, the only improvement they are excited, by their station in society, to acquire. This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others (*Vindication* 177).

Sensibility then “relaxes” or more aptly, degrades, “the powers of the mind” and undermines women’s intellectual potential (much like her heroine in *Wrongs of Woman* inadvertently illustrates, to Wollstonecraft’s chagrin). Her primary concern is with the confining nature of female education that limits women to develop their minds with “novels, music, poetry.” Wollstonecraft moreover attacks the conduct manuals written by men like Fordyce and Rousseau that insist women be formed to please men; she notes that to do so would be to corrupt the minds of women, teaching them only to think of their appearance and cultivate the charms of a coquette. She likewise fights against the “false system of education” that is “gathered from books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than rational creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers” (*Vindication* 109). She went on to write,

I may be accused of arrogance; still I must declare what I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more useless members of society (*Vindication* 129).

She resists male interpretations of the ideal woman and woman's education, insisting that their words were rooted in their desire to have "alluring" playfellows (I include wives in this term here), rather than "rational"—and more useful—wives and mothers. In essence, they sacrifice a better society in favor of their baser desires. Wollstonecraft is at her most assertive when she denounces the proclamations of Dr. Gregory and Rousseau specifically, accusing them of promoting the cultivation of "more useless members of society." Wollstonecraft then claims her right to speak for women and goes even farther by declaring that, as a woman, she is the only one with the right to do so.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the aggressiveness of her rhetoric in *Vindication*, she is swift to note that while women are rational creatures in need of a proper education, they are not equal to men in all respects, nor are they meant to compete with men but instead should act as equal companions. She frames her discussion of women not by social beliefs of the inherent inequality between the sexes, but instead posits that men and women are both "human creatures" in the eyes of God. She writes, "I shall first consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties" (*Vindication* 110). In order to equalize men and women on this level, she then has to concede that men are in fact superior to women not in mind but in body. She acknowledges that "the female in point of strength is, in general, inferior to the male" (*Vindication* 110). Thus, men and women are both meant to reach

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<sup>6</sup> What we will later see is her difficulty in making her assertions on female education and the necessity of curbing the flow of sensibility in women articulate in her final novel, *Wrongs of Woman*. Her personal life, too, shows how she herself struggled to use her education and cultivated reason to preserve her virtue and control her emotions.

their fullest potential on this earth, or “unfold their faculties” to their best abilities. Women lack not fine minds, but physical strength, a fact that few could argue with. She also likens women’s lack of mental strength to a lack of practice—they cannot improve their minds without first having the benefit of a better education. While they cannot overcome the softness of their physical bodies (and so, she implies, will always retain their femininity even as they are educated), they can improve their minds through exercise. Through this, Wollstonecraft finds a careful balance between promoting gender equality and deferring to her primarily male readers. She finishes *Vindication* with an “appeal to their understanding,” and asks only that she might “convince reasonable men of the importance of some of my remarks” (*Vindication* 288).<sup>7</sup> Her emphasis on “some” implies that Wollstonecraft knew, even as she wrote her treatise, that not all of the reformist ideas she put forth would be so easily accepted, especially the more provocative ones, like the eventual denunciation of monarchy and class and the necessity of representing both men and women in the government (*Vindication* 101-102). Her goal in putting forth these ideas was not a serious attempt to convince her audience of their necessity, but to simply have such radical ideas in print so that eventually they might not be so radical. In many ways Wollstonecraft, despite the fact that so many other women writers of this era were arguing for women’s rights, is considered the mother of feminism simply because she wrote the first aggressive, explicit treatise on the rights of women.<sup>8</sup> The later revelation of her personal history

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<sup>7</sup> Her entire closing excerpt reads, “I then would fain convince reasonable men of the importance of some of my remarks; and prevail on them to weigh dispassionately the whole tenor of my observations. —I appeal to their understandings; and, as a fellow-creature, claim, in the name of my sex, some interest in their hearts. I entreat them to assist to emancipate their companion, to make her a help meet for them! Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers—in a word, better citizens” (*Vindication* 288).

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Taylor rightly questions our right to even call Wollstonecraft a feminist, as the word itself was not coined until the 1890s. She writes that dubbing Wollstonecraft’s cannon “as feminist is problematic, and I do it only after much consideration. The label is of course anachronistic . . . Treating Wollstonecraft’s thought as an anticipation of

marked her as a definitive social outsider because it underscored the disparity between her political agenda to promote education as the road to female virtue and her real life struggle to master her own desires and sensibility with reason.

Yet before she became a social outcast, she was applauded by reviewers for the practicality of the arguments set forth in *Vindication*. The *Analytical Review* (1792) wrote:

[T]he present work is an elaborate *treatise of female education*... If the bulk of the great truths which this publication contains were reduced to practice, the nation would be better, wiser, and happier than it is upon the wretched, trifling useless and absurd system of education which is now prevalent” (qtd. Janes 294).

Wollstonecraft can be read as a figure that led England into a progressive new century in this passage. It is clear that she rightly attacked the “absurd system” of education in England and even better, developed what appears to be a workable and realistic plan for revising the system. Even what are considered some of Wollstonecraft’s more outlandish proposals are dismissed, not for their potential to undermine social order, but because of their perceived harmlessness.

William Enfield, one of the more progressive reviewers of *Vindication*, wrote in the *Monthly Review* 8 (1792), 209 that “[S]everal of her opinions are fanciful, and some of her projects romantic” (qtd. Janes 295). However, he did support her feminist agenda. He wrote that

how jealous soever WE [men] may be of our *right* to the proud preeminence which we have assumed, the women of the present age are daily giving us indubitable proofs that mind is of no sex, and that, with the fostering aid of education, the world, as well as the nursery, may be benefited by their instructions (qtd. Janes 295).

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nineteenth and twentieth-century feminist argument has meant sacrificing or distorting some of its key elements. Leading examples of this . . . have been the widespread neglect of her religious beliefs, and the misrepresentation of her as a bourgeois liberal, which together have resulted in the displacement of a religiously inspired utopian radicalism by a secular, class-partisan reformism as alien to Wollstonecraft’s political project as her dream of a divinely promised age of universal happiness is to our own. Even more important however has been the imposition on Wollstonecraft of a heroic-individualist brand of politics utterly at odds with her own ethically driven case for women’s emancipation. Wollstonecraft’s leading ambition for women was that they should attain virtue, and it was to this end that she sought their liberation” (12). This points to how Wollstonecraft’s life is distorted to fulfill twenty- and twenty-first century feminist agendas.

He went on to write that the importance of Wollstonecraft's work aims

to correct errors, hitherto universally embraced, concerning the female character; and to raise woman, from a state of degradation and vassalage, to her proper place in the scale of existence; where in the dignity of independence, she may discharge the duties and enjoy the happiness of a rational Being (qtd. Janes 295).

Enfield critiques not Wollstonecraft here but his fellow men—and the primary audience of *Vindication*—by pointing out how male vanity acts as a flimsy obstacle in the way of educating women, creatures who have moreover already proven themselves to be rational beings (women give “indubitable proofs that mind is of no sex”). For Enfield, it is only rational to allow women the education they need to further refine their minds and, in so doing, better the world. He echoes the late-Enlightenment preoccupation with self-fulfillment and individualization when he argues for the necessity of educating women so as to allow them “the happiness of a rational Being.” To not do so is to degrade women. These words, coming from a man, represent the feelings of most intellectuals of the 1790s, regardless of whether they were Jacobins or Anti-Jacobins, in that the proper education of women was considered to be a tool that would promote social stability, even if they dramatically differed in their opinions on appropriate education for women. In each of these readings, Wollstonecraft is a philosophical pioneer leading the critical conversation on the education of women beyond the maxims set forth in conduct manuals.

Even after her death, the reading public mourned the loss of a fellow intellectual. One reader in the *Monthly Magazine* claimed the following about Wollstonecraft:

This extraordinary woman no less distinguished by admirable talents and a masculine tone of understanding than by active humanity, exquisite sensibility, and endearing qualities of heart commanding the respect and winning the affections of all who were favored with her friendship or confidence, or who were within the sphere of her influence, may justly be considered a public loss. Quick to feel, and indignant to resist, the iron hand of despotism, whether civil or intellectual, her exertions to awaken in the minds of her oppressed sex a sense of their degradation, and to restore them to the dignity of reason and virtue, were active and incessant; by her impassioned reasoning and

glowing eloquence, the fabric of voluptuous prejudice has been shaken to its foundation and totters towards its fall; while her philosophical mind, taking a wider range, perceived and lamented the defects of civil institutions interwoven in their texture and inseparable from them the causes of those partial evils, destructive to virtues and happiness, which poison social intercourse and deform domestic life” (qtd. Pennell 2).

This passage is impressive no less for its length than for its overflow of sentimental rhetoric in the wake of Wollstonecraft’s passing. Granted, many scholars suspect that this letter was written by a close friend of Wollstonecraft; regardless, the mere fact that the *Monthly Magazine* published this eulogy solidifies its importance as a standard reading of Wollstonecraft’s life after her death but before the publication of the memoirs. The character sketch that is drawn here reflects a feminine yet philosophical heroine: her heart and intellect both aided her in her plight to fight injustice wherever she saw it.<sup>9</sup> Her masculine tone of understanding is applauded here, as is her “impassioned reasoning” and “exquisite sensibility.” These characteristics worked in tandem to produce a remarkable philosophical woman; this woman, in turn, had the ability to combine the best attributes of men (reason) and women (sensibility) to fight “the iron hand of despotism.” Yet just a few years later, these same traits would be used to villainize Wollstonecraft and turn her intellectual genius into a caricature of the female philosopher.

The *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1797), printed another complimentary tribute for Wollstonecraft, if less embroidered than the one published in the *Monthly Magazine*:

The works of Mary Wollstonecraft display unusual versatility of mental powers. She was able to turn her mind to new tasks in a way that made her eminent in several directions. She may be classed among pedagogical writers, but she also wrote on historical subjects and took part in discussions in political principles. She wrote fiction, and her letters descriptive of experiences in travel, and letters personal, take a high rank even to this day, among products of that kind. And more than all this, her genius furnished in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the motive power derived from originality of conception, which helped to carry forward an historic movement. Her intellectual endowments then, were of a wide scope. Her practical skill in education was even

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<sup>9</sup> Again, it is easy to read in the passage a description of Maria, Wollstonecraft’s heroine in *Wrongs of Woman*.

superior to her speculations upon that subject (qtd. Rauschenbusch-Clough 24).

Here she is depicted as a reliable educator with her mental powers again celebrated. Although the author of this tribute is more sober, carefully outlining the range of Wollstonecraft's canon, he unmistakably admits that her intelligence (or "genius") was responsible for her variety of publications and her "originality of conception" of *Vindication*. The author also depicts *Vindication* as a leader in "an historic movement." The writer went on to suggest that

[h]er manners were gentle, easy, and elegant; her conversation intelligent and amusing, without the least trait of literary pride, or the apparent consciousness of powers above the level of her sex; and for soundness of understanding and sensibility of heart, she was, perhaps, never equaled" (qtd. Rauschenbusch-Clough 43).

The emphasis here is on her femininity as a balancing force to her masculine mental powers. The author is careful to note that while she did have the mental "powers above the level of her sex," she, perhaps unconsciously, avoided improper vanity through her unassuming nature. In this way she is read as a type of Bluestocking, whose intellectual prowess is contained by her female graces of sensibility. Wollstonecraft is then, even in more modest terms compared to other homages, a female intellect that changed the landscape of discussion of gender and education, while still maintaining her womanly virtues.

However, after the publication of the memoirs and *Wrongs of Woman*, her philosophical turn of mind became suspect. No longer was she praised for her gentle feminine graces that balanced her masculine mind. Instead, the masculine aspects of her nature connoted sexual deviance and incendiary political values because those aspects represented her gender dissension; in other words, her personal life served as evidence for the philosophical woman's violation of her virtue and thus, suggested that if a woman aspires to masculine ideals, she must sacrifice her feminine ones.

The initial violent reaction to the revelation of her unconventional life is best explained by an excerpt from *The Anti-Jacobin Review* (January 1800):

She lived in a state of prostitution with *two other men*, the last of whom became her husband, and published this history of her amours, or as least of as much of them as she thought fit to entrust him; for many still remain untold, which, if faithfully related, would make a book, in comparison with which the *Adventures of Moll Flanders* would be a model of purity” (93).

The writer wastes no time in reducing Wollstonecraft to a prostitute and her history to a series of lascivious encounters. Similarly, the writer paints Wollstonecraft as a conniving sexual beast; he easily turns two love affairs into many and implies that Wollstonecraft withheld information from Godwin—to what end, remains unknown—so as to turn his hyperbolic reading of her life into fact. And yet, he then takes this fact and folds it back into fiction (though this time not of his own making) by referencing the infamous, eventually-repentant thief-prostitute Moll Flanders. Wollstonecraft’s life, even today, has almost become synonymous with a gothic romance’s torrid plot and is perhaps inevitably conflated with her writing. His retelling of her life becomes a type of “harlot’s progress” in which there is no redemption for the heroine.

Other scathing interpretations of Wollstonecraft were published in the *Monthly Magazine* (1798), the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (March 13, 1798), and the *European Magazine* (April 1798), shortly after they had written glowing obituaries of Wollstonecraft. The *Monthly Review* declared one short year after the publication of the glowing eulogy to Wollstonecraft,

It is not for us to vindicate Mary Godwin from the charges of immorality which is brought against her by the candid as well as the censorious, by the sagacious as well as the superstitious observer. Her character in our estimation is far from being entitled to unqualified praise; she had many faults; had many transcendent virtues (qtd. Pennell 3).

Wollstonecraft is depicted as being on trial after her death for “charges of immorality,” accusations of which she can’t actually confirm or reject, making the facts of her life as related

by Godwin a series of events that became twisted to shape whatever narrative her current storyteller wished to fabricate. The *Monthly Review* was perhaps the most generous publication in its censure of Wollstonecraft, only claiming that she had both faults and virtues. It is conceivable that the *Monthly Review* was less disgusted by Wollstonecraft than by Godwin's poor judgment in publishing the memoir. Regardless, the magazine could no longer praise Wollstonecraft without aligning itself with her tarnished reputation. The backlash of Godwin's actions were numerous and far reaching. For example, Robert Southey, the poet laureate, publicly denounced Godwin for airing his wife's secrets and Richard Powhele published his poem *The Unsex'd Females*, a satirical attack on female intellectuals like Wollstonecraft, in 1798 as a response to the memoir. Even the *Gentleman's Magazine* published several letters from angry readers who were appalled at Wollstonecraft's lack of religious zeal on her deathbed and Godwin's approbation of it in the memoirs (qtd. Rauschenbusch-Clough 62). But it was perhaps the *European Magazine* that best reflected the shock and disgust with which the public greeted the memoir by its very thoroughness in outlining the many ways in which Wollstonecraft and her politics became offensive. One review from the magazine wrote in April 1798:

The lady whose memoirs are now before us, appears to have possessed good abilities, and originally a good disposition, but with an overweening conceit of herself, much obstinacy and self-will, and a disposition to run counter to established practices and opinions. Her conduct in the early part of her life was blameless if not exemplary; but the latter part of it was blemished with actions that must consign her name to posterity (in spite of all palliatives) as one where example, if followed, would be attended with the most pernicious consequences to society: a female who could brave the opinion of the world in the most delicate point; a philosophical wanton, breaking down the bars designed to restrict licentiousness, and a mother, deserting a helpless offspring disgracefully brought into the world by herself, by an intended act of suicide...such was the catastrophe of a female philosopher of the new order, such the events of her life, and such the apology for her conduct. It will be read with disgust by every female who has any pretensions to delicacy; with detestation by every one attached to the interests of religion and morality; and with indignation by any one who might feel any regard for the unhappy woman, whose frailties should have been buried in oblivion. Licentious as the times are, we trust it will obtain no imitations of the heroine in this country. It may act, however, as a

warning to those who fancy themselves at liberty to dispense with the laws of propriety and decency, and who suppose the possession of perverted talents will atone for the well government of society and the happiness of mankind (qtd. Pennell 4-5).

Wollstonecraft's faults lay, then, not in her "good abilities," but in her "actions." Rather, the repetition of "actions" or "act" implies that Wollstonecraft's agency, specifically her masculine agency that enabled her sexual transgression, undermined her "originally good disposition."

Wollstonecraft is specifically seen as a figure who "[broke] down the bars designed to restrict licentiousness"—those "bars" which must moreover be read as her propriety and virtue are seemingly held in place to protect women from sexual deviance and immoral conduct. She went wrong with "propriety and decency" by breaking gender boundaries through the cultivation of her masculine mind, which becomes synonymous with the perversion of women's virtue. The writer qualifies the critiques of Wollstonecraft by noting her early promise as a virtuous woman and then deftly turns her history into a cautionary tale that warns of the dangers of "dispens[ing] with the laws of propriety." She was no longer the gentle, unassuming female intellectual, but the brutish female philosopher whose "perverted talents" undermined the "government of society." The emphasis on "every one" and "any one" points to the author's determination to isolate Wollstonecraft from any potential followers; each individual person in each body of people the author addresses must renounce Wollstonecraft and the immorality her life seems to promote. The length of this letter underscores how emphatic the author is about Wollstonecraft's actions paving the way for her depravity. The phrase "philosophical wanton" succinctly encapsulates the danger Wollstonecraft represented: her masculine intellect fueled her "wanton" appetites and undermined social stability; as a woman, her role was to preserve her virtue (which her biography clearly illustrates she did not do), so her philosophical bent is read as something that undermined that virtue by its perceived abnormality in women.

The importance of Godwin's memoir on our reading of Wollstonecraft—and the philosophical woman more generally—cannot be overstated. His attempt to revise the makeup of morality by portraying a virtuous woman whose life was a series of social injustices inflicted upon her backfired. In essence, his memoir made flesh the potential horrors imbedded in the figure of the intellectual—and thus uncontrollable—woman: brutish sexuality and violent passions that could not be curbed by her equally “masculine” mind because it stands as a perversion of male virtues mimicked by women. She was no longer a leading figure in the reformation of education, but a political radical. This connotation between the philosophical woman's masculine mind and her loss of virtue suggests that the real fear of female intellectuals at this time lay in their resistance to separate spheres ideology. The argument against the philosophical woman, as noted by the critic in the *European Magazine* earlier, lies in the idea that gender norms are in place to protect women—historically, the “weaker vessel”—from succumbing to violent passions or from being exposed to them. If a woman steps beyond one aspect of her socially prescribed gender role, such as her narrowly cultivated intelligence, there is nothing stopping her from embracing other masculine tendencies, like an unrestrained sexual appetite. The violation of her proper sphere also indicates a loss of male protection (as we will later see in *Wrongs of Woman*) and so leaves a once-respectable woman at the mercy of the men in the public sphere. So the hysteria surrounding this figure is, at its core, a fear of a woman's loss of virtue should she enter the arena of the educated male. The reception of Wollstonecraft's life shows that society could not yet separate a woman's virtue from her respectability, nor differentiate between her sexual, moral, and intellectual life, even if she was a valid philosopher like Wollstonecraft attempting to reform gender norms.

## **Wrongs of Woman: Disrupting Patriarchal Narrative and the Re-formation of Woman**

If Wollstonecraft embodied the dangers of the philosophical woman, then her final heroine, Maria, represents an attempt at reformulating what it means to be a philosophical woman in the best sense of the term (a woman whose virtue is not defined by her sexuality, but by her struggle to exemplify her philosophical ideals), rather than the “philosophical wanton” (a woman whose masculinity corrupts her virtue through excessive sexual longing). The ultimate failure of *Wrongs of Woman* to produce a positive philosophical heroine lies in the fact that Wollstonecraft struggled to write a new type of heroine, but often fell back on old stereotypes like the woman of sensibility. Her final novel was likewise published at the same time as her memoir, so Wollstonecraft’s biography was inevitably read into Maria’s struggles. To complicate this matter further, with *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft revised her original assertions in *Vindication* that education creates more moral women free of licentiousness; Wollstonecraft engaged in several romantic relationships between writing *Vindication* in 1792 and beginning *Wrongs of Woman* in 1796 that inevitably shaped her politics set forth in *Vindication* that education curbed sexual desire in women. Rather, she found through her romances that education did not automatically reinforce women’s morality, but complicated a woman’s relationship between her sexual and intellectual lives. Her affair with Gilbert Imlay in particular—easily read into Maria’s affair with Darnford—taught her that mutual philosophical beliefs were not necessarily a sufficient foundation for a virtuous relationship; she was in fact so infatuated with Imlay’s political ideals that it blinded her to his libertinism. She had to confront the fact that Imlay’s political ideals did not translate to genuine virtue when he deserted her for another mistress. Yet even then, she attempted to win him back, asserting that their union was a product of mutual intellectual and sexual stimulation. In a letter begging Imlay to continue their

romance even as he had found another lover in 1795, she wrote, “I consider those minds as the most strong and original, whose imagination acts as the stimulus to their senses” (*Letters* 297). She solidifies her understanding of the intellect’s potential to “stimul[ate] the senses” when she later writes to Godwin, “When the heart and reason accord there is no flying from voluptuous sensations, I find, do what a woman can—Can a philosopher do more?” (*Godwin & Mary* 33). In both instances, Wollstonecraft expresses the growing understanding that education complicates her relationship to her sexual and moral self—she compromised her virtue for Imlay, based on their mutual support of the French Revolution, and yet engaged in another affair a couple years later, suggesting that she resisted repenting for her socially labeled immorality, mourning only the infidelity of her former lover. Her status as a philosopher, moreover, placed her outside traditional courtship conventions at this time, making her more susceptible to the machinations of the men she conversed with, and yet still judged by the standard gender norms. Wollstonecraft likewise struggled with the question of the philosophical woman’s virtue in *Wrongs of Woman*, creating a prototype that could effectively affirm the social value of the philosophical woman, while distinguishing between her public intellectual life and her private moral and sexual ones, yet ultimately suggests through her fragmented narrative that, at this point in time, there is no separating women’s sexual, moral, and intellectual selves.

At the heart of *Wrongs of Woman* is Maria, this new heroine not completely formed and yet embodying the fundamental elements of the philosophical woman: educated, sexual, moral. Her heroine is furthermore as educated as a bourgeois lady could be within the constraints of separate spheres ideology—literate, trained to develop her taste and cultivate her sensibility—with the extra advantage of being sensitive to issues of social (in)justice and ostensibly impervious to vain coquetry. However, Wollstonecraft’s heroine, though educated, does not

have the same educational advantages as a man, such as more than rudimentary knowledge of the more masculine subjects of philosophy, French, and Latin. She is, however, more knowledgeable than the traditional bourgeois woman, because she is up to date on current philosophical and political debates, well read in current literature (both popular novels and more serious works) and read in the classics. Like the novel-hero, Wollstonecraft's heroine is flawed, though virtuous, trying to learn about herself through her mistakes. Maria then is a heroine who has the "flaws," or sexual appetites, of her male counterpart, and yet also is a moral individual. By shifting the focus of Maria's morality and respectability away from her virtue, or chastity, Wollstonecraft can then depict women as complex beings in courtship novels, and thus escape the need to define women wholly by their sexual virtue—or lack thereof. While this character pattern typically enables the hero to be both relatable and admirable, it makes the heroine a transgressive figure in traditional fiction; ironically, in pushing her heroine to have a masculine hero-like status, Wollstonecraft places her in a liminal space between the domestic and public realm. Wollstonecraft creates a sexually and politically transgressive heroine who is "both fallen and redeemed" in her novel and yet cannot be so by the standards of generic fiction (Eberle 8). With her narrative, Wollstonecraft "insists that fictional women, and by extension women readers, must be allowed moral status; they too must confront their passions in order to achieve the self-knowledge and status afforded to the hero" (Eberle 22). Eberle corroborates my reading of Maria as a prototype for a new way of writing women beyond the stock narratives that rely only on a woman's loss or preservation of her virtue, and instead works to show a philosophical woman as akin to man, both in mind and body, capable of the same mistakes, but also capable of self-reflection and growth. Maria was to be a "flesh-and-blood woman rather than an abstract individual" (Goggin 93). Wollstonecraft then attempted to create a heroine who was neither a

fallen woman of the harlot's progress, nor the traditional moral heroine rewarded for her virtue by a respectable marriage, but a "rational Being" and all the potential "happiness" that label can afford, as William Enfield declared of women in his review of *Vindication*. That is, Wollstonecraft aimed to design a heroine with the rational capacity to develop herself through self-reflection, thus making Wollstonecraft's heroine one who is not ready-made virtuous, nor flawless, but capable of moral, intellectual, and emotional maturation. In other words, Wollstonecraft broke the mold of woman as the "weaker vessel" and instead portrayed her as capable of growth.

In many ways, the tribute to Wollstonecraft in the *Monthly Review* can be read as an outline for the type of philosophical woman Wollstonecraft attempted to portray in her unfinished novel. Maria would have "a masculine tone of understanding," and display "active humanity" and "exquisite sensibility," as seen by her ability to critically engage with Henry Darnford over current philosophical debates and classical literature; empathize with her prison ward, Jemima, over the ward's mistreatment by society; and over-indulge with her fellow heroine Julie in Rousseau's novel of the same name. She is likewise "quick to feel, and indignant to resist, the iron had of despotism," as evidenced by her refusal to submit to her abusive husband's absolute power as her master, as bestowed upon him by English laws.<sup>10</sup> The difficulty in developing a heroine like this is that there is no space for her in traditional fiction. Eberle's argument is crucial to my work because she establishes that these transgressive heroines as she dubs them (avoiding the more traditional yet limiting labels of "fallen women" or

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<sup>10</sup> She instead runs away from her husband after he tries to pimp her out to his friend, and is then thrown into a madhouse by her husband, where she then meets a libertine disguised as a potential savior, Henry Darnford. Their relationship develops as a series of marginal and epistolary correspondences about politics, gender equality, and revising narratives, culminating in a torrid affair that disintegrates after they leave the madhouse. Darnford then deserts the pregnant Maria, and she, in two main alternative endings, either commits suicide after birthing her daughter or is saved from that fate by Jemima and chooses to live for her daughter.

“harlots”), are both sexual and moral individuals. Wollstonecraft’s *Wrongs of Woman* illustrates the transgressive heroine’s struggle for both intellectual and sexual autonomy, while still retaining her morality, and her inability to find these things within the domestic sphere or the courtship narrative. While Wollstonecraft, and her depiction of the philosophical woman in the heroine Maria, might have progressive values that she enacts, she is still judged by socially orthodox and inflexible gender standards, which in turn make it difficult for her to act outside of traditional narratives for prolonged periods of time. Maria must inevitably return to either the heroine’s text, or more likely, the harlot’s progress to narrate her story. Explained differently, Maria has internalized so completely the debilitating framework of narrating women that she cannot define herself beyond either one of these narratives. The only other option for female liberation—one that Wollstonecraft began to envision, but Maria had yet to grasp—is to disrupt both narratives by creating a ruptured storyline, as the fragmented, unfinished *Wrongs of Woman* implies. The unfinished status of the novel itself indicates that there is no room for positive representations of philosophical women in traditional courtship narratives by the turn of the century, and, I moreover argue that this novel, even had Wollstonecraft lived to complete it, is inherently unable to be finished—there is no place for the overt, candid depictions of this philosophical woman in polite society because of the very threat her gender autonomy poses to the preservation of her virtue.

Many scholars read Maria as a product of miseducation and overweening sensibility rather than a philosophical woman. In “Reason and Sensibility in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *The Wrongs of Woman*,” Janet Todd highlights that in learning to love books, “sensibility was cultivated to an excess” in Maria, and that was “the prime cause of her mistakes in the conduct and judgment of people” (19). Life is a novel to Maria, and everyone a character. She cannot

then escape being the heroine of her own history, and thus necessarily suffers as her favorite heroines have. The danger of novel reading lies in being unable to see the romantic narrative for what it is—a confining structure that lures women into a false sense of self-awareness as they mimic the behavior of the traditional heroine without questioning the authenticity of female characterization. For George Haggerty, the corrosive nature of sensibility inevitably “betrays” Maria (111). As motivated as she is to be rational and seek equality, her imagination inflames her desire for a sentimental romance like those in the novels she is so fond of reading. Indeed, it is hard not to read *Wrongs of Woman* as a critique of novel reading and the “ambiguous values of sensibility” (Barker-Benfield 359). The ease with which Maria believes the sentimental jargon Darnford invokes during their intercourse together serves as evidence for Maria’s inability to resist the lure of the voluptuous pleasures imbedded in sensibility and the duplicitous nature of the tropes of sensibility. Wollstonecraft is also careful to explain the extent of Maria’s education early in the narrative—novels are her chief form of instruction, along with the misguidance of her uncle (who was disappointed in love and arranged her marriage to George Venables) and the daily witnessing of her father’s abuse of her mother (which echoes Wollstonecraft’s childhood). While Maria makes plenty of mistakes—allowing herself to be wooed by Venables’s half-hearted attempts at gallantry and later Darnford’s—Wollstonecraft implies that it is not Maria who is at fault, but her miseducation, and thus, suggests that Maria has the potential to reeducate herself.<sup>11</sup>

In the end, it is Maria’s lack of a more solid education that makes her a failed philosophical woman, lacking as she does, the ability of self-reflection that later female intellectuals in fiction have. In *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social*

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<sup>11</sup> As Diane Long Hoeveler argues, “For Wollstonecraft, women’s minds were essentially identical to men’s, more prone to excess through the corrupting influence of patriarchal education” (17).

*Practice 1780-1832*, Alan Richardson notes that Maria loves novels so much that “she never quite manages to square with things as they are, rendering her unusually intolerant of social abuses but also prone to self-deception” (188). But just as she is “intolerant” of social abuse, she always finds herself at the heart of it—fleeing an unstable family, she turns to an abusive husband, only to later run from him and into the arms of a violent libertine. While despising “social abuses,” it is hard for Maria to see herself as outside them, or imagine a world in which they don’t exist. Already enmeshed in this system, it would be difficult for her to work her way outside it. Richardson’s “self-deception” references the idea that Maria, although aware of how these “social abuses” are inflicted on her by outside forces, fails to reflect on how her actions and overdependence on the sentimental plot fuel the repetitive cycle of female subordination. Thus, *Wrongs of Women* can be read as a cautionary tale of a woman who overindulges in sentiment and over-dependes on the romance plot to make sense of her life. In many ways, this unfinished novel is less a model for a woman’s conduct and more about the dangers facing a woman of feeling (Markley 63). While one can’t deny how Maria’s stunted education and overweening sensibility firmly keep her within the confines of an oppressive patriarchal system, these two flaws are merely symptoms of a fractured social system that imprisons women within the confines of patriarchal despotism. It is the men in her life that determine her fate, from her father to her uncle, and later her husband and lover, even as she tries to escape from their control.

It is clear that Wollstonecraft designs Maria’s character to be rooted neither solely in a faulty education nor in a misinformed mind, but in the social strictures that limit a woman’s political freedom. Wollstonecraft described Maria’s formation in a letter to George Dyson:

For my part I cannot suppose any situation more distressing than for a woman of sensibility with an improving mind to be bound, to such a man as I have described, for life—obliged to renounce all the humanizing affectations, and to avoid cultivating her taste lest her perception of graces, and refinement of sentiment should sharpen to agony

the pangs of disappointment...these appear to me (matrimonial despotism of heart & conduct) to be the particular wrongs of woman; because they degrade the mind (*Letters* 412).

Wollstonecraft sees Maria as not only a woman of “refined sentiment” but also as a woman “with an improving mind,” or a mind that is always developing. Although Maria might have received a bad education, her mind and heart are good. It is her situation that is Maria’s undoing—married to a man who is neither as intelligent nor as emotionally receptive as she is, she is forced to submit to his libertine habits and vulgar mind even though her heart and mind revolt against him. Wollstonecraft emphasizes that Maria’s condition is symbolic of the “wrongs of woman” because it “degrade[s] the mind.” Even more significant in Wollstonecraft’s letter is her emphasis on a woman who must “avoid cultivating her taste”—one of the most significant forms of bourgeois education for a woman—so that she is not as aware of the social abuses inflicted on her, nor feel those injuries so deeply, as she inevitably would if she continued to “cultivate” more refined sensibilities. Her stress on “humanizing affections,” which a woman must either embrace if she is in a companionate marriage, or “renounce” if she marries an unkind man, echoes her words in *Vindication* that women should first be thought of as “human creatures,” and, in this case, deserving and in need of “affections” that reinforce their humanity. Wollstonecraft’s most heartbreaking assertion lies in her heroine’s “pangs of disappointment” upon realizing her husband is not her emotional or intellectual equal; only a rejection of further education, including the cultivation of self-awareness, can lessen the pain of her discovery, but never erase it. In essence, Wollstonecraft uses Maria’s story to portray the conundrum many female intellectuals face: they are more self-aware than the uneducated woman, and yet must still limit their perceptions if they are to survive marriages founded on inequality. As a result of her natural intelligence and sensibility, Maria is more conscious of her degrading position and her

potential to maneuver her way beyond the restrictive realm of domestic oppression, even if she cannot yet find her way beyond the confines of “matrimonial despotism of heart & conduct.”

Because Wollstonecraft re-formulates the virtuous heroine to resist conventional courtship narratives, she then needs to re-write these narratives in order to create a new way of writing and reading about philosophical women. If the madhouse in *Wrongs of Woman* is symbolic of the imprisoning effect of both the novel and patriarchy for women, Wollstonecraft has to write her heroine outside of these confines; she must ultimately choose between perpetuating limiting representations of women in courtship novels and rejecting the parameters these narratives laid out for representing women and the wrongs inflicted on her by society.<sup>12</sup> As Gary Kelly argues, “Women are left only two roads to travel—submission or transgression” (*English Fiction in the Romantic Period* 40). Kelly goes on to suggest that the only possible outlet for female liberation during the late-eighteenth century is to view women as inherently suffering under the chains of sensibility (as part of a middle class sense of self) more so than men, and then critique that view in literature as a way to explore authentic self-expression and thus liberation for women (*English Fiction in the Romantic Period* 40). While his argument underscores the importance of literature as a political tool used by women writers to promote gender equality, I diverge from his reading of novel writing as a form of self-liberation for the rational woman. Wollstonecraft’s inability to finish *Wrongs of Woman* (she struggled to unify the novel form with its content during the last year of her life) seems to point to the failure of that

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<sup>12</sup> The madhouse is then symbolic of the male power over women and the prison-like effects of sensibility, according to Allan Ingram and Michelle Faubert. It is also, as Roy Porter suggests, a metaphor for the seductive trap of the generic romantic narrative. He writes in *Mind-Forg’d Manacles: A History of Madness in England from the Restoration to the Regency* that the prison draws a link between madmen “as victims of oppression, and women’s plight under the heartless tyranny of their masters” (92). Claudia Johnson also suggests that Maria “is a prisoner to her marriage but also in a larger sense, a prisoner to the delusoriness of love” (“Mary Wollstonecraft’s Novels” 200).

medium to produce long lasting liberation for thinking women of this era.<sup>13</sup> It is too easy simply to read a politically critical novel, especially one written under the constraints of a conventional courtship plot, as an act of submission rather than transgression. Instead, I posit that the potential for a fuller expression of liberation and the development of the philosophical woman is in transgression. Wollstonecraft's answer to finding a place for the thinking woman in society in fiction seems to be in rupturing patriarchal narratives, a necessary step in the reformulation of novel heroines and philosophical women. It is less important that the transgressive heroine and the new narrative can never quite be reconciled to social paradigms, than it is that they create a potential space for re-imagining narratives for philosophical women.

While I am not able to claim the unfinished nature of the text as a rhetorical strategy on Wollstonecraft's part (it is likely she would have completed the novel had she lived), the choppiness of the narrative is arguably a conscious decision on her part as a way to use the novel form to mirror its content. As Gary Kelly asserts, Wollstonecraft "claims to embody theme and argument in character and plot, and thus to avoid the common error of detaching the novel's 'philosophy' from formal elements" (*Revolutionary Feminism* 207). Kelly, along with Claudia Johnson and Barbara Taylor, resists the temptation of past scholars to apologize for the unfinished nature of Wollstonecraft's work and instead asserts that the lack of polish we read into *Wrongs of Woman* might also be seen as Wollstonecraft's attempt to rewrite traditional narratives and develop a formula that would more cohesively allow her to pair her philosophy with the formal elements of the narrative, so as to minimize the potential for readers to misread her political agenda. Still others, like George Haggerty, Allan Ingram, and Michelle Faubert,

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<sup>13</sup> George Haggerty goes so far as to suggest that "for a woman, there is no narrative," only a reenactment of patriarchal stories (107). He precisely articulates the fundamental fact that women at the end of the eighteenth century have no stories of their own, no representations of themselves as flawed, rational beings beyond the confines of patriarchal conventions, no women who could honestly express the challenges facing women in society without the fear of public censure.

look to Wollstonecraft's novels as sites in which the late author tried to chart the misogyny imbedded in narrative conventions. I follow in both these lineages, arguing that Wollstonecraft's final novel illustrates the author's potential struggle to undermine patriarchal novel structures in order to create a more complex narrative—a combination of the “heroine's text” and the “harlot's progress” as Eberle would suggest—where the thinking woman's identity could escape the misogynistic essentialization of harlot or virtuous maiden. In essence, this new narrative would combine the sexual transgression of the “harlot's progress” with the redeeming virtues of the “heroine's text,” insisting that a woman may fall, or reject gender norms, without unraveling her inherent moral fabric. This new provocative narrative, I posit, actually situates Maria on the outskirts of traditional male-written representations of women, in works like *Julie* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as a way for her philosophical heroine to tentatively establish boundaries between her story and those of her male counterparts. The temptation for Maria, of course, is to fold herself back into these narratives—a desire which is a product of her miseducation and is ultimately her undoing—so much so that the only way Wollstonecraft is able to allow Maria to stay a transgressive heroine or philosophical woman is to keep Maria on the fringes of society (she is an outcast by the end of the narrative) and at the periphery of traditional narratives. The various endings of *Wrongs of Woman* and its unfinished status point to its seemingly permanent state of narrative possibility for the philosophical woman. While the story is open, she has the potential to act outside of binding genre conventions. Thus, the unfinished nature of this novel, even though Wollstonecraft did not explicitly intend it, is the only then-available solution to envisioning a life for the philosophical woman beyond the limiting heroine's text or harlot's progress because it makes room for a new, yet-to-be-written narrative for women.

It is difficult to completely separate discussions of Wollstonecraft's re-writing of woman

and her effort to construct an alternative narrative in which the philosophical woman can be depicted without censure. Maria's engagement with various narratives—Darnford's books, her own memoir, the personal histories of Jemima and Darnford—serve as the glue that binds Wollstonecraft's attempts to reinvent both the novel and the novel heroine. To begin with, Wollstonecraft establishes the link between Maria's philosophical turn of mind and her attempts to eschew the romantic narrative by representing her heroine's interactions with Darnford's marginal notes (the production of which is a distinctly bourgeois intellectual practice) while she is locked in her cell.<sup>14</sup> The margins in this context are a place where the main narratives in his books are disrupted and an alternate one is created in the annotations that are written there. The very definition of margins (characterized by Samuel Johnson as “the edge of a page left blank, or fill'd with a short note”) inherently invites a writer to develop their own relationship to the narrative inside the text. Wollstonecraft writes:

Dryden's Fables, Milton's Paradise Lost, with several modern productions, composed the collection. It was a mine of treasure. Some marginal notes, in Dryden's Fables, caught her attention: they were written with force and taste; and, in one of the modern pamphlets, there was a fragment left, containing various observations on the present state of society and government, with a comparative view of the politics of Europe and America. These remarks were written with a degree of generous warmth, when alluding to the enslaved state of the laboring majority, perfectly in unison with Maria's mode of thinking (*Wrongs of Woman* 68).

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<sup>14</sup> The importance of the margins in this novel and in Maria's development as a new heroine has its roots in the intellectual culture of marginalia exchange. In *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books*, H.J. Jackson gives a history of this social practice. While initially used as add-ons in medieval manuscripts, and later blossoming into learning exercises in schools, marginalia developed into a deeply personal activity of intellectual self-expression by the eighteenth century. As Jackson writes, “marginalia becomes both increasingly personal and increasingly public” by the middle of the eighteenth century (45). Developed out of an increase in print production and the spectacle of the century's literary culture, these new marginalia were a way for the thinking person to engage with the author of a text as well as other intellectuals. Marginalia were then meant to be read by others—friends, lovers, critics, fellow intellectuals—and commented on in their turn. By the middle of the century then, the margin is considered as a space to be written in. Maria's perusal of Darnford's marginal notes then, reflects her engagement with the book, his ideas, and the formation of her own thoughts on the main text. It also separates her from the main body of the narratives within the book—she reads them via the margins (and Darnford's marginalia) and later, produces her own annotations.

These words mark him as a desirable hero—and potential savior—because they reveal his liberal politics and educated background. Yet the judgment Maria makes here is at once as humorous as it is telling: she approves of Darnford’s progressive politics because they are “perfectly in unison” with her mode of thinking. Darnford becomes an ideal man in her eyes, not because he thinks, but because he thinks *like her*. In addition, the adjectives describing these annotations—“force,” “taste,” and “generous warmth”—could easily be extended to the man writing them. The implicit danger in meeting Darnford through his political musings is that Maria has difficulty distinguishing the thinker of the marginal notes from the flesh-and-blood man. Already, Wollstonecraft underscores the dangers Maria faces as a philosophical woman: she is quick to bond with her fellow prisoner because he deftly employs the rhetoric of sensibility and progressive politics, and the circumstances of their meeting have all the intrigue of a gothic romance. The tension lies in Maria’s dual desire to find a way outside of her literal and figurative imprisonment (this man could rescue her) and to insert herself back into a romantic narrative that would cleanse her of her past mistakes. Yet what is most significant about this textual exchange is perhaps what is most easily overlooked: it is not Dryden’s *Fables* that Maria cares about, but Darnford’s markings. Maria eventually “returned some of the books; with the hope of getting others—and more marginal notes” (*Wrongs of Woman* 69). Her excitement is visually transformed into the dash that precedes “and more marginal notes.”

I do not mean to suggest that these texts, which were moreover written by men, do not have any significance once Maria enters the margins. The *Fables*—that canonical work favored by eighteenth century intellectuals, collecting the writings of Homer, Ovid and Dryden himself to name a few—was undoubtedly used by Wollstonecraft to establish Darnford’s intellectual credibility before he then proves his taste in the margins, as well as to provide evidence for

Maria's intellectual capacity. In short, the well-chosen book predisposes Maria to admiring the annotator. Similarly, the "modern pamphlets" indicate Darnford's knowledge of and engagement with current political and intellectual conversation, and Maria's positive reception of them likewise shows her knowledge of these subjects. Perhaps the most obvious invocation of a canonical work is *Paradise Lost*; it is hard to believe that Wollstonecraft didn't choose that work to draw a parallel between the fall of Adam and Eve from paradise and the "fall" of Maria and Darnford from social grace (and, more generally, the fall of mankind at this time to a less moral state). Her use of this text also suggests that she is contrasting Milton's depiction of Eve (and by extension, woman more generally) as the root of sin in mankind with her new heroine who can no longer serve as the scapegoat for man's deviant behavior. Maria eats her proverbial fruit, gaining moral, sexual, and intellectual knowledge, and yet does not fall from grace in Wollstonecraft's narrative. These texts establish the foundation for Maria and Darnford's marginal correspondence, but their impact fades to the background once the marginalia move into focus. Maria cares less about the fate of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* (although Wollstonecraft and the reader of *Wrongs of Woman* do) for instance, or even Darnford's engagement with such a provocative text, and more about how Darnford uses the margins to flesh out his own character, which in turn limits Maria's ability to accurately read Darnford and his manipulation of the margins—she focuses on the potential hero, rather than the larger picture that could provide her with fodder for self-reflection, and, in turn, a better understanding of herself.

Once the main narratives are interrupted by the margins, Maria can then create an alternative story—one that might even reconcile herself to her sordid state—by imagining a progressive hero. Maria shifts from using the margins of books as an escape from canonical

narratives to employing them in imagining Darnford as a potential savior, thus constructing a new romantic narrative for herself. Her passion for Darnford's marginal notes soon extends to speculation about his person. Unable to get a glimpse of him as he walks along the grounds, Maria only hears the tone of his voice. It was "manly, and characteristic of a noble mind; nay even sweet" (*Wrongs of Woman* 71). Her perception of him in the marginalia of his books is quickly applied to his voice and body. Without glimpsing him, she decides he is "manly," "noble," and "sweet." The emphasis on the word "manly" implies Maria's heterosexual passion, while "noble" and "sweet" hint at her desire for idealized male companionship (*Equivocal Beings* 64). As she greedily devoured his books earlier, she now desperately yearns to know what she perceives as the real man. She composes a "sweet" and "manly" hero out of his own words and her imagination, thus providing herself with a receptacle to fill with her own progressive ideas and conceptions of what it means to be a rational being—all this from the margins. The reality behind this, however, is that she has yet to actually meet Darnford, or even know his name, but nonetheless has developed a promising new heroine's text by locating herself, as a marginalized figure, on the edge of more established literature.

