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## By her Own Hand: Female Agency through Self-Castration in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction

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BY HER OWN HAND: FEMALE AGENCY THROUGH SELF-CASTRATION IN  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH FICTION

by

ANGELA MARIE HALL-GODSEY

Under the Direction of Dr. Michael Galchinsky

ABSTRACT

*By Her Own Hand: Female Agency Through Self-Castration in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* explores the intentional methods of self-castration that lead to authorial empowerment. The project relies on the following self-castration formula: the author's recognition of herself as a being defined by lack. This lack refers to the inability to signify within the phallogentric system of language. In addition to this initial recognition, the female author realizes writing for public consumption emulates the process of castration but, nevertheless, initiates the writing process as a way to resituate the origin of castration—placing it in her own hand. The female writer also recognizes her production as feminine and, therefore works to castrate her own femininity in her pursuit to create texts that are liberated from the critical assignation of “feminine productions.”

Female self-castration is a violent act of displacement. As the author gains empowerment through the writing process, she creates characters that bear the mark of castration. The text

opens a field of play in which the author utilizes the page as a way to cut, disfigure, or erase the feminine sexual body. On the authorial level, the feminine writer works through her self-castration process through the process of writing, editing, and publication. Within the text, her characters demonstrate a will toward liberation from authorial productive hegemony by carrying the mark of their creator's castration and by taking on the power the process allocates to the writer.

INDEX WORDS:      Castration, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Margaret Oliphant, Narrative Castration, Identity, Text as Body, Female Agency

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ANGELA MARIE HALL-GODSEY

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University

2008

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2008

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by

ANGELA MARIE HALL-GODSEY

Committee Chair: Michael Galchinsky

Committee: Calvin Thomas  
LeeAnne Richardson

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University  
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### Dedication

To the two Eleanors in my life. My Grandmother, Eleanor Rose, who was my earliest representation of a “feminist;” and, my daughter Eleanor Grace, who reminds me every day of the value of curiosity.

## Acknowledgements

When I tell people I am writing a dissertation on female self-castration in nineteenth-century British fiction, I usually get a response like “that’s interesting” or “sounds nice.” I am never surprised by the reactions, but I must say I always hope they might respond “how fascinating, please tell me more.” My experience of the dissertating process fluctuates between feelings of brilliance and failure. Even now, as I finish the project, I am struck by how much I have learned and how much I have yet to figure out. It is no coincidence, I suppose, that a large part of my argument focuses on the oscillation between two fixed points and the failure of language to adequately represent the space in between. And, while the dissertating process is a solitary one – a construction of an “expert” – it is also a process which depends upon the encouragement of others. So, while I know the gratitude I express in the following page will fail to accurately represent the depth to which I owe, love, and respect those who have encouraged, nudged, and supported me, I will, nonetheless, try.

First, my husband Greg, who I hope, more than anyone, is proud of this final product. I admire his determination, his wit, and his energy. I know I couldn’t have finished without his love and support; and, I will always be grateful for the lengths at which he went to enable me to be a full-time student.

I would also like to thank my family, especially my mother, father, and brother. Whenever I needed someone to sit on the phone and listen to me read twenty pages aloud – just for the sake of hearing myself read it – I know I could always call my mom. My father, who will admit to knowing nothing about nineteenth-century British literature, much less my formulation of female self-castration, will, I am sure, read every line of this dissertation. I owe my work ethic to him, as well as my ability to fix things and figure things out (no matter how many times



it takes me). My brother, who is one of the smartest people I know, which I will only admit here. Just a simple request: please do not use the bound copy of this dissertation as a coaster on your coffee table.

I must also thank my director, Dr. Michael Galchinsky, who I can never thank enough for knowing the right time to treat me like a colleague, a student, and a friend. I was saved by his ability to help me articulate the often spastic thoughts during the early stages of each chapter. His thoughtful and direct (even when I didn't want to hear them) comments on my writing were of great assistance in fine-tuning my "voice" and my argument. While I can't possibly express in words how much I respect him, I can hope he knows.

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## Introduction

If, as Barthes points out, “the pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas – for my body does not have the same ideas I do” (*The Pleasure of the Text* 17) then how do readers of nineteenth-century British literature encounter characters whose bodies pursue mutilation, fragmentation, and castration? Is this process pleasurable for the character? The author? The reader? Furthermore, if a writer is someone “who plays with his mother’s body in order to glorify it, to embellish it, or in order to dismember it, to take it to the limit of what can be known about the body” (37), how can the critical eye look upon this process of disfigurement and glorification as productive? What has often struck me as problematic in nineteenth-century literature written by female authors is the fact that the women characters rarely “win” and, if they do, they are always complicatedly compromised.

One semester, while reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, it occurred to me that perhaps Jane Eyre, Dorothea Brooks, Lucy Snowe, Catherine Earnshaw, and Maggie Tulliver, as well as the male authors’ creation of their sister characters: Tess Durbyfield, Esther Summerson, Miss Havisham, Estella, Madame Defarge, and Arabella Fawley (just to name a few) are not simply failures and are not merely women characters who desire, are punished, and survive as compromised beings. The critical eye certainly zeroes in on the negation – the lack – and how this missing protrusion creates a feminine identity that cannot rise out of the oppression established by the patriarchal system. Psychoanalytic readings have a majority of the female characters wanting what was so cruelly taken from them: their ability to signify. However, in the case of the female characters in the

novels of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and Margaret Oliphant the door that bars access to the field of signification within a patriarchal system is self-imposed. The women in these texts work to shift the locus of meaning from the system that prohibits their truth to their bodies – a region that can speak for itself without words. The characters' various self-imposed illnesses, erasures, and prohibitions result in a self-initiated bodily trauma that is sexual, identifying, and direct.

The current application of feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic theories do not provide an access to Victorian texts that can account for a female agency. When I look at these texts I see an overwhelming violence turned inward upon the body and psyche. More specifically, the female characters appear to develop through an intense self-violence – their *bildung* involves traumatic bodily experiences initiated by their own actions, which are actions created by the mental manifestations of their author/god. The author exhibits a passionate level of violence toward his/her female characters. This leads me to contemplate the meaning of this (self)loathing. Why would authors, female authors specifically, create female characters that they loath and that they must “punish?” Why would these same authors create characters that enact violence upon their own bodies? And why, considering the availability of radical writings and post French Revolution individualism would female authors purposely choose to create characters that are narratively, sexually, and intellectually stunted?

### ***The Development of Self-castration Theory***

Etymologically, the term “castration” carries four definitions. Most germane to this project is the fourth definition listed in the *OED*: “The removal of objectionable parts from a literary work.” Comparing the editing process to the act of castration – the “removal of testicles;

gelding” and to the psychoanalytic “castration-complex,” which is also listed as a definition to the term, equates writing and revising to emasculation and sexual development. As part of the term’s etymology, Freud’s linkage between a physical process – commonly applied to farm animals and fourteenth-century pre-pubescent male sopranos – and a psychological trauma relating to sexual development creates a field of signification that does not separate physical processes from psychological ones, but rather bounds each to the other. For Freud, this binding was extremely important to the psycho-sexual development of little boys and girls, as it fostered castration anxiety in the growing male child and “penis-envy” in the maturing female child.

The sexual development of males is always threatened by the *possibility* of castration. For Freud, this fear of castration contained both a visual and mental component. He theorized that as an infant, the male child compares his anatomy with his mother’s (or female siblings’) and recognizes a physical difference. This difference then manifests a mental understanding of absence and presence – an absence assigned to the female body, a presence to the male body. The little boy understands his present protruding appendage as “normal” and, therefore, sees the absence in other bodies as a punishment. The sexual development of the little boy progresses under the shadow of possibility that he, too, could be punished and made into an absent [sexual] body. The little boy’s sexual identity is always one of presence; however, it is the very presence that makes his sexual activities visible and susceptible to surveillance. His desire for the mother, his pre-pubescent masturbatory exploits, and his periods of arousal are all visual indicators of sexual development (and mastery) for which the father could levee a harsh punishment. Little boys are always under a cloud of suspicion because they are at birth masters of their (and others’) sexuality and, therefore, a threat to the father. Freud explained this mastery again as an anatomical difference. Because of the boy’s ever-present sexual organ, “the preference for the

hand which is shown by boys is already evidence of the important contribution which the instinct for mastery is destined to make to masculine sexual activity” (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* 54). The mere fact that there is *something* to grab, *something* to manipulate, and *something* to make sexual identity visible promulgated the nineteenth-century Freudian psychoanalytic notion that sexual identity is, and always will be, tangible.

Freud placed emphasis on the tangibility and visibility of sexual identity by transferring the interior psycho-sexual development into a scientific and historical dialogue: Freud created the language that articulated the presence of Victorian assumptions of sexuality. As in the Victorian sexual ideologies from which his scientific discourse develops, Freud privileged the masculine psycho-sexual development, which made the feminine psycho-sexual development answerable to it (feminine development is reactionary and incomplete in comparison). Furthermore, the male sexual being exerts power over his libidinal drives in that *he* can use the hand to call forth his sexuality and satisfy it in a process similar to the “fort/da” game.<sup>1</sup> As the English translation suggests, the fort/da game constructs pleasure around absence and presence. The complete game is one of “disappearance and return” whereas the “pleasure [is] attached to the second act” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 14). The hand is crucial to the game of disappearance and return just as it is crucial in the mastery of satisfying sexual desire. The hand is the implement in which sexual desire is called forth (it is here, in his hand) and it is the implement in which that same desire is satisfied, quieted and, therefore, diminished.

Freud’s insistence on the importance of castration and the castration complex and subsequent castration anxiety depended upon the connection between the physical and mental processes of castration. For the little boy there is fear and anxiety, which is mitigated by the fact that *he* can save himself from punishment. By simply following the “rules” and by becoming



part of civilization by “[exchanging] a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security” (*Civilization and its Discontents* 73) he maintains his “presence.” *He* is active in his sexual identity – he is an agent. In the fort/da game, the player becomes the active component in the procedure. The player is no longer passive and no longer needs to wait for satisfaction. *He* can create satisfaction. As an agent, his *presence* (having the present sexual organ) *creates* absence. His anatomical presence calls forth the lack in another. Hence, the little boy develops through a fear of castration only to become a master of it.

When comparing the psycho-sexual developments of males and females, Freud did not simply invert the experience. As a matter of fact, the little girl begins as a little man. Freud admits that the female and male child exhibit very little sexual differences in the first stages of sexual development. However, it is the understanding of castration that compels the little girl to realize she will never grow a penis. She need not wait in anticipation – it will never sprout. Additionally, the little girl must undergo a stronger repression of sexual libido in order to *become* a normal lacking woman. Freud asserts that women must change their erotogenic zone, must put their “masculine” desires aside in order to become a woman:

When erotogenic susceptibility to stimulation has been successfully transferred by a woman from the clitoris [the little penis] to the vaginal orifice, it implies that she has adopted a new leading zone for the purposes of her later sexual activity. A man, on the other hand, retains his leading zone unchanged from childhood. The fact that women change their leading erotogenic zone in this way, together with the wave of repression at puberty, which as it were, puts aside their childish masculinity, are the chief determinants of the greater proneness of women to

neurosis and especially hysteria. These determinants, therefore, are intimately related to the essence of femininity. (*Three Essays on the History of Sexuality* 87)

The *essence of femininity* is repression (clearly a Freudian reverberation of the Victorian period's treatment of womanhood) or, to put it in more specifically theoretical terms: femininity is a process of exchange. The substance of womanhood relies on a change of erotic zones and a putting aside of their "childish masculinity." Psychoanalytic theory forces women to realize their presence as absence. The way women work out castration is through acceptance. They too must give up portions of their possible happiness for a portion of historically prescribed security.<sup>2</sup> However, the portion they offer is that of their material body and sexual identity.

The sacrifice is immense; but, in the master's own words there is the possibility for rebellion. How do women rebel against what cannot be seen? Have women mounted a revolution in order to recover their bodies from impossibility of sexual existence? What are their tools? Their weapons? In *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1905), Freud's patient used writing as a way to substitute for loss of power:

Dora's aphonia, then, allowed of the following symbolic interpretation.

When the person she loved was away she gave up speaking; speech had lost its value since she could not speak to *him*. On the other hand, writing gained in importance, as being the only means of communication with the absent person. (33)

Of course, Dora's case relates to a specific Freudian "experiment" in which Dora's father "handed her over to [Freud] for psychotherapeutic treatment" (*Dora* 13). In light of feminist assertions that proffer writing as a tool of feminine expression, Dora's mode of symbolic interpretation gains greater importance than it was given in Freud's case analysis. Speech acts

lose power in the company of absence. Writing, a process of exchange, offers a space for expression. Writing becomes a tool to speak for and to what is not there. The process becomes a way to work through castration. What Dora has lost is not the love of Herr K or her father, but the possibility of expressing her desires. Her sexual lack creates the impossibility of signification. However, writing lays open a space for signification in spite of the absence. Writing speaks of, for, and to the lack.

Dora's inclination toward writing shadows Freud's previous clinical diagnoses of patients with "hysterical mutism" in which "writing operated vicariously in the place of speech" (32). Freud figures writing as a mere and insignificant substitute, one in which the patient could circumnavigate the physical limitations of self-induced aphonia. The writing only serves to further Dora's illness in Freud's estimation. However, Dora's case illustrates the power enveloped in the process of exchange. At the moment of loss; at the core of absence; at the center of isolation, Dora mimics speech in writing. Her written dialogue to her lover does not require his presence. The aphonia and accompanying cough may be a form of Dora's repression; but, the act of writing is a strong representation of her desire for expression. Dora's insistence on the writing process during the moments of Herr K's absence is a testament to the power of exchange: writing fills the gap left open by the absent voice.

