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Angels of Many Houses: Reconciling Domesticity in 19th-Century Victorian Literature

Amanda Vierra
College of the Holy Cross, pandavierra@gmail.com

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College of the Holy Cross
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Advised by Professor Debra Gettelman

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Abstract

The rise of the Victorian middle class is known for solidifying a separation of gender roles, with women operating in the private, domestic sphere and men in the public sphere. This historical value placed on domesticity is reflected in the rise of domestic fiction, the dominant genre of Victorian literature, which commonly depicts young, middle-class women making their way in the world. The plot of these narratives revolves around women perfecting or contending with their place in the domestic sphere through courtship, marriage, and family. Scholars on domestic fiction have continued to argue over whether domestic fiction reflected the oppressive gender roles of its time or an empowering celebration of domestic women. In this thesis, I argue that domestic fiction is neither wholly empowering nor oppressive. Instead, domestic women often stay closely attached to traditional domestic roles while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of what a woman should or should not be subjected to. The ways in which women "reconcile" or grapple with their place in the home and family differs from woman to woman. By examining the real Queen Victoria and Caroline Norton in comparison to novels by Charles Dickens, Anne Brontë, and Charlotte Brontë, we can appreciate the diversity of domestic women's personalities and desires.

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Preface

When I began looking at what academics have studied in Victorian literature, I noticed a strong emphasis on novels which have a feminist tone, such as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights.* It comes as no surprise that modern, socially progressive academics have continued to put these novels on a pedestal, and for good reason. I wondered why other Victorian novels, even by the same writers, are studied and remembered less. I recognized that some of these lesser studied novels appeared to be more reserved in their depiction of women. The female characters accept and follow their feminine duties without much fuss, seemingly reinforcing the unfavorable status of women. Thus, many modern readers and scholars alike struggle to connect with these novels because of their "conservative" bent.

With proper care and attention, one notices that these seemingly conservative texts do not inherently contradict progressive ideology. The subtleties of what Victorian audiences considered rebellious are often lost on us now, as we have become desensitized to Victorian cultural taboos and have normalized them. In fact, sometimes what seems to be conservatism within a novel enables the expression of progressive ideologies about women's place in society. This recognition that even the most seemingly conservative Victorian novels are not as archaic when understood within the Victorian framework is the inspiration for my chosen texts. I aim to expand an appreciation for them as equally pushing against Victorian gender norms like *Jane Eyr*e, and thus deserving of recognition as part of a proto-feminist tradition.

Introduction

Overview: Victorian Society & Gender

Change was everywhere in the Victorian era. The Industrial Revolution was in full swing, with Britain as the main driver of technological change in making steel and iron. This created a growing middle class and inspired a generation with ideas of individualism and the ability to move across class lines. The Great Exhibition of 1851, organized by Henry Cole and Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, become the first large fair to showcase and celebrate inventions from around the world, with Britain at the head. There were telegraphs, steam hammers, pottery, perfume, and even houses. Schweppes, the first soft drink, sponsored the event.

While the Industrial Revolution seemed to push the boundaries of what was possible, the Victorian home seemed to hold women back. Victorian society was characterized, if not ruled by, the "cult of domesticity". Domesticity is an organized system of beliefs which "refers to the lived experience of private life, the material dimensions of the home, and an ideology that imaginatively organizes complicated and often contested ideas about privacy, work, gender identity, family, subject formation, socioeconomic class, civilizing morality, and cultural representation" (Cohen). Although a complex ideology, for the purposes of this thesis, I will be primarily examining domesticity through the lens of gender identity. In domestic ideology, women were the "masters" of the "domestic" or private sphere, while the men were the breadwinners who interacted with the public sphere. This separation of gendered roles defined men's versus women's work which heavily influenced middle- and upper-class life for years to come.

This isolation of women from the public was a major topic of concern and protest for some middle-class Victorian women. In her essay *Cassandra*, Florence Nightingale looked at the "idleness of women" (Nightingale) as stifling their spiritual gifts unjustly and suppressing their instincts. Others, like Isabella Beeton, wrote *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* which not only instructs women on how to work in the home, but idealizes a woman with household duties as comparable "to the commander of an army or the leader of an enterprise" (Beeton). In a world of incredible progress, the domestic sphere promised stability in Victorian society. Regardless of the new technologies, economies, and relations being formed daily, gender roles were, as Mary Poovey notes, naturalized (Poovey 52). The talents of men were supposed to be naturally inclined towards leadership and public labor and women were naturally inclined for domestic work. Thus, by that logic, nothing would (or should) change. The "Angel in the House" ideology suggests a streamlined, united ideology on women's place within the domestic sphere, but as I show above there is literally more to the story.

Why Read Literature Historically?

While this thesis uses historical evidence throughout, my approach remains at its core literary. After all, when we reflect on women's histories, we are inclined to reflect on events which we consider as "real," such as the Suffragette Movement, not a fictional story. The importance of examining Victorian literature historically lies in two premises that are especially relevant to the histories of women and other less privileged groups of persons: 1) that history is incomplete and 2) literature can act as a historical document.

To address the first commonly accepted assumption, the historical documents we currently possess are only available to us because of specific choices the originators made.

They may have deemed creating some formal record as exceptionally important, such as how the Founding Fathers of the United States anticipated the significance of the establishment of the "New World." John Adams, in a letter to his wife on July 3, 1776, wrote, "The Second Day of July 1776, will be the most memorable Epocha, in the History of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated, by succeeding Generations, as the great anniversary Festival" (Adams). As such, we have numerous letters and constitutional documents and proceedings, as opposed to, say, Abigail Adams's grocery list. Furthermore, even if a historical document was deemed valuable, war, societal collapse, physical decay, or thievery has left things lost to our understanding. Whether history is purposely left out or lost, all good historians will approach a text noting the gaps in information. Thus, while history has much information to give us, its incompleteness opens the door for potential change in our perspective of history. We can never be sure our current understanding of history is the right one when so much is left unanswered.

Second, where pure historical data fails to give us the whole story, literature can be the mechanism which "fills in the gaps" of history. Hayden White argues that historical chronologies utilize literary techniques to create a complete story or narrative that is not evident by simply using facts or statistics. Historical narratives are heavily contingent upon personal conceptions and artistic choices the authors themselves make. That is not to say that authors simply "make up" history, but that each author presents history in a unique way, coloring the historical event through a specific tone and perception that influences the reader just as much as the presence of facts. While literary metaphors and rhetorical devices impact the narrative arc and tone of an historical event, such that history cannot be wholly separated from literary techniques, then literature itself cannot be wholly separate from its historical context. That is

not to say that literature and history are interchangeable, but rather that history is a complementary force within literature. To illuminate this point, I examine these novels in comparison to historical women whose lives parallel or closely reflect the problems faced by female heroines. Although we cannot assume each author wrote with the historical figure in mind, I believe the similarities between the two highlight how reality can be reflected in fiction.

It is important to note that within the historical framework of Victorian Britain, poor women, women of color, and other minority women were not included in the "cult of domesticity" because of widespread, underlying prejudice. Therefore, although Victorian domesticity is a complex topic that undoubtedly influenced modern-day feminist movements, the ideas I discuss might be described as "white feminist" as opposed to "feminist." Thus, when I am working within this limited cultural framework and I refer to general women's empowerment, I am referring to what Victorian society would view as the "ideal women," not what we view as the ideal women. However, I do not believe this lack of diversity means that the Victorian tradition cannot be relevant in our modern, diverse world, especially as more historians and archivists are interested in the "lost" or "forgotten" history which has been suppressed due to the oppression of a groups like women, people of color, LGBTQ persons, religious minorities, and more. If we think dominant history has many important documents missing, these minority histories have much bigger gaps for us to fill. So, historians are seeking to piece together the limited sources they must recognize to credit minority voices in history. For these groups especially, valuable history comes from literary or narrative sources. For example, the enslaved narrative, which first started being published in the 18th century, only exploded over the years as 6,000 narratives were published between 1760-1947 (Johnson 129).

The personal narrative was a form which gave space for a kind of self-expression and storytelling of one's own. Thus, this example of Victorian women telling their stories through literature is not exclusive to one demographic, but rather is one source that can help piece together histories which have been long forgotten and ignored. For the dominant group, it may be best to look at legal documents, statistics, reports, etc. but for minority groups, it is essential to look at their art.

Furthermore, to read Victorian literature is to see the empowerment of female self-expression and, in turn, perhaps notice the covert messaging in other works of literature by minority populations. A common trope within domestic Victorian literature is the commodification of service. Middle-class women of the Victorian era had little else to market but their ability as caregivers, given their restrained capacity to do paid work. As I examine in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, Esther Summerson serves as a kind of managerial force within the house and views her service as a way to gain love for herself. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, I show how Helen Huntingdon's service was rendered to an unworthy man, making her unhappy and fearful. In her book *Communities of Care*, Talia Schaffer comments on how this kind of "emotional labour" placed on caregiving women placed them in a "double bind" as "they were supposed to behave in acceptably feminine ways, but selling that behavior suggested it could be artificially drummed up, thereby undermining its reality" (Schaeffer 91). Caring was in theory a voluntary activity, one which many women enjoyed. However, caregiving, the economic activity, commodified that desire to care, and thus separated the self from one's actions as it was "quite possible to give care without feeling caring at all" (Schaeffer 91).

It is this "care-commodification" which I find a strong line of similarity between some oppressed groups both past and present. Most famously, the trans-Atlantic slave trade commodified both the labor and personhood of Africans in the Western world, requiring enslaved persons to act in service to those whom they were likely to despise. The human capacity for sympathy is corrupted by the enforced commodification of their capacity of caring, thus making it performative rather than genuine. However, perhaps more surprisingly, Schaeffer argues that the work of Victorian domestic women serves as early examples of global migrant workers (Schaeffer 94). For example, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* follows an English governess who travels to France to teach at a boarding school. Lucy Snowe endures daily microaggressions from her French colleagues, is often pressured into conformity by acting in Catholic or theatrical productions, and, because of the character's desire to run away from her past, suppresses her feelings to ensure her position remains protected. This is not just a unique idea espoused by Brontë, as this fictional trope also points towards a global economic shift during the 19th century in which caregiving service was often given by migrants such as the Irish, French, and German (Schaffer 95). In *Bleak House*, we have a French maid named Hortense. In *Shirley*, we have another housekeeping Hortense of Belgium origin, whose foreign quirks regarding domestic custom "put her at odds with her English maid, Sarah" (Rosengarten). Thus, the study of domesticity in Victorian fiction has more global implications than might be apparent at first glance. Sometimes, hidden histories aren't so hidden, but the history is in a novel.

The Debate on Victorian Domesticity in Literature

The nature of domestic work in Victorian fiction has been the subject of much academic debate over the years. In Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's book *The Madwoman in the Attic*

(1979), they argue that female authors were limited because men's domination of the literary world has made them susceptible to the male gaze, and thus their stories were defined according to male standards of women. Female characters were either "angels", or women who embodied the Victorian ideal: submissive and passive with a commitment to the domestic, private sphere. Otherwise, they were "madwomen", rebellious, unkempt women who went against their feminine instincts. Thus, all domestic depictions of women in literature by women are seen as examples of victimization as both author and character cannot define themselves outside male expectations and a patriarchal framework. This issue Gilbert and Gubar define as "Anxiety of Authorship," (Gilbert and Gubar 49) highlighting how in the nineteenth century women writers were new and had no guidance on how to write for themselves. Therefore, female authors and characters struggled and never fully succeeded in defining their own stories and characters because of the patriarchal ideology held in society, especially in literature.

Following Gilbert and Gubar by almost a decade, Nancy Armstrong, in her book *Desire in Domestic Fiction (1987)*, claims that they fail to mention or acknowledge the influence of writing for and by women in history as a force of influence outside of male domination. Novelists like Jane Austen, the Brontës, and Samuel Richardson rewrote and defined domestic practices in ways that empower the female in a private sphere and progress female autonomy and desire (Armstrong 8). These new values were inexplicably tied to the public sphere, as I mentioned above, and therefore women could control and influence domestic and feminine culture more than Gilbert and Gubar thought was possible. Therefore, rather than viewing women as victims, Armstrong argues domestic fiction has an empowering effect on women as domestic head of house.

It is this longstanding disagreement over the power of women in the domestic sphere in which I situate my argument that the private sphere in Victorian domestic fiction is neither entirely empowering nor victimizing. Rather, Victorian women in the domestic sphere exist in an in-between state as independent beings with reason, wills and desires of their own. Victorian women often desired to be viewed as "feminine," which included traditional notions of domesticity and gender roles. However, instead of forgoing independence for femininity, or vice versa, women "reconciled" these two contradicting identities into one, coherent identity. Thus, within the same historical figure, or literary text, female characters express unusual or progressive characteristics or ideas but ground them within the traditional domestic framework. Domesticity allows women the protection to experiment and push societal ideology under the guise of protecting traditionalism. There isn't one "Angel in the House," as poet Coventry Patmore describes, but many angels in many houses.

This process of marrying their independent and domestic identities, which throughout this thesis I refer to as "reconciling domesticity," is examined in three distinct chapters. I move from most conservative to most radical, highlighting how skillful rhetoricians can critique Victorian domesticity to gain greater autonomy as women. In Chapter One, I look at a novel and a historical figure who are often thought of as romantic examples of the "Angel in the House": Queen Victoria and Esther Summerson of *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens. First, I will examine what makes these characters domestic exemplars of the Victorian era as well as in contemporary society. Then, I will examine triumphs and oppressions each character faces within their domestic position. Finally, I conclude by showcasing how Queen Victoria and Esther Summerson reconcile themselves to traditional domestic expectations and find power within this commitment.

In Chapter Two, I will turn to the real woman Caroline Norton along with the fictional Helen Graham of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë. I will examine the power of female rhetoric in Victorian writing and show how Caroline Norton and Helen Graham's language skillfully pushes for greater domestic freedom for women while simultaneously grounding their rebellion in traditional ideology. Finally, in Chapter Three, I will briefly address *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë, which is an example of domestic fiction which seems to challenge traditional models of domestic fiction. I will examine how Brontë's rhetorical strategies make *Shirley* incompatible to Victorian domestic ideology and anticipates the future of feminist ideology of the twentieth century. Through examining the range of beliefs and tactics Victorian women, real and fictional, utilize, I hope to fill in a gap of women's history which has largely left out domestic women on account of their persons being naturally "hidden" from larger society. By giving their voices back, we can recognize the complexity and depth of domestic women as not just empty vessels doing men's bidding, but as individuals invested in female empowerment.