Wollstonecraft invokes the canonical Rousseau's *Julie*, in order to rewrite the tutor-tutee romance rooted in intellectual stimulation and undermine the sentimental conventions of this epistolary novel. Maria retreats to Rousseau's *Julie*—and Darnford's marginal notes—for comfort after an unsatisfyingly brief glimpse of the stranger. His novel provides Maria with consolation, advice, and a fellow heroine she can empathize with. The danger for Maria in turning to this book for solace is that Rousseau's overpowering sensibility serves to soften her towards Darnford. By extension, Wollstonecraft consciously invokes Rousseau here to illustrate how damaging Rousseau's notions of womanhood are to his female readers, clearly harkening

back to her critique of him in *Vindication*, as discussed above. As Alex Shulman writes, “the romantic novel provides Wollstonecraft’s tortured heroine a needed respite, but in the end is only a false escapism which in fact corrupts and weakens her character” (52). In short, it weakens her because it allows her to simultaneously wallow in her overflow of feeling and revel in the excess of cerebral delights, which in turn make her more susceptible to reenacting the contrite romantic plot Wollstonecraft writes against. The intellectual aspect of this book exchange and Maria’s reading of *Julie* sanctions her sensibility by rooting it in her supposedly philosophical or more rational mind; the danger of this, naturally, is that it too easily allows Maria to neglect self-reflection or develop a greater awareness of how her emotional indulgence only recapitulates the actions of stock heroines of sensibility, and thus, limits her ability to think critically about Rousseau and the situation she now finds herself in. Thus, the use of *Julie* works as a critique against male writers’ representations of overly sentimental women and the turmoil they find themselves in; rather than depicting these women as weaker than men because of this susceptibility to sentiment, Wollstonecraft uses Maria’s engagement with *Julie* as a way show sensibility as a social construct that at once masks and magnifies the wrongs inflicted on woman.

Wollstonecraft creates an alternative *Julie*-like narrative in which sensibility is portrayed as the gossamer webbing covering a darker, more complex relationship between Maria, *Julie*, and the wrongs of women hidden under courtship plots. Like in *Julie*, the romance of *Wrongs of Woman* is rooted in intellectual stimulation and the novel itself serves as an allegory for philosophical debates on morality, sensibility, and rational thought. Ostensibly about the correspondence between one-time lovers Julie and her tutor, St. Preux, as they navigate their separate (and sometimes intersecting) lives until Julie’s ultimate illness and subsequent death, the novel is in reality a receptacle for Rousseau’s viewpoint that morality rooted in sensibility

should be valued over rational morality. The parallels between Maria and Julie are numerous. Influenced at an early age to appreciate sensibility and higher learning, Julie discovers that her genteel education acts as fertile soil for a romance with the man who improved her mind (and thus, has the same tastes and values as she does). Her belief in the virtue of platonic passions eventually proves to be her undoing; her exposure to the daily temptations of St. Preux's stimulating presence demonstrates that virtue is not enough to protect her from his desire or her own. As Wollstonecraft argues in *Vindication*, a man must be equally virtuous to prevent licentious behavior in both sexes.<sup>15</sup> The other side of this, which Wollstonecraft implicitly demonstrates with the relationship between Maria and Darnford (and as her own romantic life shows), is that when a relationship is rooted in mutual intellectual and emotional understanding, there is "no flying from voluptuous sensations," as she wrote to Godwin. Thus, self-control remains difficult, even for the most well-intentioned philosophers. Although Julie has succumbed to the temptations of the flesh and used her mind to fuel her bodily desires, she is still redeemed, as is her love for St. Preux, by her steadfast morality in the face of bodily weakness.<sup>16</sup> It is ultimately her final repentance for her sins and reformation that reinforces her status as a moral woman. But Wollstonecraft rejects Rousseau's male-centric interpretation of the heroine of sensibility, and instead refashions the *Julie* plot to suggest that a woman should not have to repent for her sexual actions in order to be considered moral or redeemed. She moreover asserts that her heroine's actions are firmly rooted in the social inequalities she must suffer under. In her retelling, the man is equally culpable in female licentiousness, yet does not suffer social

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<sup>15</sup> Wollstonecraft writes, "Modesty must be equally cultivated by both sexes, or it will ever remain a sickly hot-house plant, while the affectation of it, the fig leaf borrowed by wantonness, may give zest to voluptuous enjoyments" (*Vindication* 258).

<sup>16</sup> Although Julie is a figure much like Maria in her ability to be both sexual and moral, it is possible that Julie is a more acceptable version of the later transgressive heroine because she was a French heroine in a book written by a man, and thus not subject to the strict morality of English heroines, and was furthermore created during a time in which intellectual women had more prestige.

censure as a woman does. She critiques the trappings of sensibility that limit her heroine's ability to think critically about her situation and the man before her. Like Julie, Maria over-indulges in sensibility, at times invoking all too well the sentimental mannerisms of the traditional romantic heroine. Maria differs from Julie in her obsessive reenactment of sensibility plots as a way to both cope with her traumatic life and to find a way to fold herself back into an idealized courtship plot that would cleanse her of her past romantic mistakes. Similarly, Maria's growing interest in Darnford is symptomatic of her desire to continually perform the courtship plot so as to distance herself from the brutal realities of her life, which she has yet to fully reveal to the reader of *Wrongs of Woman*. The overflow of sensuous emotion Maria experiences while reading *Julie* hides from the reader of *Wrongs of Woman* Maria's history, her lack of concrete knowledge about Darnford, and the simple reality that she is not in a position to reenact the courtship plot, being both literally locked up in a mad house and shackled to a bad marriage. Thus Wollstonecraft turns Rousseau's more idealistic patriarchal plot into a transgressive narrative about the (hyperbolic) realities of the wrongs inflicted on women, buried under the sentimental veneer of the courtship story.

It seems inevitable in a novel preoccupied with manipulating narrative conventions to create an alternate space for the philosophical woman that Maria and Darnford would turn from reading and annotating an epistolary history to writing letters of their own. Darnford slips Maria a letter in one of his books. This is the moment where Maria first learns Henry Darnford's name. Maria responds and "another and another succeeded" (*Wrongs of Woman* 72). Maria found "to write these letters was the business of the day, and to receive them the moment of sunshine" (*Wrongs of Woman* 72). Forgotten by the rest of the world, they remind themselves of their existence through the manipulation of text and a construction of an alternative utopia. It is

tempting to align Maria and Darnford's budding romance to that of the lovers in *Julie*, and yet our expectations of an epistolary indulgence are subverted when we find we are unable to penetrate the folds of their epistolary world. The reader learns that the letters are "sunshine," sentimentally speaking, and yet doesn't know their contents. The reader could again assume that they are much like what little she has read of the marginal notes and further use the philosophical musings of *Julie* to fill in the gaps of what might have been in the letters. Although it is easy to read this omission as part of the unfinished nature of the novel (Wollstonecraft might have intended to give her readers access to the letters or even provide them with more of Maria's writings), I argue that Wollstonecraft intentionally omitted these letters in order to highlight Maria's overdependence on the traditional romance plot to tell her story. *Julie* easily fills in the narrative gaps of her own story and yet the lack of solid epistolary correspondence between Darnford and Maria makes it easier for the reader of *Wrongs of Woman* (and Maria) to idealize the content of their letters and ignore any tell-tale signs of the wrongs inflicted on women in those letters. Maria is a heroine who inherently struggles to find her way outside of deceptive and confining romantic narratives even as she compulsively seeks to place herself back into a traditional narrative and thus assimilate back into separate spheres gender ideology.

Wollstonecraft calls into question the morality of the traditional hero when she reframes the reformed rake narrative Darnford puts forth as a perversion on the harlot's progress. She moreover contrasts the brutalities inflicted on women by men (which inevitably lead to women being cast as harlots in cautionary tales) with the unapologetic debauchery of a libertine that can too simply become the fodder for a tale of redemption. During one of their first meetings, Darnford recounts his history and how he came to be in the madhouse. Beneath the overflow of sensuous emotion Darnford shows in narrating his history (and that Maria feels in hearing it),

there is a violent, foolish subtext; essentially, he tells her a story of “hitherto unsuccessful Romantic love and purchased sex” (Eberle 40). Darnford’s vacuous lifestyle says much about his debauched character, no matter how he protests that he has changed his ways. Even his descent into the madhouse is of his own doing—he is betrayed by fellow debauched souls to whom he owes money. One wonders if he is reformed only because there is very little revelry to be had in a madhouse. His story reads “like a caricature of Rousseau and romanticism” (Shulman 52). He masks his misdeeds with sensibility and false regret. Even as Maria fails to recognize Darnford’s insincerity, the reader becomes suspicious of his character. Specifically, the reader might wonder how Maria, after anguishing over the brutality of men, would fail to recognize Darnford for the womanizer that he is. Claudia Johnson succinctly answers this puzzle. She writes, “The fact that Maria shares his political views makes her fatally deaf to Darnford’s obnoxious account of himself” (“Mary Wollstonecraft’s Novels” 204). Maria is infatuated by his political ideals and the possibility of a romance rooted in equality between rational beings, so much so that she overlooks his small-mindedness (i.e. the “petty” intricacies of his whoring, gambling, and drinking). Darnford has already become the ideal hero in her eyes, because of his well-cultivated taste and sensibility and his manliness that she earlier exclaims over. Her investment in his supposed virtuousness likewise echoes her desire to find an ideal man to rescue her from her current situation. Still trapped within the confines of gender ideology, here the ethos of the marriage market, Maria sees her only hope at a stable future in the arms of a man, any man.

Wollstonecraft then deftly contrasts Darnford’s story, in which he reads as both the hero and the villain responsible for his lowly state, with Jemima’s history that recounts the literal “wrongs of women,” over which Maria’s guard had no control. Wollstonecraft’s dark retelling

of the flip side of the rake's reform, with its closer look at those who suffer while a rake works towards morality, disrupts the couple's courtship in order to push Maria beyond the heroine-mold and into complete self-realization. Doubt is cast on their idealistic union when Jemima interrupts their "intimate conversation" (a moment in which Wollstonecraft takes full advantage of the ambiguity imbedded in the double-connotation of this term).<sup>17</sup> Jemima interrupts "the panting lovers" and tells them a "brutal story that could chill anybody's ardor" ("Mary Wollstonecraft's Novels" 204-205). What Jemima gives her listeners is the real story behind Darnford's fluffy romantic narrative. Jemima's history is one of violence, rape, classism, racism and misogyny, all of which lay just beneath the surface of Darnford's sugar coated tale. For Maria, the

opening buds of hope closed, as if they had put forth too early, and the happiest day of her life was overcast by the most melancholy reflection. Thinking of Jemima's peculiar fate and her own, she was led to consider the oppressed state of woman, and to lament that she had given birth to a daughter (*Wrongs of Woman* 92).

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<sup>17</sup> Wollstonecraft visually solidifies this connection between cerebral and bodily excitement by her repeated use of the words "conversation" and "intercourse." Receiving proper encouragement from the "intercourse" of letter writing, Darnford contrives a meeting with Maria (*Wrongs of Woman* 72). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "intercourse" already carried a sexual connotation at this time. To add to that, in the following five pages that recount Maria and Darnford's initial meetings, Wollstonecraft frequently refers to the couple's "conversation" (*Wrongs of Woman* 73-79). In the beginning, it is a "reserved conversation" (*Wrongs of Woman* 74), which escalates to "interesting conversation" (*Wrongs of Woman* 78). Then, they "conversed with eagerness of their situation; and, during the conversation, he once or twice gently drew her towards him" (78). After Darnford declares his love, Jemima, Maria's ward, interrupts their "animated conversation" (*Wrongs of Woman* 79). Samuel Johnson notes that "to converse" means "to hold intercourse with," "to be familiar to," "to discourse familiarly upon any subject," "to have commerce with a different sex." "Conversation" is defined as "familiar discourse," "intercourse," "familiarity." His definitions, in short, reveal the sexual innuendo imbedded in these terms. Wollstonecraft would have been aware of the double connotation of "conversation" and "intercourse" as meaning both sexual relations and civilized discourse. More significantly, "conversation" has an illicit nuance to it, as in "criminal conversation," or adultery. So when Wollstonecraft writes of the couple's "animated conversation" (*Wrongs of Woman* 79), Wollstonecraft collapses the distance between Maria and Darnford, removing the emotional and physical distance of the texts they originally occupied (his books, their letters), so that they, and the reader, now experience the flesh-and-blood characters, rather than the textual bodies constructed of words and the imagination that they once were. What the reader then finds, perhaps surprisingly, is that there is almost no difference between the Maria-Darnford romance of the marginal notes and letters and the immediacy they experience when in conversation together. In both instances, refined "conversation" or "intercourse" shapes their reading of one another.

This marks the first moment where Maria proves herself capable of self-reflection beyond the affectations of a rational heroine, thinking beyond her own gothic circumstances to how they reflect “the oppressed state of woman” more generally. It is likewise the moment where she comes closest to acknowledging how precarious her situation is with Darnford, and that he, like the men in Jemima’s tale, is a user of women. Her candid regret that she birthed a daughter becomes all the more poignant when she discovers that her child is dead. For Wollstonecraft, the daughter’s death becomes a metaphor for the suffocating effect patriarchy has on women. Jemima’s story and the death of her daughter plunge Maria into “the deepest melancholy” and the strength of her feelings give her enough clarity of mind—here Wollstonecraft highlights how truly powerful and productive the bond between sensibility and intelligence can be—to refuse to see Darnford, sending her memoirs in her place so that he may learn of the wrongs inflicted on her by men (*Wrongs of Woman* 94). Confronted with the reality of female oppression, Maria has the potential to resist romantic narrative.

Wollstonecraft deliberately saves Maria’s story for last. It is a shocking tale of family dysfunction and marital violence. Mirroring Wollstonecraft’s own childhood experiences, Maria grows up witnessing her tyrannical father abusing her weak mother (*Revolutionary* 6-27). The reader discovers that, as a child, Maria is often neglected in favor of the eldest son, with her only advocate her uncle, who means well, but fills her head with too many romance novels. It is the uncle who arranges Maria’s marriage to George Venables; unbeknownst to Maria, her uncle pays Venables a large sum of money to marry his niece. During their courtship, however, Maria sees only a gentleman-hero of taste, sensibility, and sound mind. It becomes apparent that she marries Venables to escape the oppression she feels in her family’s home. The climax of her memoir occurs when she flees her husband’s home after he tries to pimp her out to one of his

friends (*Wrongs of Woman* 120). Ashamed that her husband would try to use her as a whore—Wollstonecraft’s dramatization of her assertion in *Vindication* that marriage was “legal prostitution”—she renounces her marriage vows and runs away (*Vindication* 53). Yet before she can escape the city with her daughter, Maria is drugged, kidnapped, thrown into the madhouse, and separated from her child. There, as the reader now knows, she finds herself drawn to Darnford, a man who has, in her eyes, proved himself virtuous through his taste and sensibility, and yet, as his personal history shows, is a libertine just like her husband. Eventually the reader finds that the brief consciousness of her situation awakened by Jemima’s history is not enough to make Maria resist the charms of Darnford or the temptation to once again place herself in the middle of a romantic narrative. Maria’s memoir allows the reader of *Wrongs of Woman* to reflect on the circumstances that lead Maria to her current sordid state and understand how her reenactment of her past romantic failure with Darnford mirrors her emotional trauma, suggesting that Maria’s inability to maintain her self-awareness lies not in her miseducation, but in, as Wollstonecraft explained in her letter to George Dyson, Maria’s attempt to soften the “pangs of disappointment” that would “sharpen to agony” over her situation should she continue to cultivate her mind and senses.

The Gothic-like plot overemphasizes the reality of Maria’s situation. Yet for Wollstonecraft, the truth is just as horrific as anything a Gothic writer could invent. What the reader finds in Maria’s memoir is not a heroine’s text but, shockingly, the foundation of a harlot’s progress, should she continue her dubious relationship with Darnford. Wollstonecraft is careful, however, to lay the crimes of Maria’s actions at the feet of those who committed crimes against her, like her uncle, father, and husband, while Maria then continues to search for a way beyond the control of patriarchy within the confines of her limited power as a woman. Had this

information been presented at the beginning of the novel, Darnford would be flagged as a dubious character, and Maria's infatuation with him would be suspect. Her story is buried deeply within the greater narrative, mirroring the extreme denial of Maria: denial over her hopeless situation with her husband, denial over her complicity in her situation by using the romance plot to blind her to the dangers she faced, denial over her ability to use the romance formula to coax herself into engaging with another rogue. Johnson notes that as "we read Maria's memoir along with Darnford, we can recognize how Maria's love for him recapitulates the error she made with Venables" (*Equivocal Beings* 64). She marries Venables to escape a troubled home; she turns to Darnford in order to break away from Venables. In each instance, Maria fixates on what she considers to be an ideal man (a learned gentleman of feeling and taste) as the object of her liberation. The repetitiveness of her love objects indicates, as Todd argues, that "Maria may have learned something of herself from her experience with her husband, but the lesson is insufficient to counteract the effect of the environment and temperament" ("Reason and Sensibility" 18). Both Johnson and Todd emphasize Maria's inability to fully recognize herself as a woman living within the confines of patriarchal power. Maria's history, as told with her own voice, then acts as a philosophical exposition on the "wrongs of woman," which underscores the need for social reform that would enable women to be autonomous beings in the eyes of the law, and yet simultaneously betrays Maria's debilitating dependence on the romance plot to explain her history—she casts herself as a heroine of sensibility, betrayed by men at every turn, but fails to take responsibility for her own actions (rooted in sexual desire, fear of her abusive family, and infatuation with novels) that make her life so difficult. By highlighting the "repetitiveness of [Maria's] love objects," Wollstonecraft deliberately critiques her heroine for her inability to take control of her own life, first by assuming her portion of the responsibility for

her suffering, and then by acknowledging herself as not a heroine of sensibility, but as a complex human being that should better learn how to govern her emotions and sexual desires through the cultivation of her philosophical mind in order to protect herself from the machinations of men.<sup>18</sup>

Darnford rightly reads her history as a political treatise advocating for the rights of women. In doing so, he validates her as a human being, if only ironically to appeal to the woman. In response to Maria's memoir, Darnford wastes no time reaffirming their bond by writing her another letter. In it, he strives to prove how he is not just another Venables—or perhaps it has never occurred to him to compare himself with Maria's husband (even if it has occurred to the reader). He sends her a

most affectionate letter, in which he reasoned on 'the absurdity of the laws respecting matrimony, which, till divorces could be more easily obtained, was,' he declared, 'the most insufferable bondage. Ties of this nature could not bind minds governed by superior principles... These arguments were not absolutely impartial, for he disdained to conceal, that, when he appealed to her reason, he felt that he had some interest in her heart (*Wrongs of Woman* 137).

Again, he gets to her through his revolutionary gender politics. The fault does not lie with Maria, but rather, the "absurdity of the laws respecting matrimony." Darnford takes things one step further when he unites his judicious analysis of her situation with matters of the heart (his arguments, he admits, are "not absolutely impartial"). But he has a double motive: he wants to nullify her marriage in her eyes and his own. He reaffirms her declaration that her marriage vows are dissolved, and thus, creates room for himself in her life. Together they craft a private space to enact gender equality and insulate themselves from social obligations, even if it at the same time demonstrates the difficulty of isolating their private world from the public one. Yet the real danger in this is that Darnford essentially tells Maria what she wants to hear in order to

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<sup>18</sup> This also reads in part as Wollstonecraft's critique of herself and her relations with Gilbert Imlay.

manipulate her feelings and inflame her imagination. He might write in the language of the progressive thinker, but it works in the service of her baser desires.<sup>19</sup>

The unstable space Maria finds herself in is evident in her constant attempts to articulate her transgressive behavior through the romance plot. Even as she reframes her behavior in the context of liberation, she still uses conventional courtship terminology to define her actions, suggesting that she is unable to completely imagine herself outside the ideology of marriage and her prospective gender role. Part of her still desires to be reincorporated into polite society and so she uses the rhetoric of matrimony to fulfill that desire. Maria's dependence on conventional terms also points to Wollstonecraft's struggle as a writer to develop a new rhetoric for writing about women. Darnford seduces Maria so well that it is "as a husband she now received him" (*Wrongs of Woman* 138). Maria must rationalize her affair with Darnford by dubbing him husband (it is difficult to think that Wollstonecraft was not using that term ironically). In her isolated world where words are as malleable as bodies, she applies the bonds of matrimony to her adultery, at once subverting social order and attempting to bring order to her transgressive actions. The reason Maria specifically clings to this terminology is that she has the most to lose by their indiscretion. By using the language of the social institution of marriage, Maria legitimizes her desire.

Once the lovers consummate their passions, the story collapses, as does the liminal space Maria created to explore the potential for the philosophical woman to move beyond traditional narratives. Maria is released from the madhouse. It is before she leaves that "in an agitated

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<sup>19</sup> Again, this dynamic echoes Wollstonecraft's experiences with Imlay. This marks a moment where Wollstonecraft points to the dangers of being a philosophical woman, and thus an outcast, at this time. No longer protected by her husband or male relatives, cast out of society, Maria has no one to protect her from sexual predators, nor is she necessarily able to indulge in her own sexual desire without suffering the repercussions, such as being branded as adulterous, divorced from her husband with no way to provide for herself, or becoming pregnant.

spirit, not to be calmed, Maria began to write to Darnford. She called him by the sacred name of ‘husband,’ and bade him ‘hasten to her, to share her fortune’” (139). The irony of this passage is inescapable when the reader reflects on Maria’s history. Venables married her because of her fortune; despising her husband for his mercenary motives, she now offers herself and her money to Darnford, even as she knows, in advance, of his libertine tendencies so reminiscent of her husband’s. By calling him “by the sacred name of ‘husband,’” Maria unconsciously (Wollstonecraft consciously) invokes what a husband means to her: a crass, money-grubbing libertine. The irony is further refined when the reader looks back to what made Maria flee her husband (selling her body for money and encouraging her would-be lover to woo her with sensibility and profound thought). While she rejects her husband’s proposed lover, she allows herself to be seduced by Darnford, and the romantic notions he showers over her. In effect, she attempts to purchase his love by offering him her fortune and her bed. This showcases the degeneration of her budding sense of gender equality and self-reflection. Once she is thrust back into society she reverts to the conventional way of bonding to a man—through marriage and the subsequent dowry.

Outside the madhouse—and the liberal fantasy they create therein—Maria and Darnford cannot sustain the progressive ideals that enable a rational woman to act beyond the constraints of her gender. Once Darnford is released from the madhouse and they are reunited, the narrator notes that “with Darnford she did not taste uninterrupted felicity; there was a volatility in his manner which often distressed her” (*Wrongs of Woman* 141). Darnford’s “volatility” implies that he might be, in the future, an abusive or tyrannical husband, and highlights the darker side of sensibility, that, with its celebration of intense emotion, has the potential to romanticize abuse. Already, Maria sees that the tender Darnford of the madhouse is only a semblance of the real

man. Darnford proves just as unstable as the husband she left. Maria is charged with adultery after handing over incriminating letters between herself and Darnford to her husband—a clear instance in which Wollstonecraft reminds her reader that a philosophical woman is easily branded immoral once she violates her sexual purity, regardless of the circumstances that lead up to that transgression. The prospect of a happier future is darkened further when Maria finances Darnford's trip to Paris. The remaining scattered notes and fragments of the novel suggest that Maria is triumphant in her court trial, yet ultimately loses the love of Darnford and, in the midst of coping with his desertion, finds she is pregnant.<sup>20</sup> In the bleakest notes, Maria tries to commit suicide after giving birth to a baby girl, and finding that Darnford is, indeed, the libertine he confessed himself to be in his history.<sup>21</sup> In one version, she is successful in killing herself; in another, she is rescued by Jemima and decides to live for her baby (not unlike Wollstonecraft chooses to do in her own life). Other endings are less bleak (Darnford and Maria simply drift apart once they leave the madhouse), although it seems Wollstonecraft did not intend Maria and Darnford to remain together.

Wollstonecraft constructs an affair doomed to failure once they are released from the madhouse because she recognizes that for Maria (and the philosophical woman), there is no real freedom in fulfilling the romantic plot. Liberation comes only when the romantic trajectory is disrupted and Maria can no longer depend on the hero to rescue her from the wrongs of woman.

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<sup>20</sup> Her court trial reflects another instance in which Maria appeals to a higher morality that transcends social prejudices, and yet her actions' rationalizations and the descriptions of the wrongs done to her by her husband fall on deaf ears and she is convicted of adultery and divorced by her husband, left without any way to support herself. Wollstonecraft's courtroom dramatization implies that the legal system is complicit in the violence against women and nothing short of a reformation of that system would enable someone like Maria to be both transgressive and moral.

<sup>21</sup> This portion of the novel parallels Wollstonecraft's attempted suicide after Gilbert Imlay deserted her (*Revolutionary* 114).

Maria only exists in and between words, through the liminal space of the margins, on the periphery of the romantic narrative. Thrown back into the romantic plot, Maria is powerless; only the unfinished status of *Wrongs of Woman* permanently liberates this transgressive heroine by liberating the philosophical woman from the bonds of romantic novel conventions. The unfinished ending acts as an unapologetic (if inadvertently by Wollstonecraft) rejection of traditional narrative forms, including an attempt to unite the heroine's text and the harlot's progress, which relies too heavily on the trappings of their respective genres. The unstable narrative of the unfinished text enables both Maria and the reader to have the potential to experience infinite narrative possibilities for the philosophical woman and the promise of an alternative narrative for transgressive heroines.

### **Conclusion: The Instability of the Female Philosopher's Heroine-Harlot Narrative**

The literal unraveling of *Wrongs of Woman*, along with the scandal its later publication caused, is indicative of the growing instability of the figure of the philosophical woman during the 1790s. Wollstonecraft's own history serves as a frame for reading *Wrongs of Woman* in a two-fold manner: it can be either a progressive attempt at overthrowing patriarchal narratives that undermine female empowerment, or a novel that recapitulates the flaws of conventional narratives that cast philosophical women as weak sentimentalists. The danger of the novel genre is that it can be read in various ways, unlike political treatises, such as *Vindication*, which have more clear-cut agendas. While Wollstonecraft sets out to reformulate her *Vindication* assertions on female education with her final novel, positing that education for women only complicates their relationship to their sexual and moral selves rather than serves as the automatic cure for licentiousness, she inadvertently illustrates that female intelligence has the potential to fan the

flames of immorality. Her personal experience taught her how difficult it could be for a philosophical woman to separate her appreciation for a man's liberal politics from her emotional and sexual attraction to him. *Wrongs of Woman* is meant to be a depiction of a philosophical woman whose sexual transgression does not make her immoral. Rather, it is her aspirations to improve her life that affirm her virtue—a virtue that moreover transcends the baser social understanding of sexual modesty, focusing instead on her philosophical mind and progressive values. Yet because this final novel is read in the context of Wollstonecraft's scandalous private life, it reaffirms the readership's belief that a woman's intellectual virtue is synonymous with her sexual virtue. Similarly, Godwin's memoir cannot cleanly be categorized as a progressive and honest biography or as a cautionary tale outlining the horrors of which philosophical women are capable. The slipperiness of these two narratives and the way in which they can be read as heroine's texts, harlot's progresses, or semblances of both, point to the difficulty of candidly discussing the wrongs of women in society and the necessity for finding a new way of writing and reading about intellectual women.

The breakdown of the philosophical woman's positive, progressive story—both in fiction and in history—at this time is significant because it enables later women writers to re-formulate the courtship narrative and cultivate a space for the intellectual woman to be recreated in the coming century. Because Wollstonecraft's history is so shocking and her unfinished novel so radical, they literally shatter preconceived notions of proper topics for women writers and appropriate actions of novel heroines. This enables future women writers to continue to transgress narrative and gender boundaries, but in subtler ways. Wollstonecraft's shift from an admirable philosophical woman to Johnson's notorious "female philosopher" (or a "philosophical wanton") ironically helps to produce the changes in female education and gender

equality that she put forth in *Vindication*. She lays this groundwork for future women writers by acting as a figure with which the new thinking woman can contrast herself in order to make herself more socially palatable. But more importantly, she brazenly exposes the wrongs inflicted on women in her life and writing and, even if her audience is not yet prepared for the realities of female oppression in fiction and life, she irrevocably uncovers this violent hidden history of female subjugation.

Although later women writers would return to some of the coyness of the Bluestockings, cultivating a feminine grace in order to genteelly advocate for more political freedom, and, through their gendered performance, emphasize the harmlessness or weakness of woman in the service of having their voices heard in male-dominant intellectual circles, Wollstonecraft's philosophy is not forgotten, but instead, becomes the foundation for future women writers to promote the education of women as a way to increase their social value, particularly in their roles as wives and mothers. It is hard not to find traces of Wollstonecraft's ideas in the works of Sydney Owenson, Jane Austen, and Elizabeth Gaskell, even though Wollstonecraft is not directly referred to in the novels of these women writers—it frankly would have been fatal for their careers, especially for Wollstonecraft's near-contemporaries like Austen and Owenson, had they done so. Wollstonecraft's life and work are the foundation for reformulating how intellectual women are discussed, written about, and read, not because she is able to successfully develop a new way of writing women, but because she is the first woman writer to try to separate a woman's virtue from her sexual and intellectual personas, and thus, reformate what it means to be a moral, thinking woman.

## Chapter Two:

“One Playful Charm of a Ninon”: Glorvina’s Wild Intellect in Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl*

### **Introduction: From a Transgressive Heroine to a Virtuous Ninon**

Sydney Owenson subtly undermined the hysteria surrounding the philosophical female after Wollstonecraft’s death by creating a heroine whose virtue and femininity reinforce the social value of her learned status in *The Wild Irish Girl*. While Owenson’s naturalistic performance as a woman writer in the public realm and the seemingly conservative ending to her novel might suggest that she only reinforced gender norms, her life and work in reality provide evidence for the fact that women writers after Wollstonecraft had to be careful of appearing too radical and instead turned to more subtle ways of critiquing social norms, as Eleanor Rose Ty argues and I outline in my introduction. Owenson deliberately narrowed the scope of Wollstonecraft’s political agenda, focusing on Wollstonecraft’s ideas on the education of women in *Vindication* only, eschewing the philosopher’s later attempts to advocate for the segregation of a woman’s intellectual, moral and sexual life. Instead, Owenson crafted her “wild” Irish heroine, Glorvina, to be the embodiment of virtue—even as she is desired by the men around her and is often in compromising *Julie*-like tutor-tutee situations, she is never once tempted to ruin her respectability, as Maria in *Wrongs of Woman* so readily does. Glorvina’s intelligence is moreover uniquely feminine and wild, culled as it is from her mostly self-administered education on her own culture, along with the informal tutoring from her father and the priest; even her chief intellectual strengths, music and drawing, have long been considered necessary female accomplishments. Like her heroine, Owenson was blessed with what one reviewer dubbed her self-taught intelligence, which she set as secondary to more formal male education, and thus, made the education of a woman less threatening—she had no pretensions to male learning, only

the knowledge she gleaned from her own studies and personal experience. This author carefully cultivated the feminine heroine of natural learning, both in her most famous novel and as her own public persona, as a way to sanitize Wollstonecraft's philosophical woman and modify Wollstonecraft's early assertion that education preserves a woman's modesty, by instead insisting that certain kinds of virtue and intelligence are natural to womanhood—Glorvina is wild, true, but never overtly transgressive.

This chapter argues that by casting the educated woman as a type of virtuous Ninon (or female intellectual), Owenson creates a subversive heroine that, in her seeming subservience to man, actually has the potential to act as an educator, teaching both the British nation how to be more tolerant of their colonial subjects and the English gentleman the benefits of a companionable marriage. In essence, Owenson eschews the overt political goals of Wollstonecraft in favor of a tolerance agenda rooted in cultural assimilation, rather than national equality, a topic which can be read as more palatable to Owenson's audience because it is rooted in human understanding, rather than a radical political rejection of national hierarchies.<sup>22</sup> When Horatio, an English nobleman, first meets the Irish—and surprisingly educated—Glorvina in Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl*, he laments what he perceives to be her excess of learning and her revelry in it, which exceeds her interest in him. He writes to his confidant, “How much must a woman lose, and how little can she gain, by that commutation which gives her our acquirements for her own graces! For my part, you know I have always kept clear of the *bas-bleus*; and would prefer one playful charm of a *Ninon*, to all the classic lore of a *Dacier*” (Owenson 65). He clearly disdains the Bluestockings (or the *bas-bleus*), who by the time this novel was written in 1806 were more often than not figures of ridicule, like Wollstonecraft had

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<sup>22</sup> This emphasis on human understanding over explicit political reform is later echoed by Elizabeth Gaskell in her national tale *North and South*.

become, rather than graceful champions of educating women. Yet he tellingly distinguishes between the attractiveness of a *Dacier*, referring to the famous French (and female) scholar of the seventeenth century, and that of a *Ninon*, pointing to Ninon De Lenclos, another French woman intellectual. What distinguishes them—and makes Ninon more desirable than Dacier—is that Ninon was also a celebrated courtesan.<sup>23</sup> Thus while on the surface Horatio’s words suggest a derogatory reading of the educated woman, in reality he indicates that this figure can be desirable if her mind works in the service of stimulating a man’s senses.<sup>24</sup> The most significant aspect of Horatio’s observations is his limited understanding of women because of his libertine pursuits; in his reading, a woman may be allowed to be intellectual if she balances it with more alluring traits, in many ways making his ideal woman here a highly sexualized and disempowered philosophical woman (she is a courtesan, not a respectable woman). Yet Owenson manipulates his early critique of Glorvina, as a woman too invested in learning to be of interest to him, by portraying a heroine who not only has the graces and charm of his courtesan and the education of an intellectual, but also the virtue of a respectable woman. Thus, by the end

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<sup>23</sup> Anne Le Fevre Dacier (1642-1720) was a French scholar who is most famous for her translation of the *Iliad* in 1699. This edition brought Homer to many of the leading male thinkers of France. She defended the importance of preserving the classic poets, even when La Motte published an abridged poetical version of this text in 1714 in order to show that eighteenth-century poets had far surpassed the techniques of the classical writers (Simon 53). Dacier’s conflict with La Motte reflects her status as a philosophical woman, or radical, in the eyes of Horatio, as she staunchly opposes the male-dominant opinions on literature during her later years. Anne “Ninon” de l’Enclos (1620-1705), on the other hand, made her living as an author, courtesan, and patron of the arts. She was originally enrolled in a convent, only to leave one short year later and become a celebrated woman of means and independence, to whose patronage the future success of Moliere and Voltaire is often attributed (L’Enclos 1-13). Her independence and provocative lifestyle was no longer a viable way for a woman writer to seek her independence by the early nineteenth century because of the growing preoccupation with the preservation of a woman’s virtue. Horatio idealizes Ninon here as a woman who is on the same level as a man and yet, because of her sexually transgressive associations, works in the service of male pleasure.

<sup>24</sup> Horatio’s assertions can be read as a perversion of Wollstonecraft’s claims that the “most strong and original” minds have their “imagination [act] as the stimulus to their senses” (*Letters* 297). While Wollstonecraft insists that the imagination’s ability to stimulate the senses is a trait that both strong-minded men and women have (and moreover one that fuels their own fires), Horatio clearly feels it is the woman’s obligation to make herself appealing to a man—he likens the ideal woman to a courtesan—and use her mind as a tool for male pleasure.

of the novel, Horatio's ideal woman is not only feminine and learned, but also worthy of marriage. It is a careful move on Owenson's part meant to shift the figure of the thinking woman away from her associations with sexual and intellectual transgression and place her firmly within the respectable marriage market by the end of the novel.

Once Owenson establishes her heroine as organically intellectual and virtuous, and thus a desirable wife, she can then deftly illustrate how Glorvina can, in her seemingly subservient position to men, serve as an educator to the hero, teaching him how to be an ideal man, and through this, promote not only more unity between genders but also between Ireland and England. Owenson herself becomes a type of national educator as she advocates a greater sense of national unity between Great Britain and its colonies, and works to highlight the cultural and economic assets Ireland can give England (such as the profits of Ireland's ever-expanding textile industry and the rich history and culture that Owenson used to develop English fashion trends). Her heroine likewise serves as a vehicle for the greening of the spoiled Horatio, teaching him how to grow into the ideal English gentleman and landowner, while under the guise of being tutored by him. Both women are able to undermine patriarchal agenda from within its confines by conforming to specific gender values, like the protection of their virtue and the cultivation of womanly knowledge like music, in order to negotiate for gender and national reform, specifically because they are outsiders—Owenson is a writer of partially Irish heritage and Glorvina is the Irish princess—and as such, are perceived as being less threatening; in short, their marginalized status implies that their potential to instigate reform would be equally confined to social margins. Thus in their perceived harmlessness, these women can then subvert society's assumptions of their powerlessness. I do not mean to suggest that after Wollstonecraft the thinking woman does not have to carefully navigate the liminal space between genders, nor that she was no longer a

controversial figure. Rather, the sexual, intellectual, and moral heroine of Wollstonecraft's novel might be more acceptable because she is increasingly sanitized. For example, Owenson's Glorvina, while just as transgressive in her occupation of social and national margins as Maria in *Wrongs of Woman*, might be more appealing to an English audience than Maria because her virtue is unmolested (she is sexual, but not fallen) and she exists as a figurehead in the Irish countryside the House of Inismore occupies (she is nicely othered, and not a transgressive *English* girl). Even her ability to convert Horatio to the Irish cause is more palatable because it happens in Ireland (the marginalized country of the United Kingdom), rather than in the heart of England. Glorvina is potentially more palatable to an English audience because she is *exotic*, inhabiting the persona of Edward Said's Oriental other, and thus occupies an inherently secondary position to the English gentleman. In this position, her passionate mind might work as a tool for Horatio to define himself both by what he is not—not Irish, not female, not knowledgeable in Gaelic history and culture—and by what he desires, the “playful charm of a Ninon” with which he can idle away his time in Ireland. The prospective power in occupying the position of various others (female, Irish, intellectual) is that, in her presumed submissiveness, Glorvina—or a woman writer such as Owenson—can then work to undo social, gendered, and political hierarchies in a subtler fashion than her predecessors. In short, these women have the potential to use their role as the “weaker vessel” as a tool for self-empowerment, because society is more likely to listen to women who do not inspire fear to the degree that the philosophical woman does.

Central to my reading of Owenson and her heroine is a discussion of how Owenson used the politics set out in *The Wild Irish Girl* to promote social change in Britain through her invocation of Glorvina in her public persona; in other words, Owenson became the real-life

Glorvina promoting social change with her music, writing, and Irish fashion. The novel, written as a series of letters from Horatio, an English nobleman, uses this familiar epistolary genre ostensibly to bring the Irish Glorvina's sexual and intellectual wildness back under the English patriarchal paradigm. As Mark Canuel notes in *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing, 1790-1830*, the purpose of the national tale was to create stronger national ties between England and Ireland. He writes, "[M]uch of the writing that emerged in this period is important not merely because it advocated specific kinds of beliefs or interests, but because it advocated a new way in which different beliefs could be governed under the auspices of tolerant institutions" (2). In the same way, *The Wild Irish Girl* can be read as a type of conduct manual for the English reader on how to successfully integrate Ireland into the national identity of The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Canuel's key phrase here is "governed." The national tale has less to do with introducing new systems of belief into English culture and more to do with "governing" or regulating outside influences. Owenson's novel, however, is more complex than Canuel's description of these national tales allows. She sets out to teach England not how to better govern Ireland, but that Ireland is not something that needs to be governed. In contrast to Wollstonecraft's inflammatory assertions on the inherent equality between the sexes, Owenson's aims to promote understanding between two cultures—and illustrate how that understanding in turn benefits England—is less fear-inspiring because it reflects not the politics of a female philosopher, but the effusive celebration of the Irish culture by a Glorvina. Thus, rather than having Ireland as inherently equal to England, or as a force that would undermine English rule, Ireland's natural riches (its cultural heritage and textiles, for example) would actually be resources that can enhance England's economy and culture, and the perceived wildness of this territory can teach its colonizer about cultural tolerance.

The conflict between Owenson's agenda to promote tolerance between nations and England's political incentives to advance Ireland's assimilation into English culture is apparent in the two primary ways scholars may read *The Wild Irish Girl*, as either a subversive history that reflects the advantages of a romantic or political relationship rooted in equality, or as a conservative parable that works to place Ireland in a submissive role to England's rule. Either reading reflects the problematic space Ireland finds itself in at the turn of the century. It is neither part of the United Kingdom nor separate from it, just as the thinking woman is now neither part of traditional social order nor completely detached from it as Wollstonecraft once was. Ina Ferris, in *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland*, succinctly reads the awkwardness of the national title "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland" after the Acts of Union in 1800. She writes, "The very name adumbrates a dilemma: Ireland is at once a part of the kingdom (a political subject), but not part of Great Britain (not a national subject)" (1). The task of the national tale is then to bridge the gap between Ireland's political and national subject-hood. Owenson deftly uses Ireland's awkward political allegiance to England, I argue, as a way to explore the potential dangers and benefits of an attempted alliance forged between two seemingly disparate cultures and two separate genders. Her emphasis is on assimilation, rather than the overthrow of the current national paradigm. Moreover, she uses this liminal space Ireland finds itself in—both part of Great Britain, but not fully assimilated into it—as a way to explore how the learned woman negotiates, and ultimately finds empowerment in, a similarly marginalized space.

Owenson deliberately uses marriage as an allegory for Irish-English relations so as to articulate the interpenetrative nature of her feminist promotion of gender equality and her preservation and dissemination of Irish culture. As Mary Jean Corbett argues, through her

readings of Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee* and Owenson's novel, in *Allegories of Union in Irish and English Writing, 1790-1870: Politics, History, and the Family from Edgeworth to Arnold*, "The closure that marriage performs in each text is meant to signify the opening up of a new intercultural alliance between England and Ireland, as well as the shutting down of a violent past" (53). Julia Anne Miller, in "Acts of Union: Family Violence and National Courtship in Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee* and Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl*," corroborates Corbett's assertion that Glorvina and Horatio's marriage is an allegory for the Irish Act of Union (1800), focusing her reading on darker aspects of colonization that a cross-culture marriage attempts to silence. Miller writes,

[The] liberal message of reconciliation between opposing parties, their portrayal of their Irish heroines as unmanageable, revolutionary agents who are forcibly disarmed through marriage exposes the founding violence beneath the proposed union. Through marriage the act of violence is depoliticized, transformed from a national or colonial conflict into a family secret. The success of this transformation depends upon the cooperation of the heroine; her silence is her dowry. Yet, the heroine's historical memory—her potential to speak and reveal the family secret—remains an indeterminate element that permanently destabilizes the union (13).

In both readings of the Irish national tale, these scholars correctly read the marriage act as an attempt to divorce Ireland and England from their violent history. Miller's argument specifically focuses on the uneasy alliance forged between the colonizer and the colonized through the marriage of an English hero and an Irish heroine, and the troubling subtext that, for a critical reader, compromises the virtue of a tolerance-inspired romance. That is, a cross-national marriage is used as a balm to heal cultural wounds, yet that same balm is itself riddled with uneven power dynamics, threats of violence, and barely concealed oppression. The prominence of the heroine in the reconciliation of Ireland to English rule is two-fold: she is both evidence of colonial violence and the only voice that can expose it. Yet Miller and Corbett examine only the negative side of this union in which the national tale has the potential to silence radical (Irish)

voices; in fact, Glorvina is not forced into marriage by the end of the novel but rescued from a marriage she doesn't want to Horatio's father. In contrast to Miller and Corbett then, I read *The Wild Irish Girl* as a more positive and progressive reconciliation between cultures and genders than they do, simply because Owenson, writing in the strained political climate that she does (and walking the fine line between a woman of natural learning and a female philosopher), must frame her radical politics as tools that can reinforce certain aspects of current national and gender ideology, and thus, create more social stability.

My departure from Miller is in her reading of *The Wild Irish Girl* as a subtle rejection of the repressive power dynamics of marriage, and thus an "inadvertent" critique of the Act of Union (15). She argues that ultimately Owenson's feminism "overrides" her liberal politics (Miller 15). Yet for Owenson, this move is not "inadvertent" or accidental, but instead a calculated move to support the union and yet highlight the potential problems underlying a union that is not fully founded on genuine tolerance. Miller's reading is likewise more disenchanted with the type of work Owenson tries to do, ultimately asserting that the marriage at the end of the novel only muffles the heroine's right to speak of social injustice. Thomas Tracy more rightly asserts that Miller's reading downplays how much Owenson (and Edgeworth) self-consciously differentiate themselves from conventional social and political worldviews, and thus, are overtly critiquing gender and cultural inequality. Furthermore, her focus on the transformation of colonial relations rooted in radical reformation of gender norms undermines traditional social hierarchies. As Tracy writes, *The Wild Irish Girl* "offers a displaced *cultural* solution in its transformed gender relations" (20). In short, Owenson's naturally intelligent heroine acts as a cross-class, cross-gender, and cross-cultural figure who subverts traditional social hierarchies, and thus has the potential to undermine not only separate spheres ideology, but class conflict and

the necessity of absolute cultural assimilation. Sydney Owenson purposely draws a correlation between herself and Glorvina, in order to set herself up as an Irish girl teaching a patriarchal England the virtues of its newly conquered territory. At the same time, she places both herself and Glorvina in a seemingly submissive role—they are “wild girls”—as a way to soften the threat their educated minds have on their male audience. In a political novel with a tolerance agenda, Glorvina’s narrative (and Owenson’s later invocation of it) becomes a site for reconciling the colonial subject with its master. Glorvina’s story and Owenson’s appropriation of it also work to make the educated woman more palatable to men by placing her neatly within the separate spheres ideology; these women are wild, learned, but still feminine and virtuous.