The impetus behind Freudian psychoanalysis lay in Victorian culture. The theories of sexuality, repression, and castration all spoke to specific gender/sexual identity queries prevalent in the nineteenth century. Freud created the psychoanalytic lexicon and the mode for applying these terms. Freud's castration theory, despite its current lack of scientific validity, helps to create my theory of castration in that it has survived (in print and as literary criticism) as the primary formulation of women's castration. Furthermore, his castration theory rises directly out

of Victorian culture (social Victorian attitudes and beliefs as well as the print culture of Victorian women's novels, poetry, and letters).

***A Point of Departure: Self-castration Theory beyond the Father's Tools***

When Hélène Cixous proclaims “woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (*Laugh of the Medusa* 347) she recognizes the necessary role writing plays in the recovery of the feminine body. This notion is not new. I do not intend to use literature as a way to prove or disprove *L'écriture Feminine*, Freud, or Lacan. I imbed my argument within the very structure of castration; however, the argument departs from the father(s). Women must and have been writing their bodies. Women have been working through the looming fact of castration through their ability to write, publish, and become part of the literary landscape. Specifically, writing in the nineteenth century provides solid examples of female authorship that use the process of castration as a way to “rebel against the unwelcome state of affairs” and gain agency.

In connecting the exigency of writing to a desire for agency through castration I must include Lacanian psychoanalysis and his crucial move away from Freud's theories of castration. Lacan's major turn involves the conception of subjectivity *in* language. Since all speaking subjects are castrated in that they exchange being for meaning,<sup>3</sup> the speech act renders the speaker a subject in language. On the surface, this application of Lacanian psychoanalysis excises gender—castration through speaking is a gender-neutral process. However, the surface reading does not take into account the inability for women to signify within the field of language. Blanket-gendered castration through the speech act does not consider the process of writing as a way for women to experience, by their own hand, sexual castration and loss of their ability to

signify. Lacan's castration complex leaves the subject in a passive position and does not consider the desire some women have to create a narrative of their own castration.

When considering the writing process as one steeped in the desire to initiate a process of self-castration, one must also consider the impetus that brings the writer to this edge. The edge is the cut and everything must be brought "back to the function of the cut in discourse [because] this cut in the signifying chain alone verifies the structure of the subject as discontinuity within the real" (Lacan, *Subversion of the Subject* 229). Lacan links subjectivity to the cut in discourse. Novel writing in the nineteenth century provided the very means of establishing discourses on sexuality, human rights, individualism, education, etc. Nineteenth-century discourses through novel writing generated a reading public that inserted themselves as subjects through the opening of the *cut* in the signifying chain. The cut grants access to discourse—and, women writers of the Victorian period exhibit a desire to not only insert themselves into the signifying chain, but also to be the cutter or, to put it more clearly, to compose the mark that makes signification possible.

The desire to bring oneself to the edge and to initiate a process of castration through writing is also a process linked to the desire for death. As Roland Barthes points out in *On Racine*:

Speech is a substitute for life: to speak is to lose life, and all effusive behavior is experienced initially as a gesture of dilapidation: by the avowal, the flood of words released, it is the very principle of life that seems to be leaving the body; to speak is to spill oneself, that is, to castrate oneself. (119)

Can Barthes's assertions linking speech and castration have implications on women's writing in Victorian England? Part of the argument in this dissertation will investigate the role the first-person narrator plays within the process of castration. The text itself is a substitute for life. The

author writes and puts herself *there* on the page instead of *here* in the flesh. The act of writing mirrors the act of speaking; and, the construction of the first-person narrator writing/speaking her “autobiography” correlates to the practice of speaking her story. Furthermore, once the text is extracted from the body—from the hand—the act of ending the process (finishing the text, publishing the text, and circulating the text) relates to death: I desire to write, I fulfill this desire and, in doing so, I satisfy and then annihilate the very desire/inspiration/need that motivated the textual creation. The first-person narrator becomes a tool of self-castration in that her speech act imitates the process of castration experienced by the development of the author’s writing.

However, imitation gives rise to the text’s ability to erase the author altogether in favor of the narrator’s castration process through first-person narration. Characters that narrate their own “stories” carry the transfer of the author’s castration process on their textual body. The castration process of the first-person narrator becomes textual—part and parcel of the development (visual development from the reader’s perspective) of the text. The visual representation of the castration process provides an outlet that would eclipse that author’s own castration in the shadows. The author’s castration can remain *unseen* and hidden away from the reader. The author, therefore, creates a space to experience her own castration by transferring the fear of shame and punishment onto a character who simultaneously envelopes the process while maintaining a fictive “distance.” Authors guide their characters both to experience writing castration through the form of narrative castration (the speech act, the spilling of oneself), and to understand the field they plow up. Their labor pays off in that the author creates a field where she can cultivate several alternatives for presenting the body: she can disfigure the body, transport the body, or erase the body from the text altogether.

Text as body rises out of the French Feminist movement and is commonly referred to as *L'écriture Feminine*. As I previously stated, my argument will not attempt to dismantle the theories imbedded in *L'écriture Feminine*, but rather use portions of this feminist perspective to build a new castration theory. French Feminism moves within the vein of essentialism: women's writing is a codification of female sexuality. The system of writing ascribed by the feminine hand illustrates the liberation of femininity and female sexuality while also creating a space to write the body and give it form within and on top of the textual page. Every inch of the female body imprints itself on the text. This type of writing, as Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray maintain, allows women and readers to experience the feminine body through the feminine structure of writing. The goal, of course, is not to exploit the body, but rather recover it from the trauma of castration and the inability to signify within a phallogocentric system of language. *L'écriture Feminine* provides the vehicle that brings women to the writing "from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (Cixous, *Laugh of the Medusa*, 347).

In working with and against Kristevian and Irigararian feminism, Judith Butler establishes a theoretical construct that relies on the *materialization* of bodies. Her concern with French Feminism is that *writing the body* indicates an essentialist approach to femininity and female sexuality and, consequently, writing. The act of "miming," which constitutes a large part of Irigararian theory, forces women to inscribe their sexuality within the field of phallogocentric signification. She claims Irigaray suggests "that *miming* is that very operation of the feminine in language." And, Butler makes a contradistinction by stating

to mime means to participate in precisely that which is mimed, and if the language mimed is the language of phallogocentrism, then this is only a specifically feminine

language to the extent that the feminine is radically implicated in the very terms of phallogocentrism it seeks to rework. (*Bodies that Matter* 47)

Butler's project focuses on the performativity of sexual identity and that there must be a line of demarcation separating gender (a performative ideal) and sex (a material existence). Butler outlines the goals of *Bodies that Matter* claiming one of her aims to be "the understanding of performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (2). Butler's assertion that feminism must work toward the "recasting of the matter of bodies as the effect of a dynamic of power, such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization" imbues the castration theory I construct.

Butler also uses the notion of a "lesbian phallus" as a way to discuss the displacement of the Lacanian phallus. The question becomes: Why can't other body parts signify? A lesbian phallus "crosses the orders of *having* and *being*, it both wields the threat of castration (which is in that sense a mode of "being" the phallus as women "are") and suffers from castration anxiety (and so is said "to have" the phallus, and to fear its loss)" (84). Of course, displacing the phallus and putting it in another's hand—a feminine hand—disrupts the axis of power while simultaneously dissolving feminine lack. The feminine position no longer constitutes "the figural enactment of that punishment, the very figuration of that threat and, hence, [a position] produced as a lack only in relation to the masculine subject" (102). The material body is one that has both a presence and a "meaning." For Butler, *bodies that matter* are bodies that materialize and signify. This materialization allows for the displacement of the phallus because the material body disassociates its being from performative gender.



Placing Butler's materialization theory within the confines of my project means to exchange *matter* for a term that represents a production of female power—writing. Victorian publications are the *matter* through which women repositioned the axis of phallic power. Novels signify the manner in which women created their bodies as text – bodies of *actual matter*. Furthermore, if the symbolic order “marks the body by sex through threatening that body, through the deployment/production of an imaginary threat, a castration, a privation of some bodily part” and “without symbolic inscription, that body will be negated” (101) then it is possible literary production generated the means for women to enter the symbolic order and displace phallic power while reiterating their castration process on the page. This reiteration allows the author to make sense of her position as a castrated being and become an agent of her own castration through writing.

Self-initiated castration results in a transfer of power. This power is violent and traumatic to the subject. All writing is castration as “writing is the dissimulation of the natural, primary, and immediate presence of sense to the soul within the logos. Its violence befalls the soul as unconsciousness” (Derrida 37). The author diverts the immediacy of presence through the process of writing. The text is a production of the castration process and illustrates the violence of language: “there is an originary violence of writing because language is first [...] writing (37). Language's structural basis is violence and, as Cixous points out; this violence drives women from textual production. However, language can offer the opportunity to harness its violent origin; the core of phallic signification. Kaja Silverman discusses the multivariate phases of castration. She argues that “there is a castration which precedes the recognition of anatomical difference—a castration to which all cultural subjects must submit, since it coincides with separation from the world of objects, and the entry into language” (1). Working from the

premise Lacan sets up in “The Mirror Stage”, Silverman in *The Acoustic Mirror* insists on a castration process that begins before the moment in Freud when the little boy gazes upon the little girl’s body and notices a lack and assumes the lack is a result of a punishment. Silverman argues that by locating the central castration process within the limits of anatomy, Freud “reveals [his] desire to place maximum distance between the male subject and the notion of lack” (15). However, the alternative castration theories do not permit such a creation of distance between lack and gender. Language is the site in which the first experiences of castration arise; and, language, according to Derrida and Foucault<sup>4</sup>, constitutes the very structure of violence. Violence is natural and primary to language and this violence knows no gender. Writing is a gender-free castration process and operates with no regard to anatomy. Male authors may have *something* to lose, but the female hand already carries the scar/”mark” of castration when she comes to the table. Writing allows women a moment in which to carry the mark and make the mark simultaneously—the proverbial double-edged sword.

Castration, etymologically, carries another important definition in the rearticulating of castration theory. The fourth listed definition: “the removal of objectionable parts from a literary work; expurgation” intimates a necessary component of the writing process—editing. Therefore, Barthes’ assertion that all writing is a form of castration leads us to a larger critical inquiry: if the act of writing equals “spilling oneself” on the page—i.e. castration, then the process of the production of that work (editing and publication) replicates the act of self-initiated castration. Repetition is crucial to the birth of subjectivity in that it grants access to a subject willing to create identity through the repetition of signification. The ability of writing to mimic itself (and, in particular to mimic the component processes) emulates the fort/da game in Freud, the mirror stage in Lacan, and the production of performative gender in Butler.

The various castration theories do not exist separately but, rather develop out of one another. The theories discussed thus far illustrate a historical continuum in which I hope to situate my argument. Self-initiated castration theory develops out of Freudian theory of sexual difference, Lacanian theory of subjectivity in language, Butler's assertion of a line demarcating gender performance and the material (sexual) body, Barthes' connection of writing and castration, French feminism's notion of *writing the body*, and Foucault's arguments on sexuality, surveillance, and madness. My project will focus on the following formulation of the female self-castration process: it begins with the Victorian author's recognition of her position as a "lacking being." This lack refers not only to an anatomical absence, but an inability to signify within the structure of phallogentric system of language. The author comes to the table aware that writing for public consumption emulates a process of castration in that it annihilates authorial presence—putting herself *there* on the page instead of *here* in the present. Furthermore, as a writer, she recognizes her production as feminine, which attracts critical attention *as* a production of a *feminine text*. In order to avoid this assignation, the author works to castrate her own femininity from the production of a work: i.e., in some cases, the use of a male pseudonym.

The writing process, however, opens up a field of play in which the author resists feminine writing and works to materialize the body of the text through the process of displacing the phallus. Finally, the author creates characters who bear the mark of signification/castration with one important distinction. These characters bear the mark created by the female author. The writing process opens the door for women to gain control over their own "lacking" position *and* allows them the creative space to cut, mark, disfigure, or erase the feminine sexual body. Female self-castration is a violent act of displacement—the characters carry the mark of

castration through a process of transference from the authorial castration experience to a character who enacts or moves (or is propelled) through the text by a series of castrating experiences. The self-initiated castration process—the blade turned inward to make the cut—is, indeed, bifurcated. On the authorial level, the writer masks her own castration process by directing the focus on the page. Within the text, the characters demonstrate a desire to break from authorial productive hegemony by not only carrying the mark of their creator’s castration, but also by taking on the power the process allocates to the writer.

### ***Chapter Outline***

Chapter one, *Narrative Castration: The First-Person Speaks as Violent Narrator*, explores the ways in which Charlotte Brontë creates a textual body from the process of “autobiographical” narrative castration. Readers encounter *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* through an autodiegetic construction – these two novels are fiction, but simultaneously claim to be autobiographical. Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe narrate their history, or better yet, they narrate their will to power. Brontë desires to create a text that permits female agency through the process of self-castration. Both Jane and Lucy work to excise their bodies from the text. Each carefully positions herself outside the text (as all-knowing narrator) and within the text as subjected character. The oscillation between these two points allows the narrating Jane and Lucy to actively make a subject out of the characters of Jane and Lucy. This process of subjectification is, in fact, a process of self-castration. However, the self-castration allows the narrator, and by extension the author, Charlotte Brontë, to both experience the pain of castration and the power of making the castrative cut.

Both Jane and Lucy's narrative works within the structure of a "threat narrative." As narrators, Jane and Lucy operate as both an agent of their own castration and as an agent capable of castrating others in the text. By ruling their textual production (their narrative) they employ the methods of threat narrative to erase those who pose as obstacles to their rise to power. Jane eliminates her Aunt Reed and her cousins, who present the earliest prohibition toward independence. She also excises St. John, who threatens her story's romantic and sexually fulfilling ending. Finally, Jane removes Bertha from the text, which enables her to narrate the climax to her sexual independence. Likewise, Lucy employs *modes* of writing (romance and gothic) to illuminate her authorial control. Lucy's desire to eliminate her sexual body in order to liberate her textual one, highlights the way in which she utilizes writing modes in order to eliminate the expression of her sexual body.