Chapter 1: The Queen and the Orphan

The Angel of England

Coventry Patmore was the first author to coin the term "Angel in the House" in his poem "The Angel in the House" written in memory of his late wife. In the poem, she is perfectly submissive and charming for her husband, and since "Man must be pleased," (Patmore 74) Patmore suggests that female submission is not just a preference, but something that should occur naturally as "to please / is woman's pleasure" (Patmore 74). While many view this poem as the first encapsulation of the "Angel in the House," it was published in 1854, well into the Victorian era. In fact, conduct books detailing women as submissive beings were influential in the late 18th century. The Victorian era was reaping the benefits of a growing middle class, as a higher disposable income allowed Victorians leisure to partake in high culture and education, which correlates with the increased literacy experts see within this period. This, coupled with the rise of the separate spheres' ideology, helped make the "Angel in the House" a part of the dominant culture.

While Patmore's wife was the inspiration for his poem, for all of England, the primary "Angel" of the Victorian era was Queen Victoria herself. Queen Victoria, born in 1819, assumed the role of Queen of England at age 18 in a context that included contending with a degraded monarchical image as "the previous kings had been profligates, philanderers, opium-addled, or mad" (Baird XXXIX). Queen Victoria determined that she "shall not fail" (qtd. in Baird 55). Her reign was characterized by extreme advancement in political, social, and industrial change as, for the first time in English history, she was awarded the title "Empress of India" (Baird 382). This title was not so much something she earned, but rather given as a symbol of Western values and forged a stronger link between the colonies and England.

Soldiers, prime ministers, and Parliament were the forces through which social change occurred, but Queen Victoria was their figurehead, mobilizing the public into promoting English aims and values on a global scale.

Queen Victoria is not a fictional character. However, her public image, and how we remember her is a purposeful construct. Victoria's daughter Beatrice, in a letter to her great-nephew, King George VI, describes some of the late Queen's letters as "of no historical or biographical value whatsoever, & if pried into could only be misconstrued to damage her memory" (qtd. in Baird xlii). Therefore, much of these "painful letters" (qtd. in Baird xliii) have either been destroyed, edited, or are tucked neatly way in the Royal Archives. Even today, these archives remain restricted. Thus, it is fair to say that the historical memory of Queen Victoria more accurately falls under the category of literary fiction. Queen Victoria has been meticulously curated, both during and after her life, has been intentionally curated around domestic sentiment, winning the hearts of her admirers and preserving the prestige of the monarchy. Queen Victoria, the monarch, has always been a character. Victoria, the real woman, is largely out of our reach. With whatever fact and fiction is left for us to examine, I attempt to examine this close relationship between Victoria's literary and historical presence and how her domestic image influences her social and political power.

The Formation of Queen Victoria's Domesticity

What is Victoria's "domestic" persona? Even as young as 18, the men of state "bawled into their handkerchiefs when she simply read aloud a statement someone else has written," (qtd. in Baird 72) enamored with "her wisdom, her gentleness, and her self-possession" (qtd. in Baird 63). After her death, Henry James would famously report how it felt as though England was "quite motherless" (qtd. in Baird 485). To her subjects she was a symbol of womanly

perfection, unambitious and domestic-oriented despite her position as Queen. In many ways, they are not wrong in this assessment of her. Victoria may have been the most powerful woman in England, but that did not mean she scorned the domestic space nor her "duty" in it.

Victoria's commitment to the domestic model makes sense on a psychological level once one understands the Queen's childhood. Young Victoria dealt with feelings of neglect and abandonment from her own mother who, after the death of Victoria's father, conspired with John Conroy to prevent Victoria from assuming the position of Queen. "I was never happy until I was 18" (qtd. in Baird) Victoria reports because she was entrapped in a domestic nightmare. For a child that desired companionship and felt isolated most of the time, her childhood was decidedly miserable. Julia Baird, as well as many other authors studying Queen Victoria's life, note her extreme emotional responses to neglect and abandonment, especially as a child. In her letters, Victoria describes her loathing after her sister visits only to leave after her marriage. She reports having had much "grief" when they had parted and "cried *bitterly*" into her sister's arms. This feeling of abandonment, of feeling as though she is "destined" to "always be separated from that one loves most dearly" (qtd. in Baird 30) reveals how lonely Queen Victoria's childhood was. Victoria endured the death of her beloved father, the separation of siblings, and the estrangement of her mother, all of which from a psychological standpoint would create much distress in a young child, especially a reportedly affectionate one. Unstable childhoods often shape one's understanding of the world or make children cope with negative emotions in an unhealthy way.

Therefore, many historians question whether her seemingly enthusiastic viewpoint of domesticity can truly be understood as empowering, since Victoria's troubling childhood influenced notable patterns of codependency and blind faith in her relationships with male

supervisors. She was young, inexperienced, and insecure with a large group of primarily men surrounding her and trying to charm her into giving them special privileges. For example, Benjamin Disraeli, a beloved prime minister of Victoria, said in a letter to poet Matthew Arnold, "Everyone likes flattery; and when you come to royalty you should lay it on with a trowel" (qtd. in Weintraub 412). She had never been given affection while growing up, and now having the flattery and attention of many esteemed individuals, she was eating out of their hand's half the time. Such was the case with Lord Melbourne, whose "affection and attention" were important to her and made her exceptionally deferential too him, even when undeserved (Baird 85). The young Queen took on a role like that of a child, looking towards others who could guide her and make her feel loved and protected instead of empowering her ideas and her voice. These dependencies she had with older men got her into trouble as her deference to Lord Melbourne's opinions, coupled with his raunchy past, evidently resulted in unsavory gossip. "This affair is much tattled and very unhappily," remarks Victoria's mother, the Duchess of Kent in a letter to her, "take care that Melbourne is not King" (qtd. in Baird 65). Queen Victoria herself, after her marriage to Albert, reflects in her diary on her own foolishness of her "unbounded affection" for Lord Melbourne because "the life I lived was so artificial & superficial, & yet I thought I was happy. Thank God! I know what REAL happiness means!" (qtd. in Baird 184). In a surprising moment of self-reflection, Queen Victoria admits to Albert that she "clung to someone" as she had "very warm feelings" (qtd. in Baird 185). The impulsive and unconscious need for Victoria to receive love from anyone highlights her lack of exposure to genuine, non-toxic forms of love in her childhood. By securing a stable family with Albert, she cultivates a stable atmosphere in which she can feel adored, safe, and cared for with a partner respectable for the Queen of England.

However, the value of cultivating domesticity goes beyond just personal self-fulfillment. “They say no sovereign was ever more loved than I am (I am bold enough to say), & *this* because of our domestic home, the good example it presents,” Victoria remarks (qtd. in Baird 223). In *Remaking Queen Victoria,* Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich remark on the pervasiveness of domestic ideology in the latter half of the Victorian age, asserting that “while Victoria may have been subject to an ideology over which no individual has control, it is impossible not to think that she had some active hand in shaping the ideology that bears her name” (qtd. in Holmes and Munich 23). Victoria as a “virginal young queen embodied a dramatic change from her predecessors” (Holmes and Munich 23). In an era of distrust of the monarchy, Victoria, as *National Review* cofounder Walter Bagehot observes, brought “down the pride of the sovereignty to the level of petty life” (qtd. in Holmes and Munich 279). By humbling the monarchy, the public could identify their own values in the Queen and thus bridged the usual remoteness the monarchy resembled in the public mind (Holmes and Munich 293).

Queen Victoria being judged or subjected to traditional domestic ideology at first glance appears out of the ordinary. Hall and Davidoff characterize the formation of domestic or “separate sphere” ideology as arising out of the formation of the middle class. Wealthy women could deflect menial household chores to a hired maid, had greater access to education and artistic hobbies, and were attributed to having greater character and thus having a kind of “right” outside of normal society to express themselves. For example, Elaine Showalter describes how Florence Nightingale, despite her complaints of idles in her essay *Cassandra,* has the connections to experience an “appealing intellectual restricted world against the opposition of her mother and sister under the secret guidance of her father” (qtd. in Choperena

and La Rosa-Salas). Furthermore, Mary Holliday & David Parker claim Nightingale also "experiences accompanying her mother on charitable visits to the sick provided a way to escape Victorian rigidity" (qtd. in Choperena and La Rosa-Salas). Therefore, if upper class women like Florence Nightingale could escape from Victorian rigidity, Queen Victoria certainly could have as well. Despite this apparent power to resist domesticity, Gail Houston argues that Queen Victoria had more "to gain by appearing to conform to the dominant Victorian pattern for femininity" (qtd. in Homans and Munich 7). If domestic ideology was particular to the middle classes, why did it matter that Victoria abided by this ideology? This answer seems to reveal itself when we look more critically into how the concept of "separate spheres" was organized. Although upper-class women certainly enjoyed more freedoms on average compared to lower-class women, the application of domestic ideology affects all classes to a certain extent.

Class is usually interwoven in the discussion of domesticity. In *Family Fortunes*, Davidoff and Hall argue that gender and class operate together, never separately (Davidoff and Hall 13). Thus, since the domestic sphere was developed out of the middle class, then it can only be understood under those conditions. On the other hand, class rigidity becomes fragile during this period. The middle class was defined by the idea that man was not merely stagnant at birth, but through work, education, and personal achievement one could raise themselves up in the world. "Business prowess" became something to take pride in, not the "honour-enhancing activities such as politics, hunting or social appearance" (Davidoff and Hall 20). Middle-class ideology embraces this mobility of class, thus allowing for essentially anyone to have access to and be a part of middle-class life and values based on their actions. Thus, although she is of aristocratic birth and has the means like her previous uncles to live lavishly and extravagantly, Queen Victoria lives according to middle-class principles. Despite her

sovereignty, Alison Booths asserts Queen Victoria "is just like an ordinary good woman" (qtd. in Homans and Munich 72) transforming her appearance to that of a middle-class woman.

Thus, when Victorian and modern scholars reflect upon Queen Victoria's character, many consider her seemingly submissive domestic image as something which actually empowered her in her position. Victoria could fulfill the emotional neglect she experienced as a child while gaining the trust of her subjects through her identification with the middle class. Furthermore, the power of domesticity works in her favor as a woman in an unorthodox position of power. Despite initial frenzy over her ascension to the throne, the continual criticism over excessive female power "indicates a British discomfort with ruling women and consequently with their own Queen" (qtd. in Homans and Munich 7). Yet, by encasing her image as modest, "excessively maternal," (Homans and Munich 2) child and husband-adoring, she maintains gender expectations of women. She is not exerting her authority to obtain power for herself, as men do, but exerts her power as a "mother," with England as her "children." This domestication of political power awarded Queen Victoria "respectability and affection" (Homans and Munich 106) and helped justify her right to exert authority under this definition.

While Queen Victoria was an advocate for the submission of women and family values, author Julia Baird aptly notes that this emphasis on her demure and unambitious nature is, at the very least, a major over-exaggeration. Victoria was also exceptionally passionate, stubborn, and outspoken. She notoriously interfered with and blocked political moves from Tories to keep her Whig companions in power and was indignant of those who kept her out of political meetings. On May 9th, Tory Robert Peel tried to assume his place as Prime Minister, the interview took a sharp turn when the Queen broke protocol and demanded that "all" of her household ladies remain (qtd. in Baird 104). This demand meant "he could not form a

government," and so resigned on May 10th, the following day (Baird 105). Furthermore, despite being raised on traditional models of female subservience (Baird 161), Victoria was evidently reluctant to give or even share any of her political authority with her husband Albert. In a conversation with Lord Melbourne, who told her of Albert's triumphs at an event, she responded, "I don't like his being absent from me, and then because I dislike his taking my part in politics or in the general affairs of the country" (qtd. in Baird 181-182). While her submissive, domestic image remained public (she famously left the word "obey" in her wedding ceremony), the Queen privately confided that "she honestly didn't want to do anything" (Baird 162) that put Albert in the middle of her political duties. She liked having authority, but she also liked being a wife. Why couldn't she be both? Therefore, while advocating for Albert to be titled "Prince Regent," she could also "resent his attempts to give her advice or direction" (qtd. in Baird 163) and keep domestic life separate from her public one.

Yet, this attempt to keep autonomy and domesticity in her life was evidently a struggle for the Queen and led to much suffering in her life. Although to outsiders she was agreeable in expanding her family and fulfilling her domestic duty (having nine in total), she secretly hated pregnancy. In a letter to her daughter Victoria (whom she called Vicky), Queen Victoria laments how "the poor woman is bodily and morally the husband's slave". The violent image of maternity being a product of slavery paints Queen Victoria's "domestic bliss" in a new light. Suddenly, the affectionate tone in which she referred to Albert as "Lord & Master" (qtd. in Baird 272) takes on a more sinister meaning. Her lament even turns accusatory, as she recounts the "laughs and sneers" she endures from Albert from her bodily sufferings. The Queen's aversion to pregnancy becomes apparent when recognizing how much mothers, especially

powerful ones, had to lose. Pregnancy in the Victorian period was marked by significant maternal death rates. Therefore, while prior to Victoria's pregnancies Parliament seemed exceptionally distrustful of Albert, the possibility of the Queen's death was frightening enough that Albert is given "legal right" (Baird 165) to rule in the event of her sudden death. In a letter to his brother Ernest, Albert proudly declares that "I am to be Regent-alone", awarding Albert a "fresh significance" (qtd. in Baird 165) and greater access to government influence than before. Secondly, Albert took advantage of Victoria's weakness and stress due to pregnancy. Albert found Victoria more agreeable as she was less able to perform all her necessary tasks. This may not seem to be a problem until we notice that once Albert gains power, he does not give it back. For example, after her third child, Lord Lansdowne and Lord John Russel noted how the once stubborn Queen who only "received her Ministers alone" now attended the meetings with Albert (qtd. in Baird 209). Once acting as a mere "Prince" at Queen Victoria's mercy, he attended things with her and for her, making him, as Lord John Russel notes, "King to all intents and purposes" (qtd. in Baird 209). However, I do not mean to claim that Victoria wholly lost her voice or never acted independently (she ruled 40 years alone after Albert's death) but that there is a noticeable decline in her authority directly caused by the opportunist Albert, who "like a vulture to its prey," Baron Stockmar noted, "flies off with it to his next" (qtd. in Baird 208). Therefore, the act of pregnancy and family can be oppressive for Victoria as it left her "vulnerable and earthbound" to Albert's desire for power (Baird 165).