### **Sydney Owenson: Depictions of a National Educator**

Unlike Wollstonecraft, whose biography is often read into her writing without her overt intention, Owenson consciously invoked the natural intelligence, organic virtue and feminine style of her heroine, Glorvina, as a way to construct her non-threatening intellectual persona. She was witty, intelligent, playful, exotic—capitalizing on the titillating nature of a Ninon-like persona, while maintaining her feminine virtue—to sidestep the social fears the learned woman became a receptacle for, as the history of Wollstonecraft all too well outlined. While Owenson’s feminine persona was not completely successful in shielding her from public censure, it did protect her from being irrevocably labeled as a philosophical woman or a genuine threat to social order. Owenson was the daughter of an English mother and a Gaelic-Irish father, which enabled her to be a voice for both Irish and English concerns. Her time as a governess, when she was the sole supporter of her family, points to her middleclass background. Eventually, her writing career, focused as it was on Anglo-Irish politics, brought on the patronage of the Marquis and Marchioness of Abercorn and later was responsible for her eventual marriage to the Marquis’

knighted physician, Mark Owenson. These life experiences reflect Owenson as a woman who not only undermined gender norms (she was a prominent public figure and successful writer), but also as a woman that crossed boundaries of class, nationality, and political parties. Owenson questioned “the rigidities of the hierarchal boundaries of gender, class, and ethnicity,” but was “careful to retain those hierarchies even while arguing for expanded conceptions of them,” according to Thomas J. Tracy in *Irishness and Womanhood in Nineteenth-Century British Writing* (6). In each instance, Owenson placed herself in a subservient position: she was the pet to the Marquis and Marchioness, the wife of Lord Morgan, and, at the beginning, the unassuming Irish girl that catapulted to fame. Tracy’s assertions point to Owenson’s awareness of the precarious social position she found herself in as the embodiment of various outsiders, as well as how carefully she had to “retain” the hierarchies she sought to undermine, at least on the surface. This balance between being a potentially masculine public figure and a more appropriately feminine self-identified outsider (she drew on her Irish heritage more than her English with her invocation of her famous heroine Glorvina) worked to dissolve the “rigid” boundaries separating genders and nations.

In order to understand the shifting relationship between the intellectual woman and the public, we must look at how contemporary critics evaluated Owenson and her work and how she, in turn, saw herself. She was often favorably perceived (although not always) as an Irish de Staël, the famed Swiss female author of *Corrine* (1807), who ruled the French salons at the turn of the nineteenth century (Connolly “I accuse Miss Owenson” 100). At worst, she was considered the showpiece of her patrons. In her memoirs, Owenson reflected on her public reception. She wrote of her writing persona, “She has been so often drawn from the life—caricatured to the uttermost—abused, calumniated, misrepresented, flattered, eulogized,

persecuted; supported as party dictated or prejudice permitted; the pet of the Liberals of one nation, the *bête-noire* of the ultra set of another” (*Memoirs* 1). In contrast with Godwin’s opening remarks in his memoir of Wollstonecraft, Owenson neither pulled for public sympathy nor attempted to position herself as a great philosopher or victim of social injustice. Even more importantly, Owenson’s history was told by herself, suggesting her desire to control how her story was told—with the knowledge, perhaps, that not all well-intentioned biographers could represent her as she would like to be remembered, as Godwin proved—and to carefully control the conflation between her public and private lives. Her focus instead became how others perceived her persona. Owenson’s reading of herself points to a dichotomy between those who admired her and her humanitarian agenda and those who ridiculed her Irish antics, from her outlandish fashion sense to her overwrought prose. She tellingly referred to herself in the third person to differentiate between herself and her public persona. By drawing on the extreme readings of her public personality, she managed to situate herself nicely in the middle ground as a woman who was neither worthy of such flattery, nor such censure. Her self-conscious performativity might have shielded her from the worst of public criticism. This dichotomy between her liberal supporters and those who labeled her a “*bête-noire*,” moreover, paralleled the other dichotomy between her learned status and her wild (female) Irishness in which she likewise struggled to occupy the middle ground. In each dichotomy, Owenson never condoned any of the disparate readings of her character, but merely recorded the extremes of how the public read her, which in turn cast judgment not necessarily on Owenson, but on those with hyperbolic readings of her. By doing this, she shielded her private self behind this series of dichotomies, making the division between her private and public self the ultimate dichotomy, in which Owenson concealed nothing of how her public persona was read. Yet she simultaneously divulged nothing

about her private opinions or personal experiences that would cause her readers to side with either her supporters, or more importantly, her critics. Where there seemed to be no distinction between Wollstonecraft's private life and public politics, her novels and her history, Owenson deftly manipulated to her own advantage the distinctly Romantic intentional fallacy that a writer was her art (Wimsatt and Beardsley 948). She invoked Glorvina in the cultivation of her public persona, and yet, maintained that she had a distinct, private self that she would not necessarily divulge to her readers. The purpose of this performance was to separate herself, the person, from the persona of the exotic learned woman she cultivated, thus setting that figure up as a vehicle for social and political change and resisting the conflation between her public cultural agenda and her actions in her private life.

Some scholars dismiss Owenson's performance as a self-obsessed ploy to promote her work that actually undermined the weight of her tolerance agenda. Terry Eagleton argues that Owenson's "exuberant self-fashioning as the wild Irish girl, with its excess and extravagant narcissism" alienated readers from her work (140). He goes on to note that it was her performance "the critics view as grotesquely pretentious" (140). And yet, what Eagleton's reading too easily dismisses is that the extravagance of her Gaelic garb and her incessant self-promotion was precisely what gave Owenson her power. In *Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan and The Politics of Style*, Julie Donovan expertly explores Owenson's development of her personal style and how she used it to collapse the distance between literature and real life, in order to disseminate Irish culture through England. Owenson did so by invoking the garb of her Irish princess, wearing long robes made from Irish textiles, and through this, started a trend in women's fashion that allowed English women to wear exotic clothes, and thus, however briefly, embody the titillating (but still virtuous) Ninon-like figure. From there the fashion trend, an

inherently female craze, not only made Irish products more palatable to English consumers, but also increased cultural diffusion between the two nations. Donovan writes, “Manipulating style and adopting fashion as a form of provocative self-presentation, Owenson achieve[s] a successful translation and commercialization of text into objects for wear and sale—making the realms of the literary imagination apply more to the physicality of the material world” (3).

Owenson started wildly popular Irish-inspired fashion trends among upper class women and her invocation of Glorvina encouraged others to indulge in Orientalist fantasies of engaging with, and perhaps even being, the other. This trend moreover appealed to the “literary imagination” of women, allowing them the dual status of being socially respectable women, and exotic outsiders—they too could fantasize about being the wild Irish girl, while still remaining a good English woman, and so remain superior to the outsider status they emulate. In essence, Owenson bridged the gap between cultures and redefined Ireland as more appetizing than it was previously believed to be through the use of her non-pretentious (rather than “grotesquely pretentious”) style that at once titillated her audience and subtly disseminated Irish culture through England.

The duality Owenson inhabited as both an Irish other and an English lady, both a famous writer and genteel woman, both a political activist and a trend setter, was reflected in the extremes with which she was reviewed by contemporary critics. She was cast either as a politically transgressive figure, much like Wollstonecraft was, or as a virtuous Irish damsel, yet never completely crossed the line into irredeemable transgression or immorality as Wollstonecraft was presumed to have done. The fact that she could occupy both positions, without being definitively cast as one or the other, points to the potential at this time for the intellectual woman to distance herself from the damaging associations of the female philosopher and so reshape her image in a more positive light. As with Wollstonecraft, the focus on

Owenson's validity as a learned woman lay not solely in her chastity, but in her aesthetic choices, or her Irish style that went beyond her wardrobe and into her rhetoric. For John Wilson Croker, her infamous and incessant critic, and her defenders alike, her style was used to determine her social worth and her morality. In short, Owenson's performance as a stylized version of a wild Irish girl shifted the terms on which she was evaluated as a public figure: she was reviewed in the context of the Irish (and sentimental) style she promoted which, depending on who reviewed her, either reinforced or detracted from her tolerance agenda and moral character. For example, Croker wrote the following in a letter to the editor of *The Freeman's Journal*, dated December 15, 1806:

I accuse Miss Owenson of having written bad novels, and worse poetry—volumes without number, and verse without end—nor does my accusation rest upon her want of literary excellence—I accuse her of attempting to vitiate mankind—of attempting to undermine morality by sophistry (*Critical Receptions* 74).

Here, Owenson was a figure of moral corruption whose political agenda was rooted in faulty reasoning. He equated her “bad novels” and “worse poetry” in part with moral corruption (her lack of “literary excellence” can “undermine morality”), thus linking her aesthetic choices with her moral ones—just as Wollstonecraft was similarly attacked by *Critical Review* for her lack of masculine rhetoric in *Vindication*. He claimed her faulty logic and attempts to subvert social order were buried under the sheer quantity of her bad writing (“volumes without number” and “verse without end”). He repeated that Owenson could only be “accuse[d]” of “attempting” to undermine social conventions twice, to reinforce her inability to successfully achieve her perceived agenda because of the very weak reasoning and bad writing she used to promote it. Her lack of genuine taste then reflected her lack of morality.

One of Croker's challengers, “A Son of Ireland,” attempted to sever the connection between what Croker saw as Owenson's faulty aesthetic and corrupt morality, and thus to

undermine Croker's claims that Owenson corrupted social order and morality. Croker anticipated this response when he continued his tirade against Owenson in another letter, dated January 2, 1807:

I will be accused of having attacked with 'coward pen,' a helpless unprotected female, of the atrocious attempt to injure infant fame, and delicate sensibility, every eye will shed a crystal tear for the martyred authoress, the drooping genius of sensibility (*Critical Receptions* 76).

And so he was, by "A Son of Ireland" on January 3, 1807:

I need not apprise you that Miss Owenson, the fair author of so many beautiful novels, is the lady with whom this puissant knight hath entered the lists... It is not, however, with genius only that he is at war; the morality of our young but instructive Novelist, give him unpardonable offence; and her 'Wild Irish Girl' he will send to the House of Corrections, where she is to be stripped and scourged, for presuming to inculcate the moral of benevolence and extinction of sectarian differences (*Critical Receptions* 79).

The "Son of Ireland" went on to remind Croker

that Miss Owenson has been her own and only tutor, and that her opportunities of study and improvement have been very few and are limited; at the same time very unequal to those academic advantages which *men* alone can attain, or which form and perfect an illustrious writer (*Critical Receptions* 80).

Croker's letter was riddled with sentimental language to highlight its artifice. His overdrawn diction also ended up being an inadvertent plea for gender equality; by likening Owenson's fame to an "infant" and her person as "the drooping genius of sensibility," he in effect underscored the absurdity of categorizing women—and female intellectuals—as a species that was more tender than their male counterparts, while at the same time using her very femininity and florid writing to discount her value as a serious writer.

On the other hand, her champion, "A Son of Ireland," invoked the language of the romance novel in order to construe Owenson as a woman in need of his protection. His hyperbolic language (he was her "puissant knight" fighting in the "war" to protect her literary virtue) was ironically what Croker railed against, both in Owenson's work and in the writing of

her defenders, because he rightly read it as too easily sugar-coating Owenson's overarching political goals. Owenson's defender likened Croker's attack on her to punishing a virtuous woman for wanting to instill "the moral of benevolence and extinction of sectarian differences" in order to separate her tolerance agenda from attacks on her style. The "Son of Ireland's" use of her limited education in defense of her genius is also telling. He downplayed her achievements by emphasizing her lack of formal (male) education as if to suggest that any flaws Croker did find in her writing were a product not of her genius but of an indifferent education. He then cemented this argument by noting that "*men* alone" could appeal to Croker's standards because they had "academic advantages." The slippage between Owenson, her novel, and her heroine ('The Wild Irish Girl' could be either the text or the woman who must be sent to the House of Correction) indicates how closely Owenson and her readers aligned her with her fictional world. Both Croker and Owenson's defender highlighted her femininity, granted for differing reasons—Croker to assault codes of the gallant, and the "Son of Ireland" to emphasize Owenson's vulnerability. The significance of this epistolary exchange lies in the dual, interpenetrative ways in which Owenson was read as either a political subversive or a gentle moralist, but in either case definitively *feminine*, and never irrevocably transgressive.

If reviewers of Owenson's work were evenly divided between viewing her as a radical or an exotic creature, Owenson herself cultivated the latter while acknowledging that she also had a political agenda.<sup>25</sup> She wore Glorvina's clothes, played her harp at parties, and even signed her name as "Glorvina" at times, and remained acutely aware of the difficult liminal position she found herself in, a fact best described by her reflections on her time in London society. She

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<sup>25</sup> She explains her agenda in writing *The Wild Irish Girl*, "I came to the task with a diffidence proportioned to the ardour which instigated me to the attempt; for as a woman, a young woman, and an Irishwoman, I felt all the delicacy of undertaking a work which had for the professed theme of its discussion, circumstances of national import, and national interest" (qtd. Campbell 31).

wrote to a friend, “I was treated ‘en princesse’ and denied the civilized privileges of a sofa or chair, which were not in character with the habits of a ‘wild Irish girl’. So there I sat, the lioness of the night, exhibited and shown off” (qtd Kirkpatrick x). In this scene, Owenson had achieved fame and was even a celebrated guest, and yet as an Irish woman, entered high society not as an equal but as a show piece; her invocation of her heroine likewise reduced Owenson to a caricature of ‘a wild Irish girl’—the price she paid for promoting her progressive politics in the guise of a non-threatening subject. Torn between these dichotomies of political insurgent and Irish doll, intellectual and woman, personal and public personas, Owenson best described her feelings on navigating these often conflicting pieces of herself in a frank diary entry in 1811. She wrote that she was “inconsiderate and indiscrete; never saved by prudence, but often rescued by pride; often on the verge of error, but never passing the line” (*Memoirs Vol. 2* 52). Central to her reading of herself is her lack of passivity—she was “indiscrete” and rejects “prudence” for “pride.” She likewise displayed her awareness that while she might have been fallible, she never quite crossed the line into immorality or overt radicalism. Her reading of herself—her personal self, rather than her public persona—shows that the real Owenson, when stripped of her performative outfits and actions, was a practical woman, keenly aware of the roles she needed to play in order to promote her progressive politics and remain as respectable as a public woman could be at this time.

After her death, her critical reception became more favorable. One champion, William John Fitzpatrick, describes the difficulty Owenson faced when he noted in his 1860 biography, that she wrote “in an age when, to be a woman, was to be without defence, and to be a patriot, was to be criminal” (299). Although he wrote in 1860—a mere half-century after the publication of *The Wild Irish Girl*, his comments indicate that by the mid-nineteenth century, the figure of

the female intellectual, most often seen in society as the woman writer, no longer faced such harsh censure as Owenson struggled to overcome, and as Wollstonecraft failed to do. His comment also shows that underneath the sheer bravado of Owenson's performance as the unrestrained Irish girl was her genuine struggle to assert gender equality and national unity. Her reputation, unlike Wollstonecraft's, was secured through her performance as a type of genteel national educator, teaching the virtues and benefits of Ireland to her English audience. In the end, like her heroine, Owenson was read as a virtuous Ninon, or as *The Athenaeum* wrote in its review of her published diary, she was "a literary Ninon" (Fitzpatrick 299). Owenson's cultivation of the power of a Ninon, and her ability to critique gender, class, and national hierarchies from her secondary position, is further established when the reader examines her heroine, Glorvina, and the types of political moves Owenson was able to make based on Horatio's growing desire for the thinking Irish girl.

### **Sublime Womanhood: Glorvina as a Revisionist Sophie**

Just as Owenson acted as a national educator via her performance of a submissive Ninon, so, too, is Glorvina able to become Horatio's educator through her feminine style and natural beauty which downplays her more masculine mind. Glorvina's subversive redefinition of ideal womanhood—she is learned like a man, but still virtuous—marks her not as a transgressive philosophical woman, but as a valuable educator of man, and thus, as Wollstonecraft outlined in *Vindication*, an ideal potential wife. Owenson uses Glorvina as a prototype for a virtuous learned woman by emphasizing the naturalness of both her morality and intellect, and from there, maneuvers her heroine into the power position of the tutor-tutee romance as the real educator. In order to form a heroine masculine in mind without likening her to a female philosopher, Owenson models her heroine after Rousseau's Sophie—his ideal woman—and then, working

against this foundation, manipulates the reader's understanding of ideal womanhood. Although Glorvina initially reads as a type of Sophie, it becomes apparent to a close reader of the novel that she is an inherently more self-aware and political heroine who uses female fashion and sensibility as political statements.

In order to understand how Glorvina can be read as a type of Sophie, and thus a palatable ideal woman, we must return to Rousseau's discussion of women in *Emile* (1762). As noted in the introduction, Rousseau outlined the makings of the perfect woman, Sophie, as the companion to Emile, a fictional character educated according to Rousseau's ideal standards. She was meant to be second to man, with her education centered on how to be the best companion to her male counterpart (Rousseau 360-368). Rousseau goes on to assert that women's dress should be natural and lacking in the trappings of the mode: "[I]n her clothes one always sees simplicity joined with elegance. She likes not what is brilliant but what is suitable. She is ignorant of what colors are fashionable, but she knows marvelously which will look well on her" (394). Rousseau sets woman up then as a child-like creature dependent on and catering to man, loving only virtue and fashion more than her role as wife and mother. Yet his description of her ability to dress herself to highlight her assets suggests that for Rousseau, and indeed many English conduct manual writers, a woman must be both knowing and unknowing, both unaffected by the superficial—and seductive—aspects of fashionable society, and the courtship games played therein, and schooled in the arts of appealing to the opposite sex, including appropriate dress.

Horatio's first encounter with Glorvina seems to set up the wild Irish girl as a type of Sophie. Her dress is nothing if not "simplicity joined with elegance." Glorvina's style is "more in unison with grace and nature, though less in point with formal neatness, than the round-eared caps and large hats of our rustic fair in England" (Owenson 29). When Horatio first spies

Glorvina after a church service, she is “vested in a robe of vestal white” (Owenson 48). He lingers, too, over her physical person, deeming it “[a] form so almost impalpably delicate, that as it floated on the gaze, it seemed like the incarnation of some pure ethereal spirit” (Owenson 48). He describes her antiquated, noble dress. He later exclaims, “Such was the *figure* of the Princess of Inismore!” (Owenson 48). Clearly his first impressions of the princess are less about her famed generosity and intellect, but of her “*figure*” and the feminine, ethereal quality her robes connote. Her purity, too, is unmistakable here—she covered in “vestal white”—as is her departure from conventional English fashion; her clothes are more “in unison with grace and nature,” suggesting that her style transcends fads by returning to a more rustic notion of beauty. Like Sophie, Glorvina here can be read as a woman who wears clothes full of “simplicity” and “elegance,” and is “ignorant” of what is “fashionable.” At the same time, it “look[s] well on her.” Owenson, however, subverts Rousseau’s maxims on ideal womanhood by imbuing Glorvina’s wardrobe with political connotations. The reader—and Horatio—find that she dresses according to the ancient ways of Ireland and using Irish cloth.<sup>26</sup> While this detail might not seem particularly significant on its own, in a novel about promoting Irishness, Glorvina’s fashion is an attempt to preserve Irish culture, a fact which Glorvina reinforces when she explains the history of her garb to Horatio, at which we will look more closely later. In other words, “Glorvina’s dress may be simple, but despite its being delightful to Horatio, it is primarily political—a means of cultural attestation and resistance” (Donovan 46).<sup>27</sup> So while Glorvina

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<sup>26</sup> During this time, the primary factories in Ireland were the northern textile mills, which were responsible, in part, for the economic boom Ireland enjoyed during the years of the Napoleonic Wars.

<sup>27</sup> Julie Donovan, in *Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan and the Politics of Style*, also discusses how Owenson’s invocation of Glorvina’s style started a trend among upper-class English women. These women embraced the slightly scandalous nature of the loose, exotic garb worn by the wild Irish girl and thus, inadvertently promoted Irish style and perhaps supported Irish economy through their need to adopt this fad.

appears to wear clothing that appeals to her male viewers, she is in fact wearing her political beliefs and cultural pride on her person, a fact which is only legible to those knowledgeable in Irish history and culture.

Owenson continues to play with the supposition that Glorvina could represent a type of Sophie when she undermines Horatio's assumptions about Glorvina's (lack of) education. According to Rousseau, it was necessary for a man to choose a woman who was educated in the accomplishments that would make her a pleasing wife (music, drawing, wifely duties). He writes,

[I]t is not suitable for a man with education to take a wife who has none, or consequently, to take a wife from a rank in which she could not have an education. But I would still like a simple and coarsely raised girl a hundred times better than a learned and brilliant one who would come to establish in my house a tribunal of literature over which she would preside (Rousseau 409).

While he claims that a man shouldn't want an uneducated woman, he also idealizes the pleasures of marrying a rustic woman whose sole joy would be to care for him (as he did in his own life), whereas a more educated wife would always be attempting to enter male discourse. Rousseau's educated wife, it should be noted, is one who is trained in various accomplishments like drawing and music, and taught to read and write, with very little learning beyond that. So his educated woman is a more traditionally domestic figure, and not one who is educated equally to man. From this point of reference, he then praises a complete lack of education in a "coarsely raised girl" over the excessive learning of a wife; thus, he would choose rustic ignorance over a cultivated mind.

In much the same way, Horatio contemplates the virtues of winning the love of a "wild girl" like Glorvina, over the more polished London women he formerly associated with. He reflects on his growing romantic interest in Glorvina, and his conflict over it:

Was it possible that my chilled, my sated misanthropic feelings, still sent forth one sigh of wishful solicitude for woman's dangerous presence!...What had I to expect from the unpolished manners, the confined ideas of the Wild Irish Girl? Deprived of all those touching allurements which society only gives; reared in the wilds and solitudes, with no other associates than her nurse, her confessor, and her father; endowed indeed by nature with some personal gifts, set off by the advantage of a singular and characteristic dress, for which she is indebted to whim and natural prejudice, rather than native taste:—I, who had fled in disgust even from those to whose natural attraction the bewitching blandishments of education, the brilliant polish of fashion, and the dazzling splendour of *real* rank, contributed their potent spells (Owenson 60).

In the midst of these musings, he is lulled to sleep by the soothing melody of Glorvina's harp.

Horatio makes a point to underscore Glorvina's flaws: she has no "*real*" rank, as being an Irish Princess is nothing compared to claiming a part of the English upper class; she has "unpolished manners" influenced by her limited social circle; she has a distinctive dress rooted in "whim" and "natural prejudice." While Horatio would certainly look for a more polished wife, like Rousseau advocates, he is still taken in by the very wildness in Glorvina that so shocks him.

Despite her reputation as a learned woman, Horatio still views her as ignorant when he contrasts her with the charms of English girls that are enhanced by the "blandishments of education."

Again though, his notion of female education is much like Rousseau's—a woman trained in several accomplishments that are then used to entertain the men around them. He portrays Glorvina as a wild saint of a pagan religion, unschooled in life and the refinements of English taste—a sharp contrast from other ladies of his acquaintance, for which Horatio both reveres and ridicules her.

After Owenson establishes Glorvina as "wild" girl, she completely undoes Rousseau's vision of Sophie as an ideal companion for man by portraying her heroine as both utterly feminine, according to the dictates of English conduct manuals, and surprisingly well educated—taught primarily by the priest and through her own devoted studies. Early in the novel, Horatio hears rumors of her "great learning," how she loves "spouting Latin," "is a great *physicianer*,"

and “will sit for hours at her Latin and Greek” (Owenson 41). When he meets her in her “vestal white robes” however, he concludes that it is “impossible to look *less* like one who spouts Latin with the priest of the parish, than this same Glorvina” and moreover feels that “[t]here is something beautifully wild about her air and look” (Owenson 65). Horatio’s observation deftly illustrates his implicit assumption that those who “spout Latin” are not also wild beauties, but presumably either men, like the priest, or perhaps a Dacier. For Horatio then, Glorvina’s power lies in her “wild” person, despite her reputation as a learned woman. It is as if he expects this naturally intellectual Glorvina to be less “beautifully wild” because of her education. What cements Horatio’s attraction to Glorvina early in the novel is not her knowledge of Latin, but her mastery of more feminine accomplishments, namely, her harp playing. When he first hears her playing the harp, he mistakes the sound for “the professional exertions of the bard of Inismore” (Owenson 52). He tellingly mistakes her mastery of a subject for that of a man’s, again assuming that her expertise at the harp must belong to a “professional” rather than a princess. He is later surprised to learn that Glorvina chose to learn to play the harp because of its Irish origin, the history of which she explains to him while she plays her harp (Owenson 70-75). Horatio’s pleasure in Glorvina—first from her attractive attire, and again in her harp playing—is superficial, dependent only on the stimulation of his senses, and yet through this he finds out about Irish culture through Glorvina’s detailed lectures about the history of the harp and later her clothes. The reader finds that the more Horatio gets to know Glorvina under the guise of a drawing master, Horatio Mortimer, the more he discovers how highly educated she is, especially for a woman. She is not only schooled in more female accomplishments, like playing the harp and the drawing he teaches her, but she is learned in Irish history, politics (she supports Catholic emancipation), and philosophy. She also reads English newspapers and quotes Italian and even

writes her own poetry (Owenson 82). Even the priest exclaims over her “divine intelligence” which leads him to teach her more than just “a little reading and writing” (Owenson 79). In essence, she has access to the types of education Horatio expects to be even beyond that of an English woman, complemented by her Irish studies—studies of which Horatio is completely ignorant and must be taught.<sup>28</sup> Even as his appreciation of Glorvina is at this point still rooted in her ability to stimulate his senses, Horatio learns much of Ireland and Glorvina through her lectures and musical performances.

Horatio’s assumptions that Glorvina has an unpolished mind are put to rest when he begins to school her in the art of drawing; her subversion of his expectations (however unintentionally) quickly lead to his fascination and later infatuation with her. He notes her intellectual voraciousness with surprise. He finds that drawing is “too progressive, too tame a pursuit for the vivacity of her genius” and “her ever active mind requires incessant exercise” (Owenson 86). His description of her mind is intensely physical—it must be “exercised”—highlighting the masculine voracity with which she studies. Her intellectual breadth manifests itself in her rationale of her costume after Horatio comments on the singularity of her dress. Her lengthy explanation includes references to “Mr. O’Halloran, the celebrated Irish historian,” who can attest to the fact that the many valuable jewels such as she wears were found in Ireland, not in Peru or Golconda, as Horatio surmises (Owenson 98). She goes on to recall facts on the national jewels from “The Life of St Bridget,” and an Irish romance titled “*Interview Between Fionn M’Cumhal and Cannan*” and ends her speech with an allusion to Greek mythology. Her speech showcases her range of knowledge, from Irish to Greek history, and emphasizes that her education goes beyond Irish culture, and in some cases, can rival Horatio’s. In essence,

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<sup>28</sup> Glorvina’s mostly self-taught intelligence echoes Owenson’s natural learning, used by “Son of Ireland” to provide evidence for Owenson’s strength of moral and mental character and any flaws in her writing.

Horatio's tutoring time with Glorvina changes her in his eyes from being an ignorant Sophie to a titillating Ninon, who surprises with her knowledge, and soothes with her harp. His shifting perspective of Glorvina then pushes him to reevaluate his preconceived notions of Ireland and submit to her lectures on Irish history and philosophy.

Glorvina's Ninon-like qualities solidify her as a figure whose more feminine qualities mask her influence on the public discourse surrounding Ireland. In one telling scene, she plays her harp as they discuss "the *Maid of Corinth*." At the same time, Horatio sketches Glorvina while she thinks he is finishing off her attempts to draw the castle. There are several important factors in this scene that conflate Glorvina with Ireland and solidify the power her more feminine accomplishments (singing, harp playing, simple dress) have in softening Horatio to Ireland. First, Horatio's drawing replaces the castle of Inismore with Glorvina, suggesting to a close reader of this novel that Glorvina is Inismore, and by extension, Ireland. To draw her essence is to portray that of Ireland. The reference to Amelia Opie's 1801 poem is also significant. Opie retells Pliny's origin myth of painting, in which an artist's daughter traces the outline of her lover's shadow the night before he leaves for distant lands. According to Shelley King in "Amelia Opie's 'Maid of Corinth' and the Origins of Art," Opie's poem works not just as an origin of painting myth, but as an origin of the female artist, and imbues woman with a significant amount of power to alter society through her private actions (629-651). The reader can see that in the context of Horatio and Glorvina's study sessions, Glorvina follows the lineage of the Maid of Corinth, when the creative and intellectual pursuits she indulges within her domestic space work to educate Horatio. As Horatio exclaims, "It is thus this creature winds round the heart, while she enlightens the mind, and entrances the sense" (Owenson 99-100).

The beloved qualities of Glorvina are made all the more necessary to future marital bliss when Horatio fears losing them, and they are all the more cherished when the hero finds himself already engaged to a daughter of his father's old "sporting friend D—" (Owenson 166). His father carefully details the marriage of Horatio's brother to an English woman, effectively exchanging their family title for one hundred thousand pounds. Horatio's subsequent marriage is to be to a respectable girl of their same class. The father's insistence on the propriety of both marriages underscores the fact that English marriages, particularly as they involve the upper classes, are primarily business contracts, in which social trappings like class and wealth dictate who would be a marriageable prospect. This serves as a sharp contrast to Horatio's lovelorn desires for matrimony that eschew the mandates of the outside world in favor of higher "sweets of virtue" as he earlier exclaims. His wife to be, whom he meets at his family's Irish estate, is everything a marriageable English woman ought to be: accomplished, stylish, passive. She is a marked contrast from the wild Glorvina. In his enthusiasm over the marriage, Horatio's father explains the enjoyment of shaping such a woman into the ideal wife and Horatio identifies too well with his father's musings:

'How delightful,' he exclaimed, 'to form this young and ductile mind, to mould it to your desires, to breathe inspiration into this lovely image of primeval innocence, to give soul to beauty, and intelligence to simplicity, to watch the ripening progress of your grateful efforts, and finally clasp to your heart that perfection you have yourself created.' And this was spoken with an energy, an enthusiasm, as though he has himself experienced all the pleasure he now painted for me (Owenson 227).

This, of course, is exactly what Horatio felt with Glorvina (even if he could not, in fact, "mould" her) and, the reader later finds, what his father felt in *his* relationship with the wild Irish girl.<sup>29</sup>

While the father attempts to deliver his son an English wife, it is significant that he does not

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<sup>29</sup> Horatio often wishes that his father, who continuously courts the Englishwoman on his son's behalf, would be his rival for the girl's affection. He cries, "Oh! That he were my rival! My successful rival!" (Owenson 227). This foreshadows the revelation that Horatio's father is in fact his "successful rival" in his relations with Glorvina.

choose one for himself, opting instead for the Rousseauvian ideal of a rustic wife he can train. The chief difference, however, between the pleasures each man experienced in attempting to shape an ideal woman of their own creation is that Glorvina's makeup is one of sharp contrast to the "gay young mistress" Horatio is to marry (Owenson 225). Both men perceived the Englishwoman as "ductile," and by inference Glorvina, too, yet part of the charm of Glorvina—and what both men overlook here—is that she is not completely malleable, but also teaches these men about Irish life so as to undo the ignorance and prejudice through which they first viewed her nation. In both cases, Horatio and his father act as men of conquest, attempting to own and mold this wild girl of a colonized nation, without completely acknowledging how she subtly influences their understanding of gender relations and Anglo-Irish relations.

Horatio's growth as a man, due to Glorvina's influence, is further manifested in his inability to play the courtship games demanded of him by English society. He cannot woo his bride-to-be and ridicules her for her dependence on the excitement of urban life to give her existence meaning. His reflections on her and their upcoming union serve as a critique for conventional marriage practices and the insipidness of vain coquetry. He writes, "My gay young mistress seems already to consider me as her husband, and treats me accordingly with indifference. In short, she finds that love in the solitude of the country, and amidst the pleasures of a town, is a very different sentiment, yet her vanity I believe is piqued by my neglect" (Owenson 225). Here, the traditional English marriage is one of mutual indifference, perhaps even dislike. It is a social, financial, and familial necessity. Love is clearly performative here, losing its luster when there is no one to witness her being courted in the isolated (and Irish) countryside. Horatio's reading also establishes how matrimony works as a type of status symbol for marriageable young women. For this English socialite to be unable to be seen by her peers as

engaged, is perhaps to lose the chief enjoyment of being attached. The English lady serves as a foil to the glories of Glorvina, the ideal union between England and Ireland, and the gender equality Glorvina's marriage to Horatio would establish.

The depiction of Glorvina as a subversive Sophie points to her power as a female educator, simply because she cannot be easily placed within the framework of English gender norms, and so, acting outside of those, can push Horatio to move beyond the limits of his preconceived notions of gender and nation. Much of what she teaches him stems from her explanations of why she acts as she does, from wearing rustic clothing to playing the harp, explaining the politics of her seemingly frivolous actions. Her power lies in the femininity that softens her more radical political and cultural beliefs. What becomes apparent by the end of the novel is that while Horatio transforms himself from a libertine to a respectable and progressive gentleman, Glorvina does not change. She does not ever stop being the wild Irish girl, even as Horatio forms various opinions about her and even, at the last, when she marries him. Her continued unbridled freedom suggests that Glorvina has much to teach Horatio (rather than the other way around) and that Ireland has much to give England.

### **The Unreliable Hero: Educating the English Gentleman**

In contrast to Glorvina's tale of unchangeable virtue, Horatio's narrative acts as a coming of age tale in which he learns to relinquish his libertine past in favor of true manhood (including all the responsibilities that entails), which Glorvina teaches him through her invocation of unadulterated womanhood. The novel unfolds with Horatio M—, the son of an English lord, who is banished to his father's Irish estate to devote himself to his studies and divorce himself from the more libertine pursuits he was embroiled in, in England. He is also the heir of General M— (one of Cromwell's men) who murdered Glorvina's great-great-great grandfather and took

control of their land. Almost the entirety of the novel is told through a series of letters by Horatio to his confidant. It is essential to Owenson's work's progressive agenda that the reader sees Ireland through the eyes of a quintessential English gentleman as he faces first aversion, then love for this nation. In essence, his eventual conversion to Irish culture works as a reformist strategy to promote a more balanced union between England and Ireland (Markley 20).<sup>30</sup> The fact that this transformation is recorded in writing is just as important as the actual transformation, if not more so. As Barbara Maria Zaczek explains, "writing leaves an indelible trace. It turns ephemeral words into a script whose permanence precludes any possibility of taking back or altering the message" (13). Thus, Horatio leaves a record of his conversion that cannot be altered, even if he might later lose some of his Irish patriotism when he returns to England.

Owenson constructs this degenerate hero to make his eventual reform, in part brought on by the intellectual ministrations of Glorvina, all the more meaningful, and thus further illustrate the power of Glorvina's instructive powers to bring virtue and soundness of mind to a once dissipated mind and body. Early in the novel, Horatio establishes himself as a jaded youth who has neither the energy nor the inclination to better himself. Horatio writes of his own condition:

I have lived too fast in a moral as well as a physical sense, and the principles of my intellectual, as well as my natural constitution are, I fear, fast hastening to decay. I live in a tomb of my expiring mind, and preserve only the consciousness of my wretched state, without the power, and almost without the wish to be otherwise than what I am (Owenson 33).

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<sup>30</sup> Not everyone believed that this particular strategy of Owenson's was effective in promoting her cause. Horatio's about-face was also criticized for being a short-lived cultural conversion by contemporary readers. One reader notes, "I must enter my protest against this amazing rapidity of transformation, this wonderful changeability of opinion,—allowing even the national prejudice in its fullest extent; it only convinces more strongly of the length of time, and correct views of character, which would be necessary to dissipate it" (*Critical Receptions* 78).

Owenson deliberately sets him up as a jaded gentleman with both weakened sensibility and intellect, so that the reader then questions his ability to accurately read the world around him. Horatio's early assessment of himself undermines the prejudices and judgments he applies to Ireland by firmly configuring him as an unreliable narrator—he is a spoiled, dissipated youth, resentful of his father, and unhappy about his banishment to Ireland where he faces a seeming eternity of ennui. Julie Donovan conveys the importance of Horatio as an unreliable narrator; in his self-absorption, he has the potential to easily misread situations, particularly those involving Irish culture and the romantic dynamic between himself and Glorvina, which the reader, with the benefit of a more omniscient perspective, might more accurately interpret (27).<sup>31</sup> His emphasis on his lack of “power” to stop the “decay” of his “intellect” implies that he needs an outside force to inspire him to better himself—in this case, Glorvina, though he has yet to meet her. Indeed much of his growth lies in Glorvina's ability to stimulate his senses through music and then, ultimately, his mind by teaching him the Irish language, as we will later see; but his second mode of maturation lies in the self-realization that much of his romantic conflict with Glorvina lies in his perpetual misreading of her intelligence—in particular her knowledge of the real world and love—and his assumptions about her womanly modesty when he fears her supposed coquetry. Part of his transformation into an adult is in learning how to more accurately read the world around him—in particular women (whom he previously thought so little of) and Ireland.

Few scholars have explored in-depth the impact Glorvina's educated status has on Horatio's growing feelings for her and, in turn, his developing and more balanced understanding

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<sup>31</sup> Janet Gurkin Altman corroborates this when she argues that “reading an epistolary novel is very much like reading over the shoulder of another character whose own readings—and misreading— must enter into our experience of the work” (111-112). She sets up the two lenses through which the reader interprets the text—the narrator's and his/her own.

of Ireland and how a woman can be naturally virtuous and intellectual. Joseph W. Lew writes that “scenes of language learning and seduction assume prominent positions in the plot and are often intertwined” (20). Julie Anne Miller succinctly explains that Glorvina “tutors her tutor” in Irish culture (23). Yet very little work has been done on the significance of the tutor-tutee romance in this novel and the importance of the shifting power dynamic in the romantic and educational relationship Horatio and Glorvina share. Like Wollstonecraft, Owenson draws on the “sentimental sorcery of Rousseau” to offer an alternative reading of the romance in *Julie*, one that reverses the role of tutor and tutee and establishes the benefits of a romance produced out of intellectual stimulation, namely, tolerating, and even valuing, difference (Owenson 149).<sup>32</sup> While Horatio is originally hired to teach Glorvina drawing, and he often attempts to teach her the language of love and sensibility through novels, it is Glorvina who actually schools her tutor in Irish history and culture, genuine love (which he has never truly experienced), and virtuous womanhood—a thing he has known little of during his time as a libertine in London.

Horatio’s transformation, from a spoiled child to a man invested in the welfare of others, centers on Glorvina, who in his eyes is a conundrum: child-like, yet intellectually voracious, inherently Irish, yet schooled in English subjects, seemingly unschooled in love, yet aware of Horatio’s clumsy attempts to woo her (as evidenced by her repeated laughter at him, which he loathes). His early contempt and guarded interest in her takes on a more national goal when he agrees to tutor her, under the guise of learning more about Ireland. He reflects:

I long to study the purely national, natural character of a Irish woman; in fine, I long to behold any woman in such lights and shades of mind, temper, and disposition, as Nature

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<sup>32</sup> Wollstonecraft, as outlined in the previous chapter, wrote a parallel plot to that of Rousseau’s novel in *The Wrongs of Woman*, in order to highlight the dangers of sentimental language and judging another based on their intellectual proclivities. In essence, she outlines the worst-case scenario of this kind of romance, whereas Owenson offers a portrayal of the best outcome.

had originally formed her in. Hitherto I have only met servile copies, sketched by the finger of art, and finished off by the polished touch of fashion (Owenson 65).

Horatio's desire to study the character of an Irish woman is significant for two reasons. First, the reader can see that in this pursuit, he begins to awaken his "expiring mind." We know that his initial search for the Castle of Inismore was brought on by a suspicion that his father was hiding an Irish paramour in the Irish countryside, but after viewing Glorvina, his trajectory to uncover his father's secret love life reshapes itself into a cultural study. In other words, Horatio's childish attempts to discover his father's secrets begin to awaken his mind, which is later fully awakened when he meets Glorvina (a riddle he does not understand), and from there, applies himself to figuring out the makeup of this unreadable woman through her love of her culture. His transition from baser applications of his mind to a more thoughtful study of Ireland and Glorvina highlights the fact that his previous education has been one of life experience and the study of the culture surrounding him (then London society) in order gain personal gratification, either through the amorous affections of a woman or general debauchery. So in order for him to understand—and woo—this wild girl, he finds he must immerse himself in her passion for Irish history and culture; this in turn inadvertently leads to his genuine interest in his studies and Ireland.

Even as Horatio's perceptions of Ireland are continuously challenged once he is in that country, it is his time with Glorvina that ultimately leads to his more lasting appreciation of the nation. Although he has seen the Irish countryside, the peasants, the religious services, and even the expressions of pagan beliefs, his first impressions of Ireland are rooted in English stereotypes of Irish life and culture—he encounters the "race of Irish giants," "Irish dissipation," and "*picturesque* faith" (Owenson 14; 17; 50). His first encounter with Glorvina outside the church challenges his preconceived notions of that nation by placing him face to face with the first

pleasurable object he's found in Ireland. Thus, his desire to study Glorvina is intertwined with his curiosity to comprehend a more pleasing version of Ireland previously unknown to him and his English prejudices. His study of woman—both “national” and “natural”—reflects Owenson's intention of conflating Glorvina with Ireland (to love Glorvina is to love Ireland) and her attempt to link Glorvina's intelligence and culture as inherently natural. She is bereft of affectation, unlike the London women Horatio confidently seduced yet despised. The second significant aspect of his reflection is when he extends his need to know the makeup of an Irish woman toward knowing “woman” in general, and moreover, learning what a woman untainted by fashion can be. Here, the polished manners of English society—previously favorable to the barbarism of Irish culture—reflect not a more advanced society, but one that is riddled with moral and intellectual corruption. So Horatio revives himself from his ennui by studying a genuine woman (and not a “servile copy”) untainted by the modes of the day. Studying Glorvina becomes a way for Horatio to learn how to be a gentleman and embrace the responsibilities inherent in that position while eschewing the dissipated lifestyle of his youth; if he can find a woman unaffected by vogues, he too can live beyond the dictates of fashionable society and apply himself more meaningfully to his studies and a career as his father wants.

While he might set out to educate Glorvina on love, drawing, and English values, it is Glorvina who schools him in Irish culture, politics, literature, and religion, so much so that he eventually confesses to his confidant that he has “actually begun to study the Irish language” (Owenson 88). He has renewed his investment in learning, whereas before he thought he had seen all there was to know of the world, and he has developed a gradual investment in the preservation of the Irish culture because of his feelings for Glorvina. He tells his correspondent that Father John promises him that “he will render [Horatio] master of it in a short time—

provided [he] study *con amore*” (Owenson 88). When Glorvina also offers to help him learn the language, Horatio responds, “Then I shall study *con amore!* indeed” (Owenson 88). His exclamations of studying “*con amore!*” upon knowing Glorvina will be one of his tutors emphasizes his investment in learning as a way to be close to Glorvina and study her character. He conflates the meaning of “*con amore*” with both loving his Irish studies and Glorvina, thus collapsing the difference between knowing (and loving) the wild girl and Ireland. Although he begins his studies in order to seduce Glorvina, he later claims, albeit in a fit of filial rebellion, that if his father insists he find a profession, Horatio “must turn *historiographer* to the Prince of Inismore” (Owenson 92). His hyperbolic claiming of the task of historical preservation for the Irish prince indicates his gradual assimilation into Irish culture; that he would even choose this as a profession, however jokingly he does so, reflects his interest in his Irish studies and his very real desire to preserve the history of the culture he studies.

The moment that best reflects his transition from studying this culture to appease Glorvina and into loving Irish culture for itself occurs during the first of May celebration—an important Irish holiday, according to Glorvina, and one that, as a spring festival, symbolizes his budding romance with Glorvina. By now, Glorvina knows he “love[s] to trace modern customs to ancient origins” and so encourages him to watch “some of the rites of our heathen superstitions” (Owenson 137). During his studies, Horatio has developed a love for the ancient manuscripts in the prince’s library and for Glorvina’s lectures on the origins of her dress, her harp, and her customs, so her encouragement to have him view her “heathen superstitions” is meant to show him a more ancient custom that has survived into modernity, and thus give him another real life example of the Irish cultural history he has become enamored with—his love of the culture stems from its sharp contrast, in its “heathen” barbarity, from the artificial polish of

English high society. Thus, his study of Irish language and culture brings him back to a more authentic or natural way of expressing himself, as seen when he greets the priest on this day “in the true hyperbola of Irish cordiality” (Owenson 142). The “hyperbola” here is a far cry from the affected ennui of his former society, and Horatio’s revelry in the openness of affection in Ireland points to his receding jadedness. His full cultural assimilation occurs when the Catholic priest applauds the Englishman’s effusions on an Irish celebration. He cries, “Spoken like a true-born Irishman!” (Owenson 142). The Irish have accepted Horatio, here the outsider, because of his fervent study of their culture. Horatio moves from the quintessential English gentleman to something like a “true-born Irishman” by the end of the novel, suggesting that Ireland and Glorvina had much to teach him and England, rather than the other way around. Horatio’s reversal of expectations underscores Owenson’s desire to highlight Ireland’s potential usefulness to England, by teaching the ruling nation the value of tolerance and the breakdown of cultural, class, and gender hierarchies.

Horatio’s assimilation into Irish culture and his amorous education conflate when he confesses his love to Glorvina (and she confesses hers to him) over verb conjugations. By using the Irish language to articulate his love, he establishes how much he has learned from Glorvina and been changed by her. The prince unknowingly forces the two lovers to articulate their desire for one another when he attempts to quiz Horatio on the Irish language, choosing the verb “to love” for the young man to conjugate. Horatio recounts his hesitation over the word and how the prince then calls on his daughter to supply the conjugation:

“*I love,*’ faintly articulated Glorvina.

*I love,*’ I more faintly repeated.

This was not enough—the Prince would have us repeat the plural twice over; and again and again we murmured together—‘*we love!*’” (Owenson 161).

Horatio writes of the prince's despair at their inability to articulate the verbs, telling them, "[w]e know nothing of the verb to love, while in fact we were running through all its moods and tenses with our eyes and looks" (Owenson 162). Both Horatio and Glorvina are portrayed as learning the "language" of love that transcends cultural boundaries. Just as Glorvina learns to express her desire by reading novels of sensibility, so too does she (and Horatio) learn how to vocalize her emotions through the conjugation exercise.