Both Jane and Lucy represent an extension of the desire of their creator, Charlotte Brontë. As an author, she constructed Currer Bell (a masculine persona) in order to gain entrance into the publishing arena. Brontë understood the level to which she, as a woman and as a woman author, would be castrated by the editing and publishing process as well as how her product would be viewed as a "woman's novel" and nothing more. She had to castrate her femininity in order to produce. As a way to displace the pain of this castration, and as a way to gain agency over her own (feminine) textual productions, Brontë creates characters who are castrated (by her hand) and who castrate. She uses the writing process as a mimetic device, which grants her the experience of pain and the rewards of pleasure through inflicting castrative pain.

Chapter Two, *Dirty Little Secrets: George Eliot's Fictional Body and Bodies of Fiction*, examines the construction of George Eliot in order to investigate the way in which he became a figure who extended beyond his fictional birth. In contrast to Currer Bell, George Eliot survived

as an author – do we read books by Currer Bell? In a historical investigation of the Victorian period, George Eliot existed as an author. His creator, Mary Ann Evans/Marian Lewes, fiercely worked to protect her creation. She did so in order to protect herself and in order to ensure the survival of her textual productions. Marian's process of self-castration offers her sex as the sacrifice in order to permit the possibility of authorship.

Because of her desire to maintain and cultivate George Eliot, Marian Lewes had to operate under the linguistic structure of the secret. The secret, which I term as an erotic secret, affords Marian levels of fictional and actual gratification. As a masculine author, who creates masculine narrators, Marian could employ the female gaze on her textual productions. She was also able to use the secret to gain entrance in the male world of surveillance and novel criticism. The secret also allowed Marian to be present and active in the discussions of her author ego, which gave her great satisfaction. Finally, the secret granted safe harbor from the critical and popular judgments that would have tied her personal (sexually aberrant) life to her work as a novelist.

Through her experience as a self-castrator who gains agency through this process, Marian learns to harness power and utilize it in her novels. As the author/god, or, more acutely as *Pollian*, the angel of destruction, Marian creates characters *in order* to castrate them. She, therefore, uses the process of fiction writing to experience the masochistic desire to self-castrate and the sadist desire to inflict pain over others. By harnessing the male power proffered by George Eliot, the cross-dressing author uses masculine power to enter the developing discourses on femininity, sexuality, and authority.

The third chapter of this dissertation, *The Mother's Knife: Dickens and Female Violence*, examines how female power through self-castration cultivates a culture of fear among male

authors such as Charles Dickens. Dickens's novels show a clear desire to explore the female body and the boundaries that can be used to control them. The literature in Dickens's oeuvre exhibits a fear of castration (an anxiety about women who gain power through the process of self-castration). His fiction works to stabilize Victorian norms of male/female power relationship by working to silence, punish, or annihilate women who use castration as a method toward power. The women in Dickens's novels use self-initiated castration as a way to pervert authority and destroy others (men and social appropriate women) in the text. Their vengeance toward men who aim to develop as the Victorian masculine ego ideal is a threat, as Dickens sees it, to the trajectory of the narrative of masculine heterosexual, social, and national development.

Drawing from his real-life experiences with castrating women, Dickens uses writing as a method toward liberation. His texts represent a return to the mother, wife, and/or lover in order to disfigure and dismember their inappropriate sexually independent bodies so as to free men from the cultural narrative of competition: the Victorian male is at risk for stunted development if, in addition to the competition for employment, education, and societal esteem, he must also compete against women for sexual liberation and identity independence. By linking social structuring and libidinal desires in his novels, Dickens uses a form of "process writing" to rid his fictive communities of the threatening conflation of sex and society. By purging sex from community, Dickens narrates a return to the Victorian traditional models of marriage, domesticity, and nation.

The final chapter, *Irresponsible: The Incessant Work of Self-Murder in Oliphant's Fiction and Autobiography*, works to highlight the gulf between the writer as "artist" and the author who uses writing as a means of employment. Oliphant's self-castration process involves her removal from the aesthetics of writing in order to focus on the more practical effort to

support her domestic enterprise. While the impetus behind authorship for Brontë and Eliot differs from that of Oliphant, her process of self-castration does lead to agency. As a contributor to *Blackwoods*, Oliphant's "utility" writing earned her the label of publication "prostitute." Her prolific output alone indicates an author more concerned with turning a phrase into a paycheck than one who worked on her "craft." As her contemporaries illuminate (Henry James, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, to name a few), her writing was third-rate and certainly did not fit in with the more aesthetically appealing and more critically acclaimed writing of the Victorian period. Oliphant herself understood her position within the publishing world as one that could not be compared to the likes of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. Oliphant's *Autobiography* illuminates her understanding of her authorship as marginal and small in the light of the other two women. However insignificant she thought herself to be when standing next to Brontë and Eliot, she was granted publication and editorial latitude by *Blackwoods*, and while her popularity waned in the 1890s, her novels, short fiction, and periodical contributions were quite popular among the Victorian middle-class reader.

What the *Autobiography*, "Stories of the Seen and Unseen," and her novel, *Hester*, show are three ways in which Oliphant uses the process of self-castration in order to gain authority over her feminine identity. Oliphant terms the autobiography as an "instrument of self-murder," ("Harriet Martineau" 472). Her definition of the process of autobiographical writing shows she understands autobiography to be a form of self-castration. In the process of fictionalizing the self, Oliphant realizes the limitations placed upon the subject of the autobiography. Creating identity through autobiographical subjectification offers a new way to analyze self-castration as it differs from the semi-autobiographical fiction written by Brontë and Eliot. In Oliphant's "Stories of the Seen and Unseen," she offers women a new arena for signification. This arena,



that which is unseen and resisting articulation, offers a place where language fails and where the feminine body can exist in its most primitive form – outside of social and cultural limitations.

Finally, Oliphant's novel, *Hester*, reveals to the reader the power available to those who choose to redefine their femininity. This "new" definition of femininity foreshadows the work of the New Woman literature of the 1890s and positions itself in the discourse on "The Woman Question."

In the pursuit of power, self-castration allows women writers to experience their lacking existence at their own hand. By transferring the blade, the female writer can gain agency by enacting the process of castration upon herself (through the writing and editing process) and upon the character-creations in her textual product. By enacting this process, the female writer not only gains power, but also permits a space in which she can experience both the pleasure and the pain that rises out of castration. However, as she is not passive in this process, the pleasure and pain complex that she experiences as a result of self-castration rises out of her own desires. Female authors who participate in self-castration do so because they desire to undergo the pain of castration by their own hand, inflict pain on their textual creations in order to experience the power of the castrator and, therefore gain access to the pleasure of cutting – the pleasure of castrating.

## Chapter One

### *Narrative Castration: The First-Person Speaks as Violent Narrator*

*She acknowledges the fact of her castration, and with it, too, the superiority of the male and her own inferiority; but she rebels against this unwelcome state of affairs. (Freud, On Female Sexuality)*

How does she rebel against the *unwelcome state* of things? Psychoanalytic theory has provided readers with several answers—several ways *she* works through the *fact* of her castration. These answers leave little, if any room for female agency.

Women writers during the Victorian period show a strong desire to self-castrate. By turning the blade on herself, the female author becomes *the* source of her own “lack.” She is not passive in her sexual development. She experiences the pleasure in cutting—the bliss involved in making the mark. The very act of writing is a form of castration and it is through this medium that she can write the feminine body, mutilate it, recover it, reshape it, or erase it. This rebellion through writing offers an opportunity to modify *the unwelcome state of affairs*. Castration theory, as I will develop through this dissertation, allows for a new way to interpret women’s writing during the Victorian period. As this chapter will illustrate, Charlotte Brontë uses writing as a tool for self-castration. Both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* develop through the author’s desire to experience castration by her own hand. As a self-castrator, Charlotte Brontë employs the process in order to gain power over her own “lack.” As the hand that guides the cut of castration, Brontë subverts masculine authority by controlling the process of castration over her own authorial body and textual productions. Furthermore, Brontë creates a textual world that offers her the space in

which to castrate others. This duality of self-castration and castrator permits the author to use writing to re-experience the pain of her own castration and to use narrative to experience the pleasure of castrating others.

### **I. The Self-Castrating Creation of Currer Bell**

The first-person narrator's violent recounting structures the text and creates a textual body born out of an "autobiographical" narrative of castration. Jane, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Lucy, in *Villette*, are not only figures of their author's castrated production, but also characters who labor toward owning the power of castration (over themselves and others in the text). Both of these characters rise out of the author's desire to create a narrative that allows for agency through the process of self-castration. Their first-person narrative works within the formula of a threat-narrative. As the agent of their own castration and as an agent willing and able to castrate (excise, erase, annihilate, amputate, etc.) their textual productions, Jane and Lucy utilize a capacity to "rule" over their textual bodies (their material bodies) by using fear. No character can escape their narrative power. Jane's story exhibits a conscious decision to remove those she sees as obstacles; the most important example being Bertha (a character who literally represents Jane's inability to narrate an appropriate "romantic" ending). Likewise, Lucy's at times incoherent narrative illustrates her understanding of romance and gothic as *modes* of writing; and, she uses this knowledge to further her authorial control. The shift from Dr. Graham Bretton to Paul Emmanuel in the third volume facilitates Lucy's desire to erase her sexual identity by annihilating the novel's clearest expression of it (the relationship between Dr. Bretton and herself). As both of the texts unfold, the reader becomes increasingly aware of the narrative

voices' power and that this voice threatens to excise those characters as a way to further dwell within the narrative (castrative) experience.

I have chosen to focus on *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* because they are Charlotte Brontë's only first-person narrative novels from a woman's point of view (*The Professor* is also a first-person narrative but from William Crimsworth's point-of-view). Critics consider both of these novels to be semi-autobiographical. Because of the novels' autodiegetic<sup>5</sup> construction, readers are confronted with a narrative claiming to be "autobiographical" while at the same time presenting itself as a work of "fiction." This autodiegesis allows for the examination of the texts as a parallel construction of the authorial castration transferred onto the page through the visages of the texts' narrators. *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* use the first-person narrator as a way to give form to the author's self-castration while simultaneously performing the act of castration within the text. Charlotte Brontë publishes two texts (*Jane Eyre* (1847), a first publication and *Villette* (1852), a final publication—exempting the posthumous publication of *The Professor*) that clearly reveal the castration process I have constructed.<sup>6</sup>

Much research is available on the life of Charlotte Brontë and her two writer sisters Anne and Emily. The connection between *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, and Charlotte's own life is outlined in her correspondences, which have been used in compiling the biographical materials that notch out a composite of her life. Juliet Barker's *The Brontës* outlines this connection through evidentiary materials such as her letters and the letters of her closest confidants (Ellen Nussey, Mary Taylor, Elizabeth Gaskell, her family, and George Smith). Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* follows a similar technique, adding her own personal observations. The letters<sup>7</sup> themselves have been compiled in several additions, all depicting events, scenes, emotions, and Charlotte Brontë's interior dilemmas that coincide with the characters she creates in her novels.

That being said, the letters are “incomplete” as the compilations can only reprint Charlotte’s outgoing correspondence (the incoming letters were destroyed by Arthur Bell Nichols). Nevertheless, the surviving letters illustrate a day-by-day account of the author’s life as well as a glimpse into the interior space that birthed *Jane Eyre* and *Lucy Snowe*.

Charlotte Brontë published *Jane Eyre* under the pseudonym Currer Bell. This act marks an important part of her self-castration. Beyond the mere interpretation that writing as a man elicited different critical attention than writing as a woman, Currer Bell developed as an *author* devoid of femininity. Currer Bell did not *need* to perform as a woman. He wrote and reviewed and conversed as a member of the literary intelligentsia—an opportunity often elusive to the female authors of the Victorian period. Women novelists enjoyed an immense popularity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; however, their novels were classified as *domestic fictions*, *novels of manner*, *sentimental romances* and were reviewed with an eye toward female propriety and appropriateness. George Eliot categorizes popular female writing in the following manner: mind-and-millinery, rank and beauty, oracular, white neck-cloth novels. These novels are purposelessly long-winded with pedantic dialogue. The plot lines are unreasonable and not limited by probability and reality. Eliot claims the lady novelist customarily confuses the purpose and falls short of illustrating British culture: “a really cultured woman, like a really cultured man, is all the simpler and the less obtrusive for her knowledge” (“Silly Novels” 313). The author of a *silly novel* becomes enticed by her vanity; and,

this foolish vanity of wishing to appear in print, instead of being counterbalanced by any consciousness of the intellectual or moral derogation implied in futile authorship, seems to be encouraged by the extremely false impression that to write *at all* is a proof of superiority in women. (319)

Charlotte Brontë, just nine years before the publication of George Eliot's "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" sits at her writing desk in Haworth Parsonage and aims to create a text that critics will consider as a *text*, not as a lady's novel. Brontë's intense desire to be known and read as an *author* not as a woman fueled her insistence on the preservation of her secret identity.

Currer Bell *became* an author—his identity falling into the rules of subjectification. Currer Bell became a subject in language and his identity is as staunchly rooted as Charlotte's. Robert Southey's reply to Charlotte Brontë's initial queries about her level of talent precipitated the need for Currer Bell.

[...] It is not my advice that you have asked as to the direction of your talents, but my opinion of them. 'and' Yet the opinion may be worth little, & the advice much. You evidently possess & in no inconsiderable degree what Wordsworth calls "the faculty of Verse." I am not depreciating it when I say that in these times it is not rare. Many volumes of poems are now published every year without attracting public attention, any one of wh, if it had appeared half a century ago, wd. have obtained a high reputation for its author. Whoever therefore is ambitious of distinction in this way, ought to be prepared for disappointment.