It is this historical barrier between public knowledge and the private monarchy which has wrought such unclear and contradictory claims about the Queen. Immediately after her death, most letters were tucked away, or discarded and burned to protect the monarchy's image. The "secrecy and lack of transparency" (Baird 498) from the monarchy continues still to this

day, as scholars like Julia Baird must fight for access to the Royal Archives at Windsor Castle. If access is granted, the information chosen by scholars is still "fact-checked" by the royal house. Julia Baird reports how the editor deleted a huge chunk of information "not *inside* but *outside* the archives" (Baird 497). This obsession of keeping the "real Victoria" hidden further solidifies her image as one more akin to a fictional character than a historical figure. It is only through the insistent efforts of scholars like Baird that we have just begun to unravel the person from the icon.

Queen Victoria's power was threatened further by public and Parliament members who distrusted her legitimacy as a monarch. Politically, she was not just a monarch in a country rife with anti-monarchy sentiment, but she was a female monarch, in a country in which many people in and out of Parliament found it difficult to respect or comprehend the idea of a female in power. While some thought the Queen should remain in charge because she was English and Albert was German, there was "substantial cultural support" (Baird 161) for Albert assuming the primary leadership role by important leaders in culture. Writer John Ruskin claimed in his lecture *Of Queen's Gardens* that the natural state of women was "true wifely subjection" (Ruskin). In her popular book *The Wives of England*, Sarah Ellis argues that regardless of talent, ability, etc., a husband is above a wife "simply as a man" (Ellis 161).

The importance of Queen Victoria's life on Victorian popular culture is that Queen Victoria becomes a kind of "icon" of the period utilized for the betterment and stabilization of English society. For example, Arianne Chernock in her book *The Right to Rule and the Rights of Women: Queen Victoria and the Women's Movement* notes that because Queen Victoria's views on women's suffrage were kept private until much later, pro- and anti-women's rights movements could utilize and manipulate her image in order to fit their narrative. However,

most famously, Queen Victoria is an "icon" because she herself helps address the inherently contradictory nature of domesticity in English society. Elizabeth Langland describes two different attitudes which arise during the age that Victoria embodies: Victorianism, the traditionally maternal, feminine side of Queen Victoria which serves as a cultural "marker of domesticity," and Englishness, which is characterized by imperialism and masculinity (qtd. Homans and Munich 24). While the country viewed itself as "masculine" in nature and goal, their monarch was anything but. Therefore, popular thought worked towards creating a "myth" or narrative marrying these two conflicting images into a cohesive, stable ideology. Queen Victoria became the symbol of "what it means to be both English and Victorian" (qtd. in Homan and Munich 30) reconciling her contradicting identities into one culturally unifying image.

As we saw above, Victoria was a person who curated a specific public image but acted quite differently behind closed doors, and thus it allows us to consider her status as a figurehead or icon of Victorian domestic values rather than being a true embodiment of domestic values. When we think of Victoria as being this stoic, maternal, unassuming "Angel in the House," we are seeing Queen Victoria, the domestic icon. Queen Victoria, the person, is neither a perfect "angel in the house" archetype nor a stubborn, rebellious queen. As a cultural domestic icon, Victoria showcases domesticity in its entirety, highlighting the good and bad it can do for women in these positions. Domesticity fulfills Victoria's need for acceptance, but simultaneously threatens her need for acceptance as her passionate spirit remains largely distasteful for this conservative society. Thus, the power of Queen Victoria's status as an "icon" is that it provides her the flexibility to exist in a cultural in-between state: neither fully domestic nor culturally deviant. Victorians had lofty ideals, but in reality, the interpretations

and practice of domesticity were much more diverse and expansive than one might have recognized at first.

Dickens's Angel: Esther Summerson

It is through this lens of domestic iconography that I wish to examine the character of Esther Summerson of Charles Dickens's Bleak *House*. Esther is notoriously viewed as a textbook "Angel in the House" character for her meek, quiet personality, obsession with housekeeping, and sense of moral responsibility, which certainly granted her many admirers among Victorian readers. However, the character of Esther was not entirely celebrated, even in Victorian times. She was too mousy, too submissive, and overall lacked backbone. Charlotte Brontë found Esther "weak and twaddling" and therefore hard to take seriously (qtd. in Frazee 227). Similarly, Henry Fothergill Chorley in 1853 said Esther was "overperfect" and "too precociously good, too perpetually self-present, and too helpful to everyone around her" (Chorley 1087-88). Already within the introduction of these negative Victorian reviews, we can see that ideals about the role of women in domestic spaces were not a monolith. Some readers found her perfectly endearing while others could not stand her. These conflicting reviews don't reflect misunderstandings about Esther Summerson, but rather highlight the perceived domestic icon she supposedly represents is rather ambiguous in both practice and our interpretation of her actions.

A consistent symbol of Esther's domestic power stems from her holding of the housekeeper keys of Bleak House. She was bestowed these keys, and therefore this responsibility to observe and maintain the upkeep and organization of household functions, almost immediately upon arrival, which greatly excites Esther:

> I said I would be ready at half-past six, and after she was gone, stood looking at the basket, quite lost in the magnitude of my trust. Ada found me thus and had such a

> delightful confidence in me when I showed her the keys and told her about them that it would have been insensibility and ingratitude not to feel encouraged. I knew, to be sure, that it was the dear girl's kindness, but I liked to be so pleasantly cheated (Dickens 89).

Esther's claim to be incapable of feeling "ingratitude" towards this charge would have appeared significant to Victoria readers. In Victorian times, property was exceptionally important as the basis of the social and economic status of the family for generations to come. If the property were to be lost or mismanaged, the family loses wealth, security, and social standing. In Esther's case, she is given the responsibility of a house of a family who is embedded in an already troubling property battle at the Court of Chancery, which has caused lives to be torn apart and future final security to be brought into question. However, despite the financial stakes of losing Bleak House, Jarndyce is entirely unconcerned with money, believing that the Court of Chancery "have twisted it [the lawsuit] into such a state of bedevilment that the original merits of the case have long disappeared from the face of the earth. It's about a will and the trusts under a will—or it was once. It's about nothing but costs now" (Dickens 118). Mr. Jarndyce does, on the other hand, care about making a home. Bleak House, once "so shattered and ruined" (Dickens 119) by his uncle's obsessions with the Jarndyce and Jarndyce lawsuit, soon filled with "warmth, and comfort; with its hospitable jingle" and a "generous master" (Dickens 87). Jarndyce might not be as concerned with the economic side of properties, like most Victorians, the home still provides a sense of pride and identity for him. Jarndyce awards Esther who role as housekeeper because "in the course of your housekeeping," Jarndyce remarks, "you will sweep them [cobwebs] so neatly out of OUR sky...that one of these days we shall have to abandon the growlery and nail up the door" (Dickens 119). By giving Esther the keys to Bleak House, Jarndyce entrusts Esther to not just maintain Bleak House for the present, but to uplift it to a kind of domestic paradise, where the

“cobwebs” of life, such as the lawsuit, will never infiltrate the home and corrupt it. Thus, Jarndyce’s vulnerability in giving Esther the responsibility of his future happiness and contentment emphasizes that the role of housekeeper holds significant influence beyond household duties. Other characters acknowledge the importance of holding onto a pair of house keys as Ada, as well as the housekeeper, seem to recognize and acknowledge the specialness of this charge: “I showed my surprise, for she added with some little surprise on her own part, "I was told to bring them as soon as you was alone, miss. Miss Summerson, if I don't deceive myself?” (Dickens 88). The ritual of handing it to her when “alone” and doing it urgently also highlights the protective and serious nature of bestowing house responsibilities onto another person, even going so far as to double-check to make sure Esther truly is “Miss Summerson.” Housekeeping keys are clearly considered something which cannot be easily accessible or left alone for long, reinforcing the idea that Jarndyce’s decision to give Esther the housekeeping keys is exceptional honor, one which Esther enjoys alone.

Esther’s excitement about her special charge is evident in how “lost” she feels with the amount of trust bestowed upon her; Esther’s domestic excitement can be viewed as empowering to her. Firstly, Esther is not used to being trusted. In Chapter 1, we are introduced to Esther’s bleak childhood, having been orphaned and abandoned by a mother as she was the product of an affair. Beyond feeling the desire to know her mother, she is in turn scorned by her aunt, who reminds her constantly that her mother's sin is her sin, and that because she was born in such a shameful way, she could only expect to keep her head down and stay out of others’ way. Like Queen Victoria, Esther Summerson’s life started in a lonely way, with only a doll as a companion that fills their need for a maternal figure. Queen Victoria told her eldest daughter she was” not on a comfortable or at all intimate or confidential footing with my

mother" (qtd. in Baird 25). Victoria would, however, "spend many hours playing with her dolls" and "sent reports of her baby dolls to Feodora; sometimes they even wrote letters themselves" (qtd. in Baird 30). Esther "never dared to open my heart, to anybody else" but her "dear old doll" (Dickens 28). Esther, like Queen Victoria, humanizes her doll as her "only friend", who is "faithful" to her and gives her the love her "austere" aunt cannot (Dickens 29). Esther's childhood, imbedded with negative character reinforcement and a desperate need to "win some love to myself," (Dickens 31) is suddenly challenged by the belonging and responsibility she experiences upon her arrival to Bleak House.

Jarndyce giving her the housekeeping keys of Bleak House gives Esther an important, managerial role. Martin Danahay notes that Esther's role being titled "housekeeper" and not "housewife" comes with very different connotations and responsibilities of a women's role in the domestic sphere (Danahay 416). Housewives are primarily responsible for caring for and raising the children in a middle-class household, as well as doing the cooking and the cleaning in a working-class household (Danahay 417). The emphasis on being a "wife" and taking on a maternal role reinforces women's subservience to the man of the house; the role delegates women to exist outside the realm of public employment and instead work within the private sphere. A housekeeper, one the other hand, one does not necessarily have to be married, as in Esther's case. Secondly, unlike subservient housewives, the role of housekeeper invokes a more managerial position. The housekeeper typically does not do the manual labor, but "keeps" or manages charge of the home, delegating the tasks to those who work below her (Danahay 416-417). We see the prestige of this position through Mrs. Rouncewell, housekeeper of Chesney Wold, as the house "lies on the breadth of Mrs. Rouncewell's iron-bound bosom" (Dickens 105-106). Her authority earns her the respect of her current master, who "has a great

liking" for her and considers her "a most respectable, creditable women," so much that he "always shakes her hand" when he sees her (Dickens 106). Esther's role as housekeeper, similarly, proves the managerial and respectability of her position. Esther, upon starting her day, notes how "every one was so attentive to me, that I had no trouble with my two bunches of keys" (Dickens 115). This "attentiveness" shows the deference that other laborers place on Esther. They do not start working until they gain guidance and permission to begin. It is like how Chesney Wold opens and closes on Mrs. Rouncewell's bosom, Bleak House does not open without Esther's "two bunches of keys." Also, like Mrs. Rouncewell, Esther refrains from manual labor. When she notices the gravel is misplaced in the garden, Esther asks "the gardener to roll it," while the extent of her "responsibility" is preparing the "tea-pot" (Dickens 115). Esther's position absolves her from performing the duty of a servant, and instead living almost as mistress of the house. This elevation into middle-class livelihood is significant because, as I previously stated, her status as an illegitimate orphan means she is not expected to oversee anyone or anything significant because she is meant to keep her head down and do as she is told. However, Esther here is able to rise above that cruel expectation of herself and become someone whom people must listen to and respect within the Jarndyce home. She does not have to keep her head down, rather she must be vigilant, organized, and have control over the people working around her to ensure that domestic duties are performed sufficiently. The term "housekeeper" comes with very different and more empowering expectations. Esther may still appear to be the domestic-oriented woman Victorian domestic ideology desired her to be, but she can also at the same time act as this middle-class professional, which is not considered to be a women's role.

Ann Oakley interestingly points out that as the late nineteenth and early twentieth century unfolded, the lack of readily available domestic help caused the housewife and housekeeper positions to merge, making this once separate job description more ambiguous (qtd. in Danahay 416-417). For example, although Esther acts of manager of Bleak House, Esther remarks that her domestic journey "was the beginning of my being called Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs. Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden, and so many names of that sort that my own name soon became quite lost among them" (Dickens 121). These nicknames all come with connotations of maternity and domesticity, especially Dame Durden. Dame Durden comes from an old folk song about a housewife, invoking a more traditional, subservient image. Additionally, Esther's position at Bleak House does not prevent her from having to look after other people's children. Peepy, upon wounding himself, goes to his mother Mrs. Jellyby for support, who quickly dismisses him: "Go along, you naughty Peepy!" (Dickens 54). Esther steps in "to stop poor Peepy as he was going out and to take him up to nurse" and "fell fast asleep in my arms, sobbing at longer and longer intervals, until he was quiet" (Dickens 54-55). Esther's need to step in to take care of another woman's children parallels the common practice of upper-class women paying a lower-class nurse or nanny to raise their children and do the "messy work" of caring for children. The scope of Esther's responsibilities shows how the role of housekeeper does not eliminate Esther's housewife qualities, and therefore suggests that Esther's role in Bleak House is wide-reaching, influencing the domestic sphere on all levels from childcare to household management.