Horatio's confession of love, occurring as it does over his studies of Ireland, indicates that Horatio's amorous feelings are linked to his rekindled interest in learning and his gradual loss of the ennui with which he entered Ireland. Glorvina encapsulates what was missing in English girls for him: intellectual voraciousness, unfettered sentiment, and exoticism, which all work together to create the Ninon figure Horatio sets up as his ideal woman early in the novel. In a frenzy over his unconquerable love for Glorvina, Horatio declares, "[t]he happiness of mankind consists in *pleasure*, not such as arises from the gratification of the senses, or the pursuit of vice—but from the enjoyments of the mind, the pleasures of the imagination, the affections of the heart, and the sweets of virtue" (Owenson 167).<sup>33</sup> Here is an about-turn from his former dissolute days. He is no longer filled with and disgusted by worldly pleasures, but content with higher gratifications rooted in the mind and mutual esteem. His words seem to outline the perfect recipe for the makings of a companionate marriage, a model of marriage that became increasingly popular in conduct manuals and courtship novels at the turn of the century. The fact that Horatio advocates this type of love can be read as a promotion of gender equality and marriage reform. For an English gentleman, especially one who had formerly been so

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<sup>33</sup> Horatio elaborates on his new world view, exclaiming that Inismore teaches him that "the summit of human felicity may be attained, by removing from the material, and approaching nearer to the intellectual world; by curbing and governing the passions, which are so much oftener inflamed by imaginary than real objects; and by borrowing from temperance, that zest which can alone render pleasure forever poignant, and forever new" (167).

disgusted with the opposite sex, to promote this sort of companionate romance, suggests that he has the capacity to learn from the other, in this case, woman and Ireland. This revelation of potential equality must come from the dominant figure so that it is more palatable for a wide audience. In short, Horatio, as an English gentleman, and thus, the seat of power in both gender and Anglo-Irish relations, is the best figure to promote tolerance because he understands the value of it to England and men; Horatio's revelation similarly proves that gender equality and cultural tolerance do not threaten his masculinity or his colonial power.

While Glorvina teaches him about Ireland, Horatio blindly attempts to teach her what she already knows—love and sensibility—and through his misguided actions, discovers that she is in fact schooling him in the genuine feelings behind the sentimental gestures long associated with love and seduction. Fueled by his desire to be her first love object, Horatio attempts to use their tutor-tutee relationship to ingratiate himself to her more fully. His goal is to teach her how to nourish her proclivity towards sensibility and how to articulate these more refined feelings, which in turn have the potential to fan the flames of love. To do this, he turns to the canonical works of sensibility and rejects traditional English courtship novels. His decision serves as a critique of not only English courtship novels and their heroines, but also English women, while portraying foreign women—French, German, Irish—in a more favorable light because of their Ninon-like charms. He reflects on his changing understanding of women while watching his new muse read:

[I] perceived her lost over a book (as I passed her closet window), which, by the Morocco binding, I knew to be the Letters of the impassioned Heloise. Since her society was denied me, I was best satisfied to resign her to Rousseau. *A-propos!* It was among the books I brought hither; and they were all precisely such books as Glorvina has *not*, yet *should* read, that she may know herself, and the latent sensibility of her soul. They have, of course, all been presented to her, and consist of '*La Nouvelle Heloise*,' de Rousseau—the unrivalled '*Letters sur la Mythologie*,' de Moustier—the '*Paul et Virginie*' of St Pierre—the *Werther* of Goethe—the *Dolbreuse* of Lousel, and the *Attila* of

Chateaubriand. Let our English novels carry away the prize of morality from the romantic fictions of every other country; but you will find they rarely seize on the imagination through the medium of the heart; and as for their heroines, I confess that though they are the most perfect of beings they are also the most stupid. Surely virtue would not be the less attractive for being united to genius and the graces (Owenson 144).

Horatio's books—and their mutual enjoyment of them—become a vehicle for developing their love. Although he never directly states why he chooses to give her these books, it is easily inferred that he does so to both seduce her and school her in the ways of love. In essence, Glorvina is taught how to perform her amorous feelings for Horatio because of novels like *Julie* and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which both contain romances rooted in mutual sensibility and intelligence. His delight is in an exchange of knowledge—he rounds out her education by giving her novels she “*should*” know based on her overflow of spirits, just as she schools him in “the language, history, and antiquities of this ancient nation” (Owenson 88). His observations on English novels again critique the supposed value of a Sophie-like heroine—as Rousseau deeply influenced how women were written about, even in England—as an ideal companion to man; she is “the most perfect being,” yet “the most stupid.” His reflections also seem to suggest that the women he had known in London, full of accomplishments and groomed for marriage, are dull. He links the heroines of these novels of sensibility (the French Julie, the German Lotte, and even the Irish Glorvina in the romance he now fabricates) to a fuller version of femininity that combines intellect, feeling, and unaffected feminine style. He appears to imply that English heroines should not lose their feminine charms, but enhance them with more learning so as to better spark male desire. Horatio's observations underscore his newfound respect for a woman who combines “genius” and “graces.”

Horatio's attempts to educate Glorvina are not necessarily in vain; however, rather than learning what sensibility is (she already knows, as seen through her effusions on Irish art and

poetry), she instead learns how to perform her sensibility more consciously and read the signs of love, which in turn later allows Horatio to understand that the affectations of sensibility can in fact be genuine responses to real affection. He muses:

[H]er days and nights are devoted to the sentimental sorcery of Rousseau; and the effects of her studies are visible in her eyes. When we meet, their glance sinks beneath the ardour of mine, in soft confusion: her manner is no longer childishly playful, or carelessly indifferent, and sometimes a sigh, scarce breathed, is discovered by the blush which glows on her cheek for inadvertency of her lip (Owenson 149).

At this point in the novel, Horatio's implicit understanding of Glorvina is that, in her innocence and with her voracious mind, she can only learn the language and gestures of love through books. Rather than seeing it as something natural, he believes it must be taught—and he is the one to teach her. What this then does is create a contrast between Glorvina's relationship to her innate intelligence and book learning, and her supposed lack of knowledge about life. To teach her about life, Horatio turns to books. From there, she learns that the proper way to express longing is through sighing, blushing, and gazing, which sanitize more voluptuous feelings (Barker-Benfield 295). Horatio's unreliability as a narrator is perhaps clearest in his incorrect reading of Glorvina's performance of her feelings for him. The key importance of this passage is not in how Glorvina learns to be a heroine of sensibility, but in how Horatio assumes that she needs to be schooled in matters of the heart. He also sidesteps his own education; he has learned how to perform these sentimental affectations from his days of debauchery, but only just discovers how to actually *feel* this tenderness for Glorvina, as he boldly exclaims to his correspondent: "In a word, I *now* feel love!!—for the first time I feel it" (Owenson 159). In his attempt to school Glorvina, he finds that he is the one being taught how to love through the femininity and natural intelligence of his tutee.

Horatio's ultimate growth is manifested in what he is willing to risk to honorably gain Glorvina's hand in marriage. After their inadvertent confessions of love, Horatio joins the priest on a five-day journey of Ireland. He resolves to confess his family crimes and reveal his rank to Glorvina after his trip and then propose to her in an attempt to both absolve his family of past sins and gain an ideal wife. Of course, in exposing his true identity, he risks rejection and scorn from the woman he loves. It becomes clear that part of his maturation is in his developing sense of responsibility for Glorvina's disenfranchisement (along with her father's and the priest's as well) and in his sympathy for the people of Ireland (Miller 24). While he wants to propose to her to secure his own happiness, he also chooses to do so in the full light of truth, suggesting that his marriage to Glorvina would become more than just a happy union with his personal Ninon; it would also serve to mend Anglo-Irish relations. What happens next to disrupt Horatio's happy plans for the future only serves to emphasize the importance of forging new alliances that promote tolerance between genders and nations.

Owenson directly addresses the fear of the female intellectual—that she may easily become a philosophical wanton—when Glorvina's virtue is called into question with the supposed revelation that she has encouraged the attentions of more than one man. The author then uses Horatio's suspicions of Glorvina's coquetry to nullify the fear of the female intellectual by showing that Glorvina is in fact virtuous—it is Horatio that is at fault for presuming to know her situation—and that her intellect works in unison with her virtue to protect her from the seductive machinations of man. Thus, Glorvina ultimately proves to be a moral Ninon, who, even in the face of romantic temptation, never compromises her respectability. Owenson complicates Horatio's growth into manhood by revealing that Glorvina is in fact courted by another English gentleman. This threat to his future happiness calls into question her validity as

an educator; he feels betrayed by her clandestine actions and so has the potential to reject his new-found allegiance to Ireland. Owenson introduces this plot twist near the end of the novel as a way to show another instance in which the unreliability of Horatio's narration underscores his continued misreading of women and how the power dynamics of Anglo-Irish relations influence gender power dynamics between the colonial subject and the colonizer. Much of his obsession with Glorvina has been one of attempted dominance: to school the wild girl in English ways, to be the first man to seduce her, to "correct" her Irish notions. In turn, his frustrations with her are rooted in her lack of conformity to his expectations of her: she is learned in subjects beyond Irish culture; she is already schooled in love; she is set in her Irish ways. What this suggests is that Horatio's infatuation with Glorvina and Ireland is primarily a projection of what he expects them to be—wild, natural, but tamable. In essence, the romance Horatio pursues with Glorvina can be read as another form of English conquest over Ireland. It is Glorvina's continual subversion of Horatio's expectations—she is a wild girl, but learned; feminine, but strong of mind—and her ability to teach him about Ireland that leave room for a subtle rejection of England's complete control over Ireland.

The plot of Glorvina's secret romance establishes the dangers imbedded in being the educator of England and English men. Their adoration of her can easily shift to contempt if she is suspected of acting outside of her Ninon status, as reflected in Horatio's growing anger towards the heroine when he finds he is not the first man to read Rousseau with her. Significantly, Horatio's first glimpse of the other man is in his own copy of *Julie* (or *Eloisa*), the novel he prided himself on using to teach her the joys of sensibility. He goes to her room in search for her and, finding it empty, nosily goes through her things. Horatio writes:

I mechanically took up the book, it was my own *Eloisa*, and was marked with a slip of paper in that page where the character of Wolmar is described; I read through the

passage, I was throwing it by when some writing on the *paper mark* caught my eye; supposing it to be Glorvina's, I endeavoured to decipher the lines, and read as follows: 'Professions, my lovely friend, are for the world. But I would at least have you believe, that *my* friendship, like gold, though not *sonorous*, is indestructible.' This was all I could make out—and this I read a hundred times—the handwriting was a man's—but it was not the priest's—it could not be her father's. And yet, I thought the hand was not entirely unknown to me, though it appeared disguised (Owenson 170).

Glorvina's room, too, is strewn with expensive gifts from this secret admirer. When confronted, Glorvina only blushes, but refuses to answer Horatio's gentle probing directly. He later witnesses Glorvina as she “sighed, and drew another letter from her bosom—(yes, her bosom)” (Owenson 209). The note Horatio finds in the novel acts as physical proof of another man in her life, just as Horatio's letters are concrete evidence of his love for her. His recognition of the writing on the paper mark obviously foreshadows the knowledge that the other lover is, in fact, his father, who happened upon and ingratiated himself into the castle of Inismore in a similar fashion as his son. Yet Horatio's vague recognition of the handwriting might also indicate that he is familiar with this romantic narrative as one he too has enacted with Glorvina.<sup>34</sup> Horatio's repetition of “bosom” emphasizes his jealousy of the stranger and the possessiveness he feels over her and her body. The note he sees Glorvina remove from her bosom appears to be synonymous with the GENTLEMAN's physical self that gets to enter Glorvina's private space (quite literally in this case)—a space moreover Horatio can only occupy by spying on her and searching through her room when she is away. His jealousy reveals how he objectifies Glorvina.

Inevitably, the reader finds that what is at stake for Horatio is not his love for Glorvina (although that is important too), but the knowledge that an Irish vixen might have misled him.

Through the fear of her romantic deception, the value of what she has taught him has the

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<sup>34</sup> The reader may question at this point Glorvina's seeming naiveté and her ability to innocently seduce two English gentlemen. In order for this narrative to work, it is imperative that Glorvina inadvertently entrance both men because it shows how her Irish and intellectual wildness has more far-reaching appeal than to just one man. Still, one wonders how much of Glorvina's sentimental performance is innocent, and how much of it relies on the devices similarly used by English ladies and English novel writers.

potential to be undermined by his need to control her. Horatio eventually uncovers the truth of this romance from the maid, who tells him of how “a stranger of noble stature” one day appeared at the castle wanting to speak with the prince (Owenson 214). The maid tells Horatio that the stranger is “only known by the appellation of the GENTLEMAN” and is supposedly a rebel in the civil war in the year of 17— (Owenson 215). He repeatedly visited the following summer with the presents that are now in Glorvina’s bedroom. During these visits he spent his time with Glorvina, reading, listening to her music, conversing—in short, doing everything Horatio now does with her. The GENTLEMAN plays on the prince’s Irish sympathies when he implies he was an Irish rebel (the date here seems to be obscured by Owenson so that it could be applied to any of the Irish insurrections of the 1790s). Knowing this, Horatio now views his romance as unfortunate. He laments:

[I] was led to believe (fatal conviction!) that the virgin rose of Glorvina’s affection has already shed its sweetness on a former, happier lover... Yet to be thus deceived by a recluse, a child, a novice:—*I* who, turning revolting from the hackneyed artifices of female depravity in that world where art for ever reigns, sought in the tenderness of secluded innocence and intellectual simplicity that heaven my soul had so long, so vainly panted to enjoy! (Owenson 216).

Again, Horatio expects to teach Glorvina about love and instead finds that she has schooled him, and, worst of all, he cannot un-learn his feelings for her. His manly pride is bruised with the knowledge that he wasn’t the one to spark the first flames of affection. And yet, he is also angry at her seeming artifice. Owenson uses his jealousy here to critique male interpretations of women’s virtue. In other words, Glorvina’s value as an educator has its foundation in her wild innocence that so attracts Horatio; should that natural virtue be considered compromised, then her teachings likewise diminish in worth. Glorvina is reduced in Horatio’s reflections to a deceiving “child” or “novice,” indicating that she is allowed to be the titillating Ninon, so long as she remains his, and when her love for him is called into question, so too is her knowledge and

genuine nature. His emphasis on her “virgin” status, which he thought he conquered, reflects a certain amount of sexual betrayal that he feels, as if he were cuckolded. While the focus of his rant should be on Glorvina, the reader finds that his repetition of “I” and his emphasis of the second “I” with italics indicate that his musings are really about himself and his wounded vanity. The man no English woman could seduce was taken in by a wild Irish girl. He carefully evades responsibility for his actions or how his prejudices could have led him to misread his interactions with Glorvina. Instead, he was “led to believe” she was a “virgin rose” and thus “deceived” by her. The final act of humiliation for Horatio occurs when the priest (who belatedly discovers Horatio’s feelings after the young man falls ill over the knowledge that Glorvina has another suitor) warns him off, hinting at her relationship with the mysterious GENTLEMAN. He has failed to conquer his Irish muse and, in his angst, neglects to question the assumptions he brings to his dealings with Glorvina, along with how they lead to his continual misreadings of those around him. Glorvina, however, is always virtuous—what changes is Horatio’s reading of her, which reflects the male-centric fear that a learned woman’s gender deviance might cause her to similarly develop her more masculine licentiousness. Horatio’s ultimate realization that Glorvina is, in fact, virtuous, shows that learning and virtue run in tandem to produce a respectable woman, and moreover that both intelligence and virtue occur naturally in women. Glorvina’s virtue then validates all that Horatio has learned from her and enables him to mature into manhood.

### **Conclusion: Ideal National and Marital Unions?**

The shift in point of view at the end of the novel may indicate a departure from the unreliability of Horatio’s observations of Anglo-Irish relations and his relationship with Glorvina, towards an omniscient, and thus conceivably more reliable, narrator that can more

objectively bring a close to the union rooted in equality represented by Glorvina's marriage to Horatio. After Horatio interrupts Glorvina's marriage to his father with a confession of his true identity, his father relinquishes any claim on Glorvina. He leaves the young couple with a letter that claims his love for Glorvina is only paternal. He then sanctions their marriage and advises:

[W]hile you look forward with hope to this family alliance being prophetically typical of a national unity of interests and affections between those who may be factiously severe, but who are naturally allied, lend your *own individual efforts* towards the consummation of an event so devoutly to be wished by every liberal mind, by every benevolent heart" (Owenson 250).

The father gives Horatio his Irish estate, of which Horatio can keep the non-entailed portion after his father's death. Owenson uses the father's letter as a vehicle for her tolerance agenda. The cross-national marriage here is labeled by the patriarch as a desirable union. She then appeals to the reader's sentiments by suggesting, again through the father's letter, that the marriage between Glorvina and Horatio *should* be applauded by progressive thinkers. The giving-over of the land to Horatio signifies a new, reformist ruling of the Irish people. Yet this gift also suggests that, like Maria and Darnford, Horatio and Glorvina can only live out their newly forged gender equality on the periphery of society. It is significant that Horatio, while sympathizing with the Irish cause, is still an English gentleman and holds the power in his dealings with the Irish: he still owns their land, but plans to be a benevolent, active landlord. Thus, even their idealized union on the colonial margins carries undertones of power imbalance.

Glorvina's presence takes second stage to Horatio's new responsibilities and his father's blessing for the marriage between the Irish girl and the son. She had been a pivotal force throughout the novel, shaping Horatio's impressions of Ireland, yet by the end of the novel she is merely present, hardly speaking after her fit of passion over the prince's death. While this might indicate a return to conventional gender dynamics—she becomes a sanitized version of herself,

submissive to the men around her—it also works to place her in a non-threatening position in which she can best continue to influence Horatio’s dealings with Ireland. Furthermore, Horatio is also silenced; he no longer relates his version of their union, and moreover, it is his father who unites Glorvina and Horatio through his letter to them. What this does then is displace the power—it is no longer quite Horatio wielding power over a passive Irish girl, but the patriarchal figure dictating a new paradigm for Anglo-Irish relations and gender norms. These revolutionary ideas have to come from the established patriarch, symbolized by the father, in order to potentially convert conservative readers to join the tolerance cause.

Scholars are conflicted over the various meanings of the novel’s end. Some, such as Juliet Miller, James Murphy, and Liz Bellany, argue that the novel’s simplistic ending works to gloss over the increasing conservative shift from the celebration of Irish culture to the submersion of that culture under English ideology (Miller 15; Murphy 52; Bellany 63). Claire Connolly goes so far as to suggest that marriage is a picturesque spectacle, revealing only an idealized approximation of the union without any of its darker realities (“Completing the Union?” 157-160). While their arguments are crucial to outlining the potential dangers of this union between nations and genders—such as resumed patriarchal and English control over women and Ireland, respectively, and the threat of an abuse of power—and how Owenson appears to acquiesce to dominant colonial ideologies in regards to appropriate Anglo-Irish relations, these scholars’ readings of the novel’s ending are also complicated by the knowledge that Owenson carefully refrains from depicting the actual union between Glorvina and Horatio. As Thomas J. Tracy puts it, the “union is suggested, not represented” (19). What this may indicate is that Owenson attempted to illustrate the positive potential such a union could produce, including more tolerance of Irish culture by the English and more equality between genders.

Tracy goes on to argue that what Owenson proposes is actually fairly progressive, when considered in the historical context in which she wrote. He writes that her vision was “quite progressive—some would say radical—in that it is a much more inclusive and expansive conception of British national identity” (19). During a time in which England was reeling from the political implications of the American and French Revolutions, and entering the Napoleonic Wars, while attempting to better govern Ireland, her politics emphasized openness to other cultures as a way to expand the national body, even when the majority of the country was promoting an English-oriented British nationalism in the face of so many political crises. Thus Owenson subtly works to reform social hierarchies from within; she creates a heroine who crosses gender boundaries, then carefully folds the wild Irish girl back into acceptable English gender relations through her marriage to Horatio, and in so doing, establishes the promise of transformations in current ideologies, while respecting them.

The question that remains is whether or not Horatio has genuinely altered his perceptions of Ireland and women for the better or if he will return to his dissolute ways, and, even if he has, what role Glorvina will play in his life as his wife. Owenson deliberately obscures their future because at the time she writes this novel, the mere suggestion of a union between these two national figures is radical enough to plant the seed of tolerance in England and help reshape gender ideals. At the same time, as previous scholars have argued, the lack of a conclusive marriage scene, or a depiction of their life after the marriage, hints at the silencing effect of the marriage of Glorvina at best, and at worst glosses over a history of colonial violence with the promise of more to come. I argue, however, that the ending’s uneasiness is a product of Owenson’s uneasy relationship to her English audience; even a practical writer, she knows she can advocate for national unity and gender equality, and yet recognizes that she herself remains a

liminal, if celebrated, figure. In many ways resembling Wollstonecraft's difficulty in finishing *Wrongs of Woman*, the obscure ending of *The Wild Irish Girl* hints at Owenson's struggle to visualize a completely united nation and a companionable marriage. This is not to say that her novel does not positively impact how readers view the figure of the female intellectual or tolerance between different cultures, but rather that Owenson deliberately uses her novel to carve a smaller inroad into her wider progressive political agendas.

Glorvina's influence, though not obviously felt in the last pages of the novel, transcends the confines of the book and continues in the fashionable and literary world. By the end of the novel, she can be read as a passive figure, acquiescing to Horatio and his father's wishes. Yet most readers remember her for her "wildness" before these events, which indicates that she never really loses her political agency. The novel sparked huge trends in "wild Irish girl" attire and music, which opened up a greater conversation on the virtues of Ireland, and the allure of a woman shaped outside of conventional gender norms. Glorvina, with her soft graces and learning, is at once a feminine figure and one that gently undermines stock gender roles. Owenson might have deliberately created a heroine with sensuous, exotic appeal so that Glorvina would be distanced from Englishness and distinctly marked as other, thus maintaining English gender and national values, and yet so non-threatening, that her heroine would be emulated by English women and desired by English men. In this way, Glorvina acts a liminal figure that, through her exotic appeal, undermines gender and national stereotypes and promotes a more inclusive social order. Owenson's work and its popularity mark a shift from the conservative backlash against Wollstonecraft's progressive politics and a move towards a more liberal social order, which in turn had the potential to make the educated woman more socially acceptable, by highlighting her social value, and showing that intelligence in women is as natural as their virtue.

In this way, Glorvina is a marginalized figure who can be assimilated into respectable English culture through her marriage to Horatio. We have seen the move from an English woman being cast out of social order for her radical politics with Wollstonecraft and her novel, and the gradual move of an Irish outsider from the social periphery to the English center in Owenson's life and work. The next chapter seeks to explore the continuing trajectory of the social acceptability of the thinking woman by considering how a proper English woman, educated and rational, becomes the ideal choice for a companionable wife, when contrasted with an uneducated woman and a lady rife with overweening sensibility. Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* can be read as a novel that establishes the thinking woman's respectability. She may no longer be read as always transgressive or exotic, but also proper.

## Chapter Three:

### Domesticating the Rational Woman: A Portrait of Austen, Elinor, Marianne—and Lucy

#### **Introduction: The Respectable Rational Woman**

*Sense and Sensibility* is perhaps one of the least loved novels by Jane Austen. Many consider it to be “unrelentingly didactic” (Butler 182).<sup>35</sup> Others feel that Austen’s first published novel is out of place in Regency era culture; its publication history—the first draft, *Elinor and Marianne*, composed in 1795, with the revised version finally published in 1811—reflects more of the Enlightenment values of the 1790s in which it was originally produced, than the Regency and Romantic Era sentimental values that were more prevalent when it was published.<sup>36</sup> Yet her first novel is significant to my study of the intellectual woman because it reflects what would become Austen’s focus on rational women as heroines. Austen marks a departure from Owenson and Wollstonecraft because she focused solely on the domestic realm, eschewing the viability of women in the public sphere and the question of a male education for women altogether, in favor of establishing that a rational woman is compatible with traditional women’s roles. Austen also sacrificed the concept of a sexually attractive thinking heroine, like Glorvina or Maria, in favor of emphasizing the domestic nature of her intellectual heroines and critiquing the heroine of sensibility. Similarly, she rejected notions that companionate marriages were rooted in likeness of taste and sensibility—as *The Wild Irish Girl* indicates and *Wrongs of Woman* cautions against—instead, portraying several romances in her novel that show how equality-based unions should be rooted in compatibility. For Austen, then, a companionable

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<sup>35</sup> At the very least, *Sense and Sensibility* lacks the fantasy romance of *Pride and Prejudice*. It is, as Laura G. Mooneyham writes, a novel of “depressed possibilities” (29). In other words, the women in this novel are under grave economic and emotional pressure and are rewarded for their strength and virtue with atypical men of either modest incomes or inferior minds.

<sup>36</sup> As Janet Todd succinctly puts it, *Sense and Sensibility* “seem[s] to belong to its moment of conception rather than to its time of publication during the Regency” (Todd 47).

marriage was one in which the characteristics of each person balanced and enhanced those of the other. Perhaps what was most radical about Austen was that she altered the concept of the intellectual woman to one who could be not just inherently rational, but capable of sincere action and self-reflection (a feat Maria in *Wrongs of Woman* was on the brink of accomplishing) and so, able to adjust her conduct accordingly and continue to mature as an individual. This novel tracks the journey of two sisters—the rational nineteen-year-old Elinor, and the sentimental sixteen-year-old Marianne—as they deal with disinheritance and romance, and in the end, advocates for common sense in women by showing the virtues of Elinor’s rational mind and Marianne’s eventual cultivation of a sensible mentality. It is because of the didactic nature of this novel that Austen is able to so clearly outline the value of the rational woman in domestic life, particularly in her character study of Elinor Dashwood, which in many ways reads as a dramatization of the ideal educated woman set forth in Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication*. Austen carefully constructs a heroine who thinks, and because of that fact can better deal with the realities of life, and ultimately be rewarded for her critical skills with a stable, if modest, home. No longer is the thinking woman read as transgressive or marginalized. Rather, she is an everyday, domestic woman, and in her rational judgment, marks herself as a desirable companionate wife.

This chapter argues that Austen redefined what it meant to be a female intellectual by comfortably situating the thinking woman within the domestic realm, with her analytical skills applied to the marriage market and the small social circle she inhabits.<sup>37</sup> Austen likewise reshaped what makes a female intellectual attractive—she is neither a Rousseauvian Julie nor a woman of sensibility and beauty like Glorvina. Instead, her attractive qualities emerge out of her

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<sup>37</sup> This question of what it means for a woman to be “intellectual” is best described in the distinction Julia Prewitt Brown makes between Austen and George Eliot. In *Jane Austen’s Novels: Social Change and Literary Form*, she writes, “Jane Austen was not an intellectual in the sense in which George Eliot was” (155). Prewitt Brown is rightly differentiating between Eliot’s classical, more rigorous education and Austen’s informal learning. Austen’s intellectual abilities were then applied to analyzing and recording the world around her.

rational bent, manifesting themselves not as physical characteristics or performative emotions, but subtle wit and mature responses to trying situations. These qualities in turn make her a desirable wife because they highlight her ability to at once maintain her equilibrium during trying times and also lighten painful social moments through the levity of wit. In short, the ability of the rational heroine to see life as it is, without the deceptive lens of sensibility, and still find happiness within less-than-optimal circumstances, marks her as attractive to a sensible man, whose “peace of mind” would not then “be interrupted by the idle vanity of his wife,” as Wollstonecraft originally put forth (*Vindication* 288). In essence, Austen made the thinking woman respectable by implicitly illustrating Wollstonecraft’s maxim in *Vindications* that educated women—in Austen’s world meaning a woman given all the accomplishments of the traditional female education with the added benefit of being taught sound reasoning—make better wives because they are better intellectually matched with their spouses and can raise rational children.<sup>38</sup> And yet, Claudia Johnson, in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel*, rejecting other scholars’ critiques of the didactic nature of *Sense and Sensibility*, refuses to read the novel as solely a type of conduct manual. She instead argues, “Of all Austen’s novels, *Sense and Sensibility* is the most attuned to progressive social criticism” (49).

Unlike Wollstonecraft and Owenson, Austen took a more subtle approach to promoting gender equality, eschewing fame and scandal, and grounding her life and work in the mundane intimacies of everyday life. Her novel reflects the harsh realities of a woman’s life—her

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<sup>38</sup> Not all scholars agree that Austen specifically works to promote gender equality or document the life of a rational woman. William H. Galperin, while attempting to better situate Austen historically, critiques scholars like Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Claudia Johnson for arguing that Austen dramatizes the plight of educated woman in the eighteenth century. He regards it as an attempt to recover agency in women’s writing (18). He rather focuses on the historical Austen as she might have been read then, and then examines the feminist agenda she may have unwittingly promoted in retrospect. While not disregarding outright the canonical work of these feminist scholars, he does rightly point to the necessity of maintaining historical awareness and seeing feminist readings of Austen as products of the political climate of the twentieth century.

dependence on marriage to secure her future, and her struggles in the marriage market as she navigates class-based prejudices, seduction, and financial woes—and the everyday woman who has to cope with it in a sensible fashion via self-reflection, analysis, and wit. Indeed, the very definition of wit, the term paired as it so often is with the quintessential Austen heroine, highlights the author’s preoccupation with portraying rational women; the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that wit was defined as “the faculty of thinking and reasoning” through the late-nineteenth century. While this definition of wit is less common now, it signifies that Austen’s famously witty heroines like Elizabeth Bennet and in a more subtle way, Elinor Dashwood, were meant to be “thinking and reasoning” women. Their wit, of course, is often displayed through their humor, making the specifically eighteenth-century connotation of wit still applicable to these heroines as well. Their ability to display their “cleverness,” or give “utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way” serves as evidence for their “thinking and reasoning” minds, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this term well past the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, Austen carefully cultivated a rational woman who gives voice to her domestic concerns through witty observations and thoughtful prose, and so makes sense of the intricacies of her life.

This quintessentially rational heroine, however, has often been treated by critics as problematically as the conduct-manual-like novel she is in. In the introduction of the 1957 edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, Stella Gibbons spends much of the introduction discussing the character of Elinor Dashwood, the eldest sister of a disinherited family, and infamous for her rational, subdued personality. Gibbons writes, “Elinor, not to mince matters, is what some have forthrightly called a stick” (x). Gibbons is not alone in her dissatisfaction with Austen’s heroine, and much of the scholarship on the women of this novel revolves around Elinor’s overly

emotional, but more relatable younger sister, Marianne Dashwood. Moreland Perkins is one of the only scholars to focus on uncovering the importance of Elinor as an intellectual woman in her book, *Reshaping the Sexes in Sense and Sensibility*. As she so accurately explains, “In depicting Elinor Dashwood, Jane Austen achieved something uncommon in our major fiction: the rendering of an intellectual. Even more unheard of, a female intellectual” (12). Although it has already been established that authors like Wollstonecraft and Owenson also portray variations of the female intellectual in their work, Austen remains novel in the discussion of depictions of this figure because she is the first author in my study to successfully portray a thinking woman without the trappings of sensibility or miseducation to mitigate the profundity of the female intellectual. That is, Austen creates in Elinor a heroine who is not an outsider—she functions well in society, in many ways much better than her sensibility-driven sister Marianne—and moreover uses her wit (in both senses of the term) to strengthen her against “the pangs of disappointment” that society saddles her with (a sharp contrast to Wollstonecraft’s assertion that a woman must dull her mind and sense in order to bear the social injustices inflicted upon her). Perkins deftly explains the resistance many readers feel towards Elinor, attributing their feelings to Elinor’s “gender dissonance” (Perkins 14). Unlike the emotional, feminine Marianne, Elinor’s characteristics lean towards the masculine virtues of rational thinking and self-composure, making the eldest Dashwood sister a heroine that does not comfortably fit into gender norms. Yet this is precisely what makes a character study of Elinor so pertinent to my work on depictions of intellectual women in eighteenth and nineteenth century courtship novels; the fact that she is both a rational and a domestic woman underscores that these two traits are no longer mutually exclusive in courtship novels.

Austen's resistance to a male public persona parallels her emphasis on Elinor's domesticity and grounding in the private sphere. The previous two chapters discussed at length how some women authors invoke or are read into their heroines; it is difficult not to read the tragedy of Wollstonecraft's life into that of her heroine Maria in *Wrongs of Woman*, nor is it easy to miss Owenson's blatant co-opting of Glorvina's style from *The Wild Irish Girl*. Austen, however, remains more of a mystery: she once likened herself to Fanny Price, stating that she would be the only one to like Emma Woodhouse (another famously unlikeable Austen heroine), and yet is often read by her audience as a type of Elizabeth Bennet or even Anne Eliot, with the naïve Catherine Morland rarely considered synonymous to the more astute author. Yet it would be difficult to literally read Austen into any of her characters in the way that Wollstonecraft and Owenson clearly did, drawing, as they did, on overt biographical threads to solidify the connection between author and heroine. What we do know is that she was intensely private, as was her family (so much so that they burned many of her more personal letters), and that she "was shy in the company of strangers, reserving her wit almost exclusively for family members" (Bilger 67). Like Elinor, Austen's wit remained something that was chiefly expressed in the domestic realm on domestic issues, which is one of the reasons why her character is not as well known or preserved as Wollstonecraft's or Owenson's. Austen deliberately refrained from divulging too much about her personal life, so there is no way to write her into her novels—despite the fact that many recent pop culture books and movies attempt to rewrite her personal history as a type of ill-fated *Pride and Prejudice*. In many ways, Austen is seen to embody all of her most popular heroines through their wit, which reflects the intelligence of the author writing about them. Regardless, Austen purposely, it seems, created a novel in which there are no clear biographical ties linking her to her heroines, except for her wit—an unusual move in an era so

preoccupied with collapsing the distance between biography and fiction.<sup>39</sup> Austen instead created thinking heroines imbued with her witty characteristics, rather than more obvious biographical commonalities (like how Wollstonecraft patterns the Maria-Darnford romance after her affair with Imlay), in order to emphasize the commonness of the heroines themselves—they are everyday women, not sensationalized figures like Wollstonecraft/Maria or Owenson/Glorvina. Perkins examines Austen’s kinship to Elinor when she writes,

Austen endowed her [Elinor] with enough of the habits and powers of thought belonging to Austen herself to qualify Elinor also as an intellectual, to wit: unrelenting, dispassionate, analytical inquiry into the causes, contents, contexts and outcomes of individual persons’ conduct and experience, all conceived as ineluctably social; and the habit of taking pleasure in the pure play of ideas over her subject matter (12-13).

Elinor is clearly a heroine who does just that: analyzes herself and the world around her. Yet too often Elinor’s “dispassionate” observations are read as evidence for a cold heart. This is perhaps why readers like Gibbons consider Elinor a stick; however, as Perkins outlines, Elinor takes genuine “pleasure” in ruminating on the events around her; the pleasure Elinor feels here is not the sensuous overflow of emotion Maria feels while reading *Julie* nor the primal titillation Glorvina experiences while reciting Irish poetry to Horatio, but the private satisfaction of piecing together a series of events into a comprehensive picture of the world around her. The pleasure she takes in her daily ruminations likewise help her to come to terms with, and sometimes curb, her emotional desires rather than fan the flames of passion, as Glorvina and Maria do with their

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<sup>39</sup> In “The Intentional Fallacy,” W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley caution against viewing a text as synonymous with an author’s life. They write, “There is danger of confusing personal and poetic studies; and there is the fault of writing the personal as if it were poetic” (948). In other words, it is often too easy to read the personal life of the author back into the meaning of a text so that the text itself is eclipsed by the life of the author. Likewise, it is tempting to “poeticize” the events of an author’s life, constructing each sensational happening as symptomatic of the life of genius. They contextualize their argument by writing, “It is not so much a historical statement as a definition to say that the intentional fallacy is a Romantic one” (Wimsatt and Beardsley 946). The intentional fallacy is Romantic, perhaps because of the theatrical-like histories of many of the writers living at this time. Even keeping it in the family, the Wollstonecrafts, Godwins, and Shelleys stirred up the kind of scandal befitting gothic romances. In this context, it is hard not to draw parallels between the author’s work and her life. Austen, however, denies the reader the ability to make the personal poetical and vice versa by her extreme privacy.

studies. Thus, the enjoyment Elinor receives from her critical examinations of the lives around her is a cerebral one, rather than an erotic or physical one often experienced by the heroine of sensibility, and likewise leads to a greater sense of self-awareness than either Maria or Glorvina display. Austen, moreover, used Elinor's analytical mind (and the pleasure she takes in it) as a foil for less-rational and ill-educated women like Mrs. Palmer and her sister Lady Middleton, who were only trained to find a husband, and now pass their time finding entertainment in gossip, on Mrs. Palmer's part, and throwing lavish dinner parties and spoiling her children, on Lady Middleton's. Through this, Austen provided evidence for Wollstonecraft's assertion that better educated women make better wives that in turn better educate their children; I emphasize "better" here to suggest that, for Austen, it was not a question of necessarily providing women with a masculine education, but in fully developing women's minds within the framework of a domestic one. Both Elinor and Marianne, for example, most likely have a similar education as Mrs. Palmer and Lady Middleton, learning the required accomplishments, languages, and literacy skills, and yet it becomes clear through the actions of both sets of sisters that the Dashwood sisters are more self-aware and rational than the other sisters—even Marianne's rude rejections of social niceties towards Lady Middleton and her sister are in response to the other women's vulgar antics. Furthermore, Elinor's development as a rational heroine is underscored by her rival in love, the clever but uneducated Lucy Steele, with Elinor's critical analysis skills no better displayed than in her conversations with Lucy and observations of Lucy's interactions with the spoiled Middleton children. The dichotomy between these two women, as well as the love triangle they make up with Edward Ferrars, serve to highlight Elinor's virtues as a rational woman over Lucy's superficially bright charms. By the same token, the eventual union between

Edward and Elinor inevitably illustrates the importance of having a thinking woman as a companionate wife.

Marianne, in turn, represents another type of female intellectual, one that is not as inherently self-composed as her older sister, but still capable of self-reflection and maturation through her analysis of her own behavior and the social and emotional ramifications of it. In many ways, Marianne is a more fully developed version of Maria from *Wrongs of Woman*, as, by the end of *Sense and Sensibility*, she has learned the art of self-reflection which Maria was unable to master, and so suffered accordingly. Furthermore, Austen uses the younger Dashwood sister's failed romance, the threat to her virtue, and the harrowing seduction tale of Colonel Brandon's ward, Eliza, as a way to address the hysteria surrounding the philosophical woman of the late-eighteenth century (and thus, the root of the stigma against female intellectuals); Austen establishes this loss of female virtue as a genuine, but remote possibility when she makes the seduction itself happen off the page and thus foregrounds the cultivation of rational self-reflection as the remedy for untoward actions. It should come as no surprise, after examining novels like *Wrongs of Woman* and *The Wild Irish Girl*, which featured heroines of sensibility, that "the intensity of Marianne dominates a first reading of *Sense and Sensibility*" as Janet Todd argues (54).<sup>40</sup> She, too, is another heroine of sensibility, and "dominates" the narrative through her performative emotions and overt rejection of gender norms. She is likewise more beautiful

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<sup>40</sup> She goes on to note that in a second perusal, the reader "may be more attuned to the interiority and suffering of Elinor. Partly because of her astringent habit of mind, the emphasis on her consciousness rather than Marianne's seems to subvert the lure of romance" (54). Marianne's dramatic romance, explicitly enacted as it is, is dulled when a closer reading reveals the effect an equally tumultuous romance has on Elinor, all the more violent because she is bound by secrecy to conceal her feelings. Stuart Tave reinforces Todd's reading when he writes, "*Sense and Sensibility* is the story of Elinor Dashwood...the whole of Marianne's story is included in Elinor's: Marianne's begins later and it ends earlier...The whole of the story comes to use through Elinor... Marianne's story could not be resolved except for what Elinor does, advising her, protecting her, providing her an example...; even the two men in Marianne's life are understood by the reader, and by Marianne, as they speak to and are interpreted by Elinor. There is no part of Marianne's story that is not a part of Elinor's, but there are large and important parts of Elinor's story that are not part of Marianne's" (96-97).

than her more rational sister and more full of obvious passion—both traits of which Austen critiques through Marianne’s post-deathbed rejection of her sensibility-infused values, once she understands how her performativity blinded her to the real character of those around her, and similarly, through the fear shared by many that Marianne would lose her bloom after she sinks into a depression, and so make herself less-desirable on the marriage market. In other words, society’s preoccupation with Marianne’s looks—both her physical loveliness and how she performs her feelings—ultimately proves that her superficial characteristics are less valuable than rational conduct when it comes to her navigation of the marriage market. Thus, Marianne’s romance with Willoughby can be read as a productive revision of Maria’s romance with Darnford (both romances are developed out of mutual taste, both involve the wrong kind of man), the primary difference between them being how their disparate education and family dynamics shape the heroines. Specifically, while Marianne questions gender norms and the power of patriarchy, she remains a thinking gentlewoman, unwilling to give up her respectability for love; even as she questions the social constraints under which she lives, her sentimental actions are kept in check by Elinor, who eventually teaches her to live a more rational life. Marianne then represents a positive intermediary between the rational, but intimidating Elinor and the miseducated, doomed Maria, highlighting that a female intellectual need not be ready-made in her moral and social virtues, but can learn, through self-reflection, to be so.

Finally, this chapter also seeks to contextualize my reading of Elinor and Marianne in an analysis of Austen herself, most notably, her critical reception. Austen, of the three women writers I’ve discussed thus far, is the only one with far-reaching popularity and impact on readers today. Owenson and Wollstonecraft have been resurrected by scholars, while Austen remained in print and continued to be popular after her death, arguably because the tone of her canon

lacked the confrontational and spectacular edge of Wollstonecraft's and Owenson's (and so can be read as at once conservative and quietly subversive, rather than labeled more radical like the work of predecessors). She was first a popular writer, with most of the early criticism on her novels reading as long love letters to her genius. It wasn't until the mid-twentieth century that scholars began to examine her work more critically, questioning the social and political impact of her novels. The canon of Austen scholarship is too vast to fully cover here, as is her critical reception over the centuries from the early nineteenth century Janeites to today's fans, who are more familiar with film adaptations of her work than her actual novels. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus my analysis of Austen on the difficulty scholars have on categorizing or discussing her politically, historically, and biographically, in order to show how Austen can be read as an author who resists any categorization beyond the cultivation of her role as a lady, which in turn suggests that she seeks to undo the scandalous associations of a woman writer and instead show how a female intellectual can be compatible with the domestic ideals of womanhood. Moreover, her coyness marks a drastic departure from the performativity of Owenson and the scandal of Wollstonecraft, suggesting that Austen works to establish the thinking woman as genteel and proper.

### **“By a Lady”: Austen and the Politics of Resisting Categorization**

Austen deliberately resisted being read as a female philosopher or gender reform advocate in order to better undermine separate spheres ideology from within its confines. She similarly downplayed any potential for her status as a female writer to become sexualized, like the public personas of Wollstonecraft and Owenson had become. Instead, she developed a persona that was unassumingly domestic and ladylike. Because of this, the relative anonymity of Jane Austen during her lifetime serves as a sharp contrast to the fame and infamy of

Wollstonecraft and Owenson in their lifetimes. In fact, none of her novels published in her life had her name on them; they were simply said to be written “by a Lady.” Only *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, published after her death, had her name ascribed to them. Her emphasis on being a “Lady” suggests that she would be considered genteel and private, seeking perhaps only to earn a living rather than make a name for herself. In an era in which Wollstonecraft’s life was aired and re-appropriated and Owenson’s was one of spectacle, Austen remained a mystery. There have been attempts to uncover the “real” Jane Austen and even, so it often seems, to breathe into her life a hint of the type of scandal with which Wollstonecraft became synonymous. Much is made out of her short-lived engagement to Harris Bigg-Wither in 1802 and her flirtatious relationship with Thomas Lefroy in 1796 (Le Faye xix-xxi). But her life, like her critical reception, was disappointingly mundane. Through my analysis of scholarship on Austen—and the various critical trends we have gone through in attempting to categorize her—I found that Austen was a woman writer who consciously resisted aligning her work with political parties or her private life in order to downplay her masculine role as a writer in the public realm, and thus, emphasize her status as a proper lady. In doing so, she privatized the figure of the female intellectual, confining her to the domestic sphere where she could be seen to have a positive, educational impact on those around her; in essence, by removing the figure of the woman writer beyond the direct public gaze, she could then develop the figure of the female intellect within a more socially acceptable framework in which she would not always be directly at odds with social conventions. In this way, Austen created a minimally public persona that was divorced from previous women writers’ association with political and sexual transgression.

The reviews of *Sense and Sensibility* serve as evidence for Austen’s preoccupation with being a proper woman. Although there were only two reviews of *Sense and Sensibility* when it

was first published in 1811, they were complimentary towards the novel and foreshadowed the second printing of it two years later. Both reviews approve of the practical advice Austen appears to offer her female readers and the well-realized genteel life Austen sketches. The *Critical Review* (February 1812) described *Sense and Sensibility* as

A genteel, well-written novel ... as agreeable a lounge as a genteel comedy, from which both amusement and instruction may be derived. *Sense and Sensibility* is one amongst the few, which can claim this fair praise. It is well written; the characters are in genteel life, naturally drawn, and judiciously supported. The incidents are probable...It reflects...a great deal of good sense (qtd. James-Cavan *Sense and Sensibility* 383).