But it is not with a view to distinction that you shd. cultivate this talent, if you consult your own happiness. I who have made literature my profession, & devoted my life to it, & have never for a moment repented of the deliberate choice, think myself nevertheless bound in duty to caution every young man who applies as an aspirant 'to me' for encouragement & advice, against taking so perilous a course. You will say that a woman has no need of such a caution, there can be no peril in it for her: & in a certain sense this is true. But there is a danger of wh I wd with all kindness & all earnestness

warn you. The daydreams in wh you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind, & in proportion as all the “ordinary uses of the world” seem to you “flat and unprofitable”, you will be unfitted for them, without becoming fitted for anything else. Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life: & it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment & a recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, & when you are you will be less eager for celebrity. You will then not seek in imagination for excitement, of wh the vicissitudes of this life & anxieties, from wh you must not hope to be exempted (be your station what it may) will bring ‘with’ them but too much. (*LCB* 166-67)

Southey insists writing leads women to neglect their proper duties, those duties of being a domestic “angel in the house.”<sup>8</sup> His concern is not based on Miss Brontë’s talent—for he admits she, along with several other writers during the Victorian period, had the talent to publish (no great feat in his estimation). More specifically, Southey admonishes against recording the “daydreams in [which] [she] habitually indulge[s].” He characterizes writing as dangerous in that it is “likely to induce a distempered state of mind.” On par with the prevalent notion that women are more susceptible than men to bouts of psychological instability, Southey’s remarks reiterate the Victorian notion that women must focus on the duties of the home in order to avoid over stimulating their weak and impressionable minds. Writing becomes a danger when it allows women to “indulge” in fantasy. Furthermore, Southey insists Charlotte abstain from writing as a way to ensure the healthy capacity to bear and rear children. Charlotte has “not yet been called” to the duty of motherhood, but if she continues to write, she places her capacity to

mother in a perilous state. Her diminished capability to be a *proper* Victorian woman rises from her desire to “seek in imagination for excitement.”

In responding to Southey’s letter, Brontë thanks Southey for his opinion and acquiesces to his patriarchal point of view.

At the first perusal of your letter I felt only shame, and regret that I had ever ventured to trouble you with my crude rhapsody;--I felt a painful heat rise to my face when I thought of the quires of paper I had covered with what once gave me so much delight, but which now was only a source of confusion; but, after I had thought a little and read it again and again, the prospect seemed to clear. (*LCB* 168)

Shame, regret, and pain are her “rewards.” She calls her inquiry a “rhapsody,” equating it with passion. She notes the poems sent to Southey once filled her with delight, now only to represent a source of confusion. Clearly Charlotte understood her talents to be worthy, but comes to realize her sex is not. Charlotte reads the letters over and over again in a sort of masochistic enterprise meant to “clear” up the confusion. Southey “kindly allow[s] her to write poetry for its own sake, provided [she] leave undone nothing which [she] ought to do” and that she “[endeavors] not only attentively to observe all the duties a woman ought to fulfill, but to feel deeply interested in them.” She admits “I don’t always succeed, for sometimes when I’m teaching of sewing I would rather be reading or writing; but I try to deny myself; and my Father’s approbation amply rewarded me for the privation” (169). The future author of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* notes a system of reward for denying herself access to a creative outlet. She tries to be interested in the sorts of activities defined as “feminine” and she punishes herself for the desire she has to read and write. Southey’s response is not the only proof of the difficulty the Brontës faced in publishing their work. Aylott and Jones also refused to publish the sisters’



collection of poetry at their own expense. In addition to this first publication “failure” the sisters attempted to establish a school at Haworth—they had not one application. Despite Charlotte’s advanced and costly education in Mdme. Heger’s school in Brussels, her Aunt’s agreement to fund the school’s opening, and her desire to become a published author, she could only envisage an existence within the miasma of the governess.

It is of little surprise that Charlotte looked to conjure a separate self. She needed Currer Bell because he offered her a new start and a way to erase her past “feminine” failures. On the one hand, Charlotte was faced with being a dependent of the Haworth parsonage and her father’s meager salary. On the other, she faced a life of domestic servitude as a governess. Neither option appealed to her, especially the latter. In writing to Ellen Nussey, Charlotte claims “something in me which used to be enthusiasm is tamed down and broken—I have fewer illusions—what I wish for now is active exertion—a stake in life” (*LCB*, vol. one 341). Charlotte’s failed attempts at finding happiness as a governess lead her to want this stake in life—a claim upon a rightful position suited to her intellect and personal desires. While working for the Whites at Upperwood House, Charlotte writes “but no one but myself can tell you how hard a governess’s work is to me—for no one but myself is aware how utterly averse my whole mind and nature are to the employment” (*LCB*, vol. one 246). Where writing and reading allowed Charlotte to indulge in the excitement of fantasy and active work, her role as a governess suffocated her. In writing to W.S. Williams she explains the governess

live[s] amongst them a life of inexpressible misery; tyrannized over, finding her efforts to please and teach utterly vain, chagrined, distressed, worried—so badgered so trodden-on, that she cease[s] almost at last to know herself, and wondered in what despicable, trembling frame her oppressed mind [is] prisoned—and could not realize the idea of

evermore being treated with respect and regarded with affection—till she finally resign[s] her situation and [goes] away quite broken in spirit and reduced to the verge of decline in health. (*LCB*, vol. 2 65)

In both of these depictions of Charlotte's experience as a governess, she provides an image of imprisonment. Southey may have temporarily convinced Charlotte that writing should not be and is not a woman's calling, but she continues to use her utter distaste for "women's work" to fuel her ambition for self-preservation. Currer Bell becomes the figure of her salvation.

Throughout her publishing career, Charlotte Brontë insisted on the preservation of her "secret." The "outing" of Charlotte Brontë would mean the erasure of Currer Bell. More importantly, behind the façade Charlotte lay naked and vulnerable. Because of this she held fast to the process of protecting Currer. Even after Charlotte and Anne's "pop" visit to Smith, Elder & Co. to prove that they were indeed three authors (Currer, Acton, and Ellis Bell), Charlotte continued to sign letters to her publishers as Currer Bell. In fact, as Barker points out, "the use of her 'Currer Bell' pseudonym was significant too, for [...] George Smith was the only one of her correspondents with whom she used it consistently" (623). Barker goes on to explain that the use of this name granted her the freedom of frank and direct discourse by liberating her from gender constraints. In addition to the frankness the nom de plume allowed, Currer Bell served a greater purpose. Both *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* were published by Currer Bell during a time when Charlotte was not known to be the actual hand behind their production. As Gaskell's biography elucidates: "Miss Bronte [...] had been as anxious as ever to preserve her incognito in 'Shirley.' She even fancied that there were fewer traces of a female pen in it than in 'Jane Eyre'" (306). When the reviews insisted the pen was that of a woman, Brontë was as Gaskell puts it "much disappointed;" and, for certain, a bit toppled by the thought of an unwanted revelation.

The “outing” of Charlotte Brontë came at a heavy cost. George Henry Lewes, Victorian author and critic who contributed to such journals as the *Westminster Review*, and *The Leader*, claims to know Currer Bell’s secret and, in 1850, Currer Bell wrote to Lewes “I can be on guard against my enemies, but God deliver me from my friends” (*LCB*, vol. 2 330). Barker points out that Lewes’s treatment of Currer Bell was “a little short of disgraceful” (613). Considering Brontë’s relationship with Lewes, one which fed her need for intellectual discourse, the “outing” in the *Edinburgh Review*<sup>9</sup> appears especially cruel. Not only does Lewes reveal Currer’s likely location and parentage, the review also de-sexed Charlotte herself: “Currer Bell! if under your heart had ever stirred a child, if to your bosom a babe had ever been pressed...never could you have imagined such a falsehood as that!” (qtd. in Barker 614). Lewes calls forth Currer’s false sexual identity only to claim Charlotte does not contain the material fibers of woman. Charlotte’s writing is therefore false on two counts: it purports a masculine hand as its director and it speaks of feminine qualities to which the authoress has no real claim. Lewes’ review disqualifies Charlotte Brontë as a writer, author, and woman.

Interestingly, the *Edinburgh Review* appeared two months after Charlotte pleaded with Lewes to keep her secret and to continue to think of her as an author, not as a woman.

[...] my lot [is] to pass some black milestones in the journey of life: since then there have been intervals when I have ceased to care about literature and critics and fame—when I have lost sight of whatever was prominent in my thoughts at the first publication of *Jane Eyre*—but now I want these things to come back—vividly—if possible—consequently it was a pleasure to receive your note.

I wish you did not think me a woman: I wish all reviewers believed “Currer Bell” to be a man—they would be more just to him. You will—I know—keep measuring me

by some standard of what you deem becoming to my sex—where I am not what you consider graceful—you will condemn me.

[...] Come what will—I cannot when I write think always of myself—and of what is elegant and charming in femininity—it is not on those terms or with such ideas I ever took pen in hand; and if it is only on such terms my writings will be tolerated—I shall pass away from the public and trouble it no more. Out of obscurity I came—to obscurity I can easily return. (*LCB*, vol. 2 275)

Brontë begins this letter by expressing her intense desire to return to the publishing world and to the correspondences between herself and critics such as Lewes. She also makes it clear that if the mask of Currer Bell is lifted, readers would measure her texts as *feminine* and, therefore, place societal restrictions upon the content and style of the writing. Charlotte already experienced the damning consequences of having her sex used as a condition of review. During the first month of *Jane Eyre*'s public debut, an anonymous reviewer in the November 14, 1847 edition of *Era* extolled the virtues and depth of talent held by Currer Bell. The reviewer claimed “he has fertile invention, great power of description” and goes further to claim that no feminine hand could have produced *Jane Eyre*. The reviewer describes the power of Currer Bell's writing calling it “apt, eloquent, elegant” and that *Jane Eyre* has much to “ponder over, rejoice over, and weep over, in its ably-written pages.” Conversely, Elizabeth Rigby (later Lady Eastlake) reviewed the text in the *Quarterly Review*, December 1848.

[...] Even granting that these incongruities were purposely assumed, for the sake of disguising the female pen, there is nothing gained; for if we ascribe the book to woman at all, we have no alternative but to ascribe it to one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex.

Rigby takes aim at Brontë's womanhood claiming that no woman makes the mistakes in "her own *métier*—no woman *trusses game* and garnishes dessert-dishes with the same hands, or talks of doing so in the same breath." In stark contrast to the earlier review, Rigby, unsure of the author's sexual identity, calls forth the author as woman to only chastise her inability to perform as such. Rigby's criticism does not rest on sex alone, but also writes "and if by no woman, it is certainly also by no artist." Like Lewes, who two years later criticizes that author's sex and authorial abilities, Rigby denounces Currer Bell's authority on two plains: that of [her] own sex and that of authorship. As was always the case with Charlotte Brontë in dealing with her criticism, she answers *as* Currer Bell, for it is *he* who is insulted. Charlotte wrote a response to Rigby's "review" as a preface to *Shirley*. Smith, Elder & Co. refused to print this response as the preface to Currer Bell's newest work. George Smith believed it would do more harm than good. Brontë asserted "I cannot change my preface. I can shed no tears before the public, nor utter any groan in the public ear" and that "C. Brontë must not here appear; what she feels or has felt is not the question—it is 'Currer Bell' who was insulted—he must reply" (*LCB* vol. 2 245-6). In the end, George Smith refused to publish the preface and Brontë refused to write another. The unpublished preface has a stronger significance, however. It is in this piece of writing that Charlotte Brontë as a man (Currer Bell) criticizes an "Old Woman." He attacks Rigby's attention to gossip and attacks her feminine inclination toward the propagation of rumor: "Who manufactures fictions to supply their cravings? I need not ask who vends them: you, Madam, are an active saleswoman; the pages of your "Quarterly" form a notable advertising medium" (*LCB*, vol. 2 243). Brontë receives a great sense of satisfaction in returning the bite, which is perhaps why she fought so hard to keep it as the preface to *Shirley*.

Charlotte Brontë used writing as a way to “walk invisible”<sup>10</sup> and to house her powers of intellect behind a masculine screen. There they were safe and there they were powerful and respected. Brontë confided in Elizabeth Gaskell that

none but those who had been in the position of a governess could ever realize the dark side of ‘respectable’ human nature; under no great temptation to crime, but daily giving way to selfishness and ill-temper, till its conduct towards those dependent on it sometimes amounts to a tyranny of which one would rather be the victim than the inflicter. (Gaskell 129)

Writing as Currer Bell gave way to freedom. This freedom came as a release from the victimization offered by the role as a governess, and it positioned Charlotte, a woman during the early Victorian period, as the *inflicter*. The power she gained as an author so greatly altered her identity and selfhood that she understood the painful fall she would endure if Currer was outed. As the public insatiably tried to root out Currer Bell and to shine a light on the figure of the author as a “woman,” the author experienced a fear of revelation. The revelation may, perhaps place her back in the position of “victim” and, as readers well know, the reviews of *Jane Eyre* were quite harsh when written under a cloud of gender suspicion. How could Charlotte write as Charlotte? The writing that had been a “boon” taking her “out of dark and desolate reality to an unreal but happier region” (*LCB* vol. 2 241) was created under the influence of a masculine persona—in fact, a masculine alter identity. *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Villette*, and *The Professor* were the productions of one with “a vehement impatience of restraint & steady work” and a woman with a “strong wish for wings” (*LCB*, vol. 2 266). Currer Bell offered the opportunity for such flight. The public worked hard to castrate Currer Bell, to bring the authorial figure forth to show its feminine vestiges and deny its ability to write as an *author*. The revelation of Currer Bell as

Charlotte Brontë, in a psychoanalytic light, emulates the process of castration. Currer Bell feared the punishment by patriarchal power. Currer Bell experienced intense castration anxiety and took measures to protect his ability to fulfill his desire (to write). Castrated, Currer Bell is reduced to a feminine author expected to perform as the appropriate Victorian female.