Esther's charge over the keys not only seemingly elevates her authority within the household but also seems to give authority over herself. Esther's issues of abandonment and

self-hatred follow her even after she leaves her aunt and is awarded the position of housekeeper. For example, after discovering her mother is Lady Dedlock, she returns to Bleak House contending with the reality that she can never be with her due to the improper situation of her birth. Instead of sinking into feelings of self-loathing, she redirects her thoughts in a different way:

> When our time came for returning to Bleak House again, we were punctual to the day and were received with an overpowering welcome. I was perfectly restored to health and strength and finding my housekeeping keys laid ready for me in my room, rang myself in as if I had been a new year, with a merry little peal. "Once more, duty, duty, Esther," said I; "and if you are not overjoyed to do it, more than cheerfully and contentedly, through anything and everything, you ought to be. That's all I have to say to *you*, my dear!" (Dickens 609).

Esther's domestic duties provide an outlet for Esther to deal with her troubled past. Obviously, housekeys give literal control to Esther through her access to certain areas of the house. However, the keys also symbolize her power of self-possession. Esther, having been born out of wedlock and subsequently left in the charge of her aunt not only must cope with issues of abandonment, but has no control over being considered guilty of her mother's sin. Her aunt consequently reminds her that "your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers" (Dickens 30) and that she can do nothing to better her position. Her purpose was not her own but predetermined. Esther's position at Bleak House has enabled her to rise above her predetermined class status as an orphan and illegitimate child, as well as provided Esther a concrete means-her keys-of coping with her bad past and recognize purpose in her present situation. With her housekeeper housekeys laid ready in wait for her, her place within Bleak House as Jarndyce's ward is consistent, reliable, and comforting.

However, although the keys in one sense bring her the power of self-possession; the passage also suggests Esther struggles with self-suppression. Self-possession highlights the

control of one's whole self, while self-suppression emphasizes a struggle against part of the self. The repetition of the word "duty, duty, Esther" (Dickens 609) tonally evokes feelings of self-chastisement, as if she is close to letting herself become enveloped in her desire to be with her mother, Lady Dedlock, but feels it is wrong to do so. This chastisement is further emphasized in her belief that she "ought" to be happy and grateful in her role and not desire anything beyond what she already has. She is dismissive of her feelings, perhaps to her own detriment, as she does not reflect on how she is currently feeling, but rather on how she "should" be feeling. "That's all I have to say to you, my dear!" (Dickens 609) portrays Esther as being dismissive of herself as if she is a silly little girl grieving over a trifle, as opposed to the very serious neglect and esteem issues that characterized her upbringing. The value Esther sees in herself is not in what she thinks or feels, but rather in what she can do for the home (i.e., her womanly role and duty).

Thus, as with Queen Victoria, the "celebration" of traditional and domestic femininity Esther embodies has been seen as not something that is of her own volition, but rather a response to a traumatic past (Zwerdling 429). Esther also suffers from isolation and has not received the love she so desires in childhood and desires to "win some love for herself" in the future. Yet, unlike Queen Victoria, her version of "winning love for herself" does coincide with the scathing remarks of her aunt, as she too expects to be a service to those above her and not rise to any great standing. Dickens makes it impossible to know how much she really enjoys her domestic duties, or if (as it appears in this passage) she acts because it is the only thing she thinks she can do to be loved and respected given her illegitimacy. Some scholars have attributed the ambiguity of Esther's character as a product of Dickens's attempt to depict a "subtle psychological portrait," where readers "must be detached and critical" looking "at

Esther rather than through her" like a psychoanalyst (Zwerdling 492). Dickens wants to exemplify the effects of "someone who remains trapped between childhood and real maturity," and thus forces readers to make connections between what she willingly shows and what remains "a great deal of difficulty" to share (Dickens 27). However, other critiques wonder if Dickens Esther is anything but a monumental failure of writing a female narrator. James Augustine Stothert in 1854 cited Esther as "proof how unable Dickens is to enter into the real depths of a human mind and draw a genuine character self-consistent in all its parts" (qtd. in Collins). For the first and only time, Dickens, not able to "relax into the simple narcissism of his male avatars," was forced to adapt to the "wider anxieties of the Self-Other relationship, which are the female's lot in the world". John Forester calls Esther "too consciously unconscious", and George Brimley, in *The Spectator*, argues that Esther "would not write her own memoirs" (qtd. in Wilt 287). This perceived irrationality of emotions and actions Esther takes, and Dickens lack of experience in writing female heroines, could make readers speculate as to how much Esther's confusing personality is intentional or how much comes from a lack of understanding of the Victorian female experience.

This question of Esther Summerson's identity is complicated further when we consider her class status. We have already noted how Queen Victoria seemingly defies class division as being a Queen does not protect or prevent her from following middle-class domestic ideals. Esther's class identity is even more confusing. Her parents, we eventually discover, are a woman who married into the aristocracy and an impoverished officer who was living in Mr. Snagsby's shop before his death. Granted, Esther is not aware of her intricate family background until much later, and thus for most of the book, it seems as though we understand her to be of a lower status because she is illegitimate. However, even when she is assumed to

be of a lower class, it still makes no real sense how, or why, she can become the housekeeper of Bleak House. Beyond a rude comment from Mrs. Woodcourt, whose initial disdain for Esther's class discourages her "not to always be selfish, talking of my son," (Dickens 472) for fear of Alan marrying someone below his "birth," no one seems bothered by Esther's position as housekeeper. Rather, they praise her superiority in the position compared to others: "You are so thoughtful, Esther," she [Ada] said, "and yet so cheerful! And you do so much, so unpretendingly! You would make a home out of even this house" (Dickens 58). This high praise can be interpreted in a few ways. Firstly, perhaps Esther's status as an orphan unattached to anyone gives her the freedom to choose and navigate between different class cultures. She not only becomes the housekeeper of Bleak House but assists and takes care of various people of different social stations from the Jellybys to Jo. In Victorian polite society, who you associated with was exceptionally important to maintaining a good reputation in your class. However, Esther's background is left entirely an enigma, as she "had never heard my mama spoken of. I had never heard of my papa either... I had never been shown my mama's grave. I had never been told where it was. Yet I had never been taught to pray for any relation but my godmother" (Dickens 29). Esther's past, which Jarndyce admits to knowing "next to nothing" about, leaves her with no clear understanding of her familial connections or identifications. She exists outside of normal societal distinctions because her past gives her no claim or belonging to anyone. Thus, perhaps the lack of preconceived class notions of Esther enables her to be claimed by the middle-class Jarndyce, Ada, and Richard as "our little women" (Dickens 214). Without a familial claim, class identification and prejudice become obscured and confused, thus freeing Esther from archaic notions of class superiority and forming a family based on "their love for me" (Dickens 486).

Secondly, this can be viewed as revealing that domesticity is perhaps more diverse and not as middle-class-oriented as history assumes it is. Jarndyce does not mention her background at all, but rather thinks Esther is "clever" enough to be a "good little woman" of the house (Dickens 121). Olga Stuchebrukhov argues that Bleak House was allegorical model of the growth of the middle class in England. Victorian England was a nation in transition, uncovering "the incongruity between the outdated aristocratic state and the middle-class idea of a nation" (Stuchebrukhov 147) and highlighting a deemphasis on class as a marker of power. However, although class became deemphasized, one's gender arguably mattered more. To reiterate Davidoff and Hall, the formation of middle-class ideology formed in tandem with the separate sphere ideology (Davidoff and Hall 13), meaning that as class mobility expanded, gender roles tightened. Queen Victoria found her legitimacy to rule questioned and threatened because of her sex despite being the most powerful women in England. Lytton Strachey reports that Prince Albert refused to acknowledge her unless she identified herself as "your wife" (qtd. in Baird 271) and not Queen Victoria, and so asserting his rule as husband having precedence over her political authority. Readers may notice something similar happening to Esther Summerson. While Dickens pushed back against the class system in *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations* and *Bleak House* alike, his views of women was much less liberal. In his article "The Rights and Wrongs of Women" (1854), Dickens claims that a woman who is "too gifted, too intellectual, to fine scope for her mind and heart in the education of her child, who pants for a more important work than the training of an immortal soul...is simply not a woman"; women who step outside of traditional roles are "inferior men" (Dickens 160). Thus, Dickens similarly shows Esther being rewarded and admired for her traditional femininity far more than her social status. Jarndyce, Richard, Ada, and others' insistence of calling Esther "Dame

Durden" and "little old women" (Dickens 121) instead of her name reduces Esther to a caricature of herself, being defined by her feminine duties rather than her individual person. When Esther performs her feminine roles, such as hospitality, Richard rewards her for being "the best of little women!" (Dickens 592). Whether queen or orphan, domesticity in practice is portrayed as crossing class lines, preventing women from fully being able to "buy their way out" of the gender hierarchy.

While Esther Summerson's domesticity is evident, her attitude remains entirely ambiguous. No better passage illustrates this conclusion than the beginning of Chapter 50. Esther, who is evidently overrun with work after Caddy asks for her help caring for her while ill. Esther must "rise a little earlier" to "keep my accounts and attend to house-keeping matters before leaving home" (Dickens 769). Jarndyce, noticing Esther's non-stop work for three consecutive days, remarks:

> "Now, now little women, this will never do. Constant dropping will wear away a stone, and constant coaching will wear out a Dame Durden. We will go to London for a while and take possession of our old lodgings" (Dickens 769).

However, despite her busy schedule Esther could not seemingly respond more cheerfully:

> "Not for me, dear guardian," I said "for I never feel tired;" which is strictly true. I was only too happy to be in such request (Dickens 769).

Esther's claim that she "never" feels tired is evidently a lie, as she admits having been "getting on irregularly as it is," (Dickens 769) and Jarndyce's injection infers to readers that while Esther will not say she is exhausted, she must certainly look so to warrant Jarndyce's disapproval. Yet, while Esther pretends to not be worn out about her duties, it is less clear as to whether or not as readers we can say she is lying when she claims to be "too happy to be in such request". Esther, believing herself to be foolish and unworthy from her childhood, proves herself to be useful through Caddy and others' attention and need of her service, giving her

meaningless life purpose. And yet, simultaneously, Esther is not entirely unconscious of the injustice done to herself growing up. Even after supposedly committing herself to rising above her shameful conception, she admits to feeling both "guilty and yet innocent" (Dickens 31) being born out of wedlock. It suggests that Esther, whether or not she is fully aware of it, internally knows that she is not wholly the product of her born circumstance. Upon leaving for Bleak House, the doll, who Esther so furiously loved and was her only friend, is buried "in the garden-earth under the tree that shaded my old window" (Dickens 36). This image appears very significant, for the burying symbolizes, like death, passing on from one world to the next. The doll may have been her only friend, but now Esther was moving to a new house. This new house would be a place where she would "own all the keys" (Dickens 215) and hearts of her companions, and thus she would no longer have to feel as isolated and shameful as she once did. She is leaving old circumstances and comforts and setting off to make something new of herself. Thus, she will leave her doll and old memories behind in favor of looking to a newer version of herself. When she is in danger of sinking into past melancholy, she quickly composes herself: "There! I have wiped them [tears] away now, and can go on again properly" (Dickens 31). Esther may not always be so successful, and she certainly has self-esteem issues, but there is evidence of a desire to change and grow, and maybe that is strength enough.

Chapter 2: Reformation in Feminine Rhetoric

The Rise of Female Novelists

Nineteenth century British gender norms classified women as private and domestic beings. Legally, women could neither vote, hold office, nor speak for themselves in court. Parliament could refuse their right to legal expression. Women could not be barred from what they did in the privacy of their own homes, however, and so, the Victorian era, "the age of so many things—of enlightenment, of science, of progress," Margaret Oliphant argues, "is quite as distinctly the age of female novelists" (qtd. in Gavin and Oulton 13). Jane Austen, George Elliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and the Brontë sisters created some of the most influential literature of the nineteenth century. A sequestered existence proved conducive to the cultivation of art. Writing, which could be performed within domestic spaces, could be at the very least an outlet, if not potentially a separate source of independent income, which was rare for most Victorian women at the time.

At the same time, limitations, restrictions, and self-suppression went hand in hand with female literary expression in nineteenth-century Britain. Women, regardless of their literary prowess, were thought of as women first, and artists second. Any woman who failed to successfully disguise herself under a male pseudonym might expect numerous critiques not just on her work or talent, but on her femininity. With the publication of *Jane Eyre*, many critics who presumed the author to be a woman found the text "unfeminine and indecorous" for a young woman (Miller 18) and thus Charlotte Brontë's genius was overshadowed by the "impropriety" of expressing herself outside of acceptable forms of feminine expression. Other reviewers, like one anonymous reviewer's response from the *Era* (1847), praised *Jane Eyre* for being "unlike all we have read" and asserted that "although ladies have written histories,

and travels, and warlike novels to, to say nothing of books upon the different arts and sciences, no women could have penned the 'Autobiography of Jane Eyre'" ("Review of Jane Eyre"). Regardless of critics' opinions, the claim traditional feminine roles had on female authors limited the ways in which Victorian readers received and understood female creativity.

The life of a woman writer was a difficult position to reconcile in a culture which deemed female creativity impossible. Elizabeth Gaskell in her biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* illustrates how even Charlotte Brontë, often celebrated as writing proto-feminist novels, struggled with her two identities as woman and writer:

> Henceforward Charlotte Brontë's existence becomes divided into two parallel currents-her life as Currer Bell, the author, her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman. There were separate duties belonging to each character-not opposing each other, not impossible, but difficult to be reconciled (Gaskell 271).

Gaskell's use of "parallel" highlights the tension between the female author and her own personhood. Objects that are "parallel" to one another are of equal distance from one another, but never connect (OED). Brontë's two lives of equal size and distance from one another are equally meaningful in her characterization of herself. It is impossible for a female writer to rank the importance of her gender and her writing, as both mirror each other in vitality and longevity. Like parallel lines, they will never end and cannot exist without the other. However, "parallel" lines are, like female authors, inherently contradictory. Robert Southey, in a letter to Charlotte Brontë, says "literature is not the business of a woman's life and cannot be." In her defense, Brontë claims she "endeavored to observe all the duties a woman ought to fulfill" in accordance with popular conventions, but that "sometimes when I am teaching or sewing I would rather be reading or writing" (qtd. in Dutta 2311). Charlotte's difficulty giving up her authorship, as Elizabeth Gaskell states, threatens to compromise her God given domestic responsibility as "no other can take up the quiet regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the

mother...” (Gaskell 272) and thus opens her up to criticism. However, Gaskell is right to assert that maintaining the role of women and writers is “not impossible.” As the prevalence of female novelists rose during the 19th century, critics could not deny the existence of the women writer. Even conservative critics like J.M. Ludlow would "have to notice the fact that at this particular moment of the world's history the very *best* novels in several great countries happen to have been written by women” (Ludlow). Although many critics remained steadfast in their belief in the impropriety of female authorship as inherently masculine, others looked towards ways of clarifying and reconciling their conservative values to the progression of female artistry.