The writer goes on to conclude that the moral and lesson of the novel make it worth reading, even if the plot is not entirely original. The review's emphasis on the "genteel" nature of the novel implies a preoccupation, and appreciation of, the novel's "graceful, refined, manner[ed]" quality and the "ladylike" persona of the author--definitions of "genteel" outlined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In addition, the description of "genteel" underscores that this is a novel of "quality" meant for those of a "superior station" or class—here the middle and upper classes. Thus, Austen's novel reflects the gentry virtues of good manners and refinement—both qualities which could be extended to the mysterious author herself. The novel's entertainment value is also applauded; it is an enjoyable "lounge," which at the time was short for "lounge book," or a book one could read leisurely to pass the time, according to the same dictionary. The praise is not outlandish here, but centered in Austen's ability draw such a likeness to real life; she is praised for constructing "probable" incidents and creating characters that are "naturally drawn." Her writing style, too, is praised for its readability. Boring as this review may seem, it indicates that Austen is favored for her simplicity of writing, plot development, and characterization; her novel is devoid of the sentimental language that Owenson was at times derided for using, and

bereft of the overtly aggressive tone of Wollstonecraft's treatises. Austen, then, is a pleasing author, drawing no more attention to herself as an author than needed.

The only other review emphasizes the didactic nature of *Sense and Sensibility*. The *British Critic* (May 1812) wrote,

We will...detain our female friends no longer than to assure them, that they may peruse these volumes not only with satisfaction but with real benefits, for they may learn from them, if they please, many sober and salutary maxims for the conduct of life, exemplified in a very pleasing and entertaining narrative (qtd. James-Cavan *Sense and Sensibility* 385).

The focus of this review is on the genteel and instructive nature of this novel—especially for women. Austen received the double compliment of being both entertaining and morally instructive. These two traits in fact mirror the double connotation of wit, Austen's chief writing talent, which reflects both sound "reasoning" and "amusing" insights.<sup>41</sup> In contrast with reviews of Owenson or Wollstonecraft's work, these reviews are absent of any overt discussion of politics or Austen's engagement with the conversation surrounding gender equality. This may be because her novel reads as a conservative depiction of proper female conduct and not necessarily an attempt at revising how people perceive women or the outdated gender norms they should invoke; thus the message she relays to her readers is one that promotes rational thought and propriety in women—qualities that could hardly be derided as politically radical, even as Austen reshaped what it meant to be rational as a woman (i.e. through her depiction of a woman who uses more masculine reasoning to navigate the domestic realm). In either circumstance, her novel was well received, suffering neither extreme censure nor hyperbolic praise. It was merely a good, instructive story by a lady. Her novel in many ways reads as a text outside of current political and cultural debates; it stands alone, as it were, as an insulated world separate from the

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<sup>41</sup> Howard S. Babb speaks for most scholars when he applauds "the sheer wit that sparkles" in Austen's dialogues (242).

social debates around it. Yet I would argue that Austen can be interpreted as deliberately resisting being read as overtly engaged in gender politics as a way to distance herself from the drama and scandal of early women writers, like Wollstonecraft, and thus work more subversively to undermine patriarchy.

But the concept that Austen removed herself from contemporary political conversations, especially those about women, is of course outdated. Too often readers view Austen's novels as autonomous, a-historical entities. Much early scholarship on Austen asserts her ahistoricity. J. Steven Watson argues that Austen was unaware "of the events of the outside world" (538). Elie Halevy, in *England in 1815*, boldly proclaims that Austen was "ignorant of the brutal and unclean aspects of life" (514). Yet it is difficult to think of Austen as unaware of world events, considering her brothers were in the Navy and she lived during the Napoleonic Wars (a subject with which she deals in *Persuasion*). It is equally difficult to believe that she was "ignorant" of the "brutal" aspects of life after reading the detailed description of filth and poverty in *Mansfield Park* when Fanny Price visits her impoverished family after living with her rich relatives. G. M. Trevelyan corroborates their ideas when he argues that Austen's novels serve as evidence of England's crippling complacency in a time of extreme political strife (129). Finally, Arnold Hauser goes so far as to suggest that Austen was "ill-informed;" while in her novels, "social reality was the soil in which the characters were rooted, but in no sense a problem which the novelist made any attempt to solve or interpret" (153). He differs from the other scholars because he reads Austen not as ignorant or oblivious to social problems, but "ill-informed" of social issues, and goes so far as to suggest that while Austen might have recognized that "social reality" shaped her characters, she did not try (or "attempt") to understand or reform the social issues they faced. Hauser's critique in particular suggests that earlier scholars searched for a

particular kind of politics in Austen's novels—explicit discussions of political strife, class conflict, and gender inequality—and found it wanting. And yet what these scholars neglect to consider is not that Austen's novels are without “social reality,” but that the social reality—and political message inherent therein—she depicts is of a narrower focus, namely the domestic sphere.

Later scholarship, by contrast, focused on placing Austen back into her historical context and uncovering her potential political message. Lionel Trilling was a fundamental force in refuting Austen's ahistoricity. He claimed, “[A] large part of the interest of her work is now thought to lie exactly in the sensitivity of her response to social change” (76). Marilyn Butler continued in this trajectory, placing Austen firmly within the politics of the 1790s in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, and while her reading of Austen was more conservative than mine—for Butler, Austen was an anti-Jacobin—her work was one of the first pieces of scholarship that established the necessity of examining Austen within the context of her political and cultural climate. Other scholars like William H. Galperin and Peter Knox-Shaw have since focused their studies on uncovering how Austen was read in her lifetime. These scholars established Austen's connection to the social climate around her; what now remains to be answered is how Austen wove social commentary into her novels, which are seemingly divorced from public concerns. Warren Roberts wrote that Austen made “a deliberate choice not to discuss directly the events that so disturbed her world, and yet incorporated many of her responses to those events in her writing” (7). What makes Roberts' argument so potent is that he imbued Austen with political agency; she does not neglect the world around her but “deliberately” decided to downplay her critique of it. She then made her rational heroines more palatable. Her work suggests that the seeds of gender reform are sown not in the public arena but in the domestic sphere.

The question of Austen's political agenda has long been debated (particularly by feminist scholars attempts to use her canon to champion women's rights), and yet any concrete evidence of her political beliefs remains difficult to pin down. Austen has been considered both a Jacobin and an Anti-Jacobin, both apolitical and politically moderate.<sup>42</sup> Even Laurence W. Mazzeno wrote a whole book—titled *Jane Austen: Two Centuries of Criticism*—in an attempt to discover whether Austen was a conservative or a radical, and grapples with the overwhelming breadth of scholarship written on Austen (1-12). In the end, his book can only outline the various debates surrounding Austen, as attempting to uncover a more authentic Austen seems impossible. Part of the difficulty of clearly categorizing Austen is that, like Owenson, Austen wrote in a time in which both liberals and conservatives felt a renewed need to stabilize social order. Thus her novels, heavily focused on restoring the social order that has been disrupted earlier in the narrative, can be read as both reinforcing traditional social values or questioning them. As Edward Neill humorously explains in *The Politics of Jane Austen*, Austen is either considered a political radical or a “swashbuckling Tory whose sword leap[s] from her scabbard to defend a Burkean view of things” (2). Peter Knox-Shaw, in *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*, looks at Austen as an Enlightenment writer rather than a Romantic author, showing how her upbringing at the end of the eighteenth century influenced her writing during the Regency era. He deftly illustrates how she could be read as a Jacobin like Godwin because of her emphasis on reason, and yet, at the same time, could be placed in the lineage of Burke, who, as Knox-Shaw posits, uses the trapping of sensibility favored by the progressives to make his own conservative

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<sup>42</sup> Virginia Woolf succinctly outlines why Austen's subversive writing departs from the explosiveness of Wollstonecraft's philosophy. She writes, “If Jane Austen had been as a child on the landing to prevent her father from thrashing her mother her soul might have burnt with such a passion against tyranny that all her novels might have been consumed in one cry for justice” (97). Woolf draws on Wollstonecraft's personal history to underscore that much of this radical writer's political agenda is rooted in her experiences as a daughter in an abusive home. Austen, however, suffered no such oppression and so her novels act as genteel reminders of improving gender relations.

political agenda more appealing (Shaw 130).<sup>43</sup> He reads Austen as “moderate, even liberal” (130). His reading contrasts with Butler’s, which attempts to place Austen within an anti-Jacobin framework. Alison Sulloway is perhaps the most radical in her reading of Austen, claiming that the author’s canon exhibits “themes of the Wollstonecraftian revolution” (49). Granted the tone of Austen’s novels are much more subtle than those of Wollstonecraft’s, yet the Regency author echoes many of the tenets set forth in *Vindication* throughout her novels, including the necessity of properly educating women to be better wives and mothers, and the importance of developing rational minds in women to curb emotional excess. Austen even advocates the benefits these reforms would have for men in her depictions of how intelligent men, like Mr. Palmer in *Sense and Sensibility* or Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, suffer once they are shackled to pretty, but ignorant wives, and how those wives in turn can raise unstable children like the wanton Lydia Bennet. Claudia Johnson corroborates Sulloway’s assertions by writing that while “Austen may slacken the desperate tempos employed by her more strenuously politicized counterparts... she shares their artistic strategies and their commitment” to undermining patriarchal “myths” about gender norms (27). Yet Ellen Moers is even more subtle in her insistence that Austen is a feminist writer. In *Literary Women: The Great Writers*, she suggests that Austen critiques the social order by emphasizing women’s dependence on men and by depicting the realities of class and money when entering the marriage market (73-107). I think Austen can be read as a politically progressive writer who worked within the confines of social convention to promote social unity through gender equality. It is hard not to read the

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<sup>43</sup> Knox-Shaw writes, “[H]er fervent defenders have been saddled with the sense that she is a figure out of key with her time, while for others she appears as the arch party-pooper, darting withering looks at each fresh cult and trend” (3). He goes on to indicate that Austen is a “writer of centrist views who derives a large measure from the Enlightenment, more particularly from that skeptical tradition within it that flourished in England and Scotland during the second half of the eighteenth century” (20).

rational Elinor Dashwood as a figure that reshapes gender expectations, and as such, illustrates the mutual advantage of this equality for both men and women.

Feminist scholars are in fact the readers that have best been able to uncover the radical implications of Austen's novels, in particular how Austen was able to subtly promote gender reform as a way to avoid the backlash against female intellectuals created by Wollstonecraft, as Eleanor Rose Ty argues. For instance, Katherine Sobba Green, in *The Courtship Novel: 1740-1820*, argues that Jane Austen was a female author who questioned the reliability of courtship rituals, and more broadly, the marriage market itself. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the final love matches between Elinor and Edward, and Brandon and Marianne, can be read as fairly conventional after unconventional courtships. However, a more thorough understanding of the marriage market at the turn of the century, as well as women's power within it, highlights how Austen used these social conventions to promote gender equality. As Sobba Green writes:

Austen and her predecessors in the courtship novel wrote long before women made up any appreciable part of the labor force, long before they had any political rights. To value their heroines according to their contexts, then, we must begin by understanding that in the eighteenth century, affective individualism—narrowly defined as the right of choosing a partner within heterosexual marriage—was a feminist cause (158).

The important aspect of Sobba Green's argument is "context." Within the framework of social norms and woman's place within the domestic realm, Austen illustrates woman's power to choose her future through her decisions regarding marriage—whom she marries or if she does. Equally important here is that Austen depicts two marriages in which the heroine finds a compatible match that acts as a balancing force to her more extreme traits; Elinor finds a man as "gender dissonant" as she is, and Marianne weds herself to an older, established man who can curb her younger, more hysterical impulses. Thus, Austen gives her heroines the ultimate freedom available to woman at that time by allowing them to successfully choose husbands who

will value and complement them as individuals. Through the manipulation of courtship rituals and male sexual expectations of women, including explicit representations of unhappy and unequal marriages, Austen subtly critiques social conventions that bind people to unfulfilling marriages and lives.

Other scholars underscore Austen's political voice as inherently domestic. Her self-described focus, after all, was that "little bit (two inches wide) of ivory"; that narrow space reflects the small domain that she wrote about, namely, the life of the gentry, whose center was the domestic realm. Prewitt Brown writes that Austen "gave meaning to domesticity for the first time in English fiction" (1). While her argument might be too definitive, her hyperbole underscores the fact that Austen was one of the first authors to explore the lives of the upper middle class gentry and center her stories on the feminine world of domesticity. All of her novels remain firmly rooted in the daily lives of the female gentry, and almost always eschew the glamour of London or Bath for the basic joys (and trials) of home life. Previous stories, including novels by Frances Burney and Sydney Owenson, tended to focus on the aristocracy, and their clashes with the lower classes, which were often represented as more vulgar than the upper class. Austen then writes about a less-romanticized class—neither too poor nor too rich to be immediately interesting to the novel reader—but dealing more realistically with the conflicts facing women at that time. As Gary Kelly writes, Austen anticipated "the identity and the literary culture of the gentrified professional classes which came to dominate society and culture in Britain and elsewhere during the nineteenth century" (19). Thus, the development of the middle class, or the "gentrified professional class" which would later become the Victorian middle class, enabled the roles of woman to likewise develop until her new rational, domestic

status would become an inherent part of her identity as a middle class wife.<sup>44</sup> This new class, then, preoccupied as it was with differentiating itself from the lower and upper classes, focused its efforts on developing a cohesive sense of moral and social codes characteristic of its middle-class standing, thus enabling the female intellectual to find a respectable position there through her ability to reinforce those values through her rational actions. Kelly's emphasis on Austen's inadvertent foreshadowing of a lifestyle that would become synonymous with middle-class nineteenth-century life marks her as a transitional figure between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cultures and values. Austen's emphasis on the private social sphere in her novels indicates a wider shifting perspective in England towards family unity and domestic stability, which in turn would have the potential to promote social order.

The shifting nature of how Austen has been read—from a polite, almost unknown “Lady,” who wrote pleasing “lounches,” to a feminist radical—reflects how her cautious development of her writing persona was a useful tactic to subtly promote gender reform over a longer period of time, unlike Wollstonecraft and Owenson, who, through their overt radicalism, were best remembered for their more scandalous histories rather than their genuine reformist agendas until twentieth-century feminists resurrected them. The fact that Austen is the only author out of the three that has been continuously in print since the publication of her first novel two centuries ago signifies the resonance the gentle subversiveness of her novels had with many readers, promoting gender equality within an already established framework of separate spheres ideology. Regardless of how Austen was read during her time, she is now practically synonymous with feminism. Just as Wollstonecraft cannot be separated from the scandal of her memoir, Austen can no longer be divorced from the feminist movement that championed her

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<sup>44</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the ideological work the middle-class Victorian wife enacts, both in the daily running of the household and the subtle reinforcing of class and gender norms upon her servants, see Elizabeth Langland's “Nobody's Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian.”

work—and established it as worthy of critical discussion—in the mid-twentieth century. The surprisingly radical nature of her politics manifests itself in the majority of her readers’ continued dislike of her more rational heroines like Elinor Dashwood and Fanny Price and disgruntlement at Austen’s (and her family’s) caginess in regards to exposing her private life to public consumption. Austen always remained a sensible author. She avoided the dangers of having her personal life conflated with her novels, or her personal history and ideas overshadowing the everyday politics imbedded in her narratives. For Austen, her conduct as a “Lady” served as evidence that a woman could be both intellectual and proper. Similarly, her first novel does the subtle work of establishing the necessity of properly educating women so that they can better negotiate the domestic realm and more clearly work their way into a companionate marriage.

### **Elinor: The Rational Heroine’s Analysis of Romantic Conflict**

A closer look at Elinor’s “gender dissonance,” as Perkins dubs it, can let us understand what makes Elinor Dashwood synonymous with domesticating the rational woman. Elinor is arguably one of the most misread heroines of Austen’s canon, her self-composure often likened to coldness and her insistence on propriety akin to self-satisfied superiority. In essence, her most masculine attributes—her analytical mind and emotional restraint—are the root of most readers’ dislike of Austen’s heroine. She is certainly not the liveliest of the author’s creations: she hopes for love, but will not die for it; she desires Edward’s hand in marriage, but does not fan the flames of her desire, recognizing, as she does, the impracticality of their union. She curbs the financial and emotional excess of her mother and sisters and stays steadfast in her pursuit of economic and emotional stability. She is civil to others, even when civility is difficult, such as with the mercenary Fanny Dashwood or the overbearing but well-meaning Middletons. She is

admirable in her self-composure and her actions should, no doubt, be emulated by many. She is too easily considered, however, in her pursuit of a rational life, boring. Stella Gibbons speaks for many critics when she finds that “[E]linor is not easy to like” (Gibbons xi). Ian Watt later corroborates this when he argues, “Elinor is good and nice, but she is only intermittently interesting” (Watt 53). He goes on to suggest, “[I]t would not be easy to make Elinor as attractive as her sister” (Watt 53). But what makes Elinor less attractive, less interesting? Certainly her life is as rife with romantic tangles as Marianne’s and, as Austen establishes within the first chapter of the novel, Elinor feels as deeply as her sister. It is true that Elinor is not as physically beautiful as Elinor (a fact which most film adaptations of the novel emphasize), but she is attractive in less tangible ways, which Watt neglects to consider; she is, after all, chosen by Edward to marry because of her sound judgment and self-composure—heady attractions for a man once betrothed to a beautiful, but ignorant woman. Austen resists creating a typical heroine in the formation of Elinor Dashwood; in Elinor is a heroine that does not face the problems in her life with fainting fits and psychosomatic illnesses like Marianne (or Maria and Glorvina), but through critical thinking and more-or-less objective reasoning. In addition to this, Elinor, in her very prim boringness, actually works to make the figure of the thinking woman respectable. The thinking woman here is no longer transgressive or marginalized, but downright civilized. Her intellectual prowess is applied to the domestic life around her and her commitment to establishing herself in her womanly “profession” of marriage. By showing the rational woman as grounded in the realities of respectable life, Austen sanitizes and celebrates the figure of the thinking woman, by at once confining her to the domestic realm and illustrating how she flourishes there. Austen then highlights how Elinor applies her intellect to the female concerns of courtship and matrimony. A “gender dissonant” heroine like Elinor, moreover, revels in the

nuances of her domestic space—she is masculine by virtue of her rational bent, but applies her analytical skills to her limited feminine, privatized realm. Austen, through this, can show the thinking woman as a natural figure within the domestic framework, pushing for gender equality while maintaining separate spheres ideology.

The concept of being intellectual, however, is not necessarily incompatible with being attractive for Austen, as made evident through the love triangle between Elinor; the un-ambitious heir, Edward Ferrars; and Edward's secret fiancée, Lucy Steele. Through this love triangle, and the verbal sparring between Elinor and Lucy as they battle for the right to attach themselves to Edward, Austen underscores the attractiveness of a rational wife in forming a companionate marriage. Edward's ill-advised engagement to Lucy represents his youthful infatuation with a pretty face—Austen's classic recipe for a bad marriage—and his growing love for the rational Elinor years later points to his maturation as a young man. He values the virtues of a well-educated woman to be his future companion over the conniving coquetry of the miseducated Lucy Steele. Imbedded in Austen's differentiation between Elinor's rational mind and Lucy Steele's clever one (and Edward's maturation) is a critique of the education system which stunts women's intellectual growth. As Warren Roberts argues in *Jane Austen and the French Revolution*, Austen (echoing Wollstonecraft) “found fault with educational practices because of their effect on girls, the sad and pathetic results of which she illustrates through one character after another” (177). In this way, Lucy can be read as one of these “pathetic results” for her inability to improve what Austen insists is a naturally clever mind.<sup>45</sup> Lucy's potentially strong

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<sup>45</sup> The giddy Mrs. Palmer is another example of Austen's portrayal of uneducated women and the difficulties their lack of education causes. While readers find infinite amusement in Mr. Palmer's surly remarks to his less knowledgeable wife, his cruelty cannot be overstated. Like the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice*, the Palmers are a couple whose marriage was founded on early infatuation; once the men realize their wives were trained only to be amiable ladies in order to catch a husband, the happiness of the marriage fades and the men are left attached to a

mind is corrupted by a lack of education, and her limited mental powers applied to the baser aspects of social climbing. In fact, Edward later admits he was dismayed by “her ignorance and a want of liberality in some of her opinions,” even as he wanted to believe she was a “good hearted girl” (Austen 369). It becomes clear through her manipulation of Edward and Elinor that Lucy is indeed clever, and, though schooled in the art of coquetry and general female accomplishments, was not taught to develop self-reflection or reasoning that would help her cultivate herself as a genuine proper lady, and not a semblance of one. Thus, in the love triangle between Elinor, Lucy, and Edward, Austen shows that a well-cultivated mind in women is the foundation of a mutually satisfying companionate marriage.

Essential to my discussion of Elinor is an analysis of the misreading of her character by many readers so as to show that Elinor is not cold, but is both rational and passionate, both masculine in mind and domestic in heart. A first reading of *Sense and Sensibility* often leaves the reader with the impression of Elinor as a painfully cerebral heroine, sacrificing her humanity (here embodied in the expression of her emotions) for the sake of keeping up appearances. This misreading of Elinor is most apparent in the changes made to the story by recent film adaptations of the novel. It is hard to forget Emma Thompson’s scene-stealing hysterical sobs at the end of the 1995 Ang Lee film adaptation of the novel. While Elinor does break down in the novel upon realizing that Edward is a free man and has come to claim her hand in marriage, she leaves the room to cry. Thomson’s performance instead has Elinor break down in front of her lover, unable to keep in the intensity of her emotions any longer. For the modern viewer (or perhaps dissatisfied reader of the novel), this scene is the ultimate catharsis; Elinor can no longer contain herself. Even the 2008 miniseries of the novel has many scenes in which Elinor retreats into

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creature with whom they cannot relate. Austen hints at the abusiveness of these relationships—the women are ridiculed without always knowing it.

nature in an effort to find emotional respite from the drama of her family life. Many scenes reflect her gazing out into nature, breathing heavily, with eyes, as they say, full of meaning—actions much more akin to the heroine of sensibility than Elinor. The miniseries also has her often discreetly going back to the gift Edward gives her on her departure from Norland, in lieu of the marriage proposal she had secretly hoped for. Both film adaptations effectively humanize Elinor for a contemporary audience—but, in so doing, lose something that was essential for Austen. Elinor it seems, to be a proper heroine even today, must cry, must feel in a very public way.

A closer reading of the novel, however, reveals that Elinor is a woman who feels deeply, even if she doesn't always show it. In fact, her ability to privatize her emotions, or strip them of the Romantic heroine's performativity, separates her from the traditional heroine. Her rational mind enables her to not only navigate the treacherous social waters she finds herself in once she leaves Norland, but also to better understand her feelings, and make deductions about social situations based on her careful observations. Her interiority reflects a strong capacity for self-awareness lacking in more typical heroines like her sister Marianne, who frequently engages in emotional excess to the distress of those around her. Austen is careful to establish at the start of the novel that Elinor feels as much as she thinks. Austen writes:

Elinor, this eldest daughter, whose advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counselor of her mother, and enabled her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence. She had an excellent heart;— her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them: it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn, and which one of her sisters had resolved never to be taught (44).

Perhaps what is most surprising, especially for contemporary readers, is that Elinor is “only” nineteen and yet so mature—and probably the reason Emma Thompson made the heroines of the

novel significantly older in her script for the film adaptation. It helps to understand Elinor's seemingly premature adulthood by placing her within her historical context: she is a disinherited genteel woman, with very few marriage prospects—her lack of dowry and her economically fallen status hardly recommend her as a wife, even if her common sense does—and thus, no real way to provide for herself beyond maintaining a tight economy over her mother's household. Considering the responsibilities inadvertently thrust upon Elinor (she is the caretaker of her capricious mother and sister), her family's reduced circumstances, and her own entrance into the marriage market, it makes sense that Elinor would be practical. She cannot afford to let her emotions carry her away.<sup>46</sup> She must instead find a reasonable house to let while her mother and sister mourn.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, it appears that Elinor's rational bent is in part developed out of her strong desire to keep her family together, suggesting that, for Austen, a female intellectual must *want* to develop her reason, as Marianne at first “resolved never to be taught,” yet later chooses to learn. Despite the fact that Austen begins by commending Elinor's “coolness of judgment,” the author ends by emphasizing her “heart,” “strong” feelings, and “affectionate” nature. It becomes apparent that Elinor's ability (and desire) to “govern” her feelings is what distinguishes her from her mother and sister, and the typical Romantic heroine, as is her genuine investment in the well-being of those around her; unlike Marianne, her more constrained sensibility is not ruled by self-involvement but by altruistic empathy for the individuals in her social circle.

Her self-governance is often read as cold hearted, yet her composure, along with her analytical mind, act as tools that help her understand her emotions and the world around her.

Her “strength of understanding” marks her as a rational heroine because it indicates her ability to

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<sup>46</sup> Even Marianne does not really have that luxury, but, as will be discussed later, Marianne has the benefit of a more grounded sister to care for the necessities of life while she wallows.

<sup>47</sup> There is a third, younger Miss Dashwood, Margaret, who will not be discussed in this chapter, as her role in the novel is miniscule.

think beyond the scope of her own desires: she is aware of those around her and their impact on her and her family, as well as how her own motives and needs impact others. For example, while she has strong feelings for Edward, she resists admitting it, even to Marianne, because she knows she would be an undesirable match in the eyes of his sister and mother, and she would face social censure, and the possible disinheritance, should they become engaged.<sup>48</sup> In this instance, Elinor is keenly aware of how social hierarchies and economic considerations impact her future happiness, which in turn makes her censor emotions that might cause her or those she loves future pain. Moreland Perkins best describes Elinor's critical thinking skills and how they help her negotiate domestic life. Perkins writes,

[B]ecause Elinor is not, could not then be, a professional person and is the heroine of one troubled love story and an anxious monitor of another, the domain of application for her intellect is almost entirely the actions, circumstances, and feelings that figure in affairs of the heart. Because of this limitation, Elinor's intellect must be steadily—hence for some readers dauntingly—on display; and for the same reasons, her orientation to her own emotions will be more rational than many readers can find attractive (13-14).

Austen must always portray Elinor in a state of intellectual reflection in order to establish her heroine as a rational woman. What is overbearing to some readers is in fact a conscious choice on the part of Austen to solidify the validity and strength of Elinor's internal, cerebral life. In this way, Austen can assert that a woman can be both concerned with "the affairs of the heart" and a thinking woman, effectively legitimizing women's intellect at least in this feminine realm.

The "application for her intellect" also lies in its ability to underscore Elinor's "orientation to her own emotions," and moreover, her determination to come to terms with her

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<sup>48</sup> When questioned by Marianne about her feelings for Edward, Elinor replies, "The excellence of his understanding and his principles can be concealed only by that shyness which too often keeps him silent...I have seen a great deal of him, have studied his sentiments and heard his opinion on subjects of literature and taste; and, upon the whole, I venture to pronounce that his mind is well-informed, his enjoyment of books exceedingly great, his imagination lively, his observation just and correct, and his taste delicate and pure" (58). Here she displays her careful analysis of the man, neither overinflating his charms nor downplaying his well-formed mind, much in the same way he avoids invoking picturesque language to discuss the natural beauty surrounding Barton cottage. Yet she also significantly avoids directly admitting her growing feelings so as to protect herself from disappointment.

reduced social position. What makes Elinor's "coolness of judgment" so unappealing to many readers is the fact that this heroine refuses to romanticize the world around her—a trait which too often make her appear to be Gibbons' "stick"—but in actuality reflects her practical desire to shield herself from the dangerous delusions of inflated sensibility which Marianne suffers from, when she ignores the impropriety of her relations with Willoughby, and which allow Maria to ignore her complicity in the wrongs inflicted on her. For example, when Willoughby exclaims against Mrs. Dashwood's desire to alter their humble cottage, Elinor forthrightly assures him that her mother does not have the financial resources to improve the home. When he then rhapsodizes over the perfection of the cottage, claiming that he would love to tear down his grand family estate and build a replica of Barton Cottage in its place, Elinor coolly replies, "With dark narrow stairs, and a kitchen that smokes, I suppose" (Austen 107). Although Elinor's quick assertion that her family has no money to adapt the cottage might be read as a thoughtless reminder of what her family, her mother in particular, had lost (including the more luxurious living conditions of their father's home), it in fact reflects Elinor's steadfastness and perseverance in maintaining the family budget so that they can survive year to year. In addition, her witty remark to Willoughby's effusions, though cutting, makes it impossible to romanticize the Dashwoods' near-impooverished state. This is a clear instance in which Elinor's wit reflects her practical attempt to empower herself not through sentimentalizing her condition (as Maria and Marianne do to their detriment), but through soundly acknowledging the very real constraints under which she lives and so adjust her actions to better traverse her complicated situation. Her comment is also a critique of Willoughby's sentimental assertions in light of his privileged position; he can afford to choose (however fancifully) if he wants to live in a grand mansion or a humble cottage, while the Dashwood sisters must submit to a cottage life because

they lack the resources to choose otherwise. Thus, Elinor subtly chastises Willoughby for his unconscious insensitivity to their circumstances. Her wit moreover “softens the pangs of disappointment” she experiences in feeling herself thus set adrift after her father’s death—a sharp reversal by Austen of Wollstonecraft’s early assertions that only a dulling of the mind and sense allows a woman to feel less deeply the wrongs imposed on her.

The value of Elinor’s rational mind is further solidified when contrasted with that of her romantic nemesis, Lucy Steele. Elinor’s analysis of Lucy reveals not only how Elinor strives to be impartial in her reading of the world around her, but also Austen’s judicious character sketch of Lucy as a woman who uses her clever turn of mind to ingratiate herself to others.<sup>49</sup> The reader finds that what makes Elinor different from Lucy is her self-restraint; Elinor does not seek to win over Fanny Dashwood so she can marry her brother, Edward, nor does she scheme to find the most advantageous marriage for herself—all of which Lucy excels at. Austen writes,

Lucy was naturally clever; her remarks were often just and amusing; and as a companion for half an hour Elinor frequently found her agreeable; but her powers had received no aid from education, she was ignorant and illiterate, and her deficiency of all mental improvement, her want of information in the most common particulars, could not be concealed from Miss Dashwood, in spite of her constant endeavour to appear to advantage. Elinor saw, and pitied her for, the neglect of abilities which education might have rendered so respectable; but she saw, with less tenderness of feeling, the thorough want of delicacy, of rectitude, and integrity of mind, which her attentions, her assiduities, her flatteries at the Park betrayed; and she could have no lasting satisfaction in the company of a person who joined insincerity with ignorance; whose want of instruction prevented their meeting in conversation on terms of equality, and whose conduct towards

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<sup>49</sup> In one of the greatest, if subtlest ironies of the novel, Edward meets Lucy at the home of his educator. The home should be a place of academic contemplation and yet in the heart of it is the base Lucy. This points to the inequality of the education system at this time. It is expected that Edward, as a gentleman, better himself through education. Lucy, on the other hand, is expected to find a husband. With limited options and very little to recommend her beyond her charms, she must work doubly hard to secure a husband that can support her. Like Maria in *Wrongs of Woman*, Lucy has the potential to more fully develop her mind, but she lacks the proper guidance to do so. She instead turns her mental powers to not just securing her future by marriage, but in securing a fortune and title (whereas Elinor seeks only a stable home with someone she esteems). What differentiates these heroines is that Maria genuinely wants to better herself, but lacks to tools and guidance to do so, whereas Lucy is content to manipulate others for her own ends.

others, made every show of attention and deference towards herself perfectly valueless (154).

Even Elinor is forced to admit that Lucy can be “agreeable” until the thin veneer of her cleverness fades and her true ignorance and insincerity (which seem to run in tandem for Austen) are revealed. Austen draws a correlation between vulgarity of mind and vulgarity of action; Lucy’s “constant endeavour to appear to advantage” only underscores her lack of real understanding. Elinor’s dual feelings—pity for Lucy’s lost intellectual potential and disgust for Lucy’s insincerity—suggest that while a flimsy education system may be at fault for stunting the growth of a woman like Lucy, the ignorant woman is equally culpable for further degrading her own mind through her selfish actions and lack of “delicacy.”<sup>50</sup> But Austen seems to take a certain pride in Lucy’s tenacity—as seen by Lucy’s reward of a rich husband. The reader is happy by the end of the novel that Elinor and Edward are together, but there is an equal satisfaction, perhaps, in the knowledge that Lucy’s relentless conniving paid off—and upset the lives of the less-likeable Ferrars in the process. Lucy represents a woman with very few advantages or skills to recommend her to the opposite sex and, in spite of it all, subverts the social system by marrying above her station.

Although the reader and Austen might take some satisfaction in watching Lucy’s machinations unfold, Austen mitigates that through Lucy’s interactions with the Middleton children, and through a character study of Lady Middleton herself, in order to underscore the very real dangers an irrational wife poses to the domestic sphere. The reader discovers that Lady Middleton, wed to Sir John of Barton Park, on which the Dashwoods’ cottage resides, has not been schooled beyond the basic female accomplishments of designing pleasing table settings and

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<sup>50</sup> This is another instance in which Lucy is different from Maria in Wollstonecraft’s final novel. Maria strives to better herself, despite her inability to fully grasp how to do that. Lucy, however, applies her mind only to the material aspects of life. Elinor, while practical, also yearns for emotional and intellectual companionship.

throwing parties. Austen writes, “Lady Middleton piqued herself upon the elegance of her table, and of all her domestic arrangements; and from this kind of vanity was her greatest enjoyment in any of their parties” (69). Austen similarly notes that “Lady Middleton had the advantage of being able to spoil her children all the year round” (69). In both reflections, Lady Middleton reads as an idle wife, consumed with maintaining social appearances—her “domestic arrangements” please her more than her party guest, with whom she interacts very little—and content to “spoil,” rather than educate her children. Austen highlights the indolent nature of Lady Middleton in order to suggest that she will, in turn, raise indolent children. The propriety of Elinor’s rational mind (and to some extent, Marianne’s) is highlighted when they find “the cold insipidity of Lady Middleton...particularly repulsive” (Austen 71). They similarly detest the woman’s “enjoyment” in “her four noisy children after dinner, who pulled her about, tore her clothes, and put an end to every kind of discourse except what related to themselves” (Austen 71). Lady Middleton’s “insipidity” is so “repulsive” to these female intellectuals because they understand, it is implied, that she lacks the mental strength to discipline her children and teach them social manners at the very least, and a greater sense of self-awareness at best. Moreover, their violent actions reflect their unruly upbringing and foreshadow their unruly nature as adults. The self-absorption of the mother, in the end, is reflected in that of the children, who stop “every kind of discourse” not related to themselves.

In contrast, Lucy’s behavior towards the Middleton children displays not only her clever conniving—she knows Lady Middleton wants her offspring praised, and does so liberally to gain her approval—but her collusion in the bad education these children receive. Lucy’s complicity in spoiling these children for her own ends likewise emphasizes Wollstonecraft’s concern that a faulty education leads to moral corruption. In one of Austen’s most explicit scenes on ill-

tempered children, the contrast between Lucy and Elinor is most obvious. Elinor “allowed” the Steele sisters “credit for some kind of sense” for their “constant and judicious attention” to Lady Middleton and her children (148). And yet Austen is careful to note that the Dashwood sisters do not participate in the Steeles’ “continual raptures” as “their sashes [are] untied, their hair pulled about their ears, their work-bags searched, and their knives and scissars stolen away” by the Middleton children (Austen 148). The heart of Austen’s critique of Lucy occurs when Miss Steele stuffs the mouth of the sobbing three year old daughter with sugar plums to soothe and silence her, to no avail. As Austen notes, “With such a reward for her tears, the child was too wise to cease crying” (149). Elinor’s acknowledgement of Lucy’s “sense” is because Lucy understands that the children are everything to Lady Middleton, a fact which Elinor also recognizes. However, Lucy then uses that knowledge to curry favor with the lady, a social maneuver Elinor would never stoop to. The undercurrent of violence in the scene—from the children’s stealing of potentially harmful objects like “scissars” and “knives,” to the sharp pin-prick that makes the young girl cry—reflects the very real havoc these children have the potential to wreak should they be left unchecked, not only as children, but also as future adults. Similarly, Austen wryly calls attention to the fact that the little girl is clever, knowing that a temper tantrum will secure her sweets better than docile behavior. Austen implicitly links the child’s bad behavior and subsequent reward with that of Lucy, as Miss Steele knows her manipulations, though vulgar, will eventually secure her a rich husband. Yet in both cases, from the sugar plums to the rich husband, the reward is only immediately beneficial. Eventually too many sugar plums will rot the child’s teeth, spoil her appetite, or make her sick, just as Lucy’s final marriage to Robert Ferrars, while providing her with wealth and station, also promises a future of abuse and family infighting, as we will later see. Thus, while the reader can admire

how Lucy is rewarded with her conniving by a rich husband, this feeling is tempered by the knowledge that the marriage is incompatible and any future children she bears will be as vulgar as she. In short, Lady Middleton's indolence and Lucy's complicity in the spoiled antics of the Middleton children highlight the fact that a poorly educated wife cannot raise rational children. In turn, Elinor's refusal to encourage the behavior of these children underscores how her rational mind not only keeps her from using her analytical qualities to manipulate those around her for her own short-sighted ends, but also would make her a better educator of her own children. Elinor's behavior indicates, as Wollstonecraft outlined in *Vindication*, that a better education makes a woman not only more fit for child rearing, but also inherently more moral because her analytical skills can curb her baser desires fueled by self-interest alone.

Despite the differences between Elinor and Lucy, it is hard to ignore how similar their circumstances are and how they both apply their intellectual abilities (however limited on Lucy's end) towards pursuing a stable future. Norman Sherry offers a perceptive reading of Elinor and Lucy's noxious relationship. He notes that Elinor's almost overbearing self-satisfaction in maintaining propriety and discretion are mirrored in Lucy's careful manipulation of social conventions for her own ends (58). While it is a little extreme to draw a correlation between Elinor's self-composure and Lucy's scheming—it too closely mirrors the misreading of Elinor I argue against—Sherry's observation does point to the significant fact that both Lucy and Elinor are extremely aware of social conventions and have the mental agility to make calculated use of them—Elinor to preserve the dignity of her family and shield Marianne from social censure, and Lucy to forward her climb up the social ladder. What makes Elinor and Lucy so keenly aware of these social conventions is the fact that they are both in undesirable social situations: Lucy has no family name and no dowry to recommend her to the opposite sex, but must make her way in

the work all the same, and Elinor, while part of a respectable genteel family, is equally poor. Unlike Lady Middleton, with her wealth and high station, neither of these women can afford to be “indolent” or “ignorant” if they are to successfully find their way through the marriage market. Both women are at the age in which they must leave home in pursuit of a more permanent household and both know their options for a desirable marriage (however each one defines that) are limited.

The revelation that Lucy and Elinor are attached to the same man (Lucy by a secret engagement and Elinor by love) highlights the fact that these women are more than just rival lovers, but rival “professionals” struggling to assert their right to claim Edward’s attention, and thus, secure their future stability. As Perkins rightly asserts,

Behind the intensity of energy in both is their shared awareness that their livelihoods are at stake. Their situation is for these two young women not unlike a young man’s who is seeking an opening in a profession: he may care for the profession he has chosen to pursue; but often he cares even more that he should find a place and a means of supporting himself in *a* profession. For both Lucy and Elinor, the only vocation, livelihood, and position in the world that is both available and acceptable to them is marriage. Neither can be sure how many chances she will have. One has Edward’s pledge, the other his love. Both cannot win. And the loser may lose all (76).

Perkins deftly strips down these two women’s situation. Ugly as it is, at the heart of the love triangle between them and Edward is the simple fact that Elinor and Lucy are in search of a “professional” position in a field with limited options. Lucy, granted, is more concerned with finding “*a* profession” or “*a* husband,” but the necessity of marrying is equally important to Elinor. Thus, their verbal sparring carries more weight. It is not just the cattiness of two women, but a genuine battle over prime professional real estate—regardless of the very real feelings Elinor holds for Edward. Perkins’ argument also implicitly suggests the importance of Elinor’s rational mind as a tool that helps her establish herself within the framework of her “profession.” By placing the two women’s situation in historical context, Perkins establishes the stakes of

Elinor and Lucy's double-edged conversation after Lucy reveals to Elinor that she is secretly engaged to Edward.

Elinor's analytical skills enable her to cope with the unstable situation in which she is placed. Her rational mind records and evaluates the information Lucy gives her and then reflects on how that information in turn impacts her. Elinor's critical thinking skills are especially crucial at this point in her life because she cannot discuss the love triangle she finds herself in with anyone, not even her family, because she has been neatly sworn to secrecy by Lucy. The reader knows that perhaps the sole purpose of Lucy's visit to the Middleton residence was to meet Elinor and undermine any threat the eldest Miss Dashwood posed to her marriage plans. Elinor, in turn, must at once keep Lucy's vulgar secret and assert her indifference to the whole matter as a way to preserve her integrity and protect herself from the insidious efforts of Lucy to undermine Elinor's self-worth. Austen deftly illustrates the dual nature of the women's conversation as they size up their professional competition when Elinor arranges to have a private moment with Lucy after her revelation of her attachment to Edward. Lucy revels in "Edward's affection and constancy nothing can deprive [her] of" (Austen 173). Elinor replies,

'That conviction must be every thing to you; and he is undoubtedly supported by the same trust in your's. If the strength of your reciprocal attachment had failed, as between many people and under many circumstances it naturally would during a four years' engagement, your situation would be pitiable indeed' (Austen 173).

Lucy counters,

'Edward's love for me...has been pretty well put to the test, by our long, very long absence since we were first engaged, and it has stood the trial so well, that I should be unpardonable to doubt it now. I can safely say that he has never gave me one moment's alarm on that account from the first' (Austen 173).

In classic Austen style, both women subtly assert their right to Edward's attention. Elinor correctly reads Lucy's confidence in Edward's love as an attempt to disavow her suspicions of

Elinor's importance to the man. She counters with an accurate account (later corroborated by Edward) of the reality of Lucy's situation: after years apart, Edward has ceased to love her. She has made an educated guess about the true state of the affairs, based on her analysis of Lucy's early remarks and Edward's behavior to herself. The emphasis on "pitiable" in Elinor's remarks, while it can be read as a subtle catty jab, also reflects Elinor's genuine pity of a woman who is bound by a promise to a man who no longer feels for her. Moreover, Elinor pities not just Lucy's situation, but her stunted mind, as reflected in her use of "gave" rather than "given." Just as she can dislike Lucy for her insincerity, she can also pity Lucy for her early lack of self-improvement, because it means that she, unlike Elinor, lacks the mental resources to recover from the loss of Edward's affections. Elinor's remarks are a clever tactic meant to draw Lucy out so that Elinor can gather more information on the reality of the situation at hand. Lucy, in turn, does everything to assert her claim to the professional position of Edward's future wife. Her insistence that Edward "never gave [her] one moment's alarm" on the account of loving another means to put Elinor in her place—Elinor does not matter, nor ever did. However, saying it does not make it true. What Lucy reveals in her emphatic rejection of Edward's emotional infidelity is that she suspects, or rather knows, that the man has been unfaithful. Based on his frequent mention of Elinor, Lucy knows with whom. This seemingly polite exchange reflects the battle between these two women—Lucy fights for her fading engagement, Elinor for her self-respect, and both for the ephemeral potential to be courted by Edward and thus, secure their future in a world in which they have limited options.

Their supposedly amiable discussion also reflects the women's ability to manipulate proper social conduct and verbal niceties as a way to gather information and analyze the enemy. The significance of the verbal battle between Elinor and Lucy cannot be overstated. While Mark

Schorer writes in his preface to *Pride and Prejudice* (1956) that “there are none but verbal brutalities” in Austen’s novels, I suggest that these “verbal brutalities” are just as caustic to the women as a literal battle because the stakes are so high (x). Schorer dismissed the weight of the spoken word to cause harm with a simple “but,” yet I would maintain that the seemingly civilized discussion reflects not only the characters of each woman but lays bare the desperate situation they both are in. Ian Watt succinctly counters Schorer when he writes, “The brutalities are not gratuitous; they are a means whereby Jane Austen shocks us into seeing the disparity between proper norms of conduct and the actualities of human behavior” (47). In this way we see the violence Lucy inflicts on Elinor when she cruelly exaggerates the woman’s lack of importance to Edward and forces Elinor to abandon her already faint hope of being with Edward. The reader can also see how proper conduct is used to manipulate others for one’s own end. Even Elinor, for all her kindness in general, carefully arranges the meeting with Lucy, cleverly using the social niceties of a dinner party to maneuver her way into another conversation with Lucy.<sup>51</sup> Elinor herself is not merely on the defensive here—she, too, strikes Lucy as a way to establish her independence from the scheming woman and acknowledge that Lucy has purposefully placed her in a binding situation that limits her ability to engage with the revelation of Edward’s engagement on her own terms.

This conversation between Lucy and Elinor is another instance in which Elinor is read as too cold, diving, as she does, headlong into a discussion with her rival, seemingly with no concern in the world. Gibbons writes,

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<sup>51</sup> Elinor makes a display of offering to help Lucy with rolling papers that are meant for Lady Middleton’s daughter, deftly playing on Lady Middleton’s pride for her children to work herself out of a card game. Austen writes, “Elinor joyfully profited... and thus by a little of that address which Marianne could never condescend to practise, gained her own end, and pleased Lady Middleton at the same time” (171).

So far, we have only thought of Elinor as noble but not likable: when we read how anxious she is to learn all that she can about this engagement, we are shocked: at least, I am. Her attitude seems as vulgar as Lucy's own. Surely a girl with any delicacy would have kept as far away from Lucy as possible?...In the passages describing Elinor's motives [for engaging Lucy in conversation about her engagement to Edward] there is an elaboration and *fine-spunness* which may convince the intellect but does not convince the feelings, and I believe the fact is that in the scene between the two girls Jane Austen's sense of comedy for once got a little out of hand (xiv).