The biographical experiences of castration Charlotte encountered as she entered the publishing arena were typical of the Victorian treatment of the *ideological* construction of femininity. Charlotte did not have to become Currer Bell in order to publish—women had been financially successful and socially popular as novel writers since the eighteenth century. But, Charlotte wanted to be judged not as a *woman*, but as an *author*. Popularity and financial success were not her aim but, rather, an entrance into the literary intelligentsia. Furthermore, writing had a particular and more important role in Charlotte Brontë's life: it allowed her to experience the process of castration, but with a twist—she could replace the public's hand as the castrator with her own, and she could wield the power and threat of castration in various directions. As a castrator, Charlotte is able to experience the thrill of *making* the cut while becoming the agent of her own lack. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the actual process of putting ink to the blank page is a process of castration (Barthes, *On Racine*, 119). Brontë makes the cut that formulates her own lacking identity. She makes the mark and inscribes the visual formulation of that mark on the text. The text becomes the material and, therefore, tangible representation of her self-initiated process of castration. *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* are the stories that envisage a feminine form as an active agent through castration. The writing process and its final published form is a process of authorial mutilation and erasure. The play between absence and presence motivates Brontë as it offers a way for her to experience castration under her own direction. The characters in the text undergo a mimetic process in that Jane and Lucy are the

“authors” of their narrative. In this structure, Jane and Lucy move through the text toward a liberated existence by castrating themselves and others in the text. The texts become a history of sorts: *The History of the Author's Castration*.

## II. Jane Eyre Makes the Cut for Sexual Liberation

*Jane Eyre* opens with a description of our narrator as a small child who has retreated into a window seat. Her isolation affords her a moment with *Bewick's History of British Birds* while being “shrined in double retirement” (64). Clearly stated in the first sentence of the text, the reader is aware of the autodiegetic structure of the narrative: “There was no possibility of taking a walk that day” (63). The first chapters outline the violent nature of Jane’s childhood—her body being the locus of brutal punishment by all members of the household. John Reed’s punishment is continual and “every nerve [Jane] had feared him, and every morsel of flesh in [her] bones shrank when he came near” (66). Her body becomes the center of all meaning. It is with reference to her body that Aunt Reed makes class and moral distinctions by describing Jane’s countenance. It is on the body that John Reed employs his art of mastery by surveillance and punishment. The body is the very material that calls forth identity and, therefore, it is here that Jane experiences the erasure of identity by the removal of the body. The members of the household continually put Jane’s body out of sight: Jane narrates:

Me, she had dispensed from joining the group; saying ‘She regretted to be under the necessity of keeping me at a distance; but that until she heard from Bessie and could discover by her own observation that I was endeavouring in good earnest to acquire a more social and childlike disposition [...] she really must exclude me from the privileges intended only for contented, happy, little children. (63)



The servants and children at Gateshead are engaged in the constant removal of Jane's body. But it is within this process of removal that Jane finds a sense of power and agency. Jane repeats this process during times when others focus on her body as a center for detection and surveillance in order to render judgment or assign punishment. At Thornfield Rochester entertains Blanche Ingram and other members outside of Jane's class. Jane, summoned to the party by a Rochester demand, retreats to a shady corner where "the window-curtain half hides me" (251). From the curtained window perch Jane can be the "gazer" and able to render judgment on those she watches while escaping their gaze by placing herself outside of it. Feminine subjectivity

turns upon the obligatory acknowledgement of three things which are fundamental to all subjectivity, but whose disavowal and projection serve in large part to define masculinity: castration, subordination to the gaze of the cultural Other, and what I have been calling "discursive interiority" (i.e., insertion into a preexisting symbolic order). (Silverman 149)

By placing herself outside of the gaze, Jane eschews one of the fundamental components of feminine subjectivity. As I will continue to argue, Jane averts the passive castration process by enacting it upon herself, which is another manner in which she prevents feminine subjectivity. Kaja Silverman's notion that the formulation of female subjectivity completes itself once the subject participates in "discursive interiority" works within this argument in that Jane uses the power of narration to not only insert herself into the symbolic order but to also displace the power of the phallus—a phallic power she relocates on her own body by creating a bi-gendered narrative.

In another example of when Jane removes her body so as to avoid the assignation of pain and judgment comes after her realization of Rochester's marital status. Jane claims "the more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself" (408)

and she flees Thornfield “with some fear—or hope—that here I should die: but I was soon up; crawling forwards on my hands and knees, and then again I raised to my feet—as eager and as determined as ever to reach to road” (413). Jane removes her body from the very place and person that would have made her the center of moral and lawful crimes. She weeps as she leaves her “master” and after lying on the ground “pressing [her] face to the wet turf” she scurries like an animal, even calling herself delirious. This passage illustrates Jane’s determination to not only remove her body from the purview of the gaze, but also to reduce the body to animal material—waste.

As a crawling, scratching, figure soiled by the turf, Jane reduces her body and, in doing so, castrates her own femininity. Furthermore, as John Kucich argues “in the struggles for power that saturate Brontë’s fiction, eroticized self-negation can be an effective instrument of mastery over others, as well as a sign of social authority, and not simply a submission” (39). Jane’s flight mimics this erotic self-negation. By reducing the body, Jane creates an image much like that of Bertha Mason, who is full of passion and unbridled sexual aggression. The removal of Jane’s body punishes Rochester (both figuratively and literally—Bertha lames Rochester and destroys Thornfield in a fire. But additionally, Rochester is unable to fulfill his erotic desire. Jane gains mastery over Rochester in that she creates a narrative pause in the story. Jane narrates the entire novel as the older wife of Rochester, so she could illuminate the audience to Rochester’s recuperative ending. However, she chooses to delay gratification, and Rochester’s story ceases to be the subject of the novel for close to the entire third volume. Using a sort of threat-narrative, Jane punishes Rochester by excising him from the text and delaying the ending of his story. Rochester is castrated by Jane’s (threat) narrative; however, his castration gives way to her own sexual liberation. The culmination of the novel reads quite differently than Rochester’s

usual verbosity and gallantry. Jane narrates the end of his story. He doesn't say a word. Jane's processes of self-castration resurrect the traditional reading of the story's culmination: Jane as a wife because of her economic liberation. Instead of a reading based on feminine happiness because of an elevation of class and marital status, Jane commands the ending of her narrative by castrating all competing voices and figures (Bertha, Rochester, St. John, Aunt Reed, and the Reed children).

Jane's narration evolves out of the speaker's desire to erase her body, for it is on the flesh that others can "punish her body to save her soul" (129). The most significant portion of the text in the development of Jane's desire to erase her body by self-castration reveals itself during the famous "red room" scene. Jane is "a discord in Gateshead-hall" and is a "useless thing, incapable of serving their interests, or adding to their pleasure; a noxious thing, cherishing the germs of indignation at their treatment, of contempt of their judgment" (73). The useless "thing" recognizes that her very presence—material existence—creates the tension in the home. Because she is a germ of discord, the Reeds punish her by locking her in the third-story "red room." This imprisonment leads to Jane's mental anxiety-induced loss of consciousness. Child Jane thinks she sees the reflection of her dead uncle's ghost, which produces the following reaction: "My heart beat thick, my head grew hot, a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings: something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down—I uttered a wild, involuntary cry—I rushed to the door and shook the lock in a desperate effort" (74). The older narrator Jane reminds the reader of her control over the story by telling the reader "I can now conjecture readily that this streak of light was, in all likelihood, a gleam from a lantern [...]" (74). This interjection illustrates the lengths the narrator goes to in order to maintain authorial control over her history. Most importantly, the moment of crisis brings the

narrative to the edge, the place where the cut is made into the chain of signification. Jane evolves from a “thing” of discord to a description of bodily machinery. This corporeal apparatus, placed outside of the household’s gaze and surveillance (and, therefore avoiding their judgment and punishment) reduces itself to the bare material essence. The red of the room symbolizes blood and the thick beating heart illustrates the visual portrait of a labored circulatory system. Her flesh dampens as her body temperature rises – a bodily function aimed at producing sweat to aid in the body’s regulation of internal temperature. The rushing of wings in the ear indicates an increase in heart rhythm as the feeling of suffocation implies the body’s desire to conserve air by restricting its over usage. Jane’s time in the red room instructs her in the fruitful process of bodily reduction. Jane describes her body in terms of systems and organizations and functions. As a body, a material body, Jane sees herself as an equal. She castrates femininity (she is not a little girl in the red room, but a body) in order to harness a drive toward eventual rebellion. Jane becomes a mere body (an organism of flesh, blood, systems, and regulatory functions); and, as a *body*, the rebellion can’t be quashed on the basis of sex or class. Aunt Reed and the Gateshead household can only quiet the body’s rebellion by removing it—by pacing it out of sight.

“Unjust!—Unjust!” cries Jane’s reason, which brings forth her new “Resolve,” a “transitory power [...] instigat[ing] some strange expedient to achieve escape from insupportable oppression” (72). As Ivan Kreilkamp argues in “Unuttered: Withheld Speech and Female Authorship in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*” Jane understands the impulse to cry out, but also understands the power of holding back and “remov[ing] the physical body from the scene of vocal excitement” (347). After the cataclysmic moment in the red room, Jane claims “*Speak* I must: I had been trodden on severely and *must* turn” (95). She proceeds with her vocal rebellion

towards the oppressors of Gateshead by telling Aunt Reed “I am not deceitful: if I were, I should say I loved *you*; but I declare, I do not love you: I dislike you the worst of anybody in the world except John Reed[...]

(95). The rebellious vocal body goes on to tell Aunt Reed that her children are liars and that she is

glad you are no relation of mine: I will never call you aunt again so long as I live. I will never come to see you when I am grown up; and if any one asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty. (95)

It is this rebellion that ensures Jane’s removal from Gateshead to Lowood. This textual erasure of Gateshead is another important component of Jane’s threat-narrative. Once Jane leaves Gateshead, the reader is left unaware of the continuance of this house. Jane returns to Gateshead once, to narrate the horrible death of her Aunt Reed and to serve a dish of sweet narrative revenge to the cousins. Jane narrates their social and mental declines, and the reader is told that the narrative will no longer refer to the Reeds again (326). Jane completes her narrative threat and powers of erasure by excising the Reeds from the text. Their narrative death liberates Jane and allows her to push her history forward without the Reeds as encumbrances.

Jane’s stint at the Lowood School resembles her ability to hold back. The Lowood section reveals a Jane that understands the power given to those who repress their passions and desires. This type of repression “actually heightens interior life libidinally, by disrupting it” (Kucich 23). Jane comes to realize the static and repetitive life offered by the school (as a student and as a teacher) does not permit the indulgence in passion, which leads to rebellion and growth. The narrative can only progress when Jane’s body *moves*. The narrative structure must liberate the body through the exercise of the passions in order to erase the body and repress the

passions. This exercise is extremely significant in the construction of a castration narrative. The constant telling of the story, the spilling out onto the page, as Barthes puts it, grants access to the textual space where narrator creates the body and encounters the body (and sexuality) only to castrate it.

The oscillation between the “regulated feelings [that] had become the inmates of my mind” and the “stirring of old emotions” and “impatient impulses” (150, 145) motivates Jane to further her story, which “is not to be a *regular* autobiography” (my emphasis 149). The prompting of Jane’s movement from Lowood to Thornfield arises out of her desire for liberty: “and now I felt that it was not enough: I tired of the routine of eight years in one afternoon. I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer” (151). But this liberty Jane cannot grasp (although, the older narrating Jane knows she will have liberty) and so, she “abandoned it, and framed a humbler supplication; for change, stimulus: that petition, too, seemed swept off into a vague space; ‘Then,’ I cried, half desperate, ‘Grant me at least a new servitude!’” (151). By narrating the interior monologue, Jane grants visual (readerly) access to the internal process of self-castration. The narrative structure must have the body move in order to further its agenda (the encountering of the body, the castration of the body, etc.). However, the narrative need not articulate Jane’s inner combat. The narrator knows Jane “wins” in the end, so the articulation of this inner tension must serve a greater purpose. Perhaps, as Shuttleworth explains

woman’s ‘mission’ is to try and suppress all mental life so that the self-regulating processes of her animal economy can proceed in peace. Female thought and passion, like government intervention in the Spencerian model of the economy, created blockages and interference, throwing the whole organism into a state of disease. (91)

If Victorian society programmed woman to suppress mental life as a way to foster the regulations of her physical body, then my argument that Jane creates a narrative in which she stimulates the interior through narrative articulation shows her aim to be a disruption of the orderly body. The interior split allows Jane to bring her interiority forward. The greater purpose is to give the interior form and to “[throw] the whole organism into a state of disease” or dis-ease. Jane’s interiority is no longer amorphous, it has a material existence because it is part of the text—it gains form through textual expression. In narrating the mental space, Jane threatens her own body with dis-ease. This is the project of self-castration: the creation of a bodily uneasiness or disruption.

In another moment of giving form to interior space, Jane reprimands herself:

“*You*,” I said, “a favourite with Mr. Rochester? *You* gifted with the power of pleasing him? *You* of importance to him in any way? Go! your folly sickens me. And you have derived pleasure from occasional tokens of preference—equivocal tokens, shown by a gentleman of family, and a man of the world, to a dependent and a novice. How dared you? Poor stupid dupe!” (237)

As in the quote I highlighted before, Jane uses direct quotations here. This indicates a *dialogue*. Jane gives form to interior space through articulation and through *voice*. Furthermore, the voice replicates the same judgments that Aunt Reed, her children, Mr. Brocklehurst, Blanche Ingram, or the Victorian reader might levy upon her. The narrative interior voice tells Jane to “cover your face and be ashamed” (237) and, in doing so, locates the source of her punishment on the body. In a simultaneous moment, the directive *you* calls forth Jane’s physical existence while attributing corporeal form to the inner voice. Jane’s narrative structure affords her the opportunity to split herself for the purpose of castrating herself. She makes the mark, feels the

pain, is subjected to judgment and the signifying chain by a voice she endows with power. Just like the oscillation between presence and absence of the body, the movement between inner and outer existence provides the tension required for self-castration. Jane becomes an agent of this castration because she narratively conjures the split.