The term “reconciling domesticity,” which embodies the central idea of my thesis, refers to the experienced reality of women who live in accordance with traditional rigid expectations of feminine behavior in the Victorian era. I observe this reconciliation happening in two distinct ways. The first way aims to emphasize the supremacy of traditional femininity over female writing. For example, some Victorian critics noted the professional connotation of the term “writer” as contradictory with the role of women. Thus, in order to highlight the “specialness” of women’s writing, Elaine Showalter notes terms such as “authoress, female pen, lady novelist, and as late as Hurst & Blackett's 1897 commemorative volume, *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign,* the elegant "lady fictionists” were common (qtd. in Showalter). The insistence on specifying the gender of the writer reminds readers of the perceived incongruity between womanhood and professional writing at the time as by referencing the femininity of the author you are signaling, they are somehow different, or distinct from writers in general on account of their gender, reinforcing the belief of writing as masculine by default. Furthermore, the tendency to place the feminizing language at the beginning of the term (i.e., “**female** pen”, “**lady** novelist”, “**mistresses** of the craft”) signals

not only that writing and femininity are distinct entities, but that a woman's femininity has supremacy over her position as a writer. Additionally, it is important to note the degrading tone when Victorian critics describe feminine writing. They seek to define women writers as not being able to produce artistry to the same standard as men, as their weaker bodies were, as Geraldine Jewsbury says, liable to "collapses, eclipses, failures of power … unfitting her for the steady stream of ever-recurring work" (Jewsbury xxi). According to Gerald Massey, "there is so great a draft made upon women by other creative [domestic] works" that women will always only have time to create "half-lame" or mediocre art" (Massey 271). If they did manage to write as "intellectually" as men, women were "imitating men rather than developing their own capacities" (Mill 204). This distinction between male and female writing helped maintain Victorian gender ideology even as female authorship increased.

From a modern perspective, we may imagine female writers to be indignant at the attempts to minimize or qualify their literary talents. However, many women writers did not take on a combative stance, but rather, desire to portray an appearance of "domestic felicity" even within their own writing. These women viewed writing as something which augmented their feminine roles, but hardly changed it. Writing perhaps allowed them to express their creativity, but their lives were "as simple and peaceful as any happy common woman of them all" (Craik 58). Instead of attempting to fight feminine stereotypes, some women writers seem to become more protective and defensive of their conventionality and include it in their artistic image. Therefore, the power of female authorship perhaps was not (or more aptly could not be) as revolutionary as it appears at first glance. Many Victorian women have carefully qualified argumentations which seek to reconcile the traditional with the progressive in such a way as to make their ideas appear not very revolutionary at all. To further develop this claim,

this chapter follow the same pattern as chapter one, examining two case studies—the real-life Caroline Norton and the fictional Helen Graham of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall—and how they redefined their position within the domestic sphere. Caroline utilized her rhetoric to appeal to her primarily male audience to mobilize them to work in her favor. Helen, similarly, appeals to traditional ideas of masculine leadership to hold irresponsible men accountable for their hurtful actions against her domestic happiness. These women represent the ways in which women can skillfully utilize conservative values to push for progressive social change, laying the foundation for future generations to examine and challenge gender roles in the future.

The Case of Caroline Norton

Caroline Norton was born Caroline Sheridan into a genteel family in 1808. However, the death of her father in 1817 left the family penniless and desperate. Therefore, Caroline felt obligated to marry George Norton, a barrister and Tory member of Parliament, to financially support her family. Unfortunately, the match was famously abusive and controlling. George Norton was a drunk and a possessive husband, whose violent outbursts were severe and numerous (Chedzoy 53). In 1835, Caroline was beaten so badly that she miscarried her fourth child ("Caroline Norton (1808-1877)"). Thus, Caroline Norton evidently looked for ways of expression and enjoyment in her life. As the granddaughter of playwright and politician Richard Brinsley Sheridan, she was brought up with a love and talent for writing. Her first serious publication, *The Sorrows of Rosalie*, was published soon after the birth of her first son and was a major success (Chedzoy 64). While she was in an unhappy marriage, she could earn some money for herself where her husband was failing as a barrister, showcasing her value.

The union collapsed in 1836 when George sued Lord Melbourne, then prime minister, for "having an affair" with Caroline ("Caroline Norton"). Although this may seem like yet

another way George could harm and humiliate his wife (which was certainly a benefit in his mind), it more importantly would give him access to a divorce. Divorce laws were limited, only allowing men to obtain divorce if they could prove their wife had been unfaithful. Women upon marriage were "covered" by their husbands, having no separate legal existence of their own as they became "one" with their husband. When George's lawsuit ultimately failed on account of the lack of reliable evidence, they remained separate but were legally still married ("Caroline Norton"). Therefore, Norton's contact with her children and control over her book profits were considered her husband's property. Although she was the victim, the law seems to be punishing her for her husband's mistreatment.

Caroline Norton decided to use her writing to her own advantage. Thus, after the Lord Melbourne scandal, Caroline Norton became an outspoken and prolific writer on the legal rights of married women. Caroline wrote numerous political pamphlets, including *Observations on the Natural Claims of a Mother to the Custody her Children as Affected by the Common Law Rights of the Father,* which argued that children under 7 must remain in the custody of their mother and *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century,* which argued from women's right to have contracts, inherit property, and keep her own financial earnings ("Caroline Norton").

Caroline Norton is an exemplary Victorian female writer. She is smart, resourceful, and bold towards injustice. In her pamphlet English Laws for Women, Norton declares she is standing up for the "hundreds of women" who need "some single example" to make their cases heard (Norton). However, within the same pamphlet, Caroline Norton was no feminist in the modern sense of the term. Caroline says, "The natural position of woman is inferiority to man. Amen! That is a thing of God's appointing, not of man's devising. I believe it sincerely, as part

of my religion. I never pretended to the wild and ridiculous doctrine of equality" (Norton). Norton, like many other Victorians at the time, viewed the traditional family model, with women as the homemakers and men at the head, as a reflection of the biblical model of Adam and Eve, in which Eve was formed as a "companion" to him. From Norton's religious perspective, there is no argument from female equality as it is contrary to the will or desires of God, which is blasphemous and dangerous.

Additionally, it is important to recognize the limitations in Caroline's true power as a writer. Although she was prolific and well spoken, the real power of women writers is found in their ability to evoke sympathy for the audience. Although Caroline Norton has written and pleaded her case utilizing her own talents, this talent is not enough to ensure her victory. Women were considered to be emotionally driven and "devoid of brain-power, and have neither reflection, judgement, nor forethought and hardly any memory" (Abbott 27). Before her argument has begun, preconceived biases already discredit her voice. Instead, we see Norton urging the audience to act on her behalf because her voice is not recognized in the legal sphere. At the first divorce trial, where her virtue was being questioned, she was not allowed to speak nor call anyone in her defense: "I have lately been insulted, defrauded, and libelled" (Norton). In order to obtain legal justice, these rights need to be granted to her on behalf of the dominant party (English gentlemen, in this case). It was her ability to invoke their sympathy towards her plight could force enough valued voices to speak on her behalf, not only the merit of her argument.

Norton's pamphleteering began to bring attention to her ongoing legal troubles, sparking awareness and pushing forward new laws. When George Norton kept her kids from her, Norton inspired public interest in child custody reform by publishing several pamphlets

and letters: *Observations on the Natural Claim of a Mother to the Custody of her Children as affected by the Common Law Right of the Father* (1837), *The Separation of Mother & Child by the Law of Custody of Infants, Considered* (1838) and A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor on the Infant Custody Bill. Later, after her failed divorce case in 1853, Norton again turned to writing more pamphlets and letters: *English Laws for Women in 1854* and *Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth's Marriage & Divorce Bill*. Although Norton may have inspired interest in legal reform, she was not present in the courtroom. "If Women had more Justice they would have no need of appeals to sympathy," Norton prefaces in *English Laws for Women*, highlighting that her lack of legal citizenship makes finding personal "redress impossible" (Norton). Norton is relying on "appeals to sympathy" to inspire others to plead on her behalf, and so in a sense gives others control and access to her narrative (Norton). Therefore, to ensure her sympathizers act in her favor, Norton must ensure her desires line up with her audience's. For example, besides appealing to commonly held beliefs of female inferiority, she addresses in her pamphlet *English Laws for Women* critics who find her case too circumstantial to require legal action:

> For the shallower rebuke, that mine is an exceptional case; that the law need scarcely be disturbed to meet a solitary instance of tyranny; there is a ready and reasonable answer. ALL cases requiring legal interference, are exceptional cases; and it will scarcely be argued that a balance must first be struck in numbers, and instances of wrong be reckoned by the dozen or the gross, before justice will condescend to weigh the scales. But it does not follow that mine is a solitary example of injustice, because it may possibly happen, from a combination of peculiar circumstances, to be the instance which shall call attention to the state of the law. Hundreds of women are suffering at this moment, whose cases are not less hard, but more obscure: and it consists with all experience, that although wrong and oppression may be repeated till they become almost of daily occurrence, they strike at last on some heart that revolts instead of enduring; or are witnessed by men whose indignant sympathy works out reform and redress (Norton, 1854).

Caroline Norton positions her case as something which not just benefits herself, but as something which aligns and benefits the interests of her readers: patriotic, English gentlemen. Gentleness in Britain often revolved around patriotic attitudes which emphasized the need to defend what is just in a society. Norton's language is riddled with metaphors of injustice, alluding to not just her case but "ALL" other cases and future cases being threatened by this "instance of tyranny." Tyranny is typically oppression associated with governments, which affects whole societies. Abusive husbands, although oppressive, harm on a smaller, narrower scale. Thus, by invoking political imagery rather than personal sympathy, it positions her audience as equally capable of being victims, and thus should incite their patriotism into action. Norton emphasizes the audience's personal stake further by highlighting that her injustice (and women's injustices as well) is equal to any other injustice committed. Although women's injustices are devalued on account of disenfranchisement, Norton asserts that all law interferences "are exceptional cases." Therefore, if all cases of injustice are equally exceptional, then it means that women's legal issues have equal validity and right to state attention, and so makes ignoring women's issues unjust and irrational under English gentlemen principles. Furthermore, Norton imposes a sense of personal responsibility on her audience by claiming that "men's indignant sympathy" is needed in order to create "reform and redress." English gentleman should not only be inspired to promote justice, but that their lack of action ensures that the "hundreds of women" suffering will continue to suffer, and so would be culpable in their oppression instead of the patriots they claim to be. Although Norton's voice alone lacks political power, Norton's purposeful language and framing elects the help of a politically powerful population and so boosts the likelihood of her message creating a meaningful impact.

Despite her interest in political advocacy, women like Caroline Norton were not trying to overhaul society or fundamentally change the domestic structure. Rather, as she says in *English Laws for Women*, "The problem is not...the fact that women are owned by men, but rather the fact that they cannot own the property that grounds the autonomous self" (Norton). Men like George Norton can throw away his money on drink and gambling while wives like Caroline must suffer the consequences of their poor choices. What is interesting to note here is Caroline's use of the word "property" as a means for expressing one's autonomy.

Norton's use of the term "property" introduces the fundamental issue between married women and the legal system. The British justice system is formed to serve its citizens. If one recognizes a citizen, they are recognized as being a full member in society, having both implicitly agreed to follow the rules of society and in turn be protected by the justice system. Victorian women at the time were not recognized as citizens but were instead "covered" under their husbands, which Mary Poovey notes caused heavy debates on the legal status of women. Marriage was considered the ultimate destiny of women, but "when a woman became what she was destined to be (a wife) she became "non-existent" in the eyes of the law" (Poovey 52). The irrationality of "non-existent" women "prevented the state from addressing social injustices and the problems of industrialization" and so reform seemed inevitable (Poovey 54). Yet, the consequences of recognizing women as legal entities challenge Victorian domestic ideology. If women are made citizens, that in theory entitles them to the same rights as men, and so reduces men's authority over women in the public sphere. This political shift in power would destabilize the separate spheres ideology and validate women's right to live within the public sphere.

Furthermore, the use of the word "property" does more than just assert women's place in the public sphere, but it suggests further claims of personal autonomy. Caroline does not merely bemoan her inability to earn money and care for her children, but she is clear a different kind of property is being violated: her bodily autonomy. She writes:

> This pamphlet addresses itself, not to private sympathy, but to English justice: it is an attempt to argue the reform which ought to be, from the abuse that has been: –a complaint of the exercise of irresponsible power, to the source of power (Norton, 1854).

Norton's preface is based in legal rhetoric as she addresses her cause as the business of "English justice," not "private sympathy." By asserting her right to talk to the English justice system, Norton makes a profound legal maneuver: she declares herself a legal citizen of England without permission or approval from the state government. Not only does Norton justify her right to call upon judicial intervention, but her rhetoric suggests that women are innately citizens and always have been. Norton does not ask for reform but declares the government "ought" to rectify the abuse done to women, asserting that government negligence is not an option, but a failure in performing its duties to its citizens. Thus, when Norton calls upon the government to fix an "exercise of irresponsible power" this irresponsible power seems to refer to both her abusive husband and the English government. Like the government, the husband has legal responsibilities to his wife as her legal representative, as it "the interests of the husband and wife were assumed to be the same" (Poovey 51). Men, on account of being "irresponsible," fail to properly represent women as they are supposed to, and so also fail to legally represent the interests of women.