Gibbons neglects to understand that Elinor is motivated to talk with Lucy specifically because of her feelings for Edward. Elinor, always the thinker, must gather evidence, must analyze that evidence, and deduce from it the verity of Lucy's claims, the potential of Edward's happiness with Lucy, and her own dwindling hopes for a union with Edward—however little she believed in the possibility of a union with him to begin with, she finds his engagement inevitably squashes all remaining hopes, just as it reveals that Edward might have proposed to her and risked familial rejection had he been unattached. Thus Elinor's actions are rooted both in her rational need to better understand the shocking information she received and in her emotional pain over the loss of Edward. She is also in the precarious position of being further exposed to the censure of Edward's family and the joking of the Middletons, which is why she governs her emotions to prevent further mortification. Most already suspect that Edward has feelings for Elinor, as Fanny Dashwood's pointed remarks on Edward's need to marry well imply, and others suspect Elinor of loving him in return, as the Middletons' frequent teasing underscores. Elinor, then, cannot afford to be further exposed to the romantic speculation of those around her. Her apparent coldness is, in fact, a rational—and emotional—effort to protect herself and those she loves from the pain of potential scandal.

Central to Austen's development of the rational woman in domestic life is Edward's growing affection for Elinor, despite his secret engagement to Lucy. Like Horatio in *The Wild Irish Girl*, Edward's growth as a man correlates to his changing expectations of a desirable wife.

When he first engaged himself to Lucy, he was young and naïve, thinking only a pretty face and pleasant demeanor would be enough to make a companionable wife. It is reasonable to assume that Edward finds a more rational woman like Elinor appealing as he matures, based on the fact that he courts her, even knowing he is committed to another. Austen writes that he has an “open affectionate heart” (15). We also know that he has no desire to live an ambitious, public life like his sister and mother would like him to. He is a quiet man, more comfortable at home than out in the world, making him as perfectly “gender dissonant” as Elinor. Austen establishes his cultivated mind when she writes, “His understanding was good, and his education had given it solid improvement” (53). Like Elinor, he feels and thinks, and unlike Lucy, his promising intellect is further cultivated through his education. When he first falls for Lucy, Edward is a young man resentful of the familial pressure placed upon him to make a name for himself in the world, and Lucy is a pretty woman whose flattery and attention are like a soothing balm to his injured sense of self. Only later as Edward matures and Lucy fails to mature with him, does Edward begin to comprehend the necessity of having a companionate wife.

Edward’s straight-forward intelligence (a trait he likewise admires in Elinor) shines through in his resistance to the affectation of sensibility or current trends in taste. Although he lacks the performativity of Willoughby (which Marianne rails against during his flat reading of one of Cowper’s poems), he does truly feel and carefully think about the beauty of art and the world around him. For example, when he visits Barton Cottage, Marianne attempts to engage him in a discussion on the picturesque nature of the landscape surrounding them, to which he replies, “You must be satisfied with such admiration as I can honestly give...I like a fine prospect, but not on picturesque principles. I do not like ruined, twisted, blasted trees. I admire them much more if they are tall, straight, and flourishing” (Austen 127). His witty response

echoes an answer Elinor might give to Marianne's sentimental ruminations on a gothic landscape. Similarly, his resistance to sentimental rhetoric indicates his reticence towards any affectation that would praise a "ruined" tree over a "flourishing" one. In essence, he rejects the performativity of excessive emotion in the face of nature in favor of "honestly" expressing his thoughts and feelings. His emphasis on "honestly" conveying his "admiration" also implies his denunciation of the deceptive nature of such language and, by extension, any socially acceptable rhetoric (including the affectations of his family) that glosses over a more levelheaded understanding of life. Thus, a man with his sensible outlook on life would find it difficult to build a happy home with the vain coquetry of a woman like Lucy Steele.

Elinor perhaps best explains the danger Edward faces in committing himself to an uneducated wife like Lucy. After learning of his secret engagement to Lucy, Elinor reflects that

[s]he might in time regain tranquility; but *he*, what had he to look forward to? Could he ever be tolerably happy with Lucy Steele; could he, were his affections for herself out of the question, with his integrity, his delicacy, and well-informed mind, be satisfied with a wife like her—illiterate, artful, selfish?...The youthful infatuation of nineteen would naturally blind him to every thing but her beauty and good nature; but the four succeeding years – years, which if rationally spent, give such improvement to the understanding, must have opened his eyes to her defects of education, while the same period of time, spent on her side in inferior society and more frivolous pursuits, had perhaps robbed her of that simplicity which might have once have given an interesting character to her beauty (166).

Elinor's emphasis on "tolerably happy" suggests that, in her rational way, she is not even expecting marriage to necessarily bring infinite pleasure to anyone. She instead thinks only of the moderate happiness of a stable home with a likeable companion. Even with this modest look at a marriage popular during this time, Elinor knows that Edward could never be satisfied with a woman as base as Lucy; she contrasts Edward's "well-informed mind" with Lucy's "illiterate" selfishness. Her implicit correlation between Lucy's ignorance and her lack of moral integrity underscores Austen's emphasis on the importance of a female intellectual's sincere desire to

better herself—and how that desire ultimately determines her ability to develop her mind and mature emotionally. In short, Lucy is a woman who cannot grow and change with Edward, nor cultivate her mind to better understand her husband. Elinor knows the depths of Edward’s mind after the time spent with him drawing, reading, and conversing at Norland, and thus knows his temperament even better than Lucy herself. Elinor clearly outlines the reality of Edward’s situation—which Edward himself later verifies. At nineteen a pretty face can go a long way to making a man fall in love with a woman. What changes Edward’s feelings towards Lucy is their mutual divergence from who they were when Edward first proposed. Edward continued to develop his mind; Lucy’s once potentially promising mind deteriorates under the influences of “inferior society and more frivolous pursuits.” It is clear that Lucy did at one time have the potential to become a rational woman, but chose to pursue a path of vulgar frivolity. The more learned Edward becomes, the less he can ignore the defects of Lucy. Elinor pieces this story together—and the unhappy marriage it bodes—through the information she gleaned from Lucy and her knowledge of Edward, suggesting that though she hasn’t known Edward for as long as Lucy, she understands him better because of her strong rational mind.

Elinor’s well thought-out suspicions are made more tenable after her second discussion with Lucy. She reflects on Lucy’s words and has

the melancholy persuasion that Edward was not only without affection for the person who was to be his wife; but that he had not even the chance of being tolerably happy in marriage, which sincere affection of *her* side would have given, for self-interest alone could induce a woman to keep a man to an engagement, of which she seemed too thoroughly aware that he was weary (Austen 177).

Elinor again repeats her concern that Edward will not even be “tolerably happy.” Lucy’s insistence that Edward has been a constant lover only proves to Elinor that Lucy attempts to secure Edward even though she “thoroughly” knows (and later admits when she runs off with

Edward's brother Robert Ferrars) he no longer cares for her. Lucy's motives for marrying Edward, then, are mercenary. She knows he is too honorable to break off their engagement and so uses that to her advantage. Therein lies the difference between Elinor and Lucy: while both are confined to the profession of marriage and both have limited options within that framework, Lucy has chosen to apply her mind to secure the most advantageous marriage possible—Edward is, after all, the heir to a large fortune—while Elinor seeks only a comfortable home and a husband she can love.<sup>52</sup> Elinor's confrontation with Lucy reveals Edward's growth as a man through his desire to attach himself to a more rational woman.

It is significant that Edward's confession of his lack of love for Lucy happens while discussing the letter she writes him breaking off the engagement and announcing her marriage to his brother. The letter serves as proof for her uneducated status and the shame Edward would feel in having such a wife.<sup>53</sup> Edward shows Elinor Lucy's break-up note and says:

'I will not ask your opinion of it as a composition... For worlds would not I have had a letter of hers seen by *you* in former days.—In a sister it is bad enough, but in a wife!—how I have blushed over the pages of her writing!—and I believe I may say that since the first half year of our foolish—business—this is the only letter I ever received from her, of which the substance made me any amends for the defect of the style' (Austen 368).

The lack of compositional strength parallels Lucy's lack of character and intellectual substance.

The number of dashes and exclamation points in Edward's speech emphasize his disgust with

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<sup>52</sup> Austen's greatest narrative achievement in the novel is that she gives both women what they want—Lucy gets the newly appointed heir, Robert Ferrars, after the scandal of her engagement to Edward prompts the family to disinherit him, and Elinor gets Edward, who now earns a modest income from Colonel Brandon's parsonage. She seems to suggest that although Lucy has corrupted her potential to develop her mind, society has gone a long way to teach her that her vulgar actions will reward her with economic prosperity and upward mobility. While this does not fully condone Lucy's actions, it does serve to underscore the importance of social reform so that the actions of someone like Lucy will no longer be rewarded.

<sup>53</sup> Lucy writes, "Being very sure I have long lost your affections, I have thought myself at liberty to bestow my own on another, and have no doubt of being as happy with him as I once used to think I might be with you; but I scorn to accept a hand while the heart was another's. Sincerely wish you happy in your choice, and it shall not be my fault if we are not always good friends, a sour near relationship now makes proper. I can safely say I owe you no ill-will, and am sure you will be too generous to do us any ill offices. Your brother has gained my affections entirely, and as we could not live without one another, we are just returned from the altar" (Austen 368).

Lucy as well as his relief that he no longer has to marry her. Edward then suggests that part of his shame in his engagement to Lucy is what Elinor would think of his wife; he does not want her to read any of Lucy's letters for fear they would reveal the littleness of his fiancée's mind. In essence, her flawed writing reflects her flawed moral and intellectual character. By valuing Elinor's opinion of his would-be wife so highly, Edward reveals that Elinor embodies the ideal, rational woman for Edward.

His inevitable comparison of the two women is made more explicit when he acknowledges that while "his eyes had long been opened, even before his acquaintance with Elinor began, to [Lucy's] ignorance," his knowledge of Lucy's "want of education" becomes all the more obvious when he meets Elinor (Austen 369). Edward explains his attentions toward Elinor at Norland:

'I was simple enough to think, that because my *faith* was plighted to another, there could be no danger in my being with you; and that the consciousness of my engagement was to keep my heart safe and sacred as my honour. I felt I admired you, but told myself it was only friendship; and till I began to make comparisons between yourself and Lucy, I did not know how far I was got' (Austen 370).

Edward proves himself similar to Elinor in his continual contrasting analysis of both women to determine Elinor's value. Edward loves Elinor, then, because of her striking dissimilarity to Lucy. The revelation of his love for her finds its foundation in his "admiration" for her and her sound judgment (and lack of performative sensibility) on the subjects of life, literature, and art. Here, Edward also points to his education as man—he is "simple" to think he could be in Elinor's presence without loving her. He now knows he has been schooled in proper love and revises his early impressions of what makes a desirable wife. Even their final union is rational, as Elinor refuses to marry him until they have something to live upon. Although she loves him, and he her, neither think it wise to establish a home upon nothing. His marriage to Elinor

enables Edward to be the man he wishes to be: a quiet family man, with a simple living at Delaford.

Austen's depiction of Elinor's steadfastness and critical evaluations of the situations she finds herself in reflect the author's desire to portray domestic women as rational beings who apply their intellect to the daily dilemmas of the female sphere. The union between Edward and Elinor is perhaps one of the more subdued marriages in Austen's novels—Elinor is rewarded with a husband who earns only a modest income, which contrasts sharply with some of the more fantastical marriages, like Elizabeth Bennet's marriage to the rich Mr. Darcy. The purpose of this subdued ending is to emphasize the very real social and economic factors that shape a woman's life at this time. To construct a rational domestic heroine and then give her a fantasy marriage of wealth and upward mobility is to undermine her rationality—Elinor does not seek, nor expect anything beyond a stable home with enough to live on, and so finds contentment (or “tolerable happiness”) in the prospect of a life less glamorous than Lucy's. Although Lucy herself is seemingly rewarded with a fairytale marriage, her future is not the ideal union between equals. Austen hints at a less-than-tranquil domestic life for Robert and Lucy; Austen euphemistically consigns them to “frequent domestic disputes” and constant “jealousies and ill-will” between them and Fanny Dashwood (Austen 378-79). The marriage between Lucy and Robert serves as a foil for the union between Elinor and Edward: one has all the trappings of an ideal union often seen in romance novels, the other, all the reality of a companionate marriage. Elinor, then, represents a respectable, feminine woman who uses her analytical skills to successfully navigate the marriage market and establish a stable future rooted in a companionate marriage.

**Rescued from Sensibility: Marianne's Education as a Re-telling of *Wrongs of Woman***

In contrast to Elinor's narrative, Marianne's offers the reader an alternative to both the often intimidating steadfastness of the rational Elinor and the ill-fated sensibility of Maria in *Wrongs of Woman*. Austen constructs Marianne to be a positive intermediary, then, between the natural priority of her eldest sister and the miseducated Maria in Wollstonecraft's novel, in order to show that a female intellectual can be a woman who, with the sincere desire to better herself and the proper guidance, can develop her mind to curb emotional excess and impropriety. Marianne is often considered an atypical Austen heroine because of her likeness to the Romantic heroines of the day—filled with sensibility and feeling obliged to constantly perform it. It would seem Marianne might be out of place in a discussion of the rational heroine, simply because for most of the novel, she appears to be resolutely irrational. Yet what is significant to Marianne is her growth from a creature of sensibility into a woman as rational as her sister. Central to the discussion of Marianne is the question of her virtue—Elinor's female modesty is never questioned, yet Marianne's is through her flagrant show of affection for Willoughby. Austen constructs this positive rewriting of *Wrongs of Woman*, along with that of the seduced and abandoned Eliza, in order to address the continued fear that a female intellectual could be synonymous with sexual transgression and ultimately prove that, while a loss of virtue is a possibility for this figure, it is a remote one, consigned to the margins of her own narrative and social reality. There is also a striking resemblance between Marianne's love story and Maria's in Wollstonecraft's final novel, but what distinguishes Marianne's story from the tragedy of Maria's is Marianne's more solid education and more stable family. Marianne, as we will find, has a mind as strong as Elinor's, even if she doesn't always use it for rational ends. Her family is moreover respectable and loving—a sharp contrast to the familial dysfunction to which Maria was exposed. Marianne's intelligence is manifested in her calculated resistance to gender norms,

particularly in courtship matters. Typically, Marianne is read as a careless, ineffective reader of the men around her, but she never crosses the line of impropriety, even as she questions the social conventions. Marianne, like Maria, learns that while she might have progressive gender politics, the rest of society does not and she is restrained by the conduct of others to be a domestic woman, or, through the performativity of her values, a lady of scandalous reputation. In the end, her marriage to Colonel Brandon reconciles her progressive values with the conservative ones of society by matching her with an older man who can curb her youthful excess, while at the same time continuing to value her sensibility.

Just as Austen establishes that Elinor is a feeling as well as thinking woman, she stresses that Marianne, while often the slave to her emotions, also has a well-informed mind. Austen writes, “Marianne’s abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor’s. She was sensible and clever; but eager in every thing; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent” (44). Marianne’s weakness, then, is her lack of “prudence.” Austen’s insistence that Marianne is “quite equal” to Elinor in her mental capabilities is doubly emphasized by the author’s use of “quite.” The author then solidifies this connection when she notes that her heroine is “sensible”—a trait many readers of the novel associate with Elinor, rather than Marianne. Austen clearly attempts to show the strong moral and intellectual foundation Marianne’s character is supported by, a foundation that ultimately saves her from her lack of prudence.

Marianne’s “sensible” and “clever” nature is underscored by her willful rejection of gender norms within the confines of social propriety. Marianne promotes the equality of the sexes in her intellectual interactions with Willoughby and Colonel Brandon, and in her courtship of Willoughby. I say “of” Willoughby, and not “with,” because there are clear instances in

which Marianne challenges her submissive female role in the marriage market by courting him. She dances only with him, writes him love notes when she feels his attention waning, and confronts him at a public assembly when he ignores her. She even accompanies him alone to his family estate and his future inheritance—a dangerous thing for a young woman to do. Even if he did not seduce her while they were alone, her reputation might still be damaged should news spread of her indiscrete actions. Elinor frequently attempts “to suggest the propriety of some self-command” in her sister, especially after Marianne visits Willoughby’s estate unchaperoned (Austen 88). She explains to Marianne that “the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety” (Austen 102). Yet her younger sister “abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserve,” and so tells her sister that “if there had been any real impropriety in what [she] did, [she] should have been sensible of it at the time” (Austen 88, 102). Austen, through Elinor, critiques the “pleasantness of an employment,” and implicitly, the feelings that arise in being alone with a man, as a deceptive reasoning that condones bad behavior, thus rupturing the philosophy of sensibility that insists that feelings alone will guide a person toward a virtuous path. Marianne resists this rational reading of her own conduct, instead emphasizing that while she might be exposed to social censure, there was no “real impropriety” in her actions; like Maria, then, she attempts to create her own set of moral values, in which the purity of her actions and feelings dictate their propriety, regardless of how society views her interactions with Willoughby. In short, Marianne refuses to be the demure female—just as Maria does in *Wrongs of Woman* when she has an affair with Darnford. Yet Marianne is ultimately the more “sensible” heroine because she knows, even as she questions them, that social mores do shape how people read her actions and thus, affect her standing in the world, as she learns from her sister. Key to Marianne’s status as a female intellectual, then, is her

willingness to learn from her sister and rectify her early flawed judgment. Similarly, as ill-advised as some of her actions are, too easily revealing her feelings for Willoughby and thus leaving her susceptible to scandal when he later marries another, richer woman, she never crosses the line of respectability. In short, she would never allow herself to fully succumb to Willoughby's charms until after their wedding. Adultery or seduction would be as shocking to her as they would be to any gentlewoman. She might feel for a woman like Wollstonecraft's Maria who gives herself over to her passions—and does, when she discovers how Willoughby seduced and abandoned Colonel Brandon's naïve ward—but would never permanently risk her own respectability for love.

I am again indebted to Moreland Perkins for succinctly identifying what makes Marianne such an anomaly in the canon of Austen's heroines. Perkins writes,

[O]nly Marianne rejects the genteel code of general civility in favor of either speaking the blunt truth or nothing; hence *only* she practices rudeness in respectable company...*only* Marianne reciprocates the sexually aggressive behavior of a man she finds attractive: *only* she displays the same freedom of affectionate expression and amorous initiative that her unabashed male lover shows, and *only* she feels the same freedom from concern about onlookers' ideas of propriety (176).

She goes on to argue,

[M]arianne's personal rebellion is socially reformist in conception, never revolutionary: she courts disapproval but she shows no readiness to cross (though she may tread) the line that separates the respectable young woman from the outcast; [she carefully avoids] radical isolation (Perkins 178).

Perhaps what makes Marianne so likeable to readers in contrast to Elinor is her rejection of the stiff formalities common in her social circles. In many ways, Marianne is a progressive heroine more akin to women of the twenty and twenty-first century than her own: she is "sexually aggressive," insists on "freedom" of "amorous initiative," and is not afraid to speak the "blunt truth." Yet her overt rejection of social niceties also gives her less mobility than Elinor, who as

we've seen, carefully uses social conventions to both appease those around her and gain her own ends. Perkins' repetition of "*only*" asserts Marianne's marked difference from Austen's normally more grounded heroines and signifies the importance of Marianne's departure from Austen's traditional heroine mold. Marianne must be different so as to better chart the development of a progressively thinking woman as she reconciles herself to social dictums and cultivates self-control. Although Marianne's return to a seemingly more conservative domestic life can be read as Austen's promotion of traditional social order, what Marianne's story indicates to a careful reader is that progressive gender politics are not mutually exclusive of a traditional domestic life for women. The ultimate freedom allowed a rational woman in the position of Marianne and Elinor is in choosing to marry a compatible husband that provides balance to her character--Edward by being as "gender dissonant" as Elinor, and Colonel Brandon by stabilizing the excessive spirit of Marianne.

Perkins rightly explains Marianne's "rudeness" as a calculated rejection of "the genteel code of general civility," not, I would add, because she desires to hurt those around her, but because she disdains anything that hints at insincerity. For example, when Lucy, after being accosted by Lady Middleton's barbaric children, exclaims that Lady Middleton is "a sweet woman," the reader finds that "Marianne was silent" (Austen 149). In fact, Austen explains that "it was impossible for [Marianne] to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; and upon Elinor therefore the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell" (Austen 149-150). In this instance, Marianne can be seen in many ways as acting rationally—she does not speak what she feels to be untrue. And yet, through her virtuous silence, she lays the burden of telling polite lies on her sister, which underscores Marianne's self-absorption, as she refuses to submit to social niceties, but relies on her sister to buffer any censure they may

face because of her own actions. Indeed, her “freedom from concern about onlookers’ ideas of propriety” is most apparent when she refuses to dance with anyone but Willoughby during their courtship, accompanies him alone to Combe Magna, and then publically confronts him at a London ball when he treats her as a distant acquaintance. Ignoring her sister’s advice to “not betray what [she] feel[s] to every body present,” she demands Willoughby explain his cold behavior towards her. She cries, “Good God! Willoughby, what is the meaning of this? Have you not received my letters? Will you not shake hands with me?” (Austen 199). The informality of her language (“Good God!”) and her conduct (hand shaking was not something a polite lady did at this time), reflect her genuine expression of what she feels at that moment, as well as her complete disregard for those around her. This scene is all the more striking because it highlights the differences between Marianne and Willoughby; she is always open, free from social facades, and yet he easily falls back into them to preserve his prospects. But despite the worthiness of Marianne’s sensibility, Elinor is right to encourage her censorship, not because it is wrong for Marianne to question Willoughby’s behavior, but because it is unwise to expose her herself to the gossip of others because of one man’s misconduct. In short, it is only Marianne who directly suffers from her brash actions, even if they are meant to rebel against false social niceties that mask a genuine engagement with others. Perkins deftly distinguishes the difference between a heroine like Marianne and one like Maria when she notes that Marianne is “socially reformist in conception” but “never revolutionary.” Maria, in a revolutionary claim for female autonomy, rejects the dictates of social order that would tie her to an abusive husband and declares her adulterous relationship with Darnford sanctioned by higher moral codes. Marianne flirts with social censure but is ultimately not willing to irretrievably lose her respectability as a gentlewoman. Yet Marianne is more radical than Perkins’ reading allows. Granted, Marianne

avoids the “radical isolation” Maria faced at the end of *Wrongs of Woman*. However, given the small sphere Austen chooses to write about—the gentry class and domestic realm—Marianne’s actions are quite radical in nature, perhaps more so because she consciously “treads” the fine line between the respectable lady and the fallen woman. Marianne “advocates self-expression [for women] unhampered by conventional restraints” and thus, in a realm preoccupied with maintaining respectable appearances, is a radical voice (Johnson 60).

Marianne’s desirability as a wife is reinforced by the fact that she is courted by two eligible and vastly different suitors—the older Colonel Brandon and the younger John Willoughby—who value her for her taste, both in music and in poetry, and her physical beauty. Brandon feels as deeply as Marianne (or even as much as Willoughby professes to feel), yet refuses to perform his feelings. When he first hears the delights of Marianne’s musical performance at the Middletons’ he pays “her only the compliment of attention” which contrasts sharply with the “shameless want of taste” of the rest of the chatting crowd (Austen 72). Because of Brandon’s lack of performativity, however, Marianne can only conclude that he “has neither genius, taste, nor spirit” (Austen 87). Her initial misreading of this man indicates that, like Maria, Marianne has yet to properly read the men around her. She relies on the superficial aspects of sensibility and overt expressions of taste and feeling to determine the character of a person, rather than carefully analyzing him. Marianne’s development into a rational woman is seen when she later views Brandon as Elinor originally described him: “a sensible man, well-bred, well-informed, of gentle address, and...possessing an amiable heart” (Austen 87). He is sensible, like Marianne, and her marriage to him symbolizes the fact that she has reconciled herself to promoting gender equality within a domestic framework; she marries a man similar in understanding and taste, and moreover a man who values her as an individual. In fact, as he

admits to Elinor, “I once knew a lady who in temperament and mind greatly resembled your sister, who thought and judged like her” and declares that “when the romantic refinements of a young mind are obliged to give way, how frequently they are succeeded by such opinions as are but too common, and too dangerous!” (Austen 91). As he later reveals, the woman he once knew was his father’s rich ward, whom he loved, and who was forced to marry his elder brother, who did not love her. After an unhappy marriage, and subsequent divorce, Colonel Brandon finds her on her deathbed with a child produced out of wedlock. This child, Eliza, then becomes Colonel Brandon’s ward, and, like her mother, falls prey to seduction.<sup>54</sup> Thus this story reflects first Colonel Brandon’s affection for Marianne—she represents an unblemished version of his first love, with all the deep feelings and liveliness of his father’s ward—and his enjoyment of her “romantic refinements,” even if they do not serve him, because they mark a departure from the “too common” and “too dangerous” social banalities that would condone an unhappy marriage for the sake of title and money, but punish those who would find true happiness. Colonel Brandon is the ideal husband for Marianne because he feels deeply her loss of youthful idealism and appreciates her resistance to “too common” opinions. He moreover wishes to provide her with a safe haven to express herself, without facing the dangers Brandon’s first love or his ward, Eliza, endured. Within her limited sphere, then, Marianne finds liberation not in flaunting social conventions but in marrying a man that can better help her find emotional and intellectual fulfillment within those confines.

The intertwining subplots of Colonel Brandon’s love and his ward offer the reader a vision of what can happen to a woman of deep feeling and sound mind if she is improperly guided. Although Mrs. Jennings and many of the Dashwoods’ circle believe Eliza to be his

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<sup>54</sup> This name echoes that of Wollstonecraft’s sister, whom the writer helped escape from an abusive husband.

“natural” or illegitimate child, Eliza is not; he takes her in because of his love for his fallen, dying first love, suggesting that it is crucial here for Austen that the man Marianne eventually marries is in fact virtuous, although suspected of illicit acts, and not just seemingly so, as Willoughby is. The ill-fated first love finds her ruin through the wrongs inflicted upon her by a greedy guardian and a cold husband, much like Maria in *Wrongs of Woman*. Perhaps the most poignant part of this tragedy lies in the fact that her daughter, Eliza, suffers the same fate, not because her guardian, Colonel Brandon, controlled her too much, but because he allowed her too much freedom. While he provides for her and sees to her education, he too easily allows her to visit Bath with a friend, where she disappears, only to reemerge months later pregnant and abandoned by her lover (whom we later find is Willoughby), and completely destitute. Brandon rescues her and then establishes her quietly in the country.<sup>55</sup> However sordid the details of these stories might be, the most significant aspect of them is that they happen off the page. The reader hears only of these actions after the fact, in relation to how they affect those within the main body of the narrative. Austen does this to make these gothic-like tales ephemeral—they are the subject of hurried, gossipy whispers, or hushed, confessional drawing room discussions, as with Colonel Brandon when he outlines these events to Elinor. The secretive way in which variations of this story are repeated, first from speculations made by Mrs. Jennings, to Colonel Brandon’s confession of this history to Elinor, to Elinor’s repetition of it to Marianne, reflects the very real fear this society has of a woman’s complete and utter ruination. Yet because these actions are discussed as distant facts, removed from the main body of the story, they, too, are seen as remote

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<sup>55</sup> The plot of the ill-fated trip to Bath is more fully fleshed out in *Pride and Prejudice*, when the coquettish youngest Bennet sister, Lydia, goes to Bath with a friend and runs off with Wickham, only to be discovered in London and, fortunately, married to the man to save not only her virtue but the reputation of her sisters.

possibilities, ones, moreover, that can be prevented through solid guidance and continual self-improvement.

Marianne's romance with Willoughby, on the other hand, reads as a positive rewriting of *Wrongs of Woman*, in which much of Marianne's social circumstances—her loving, genteel family, her reduced income, and her own developing common sense—protect her from completely giving herself over to her passions for Willoughby and her struggle to assert gender equality. Willoughby is just as seductive to Marianne as Darnford is to Maria. When they first meet, it is a scene out of a great romance—the handsome stranger rescuing the damsel in distress. Marianne then finds “the same books, the same passages were idolized by each” (Austen 56).<sup>56</sup> Eventually “his society became...her most exquisite enjoyment” (Austen 57). This dramatic meeting creates an immediate intimacy between the two—a dangerous thing because now Marianne can only know him through that romantic image without ever getting to the heart and mind of the man. Words like “idolized” and “exquisite enjoyment” suggest that this is a relationship based on Marianne's idealization of Willoughby. Like Darnford's mastery of annotations, Willoughby's knowledge of literature purchases him a strong, seemingly moral character in Marianne's eyes. He is valued, not because he has taste, but because he shares hers. The failure of the idealized union of minds between Willoughby and Marianne is not the heroine's fault; she does not falter in her love for him even after he mysteriously flees to London at the height of their romance, nor does she renege on her performance of gender equality in the

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<sup>56</sup> The full passage succinctly describes the immediacy of their connection. When Willoughby visits Marianne after rescuing her from her tumble in the rain, she “proceeded to question him on the subject of books; her favorite authors were brought forward and dwelt upon with so rapturous a delight, that any young man of five and twenty must have been insensible indeed, not to become an immediate convert to the excellence of such works, however disregarded before. Their taste was strikingly alike. The same books, the same passages were idolized by each—or if any difference appeared, any objection arose, it lasted no longer than till the force of her arguments and the brightness of her eyes could be displayed. He acquiesced in all her decisions, caught all her enthusiasm; and long before his visits concluded, they conversed with the familiarity of a long-established acquaintance” (83).

face of adversity. Rather, it is Willoughby's weakness that ends the relationship and his dependence on a generous income to secure his happiness. Although he has earlier proven himself to be "a young man of good abilities, quick imagination, lively spirits, and open, affectionate manners," he in the end reveals himself to be a man whom "the world had made extravagant and vain...and vanity had made him cold-hearted and selfish" (Austen 84, 276). He can speak to matters of taste and sensibility, but when under pressure reverts to baser modes of survival. He deserts Marianne, even though he is on the verge of proposing to her, at his darkest hour when his past libertinism is revealed and brings about his disinheritance, and thus saves her, along with the guidance of Elinor, from a fate like Maria's. He goes in search of a woman with money; had Marianne a fortune like Maria's, it could reasonably be assumed that Willoughby would then waste no time in attaching himself permanently to her—and in the end conceivably bind Marianne to a marriage rooted in false gender equality. Marianne's constancy, both in her love and in her determination to live as an autonomous being, might have suffered at the whims of Willoughby's inconstancy.<sup>57</sup> Just as the union between Darnford and Maria crumbles after she declares him her husband, so too does the romance between Marianne and Willoughby fail just as it would seal the heroine's fate as permanently bound to a less than desirable man. This romance plot likewise serves as Austen's critique of romances that are rooted solely in similar taste and thinking because, just as in *Wrongs of Woman*, it is too easy for a heroine to admire someone because he thinks *like her* and so blind her to his real character.

Marianne's recovery from her Willoughby-induced illness serves as an irrevocable act of sense, and through it, firmly establishes Marianne not as a heroine of sensibility but as a rational

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<sup>57</sup> Austen draws a subtle parallel between Edward and Willoughby, just as she does more explicitly with Elinor and Lucy, in order to show that, while both men acted wrongly, it is Edward's moral steadfastness—he promises to marry Lucy when their engagement is revealed, because it is his duty to preserve her honor—that in the end rewards him with his ideal wife, while Willoughby forever suffers from the loss of Marianne.

woman. As Johnson dryly notes, “Women abused in love are expected to die” in the sentimental novels of this time (64). Marianne, however, rejects this dictum, in part from the help of her sister Elinor. Although it is Elinor who primarily nurses Marianne out of her illness, it is Marianne herself who resolves to use her ill-fated experience to further her own emotional and mental growth. She explains to Elinor,

My illness has made me think—It has given me leisure and calmness for serious recollection. Long before I was enough recovered to talk, I was perfectly able to reflect. I considered the past; I saw in my own behavior, since the beginning of our acquaintance with [Willoughby] last autumn, nothing but a series of imprudence towards myself, and want of kindness to others (Austen 350).

In short, Marianne has learned the power of self-reflection and can then honestly admit her own complicity in her pain—feats which Maria was never quite able to achieve. Her chief lamentation, in fact, is in how her own behavior caused much of her suffering and also, through her self-absorption, pain to others. Austen’s emphasis on analytical words like “think,” “serious recollection,” and “reflect,” highlight that Marianne, the once overly-emotional sister, is now capable of critical self-examination. It is essential here that Marianne uses only rational words to discuss her new understanding of the past, rather than more emotional rhetoric to justify her past behavior, because she shows, through her language, just how much she has internalized Elinor’s rational influence and continued to nourish it, while seemingly at the height of her emotional hysteria over Willoughby. Whereas the fate of Maria in Wollstonecraft’s novel is uncertain—she might die of a broken heart, or decide to live for her daughter—Marianne recovers, and becomes “determined to enter on a course of serious study” (Austen 348). Austen declares, “Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favorite maxims” (380). Although Austen is in one sense making fun of Marianne, the author’s hyperbolic assertion of

her heroine's "extraordinary fate" does truly point to Marianne's transformational rejection of the maxims upheld by heroines of sensibility. Marianne remains radical in her politics when she chooses her own future fate of sensible happiness. Marianne, in short, is a heroine, then, who performs her gender politics, yet avoids Maria's grave fate of having her politics discredited by her adulterous actions; Marianne, as a respectable woman, can better promote gender equality within the confines of respectable society, which makes her an example of the reformed heroine of sensibility, and so, a rational domestic woman.

### **Conclusion: Rational Ladies in the Domestic Realm**

Although on the surface, Austen's novel reads as the least radical of the three thus far discussed—it has none of the overt representations of female oppression in Wollstonecraft's novel nor the explicit tolerance agenda of Owenson's novel—its treatment of the female intellectual is still considered a problematic by its readers, a fact which becomes most notable in recent film adaptations of the novel, specifically the 2008 miniseries, the screenplay of which was written by Andrew Davies. Just as the Ang Lee film sought to sanitize the rational Elinor for the public by having her publicly break down at the end of the film, so, too, does the 2008 film, directed by John Alexander, seek to minimize the rational bent of that heroine. The character of Elinor, in the Alexander adaptation, is similarly expected to perform her emotions, in this case only when the viewer is looking. Frequent scenes feature Elinor retreating to the safety of nature for an emotional respite. One scene in particular features her breathing deeply in a cave near the ocean, a pained expression marring her face, an action more aligned with the traditional romantic heroine, or heroine of sensibility, than the rational Elinor who could not afford the luxury of escaping her family troubles in nature, but must instead be content to analyze her situation while going about her daily life.

The 2008 adaptation, moreover, contains Elinor's story within that of Marianne's—the traditionally more likeable, relatable of the sisters. The film opens with Eliza's seduction—told through a series of close-ups, which in their fragmentation of the scene mimic the pieces of Eliza's history that are pieced together through gossip and confession. Disappointingly, this early emphasis on the Wollstonecraftian scandal does just what Austen attempted not to do: make the scenes of seduction the focus of the novel. Rather, hers was a story that was meant to be rooted in the rational development of her heroines, and not in the savoring of the more illicit aspects of the plot—a thing which too many film adaptations of her novel dwell on. The fact that Marianne's story is designed to eclipse Elinor's likewise reflects how many readers and viewers continue to be unsettled by Elinor's "gender dissonance," which in turn suggests that the concept of the female intellectual, bereft of the allurements of the traditional heroine, leaves many uneasy with the threat to gender norms that she represents; Elinor's self-composure is likewise intimidating to many, as her resistance to the traditional heroine-mode requires constant self-reflection and discipline, making her gender deviation less than satisfying.

The film is at its best when it explains the ultimate compatibility of Colonel Brandon and Marianne. The scene in which Marianne finds Colonel Brandon tending to his hawk illustrates her dawning understanding that she can enjoy the future security he offers her without having to give up her proclivity towards sensibility. She watches as his hawk flies around the estate, only to land lightly on Colonel Brandon's arm. In this scene, the hawk is symbolic of Marianne, and his treatment of the animal shows that the wild Marianne can still be free, even as she commits herself to this man. Thus, the tense balance between her need for personal freedom, even in light of her earlier ill-judged actions, and her desire to marry him (and even love again), is resolved by Colonel Brandon's gentle understanding of her character, reflected in his treatment of the hawk.

In this way, the most recent film adaptation is most effective in its study of Marianne as she develops into a more rational woman.

More broadly, the excess of film and novel adaptations of Austen's work reflect her continued social resonance and yet likewise misappropriate her fiction of sensationalistic ends. Many of these adaptations and even sequels focus more often than not on the secondary, scandalous aspects of her novels, using characters like the ruined Eliza or the illegitimate offspring of rogues like Willoughby to craft highly romanticized—even at times bawdy—narratives that neglect Austen's emphasis on propriety and reason in women, even as they pay tribute to her work by writing beyond its scope. This sentimentalization of Austen's work today skews her canon so much, that it can read like that of Wollstonecraft's or Owenson's, despite Austen's preserved reputation as "a Lady." What these scandalous adaptations and sequels imply, in part, is a continued skepticism about the role of the female intellectual in the domestic sphere and in the ability of that role to produce lasting satisfaction for her audience, even if she herself is content. Even so, the problematic treatment of each heroine in the above-mentioned film adaptations points to the subtle but undeniably radical nature of Austen's reformulation of the female intellectual. While not well known in her own time, her popularity only increased steadily after her death, and future women writers—and their heroines—are invariably compared to Austen. Her insistence that women are rational creatures, and moreover that this revelation would not disrupt social order but improve it, laid the groundwork for future women writers to continue promoting gender equality and slowly reshape separate spheres ideology. The final chapter explores how one such author, Elizabeth Gaskell, is read as a type of Victorian Austen by her reviewers and, in this role (however inadvertently it is applied to her), uses Austen's

rational domestic heroine as a tool to promote social change through the breakdown of class and gender hierarchies.

## Chapter Four:

“I do not care to understand”: Governing Female Intelligence in Gaskell’s *North and South*

### **Introduction: Feminizing the Thinking Woman, Revising Manhood**

When Thornton proposes to Margret Hale in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (originally published in weekly installments from 1854 to 1855), she flatly rejects him.<sup>58</sup> In one final attempt to make her know his true feelings, Thornton tells her, “I know you despise me; allow me to say, it is because you do not understand me.” She responds, “I do not care to understand” (Gaskell 178). The theme of “understanding”—of one another, of their own sexual desires, of their need for intellectual autonomy—echoes throughout Gaskell’s novel, suggesting that for this author, education, both through classical learning and life experience, is a process through which the hero and heroine negotiate their feelings for one another; they rely on their rational minds to come to terms with their almost violent passion for one another and to teach them how to learn from each other. Thornton insists he “knows” what Margaret thinks of him, and yet is later able to acknowledge that at that time, he had no real knowledge of her as a person; Margaret explicitly resists “understanding,” which implies that though she has the ability to learn who Thornton is, she does not “care” to, or more precisely, is afraid to. Acknowledging that she has something to learn from him, just as he does from her, requires she give up many of her preconceived (Southern) notions about gender and the social order.

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<sup>58</sup> The scene is founded on a series of misreadings between the hero and heroine. Thornton is earlier forced to admit his love for this thinking woman so contrary to anyone he has met before when she attempts to save him from an angry mob. She flings her arms around him—a gesture that he and the rest of Milton read as a confession of her love for Thornton. Margaret, in turn, assumes that he proposes to her not out of love but to protect her virtue, which she called into question when she publicly threw her arms around Thornton. So Thornton is taken aback by her harsh rejection when she seemingly reveals her feelings for him to the world, while Margaret suffers nothing but shame for his seeming insistence on protecting her from public disgrace.

While the previous chapters chart the development of the intellectual woman from a sexually and politically transgressive figure to a rational, domestic (yet undomesticated) woman, this chapter focuses on how Gaskell resolves many of the early conflicts surrounding the female intellectual in her depiction of Margaret Hale, who embodies a still proper but boundary-crossing heroine by the middle of the Victorian era. Elizabeth Gaskell, and her heroine Margaret Hale in *North and South*, point to the growing acceptance of intellectual women in the 1850s and the necessity of breaking down separate spheres ideology in order to establish a revised social order. Gaskell speaks to her predecessors by invoking the feminist ideals of Wollstonecraft—Gaskell, too, believed in the necessity of properly educating women so that they could be better wives—and through her use of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* plot as a frame for *North and South*.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, her novel, as the title implies, is a national tale along the lines of Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl*, which attempts to promote national unity—in this case, the final romantic reconciliation between the hero and heroine of *North and South* argues for a better understanding between the Northern industrialist and their rural, Southern neighbors. Building on Owenson’s work, however, Gaskell insists that her heroine at once educate and be educated by the hero. An ideal companionable marriage is not, for Gaskell, in uniting persons of similar sensibilities as with Owenson, but, as with Austen, in binding together two often dissimilar but complementary

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<sup>59</sup> Stoneman writes, “Behind many of Elizabeth Gaskell’s ideas on the education and social role of women lies the tradition of rational feminism as expressed by Mary Wollstonecraft. In spite of the incongruity between Wollstonecraft’s Jacobinical, free-love image and Mrs. Gaskell’s demure matronliness, there is considerable congruity of ideas. Both believe that women must be treated as rational and responsible because subordination is contrary to Christianity and because only rational beings can be capable mothers. Both deplore the education of girls only to be pleasing to men, and attack the same conduct-book writers—Dr. Gregory and Lord Chesterfield in particular. Both believe that working women are often more ‘rational beings’ than ‘fine ladies’; both believe that sexual love causes more mischief than fulfillment and that friendship is a more rational basis for relationships of all kinds” (*Elizabeth Gaskell* 44). Gaskell perhaps “avoids public reference to Wollstonecraft to avoid appearing a ‘strong-minded woman’ or being associated with sexual freedom” (Stoneman *Elizabeth Gaskell* 44). In *The Politics of Story in Victorian England*, Rosemarie Bodenheimer notes that *North and South* “reaches back to Jane Austen both for its depiction of strong minded domestic virtue and for the social optimism of its *Pride and Prejudice* plot structure” (53).

forces that work together to produce a more progressive worldview.<sup>60</sup> In essence, Gaskell successfully combines the transgressive elements of Wollstonecraft's philosophical woman (or even the woman of natural learning) and the proper elements of Austen's rational, domestic woman in the creation of Margaret, so that her heroine is both sexually attractive and virtuous, intellectual and moral, thinking and feeling, and moreover productively occupies both the public and private spheres. Gaskell draws on Wollstonecraft's tenets set forth in *Vindication* that an educated woman makes a better wife and that a solid education can curb licentiousness in women; Gaskell then develops the latter point, suggesting through the trials Margaret faces, that an education does not just help a woman resist vice, but more significantly enables her to negotiate the tension between her often conflicting moral and sexual selves, so as to better understand herself and in turn make more rational decisions. Gaskell moreover asserts in her final novel one of Wollstonecraft's favorite maxims that "modesty must be equally cultivated by both sexes, or it will ever remain a sickly hot-house plant" (Wollstonecraft 258). Thus Gaskell lays the responsibility of self-control and the protection of female virtue not just at the woman's feet, but at the man's, as seen by Thornton's self-restraint that overpowers his strong sexual desire for Margaret. Gaskell likewise resolves the tensions between femininity and intellect that Owenson tried to, not by having female desirability in the marriage market take precedence over her masculine learning and public persona, but through revising what it means to be not only an ideal woman but also an ideal man. Similarly, the demands of the marriage market run in

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<sup>60</sup> R. A. York offers a compelling argument about how Margaret learns to adapt her assumptions about communication in order to grow and mature as an individual. In *Strangers and Secrets: Communication in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, York notes Margaret's assumptions that one can only communicate with people of similar sensibilities. York writes, "If this were true, no maturing would be possible, and no differences could ever be reconciled; North and South would be inescapably separate. That they can be brought together—with difficulty, against obstacles of chance and prejudice, in defiance of the norms that restrict intercourse between people of different origins and inclinations—is what Mrs. Gaskell sets out to show in the novel" (77).

tandem with the demands for social reform and the breakdown of separate spheres for Gaskell, suggesting that more than any of the authors discussed in this project, Gaskell best highlights how the personal is the political, and what occurs in the public realm likewise influences and is influenced by the private realm. In Gaskell's novel, then, separate spheres are no longer separate but productively interpenetrative. In order to emphasize the collapse between spheres, this Victorian author draws on Austen's novel, by depicting a domestic, rational heroine that she then moves fluidly into the public realm to promote social change, as seen when Margaret finds herself as a key player in Milton politics. In short, Gaskell weaves together the various threads of the previously discussed novels in order to construct a more cohesive female intellectual that not only resists gender norms but reforms them.

There are three intersecting issues that permeate the pages of *North and South* and ultimately establish the respectability of the thinking woman: the mutual education of the hero and heroine through their interactions with one another; the interpenetrable nature of mind and body (and sexual and intellectual stimulation), including the potential threat it poses to a woman's virtue; and the necessity of destabilizing gender roles by a complete reversal of social, sexual, and monetary power between the main characters in order to promote a marriage rooted in equality by the end of the novel. I argue that Gaskell weaves together these intersecting issues in order to portray an educated heroine who is morally proper, yet politically and publicly active, and who moreover retains her respectability in the face of sexual desire and deviation from gender norms. The manifestation of such a heroine at this point in time indicates not only the growing acceptance of the thinking woman in society, but also her increasing value as a figure who creates social stability and national unity. Gone is the sexually and politically transgressive heroine of Wollstonecraft or the wild thinking outsider of Owenson's novels, and in their place is

a much more rational, Austen-esque heroine who takes her domestic status and uses it to reform inequality in the public world.