*Jane Eyre* represents the textual production of a desire to narrate one's own castration. This narrative presents the author with a unique manner in which to experience castration through the writing process and to enact castration through the creation of characters that are themselves castrated by the author's direction. Brontë seems to understand that "power resides in the figure who can unveil the hidden secrets of the other whilst preserving the self unread" (Shuttleworth 10). As an author, Charlotte Brontë creates a world that, in its textual reproduction, becomes a *history* of female self-castration. It is within the text that the author finds the most pleasure in the cut. She can experience the trauma of her own lack at her own hand and, therefore be an agent of her own sexual development. Mary Jacobus in *Reading Woman* avers "there is no literal referent to start with, no identity or essence, the production of sexual difference can be viewed as textual, like the production of meaning" (4). So, if sexual difference can be or is a textual production, then the process of castration can also be viewed in this light. Jane is successful at the end of her narrative because she has maintained narrative voice and power. Her triumph lies in her ability to narrate a text that forces her to confront castration and take on the process as a mode toward sexual liberation. Jane hopes the castrative narrative opens the door to material signification—not sexual signification: "I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh:—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are" (338). Jane is the power behind her own narrative. The mortal



flesh of which she speaks is a medium governed by custom and conventionalities. She claims that her spirit *addresses* Rochester's. This address is a narrative, and by giving the spirit a narrative, by making it speak and by creating a textual reproduction of the exchange, Jane materializes it.

### III. Lucy Snowe and the Gothic Liberation from Sex

In a decisive move toward the erasure of sexual difference and the establishment of equality, Brontë's final novel *Villette* goes beyond the work she launched in *Jane Eyre*. Lucy Snowe's position as an autodiegetic narrator sets in motion a schism between author and narrator. Lucy's autobiography illustrates her clear and direct desire not only to narrate as a way to experience castration, but also to take on the role of the author altogether. Lucy Snowe instigates a forceful separation between herself and her creator. This autodiegetic schism reveals a larger field of play. Lucy, as if recognizing her position as a mere narrator, takes on the role of the author by breaking the writing process into components, which she uses to de-sex herself (a form of self-castration). Ultimately, the narrative experiment achieves its end in that it illustrates "the refusal to be *either* realistic *or* gothic, to write from the position of *either* a narrator *or* a character, is linked to a subversive impulse against a Victorian insistence on being *either* masculine *or* feminine, *either* male-identified *or* female-identified in life and in writing" (Warhol 871).

Charlotte Brontë is no stranger to gothic literature. Readers easily find gothic elements in all of her works – especially *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. However, Charlotte Brontë's most lasting protagonists, Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, have two completely different relationships with the gothic genre. Whereas Jane confronts external gothic structures in order to move beyond them

(through self-initiated castration) and construct a liberated sexual existence, Lucy Snowe *creates* gothic elements in order to erase her feminine identity – her sexual body. Matthew Arnold responded to Lucy Snowe’s character by calling her a being full of “hunger, rage, and rebellion.” Of course, Arnold did not mean to be complimentary; he in no way meant to interpret Lucy as a rebellious “feminist” character. But since Arnold, critics have looked to Lucy as a character who fights to find a center in a period when “surplus women” posed a major concern. Lucy’s fight for center through employment is certainly a key issue; however, in contrast to many critical readings of this text, I argue Lucy enacts a process of self-castration.

The gothic elements that haunt Brontë’s protagonist in *Jane Eyre* resurface in *Villette*, but the latter shows a clear movement away from the gothic as a genre to the gothic as a *mode*. Whereas typical feminine characters in gothic novels *encounter* ghosts, storms, isolation, and displacement, Lucy *creates* them as a way to narrate her autobiography. Her willingness to employ gothic modes provides the ability to transcend national, architectural, sexual, and medical limitations. These confines work only when she is the feminine subject. As the narrator, Lucy takes the active step to make the familiar forms of narration, storytelling, and writing unfamiliar. This defamiliarization allows the narrator to avoid being made the feminine *subject* of her text. The process is akin to a queering: *queer* as a critical term, “refers to writing that question generally accepted associations and identities involving sex, gender and sexuality” and the term can be “used to refer to sexual relations [...] that a person engages in without reproductive aims and without regard for social or economic considerations” (Murfin and Ray 386). Lucy Snowe has a sexual relationship with her textual production. The textual production is not one she “births” in the traditional sense but, rather, a process of reproduction in which the fruit of her labors is that of a strange, almost unrecognizable being. By using the gothic as a

mode, Lucy can engage the text through seduction. This symbiotic relationship permits Lucy's *play* with the gothic genre and her ability to employ the gothic as a mode. It is within this play that Lucy both reveals and conceals her sexual desires in order to shape her *self* as a non-sexed being. Lucy's active queering of the gothic allows her the authority to rewrite her body as androgynous matter and, therefore, give M. Paul, Madame Beck, and Dr. John nothing to look at, nothing to survey, and nothing to diagnose. Employing the gothic as a mode in her own autobiographical narrative, Lucy initiates an erasure of her sexual body through the construction of her textual one.

In chapter twenty seven, a full two thirds through the novel, Ginevra Fanshawe asks: "Who *are* you, Miss Snowe? Are you anybody?" These two questions elicit a response that illustrates Lucy's intent focus on crafting her autobiography; she answers: "Yes, I am a rising character: once an old lady's companion, then a nursery governess, now a school teacher" (296). She describes herself as a character: not a rising individual, an emerging professional, or a budding woman – but a *character*. This rising character, the assignation given by the narrator in reference to herself, is quite different from *Jane Eyre*. Jane would have never classified herself as such. Jane's desire for autonomy would have never allowed for this alignment with characterization – as Jane harnessed power through being a creator of material production. Lucy, on the other hand, revels in the opportunity to be both the creator and the character. This classification late in the text has important implications when applied to the early part of the text as well. In the beginning of the novel, the reader is confronted with an unidentifiable narrator. The first information confirming the narrator's identity comes in the second chapter when this guiding voice claims "I, Lucy Snowe, plead guiltless of that curse, an overheated and discursive imagination" (9). The reader becomes aware of the name attached to the voice while also

gaining pertinent information: the narrator disassociates herself from an overheated and discursive imagination. Lucy may not suffer from this “curse” as she calls it; but she seeks it out through her narrative implementation of gothic modes.

*Villette*’s narrator begins the novel with a jarring reminder to the reader: as if to say “I, Lucy Snowe, am the writer of my body. I am the creator of my textual existence.” There are numerous examples of Miss Snowe’s Bakhtinian “master-voice.” She often writes her true feelings and then calls on the reader to “cancel the whole of that” bit of information and “picture me then idle, basking, plump, and happy, stretched on a cushioned deck, warmed with constant sunshine, rocked by breezes indolently soft” (31). The stark contrast between what Lucy originally conveys to what she orders the reader to forget and then replace with scenes inconsistent with her actual existence illustrates her consciousness of the process of narration. One may ask, why would she narrate an image she would later wish erased? Lucy identifies with the process of narration – she gains power from it. It is her will to power. The act of writing and then rewriting or redirecting demonstrates the enormous authority one gains from narration. Some critics interpret Lucy’s absence of familial history as a process of her own forgetting. Contrastingly, I see her lack of family history and her failure to tell the reader she knew of Dr. John as John Graham from her childhood days at Bretton as a purposeful manipulation of the text for her own narrative gain. One of the key moments in the book that provides an example for this line of reasoning comes in the infamous *Vashti* chapter. After receiving the desired correspondence from Dr. Bretton, Lucy first recognizes the reader’s desire to know “how [she] answered these letters: whether under the dry, stinting check of Reason, or according to the full, liberal impulse of Feeling” (243). She then proceeds to elucidate a tenuous fight between Feeling and Reason:

Feeling and I turned Reason out of doors, drew against her bar and bolt, then we sat down, spread our paper dipped in the ink an eager pen, and with deep enjoyment poured out our sincere heart. (243)

She covers two full pages with “strongly-ardent affection” that reveals a “closely-clinging and deeply honouring attachment” (243). And in spite of the fact that she does not give these letters up to the reader’s perusal, it is clear that her passionate moment found a medium of expression. However, like the prohibition she places on the reader’s eyes, she also excludes her addressee:

Then, just at that moment, the doors of my heart would shake, bolt and bar would yield, Reason would leap in, vigorous and revengeful, snatch the full sheets, read, sneer, erase, tear up, rewrite, fold, seal, direct, and send a terse, curt missive of a page. She did right. (243)

This fight between Reason and Feeling, which she later terms Imagination, highlights two main points: the first being that her process of narration includes and then systematically excludes the information (however scant or ambiguous) pertinent to the development of her sexual character. Secondly, she encounters this burgeoning sexuality through an employment of gothic modes. She locks herself away; she steals a moment from the eyes of surveillance, and in her anxious isolation engages in a semi-violent confrontation with two mighty internal foes. Her initial desire to be led by Feeling – to be guided by the hand of passion – to be a gothic heroine – gives way to her desire to erase her sexual body. Conflating these two points, it is clear that Lucy initiates the erasure of her sexual body through the process of her textual existence: her process of narration.

The narrator makes a conscious effort to describe her encounters with internal passion in gothic terms. She clearly wishes to excise romantic terminology out of her narration. She claims

Pere Silas' story could have done without the romanticism, but that the brewing storm that drove her into his parlor helped to carry the story along. Furthermore, Lucy claims the garden – a location where Lucy encounters the Nun for the second time – appeared to her “independently of romantic rubbish” and that she liked to “rise early, to enjoy [it] alone; on summer evenings, to linger solitary, to keep tryste with the rising moon, or taste one kiss of the evening breeze” (100). The solitariness of the garden walks entices her and at “first she was tempted to make an exception to this rule of avoidance: the seclusion, the very gloom of the walk attracted [her].” Gloomy seclusion used to scare her; but once she figures out how to use gothic modes to encounter and understand her sexual desires the garden could no more be “parted with than my identity – by slow degrees I became a frequenter of this strait and narrow path” (101). Of course, the references to threatening external nature appear much earlier in the novel. In fact, her gothic inspiration comes from the haunting mystery of the Aurora Borealis:

[...] I should have trembled in that lonely walk, which lay through still fields, and passed neither village nor farm-house, not cottage; I should have quailed in the absence of moonlight, for it was by the leading of the stars only I traced the dim path; I should have quailed still more in the unwonted presence of that which to-night shone in the north, a moving mystery – the Aurora Borealis. But this solemn stranger influenced me other wise than through my fears. Some new power it seemed to bring. I drew in energy with the keen, low breeze that blew on its path. A bold thought was sent to my mind; my mind was made strong to receive it. (39)

Reason tells Lucy that she should tremble and quail, but her solitary existence in fields far from villages and farmhouses without the aid of moonlight does not make her shake but, rather, influences her and brings a bold thought to her mind. Lucy recognizes the power of the gothic,

and internalizes this power. This bold thought is to thrust her body outside of her national home. The bold thought, brought on from gothic reasoning, allows her to transcend national boundaries and escape her financial destitution. Once in Villette, she later uses the power presented by the gothic by employing gothic modes into her narration in order to reduce and finally eliminate her sexual identity.

The most prominent link between Lucy's experiencing her sexual body through the insertion of gothic modes into her narration comes in the ghostly form of the Nun. The nun exudes gothic elements: she is a ghostly form arising out of a folkloric tale. Those in the town often speak of the Nun haunting the garden and Madame Beck's school. According to Gilbert and Gubar's essay: "The Buried Life of Lucy Snowe", the ghostly figure "appears to Lucy on five separate occasions, at moments of great passion, when she is an actor in her own life. The apparition embodies her anxiety not only about the imagination and passion, but about her very right to exist" (Gilbert and Gubar 425). While I agree that Lucy's encounters with the Nun appear to coincide with moments of great passion and that these encounters symbolize Lucy's anxiety over her right to exist, I am not so sure the apparition she visions rises out of the passion she subsequently experiences. My argument here is that Lucy *conjured* the Nun in order to experience her sexual feelings as part of the gothic narration. To be clear, it seems to me that Lucy's desire to ingest John's epistle can only find a true passionate release or a clear connection to her sexuality when she reads it under the strain of gothic hauntings and hallucinations. Upon receiving his first letter, she narrates: "I held in my hand a morsel of real solid joy: not a dream, not an image of the brain, not one of those shadowy chances imagination pictures [...]" but a tangible representation of sexual gratification. If Lucy were to have read the letters plainly, without excitement, she would have understood them as she later understands her relationship

with John – as a diagnostic interest, a desire to chase the nun out of Lucy’s “diseased head.” Therefore, Lucy *conjured* the nun. She sees what does not exist. She brings the nun into the garret, into the garden, into her room when she needs ignition for her buried sexuality. Maureen Peeck asserts Lucy “could easily have proved the apparition false, but she is more inclined to accept its validity as a supernatural visitation” (224). Her narration ignores the obvious for effect; Lucy, as the writer of her textual and sexual exploration, employs a gothic mode. The narrator does not clue the reader into the falsity of the nun until the third to last chapter. Lucy as the creator of her textual existence realizes the importance of the nun – albeit a Fanshawe wooer in disguise – in order to fully explore and express her sexual desires and passionate impulses. Lucy’s nun is a necessary figment and a conduit that channels her sexual energy. Lucy’s ability to encounter her sexuality in this manner also enables her to choose the place, time, manner, and frequency of her sexual experiences. This is the same rising character who pleaded guiltless to having an overheated and discursive imagination. However, Lucy’s role as narrator and constructor of her textual being claims authority over how she encounters herself.