Despite Caroline Norton's grievances with the legal power women are allotted, Norton does not explicitly seek to change the domestic hierarchy between men and women. Norton characterizes her husband as an "irresponsible power," not a "false power." She does not

question the premise that men are the natural superiors and leaders of women, which validated men's right to "power." The theory of gender dynamics was considered good, and thus the need for "reform" stems from what she sees as a deviation from social ideals. If men govern with respect to their wives, then they are enacting English justice within the marriage and their power is good. However, Norton notices more and more husbands are governing poorly and abusing their authority. Thus, the true revolutionary claim of Caroline Norton is not that wishes to change the role of domestic women, but that she wants to challenge the institution of marriage. Unlike Esther and Queen Victoria, who find success in their marital and domestic roles, Norton's writing forces the British public to notice the ways in which marriage can promote injustice to a severe degree. What is ideally seen as a "solitary" unfortunate result of bad luck, marriages are gateways to the suffering of "hundreds of women" (Norton). Justice cannot be recognized if bad husbands are protected while innocent wives are condemned to cruelty. In order to ensure justice, women will have to have the ability to settle with a husband worthy of her submission and attention, reforming the institution of marriage into one which focuses on "conjugal companionship" rather than total domination (Hammerton 270).

In the end, Norton's pamphleteering was a success as it is heavily accredited to the successful passage of both the Infant Custody Bill and the Marriage & Divorce Bill, Lord Lyndhurst paraphrased her letters several times in the drafting of the Marriage & Divorce Bill and her ideas appeared in "several sections" ("Caroline Norton") of the Marriage & Divorce Bill. Caroline Norton's appeal to Victorian senses of justice and gender hierarchy reconciles and reframes Norton's radical notion of marital independence as coinciding with Victorian domestic ideology. This reconciling aids in minimizing pushback and thus elevating Victorian

women's autonomy and individuality within marriage. If unfit men abuse their power, they have defiled their right to rule, and so must be corrected.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall: "Unhappy Wife, Unhappy Life"

Anne Brontë is less well known than her sisters Charlotte and Emily, and so *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* may not be familiar to some readers. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, a mysterious young widow, Helen Graham, moves into the neighborhood and becomes tenant of Wildfell Hall. Everyone finds her peculiar, and a gentleman farmer Gilbert Markham develops a close relationship with her and soon falls in love. As they become closer, Helen Graham reveals her mysterious past. Helen Graham is Helen Huntingdon, the wife of Arthur Huntingdon. Arthur is a cheating and controlling husband, and so Helen runs aways to protect her son, Arthur, from his influence. Her brother is the owner of Wildfell Hall and helps keep her hidden from Arthur. Helen is eventually freed from Arthur after he dies suddenly of illness, marries Gilbert, and live happily ever after in Helen's new estate she inherits from her "uncle" (he is not related by blood but affection). One cannot help but notice the similarities between the character Helen Graham and the figure Caroline Norton, as both women struggle with escaping the clutches of an abusive husband and keeping access to their children, who are property of the husband regardless of his "unfit" parental status.

Helen Graham is arguably bolder and more unapologetic in her critique of her unfortunate situation, and yet, like Caroline Norton, she does not seek to overhaul society. In the preface to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë responds to critics who comment on the "vulgarity" of her text for portraying matters of abuse plainly.

> …I will venture to say, have not been more painful for the most fastidious of my critics to read than they were for me to describe. I may have gone too far; in which case I shall be careful not to trouble myself or my readers in the same way again; but when we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they

> really are than as they would wish to appear. To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light is, doubtless, the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but is it the most honest, or the safest? (Brontë 3-4).

Anne Brontë justifies her artistry by appealing to the values and sentiments of her audience ("I may have gone too far") and highlights herself as someone who also shares the same sensitivity towards vulgarity ("have not been more painful for the most fastidious of my critics to read than they were for me to describe"). She reminds her audience that she too abides by Victorian polite society and does not seek, as she mentioned earlier, "to reform the errors and abuses of society." Thus, when Brontë ultimately claims it is "better to depict" vulgarity as it really exists, presents her writing not as taking too much artistic liberty, but as something she has been forced to do out of necessity:

> I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it. But as the priceless treasure too frequently hides at the bottom of a well, it needs some courage to dive for it, especially as he that does so will be likely to incur more scorn and obloquy for the mud and water into which he has ventured to plunge, than thanks for the jewel he procures… (Brontë 4).

This lack of "courage" to stand up for moral righteousness in society is Brontë's main goal in writing this novel. While fiction may be appealing to the imagination, it detaches us from a potentially harmful reality, leaving us not "safe" from its attacks. Therefore, this "priceless treasure", or truth Brontë provides, seeks to protect an audience who does not have the knowledge or courage to recognize the corruption around them. It is this "truth", however unsavory, that "conveys its own moral" and can work through the reader to inspire reflection and change in Victorian society where it is needed.

The "truth" Anne Brontë seeks to convey through her controversial depictions of abuse is, like Norton, a need to reform the institution of marriage. In Chapter One, the case studies of Queen Victoria and Esther Summerson saw great success in their domestic roles and marital

obligations overall. For Helen Graham of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Caroline, their domestic lives are tortuous and oppressive. They have no autonomy nor protection in their lives in their present marriages. And yet, like Norton, Brontë does not appear to challenge the present role of women in society, given Helen's rather traditional ending. Rather, Brontë explores how the system of marriage allows incompetent men to rule as tyrants over women. It is not domesticity as a value which is broken, but marriage as the legal construction that creates and preserves the domestic sphere. When marriage fails, the stability of the domestic sphere often goes down with it. The character of Helen Graham serves as a case study of the consequences women face when placed in abusive relationships and suggests the main issues which enable this problem. Throughout the novel, Helen Graham's domestic success (or lack thereof) is dependent on her ability to freely submit to a man worthy of her submission. This serves to clarify conservative domestic values as something which both embraces the traditional feminine while also detailing a women's right to marital autonomy.

While the domestic sphere has traditionally been asserted as the space ruled by women, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* explores the curbing of women's domestic authority. Helen Graham's maternal care, upon first meeting the Markham's, is heavily criticized by Mrs. Markham for watching her son too closely:

> "But by such means," said I, "you will never render him virtuous. —What is it that constitutes virtue, Mrs. Graham? Is it the circumstance of being able and willing to resist temptation; or that of having no temptations to resist?—Is he a strong man that overcomes great obstacles and performs surprising achievements, though by dint of great muscular exertion, and at the risk of some subsequent fatigue, or he that sits in his chair all day, with nothing to do more laborious than stirring the fire, and carrying his food to his mouth? If you would have your son to walk honourably through the world, you must not attempt to clear the stones from his path, but teach him to walk firmly over them—not insist upon leading him by the hand, but let him learn to go alone" (Brontë 27-28).

Despite Victorian norms signaling the moral purity of women, Mrs. Markham seems to undermine female morality by assuring her she "will never render him virtuous" while closely under her wing. This comment brings out an interesting ideological contradiction which appears within the Victorian era. Although women may be more innocent than men, it is not on account of them having stronger character. Rather, women are perceived as naturally "more ignorant" of sin (supposedly less interested in sex, among other vices) and so were less able to cope with corrupting forces. Therefore, despite their moral superiority, women were not seen as the best teachers or defenders of immorality as they were unaware of how to defend themselves against corruption. While men thrive on experience, women do not and thus cannot impart this experience onto their male children. A son close to his mother is "spoiled" in so far as he is kept in the domestic sphere, or the sphere of "idleness and ignorance" which is unbecoming of a man destined to be knowledgeable about the world. As Mrs. Markham notes, "a strong man" is not made moral by "leading him by the hand," but instead should "overcome great obstacles" on his own. Even when mothers are the heads of house, we notice how their ability to exert maternal control over their children is second to their femininity, which can only harm her children, especially the male ones, of making their way in the world.

Women keep the domestic sphere, but they do not control it. Women's "natural moral superiority" (Vaid 65) justified her position as caretaker of the domestic sphere as they provided "psychical comfort, nurturance, and the moral character of the family and the home" (Vaid 64). However, as seen in the case of Caroline Norton, any property, including her own, is under the control of her husband. The home is legally recognized as the husbands, and so women's domestic authority was minimized as she must "take part in their husbands' interests and business" over her own (Appell). Aptly, Mrs. Markham rather calls it a women's duty not

to infiltrate her guidance with her domestic duties, such as "stirring the fire, and carrying his food to his mouth." Paradoxically, she must guide in such a way which discounts her moral superiority, and instead teaches her son to walk "alone" in his moral journey. This lack of domestic ownership is also reflected in Helen's incomplete authority over her son Arthur. Mrs. Markham's assertion that her son will one day grow to be a "strong man" indicates that although she may be his mother, his destiny is greater than her maternal guidance. He is never directly referred to as "her son," highlighting that his future destiny as a grown man is more relevant to his upbringing than his status as a son. The hold and sway of maternity is limited to distinct and finite years, but upon maturity, the masculine precedes and proceeds the power of the domestic women for a man's entire life.

Yet, remarkably, Helen Graham's rebuttal to this traditional assertion of a mother's passivity is surprisingly bold for its time:

> "I will lead him by the hand, Mr. Markham, till he has strength to go alone; and I will clear as many stones from his path as I can, and teach him to avoid the *rest*—or walk firmly over them, as you say…It is all very well to talk about noble resistance, and trials of virtue; but for fifty—or five hundred men that have yielded to temptation, show me one that has had virtue to resist. And why should I take it for granted that my son will be one in a thousand? —and not rather prepare for the worst, and suppose he will be like his—like the rest of mankind, unless I take care to prevent it?"
>
> "You are very complimentary to us all," I observed.
>
> "I know nothing about *you*—I speak of those I do know—and when I see the whole race of mankind (with a few rare exceptions) stumbling and blundering along the path of life…" (Brontë 28).

In this section, we see Helen Graham taking on a biting, direct tone towards her critics, asserting her right to express her convictions openly despite being a woman. This biting tone is much different, and perhaps bolder, when compared to the writing of Caroline Norton. First, we might compare the publicity of their speeches, with Caroline's words being addressed to

England and Helen's being addressed to a small group. I still consider this small group setting Helen is in "public" because she does not speak in private confidence but is addressing strangers. Norton's public rhetoric reaches a larger audience and is not merely focused on individual gain. Norton views herself as speaking on behalf of women like herself and is seeking to entice men with political authority to find her issue important. Thus, her rhetoric is "public facing" in that it considers the perspectives of her audience to appeal and flatter their better instincts.

Helen, on the other hand, is addressing a much smaller group. This may in some ways make her outspokenness seem less daring, on account of the private setting in which she is speaking to these strangers. While Norton is imploring for others to fight and speak on womankind, Helen defends her own position as an individual and thus does not call upon the sympathies of others to feel her plight. She confidently proclaims that "I will" lead him and "I will clear" the stones in his path, thus asserting that she is not restricted nor moved by the actions or prejudices of the audience but will act in accordance with what she believes is right. Helen is less concerned with meeting the audience where they are, and instead is rather insulting in her language, asserting she has not seen one man able to utilize virtue. And, when confronted with her harsh language ("you are very complimentary to us all") she does not back down, but instead reasserts her rightness to speak so, "I speak of those I do know." Norton "hopes" for her case to inspire sympathy from her audience to inspire new laws and societal change. Helen does not rely on "hope" and "chance" but enacts truth for truth's sake, which goes against common feminine norms of suppressing one's feelings and expressing gentleness in all conversation.

What is also bold in her speech is Helen's proclamation that "for a very few rare exceptions" all men are "sinking into every pitfall" of temptation. This assertion goes against the commonly held Victorian ideal that men were emotionally stronger than women, having the power to resist the pushes and pull of the emotional drives of humankind. Helen does not only combat this viewpoint, but also suggests there is a kind of pattern or fundamental corruption within men themselves. First, by limiting the number of virtuous men to "a few exceptions" virtue is made an anomaly, not a norm within the men of her time. Every day she sees "fifty" or "five hundred" men falling into sin and destruction. Her son is not an exception to her critique, and instead asserts, "why should I take it for granted that my son will be one in a thousand?" Her affection for her son, which is evidently great as she believes protecting him is her ultimate goal, does not save him, given her belief that men are creatures easily tempted. His goodness is measured in so far as she "takes care to prevent" him from following the path not just by his alcoholic father, but of the multitude of men who prove their unreliability in fighting against sin. This again highlights that despite Arthur being her son, his masculine identity seems to contradict with maternal instinct, as despite her fondness, she must also fear what he might become.

This depiction of men as inherently corruptible can be seen in the repeated failing of male friendships within the novel, especially within high masculine circles. Arthur Huntingdon and his companion, Mr. Hattersley, "mutually corrupted each other" (Brontë 219) according to Helen, as both parties enjoy and enable each other's unhealthy and shameful connection to London high life. The relationship between Arthur Huntingdon and his son is no better. While Helen aims to save young Arthur from "trifling indulgences" so he can be saved from his father's bad habits, his lenient parenting towards the child "counteracts my arduous labour for

the child's advantage," and thus seems apt at further rewarding "childish disobedience" (Brontë 276). Outside her family, Mr. Hargrave, a reportedly "harmless companion for Arthur" (Brontë 221) is exposed as a predatory opportunist, exposing Arthur Huntingdon's affair only to give himself an opportunity to have an affair with Helen himself. Even Gilbert Markham, despite his lower class, is not entirely innocent of exhibiting violent and aggressive behavior. On seeing Frederick Lawrence, Helen's brother, in her garden, Gilbert mistakes him for her estranged husband Arthur, and so brutally attacks him in spite and jealousy, nearly killing him. The only seemingly good male friendship, Gilbert Markham and his brother-in-law, who he is said to be writing to in the novel, is never fully explained. Overall, Brontë seems interested in this tendency of men to resort to violent or backstabbing behaviors with one another.

Helen's critique of men's corruption asserts her power over men. While Mrs. Markham may believe the female presence will corrupt Arthur, Helen reveals the vastly more dangerous and corrupting force that men will have in Arthur's life. Despite her critique of men's emotional strength, she cushions her approach by reasserting her kind of moral authority to "teach" her son because of her lack of exposure to debauchery. Thus, by asserting herself as an instructor, not merely an overseer of her son's life, she becomes a moral authority not only over her son, but the fifty or five hundred men who might show him otherwise, incorrectly. Ultimately, she is the more rational choice of instructor than strange, unreliable men, and so insinuates a kind of moral aptitude present within the maternal role.