The first of these issues surrounding the thinking woman's respectability, namely how Thornton and Margaret educate one another through their different worldviews, highlights the importance of democratizing education for Gaskell. The novel revolves around Margaret Hale as she is uprooted from her Eden-like home in the South and forced to find her way in the Northern industrial town of Milton. Margaret's subsequent forays into the public realm of the factory workers, as well as her struggle to keep her family together after her father's religious dissension, highlight the assertion by many feminist scholars that the private domestic realm of women is inherently political.<sup>61</sup> What happens within Margaret's home in essence mirrors the social unrest woven into the very social fabric of England at this time, and in the end, proves to be the site for reconciling the larger social conflicts between the factory masters and their men and the Northern industrialists and the Southern landed gentry.<sup>62</sup> Foundational to my discussion of the thinking woman in this chapter is Gaskell's insistence on the democratization of education in a much more explicit way than her predecessors. Margaret represents the classical book education of the middle-class gentry, and Thornton embodies the real-world knowledge of business, poverty, and economic struggle. Thornton's primary conflict is rooted in his desire to finish the formal education he had to abandon at an early age to support his family after his

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<sup>61</sup> As Robin B. Colby notes in "*Some Appointed Work to Do*": *Women and Vocation in the Fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell*, "[F]eminists have long insisted, the 'personal'—what one does at home, in the domestic sphere—is political" (18). Catherine Gallagher supports this in *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction* when she emphasizes how the moral influence of women over men connects public and private life in this novel (168).

<sup>62</sup> While there is an obvious attempt to reconcile middle and lower classes in this novel, Rosemarie Bodenheimer rightly notes that this novel also attempts to heal the tension between "traditional landed gentry" and "the rising business entrepreneurs" (16). The conflict arises out of the gentry's fear of their fading lifestyle in the face of Industrialization; gone would be the lifestyle writers like Jane Austen so carefully documented and in its place would arise increasing urbanization and a middle class founded on trade and commerce.

father killed himself. For Thornton, finishing this education through tutoring sessions with Margaret's father makes him a respectable gentleman, rather than just a working man. In contrast, Margaret has all the benefits of a good education, between her early childhood in Helstone and her time in London with rich relatives as an adolescent. Her tastes are refined enough to discern the difference between Dante's classic poems, which she reads, and Washington Irving's popularized *The Tales of Alhambra*, which Thornton's less educated sister references in an attempt to appear sophisticated. Yet even Margaret's education is not complete, because she must learn how to understand her new urban environment and new type of poverty and struggle that come with industrialization and her family's own loss of reliable income. Still, Margaret is clearly more educated than the average Milton woman and this is reflected in how Thornton views her differently from other women. He literally reads Margaret as an alien body, distinct from any woman he has met before, because she is a thinking woman. Gaskell offers detailed descriptions of Thornton's obsessive ruminations on Margaret's figure—from her tapered fingers to her proud face, to the way her body pressed against his when she tries to protect him from a mob—in order to highlight how Margaret's very intellectual identity solidifies her femininity in Thornton's eyes. Margaret becomes synonymous with real womanhood for Thornton because of her marked difference to other women with whom he associates. This allows him to reshape what femininity means for him and in turn reevaluate the makeup of his own masculinity, so that his self-described brutish figure becomes one associated with deep compassion and feeling for others (traditionally female virtues).

My final chapter shows that in order for the intellectual woman to find a stable place in respectable society, a redefinition of masculinity is required. Picking up where my chapter on Austen leaves off, I show that the educated woman pushes a man to reconcile two conflicting

halves of himself, in this case, the educated gentleman and the factory owner. On a larger social scale, the equality imbedded in their eventual union serves as an allegory for a more stable cross-class interaction that would better reconcile the factory workers of the Industrial Revolution with their masters. As Carolyn Lesjack argues, Gaskell worked to enlighten “the ignorant middle classes” about the lower and working classes, and the poverty they struggled with during the economic hardship of the Hungry 40s (brought on by crop failures), and the difficulties of factory life brought on by the Industrial Revolution (30). Jill L. Matus develops the idea that the “intense emotional experience[s]” of Gaskell’s characters mirror the social upheaval of the time (27). However, I would suggest that the importance of these characters’ emotional and intellectual lives in fact overshadows social instability, thereby facilitating the breakdown of traditional order in an effort to establish a more progressive society.<sup>63</sup> With this breakdown of traditional order comes the breakdown of conventional assumptions about the marriage market and gender norms, and the potential to reshape society so that it is rooted more firmly in equality between classes and sexes. It is Margaret who rescues Thornton’s failing factory at the end of the novel by financing its reopening, and it is Margaret who resolves the class dispute between Thornton and the factory worker, Mr. Higgins. In order to allow Margaret to help him, Thornton must give up his preconceived notions of the woman as inherently domestic; in fact, he must accept the collapse between spheres, as seen when Margaret enters the business realm to help him, and Thornton returns to Margaret’s original domicile in Helstone to better understand both her intellectual and domestic roots. Through this, Margaret navigates domesticity and the public

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<sup>63</sup> Bodenheimer writes that *North and South* “represents a breakthrough in the matters of conceptualization which dominated the industrial fictions of the 1840s. Revising paternalistic images of government, views of the working class, and the separate woman’s sphere, Gaskell’s narrative is itself an enactment of the experimental social activity it recommends, for it takes us through a gradual breakdown of traditional ways of thinking about society and into the confusion generated by the process of working toward new ones” (55).

arena fluidly. In return, Thornton earns an educated wife who values him through her ability to buy in—both literally and figuratively—to his factory life. He likewise cultivates his own feminine qualities of fidelity and compassion, which in turn make him a better mill owner. Thus, Thornton’s attraction to Margaret is a reconciliation between his manufacturer’s identity and his gentlemanly aspirations, and by extension, a compromise between social classes.

Essential to Margaret and Thornton’s mutual schooling is their distinctly sexual education that teaches them not only what overwhelming passion feels like, but also how to curb that passion with sound judgment and an investment in personal virtue and social propriety. Most readers of this novel cannot ignore its sexually charged content—from Thornton’s graphic ruminations of Margaret’s body to Margaret’s physical interactions with him—which leads me to argue that, for both Margaret and Thornton, their relationship is as much a sexual education as it is a union between complementary minds. Gaskell offers a quite controversial, if unintentional, discussion of the often unspoken question of female sexuality and of the conflicting desires, even among progressive thinkers like Gaskell, to educate women so they can be autonomous beings and yet still withhold information about sex that could make women act autonomously, or more precisely, lasciviously, in romantic situations. Patsy Stoneman succinctly notes that writers of the mid-nineteenth century could not escape the conundrum of wanting to educate women and yet omit frank discussions of sexuality in deference to strict Victorian moral codes. She writes that there “is an inconsistent desire to educate girls to exercise independent judgment, while at the same time denying them information that would enable them to become ‘a law unto themselves’ in sexual matters” (Stoneman “Gender” 140).<sup>64</sup> The obvious concern is that in

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<sup>64</sup> Stoneman elaborates on Gaskell’s reserve on sexual matters in her biography of the writer. She writes that Gaskell “never openly speaks of sexuality and desire... This reticence was reinforced not only by Victorian ideology but also by the conscious conviction, which she shared with Mary Wollstonecraft, that sexual attraction is too unpredictable, evanescent and uncontrollable to form more than an incidental part of a rational life” (Stoneman

teaching women about sexuality, they would become sexually voracious beings; this a subtle moment in which the memory of Wollstonecraft as a philosophical wanton lingers in the background of the conversation surrounding the education of women, even fifty years later. To avoid this fear of sexual voracity in educated women, Gaskell attempts to find a solution to this problem by forming a heroine who is cautious, knowing that she needs to question separate spheres ideology within “existing social patterns” (Stoneman “Gender” 139). This is perhaps why she is not traditionally considered a popular heroine, especially with feminists. Like Austen’s Elinor, Margaret is no Jane Eyre, whose openly passionate nature and violent rejection of social norms act as an overt feminist stance. This is also why Gaskell is “not an obvious feminist” for she, too, seeks to reform gender relations within the confines of her domestic persona (Stoneman “Gender” 143). Margaret’s chief conflict in this novel is being able to recognize herself as both a desirable figure to men and as a woman who is capable of sexual feelings—and that these facts are not mutually exclusive to her status as a respectable lady. It is her analytical mind, like Elinor Dashwood’s, that enables Margaret to navigate these feelings and find a way of reconciling her baser emotions with her rational mind. Gaskell then hints at a solution to curb the temptations thinking women like Marianne or Maria face by educating women in matters of sexuality, even if she does not explicitly address the question of educating women about sexuality. Similarly, Gaskell also emphasizes the importance of tempering male sexual desire and cultivating modesty in him, as well as his female counterpart. For example, while Thornton is violently in love with Margaret, thinking often of her physicality and femininity, he always expresses his desire for her within the constraints of social propriety—he asks for her hand in marriage, rather than arranging a ruinous seduction like Darnford, Horatio,

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*Elizabeth Gaskell* 32). I would, however, suggest that her novel inadvertently shows the potential for the educated woman to actually use her rational mind to better navigate her sexual feelings without succumbing to wanton behavior.

or Willoughby might, and never once tries to force her affections. Thus, Gaskell underscores that a solid sexual education teaches men and women to better understand their desires and cultivate modesty, so as to prevent untoward behavior.

Gaskell stands apart from the other women writers I have considered in her ability to be both a well-known and respected public figure (if sometimes a touch scandalous), and also inherently domestic. In retrospect, she seems to have found the perfect balance between the politics of her novels and the homey persona of wife and mother she put forth to the public. Her balance seems to stem from the fact that she only posed political dilemmas in her novels—such as the effect of Industrialization on cross-class relations in *Mary Barton*, or *North and South*, or the woman question in *Ruth*—yet carefully avoided explicitly advocating either a liberal or conservative agenda; rather, she relied on her “rational sanity of judgment” to illustrate only the importance of understanding others and emphasizing personal, human connection over overtly political stances (McVeagh 2). In short, she reframed her political agenda in terms of one’s moral obligation to understand and help those around her. She also drew on the person who had become by her time the quintessential lady writer, Jane Austen, invoking her in her careful cultivation of her own image as a lady and using many of Austen’s novels as the frameworks for her own. While many feminist scholars consider Gaskell, like her heroine, to have been more conservative in terms of gender politics, seemingly supporting separate spheres ideology with her conventional resolutions in her romantic narratives, Gaskell was in reality a canny woman who understood the value of promoting gender equality within the confines of her domestic realm. As Stoneman writes, “The ‘separate sphere’ which could be a prison could also be, within its limits, a field for autonomous action, producing odd contradictions in women’s lives” (Stoneman *Elizabeth Gaskell* 22). Gaskell, in essence, drew on her powers as a domestic,

educated woman to change gender ideology from within that system, and yet at the same time dealt with the “contradiction” of being both a domestic woman and a woman writer by emphasizing her femininity (she is a wife and mother) as equal to, if not more important than, her writing persona. Thus, her dual status as a writer and wife suggests that though her politics may, in many ways, have been as radical as Wollstonecraft’s, her actions themselves were not necessarily going to be equally radical or transgressive as Wollstonecraft’s were. Although she, at times, faced social censure because of the candid nature of some of her works, her femininity and firmly established status as a domestic woman inevitably overshadowed her potential for political transgression. Gaskell deftly oscillated between her image as a proper lady and a public, political figure without losing her respectability. She then applied this chameleonic nature to her heroines in an attempt to make the educated woman a respectable and valuable member of society.

### **The Lady Author: Gaskell as the Victorian Austen**

Gaskell deliberately constructed her persona as a proper Victorian lady, who, through her dual sphere-crossing roles as wife/mother and writer, acted as a national educator and moral guide. Much of Gaskell’s success in depicting herself as a lady lies in the fact that contemporary reviewers often favorably compare Gaskell to Jane Austen. Although Gaskell didn’t appear to consciously invoke her predecessor, her use of Austen’s plots and her own emphasis on being both a proper lady and a writer made it easy for her readers to think of her as a Victorian Austen.<sup>65</sup> John Malcolm Ludlow, in the *North British Review* (May 1853), described Gaskell’s

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<sup>65</sup> It is questionable whether Gaskell would purposely dub herself a Victorian Austen, considering that she associated with women writers like Charlotte Bronte, who considered Austen’s work to be cold and lifeless, if well crafted. In a letter to W. S. Williams, Bronte writes, “I have likewise read one of Miss Austen’s works “Emma”—read it with interest and with just the degree of admiration which Miss Austen herself would have thought sensible and suitable—anything like warmth or enthusiasm; anything energetic, poignant, heartfelt, is utterly out of place in

characterization in her novel, *Ruth*, as “almost perfect, and wrought out with the truth and finish of a Miss Austen” (*Critical Heritage* 279). Another reviewer in the *Manchester Examiner and Times*, this time discussing *Wives and Daughters* on February 27, 1866, wrote, “Like Miss Austen, Mrs. Gaskell was preeminently a character painter; but the characters that she painted were more refined, and the stories by which she delineated them were more poetical than any work of Miss Austen’s” (*Critical Heritage* 468). Yet others praised her novels, particularly *North and South*, as works that would be remembered by posterity.<sup>66</sup> An anonymous reviewer in *Saturday Review* on May 24, 1866 likened Gaskell to Austen but was quick to note that in “two respects Miss Austen, with all her charms, is found wanting. She has neither the refinement nor the pathos of Mrs. Gaskell” (*Critical Heritage* 481).<sup>67</sup> What these reviewers repeatedly stressed was how Gaskell wrote beyond Austen’s literary vision; this is chiefly apparent in her graphic (almost gothic) descriptions of her characters’ mental and emotional turmoil and her ability to make readers empathize with her characters.<sup>68</sup> It would also seem that Gaskell opened up

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commending these works: all demonstration the authoress would have met with a well-bred sneer, would have calmly scorned as outré and extravagant... she ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound: the Passions are perfectly unknown to her” (127). Gaskell, I argue, brings the “Passions” and “anything energetic, poignant, heartfelt” to the plots of Austen and thus appropriately “ruffles her reader.”

<sup>66</sup> In December of 1865, David Mason wrote in *Macmillan’s Magazine* that “it is impossible to determine now the exact position which Mrs. Gaskell will hold ultimately amongst English writers of our day. It will be a high one, if not amongst the highest. Miss Austen’s popularity has survived that of many writers of her time, whose merits were perhaps greater in themselves. So, if I had to say which of those novels we talked most of now will be read when all are dead and buried, I should give preference to ‘Cranford’ and ‘North and South,’ above novels which seem to excel them in innate power” (*Critical Heritage* 517).

<sup>67</sup> The full description reads as follows: “In contrast with *Emma*, with *Mansfield Park*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, there can be no question as to Mrs. Gaskell’s pre-eminence. In both writers there is the same freedom from exaggeration, the same delight in the ludicrous aspects of daily life, the same vivacity, the same perception of the imaginative reality of their creations, and the same recognition of the complexity of human character. But in two respects Miss Austen, with all her charms, is found wanting. She has neither the refinement nor the pathos of Mrs. Gaskell. Her most prominent and best-drawn women have usually a dash of vulgarity about them. With Mrs. Gaskell, on the contrary, even her snobs lose a certain portion of that intellectual vulgarity which makes the real snob so grievous an infliction... Pathos, again, does not enter at all into Miss Austen’s novels. With Mrs. Gaskell it is one of her greatest charms” (*Critical Heritage* 481).

<sup>68</sup> Even today, many scholars look at how connected Gaskell’s work is to Austen. In *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel*, Ruth Bernard Yeazell links the plot of another of Gaskell’s novels, *Wives and*

Austen's "little bit of ivory" to address current political concerns. As with Owenson, Gaskell was preoccupied with national unity as much as she concerned herself with the question of female education, implicitly highlighting through her novels the difficulty of individual growth without the aid of widespread social reform, as Wollstonecraft's tragic life all too well outlined. Once Austen favorably portrayed the thinking heroine as a rational domestic woman, Gaskell later had the mobility to take that firm foundation and use it to move that heroine into the public sphere in order to show her value as a national educator.

Gaskell, like Austen, was careful to downplay the "gender dissonance" (to continue using Perkins' phrase) of being a woman writer in the public sphere. She instead leaned on her persona—one of many she self-consciously embodies—as a rational domestic woman, a figure whom Austen went a long way toward making respectable. Just as Austen published under the title "a Lady," Gaskell published her works under Mrs. Gaskell, clearly establishing herself as a wife and mother first, which then softened her more masculine tendency of writing and publishing novels. She was considered by Lord David Cecil to be the "typical Victorian lady" and "all a woman was expected to be" (184). Richard Monckton Milnes eulogized Gaskell "as a most genial and delightful lady, who gave light and comfort to her home and pleasure to every society she entered" (*Critical Heritage* 506). Even in her private letters, Gaskell emphasized the importance of domestic duties. While this may read as Gaskell's acquiescence to separate spheres ideology, in reality her emphasis on women as primarily domestic served her subversive gender politics. Stoneman calls Gaskell's seeming submissiveness to gender norms in her private life—a sharp contrast to her politically minded writing persona—as "pragmatic

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*Daughters*, to Austen's *Mansfield Park*. She also connects the unhappy marriage of the Gibsons in *Wives and Daughters* to the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice* (211). Lucy Poate Stebbins, in *A Victorian Album: Some Lady Novelists of the Period* also draws a correlation between the two authors (126), as does Arthur Pollard in his biography (231033), and W. A. Craik in *Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel* (292).

negotiations” (“Gender” 133). She further writes, “The well-traveled and urbane Gaskell knew more intimately than either the isolated Brontes or the modern reader the details of social expectations for women” (Stoneman “Gender” 133). In essence, Gaskell’s “pragmatic negotiations” hinge on her ability to acknowledge the importance of women in the domestic sphere in order to gain ground in the public one. After the Wollstonecraft scandal, Gaskell knew that she could not push her tolerance agenda without also strategically embodying the gender norms she sought to undermine; in other words, by portraying herself as a woman who functioned well in both the private and public realm, she undermined concerns that the intellectual woman scorned domestic duties and was synonymous with a transgressive lifestyle. Thus, she then embodied a rational domestic woman who extended her domain to the public realm in order to educate her proverbial children on human understanding and compassion.

Although posterity has judged Gaskell to be the quintessential Victorian lady with an investment in teaching compassion for human suffering, she was not without her critics in her own time, who judged her to be overreaching in her ambitions, though never explicitly transgressive. Critics’ censor of her was especially prevalent after she published the frank biography of Charlotte Bronte, which discussed Bronte’s love for her married teacher, and continued to write social novels like *Ruth* (which features a fallen, yet moral woman like Wollstonecraft’s Maria) and *North and South* (which critiques the ruling class and Industrialization).<sup>69</sup> One critic derided her for “the recklessness with which she has seized on a subject...which she has so misrepresented” (*Critical Heritage* 124). After her death, Henry Fothergill Cholely, in *Athenaeum* on November 18, 1865, wrote that Gaskell was, “if not the most popular, with small question, the most powerful and finished female novelist of an epoch

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<sup>69</sup>Deidre D’Abertis neatly summarizes the often overlooked scandalous nature of Gaskell. She writes that she “offended, even outraged critics with not one but several politically engaged works of fiction. She was threatened with libel suits by individuals angered over her handling of sensitive material in her role as biographer” (10).

singularly rich in female novelists” (*Critical Heritage* 508). He mitigated his praise of her, however, with a critique of her “intense but prejudiced desire to right what is wrong” (*Critical Heritage* 508).<sup>70</sup> Gaskell then remains a lady, but one of questionable values or sense. Although he critiqued her “prejudiced” views on current social issues, her fault lay not in her overt political stances but in an ethical desire to “right what is wrong.” It would seem her “recklessness” undermined her claims of being neatly contained within her domestic sphere and yet she was still considered by some to be “the most powerful and finished female novelist of an epoch.” We might wonder how she avoided being completely dismissed by critics for her radical—and by many critics’ standards, inappropriate—political beliefs, when her novels had the potential to make her just as sensational as Wollstonecraft or Owenson. The answer partially lies in her married status and her continual reinforcement of her domesticity; she was always “Mrs. Gaskell” to the public. Similarly, she is critiqued not for her reformist agendas but her “intense” impulse to help others, as a woman (or mother) might reach out to someone in need. Thus, by maintaining her status as a respectable, married woman, and fulfilling her social obligations of motherhood, she was allowed to be well intentioned but misguided in her desire to “right what is wrong.” She was likewise allowed to voice her concern as long as her reading of current events was rooted more in questions of morality or ethics, rather than overt politics.

Gaskell also resisted critics’ attempts draw out her political beliefs beyond her tolerant, centrist views; she instead insisted she “strive[s] more and more against deciding whether any other person is doing right or wrong” (*Letters* 424). Her novels, then, don’t accuse anyone for

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<sup>70</sup> Other reviewers echo these sentiments. The *Saturday Review* (November 18, 1865) wrote that Gaskell was a writer who “without being unique, or in any sense extraordinarily original in her range of subjects or in her method of treatment, sometimes not rising above a level which has been reached by many other English story-tellers...sometimes one-sided in social views, sometimes indiscreet in following her personal impulses too blindly,...has yet achieved a success which will live long after her” (*Critical Heritage* 509). They go on to critique novels like *North and South* as one-sided (*Critical Heritage* 509).

continuing class conflict or social oppression, but insist on the necessity of understanding others for social unity. Her politics, like Austen's, were firmly entrenched in the female concerns of relationships. Gaskell further eschewed confronting accusations of her problematic writings by never directly admitting that she intentionally acted in ways that would cause others to question her domestic values. In a coy letter to her friend Tottie Fox, Gaskell wrote, "I think I must be an improper woman without knowing it, I do manage to shock people" (*Letters* 223). Here she avoided taking direct responsibility for potentially shocking others; the blame seemed to lie in how the public read her, while she remained ever an innocent. Her tone was playful, as if she did not understand why she would be the subject of scandal or gossip. It is hard not to read this letter as a strategic rejection of any claims she had to being a political radical, even more so because she did this not in a public venue, but in the personal, private realm of letters.<sup>71</sup>

The conflicting conversation surrounding Gaskell illustrates the growing concern about women's place in society at this time. The discussion of gender reforms in education, marriage, and labor at the turn of the century was then transformed into the Victorian era's "woman question," or specifically, the promotion of women's rights (Hamilton 182).<sup>72</sup> Although this topic did not become prominent in this particular formulation until the publication of John Stuart Mill's *Subjection of Women* in 1869, the 1840s—when Gaskell began to write—showed many women at the forefront of political debates, which in turn laid the groundwork for public debates

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<sup>71</sup> As we know from her biographers, Gaskell was highly conscious of how her letters revealed the type of woman she was. She frequently asked correspondents to burn letters she feared could be misread should someone publish them. She even had a secret code in letters to her publisher that indicated which parts he should burn and which he could keep (D'Albertis 13). This points to her desire to control how she is read by the public and her fear of having a biographer tell parts of her personal history she doesn't want exposed. The scandal of her biography on Charlotte Bronte perhaps made her more wary of how her personal writings could be so misread.

<sup>72</sup> Stoneman echoes this when she writes, "During Gaskell's lifetime 'woman's role' and the relation of men and women within their separate worlds were the subjects of endless prescriptions and debate, and it was among these shifting positions that she formed her opinions and began to write" ("Gender" 132).

on women's rights. Gaskell found herself in the midst of a conversation that later questioned separate spheres ideology in a way that had not been so explicitly attempted since the 1790s. Gaskell's compartmentalization of her various personas, or as she called them, her "mes," underscores how she negotiated her public and private selves, as well as her moral and social selves—and avoided being called to task for being more public writer than domestic woman. She wrote of her selves in the context of choosing a home:

One of my mes is, I do believe, a true Christian—(only people call her socialist and communist), another of my mes is a wife and mother....Then again I've another self with a full taste for beauty and convenience...How am I to reconcile all these warring members? I try to drown myself (my *first* self,) by saying it's Wm [my husband] who is to decide...only that does not quite do" (*Letters* 69 qtd. Stoneman *Elizabeth Gaskell* 33).

Although this discussion of her various "mes" was grounded in a domestic decision, it extended far beyond the scope of her home life. She used her religious persona as an example as how she is often misread by the public; she cared for the welfare of others, but was not a "communist" or "socialist" as she claimed people call her. Her tone here was again playful, hinting that she aimed only at promoting the religious virtue of kindness to others, rather than attempting any overhaul of England's political machinery. In contrast to her religious self was her other self that liked "beauty and convenience," emphasizing her feminine, middle class qualities. Her coupling of wife and mother as one self reveals that those two terms were synonymous for her. Here her writing persona was implicitly included in her gentle rejection of her "communist" or "socialist" leanings; she downplayed her writing "mes" here by not directly addressing it. Yet what is most significant about her discussion of her "mes" is that she did not favor one "mes" over another—they were all important facets of her overall character. The closest she came to emphasizing one "mes" over another was in her assertion of her moral, or in her eyes, religious "mes" over any overt political "mes" she might have had, denouncing those political labels she had been accused

of embodying. Unlike other female writers like Owenson or Wollstonecraft, then, she resisted placing her writing persona above her other “mes.”<sup>73</sup>

Yet despite her discussion of her various “mes,” Gaskell was not without her conflicted feelings about women’s roles and their proper sphere. She advocated a balance between a woman’s domestic duties and her writing, and yet noted how singular to women this conflict was—men could be solely writers, but never women. She wrote to Tottie Fox,

One thing is pretty clear, *Women*, must give up living an artist’s life, if home duties are to be paramount. It is different with men, whose home duties are so small a part of their life. However... assuredly a blending of the two is desirable. (Home duties and the development of the Individual I mean)... but the difficulty is where and when to make one set of duties subserve and give place to the other. I have no doubt that the cultivation of each tends to keep the other in a healthy state,—my grammar is all at sixes and sevens I have no doubt but never mind if can pick out my meaning (*Letters* 68 qtd. Stoneman *Elizabeth Gaskell* 34).

What is most striking about her letter is that fact that her “grammar is all at sixes and sevens” as she attempted to figure out how to best balance her “artist’s life” with her “home duties.” She deferred to her domestic life, noting its “paramount” importance, but also clearly distinguished between her responsibilities as a wife and mother, and her desire to develop herself as an “Individual.” The breakdown of her grammar, as she saw it, became the manifestation of her conflict over deferring to her domestic duties; she desired a balance between her public and private life and yet did not quite know how to do that, given the social expectations placed on a woman at this time. Her struggle to clearly define herself as both a woman and a writer influenced her portrayal of domestic but outward-moving heroines. For Gaskell, entering the

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<sup>73</sup> Unlike Charlotte Bronte, Gaskell never felt it necessary to separate herself from conventional life in order to be a writer. Bronte asked her, “Do you, who have so many friends,—so large a circle of acquaintances,—find it easy, when you sit down to write, to isolate yourself from all those ties, and their sweet associations, so as to be your *own woman*, uninfluenced or swayed by the consciousness of how your work may affect other minds; what blame or sympathy may it call forth?” (*The Brontes* 409). And yet to be her “*own woman*”, as Bronte wrote, Gaskell did not feel the need to isolate herself from society and rather appeared to enjoy her domestic duties. This was due in part to her Unitarian background that emphasized the importance of women as domestic educators.

public realm as a woman was a constant negotiation between her homely duties and her public goals.

Part of what enabled Gaskell to so deftly navigate the nuances of her public and private selves was her education. Unlike her predecessors, Gaskell was formally schooled and unusually well-educated for a Victorian woman, a fact that most historians and scholars attribute to her Unitarian upbringing. Unitarians believed that both men and women needed to be well-educated so as to better teach children and be productive members of society—ideals which ran in tandem with the feminist agenda Wollstonecraft advocated fifty years earlier. As Coral Lansbury writes, “[T]o be born a woman in the Victorian era was to enter a world of social and cultural deprivation unknown to man. But to be born a woman and a Unitarian was to be released from much of the prejudice and oppression enjoined upon other women” (11). Already Gaskell had more mobility than the average Victorian woman, including more movement between public and private spheres, because of her religious orientation. She also took on the Unitarian belief that educated women make better mothers—education, for Unitarians, began in the home, and so a learned woman would be at the forefront teaching children how to be moral, rational adults. Essentially, Gaskell’s educated status reinforced the feminist argument that the domestic is the political because she emphasized that the foundation of England’s future lay in a woman’s ability to properly educate her children and prepare them to be productive members of society. In this way Gaskell also acted as a national educator in her role as writer, attempting to instruct her public on how to create a more moral and progressive social order.

Gaskell was successful in defining herself as a respectable lady in the long term, as critics of later eras accept her formulation. While her values were sometimes questioned by critics in her era, David Cecil, in his 1934 *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction*, solidified

Gaskell as a “typical Victorian lady” and “all a woman was expected to be” (184). He reconciles her public, masculine voice by emphasizing her femininity—just as Gaskell did in her lifetime. What made the difference here was that Cecil, as a man, approved of her, and wrote during a time in which women increasingly occupied the public sphere. Cecil convinced readers of Gaskell’s virtue by contrasting her with other women writers of her era who did not embody domestic virtues. He wrote of George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte:

Ugly, dynamic, childless, independent, contemptuous of the notion that women should be confined to that small area of family and social interests which was commonly regarded as the only proper province of their sex; fiercely resentful of the conventions that keep them within it—at every turn they flout the standards which were set up before the women of their day. In the place of the placid dove cotes of Victorian womanhood, they were eagles...But we only have to look at a portrait of Mrs. Gaskell, soft-eyed, beneath her charming veil, to see that she was a dove (97-98).

Cecil relied on Gaskell’s feminine physicality—he looked at her portrait—to establish her as a “dove” or virtuous Victorian lady. It is impossible to read Cecil’s reference to Bronte and Eliot as “eagles” (traditionally masculine birds) without thinking of Eliot’s famously unattractive features or Bronte’s plain ones. Here the physical attributes of the women mirrored their virtues. He equated Eliot’s and Bronte’s lack of feminine beauty with their rejection of the “social interests which [are] commonly regarded as the only proper province of their sex.” Cecil’s sharp language when he refers to the two other women writers—they were “fiercely resentful,” “ugly,” “childless,” and “contemptuous” of Victorian womanhood—underscores the fact that their writing and feminist politics were undermined by their more open rejection of social norms. Gaskell, on the other hand, could promote her agenda precisely because she occupied “the placid dove cotes of Victorian womanhood.” In retrospect, Gaskell was a figure who gracefully occupied the domestic and public realms and worked from within separate spheres ideology to promote gender equality; she then shaped her heroines to be figures who,

educated but still feminine like herself, gracefully entered the public realm and served as educators to those around them.

### **Viewing the Feminine: The Figure of the Thinking Woman**

Margaret Hale's femininity in this novel enables her to enter the public realm while appearing to be non-threatening; the vivid descriptions of Margaret's womanly figure establish that her education does not conflict with her feminine graces, but enhances it. Just as Cecil insisted that Gaskell's dove-like beauty proves both her domestic and authorial virtue, Gaskell in turn emphasizes Margaret's female physicality in order to soften her masculine actions and rational mind and make those traits more alluring to the male gazer. Yet before Gaskell details Margaret's feminine graces, she highlights her heroine's more masculine characteristics of physical and intellectual labor. Margaret is a heroine meant to deviate from the gender stereotypes embodied in her cousin Edith (Colby 53). The novel opens with the languid Edith—moneyed, spoiled, and concerned with very little beyond her upcoming wedding. She falls asleep on the couch after dinner, the perfect picture of a golden angel. In the meantime, Margaret is busy with wedding preparations, packing for her journey back to Helstone, and helping her Aunt Shaw entertain wedding guests by modeling their new Indian shawls.<sup>74</sup> Although much of her work in the opening chapter is domestic, it establishes Margaret as an active woman and foreshadows her vigorous lifestyle in Milton.

Margaret's industry—so contrary to the languid living of Edith—is synonymous with her ever-active mind. Gaskell writes of Margaret's return to Helstone:

When Margaret had been here before, she has brought down with her a great box of books, recommended by masters or governesses, and had found the summer's day all too

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<sup>74</sup> As York writes, "The world in which Margaret lives at first is a banal one, dominated by thoughts of success, money, comfort, and self-display; it is a world in which not much can be said that is original" (79). York goes on to suggest, "The North is not all that much better" (79).

short to get through the reading she had to do before her return to town. Now there were only the well-bound English Classics, which were weeded out of her father's library to fill up the small book-shelves in the drawing room. Thomson's Seasons, Hayley's Cowper, Middleton's Cicero, were by far the latest, newest, and most amusing. The book-shelves did not afford much resource (20).

Gaskell establishes that Margaret not only received a decent education—she had masters and governesses—but also continues her studies on her own, so much so that she has exhausted the contents of her father's library. Her mental restlessness, hinted at in her remorse over not having “a great box of books” to bring with her to Helstone, indicates her need to be constantly intellectually stimulated. Yet Gaskell's description of Margaret's reading point to the limits of her genteel education and gentry lifestyle. The “newest” of her father's books, Hayley's biography of Cowper (1803-1804), was published over twenty years earlier. Her life in Helstone is stagnant, as symbolized by her father's collection that has not been developed beyond the classics of the eighteenth century, and yet in its very stagnancy, suggests that education is necessarily a continual process, without which there is no personal growth.

Her intellectual pursuits don't end when she moves to Helstone. For example, she is vexed when she has to prepare the house for a visit from Thornton when they first move there because it takes time away from her studies. Gaskell notes that “[s]he had planned other employments for herself: a letter to Edith, a good piece of Dante, and a visit to the Higginses” (70). Margaret's list is representative of her notion of womanhood—she wants to continue her intellectual studies and pursue her social duties by maintaining her relationship with her cousin, and visiting (and aiding) the poor factory working family, the Higginses. As Stoneman argues, “Margaret's notion of the feminine role is energetic and self-reliant. Forced by necessity to take control within her own family, she is also forced to emerge from its protection, walking the streets and speaking directly to people of different classes” (138). Margaret is ever active, from

taking care of household duties in place of her ill mother, to traversing the grounds of Milton to help those in need, to maintaining her scholarly exercises, which reflect Gaskell's Unitarian understanding of ideal womanhood. It is Margaret's book learning, however, that distinguishes her from the other women of Milton, a fact that Gaskell makes painfully obvious when Mrs. Thornton and her daughter Fanny come to visit the Hales. Fanny, much like Edith, is spoiled by the luxury her brother's work has provided for her; she also affects a type of refinement associated with London and good society. Gaskell contrasts Margaret's classical learning with Fanny's love of popular novels in order to highlight Fanny's lack of education and Margaret's genuine refinement:

Fanny exclaims, "Oh! London and the Alhambra are the two places I long to see!"  
"London and the Alhambra!"  
"Yes! Ever since I read the Tales of the Alhambra. Don't you know them?"  
"I don't think I do." (Gaskell 89-90).

Fanny references Washington Irving's popular story collection—inspired by his visit to the Castle of Alhambra in Spain, but heavily embroidered with fictional romances and adventures—in order to appear sophisticated. Alhambra and London are synonymous in her mind with a world of taste and luxury. Her assertion betrays her lack of real education; she conflates the real life castle with the romances Irving sets there. On the other hand, Margaret's ignorance on the subject of popular novels reflects her higher learning and refinement. The conversation establishes the fundamental difference between the North and the South: the South is the seat of refinement (and a classical, if outdated, education) while the North (and popular commodities like romance novels) represents seeming vulgar commercialization and trade. In essence, this scene emphasizes Margaret's privileged background as an educated Southern lady.

Her first suitor, the polished London lawyer Henry Lennox (and brother to Edith's future husband), admires Margaret because she is more self-aware than Edith and can engage him in

intellectual stimulating conversation. Like Willoughby and Marianne, the attraction between Margaret and Mr. Lennox lies in their similar taste. Gaskell writes, “He liked and disliked pretty nearly the same things that she did” (12). The difference here between their relationship and Marianne and Willoughby’s (or Maria and Darnford’s, and Glorvina’s and Horatio’s for that matter) is that similar sensibilities are not the foundation of a companionate relationship. Gaskell’s rejection of rooting companionate marriage in superficially similar taste is manifest in Mr. Lennox’s polished, shallow London airs and his lack of real understanding of Margaret. This is most obvious when he visits her in Helstone and sees evidence of her studies. Gaskell writes,

He took up one of the books lying on the table; it was the *Paradiso* of Dante, in the proper old Italian binding of white vellum and gold; by it lay a dictionary, and some words copied out in Margaret’s hand-writing. They were a dull list of words, but somehow he liked looking at them (23).

Mr. Lennox’s perception of Margaret’s industry—the “proper” material of the book and the “dull list of words”—implies his lack of interest in intellectual stimulation for its own sake, as well as his investment in the polished facade a solid education gives him; he notes the title of Margaret’s book but focuses more on the book’s appropriate exterior rather than its content. In other words, education for Mr. Lennox is about maintaining social appearances and not necessarily in developing his mind. He lingers even more on Margaret’s handwriting; he doesn’t care about the “dull” words for their own sake, but because they serve as reminders of Margaret. Through his observations, Gaskell suggests that the danger of this superficial compatibility is that cultivated taste and learning don’t always reflect the real man. In fact, for Margaret and Thornton, it is difference that brings them together. To marry Lennox would be to limit her personal growth. As R. A. York succinctly writes, Lennox “offers no essential challenge to her, makes no demand of change...The temptation he offers is the temptation of endogamy” (81). When Henry Lennox

proposes to her, Margaret faces the “temptation” of settling for the life she knows and already finds wanting, and yet her resistance to this emphasizes her budding desire for stimulation and experiences that will challenge her preconceived notions about the world. Her rejection of Mr. Lennox, in short, points to her growing desire to continue with her education—in this case, one that would move her beyond the realm of books.

After Gaskell repeatedly establishes Margaret’s educated status and her desire to continue improving herself, she then balances that through vivid descriptions of Margaret’s body. More importantly, it is the male gaze that establishes Margaret’s femininity. When Thornton first sees Margaret, he finds

a young lady of a different type to most of those he was in the habit of seeing. Her dress was very plain: a close straw bonnet of the best material and shape, trimmed with white ribbon; a dark silk gown, without any trimming or flounce; a large Indian shawl, which hung about her in long heavy folds, and which she wore as an empress wears her drapery. He did not understand who she was, as he caught the simple, straight, unabashed look, which showed that his being there was of no concern to the beautiful countenance, and called up no flush of surprise to the pale ivory of the complexion (Gaskell 58).

This is the first time the reader views Margaret in her entirety and outside of her own perspective. Thornton immediately notes her difference to “most of those he was in the habit of seeing,” but what becomes apparent by the rest of his detailed description of her figure is that the “those” he refers to is women. She lacks the fancier millinery work Milton women like to wear and yet the material of her outfit is “the best;” the reference to the Indian shawl signifies her background of wealth from her days in London with her rich aunt and cousin. It should come as no surprise that Thornton defines her femininity through the fabric she wears and the style it is cut in. He is a businessman and knows the value of the cloth like his factory produces. It also suggests that he attempts to define this different woman through what he does know and thus better understand her. Yet even as he tries to place Margaret in a more familiar framework, he is

forced to admit “he did not understand who she was.”<sup>75</sup> His acknowledgement that he does not “understand” her underscores that Margaret, because of her difference, becomes a pivotal figure in his education as a man. Once her demure femininity is established, Gaskell then reinforces her gender dissonance by emphasizing her direct gaze. Thornton lingers on the description of her “straight, unabashed look” that reveals her self-composure and self-restraint. She does not blush in the presence of men, as a modest Victorian woman should, but calmly engages with this stranger.

Thornton’s graphic ruminations on her body establish how Thornton defines his masculinity by contrasting it with her self-confident womanliness. He goes on to describe Margaret as “full of a soft feminine defiance” which gives her “the impression of haughtiness” (Gaskell 58). Thornton drinks in the sight of “the lovely haughty curve” of her throat: he “looked upon her with an admiration he could not repress, she looked at him with proud indifference, taking him, he thought, for what in his irritation, he told himself he was—a great rough fellow, with not a grace or a refinement about him” (Gaskell 58). His reaction to her is in part sexual; what attracts him is also what repels him: her “defiance” and “haughtiness.” He resents her unresponsiveness because it belittles him as the gazer, which in turn makes him internalize her indifference by demeaning his own desirability. He is no longer the respectable Milton-Northern manufacturer but a “great rough fellow.” The raw “appreciation” he experiences in gazing at her reduces him to an unrefined, purely masculine being. Gaskell constructs two extremes in Margaret’s feminine, self-composed figure and Thornton’s brutish, uncontrolled admiration to highlight the gender imbalance that occurs at the very start of the relationship between the two principal characters: although feminine, Margaret is the only one

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<sup>75</sup> This early revelation serves as a sharp contrast to Mr. Lennox’s overconfident belief that he knows Margaret.

who exhibits self-restraint, without blushing, while Thornton, the traditionally rational counterpart to the “weaker vessel,” is overcome by his emotions here, proverbially blushing at his feared lack of “grace” or “refinement.” With this subversion of gender norms so soon in place, Gaskell asserts the arbitrariness of gender norms.

Thornton echoes this sharp contrast between Margaret’s grace and his roughness when he recalls his early impressions of Margaret to his mother. He says, “She held herself aloof from me as if she had been a queen, and I her humble, unwashed vassal” (Gaskell 72). He goes on to obsessively document her femininity when he visits the Hales for tea. He recalls,

She stood by the tea-table in a light-coloured muslin gown, which had a good deal of pink about it. She looked as if she was not attending to the conversation, but solely busy with the tea-cups, among which her round ivory hands moved with pretty, noiseless, daintiness. She had a bracelet on one tapered arm, which would fall down over her round wrist. Mr. Thornton watched the re-placing of this troublesome ornament with far more attention than he listened to her father. It seemed as if it fascinated him to see her push it up impatiently, until it tightened her soft flesh; and then to mark the loosening—the fall... She handed him his cup of tea with the proud air of an unwilling slave, and he almost longed to ask her to do for him what he saw her compelled to do for her father, who took her little finger and thumb in his masculine hand, and made them serve as sugar-tongs (Gaskell 74).

In each instance he compares her to a “queen” unconscious of the effect she has on her “unwashed-vassal.” Although her domesticity shines through as she serves them tea, Thornton inverts the power dynamics. She may be the “unwilling slave” who fixes his tea, but it is Thornton who suffers as he watches her perform her womanly duties; it is her physical presence that draws him in. Again, he equates her femininity with her gown “which had a good deal of pink in it,” and carefully records the movements of her “round ivory hands” and her “tapered” arms. His ruminations escalate as he fantasizes about taking her “dainty” hands in his to stir his tea. While it might seem like a paltry longing, Thornton’s desire to touch Margaret reinforces his sexual desire for this unreadable woman, as well as the unconscious power Margaret’s

presence has on Thornton.<sup>76</sup> Scholars rightly highlight the intensity of Thornton's description of Margaret's body. Terence Wright best explains, "[W]hat strikes the reader most forcibly here is the carefully composite detail in the picture, and the physicality, indeed the fleshiness, of this detail" (103). He goes on to argue, "She is, as one might say, 'all woman', this womanliness is conveyed in her centered, self-assured poise" (Wright 103). While he focuses on the "fleshiness" of Thornton's description of Margaret, he clearly states that her womanliness is not asserted through her bashfulness or coy affectations, but in her "centered, self-assured poise." Margaret, in short, is a woman who knows who she is in Thornton's eyes—a far cry from the less refined Milton women.

Unlike the heroines discussed in earlier chapters (with the exception of Marianne Dashwood), Margaret is perhaps the only one who actively changes—primarily through her education in Milton, which teaches her the limits of her Southern lifestyle and a more direct form of communication—as much as her hero counterpart. Part of her restlessness in the South—and what ultimately leads her to reject Henry Lennox, despite their seeming compatibility—is that even in the South, she is an outsider who exists on the periphery of the privileged life her aunt and cousin live, because she, as the daughter of a vicar with only a modest income (in many ways echoing Elinor's reduced circumstances), relies on the favors of wealthy relatives for her education and privileged social standing (Craik 93-94). Her liminal status is brought more

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<sup>76</sup> Thornton's gaze is unceasingly riveted on Margaret. At his dinner party he cannot fail to once again admire her feminine perfection. Gaskell writes, "[H]e was struck anew with her great beauty. He had never seen her in such dress before; and yet now it appeared as if such elegance of attire was so befitting her noble figure and lofty serenity of countenance, that she ought to go always thus appareled" (148). He notes her "large soft eyes that looked forth steadily at one object, as if from out their light beamed some gentle influence of repose: the curving lines of the red lips, just parted in the interest of listening to what her companion said—the head a little bent forwards, so as to make a long sweeping line from the summit, where the light caught on the glossy raven hair, to the smooth ivory shoulder; the round white arms, and tapered hands, laid lightly across each other, but perfectly motionless in their pretty attitude" (Gaskell 148). After she flings her arms around him during the riot, he fantasizes about the feel of her body pressed against him. He finds "[h]e could not even shake off the recollection that she had been there; that her arms had been round him, once—if never again" (Gaskell 192).

prominently to the fore when she moves to Milton and finds herself completely isolated; she has been forced to give up her old life and must moreover endure and attempt to assuage the rift between her parents caused by her father's abrupt decision to uproot his family out of a crisis of faith—a decision Margaret's mother resents. Forced to adjust, Margaret struggles with adapting her Southern etiquette to Milton's individualism. Margaret's difficulty in adapting to Northern life, in essence, is "partly because of differences in communication" (York 85). She insults the Higginses, a factory working family, when she offers to visit them and bring them a basket of food, and she likewise alienates herself from the upper-class, especially women like Mrs. Thornton and Fanny, by her London airs, which diverge so sharply with her reduced circumstances. Yet through her experiences navigating this industrial town, Margaret's "sense of decorum" changes (York 83). In this way, Margaret's ultimate growth comes when she acknowledges the defects of the Eden-like South and the paternalist philosophy it embodies (Bodenheimer 56); as she befriends the Higginses, she learns she does not have to care for them as if they were children and learns to take enjoyment in her more vigorous lifestyle and growing independence—both of which were stunted when she lived in the South. She even finds empowerment in her outsider status because it allows her to act as an intermediary between the mill owners and the factory workers, a fact which finally reaches fruition when Thornton and the radical Mr. Higgins work together to create a lunchroom for the workers.<sup>77</sup>

Just as the descriptions of Margaret's body are too numerous to fully document here, so, too, are examples of her adaptation to Milton life. There are two key moments, however, that

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<sup>77</sup> Colby corroborates my reading, when she writes, "Initially an outsider, Margaret Hale moves in the course of the novel between the two classes, serving as an effective intermediary who promotes communication and understanding. Margaret comes to see herself as involved in the public sphere and abandons the position of observer for the position of participant. For Margaret, this means compromise and even pain, but at the same time an enlargement of identity" (47). Jane Spencer also reads Margaret as a figure inextricably linked to the public realm and the politics therein. She writes that Margaret is a heroine "whose life is responsibly and directly entangled with the male world of industrial politics" (95).

best highlight Margaret's assimilation into Northern culture. The first scene occurs at Thornton's dinner party (occurring, significantly, during the workers' strike). Margaret listens to the mill owners discuss the economics and politics of running a factory and prides herself on knowing "enough now to understand many local interests—nay, even some of the technical words employed by the eager mill owners" (Gaskell 149). Her absorption of the "technical words" reflects her adaptation to the Milton way of life and the specialized industrial language it requires. Her subtle excitement on understanding "local interests" points to her desire to continue educating herself in any way possible. When the men leave after dinner, she wishes to

listen to something larger and grander than the petty interests of which the ladies had been talking about. She liked the exultation in the sense of power which these Milton men had...they seemed to defy the old limits of possibility, in a kind of fine intoxication, caused by the recollection of what had been achieved, and what yet should be (Gaskell 149).