Nineteenth-century psychology considered men being as having a "better capacity to harness the power of emotion in the service of reason," while women's emotions were "portrayed as a comparatively ineffectual emotionality, a by-product of female reproductive physiology and evolutionary need to be attractive to men" (Shields 92). This difference in

emotional states was considered "natural" and so women were thought to be unable to embody reason the way men do. However, Helen Graham's rhetoric showcases her tonal fluidity, having a capacity to effectively utilize both reason and emotions when arguing with Gilbert on her role as a parent:

> "I would not send a poor girl into the world, unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path; nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power or the will to watch and guard herself;—and as for my son—if I thought he would grow up to be what you call a man of the world—one that has '*seen life*,' and glories in his experience, even though he should so far profit by it as to sober down, at length, into a useful and respected member of society—I would rather that he died to-morrow!—rather a thousand times!" (Brontë 30-31)

In the first part of this paragraph, we can notice how her language is very brief and succinct. In the Victorian era, female expression was expected to be "passive, dependent, and idle creatures" (Langland 291). It was men's duty to be "active, progressive, [and] defensive," (Vaid 66) thus women who spoke too frankly, or too boldly, were considered to be engaging in improper discourse for their sex. Thus, women instead, as Gilbert and Gubar mentioned in *The Madwomen in the Attic*, were often trapped by patriarchal rhetorical convention and so struggled to find their authentic literary voices (Gilbert and Gubar 17-18). Yet here we see Helen expressing her own feelings plainly, forgoing gentleness for power and abruptness, showcasing a kind of boldness usually seen as unacceptable for her sex. It is as if she has a right to say what she says, and so feels no need to soften her points nor ask permission to speak. While Caroline Norton is aware of her own limitations to voice her opinions, Helen Graham in this moment seems decidedly unaware, or uncaring, of the perception of her speech. Helen in this moment is directly speaking to Gilbert Markham, and as a man, deals in conversations based in logic. Thus, to appeal to her audience, it is in her best interest to defer to the masculine form of conversation.

However, this masculine voice is not maintained for long. In the middle of her speech, she bursts into emotional hysterics: “I would rather that he died to-morrow! —rather a thousand times!” This abrupt and uncontrollable break in Helen’s composed voice showcases that this public rhetoric cannot be maintained indefinitely. Helen’s feminine voice, and in turn her feminine emotions, must break through the surface. Although Helen does an excellent job exhibiting the logic of her argument, her emotional outburst is arguably much more powerful. The abrupt dashes, cutting off her composed rhetoric, can make us feel her anger and rage as it bubbles up inside her. She is not merely humoring Gilbert in friendly dialogue, but views the topic as a matter of life and death for her son, and so highlights the passion of her monologue and forces us to take her message seriously.

In fact, Helen Graham’s position as a mother gives her more right to use a public voice. The role of men and women, as author Mary Poovey argues, was naturalized (Poovey 52). Men and women, on account of their role being considered inherent to their sex, earn a kind of unequivocal claim to their respective roles because the other cannot be recognized as the rightful ruler. Elizabeth Gaskell makes a similar claim in her biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë,* asserting that the reason why women are so wedded to their role as domestic beings is “no other can take up the quiet, regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the mother” (Gaskell 272). Thus, Helen, as mother to Arthur, has an exclusive right to exhibit motherly feelings which grants her authority which is neither conditional nor can be taken away.

These implicit rights of women in the domestic sphere go beyond just having some ability to assert their authority over their children but suggest a special kind of authority over their own husbands. While a man’s role as head of house was legally recognized and respected, this supremacy of male authority appears to not be as unconditional at first glance. As seen in

Caroline Norton's pamphlets, Helen Graham's gripe with Arthur is not in her role as wife but in his treatment of her, as she tells him:

> "I shall not feel myself neglected: while you are doing your duty, Arthur, I shall never complain of neglect. If you had told me before, that you had anything to do, it would have been half done before this; and now you must make up for lost time by redoubled exertions. Tell me what it is; and I will be your taskmaster, instead of being a hindrance" (Brontë 184).

Helen deflects taking blame and instead places accountability on Arthur. As Caroline Norton did in her pamphlet *English Laws for Women*, Helen's claim that she "shall not feel myself neglected" shows an acceptance of women being submissive in their current roles. "Shall not" suggests that this subservient role is a moral truth and suggests an impossibility of women to be discontent in submissive roles. However, if she is ever perceived to be discontent, Helen argues it is on account of her husband's "neglect" or fault. What is unique about this assertion is that women were often at the forefront of blame when it comes to malcontent in the home. Women were called to be devoted partners, so devoted that their "highest duty is so often to suffer and be still" (Ellis 94). Any perceived discontent was often considered some innate fault in the feminine character, both in real life and in fiction, such as the character of Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, who one reviewer claimed "took a savage delight in refusing to be comforted" with her lot in life (Allott 182). Helen skillfully avoids taking on this blame by making any perceived discontentment a product of male, not female deficiencies.

With this emphasis on male accountability, Brontë suggests that men have just as much of a responsibility of cultivating a domestic space as women. Conduct books for husbands, such as the anonymously written The Young Husband's Book: A Manual of Domestic Duties, assert that "there can never be any harmony in the family" if men are not doing "the duty of supporting his wife" ("The Young Husband" 10). We see this lack of spousal support in Arthur,

whose constant traveling with friends leaves Helen with no sense of domestic direction. Helen argues to Arthur that "if you had told me" of your whereabouts and desires, that she could have been "half done" in completing her duties. However, his "neglect" in giving her proper direction makes her duty not only much harder but makes her a "hindrance" to them. This assertion of him making her a "hindrance" is skillful. It again deflects female discontent or domestic failure as a fault of the male, and boldly displays a woman's right to have expectations of her husband. Without a husband's support, then the domestic model breaks down, as "the same law which imposes upon the husband the duty of supporting his wife, gives him a general and paramount claim to her obedience" ("The Young Husband" 11). Thus, Helen's highlighting of this ability for men to corrupt the duties of women brings up an interesting tension. Helen might assert she "shall not" wish to do another duty, but her willingness to submit to her husband is not unconditional. Her submission is conditional upon her husband completing his own duties as well. This conditional submission is seen when Helen asserts Arthur "must" make "redoubled exertions" to account for the anxiety he has put her through. Not only does Arthur have an obligation to complete his duties as husband now, but he always should have been performing them. He must "redouble" his duties because his previous commitments have been forgotten and so must be righted through a renewed commitment as without a renewed sense of commitment, women's purpose, and subsequently the separate sphere-oriented family structure of Victorian society will collapse.

Through Helen's tumultuous relationship, Brontë points out this major flaw within current Victorian marriage standards: the lack of decision women have in choosing a husband. Helen, admits that "in my secret heart, that Arthur is not what I thought him at first, and if I had known him in the beginning as thoroughly as I do now, I probably never should have loved

him, and if I loved him first, and then made the discovery, I fear I should have thought it my duty not to have married him" (Brontë 171). Helen's claim that Arthur "is not what I thought him at first" suggests that perhaps Helen was not so "willfully blind" after all, but that Arthur's was not so evident to her as one might imagine. Women's regulation to the private sphere naturally ostracizes them from experiencing the world at large, which limits their exposure to men and subsequently disempowers them to recognize red flags in their behavior. Before Arthur, Helen had "not been tried yet" (Brontë 113) in dealing and discerning men of poor character. Despite her initial assertion she should "not only should think it *wrong* to marry a man that was deficient in sense or in principle, but I should never be *tempted* to do it," (Brontë 112) she is unable to decipher her "false reasoning" from good reasoning, and so swept away by the initial attraction of his "laughing blue eyes" (Brontë 115). However, Helen admits she "was willfully blind" of Arthur's faults during their courtship, and thus seems to go against this claim of female ignorance. This seeming contradiction can be answered by, as Charles Petrie explains, the demand Victorian men have that women are "not only innocent but give the outward impression of being innocent...the stamp of masculine approval was placed upon ignorance of the world, meekness, lack of opinions, general helplessness and weakness..." (Petrie 184). As women were restricted from all other life paths besides marriage, only through marriage "alone was it possible for a woman to rise in the world" (Petrie 180). Helen, similarly, declares a fear that if she did not consent to being "willfully blind" she might "have thought it my duty not to have married him". The expectation and often necessity of women to be married requires women to forgo "battling with my conscience" and instead accept ignorance into their life to obtain a husband. It becomes evident that if women are to be truly empowered to live as a domestic wife, then she must have both the knowledge and the ability to freely choose an

acceptable husband and leave him if he proves to be inadequate. Domesticity is achieved upon women's satisfaction with her husband, to whom she willfully submits and feels fulfilled in her domestic position.

We see such domestic fulfillment between Gilbert Markham and Helen Graham, whose courtship greatly opposes her and Arthur's courtship. Helen and Arthur's courtship was quick while Helen was young and inexperienced with men. Gilbert and Helen's initial friendship is long and is founded on deep, personal connection with a more experienced Helen Graham. Furthermore, Helen's power within the two relationships was different from both an economic and will standpoint. Arthur Huntingdon was richer and the initiator of the courtship, putting Helen in a power imbalance which made her fearful to express her desires. Gilbert, a gentleman farmer, remains socially and economically below Helen, giving Helen the upper hand. Gilbert, on hearing of Helen's newfound fortune after her uncle dies, resigns himself to his incompatibility with her on account of her status ("I feared to intrude") (Brontë 408). When they meet again, it is Helen who guides the conversation and poses the question of marriage: "the rose I gave you was an emblem of my heart, would you take it away and leave me alone?" (Brontë 412). Helen not only is shown having autonomy over choosing her partner, but Brontë inverts the traditional masculine and feminine roles in courtship. Gilbert, as the stereotypical blushing maiden, is shy and slightly resisting while Helen is bold and direct in her feelings for him. Despite Brontë's rootedness in conservatism, there is an inversion of power dynamics in who should have the authority when it comes to marriage and courtship, positioning marriage as healthier and fulfilling to Helen when she has power in her relationships.

And yet, Helen and Gilbert's relationship does not appear to have rocked the social fabric. Gilbert may have been deferential to Helen's will at the beginning, but post-marriage,

it is hard to tell how much authority Helen still holds. First, Helen's own aunt, desiring to live in the Staningley estate with Helen and Gilbert, asks Gilbert's sole permission to reside with them, despite previous passages asserting that Helen was the owner of the estate. Additionally, Gilbert's mother, upon hearing of his newfound fortune, accredits it to Gilbert's "own superior merits and character" with no credit given to Helen (Brontë 416). This suggestion that Gilbert has taken on the property-owning role of husband is further solidified with calling her domestic happiness "my own affairs" (Brontë 416), only mentioning Helen by name briefly. Thus, after marrying Gilbert, there is good reason to assume that beyond their unusual courtship, their marriage follows closely in line with how Victorian marriages were organized, with Gilbert as the automatic head of house and Helen as his faithful companion. Although, perhaps, as we saw in Caroline Norton's writing, there is a kind of rebellion embedded in this conservatism. Rather than traditional domesticity being compulsory, it was freely given on account of Helen having a husband who is deserving and cultivates her domestic tendencies to their highest degree. Brontë reconciles the autonomy and respect of women with the societal expectation of domestic contentment by giving women the authority to decide with whom to cultivate domesticity.

Chapter 3: Reimagining the Place of Women

Dreaming About Shirley

The previous chapters focused on characters, authors, and historical figures who navigate from within the traditional domestic framework, directly responding to real societal issues in a realistic way. In this chapter, I address a novel that takes an unconventional approach to reconciling domestic expectations. *Shirley*, one of Charlotte Brontë's lesser known novels, follows the lives of Caroline Helstone, the pastor's daughter, and her friend Shirley, a bold and confident heiress of an estate who cares for tenants and does business with local men. The plot is set against a background conflict of the Napoleonic Wars and worker uprisings in the early nineteenth century. Shirley's unconventional and masculine character serves as a foil to Caroline, who is more reserved. Nevertheless, both marry their love interests, Robert and Louis Moore, in a joint ceremony and live happily ever after.

Despite the conservatism of the era, Victorian writers did occasionally break away from traditional models and create something unique. Barbara Caine claims that Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* is "the one [novel] in which she provided her most extended outcry against the situation of women and the limits imposed on them" as "the fate of "old maids", the situation of girls whose home life is unsatisfying, but who are unable to leave home in search of work, the way in which women are treated and evaluated by men are all issues dealt with at some length" (Caine 92). Thus, unlike Queen Victoria, Esther Summerson, Caroline Norton, and Helen Graham, Charlotte Brontë has not presented a realistic, carefully crafted argument for a minor change in Victorian society. Rather, *Shirley* is a fantastical experiment that imagines women like Emily Brontë (with a fiery spirit) living outside the bounds of normal society with little to no restrictions on their character.

The novel has persistently faced negative reviews since its first publication (Michie 269). During the 19th century, reviewers like George Henry Lewes thought Shirley dealt with "wilful improbability" with a clunky plot and imperfect characters. Lewes also believed "a more masculine book, in the sense of vigour, was never written" (qtd. in Caine 91). As I have shown, despite strategic rhetoric, Victorian heroines are still held to and must adjust to domestic expectations for women, highlighting the need for women to "reconcile" their independent spirits to societal expectations to be accepted in polite society. However, Shirley seems to blast through this perceived societal obligation, not only living and working as a man would, but living so with hardly a mean or judgmental glance her way. For the Victorian world and audience, it was indeed hard to make sense of the novel. How many women were truly independent spirits, free to act in a masculine fashion with no pushback, and run a public business of her own accord? In more recent criticism, scholars have begun to credit *Shirley* as a worthwhile attempt at evaluating domestic power and femininity. For example, Patricia Ingraham claims that critics who consider Shirley "a weaker variation of *Jane Eyre*" fail to recognize "the significance of working out the problems of an industrialized society through romantic entanglements" (Ingraham 33). It is through the depiction of female struggles against male authority that Brontë brings to light the use of "gender politics" as a rhetorical device used in the oppression of the working class.