Colby argues that this scene promotes women's right to participate in "masculine" debates (57). Gaskell documents the sense of liberation and excitement Margaret feels while listening to the men with expansive language like "exultation," "intoxication," "defy," and "larger and grander." Margaret's world literally expands as she engages with Thornton, his fellow mill owners, and with the workers like Higgins that they struggle against. In this instance, Gaskell portrays Northern industrialization favorably. It represents innovation and new possibility, both in terms of redefining knowledge and industry for Margaret—she learns to be productive outside of the domestic realm through her constant learning—and in terms of the wider social changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution. Margaret rejects the "petty interests" that make up the content of the women's conversation, which signifies her resistance to separate spheres ideology. Her "exultation in the sense of power" the Milton men have hints at her desire to harness that power

or public agency for herself, which she does by partaking in their conversation at dinner when she advocates for a centrist position of mutual understanding as a way to deal with the strike.

Her ultimate assimilation into this culture, prior to her marriage to Thornton, occurs when she uses the language of the factory men (Colby 53). While she had only been able to recognize the factory jargon at the party, she now uses it—including the lowbrow slang associated with the workers. She defends her word choice when her mother accuses her of being vulgar over tea, enlisting Thornton's aid as she does so.<sup>78</sup> She says, "Now, Mr. Thornton, though 'knobstick' has not a very pretty sound, is it not expressive? Could I do without it, in speaking of the thing it represents? If using local words is vulgar, I was very vulgar in the forest,—was I not, mamma?" (Gaskell 219). Margaret validates her vocabulary by emphasizing how synonymous a word like "knobstick" is with the object it represents (in this case, a literal stick with a knob at the end of it). She likens her fluency in Southern culture to her growing assimilation into Northern life when she compares the "vulgar" words of Milton to that of the forest, cleverly implying that the industrial slang is no worse than the potentially softer language she used in Helstone. Through this she then uses her slang fluency as an allegory for cultural assimilation and, in turn, the potential for unity between the North and the South. This marks a turning point in Margaret's development—she has learned more straightforward ways of communicating, from using industrial slang to using the handshake—and no longer believes the North to be, as her mother implies through her critique of its language, "vulgar." Subtle as it is, she is willing to admit she

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<sup>78</sup> The subtext of this scene, of course, is that Margaret has recently rejected Thornton's hand in marriage. Thus, her desire to explain her use of Milton words to her mother is partially rooted in an equally strong need to show Thornton that she is beginning to understand Milton culture, and by extension, him. She also strives to connect the "vulgar" vocabulary of her home and Milton as a way to establish that the North and South (and she and Thornton) are not as different as they seem. The awkwardness of this conversation for Thornton and violent eroticism of this scene is underscored by Thornton's feeling that "[i]t was a stinging pleasure to be in the same room with her, and feel her presence" (Gaskell 220).

did not know the North, and once she learned its customs, she grew to love it; this lays the ground for her eventual reconciliation to Thornton and her maturation as a woman.

### **A “Gentleman”: Thornton as a Revision of the Ideal Man**

Thornton’s desire for a more well-rounded education is rooted in his need to reconcile his gentlemanly aspirations with his gritty, factory life. His identity crisis is best addressed during his dinner party, when Margaret asks him if one of the men at dinner is a gentleman. Thornton responds, “I am not quite the person to decide on another’s gentlemanliness, Miss Hale. I mean, I don’t quite understand your application of the word. But I should say that this Morison is no true man” (Gaskell 150). The following conversation about what constitutes a “gentleman” unfolds with Margaret’s response:

“I suspect my ‘gentleman’ includes your ‘true man.’”

“And a great deal more, you would imply. I differ from you. A man is to me a higher and completer being than a gentleman.”

“What do you mean?” asked Margaret. “We must understand the words differently.”

“I take it that ‘gentleman’ is a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as ‘a man,’ we consider him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself,—to life—to time—to eternity...I am rather weary of this word ‘gentlemanly,’ which seems to me to be often inappropriately used” (150).

Their discussion points to the central crisis of self that haunts Thornton throughout the novel: he wants to be both a self-made “man”—literally, as a respected mill owner, and metaphorically, as a man who does not need others to define himself—and a yet, as we later see through his actions towards Margaret and in his desire to finish his formal education, he also wants the application of “gentleman” used on him. Part of his desire to be dubbed “gentleman” is rooted in the cultural conflict between the North and South and his need to prove himself just as good as or better than the Southern gentleman. Even as he wants the title of gentleman, though, he is conflicted about it, noting how promiscuously the term is applied to men—the wealthy, the

titled, the educated—without any real thought to their personal character, or the factors that would make them a “true man.” Thornton’s opinion reflects that of the Northern man who makes his name based on his own toil, not wealth or position inherited from others, like in the South. Margaret’s confusion over the difference between a “true man” and a “gentleman” highlights how invested Southerners are in status and respectability. Their conversation marks a pivotal turning point in their relationship in which Margaret begins to revise her understanding of “gentlemanliness,” and Thornton for the first time expresses his crisis of masculine identity to Margaret (the embodiment of the refined life he both disdains yet longs for to validate his identity).

Margaret—a product of the life he longs to emulate and the daughter of Thornton’s tutor, Mr. Hale—in many ways embodies the type of refinement he aspires to. To marry her would make him a gentleman, if only in the eyes of others, rather than in his own. Thornton’s investment in being considered a gentleman is reinforced throughout the novel in his discussions with Margaret about the difference between a “man” and a “gentleman.” His eventual permanent role as a gentleman (rather than just a man of trade) occurs when Margaret declares him so to her brother, who has the same Southern prejudices she once did. Just as Margaret is repeatedly described as “all woman,” so too is Thornton correspondingly described as “all man”—a figure distinct from the polished effeminacy of Southern men like Henry Lennox or Margaret’s father. In fact many Milton people, especially Thornton’s mother, view his studies as a descent into effeminacy; reading literature has no practical application to the factory he runs and so would be better done by those who do not have to earn their living.<sup>79</sup> Thus, Thornton’s

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<sup>79</sup> Mrs. Thornton pointedly declares to Mrs. Hale and Margaret, “I have no doubt the classics are very desirable for people who have leisure. But, I confess, it was against my judgment that my son renewed his study of them. The time and place in which he lives, seem to me to require all his energy and attention. Classics are all very well for

resistance to those Northern prejudices allows him to enter a more domestic realm, according to Northern standards. Thornton's brutish masculinity might seem at odds with the life of luxury Margaret represents, but Gaskell uses the graphic descriptions of his body to reshape how the reader views ideal masculinity, as Margaret's reflections on his figure will later illustrate. While Margaret's feminine figure in many ways reinforces the naturalness or womanliness of an educated lady and makes her non-threatening, Thornton's overt masculinity symbolizes the notion that practical skills like running a factory, and higher learning like Thornton gets in studying the classics, do not need to be mutually exclusive. His interest in classical literature and Margaret's acceptance of this redefinition of masculinity not only enable Thornton to be both an educated and a working tradesman (and thus facilitate his entrance into what Milton people would consider a more feminine realm), but also make it possible for Margaret to enter the public realm and still maintain her femininity.

Gaskell establishes Thornton's intelligence before presenting his manufacturer's identity in order to highlight his potential to transcend his mother's belief that "Milton men ought to have their thoughts and powers absorbed in the work of to-day" (Gaskell 104). Mr. Hale describes the mill owner as "a very intelligent man" and Thornton quickly becomes Mr. Hale's favorite pupil (Gaskell 37, 64). Even Margaret is forced to admit that he is "a man of great strength of character,—of unusual intellect, considering the few advantages he has had" (152). They learn that Thornton was a strong student before he had to leave school. He explains "I was even considered a pretty fair classic in those days, though my Latin and Greek have slipped away from me since" (Gaskell 79). His own conflict about the value of his education comes to light when he tells Mr. Hale,

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men who loiter away their lives in the country or in colleges; but Milton men ought to have their thoughts and powers absorbed in the work of to-day" (Gaskell 104).

But I ask you, what preparation they were for such a life as I had to lead? None at all. Utterly none at all. On the point of education, any man who can read and write starts fair with me in the amount of really useful knowledge that I had at that time....Now that I have my mother safe in the quiet peace that becomes her age, and duly rewards her former exertions, I can turn to all that old narration and thoroughly enjoy it (Gaskell 79).

For Thornton, a classical education is a luxury, although he does pride himself on being “a pretty fair classic” in his youth. His repetition that this type of learning doesn’t prepare anyone for a factory life (“None at all. Utterly none at all.”) emphasizes that his tutoring with Mr. Hale does not directly impact his work life, but is instead something to “enjoy.” And yet the subtle irony in his assertion lies in the fact that his decision to study with Mr. Hale actually enables him to get a larger perspective on the class struggle and factory conflicts that plague his working hours. For example, he outlines his new perspective on his role as a mill owner when, having lost his mill to financial ruin, he seeks a job that would allow him to reform master-men relations, a new outlook which is moreover grounded in his studies with Mr. Hale and his discussions with Margaret. He explains,

My only wish is to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere ‘cash nexus.’ But it might be the point Archimedes sought from which to move the earth, to judge from the importance attached to it by some of our manufacturers, who shake their heads and look grave as soon as I name the one or two experiments that I should like to try (Gaskell 391).

In a complete reversal of his previously single-minded capitalistic ideals, Thornton describes his “wish” to develop “intercourse” between masters and men in terms of Chartism, or the working-class reformism set forth by Thomas Carlyle in his 1839 pamphlet that outlined the necessity of political equality for working men. Thornton’s reference to “cash nexus,” or the singularly monetary connection between individuals, echoes Carlyle’s critique that industrialization has reduced human connection to monetary gain rather than forging bonds of fellow understanding. Thus Thornton, through the humanizing influence of Margaret, learns to view his workers not

just as hired hands whose labor has a set economic value, but as human beings. Similarly, the larger world view his studies with Mr. Hale have given him is evidenced in his reference to Archimedes, the Greek philosopher who argued that the earth could be moved through leverage, assuming that someone could find a position outside of earth from which to move the planet. Archimedes' plan has since become the classic metaphor for an act that works theoretically, but has no practical value. In short, Thornton makes this reference to address the concern of many manufacturers who believe that cross-class communication similarly works in theory but not in practice—a notion which Thornton seeks to disprove. Yet another significant aspect of his reference to Archimedes is more subtle: the image of a person standing outside of the earth suggests that in being removed from his proverbial sphere, Thornton can better “move” or alter it. Thus, in gaining a larger perspective outside of his seemingly small factory world, he can then work to reform it. As Bodenheimer argues, “Thornton’s task in the story is...to bend his attention away from his status as a merchant-prince toward a working attachment to his laborers and a genuine encounter with the difference in their points of view” (57). That is, in order to mature as a man, he must communicate with and listen to the men with whom his life and welfare “are so constantly and intimately interwoven,” as Margaret suggests (Gaskell 112).

Margaret’s changing feelings for Thornton manifest themselves in her favorable reading of his masculine figure. Margaret’s initial feelings towards Thornton are rooted in her own sense of helplessness over her own fate and her Southern prejudices. She describes Thornton to her parents: “With such an expression of resolution and power, no face, however plain in feature, could be either vulgar or common. I should not like to have to bargain with him; he looks very inflexible” (102). She acknowledges his powerful will—that alone is the feature that stands out to her, not his figure or his “plain” face. His inflexibility reinforces his overt, rigid manliness

and while Margaret denies wanting to “bargain” with him, she nevertheless repeatedly engages with him in this fashion. She eventually judges him more harshly, casting Thornton as a manufacturer who is “testing everything by the standard of wealth” (129).<sup>80</sup> Thornton holds the monetary power at the beginning of the novel. He is a powerful prominent social figure. As the daughter of a dissenter, uprooted from her childhood home in the South of England and exiled to an alien industrial city, Margaret lacks both social respectability and financial security. Therefore, what she both admires and criticizes in Thornton is what she lacks herself—the control over her own future.

Gaskell then deliberately contrasts the overtly masculine Thornton with Margaret’s effeminate father in order to establish the solidity of Thornton’s character. Many critics consider the contrast between Mr. Hale and Thornton as a favorable depiction of masculine self-control over effeminacy, which in part is true—Gaskell does not favor the polished but superficial Southern men, as evidenced by Mr. Lennox. In fact, what Margaret appreciates most is the openness she begins to find in Thornton’s features. As Matus points out, “a close look at the text’s rendering of emotion suggests that it is not necessarily unmanly for men to experience powerful, even uncontrollable feelings” (37). (This is supported by Thornton’s obsessive, passionate ruminations about Margaret’s body and his intense jealousy when he suspects Margaret loves another man). When Margaret examines Thornton’s features as he studies with her father, the reader finds it is the first time Margaret views Thornton favorably. Margaret notes how her father’s languid eyes and soft lines around his face are “almost feminine” (Gaskell 74). She then goes on to observe that

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<sup>80</sup> Gaskell perhaps consciously invokes the original title of *Pride and Prejudice*, when she dubs the title of this chapter “First Impressions.”

in Mr. Thornton's face the straight brows fell low over the clear, deep-set earnest eyes, which, without being unpleasantly sharp, seemed intent enough to penetrate into the very heart and core of what he was looking at. The lines in his face were few but firm, as if they were carved in marble, and lay principally about the lips, which were slightly compressed over a set of teeth so faultless and beautiful as to give the effect of sudden sunlight when the rare bright smile, coming in an instant and shining out of the eyes, changed the whole look from the severe and resolved expression of a man ready to do and dare everything to the keen honest enjoyment of the moment, which is seldom shown so fearlessly and instantaneously except by children. Margaret liked this smile; it was the first thing she had admired in this new friend of her father's; and the opposition of character, shown in all these details of appearance she had just been noticing, seemed to explain the attraction they evidently felt towards each other (Gaskell 74-75).

Margaret's gaze lingering on Thornton matches his gaze on her in intensity and with erotic undertones that are just as strong. What appears to be most appealing is the contrast between Thornton's contained nature ("resolve") and the spontaneous smile that lights his face, revealing his "keen honest enjoyment" in studying with Mr. Hale. Here Margaret carefully de-sexualizes his pleasure, making it one akin to that experienced by "children." This description also reveals that Margaret has never met a man like Thornton—I say "man" because that is how she first perceives him, not as a gentleman. She studies the lines on his face seemingly "carved in marble," which contrast with the softer wrinkles lining her father's effeminate face, and by extension, the softness of Southern men. Margaret admits that his smile is the first thing she likes about him, which reveals that what she admires most in him what is uneconomic; the smile is produced out of pure pleasure found in a leisure activity and reveals a man not continuously preoccupied with the running of his mill.

Thornton's maturation as a man develops out of his early conflict with Margaret; while he admires her figure and her educated status, he still disdains the privileged culture she comes from, nor can he understand her rejection of his Northern ways. Their first argument reflects the culture clash and his early attempts to know Margaret. Thornton says, "I would rather be a man toiling, suffering—nay, failing successful—here, than lead a dull prosperous life in the old worn

groove of what you call more aristocratic society down in the South, with their slow careless days of ease” (Gaskell 75). Margaret responds,

“You do not know anything about the South. If there is less adventure or less progress—I suppose I must say less excitement—from the gambling spirit of trade, which seems requisite to force out these wonderful inventions, there is less suffering also... You do not know the South, Mr. Thornton” (Gaskell 75-76).

“And may I say you do not know the North?” he asked, with an inexpressible gentleness in his tone, as he saw that he had really hurt her (Gaskell 76).

Again, Thornton prides himself on his industry—just as much as Margaret prides herself on hers—and his ability to deal with the gritty realities of life (“toiling,” “suffering,” “failing”), no doubt a product of his tragic early childhood. He derides the “dull prosperous life” that is synonymous with the “more aristocratic society” in the South. His identity as a man comes out of his ability to work, so he would feel almost emasculated without his daily toil. Margaret rightly questions Thornton’s idealization of the North at the expense of her beloved South, even as she likewise romanticizes her former life. Her emphasis is on the lack of suffering in the South, a poignant comment coming out of her experiences tending the poor in Milton and viewing the rampant poverty as she walks the city’s streets. She insists on Thornton’s ignorance with her repetition of “you do not know the South.” This statement also implicitly suggests that he does not know the North, particularly the darker aspects of factory life. While he is no stranger to poverty, death, and toil, his visions of Milton idealize this hardship without attempting to rectify it. Thornton uses his rhetoric to gently remind her that she is as ignorant of Milton life as he is of the South. The most significant part of this exchange occurs in what Margaret overlooks: Thornton is genuinely shocked by how his blunt speech hurt her and he attempts to rectify the situation. This subtle action implies that he does want to understand Margaret, but it is their differences in communication styles, and Margaret’s resistance to Thornton’s attempts to bridge that communication gap, that create the conflict between them and

ultimately lead to their mutual understanding of one another. Margaret's resistance becomes the tool that hones Thornton's mind; in his attempt to understand her, he must be willing to reject his Northern biases.

### **A Mutual Education: The Riot, The Proposal**

*North and South* is riddled with examples of Margaret and Thornton's continual struggle to know themselves and one another, so much so that they cannot all be covered here. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the two most significant moments in their romance that typify their violent clashes which then produce a greater understanding of self and the other: the riot scene and the subsequent proposal scene. These two scenes collapse the distance between the public politics of Milton and the private romance between Thornton and Margaret. These scenes work on multiple levels to at once force Margaret to recognize her sexual feelings for Thornton and to push Thornton beyond his sexual longing for Margaret toward a better understanding of her as a thinking woman. With his "true man" identity repeatedly questioned in each scene, Thornton finds himself at the brink of redefining his masculinity; in order to be worthy of Margaret's love he must let go of his prejudices and value her thoughts on Milton's current political climate. Margaret, in turn, must acknowledge herself to be "all woman," which includes admitting her sexual appetites that seem to contradict her rational mind.

The riot scene acts as the moment in which boundaries between the public and private realms of Milton collapse; the violent emotions of the rioting union strikers (they rebel against the Irish hands Thornton brought in to continue operating the mill during the strike) parallel the intensity of what amounts to a sexual climax between Thornton and Margaret. This is a scene in which everything is exposed: the brutal hostility between masters and men, the sexual tension between Thornton and Margaret, and Thornton's conflict over being a master, who makes the

difficult decision of hiring Irish hands, and being a man, who can understand the plight of his fellow men, including the factory workers. Prior to Thornton's untoward marriage proposal, Margaret rescues him from a mob of angry mill workers gathered outside his home.<sup>81</sup> Harman describes the riot scene as "a defining moment in the history of women's participation in public/political life" (*Feminine Political Novel* ix). Colby also asserts that Margaret's "steadiness and resolution in the face of personal danger attest to the fitness of women to perform in a crisis" (58). Margaret is clearly the rescuer in this situation, acting as a public mediator between the mill owner and his workers. While the factory workers are fueled by rage and Thornton acts to spite them when he calls the police to break up the mob, it is Margaret, and Margaret alone, who keeps her head, advocating for reason over rash actions that would injure all involved. When she and Thornton are trapped in his house, awaiting the police to rescue them from the mob, she first challenges him to "go down and face [the mob] like a man" (Gaskell 161). Margaret understands that the mob's actions are ruled by fear, hunger, and despair; the only way to resolve the problem is to reach a compromise between the two parties. Her command is a sexual challenge as much as it questions his authority as a mill owner. By this point in the novel, Thornton already depends on Margaret's perception of him to define his own manliness and so he obeys her order so as to prove that he is a "true man," or one who is respectable in his own eyes.

When he goes to face the crowd, she immediately regrets it. She rushes after him; when the mob turns even more violent, Margaret throws her arms around Thornton to protect him from

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<sup>81</sup> Another plot thread in this novel is the ramifications of a failed strike. Although the laborers, led by Higgins, strike to negotiate for better wages, the strike extends beyond the two weeks they thought it would originally last. Thornton, rather than give in to their wishes, hires hands from Ireland to take their place. The laborers discover this and form a mob to confront Thornton. Chaos erupts; the strike dissolves. It is eventually responsible for Thornton's financial ruin. In her usual ambiguous style (also invocative of Austen), Gaskell refuses to take sides on the issue. Her focus is on the universal pain that results from the strike.

being pelted with stones and brick-a-brack (her rationale being that no one would hurt a woman). As a result, she is struck in the head by a stone; blood oozes from her wound and she passes out. It cannot be overstated how significant the proximity of Thornton and Margaret's bodies is, especially because it is a memory Thornton becomes obsessed about. Margaret faces him, her arms around his neck, her face pressed close to his, both fronts of their bodies are pressed against each other. Given the courtship constraints of the time, it is assumed that neither Thornton nor Margaret, as respectable people, would have ever had a physical experience such as this. It is also unlikely that Thornton would have been able to give much attention to anything superfluous to running his mill. The uniqueness of their situation is all the more striking for the violence imbedded in their embrace. Margaret's bloody wound becomes her proverbial loss of virginity. As Wright argues, Margaret's challenge is "a sexual challenge, and her taking of the blow is a sexual reconciliation" which inevitably suggests that "the incident is an advance in intimacy of a sexual nature" (112). Her vulnerable state when she passes out from her injury restores Thornton as the rescuer, as he now shields her from the angry mob, and by extension allows him to reassert his masculinity.

The violent contact of their bodies is especially scandalous because it happens in broad daylight in front of a hoard of witnesses; for Margaret, there is no taking her actions back—it reveals to the society that Margaret has feelings for Thornton. What is appalling about this incident is not the riot itself but the realization that Margaret must confront. It is not just that she has sexual feelings for Thornton, nor even that he might love her, but that she must acknowledge the "awareness of herself as sexually attractive" even if she refuses to believe it (Matus 42).

Fundamentally, this "great rough fellow" forces her to acknowledge her sexuality.<sup>82</sup> Thornton

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<sup>82</sup> The recognition that she is a sexual being could not have been initiated by another man. Her previous suitor, the London socialite Mr. Lennox, is unable to draw this realization from her, even as he makes her uncomfortably aware

makes her realize her womanliness in a way that Mr. Lennox could not because she now has to confess her own amorous feelings for Thornton. This realization marks a rite of passage for her as a thinking woman; she must acknowledge her sexuality, both as a desirable woman and as a woman who desires Thornton, and attempt to reconcile these baser emotions with her formerly more rational self. This moment is also a type of loss of virginity for Thornton as Margaret forcefully penetrates his personal space. He is no longer the independent entity after this, nor can he reclaim his old bachelor lifestyle now that has experienced what, it would now seem, is so glaringly lacking in his life. After the riot, Thornton obsesses over the memory of Margaret pressed against his body, her arms around his neck, her lips and breath against his skin. His desires are concretized by Margaret. His greater shock is in Margaret's overwhelming drive to protect him; for him (and indeed the rest of society) it is clear evidence that Margaret had been harboring feelings for him, which gives him hope where before he had none. Yet for Margaret, she feels only a "sense of shame so acute that it seemed as if she would fain have burrowed into the earth to hide herself, and yet she could not escape out of that unwinking glare of many eyes," eyes which moreover judge her for her seemingly improper conduct (Gaskell 174). Her shame lies in the fact that people perceived her actions to be of a sexual, amorous nature, or "bold and forward" attempts to secure Thornton's hand in marriage, as Fanny, Thornton's sister declares, rather than altruistic in nature (Gaskell 167). In sum, the events of the riot mark the (premature) consummation of their relationship, revealing Margaret's intense sexual desire for Thornton and his dependence on her person for personal (and sexual) fulfillment.

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of how much he desires her by a premature marriage proposal. The manliness of Thornton, combined with his straight-forwardness is what enables him to reach Margaret. Mr. Lennox is too polished, and thus, his desire seems unreal.

If Margaret initiated the erotic exchange on the day of the riot, Thornton attempts to reach a more fulfilling (and less public) climax of their relationship by proposing to her. Much is at stake. Margaret's actions have exposed her to the gossips of the town, to her chagrin. Consequently, Thornton, as a gentleman, is honor-bound to make an honest woman of her through marriage.<sup>83</sup> Fired with his passion for her and his conviction that he is doing the right thing by society, he proposes to Margaret. She rejects him, asserting that her actions in the mob were those of a woman who would have protected any fellow man from danger as her social duty, and not, as Thornton supposed, her desire to save the man she loves. Her denial of the sexual nature of her actions on the day of the riot reflects the double bind she now finds herself in: for her actions to appear blameless by social standards, she must refute their sexual nature by "reliev[ing] [Thornton] of from even a fancied obligation," as she puts it, to marry her and thus preserve her virtue (Gaskell 176). In essence, Margaret finds herself "bound by the duplicitous ethic of the 'virtuous woman' who must avoid sexual shame, while not appearing to be aware of what it is she must avoid" (Stoneman *Elizabeth Gaskell* 129). The riot exposes Margaret's sexuality to both herself and the public and now she must feign ignorance of the implications her actions cause. It is even more difficult for Margaret to understand her actions on a personal level. As Bodenheimer writes, "While Margaret painfully attempts to separate her persona from her morally disinterested self, Gaskell insists on the ambiguity of her actions" (65). At this point in the novel, Margaret cannot yet admit that her actions were the product of both her public "disinterested self" and her private romantic self. Gaskell critiques this "duplicitous ethic" that

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<sup>83</sup> Margaret's symbolic loss of virginity is reinforced by the fact that Thornton must save her reputation by marrying her, as a respectable man would do to a woman he seduced. Although Margaret didn't consciously understand the implications of her actions, she still marked herself as a fervently nubile woman, which, in Victorian society, parallels actual wantonness so closely as to make any distinction fruitless.

plagues respectable women in this scene, outlining the pitfalls of this antiquated custom that infantilizes women and leaves them unprepared for dealing with situations such as these.

What the proposal scene also does is invert the gender roles of Margaret and Thornton, marking Margaret as the public advocate in the scene and placing Thornton as the voice of private romance as he proposes to Margaret, in his attempt to fix the scandal of the public riot through a private act.<sup>84</sup> This gender inversion works to break down separate spheres ideology and help Thornton redefine his masculinity. Margaret derides him for thinking her actions were more personal than they really were “instead of perceiving, as a gentleman would—yes! A gentleman...that any woman, worthy of the name woman, would come forward to shield...a man in danger from the violence of numbers” (Gaskell 177). Here, Margaret rejects the conflation between “man” and “gentleman,” and instead draws on her Southern class prejudices to reduce Thornton’s respectability. She makes a point of emphasizing her distinction when she repeats herself with “yes! A gentleman,” knowing full well that he will understand how she slights him. He responds by invoking his definition of “man” and rejecting the status of “gentleman.” He says, “[T]he gentleman thus rescued is forbidden the relief of thanks!...I am a man. I claim the right of expressing my feelings” (Gaskell 177). He forsakes being considered a gentleman in her eyes for the privilege of speaking plainly about his feelings—as a man. In his assertions comes a redefinition of manhood in which it is not only acceptable but manly to express his feelings. This revelation then rejects the refinements of being a “gentleman” that prohibit frank conversation in favor of affectation.

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<sup>84</sup> Colby writes, “In this scene gender distinctions get turned completely upside down as the woman takes a public stand of behalf of a man, and a man speaks for romance, the center of the private world. What is even more interesting is that Gaskell validates both perspectives: Margaret’s act is definitively political, but it is, at least on a subconscious level, personal as well. As a result of Thornton’s declaration, Margaret is forced to confront her unacknowledged feelings about him” (58-59).

The proposal concludes with Thornton's attempts to make her understand him. He tells her, "I know you despise me; allow me to say, it is because you do not understand me," to which she responds, "I do not care to understand" (Gaskell 178). Margaret greets Thornton's proposal with shame and anger because she believes that "his offer was forced and goaded out of him by sharp compassion for the exposure she had made of herself,—which he, like others, might misunderstand" (Gaskell 177). Yet even then, after reflecting upon the incident, "the clear conviction dawned upon her, shined bright upon her, that he did love her; that he had loved her; that he would love her" (Gaskell 179). She then "disliked him the more for having mastered her inner will" (Gaskell 179).<sup>85</sup> Gaskell plays on the word "understand" here. What they don't understand on the surface is one another, but also more deeply themselves, as well as the awakening passions and fear of the unknown (marriage, love, sex). Furthermore, both are taken out of their element when they become dependent on someone else. A great intimacy with the hero influences Gaskell's agenda to favor examining the human condition over social propriety; that is, at this moment in the story, we are more concerned with the psychological trauma experienced by her main characters than we are the strike, the riot, the social expectations, and the courtship conventions, all of which fade into the background at this moment. The proposal marks the moment when Thornton exposes himself to the utmost vulnerability, just as Margaret did in the riot. Thornton is sure of his success. All the advantages of the match are on the woman's side (financial security, social upward mobility); the man, in turn, receives respectable sexual gratification in the confines of the marriage bed. While his intentions towards Margaret

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<sup>85</sup> Gaskell writes that after the proposal, "[t]he deep impression made by the interview, was like that of a horror in a dream" for Margaret (180). Thornton is "almost blinded by his baffled passion" and he "had positive bodily pain;" however he resolves that "she could not make him change. He loved her and would love her; and defy her and this miserable bodily pain" (191). Still, "He could not shake off the recollections that...her arms had been round him, once – if never again" (192). These passages reinforce the gothic quality Gaskell folds into accounts of the psychological states. For Thornton especially, Gaskell points to the pleasure taken in the pain (of awakening sexuality, of rejection, of becoming dependent on another for happiness).

are sincere, his proposal is primarily rooted in sexual desire; even as he resents her willfulness, he cannot help admire her proud lips and strong form. Thornton makes a clear invitation to Margaret to know him better—not through marriage, but through a deeper understanding of who he is underneath the austerity of his manufacturer’s persona. Here, Thornton casts aside questions of social respectability and seeks only to connect more deeply with Margaret. When she refuses even this, with her obstinate admission that she doesn’t care to understand, his longing for greater intimacy is channeled into a desire to have mastery over her body and his own; thus, he refuses to stop loving her. In the end, he reclaims partial control over himself by rejecting her ability to rationally dictate his feelings and gains mastery over her pride by forcing her to admit that she doesn’t have the power to change him. Furthermore, Thornton shows Margaret that she has no control over how men respond to her desirability in order to ironically (and unsuccessfully) break from the hold her body has over him.

For Margaret, rejecting Thornton constitutes rejecting her sexuality and her feelings for him. Likewise, her refusal of him is an attempt to regain control over her own body. Margaret has always been in the position to be admired, yet now she has been “forced” and “goaded” into switching roles. She feels as if she is the vulnerable one, exposing her desire to Thornton and falling prey to his mercy. She rightfully rejects Thornton because she knows his proposal is fueled by sexual desire; to him, she is a sex object he can purchase, just as he buys cotton for his mills. She also feels that others have persuaded him into misreading her intentions. She detests the gossips (including Thornton’s sister) who have meddled with her personal life. More deeply, she resents that the gossips might know more about her unconscious desires than she does herself. By the end of the interview, however, Margaret cannot sustain her self-righteousness because she realizes, despite Thornton’s lust and misguided assumptions about her, he does truly

love her. The repetition of his love for her—past, present, future—represents a new form of terror for Margaret; he has gained mastery over her “inner will” and, unlike past suitors, forces her to submit to his “clear” and “bright” desire. Their proposal is a literal instance where Margaret “bargains” with Thornton as she once feared doing, and in her mind she loses. This constancy (ironically a traditionally feminine trait) in the face of rejection compels Margaret to reconsider Thornton’s character and re-evaluate her own emotions.

### **Conclusion: That Man! That Woman!**

The novel concludes with a complete overthrow of gender norms and separate spheres ideology, a product of the education Margaret has received during her time in Milton and the education Thornton received from Margaret’s resistance to him and his culture. According to Wheeler, Margaret’s marriage to Thornton is a “culmination of their mutual education” (36). By the end of the novel, Thornton and Margaret have learned to “understand” not only one another, but themselves—in rejecting their pasts and families, they embrace the promise of a future untainted by social and gender prejudices. What is significant about their feelings at the end of the first proposal is that they were in some ways right about each other. Thornton was too much the merchant accustomed to viewing the world through rules of the market place; Margaret was too proud to make herself dependent on another person for her happiness.<sup>86</sup> Had they married at this time they would have ended up with an unremarkable marriage. That is, not truly knowing themselves or each other, they would have functioned the same way as husband and wife, only acknowledging the surface (and arguably the worst part) of one another. This rupture of social

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<sup>86</sup> Her parents serve as a constant reminder to her of what happens to people who marry for passion. Mrs. Hale constantly complains of the luxuries she was accustomed to having before marrying beneath her station. Mr. Hale struggles to please his wife while leading an unfulfilling life himself. Whatever passions they had are gone; Gaskell seems to suggest that it is this lack of a happy union that eventually kills both the Hales.

convention pushes them to evaluate one another as human beings and not players in the marriage market. Their final union also resolves the public conflict between the factory workers and the mill owner through a private romance, just as Thornton initially attempted to do.<sup>87</sup> On another level, their marriage reflects a union of gentility and commerce, in which Thornton can be both a man and a gentleman (and feel for others), while Margaret can be both a domestic woman and a public advocate for social change (Pollard 118).

Yet between the first proposal and their final reconnection, much happens to Thornton and Margaret to help them move beyond the constraints of social mores and into a genuine understanding of themselves and one another, including Thornton's loss of his mill, the death of Margaret's parents, and her new status as an heiress after Mr. Bell dies and leaves her his wealth. Although the various occurrences that help Margaret and Thornton mature are too numerous to fully recount here, there are two key moments—Margaret's shame in being discovered a liar by Thornton, and Thornton's factory reform aided by his working-class nemesis Mr. Higgins—that highlight how these characters, when separated from one another, actually begin to learn and internalize the values of the other. Before Thornton learns to understand Margaret, and while he is still smarting from her rejections, he sees her walking arm-in-arm with a man late one night, a fact she later denies when questioned as a potential witness to a possible murder. Margaret lies about these circumstances, it turns out, to protect her brother (the man she was seen with), who is a wanted man in England and returned only to see their dying mother one last time; he was accused of mutiny (albeit against a lunatic captain) during his time in the navy, so being discovered in England would result in his arrest and eventual hanging. Thus, Margaret denies that she was out that night because few outside the family know she has a brother, and yet feels

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<sup>87</sup> Colby writes, "The resolution of the novel... points to the inextricable union of the public and private through the marriage of the central characters" (60).

surprise when Thornton, knowing she lies, protects her from further inquisition as the magistrate on the case. Although she knows she lied to protect one she loves, Margaret feels only shame in the knowledge that she is no longer an untainted woman in Thornton's eyes. She reflects that "[s]he stood as a liar in his eyes. She was a liar" (Gaskell 258). She cannot escape "the one lurid fact that, in Mr. Thornton's eyes, she was degraded" (Gaskell 258). Her conflation of his perceptions and reality—she moves from being a liar "in his eyes" to declaring she "was a liar"—underscores how much she values his opinion, even if she did not realize it until now. Moreover, her emphasis on her "degraded" status suggests that her lying is akin to a loss of virtue—moral here, if not sexual. And yet, the sexual aspect of her lie, including the implication it has on her respectability, is also present because Thornton assumes the man she was with was her lover, and thus his rival in her affections. He then considers her behavior not only as wanton, but, when coupled with the lie, reflective of her questionable moral virtue. Indeed, his anger towards her lies in the fact that though he now questions her virtue, he still loves her and even, in her best interest, sends his mother to school her in proper conduct (which further shames Margaret). The revelation that the man Margaret was with was her brother restores her virtue in Thornton's eyes. Until that point, however, Margaret suffers with the knowledge that she has lost Thornton's good opinion and so learns to better appreciate it, as evidenced by her assertion to her brother that Thornton is in fact a gentleman and her rejection of the academic prejudice of Mr. Bell in favor of commerce and industrialization.<sup>88</sup> She even goes so far as to admit, in a visit to Helstone after her parents' death, that it is not an Eden, but a superstitious, ignorant village.

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<sup>88</sup> The academic Mr. Bell chides Margaret for "standing up for the progress of commerce" (Gaskell 300). She then derides Mr. Bells' "Oxonian medieval bigotry" that looks down on men like Thornton for their lack of academic knowledge, which, in her eyes, doesn't always have concrete value outside of the scholarly circle (Gaskell 302).

Thus, Margaret's shame is one that produces growth and self-knowledge, as she is forced to admit how much she relies on Thornton to teach her about the world around her.

Similarly, the distance Thornton maintains for Margaret after his failed marriage proposal allows him to truly understand her, and her push for communication between men and masters and the cultivation of compassion for the poverty stricken. After the failed strike, Mr. Higgins is barred from working in the factories because he was one of the primary orchestrators of the strike; yet he needs work, having taken in the family of a factory worker driven to commit suicide because of the dire effects of the strike and subsequent riot. Margaret encourages Mr. Higgins to speak with Thornton, feeling that if they "would speak together as man to man" rather than worker and master, then they would better understand one another (Gaskell 281). Thornton does just that when, after he corroborates the worker's story, he meets Higgins on his own terms, at his house in the poor neighborhood, and offers him a job because he is impressed that Higgins would take on such a burden as caring for another man's family, and in part, because he wishes to be thought just in Margaret's eyes. From there, the men work together to produce a lunch room for the factory workers, a scheme which guarantees one solid meal a day for the workers and promises hearty workers for the mill owner. In fact, this plan, which benefits both the workers and the mill owner, is precisely the type of Archimedes-like proposal Thornton later wishes to implement in another position after his own factory closes. Yet the most significant moment of Thornton's growth occurs off the page, when he visits Helstone in an attempt to better understand Margaret, while she copes with the deaths of her mother and father. Thornton only reflects to Mr. Bell that "[i]t was a great change to leave [Helstone] and come to Milton" (Gaskell 321). Although he refrains from divulging further what his experience in Helstone was like, this admission shows his growing awareness of the struggles Margaret faced when she

moved to a Northern town so completely different from anything she had ever experienced.<sup>89</sup>

Thus, Thornton develops as a man both by implementing a more humane work ethic in his factory and through his empathy for Margaret's struggle to assimilate into Northern culture, showing that he can be both manly and compassionate towards others.

Their final reconciliation takes place over a year after the first proposal within Margaret's chosen home, which literalizes Gaskell's insistence on resolving public crisis within the domestic sphere. Their reconciliation also suggests that the personal and economic crises they both face at various times are a crucial part of their mutual education, as these hardships teach them both the value of human compassion and rational self-composure with which to cope with adversity. In the end, Margaret, learning of Thornton's failed business, desires to help him by using her inheritance to finance the reopening of his mill. Gaskell writes, "she was most anxious to have it all looked upon in the light of a mere business arrangement, in which the principal advantage would be on her side" (394). While this reflection reads as another of Margaret's attempts to distance herself from her feelings for Thornton, a close reader recognizes it as Margaret's attempt to speak Thornton's language of commerce in order to mend their frayed bonds. Gaskell then places Margaret as an heiress, and therefore, a woman who does not need to marry for financial security—a far cry from the poor daughter of a dissenting clergyman. Margaret is now in "a position of power" (Colby 60). Thornton, in turn, rightly reads her offer as a reconciliation for her past behavior. In response to her offer, Thornton offers her a rose from her beloved Southern home in Helstone, which symbolizes his "acknowledgement of her

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<sup>89</sup> Yet Margaret's own visit to Helstone after her parents' death reveals the bigotry and ignorance sewn into the fabric of her former Southern life.

completely and his attentiveness to her” (Colby 61).<sup>90</sup> These acts are representative of their understanding of one another. The reconciliatory moves, as each meets the other half way, appeal to what each sees as the most important thing in the other’s life (Thornton’s mill, Margaret’s Helstone). Overcome by emotion, Margaret hides her face from Thornton; he coaxes her to acknowledge him:

[She] turned her face, still covered with her small white hands, towards him, and laid it on his shoulder, hiding it even there; and it was too delicious to feel her soft cheek against his, for him to wish to see either deep blushes or loving eyes. He clasped her close. But they both kept silent...After a minute or two, he gently disengaged her hands from her face, and laid her arms as they had once before been placed to protect him from the rioters.

‘Do you remember, love?’ he murmured. ‘And how I requited you with my insolence the next day?’

‘I remember how wrongly I spoke to you, - that is all’ (Gaskell 395).

They then reflect how shocking their union will be to their respective families:

‘How shall I ever tell Aunt Shaw?’ she whispered, after some time of delicious silence.

‘Let me speak to her.’

‘Oh, no! I owe to her,—but what will she say?’

‘I can guess. Her first exclamation will be, ‘That man!’’

‘Hush!’ said Margaret, ‘or I shall try and show you your mother’s indignant tones as she says, ‘That woman!’’ (Gaskell 395).

Layered into this moment is the memory of the riot and the subsequent proposal, as well as the recognition of their “insolent” and “wrong” behavior to one another. Their romance comes full circle when Thornton intentionally places Margaret’s arms around him exactly as they were the day of the riot, which he has fantasized about so often. Margaret, despite her entrance into the world of commerce as his financial backer, still retains her femininity, as evidenced by her “small white hands” and “soft cheek.” Lacking in this scene are the extreme violent undertones

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<sup>90</sup> Other scholars read this scene with the rose as “marking her assimilation to a new order, the dominance of agriculture by industry” (Kestner 166). Yet the “assimilation” is equal for Thornton as well—he must immerse himself in Margaret’s past in order to get this rose—for he, too, embraces the private realm and Southern sensibilities, just as Margaret reaches out to him and his Northern identity.

of their previous encounters. Their physical contact is now “too delicious,” rather than something causing pain. This suggests that they have come to terms with their sexuality and their emotional dependence on one another. The long silence here acts as a “frank exchange in which each rejects their families, the embodiments of the inflexibilities of North or South” (York 75). Yet it is hard not to read their “delicious silence” as Gaskell’s euphemism for kissing, especially after the eroticism of their gaze focused on the other, the violent physicality that manifests itself during the riot, and Thornton’s memories of Margaret throwing her arms around him.

The last lines of the novel leave the reader with two key phrases: “That man!” and “That woman!” It is no accident that Gaskell ends her novel with a play on these words; Thornton and Margaret, of course, cry these terms in imitation of the family members who dislike them, but Gaskell uses their exclamations to redefine what it means to be male and female. While Thornton has struggled with his mill owner’s identity and his desire for a gentleman’s refinement, the use of “man” at the end of the novel points to an alternative way of reading manhood, this time given to him by Margaret when she cries the term. This new “man” goes beyond his “true man” and Margaret’s “gentleman,” because its meaning is produced out of his union with Margaret—she literally makes him a new man, economically, socially, and romantically. He, in turn, dubs Margaret a “woman,” not a Southern lady. Imbedded in his term “woman” is a respect for Margaret’s public persona, from her opinions on the strike to her new role as financial backer, and her educated status. In essence, both of them eschew the conventional definitions of “man” and “woman” in favor of defining them according to their personal experiences and understanding of one another.

Coming full circle, Gaskell's novel illustrates the potential of the educated woman to cross the boundaries that separate the private and public realm while still remaining respectable. This novel sees in the figure of Margaret Hale the return of a sexually desirable thinking heroine, like Wollstonecraft's Maria and Owenson's Glorvina, and yet retains the respectability of a rational domestic heroine like Austen's Elinor. Margaret's potentially gender-dissonant characteristics, such as her classical education and her active participation in public politics, become synonymous with being a woman through Gaskell's emphasis on Margaret's feminine figure and scrupulous principals. Gaskell herself walks the fine line between a public writer (and in many ways, a national educator through her novels) and her role as wife and mother, and yet her (domestic) femininity absolves her of her radical politics, just as it does for Margaret. Thornton's ability to reshape what it means to be a man opens up space for Margaret to redefine what it means to be a virtuous woman—she can now be sexual, intellectual, and public, yet still respectable. Speaking more generally, it could be argued that part of what enables this increasing acceptance of this once liminal figure is the shifting social boundaries more generally; the Industrial Revolution collapsed the distance between classes, as the money to be made in running a mill allowed for upward mobility. The increased population of women at this time also necessarily forced the separate spheres ideology to change—there simply weren't enough homes for women to settle in to make the domestic realm the sole arena in which women could be productive members of society. Gaskell wrote at a time in which social concerns, like the effect of the Industrial Revolution and the woman question, produced a drive for social and gender reforms in a way that had not been seen since the political upheaval of the 1790s. Wollstonecraft's philosophies were unmistakably revived at this point, if implicitly because of her still-taboo status, as a way to again champion the rights of woman. Gaskell acted as a pivotal

woman writer that drew on her predecessors to establish the importance and respectability of thinking women in the public realm.

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