Despite the belief of Shirley being an "improbable" reality, Charlotte Brontë enthusiasts will know that Charlotte Brontë, like other female Victorian fiction writers, wrote from personal experience. Elizabeth Gaskell reveals that Shirley is Charlotte's idealized representation of her sister Emily Brontë, or "what Emily Brontë would have been, had she been placed in health and prosperity" (Gaskell 315). Emily, like Shirley, is described as a

passionate woman. Gaskell describes Emily as having "had a head for logic, and a capability of argument, unusual in a man, and rare indeed in a woman" (Gaskell 177). However, despite this claim, some close friends of Brontë reportedly did not recognize Emily in the portrait of Shirley, which is understood if we look at Charlotte Brontë's account of Emily in her preface to *Wuthering Heights*. While the character Shirley is decidedly bold and unrestricted by domestic duties, Charlotte Brontë notes, "My sister's disposition was not naturally gregarious; circumstances favoured and fostered her tendency to seclusion; except to go to church or take a walk on the hills, she rarely crossed the threshold of home" (Brontë xxi). Outside of her writing, Emily lived a traditional domestic life, focused on maintaining the Brontë parsonage. Charlotte Brontë might be grounded in her real relationship with Emily, but also is decidedly taking her own liberties with Emily's character.

For a Victorian novel, *Shirley* is decidedly not domestic at all. Shirley Keeldar is a young, single heiress who owns a lavish estate housing many tenants. Her parents wanted a son, but upon giving birth to a daughter, named her Shirley Keedler, a notably masculine name, as she took on the roles destined for a young heir. And yet, the third person narrator reveals that this "unconventional" power she finds herself in could not feel more natural to her:

> She was glad to be independent as to property; by fits she was even elated at the notion of being lady of the manor, and having tenants and an estate. She was especially tickled with an agreeable complacency when reminded of "all that property" down in the Hollow, "comprising an excellent cloth-mill, dyehouse, warehouse, together with the messuage, gardens, and outbuildings, termed Hollow's Cottage…" (Brontë 124).

Despite Shirley residing on her estate, an estate serves a much different purpose than a traditional home. While a home is understood to be a personal place of residence, an estate implies a property owned to generate income for the main household. Thus, estates can be understood more as a business than a domestic paradise. Shirley's tenants pay her to utilize

and live on the land. Shirley's permanent residence being on her estate seems to erase the presence of the domestic sphere as her life is entirely rooted in the public, or economic sphere. There is no description or activity in a home besides Fieldhead, and thus Shirley simultaneously discusses business, such as inspiring the clergy to enter "fully into the spirit of her plans as to head the subscription-list with their signatures for £50 each," (Brontë 153) at Fieldhead while readily receiving "chance guests" that come to dinner with "impromptu regale" (Brontë 158). Due to this lack of separation between public and domestic responsibilities, readers notice that Shirley's domestic tasks are frequently overlooked compared to her duties as an estate holder. When Shirley seems prepared to take to her sewing, and common past time of domestic women, she "is doomed never to sit steadily at it for above five minutes at a time. Her thimble is scarcely fitted on, her needle scarce threaded, when a sudden thought calls her upstairs." She becomes distracted by a need to oversee the operations of the house. If her dog comes in, "she must convoy him to the kitchen, and see with her own eyes that his water-bowl is replenished." If John has questions about farming, "his mistress is necessitated to fetch her garden-hat... to hear the conclusion of the whole agricultural matter on the spot." Soon, "bright afternoon thus wears into soft evening, and she comes home to a late tea, and after tea she never sews" (Brontë 215-216). Shirley's responsibilities at Fieldhead are not rooted in traditionally feminine roles, but in "all that property" she own's named "Hollow's Cottage". Without a traditional domestic space and duties holding her down, Shirley carves out this new hybrid-domain for herself which is quite foreign to average Victorian readers.

Furthermore, Shirley being "glad" of her independence in property is strikingly unique compared to the more family-focused characters of the previous chapters. For Esther

Summerson and Queen Victoria, being desired was exceptionally important to their well-being, desiring to make up for the lack of affection they received as children. Caroline Norton and Helen Graham may have shown some independence in separating from their abusive husbands, but still expressed interest in finding a worthy husband they could be content with. However, Shirley, while reflecting on her position in society, seems to forgo companionship in favor of enjoying her economic prosperity. Her joys are wrapped up in her status as "lady", "elated" at her "tenants and estate," pushing against the idea that God, as Gisborne argues, "deliberately created her [women] for the Profit and Comfort of man" (qtd. in Poovey 3). While most Victorian women's lives centered around cultivating a "portrait of female propriety," (Poovey 3) Shirley lives for the profit and comfort of herself, living in accordance with what she finds "agreeable" to herself despite it being at odds with traditional desires. By grappling with women's unconventional desires, Brontë subverts "sexual systems such as marriage, but also attempt to reconfigure economics desires," (Gardner 409) boldly suggesting that women have greater depth and personhood than Victorian society recognizes. Women's value was placed in their usefulness to others, especially men, with the domestic sphere. Yet, Brontë forces us to see the beauty of Shirley's property, as although it may not be in service of the domestic, the "excellent cloth-mill, dyehouse, warehouse, together with the messuage, gardens, and outbuildings" provides people a way of life and income. By recognizing that Shirley can do good outside of the domestic sphere, it portrays women's desires as inherently valuable and thus challenges the limited scope of acceptable desires Victorian society has deemed appropriate for women.

However, just after this passage, Brontë seems to attempt to "reconcile" Shirley's unconventional lifestyle with traditional feminine qualities:

> …but her exultation being quite undisguised was singularly inoffensive; and, for her serious thoughts, they tended elsewhere. To admire the great, reverence the good, and be joyous with the genial, was very much the bent of Shirley's soul: she mused, therefore, on the means of following this bent far oftener than she pondered on her social superiority (Brontë 124).

This is one the few times Brontë uses the "reconciling domesticity" technique we have observed in the previous chapters. However, unlike in previous chapters, this attempt at reconciling seems to only further emphasize Shirley's lack of conventionality, not rectify it. Shirley may be extremely feminine and "admire the great, reverence the good, and be joyous with the genial," but this side of her does not overshadow or disguise her more public persona. Unlike Mrs. Craik, who argues that women desire to prove themselves "as simple and peaceful as any happy common woman of them all" (Craik 58), Shirley does not seem to stifle her independent spirit with her femininity as her "exultation" for property is "undisguised". Shirley doesn't seem to feel any anxiety over potentially "neglecting" her feminine duties. Instead, she follows her public and private "bent" of her soul as she desires, seemingly free from the social restraints present to Victorian women of the time. This unapologetic attitude is made possible by Shirley's class position. Shirley's status as a young heiress with no competing male heirs affords Shirley freedom from male dependency and subsequently a need to win male approval. A 1913 article from the *Examiner* described that for most Victorian women without wealth, single life "was often precarious for they [women] either depended on the men in their families for the rest of their life (fathers, brothers, uncles, nephews...) or ended up in a situation of poverty because of the difficulties of employment" (qtd. in Canot 13). And yet, even in Shirley's unrealistic financial circumstance, she would still be held accountable by Victorian gender roles, as marriage was more than viewed as a financial need for women, but a goal "appointed by society for them, [as] the prospect they are brought up to, and the object which

it is intended should be sought by all of them" (Mill 502). Thus, to Victorian readers, it would be hard to comprehend a publicly oriented attitude coupled with her feminine qualities as it threatens the foundations of their societal and cultural reality.

Additionally, Charlotte Brontë use of a third person narrator used throughout the novel, as seen above, deviates from the first-person narrators previously mentioned and attempts to cushion the irreconcilable nature of Shirley. First person narration works to place the reader in the shoes of the narrator and identify with them, recognizing similarities in their experiences and emotions. Third person narration, on the other hand, creates distance between the reader and the characters, as a character's private thoughts are shared sparingly and through a secondary source. Thus, some qualities or beliefs of a character will remain unclear to readers, and so reflects the tension between Brontë's artistic curiosity and Victorian identity. Charlotte Brontë's reported desire to portray Emily "under better circumstances" suggests that Brontë secretly had to "step out of her sex" (Allot 167) and imagine women living in a different way than Victorian society required. Yet, even within her imagination, Brontë still felt the weight of societal expectation in her own life, and so the third-person narration provides a voice which allows her to experiment from a safe distance, never fully stepping into uncharted ideological territory.

Shirley continues to assert her free spirit in her courtship and marriage to Louis Moore. As we saw in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the fortune Helen inherits falls into Gilbert's control and her estate becomes his "own affairs". However, when negotiating her own marriage to Louis, Shirley boldly establishes her economic power within the marriage:

> "I do not ask you to take off my shoulders all the cares and duties of property, but I ask you to share the burden, and to show me how to sustain my part well. Your judgment is well balanced, your heart is kind, your principles are sound. I know you are wise; I feel you are benevolent; I believe you are conscientious. Be my

> companion through life; be my guide where I am ignorant; be my master where I am faulty; be my friend always!" (Brontë 349).

She implores him to "share the burden" instead of removing it from her, not only asserting her right to hold "cares and duties of property" but also removing some of Louis's power over her as husband. When the husband holds all the monetary value in a relationship, women are often left defenseless in their wake, as we saw in the case of Caroline Norton. However, instead of trusting Louis to be a responsible master, she keeps some responsibilities to herself. This dividing of property asserts Shirley as an independent being from her husband since she holds some duties as being her "part" or property. Furthermore, it characterizes their relationship in a more equalizing than is traditionally seen within Victorian society and domestic literature. If both parties have property of equal value, then neither shares any great advantage over the other. Shirley is not a thing to be protected, but a "companion" and "friend" of Louis's. Shirley is humanized as having autonomy not just in choosing her husband, as Helen does, but in having some influence in their economic standings.

However, after their marriage, Louis' position in the home seemingly shifts from equal companion to master:

> She furthered no preparations for her nuptials; Louis was himself obliged to direct all arrangements. He was virtually master of Fieldhead weeks before he became so nominally—the least presumptuous, the kindest master that ever was, but with his lady absolute. She abdicated without a word or a struggle. "Go to Mr. Moore, ask Mr. Moore," was her answer when applied to for orders. Never was wooer of wealthy bride so thoroughly absolved from the subaltern part, so inevitably compelled to assume a paramount character (Brontë 357).

Louis may be "the kindest master" of Fieldhead to others working below him, but he is "absolute" in his rule with Shirley. Instead of fighting back for her power, she "abdicated without a word or struggle" which reveals that Shirley does submit to Louis unwillingly, but openly recognizes his "paramount character". Her "abdicat[ion]" becomes even more apparent

when Brontë notes Louis “was virtually master of Fieldhead” before he became one “nominally”. This suggests that Shirley, legally, did not have to defer to Louis as master of Fieldhead as she was still in charge. However, Shirley was exceptionally invested in raising Louis from the “subaltern part” and rise to the position of master which his “paramount character” deserves. Regardless of Shirley’s enthusiasm in giving up her power of Fieldhead, it is “inevitably” true that Louis will become the “nominal” head anyway, as married women cannot hold property in their name. Thus, Shirley’s unique position as both woman and heiress appears to revert to traditional models of domesticity, relinquishing independence and following his “orders”.

Nevertheless, immediately after this passage, Brontë seems to immediately contradict her previous description of Louis and Shirley. Instead of Louis ruling “absolute” over Shirley, it is Shirley who seems to hold the of power:

> In all this Miss Keeldar partly yielded to her disposition; but a remark she made a year afterwards proved that she partly also acted on system. "Louis," she said, "would never have learned to rule if she had not ceased to govern. The incapacity of the sovereign had developed the powers of the premier" (Brontë 357).

Louis, despite being the man and leader of the household, has no authority or power over Shirley. Any power he has is due to Shirley “ceasing to govern” over some responsibility or duty. After all, she is a self-proclaimed “leopardess”, and a “leopardess is tameless” (Brontë 349). The metaphor of Shirley being “sovereign” and Louis being “premier” highlights the dynamics of power within their relationship and presents Shirley in the image of Queen Victoria. Although a prime minister has one of the highest positions in England, their power can be overridden by the sovereign who has constitutional authority to dismiss them. Her “absoluteness” is shown in how the workers “applied” for orders from her first, only deferring to Louis at her command (“Go to Mr. Moore”). Like Queen Victoria, Shirley’s husband can

only hope to rule over her by her "yielding" power to him or her own "incapacity" to rule, which we know is voluntary incapacity on account of her acting out "on system" not by chance or accident. Shirley does not defer to Louis on account of her disbelief in her own abilities or right to do something, but rather he is "elected" to work on her behalf, making him a sort of representative to the ruler as opposed to the true ruler.

Despite the rebellious and unconventional status of Shirley, it is a novel which just as much reflects its time as the other novels mentioned in this thesis. The Victorian era marks a period of transition for women's social, economic, and political rights. The traditional role of women remained ingrained in society as mothers and domestic servants was influenced by and expanded upon conducts books and the "ideal of the Republican Motherhood" of the 18th century, which charged mothers with the responsibility of shaping their sons for the betterment of the nation (Cruea 187-188). At the same time, the economic and social changes of the century inspired shifting cultural attitudes on women's rights. The Women's Movement is accredited as being one of the first feminist movements which, by the 1850s, introduced a counterculture which saw "overlapping parts of a long-term change in cultural attitudes towards gender, a gradual shifting of power away from its patriarchal basis, and a steady movement for women toward twentieth century feminism" (Cruea 187-188). Victorian women may be domestically grounded, but it does not mean their thoughts were not oriented elsewhere.

When we read these domestic narratives, we can see the overlapping ideologies collide in the formation of their female heroines. All at once, we see Queen Victoria rule and nation and worship her husband. We see Esther command a household and suppress her feelings. We see Helen Graham fight for marital freedom to later end up in another marriage. Amid all this

push and pull between traditional and rebellious modes of understanding women, we get Shirley, a character whose proximity to twentieth century feminist rhetoric highlights the reality that the Victorian era was the century in which modern feminism was born. We attribute so much credit, and rightly so, to those activists who are the loudest, the boldest, the most public. And yet, it is these rhetorical and intellectual literary experiments, such as Norton's suggestion of female bodily autonomy, which though subtle in their original conception, embolden readers to reflect on the ideological framework that informs their present worldview and dare to make a new one. Domestic women deserve a place in our literary canon, and if we wish to do them justice, we need to read their stories again.

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