Lucy’s use of the gothic to encounter sexuality inevitably leads to the complete erasure of her feminine body. M. Paul, Madame Beck, and Dr. John all enact a type of surveillance and diagnosis in order to classify Lucy as a feminine subject. M. Paul’s knowledge of physiognomy allows him to survey the English stranger. Lucy recounts this episode by narrating: “The little man fixed on me his spectacles. A resolute compression of the lips, and gathering of the brow, seemed to say that he meant to see through me, and that a veil would be no veil for him (61). Madame Beck’s constant acts of espionage render Lucy a subject of surveillance. This surveillance invades Lucy’s private things and initially reduces her to an object of curiosity. Later, Madame Beck’s surveillance reduces her to a threat – a feminine threat and object that



means to take M. Paul from Madame Beck's equation of financial security. Finally, Dr. John means to diagnose Lucy and her nervous inclinations. His letters attempt to calm her mind and drive the Nun out of her passionate head. Lucy's femininity allows access to Dr. John's medical discourse. In each of these relationships, Lucy uses gothic modes to eliminate her subjugated position by erasing her feminine body.

During the evening excursion to watch the infamous Vashti perform, Lucy realizes Dr. John can only view women with "intense curiosity." She notices that Vashti's "agony did not pain him, her wild moan –worse than a shriek – did not much move him" (249). However, Lucy views Vashti as a "marvelous sight: a mighty revelation" (247). Lucy finds comfort in Vashti's androgynous being. She is attracted to the power of *matter*. Lucy's narration describes Vashti as mighty brawn, muscle, abounding blood, and full-fed flesh. Furthermore, Lucy calls the actress demoniac, with "hate and murder and madness incarnate" driving the character to transform what hurts into an object that can be "attacked, worried down, [and] torn in shreds" (247). This revelation is much like the revelation contained in the Aurora Borealis in that Lucy internalizes the gothic and then queers it in order to implement gothic horror, terror, isolation, anxiety, and passion upon her own body. Lucy is saddened that Dr. John judged Vashti as a woman; she claims it "was a branding judgment" (249). But in seeing another put under the medical microscope of curiosity, she realizes she must act, she must violently attack the very sexual connection between herself and Dr. John. Lucy buries the Dr. John letters. This event is accompanied by her second and most physical encounter with the Nun. In narrating the burial in terms of the gothic enterprise, Lucy is able to encounter and then extinguish the most tangible expression of her sexual identity. She buries it deep where it can remain untouched. She conjures the nun in order to feel the appropriate emotions of sexual loss and unfulfilled

jouissance. But in burying the letter through a narrative employment of gothic modes, Lucy effectively erases and de-centers her feminine body. She escapes medical diagnosis upon her feminine body through the burial of tangible morsels of her one-sided sexual attachment.

The end of *Villette* has always puzzled readers. Is M. Paul dead? Will he come back to Lucy and fulfill his promise to marry her? Both Lucy and M. Paul declare their love and make plans for their life together – a life to start after her returns from Central America. Waiting for his return, Lucy is an emblem of the angel in the house: she says “my school flourishes, my house is ready; I have made him a little library, filled its shelves [...] and cultivated out of love for him the plants he preferred...”(474). Lucy is a desexualized angel of the house, made even more so by the mystery surrounding her husband-to-be’s return. As the non-sexed keeper of the house, Lucy constructs her ending narration with the gothic element of mystery and the gothic play between absence and presence. She presents the reader with an ever continuing delay of marital and sexual jouissance. In doing so, Lucy is able to employ the gothic to again avert sexual existence. She is able to remain asexual and the narrator of her own feminine castration, and in doing so she gains an ownership over her school and her house and her narration’s always absent ending.

Charlotte Brontë uses the writing process as a way to experience castration. In a similar fashion to reading Southey’s castrative letter again and again, Brontë creates a history of her self-castration so that it can remain the visible, tangible, and material exemplum of her power and agency. Brontë uses the function of language to make the mark upon a textual body. This mark opens the field of signification and allows her to narrate her desire to subject her body to the traumatic experience. Writing equals castration, and since Brontë engages in the process of her own accord, she becomes the agent of her own castration.

Brontë's characters, Jane and Lucy, emulate this desire for self castration. In doing so, their narrative structure develops out of an intense need to use the process of castration to gain agency over their textual productions. Brontë uses the text as a way to experience the pain castration carries from a distance; however, her characters immerse themselves in the process and, therefore, make it a constitutive part of their subjectivity. Self-initiated castration becomes the way Charlotte Brontë circumvents the medical, social, economical, and cultural obstacles that stand in the way of her knowing and owning her own body. In reading these texts as the material formulation of the sexual body, I argue we can see the literature as an example of the method toward sexual liberation, in Jane's case, and liberation from sex in Lucy's.

## Chapter Two

### *Dirty Little Secrets: George Eliot's Fictional Body and Bodies of Fiction*

Of those immortal read who live again  
 in minds made better by her presence  
 Here lies the Body  
 Of  
 George Eliot  
 Mary Ann Cross,  
 Born 22, November 1819  
 Died 22, December 1880

The text on Mary Ann Cross's headstone points to the author's most lasting accomplishment: being George Eliot. Interestingly, the engraving signifies to all those who search and find the marker that here, in this very spot, lies the *body* of *George Eliot*. Most importantly, the headstone does not refer to her as Marian Evans or Marian Lewes. "Mary Ann Cross" essentially obliterates the connection between the author and her pseudonym. The headstone brings together two parts of the author's life that are mainly unrelated. The connection between Marian Evans/Lewes and George Eliot is most poignant; and, "Mary Ann Cross" chronicles a life after Lewes and a life after George Eliot. What Mary Ann Cross does signify is a return to her given name combined with a legal last name. However, it was the change in her first name and the illegal married name of Lewes that prompted, in a large part, the need for George Eliot.

Of course, George Eliot was a creation of Marian Lewes. Despite the fiction, George Eliot had a real presence in that he was imagined to be the body behind the work. Editors, reviewers, readers, and critics all corresponded with George Eliot and imagined him to be tall or short, round or slim, youthful or aged. The figure of this "man" loomed over conversations at

dinner tables, pub tables, and garden parties. Historically, “he” existed. The critical reviews, letters, publications, and documents bearing his name point to a *person*, a *body*. George Eliot’s fictional body and bodies of fiction have an influence on literary history. For instance, although both women used pseudonyms, why do we read books by Charlotte Brontë, but not by Marian Lewes? George Eliot’s body comes at the high price of Marian’s female body. George Eliot’s body provides the proof of an erasure. It is the trace of the female body – the present result of a process of annihilation.

George Eliot is both a presence and an absence. The birth of George Eliot made possible Marian Lewes’s literary career because it provided her the opportunity to develop and live within an erotic secret. Marian’s secret, George Eliot, enabled levels of fictional and present gratification. As a man, Eliot posed as a masculine authority and created narrators who ruled over the text through their implementation of the female gaze. Her secret (George Eliot) allowed Marian access to the developing discourse, reflected in the literature of the time period, on the domestic sphere and on the feminine body. As a man, Marian was able to conduct surveillance – not just in her fiction, but in the developing enterprise of novel criticism. More concretely, the secret provided refuge from critical and popular tongue lashings while simultaneously enabling the author to direct tongue lashings at others. The secret, therefore, is erotic, in that the one who maintains the secret experiences gratification (and, in Marian’s case, a sort of sexual gratification) in the creation and execution of it. The secret is also erotic because in order to eschew bodily limitations, Marian must enact a process of self-castration, whereby she offers her sex as a sacrifice to make way for the birth of George Eliot. Furthermore, the secret, an unuttered utterance, is in constant danger of revelation. This revelation unmasks George as Marian and then ties her writing to a woman with a reputation for lascivious sexual behavior. As

the creator of the secret and the one who must also guard its existence, Marian participates in a continual oscillation between reality and fiction. While wanting to safeguard the thing that enables Marian to participate in the philosophical, scientific, and literary movements of the nineteenth century, Marian also desires its undoing. The desire to denude George Eliot in order to reveal Marian Evans is highly erotic. The denuded George Eliot would reveal, indeed, the body of Marian Evans. The secret cloaks the feminine form (freeing it from the proscribed notions of Victorian femininity), but also threatens to erase it entirely. The erasure of the feminine body is a process of self-castration that grants Marian access to the vault of illicit desires that are allowable to her male counterparts, but not to Victorian women (fame, sexual expression, gender transgressions, etc.) Marian's dependence on the erotic secrets finds expression in her writing process and her powerful product.

In addition to the erotic secret, Marian's pseudonymity permitted the construction of a new narrative structure, which enabled Eliot's fiction to play with gender and class boundaries. Marian Lewes uses the process of self-castration as a way to build a second self, who in turn creates feminine characters who use violence (violence toward the self and toward other female characters), absence, and negation as a way to survive within the text. George Eliot is able to shape the developing discourses on sexuality, femininity, and power – it is a way for Marian to obtain the power of the phallus. The pseudonym grants access to masculine power while simultaneously illuminating that which Marian tries to make absent – her femininity. Her authorship necessitates the physical and linguistic shifts between pleasure and pain, absence and presence, and concealing and revealing. Marian's castration narratives exhibit a desire to be an agent of her own castration by transferring the process on to her textual creations.

The “body” of George Eliot, as indicated by the headstone, represents a tangible fiction – George Eliot exists between the space of the present and the absent. With the ethos of masculinity behind her, Marian can participate in the male-dominated literary, philosophical, scientific, and critical communities. As an active member of these communities, Marian can enter into and mark upon the developing Victorian discourses on femininity, sexuality, the middle class, and authority. However liberating this inclusion may seem, George Eliot simultaneously served as a reminder of Marian’s biological limitations while allowing her to rise above them. The process of self-castration enables Marian to relive the castrative moments while enacting castration on the text, its characters, and its readers. The agency granted by the self-castration process is fundamental to her textual creations, which, ironically, endlessly reproduces it.

This chapter will investigate the layered castration process crucial to Marian Lewes’s literary production. At the first level, Marian creates George Eliot and is therefore able to manage her literary career through a male mediator. Marian’s arrival at the door of fiction occurs only after the development of her pseudonym, which highlights the necessity of the masculine ethos during the Victorian period. The first layer of castration also allows Marian an opportunity to engage in the aesthetic discussions concerning art and the critical development of novel writing. George Eliot erases femininity in order to grant Marian Lewes power. The second layer of Marian Lewes’s castration process develops from her involvement in what I term the “erotic secret.” While the need for the secret motivates her fierce protection of George Eliot, Marian participates in the pleasure gained by a continual oscillation between concealing and revealing her identity. This continual shift between a desire to conceal and a competing desire to undress

allows the author to reenact the process of self-castration and to re-experience the pain of castration while simultaneously experiencing the pleasure in making the cut.

The third layer of Marian Lewes's castration process involves the harnessing of power—a power she obtains through the self-castration. As a disfigured feminine body and a refigured male identity, Marian can impose castration upon the characters in her textual productions. As the author/god, Marian uses the guise of George Eliot to experience the pleasure and power residing in castrating others. Marian creates women she can castrate and women who become self-castrators. In doing this, she harnesses the male power to enact castration while also offering her characters a way to survive in the text as self-castrators. The entire process of Marian's self-castration can be schematized in the following manner: Marian creates George Eliot in order to conceal her femininity and participate in the critical, philosophical, scientific, and literary communities. As George Eliot, Marian's fiction exhibits a clear desire to harness masculine power and enter the developing discourse on femininity, sexuality, and authority. The male pseudonym operates as a double-edged sword in that it reminds Marian of her biological limitations while simultaneously allowing her to circumvent them. As a cross-dressing figure, Marian continually employs the experiences of pleasure and pain, absence and presence, and concealing and revealing in order to relive the castrative moments and inflict castration on the text, the reader, and the characters. As an agent of her own castration, she permits herself a mastery over the castration experiences of her textual creations.



## I. George Eliot's "Come to Fiction" Moment

We should aim to be like plants in the chamber of sickness, dispensing purifying air even in a region that turns all pale its verdure and cramps its instinctive propensity to expand...(qtd. in Haight 15-16)

Written in a letter to Maria Lewis sixteen years before the birth of George Eliot, this quotation exemplifies Marian's intense desire to be part of an intellectual and moral awakening. Marian could never have foreseen how her early desire would be put to the test and how her role as a fiction writer would grant her access to purify the air breathed by a public who worked to cramp her "instinctive propensity to expand." Marian Lewes's "come to fiction" moment in 1856 occurred as a result of necessity and desire. The embers of necessity and desire were stoked and fiercely protected by George Henry Lewes.

Marian Lewes's arrival as a fiction writer was precipitated by her years as an anonymous reviewer with Chapman and the *Westminster Review* and other magazines. The work was not always steady, and certainly not always satisfying. However, the years of reading and reviewing literary works prepared Marian for the task of creating her own fiction style. As her reviews illustrate, the burgeoning author knew what she didn't like about novel writing. She clearly advocates a new style of fiction in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists." The essay, written in 1856, the same year "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton" appeared in *Blackwood's*, chastises the efforts made by female authors who write for vanity and from idleness. In the essay, Evans defines the female as an artist. She must exhibit "patient diligence, a sense of responsibility involved in publication, and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer's art" in order to reach literary excellence (319). Of course, the anonymous writer in the *Westminster Review* could safely criticize women writers without a fear of punishment. The distance afforded

by her anonymity gave her the space to work through the creation of her own style of writing – a writing that might transcend gender boundaries and be welcomed in the critical landscape as writing written by an *artist*, not by a woman.

“Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” also reveals Evans’s critique of the novel form, which shows her interest in becoming part of the developing conversation of writing as art. Carlyle, George Henry Lewes, John Chapman, and Herbert Spencer were all supporters of the novel as an artistic form. Marian Evans was initially less convinced. To this critic, the novel form provided the very means for *mind-and-millinery*, *oracular*, and the *white-neck-cloth* species of feminine writing, writing she sees as frivolous, didactic, and moralistic. Furthermore, the novel was a dangerous genre in that it lacked a consistent and specific format. Evans viewed art as consisting an “absolute *technique*” safe from “the instructions of mere left-handed imbecility.” She goes on to define the novel as a genre with “no barriers for incapacity to stumble against, no external criteria to prevent a writer from mistaking foolish facility for mastery” (320). It is clear that Marian Evans understood writing as a process that worked continually toward mastery. The novel’s fluid technique only invited the writing she most abhorred. She was not interested in adding to the large and growing “heap” of books, as she refers to it in several letters. There is a glimmer of hope, however. Even though it is “precisely this absence of rigid requirements which constitutes the fatal seduction of novel-writing to incompetent women,” the novel is “like crystalline masses, it may take any form, and yet be beautiful; we have only to pour in the right elements—genuine observation, humour, and passion” (320). The possibility exists that this form of writing would allow for the creation and expression of George Eliot’s realism and would permit Marian Lewes access to the literary field that was becoming more focused on the discussion of social, sexual, and philosophical queries.

The critical writings Marian produced for the *Westminster Review* and (occasionally) for *The Leader* not only enabled her to support herself and her dependents (the Lewes children, his wife, and his wife's children by Thorton Hunt), it also allowed her to hone her writing technique. Marian worked several projects simultaneously, including translations of Spinoza<sup>11</sup>, author of the 'Belles Lettres' section of the *Westminster Review*, and submitting articles to *Fraser's* and other popular periodicals.

While the periodical press satisfied her financial needs, it did not satiate her desire to contribute something of greater worth. Periodical publishing "provided new opportunities for middle-class writers" but it also, according to critics, "resulted in an overall decline in the quality of literature" (Easley 15). The quality of literature suffers at the hands of overproduction. Additionally, the short pieces authored by novices for monetary compensation flooded the market place with literature devoid of attention to aesthetics. The birth of George Eliot coincides with the growing debate on fiction during the mid-Victorian period. Thomas Carlyle was the first to champion reform and he aimed "to reestablish a sense of ethical responsibility in the literary marketplace, thereby reinstilling moral values in the process of literary production" (Easley 16). The notion of art as having a moral instruction was not new, but Carlyle insisted that fiction, specifically, should benefit society as a whole. John Chapman pushed for reform in fiction as well. In the early fifties he "suggested that Lewes should write an article which would 'erect a standard of Criticism whereby to judge [novels] with a view of elevating the productions of Novelists as works of Art and as refining and moral influences. If more were claimed from the Novelist the best of them would accord more'" (Dodd 272). Marian's work with Chapman on the *Westminster Review* placed her in the midst of this great revolution. Her work among *men* granted access to a critical and literary intelligentsia that was not open to many other women

authors of the time period. When she argues for the instruction of women in “Silly Novels” and when she claims “the most mischievous form of feminine silliness is the literary form, because it tends to confirm the popular prejudice against the more solid education of women” (311) what she alludes to is the transference of standards of femininity in to the language of criticism of female writing. While her editorship produced articles such as the 1853 publication of “Fiction as Art,” her female contemporaries were receiving a high-level of recognition (albeit not critically superior recognition) in the same periodicals for their “Silly Novels.” Marian was part of the (masculine) literary movement. Like a back-stage pass, her life among men granted a prized position as an artist—one that ignored her gender and allowed her to enter the critical landscape as one of them. The erotic secret kept alive her ability to mingle among men (through her fiction) as a man – a woman in men’s clothing. Marian can be both the one who makes the cut (the castrator) while, in actuality, the one who experiences the cut (the castrated). The secret gives her access to the knife (the pen), which mitigates the pain of castration in that it grants her the power to make the mark, to mark on the page, to create a world in her fiction where she can be both castrating male and castrated female.

As the anonymous critic in the periodical press and as a member of the “boys’ club,” Marian’s critical notions on fiction and art grew from a masculine mind. At this time, women’s writing was only useful when it “depicted the morals and manners of middle-class domesticity”; and, when women wrote on “conventionally masculine subjects such as politics, economics, and social policy [they] problematized the definition of feminine writing” (Easley 24). With her own abhorrence of lady novelists and with the critical castigation of women’s writing by male reviewers, Marian could not arrive at the door of fiction as a woman. Her scandalous private living situation barred her from taking a position of moral authority, which was a position most

needed and called for during this time of literary revolution. Additionally, Marian understood the great power that lay behind the masculine voice. Fiction writing would afford her the greatest opportunity to fulfill her life's "preparation for some special work that [she] may do before [she] dies" (Haight 173). In *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans*, Rosemarie Bodenheimer suggests this special work, the work of fiction, could redeem womankind as well (161). This project of hers could not bear the personal and critical scrutiny if the "special work" were tagged with her name. But instead of anonymity, Marian Evans experiences the pleasure in the cut of self-castration: George Eliot becomes an author and an invisible yet present body.

When Marian Lewes put pen to paper to begin "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton" her understanding of fiction as art had been solidly constructed by years of critically analyzing the works of others. With anonymous publication in mind, she set out to unveil her powers of description, dialogue, and sympathy. In "How I Came to Write Fiction" Marian describes Lewes's encouragement to "try the experiment" (323). The essay also documents Lewes's supportive words and high praise of Marian's ability to "command pathos" (324). Additionally, the essay details Marian's first interactions with her publisher, John Blackwood. The relationship that begins in 1856 provides the cornerstone to the discussion of Marian Evans and her creation of George Eliot.

On February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1857, George Eliot introduces himself to his editors. In a letter to Major William Blackwood, he writes:

Whatever may be the success of my stories, I shall be resolute in preserving my incognito, having observed that a *nom de plume* secures all the advantages without the disagreeables of reputation. Perhaps, therefore, it will be well to give

you my prospective name ... and accordingly I subscribe myself, best and most  
sympathizing of editors,

Yours very truly,

George Eliot (*Letters*, 2:292)

From the moment George Eliot steps on to the public stage, he is in constant peril of revelation. Marian Evans, George Henry Lewes, and John Blackwood go to the utmost extremes to keep the fiction of Eliot alive and well. The production of Eliot's novels rises out of the complex triangular relationship among Lewes, Blackwood, and Marian/George Eliot – lover, publisher, and cross-dressing author. While the appearance of the relationship remained, in the beginning, a process of negotiation between three men, the reality presented something wholly different. The triangulation depended upon a secret and, once revealed to all members of the relationship, the secret had to continue. All participants in this triangular relationship understood the danger that lay in exposing the woman behind the fiction. Eliot wants to keep the incognito status as long as possible for he understands “anonymity is the highest *prestige*” for an unknown author. He insists if “George Eliot turns out to be a dull dog and an ineffective writer—a mere flash in the pan—I, for one, am determined to cut him on the first intimation of that disagreeable fact” (Haight 165). But more than the fear that Eliot would be a dull dog or a Victorian equivalent to the one-hit-wonder, the life of Eliot must be preserved in order to let the purpose of his fiction survive. If revealed, the unsavory details of Marian Lewes's elopement, illegal marriage, and reported sexual appetite would threaten the newly established aim of Victorian fiction and would thrust Marian's sexual life and body into the forefront. She would no longer be part of the literary revolution, but rather a casualty of her female body and sexual deviancy. She would, in fact, be another silly lady writing novels. This first layer of self-castration is key for Marian in

that it allows her to erase her sexual body in order to experiment with the pleasure of power and authority.

The triangular relationship (Lewes, Eliot, and Blackwood) further illustrates the need for George Eliot. The cut of castration provides Marian an opportunity to *play* with gender and cross-dressing. She is both Lewes's lover and male friend (Lewes's introduces Eliot as his friend when first contacting Blackwood). She is simultaneously the female and male author. A day in the life of Marian Lewes reflects a continual oscillation between her masculine and feminine identities. As Bodenheimer's catalogue of the writer's various signatures shows<sup>12</sup>, she may wake up as Marian Lewes, write to her brother as Marian Evans, correspond with her friends as Marian Evans Lewes, but she will create fiction as George Eliot, read critical reviews as George Eliot, correspond with fellow authors as George Eliot, and deal with John Blackwood as George Eliot. This constant shifting required Marian be adept at the process of self-castration, in that she had to place her body under strict surveillance. In addition to the self-surveillance, the regulations of Victorian society subjected Marian's sexuality to societal surveillance. Her sexual life, especially the relationships with Chapman, Spencer, and Lewes, became a marker of her tainted feminine identity.

For example, after the news of her "elopement" with Lewes reached the ears of their London friends, John Chapman, in an attempt to shed a kinder light on George Henry Lewes, enters into a discussion with Robert Chambers on Marian's fierce sexual appetite. He tells chambers that Marian had made overt sexual advances toward him. He later tries to assuage the damage this attack may have on his friend and co-worker by requesting Chambers keep the conversation private because he "only dropped the word [...] because [he] felt that Lewes was not as [Chambers] imagined almost alone to blame" (*Letters*, 8: 125-6). Furthermore, George

Combe<sup>13</sup> “was mortified to think that the woman whose skull he had pronounced perfect turned out to have a character which made a monkey out of phrenology, not to mention his own reputation” (Hughes 153). Marian Ann Evans’s sexual “appetite” levied a serious blow to one of the Victorian period’s well-established scientific communities. Combe was so eager to evade the tarnish Marian’s misread body (her head) may do to his reputation that he classified her actions as those of a madwoman. He writes to Charles Bray asking if there exists “insanity in Miss Evans’s family; for her conduct, with *her* brain, seems to me to be like...morbid aberration” (*Letters*, 8: 129). As this societal surveillance illustrates, Marian could be a woman and write as a woman, but her work would carry the mark of punishment levied against the sexually improper woman. In order to evade the surveillance of her feminine body, Marian worked to become bodiless. George Eliot helped Marian avoid the kind of surveillance George Combe attempted to use as a punishment for sexual transgressions.

As a nominally male writer, her body of work became the subject of critical surveillance instead of her physical body. Marian’s only real possibility of existence as a writer was to create an author that could escape surveillance and, therefore avoid punishment. As a cross-gendered author, Marian must have been aware of the need to continually alter her narrative voice in order to hide its actual gender. She may have started the day with a letter to Cara Bray on the ailments she suffered or on the tangible love she finally attained with Lewes, but she would shift this voice when writing to John Blackwood as George Eliot. Writing as a man who was a woman, Marian effectively managed the duties of both the castrator and *the castrated*. As the occupier of these positions, she obtained the power of the castrator (delivering the cut) as well as experienced the pain of the castrated. Her fiction writing mirrors this dual position.



In the first months following the publication of “Amos Barton” Eliot received high praise for his writing. Shielded from any negative reviews (Lewes opened Eliot’s mail and screened the published reviews to keep Marian from reading any discouraging critical analysis), Eliot experienced the intense pleasure of critical esteem. Marian also enjoyed the doubleness offered by her incognito. She was often physically present during conversations by learned men as they discussed this new writer. Her pseudonym constructed a distance always denied by the feminine body. George Eliot provided the means by which the female body could participate with the celebrated male minds of the Victorian period.

George Eliot was a powerful force and, as a man, Eliot could demand to be a part of the publishing process. Blackwood often met with fierce resistance when he suggested changes to Eliot’s writing. The stern replies from Eliot illustrate bravado and a deeply rooted ethos granted only to male authors during this time period. Upon suggesting that Eliot revise portions of “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story” Blackwood elicited a stern retort – “my artistic bent is directed not at all to the presentation of eminently irreproachable characters, but to the presentation of mixed human beings in such a way as to call forth tolerant judgment, pity, and sympathy” (Vol II, 299). Similarly, but with even more vehemence, Eliot threatens Blackwood after he criticizes the characters of Janet and Robert Dempster in “Janet’s Repentance”: “the real Dempster was far more disgusting than mine the real Janet alas! had a far sadder end than mine” and that if it is too painful, too real for publication, then Blackwood should “consider whether it will not be better to close the series for the Magazine *now*” (Haight 174). Famously, Blackwood responds with “I do not fall in with George Eliots every day” (*Letters*, 2: 352) and concedes to the author’s vision of his stories. The absolutism Eliot wielded over his literary productions demonstrates Marian’s

use of the pseudonym as a way to not only to participate in literary cross-dressing, but also to experience the pleasure of authority.

The publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* under the pseudonym did garner unwanted attention. By the middle of 1857, George Eliot's reputation as a fiction writer came under heavy attack. Other men claimed to have authored *Scenes* and *Adam Bede*. The intense desire to ferret out the real George Eliot led to several imposters. The attack on Eliot's credibility from the likes of Joseph Liggins<sup>14</sup> and his most persistent supporter, Bracebridge, and from the accusations levied by the Curate of Chilvers Coton, John Gwyther<sup>15</sup>, necessitated the unveiling of George Eliot. Several published reports circulated in the London periodicals. The reports accused Eliot and his publishers of defrauding Joseph Liggins. Lewes and Eliot pleaded with Blackwood to take a strong stand against the attacks; however, Blackwood urged silence and instructed Eliot to "KEEP HER SECRET" (*Letters*, 3: 68). It soon became clear that Blackwood's instructions were self-serving. As the co-owner of *Blackwood's*, he understood the peril that lay outside the secret. George Eliot had no past—only a carefully constructed present. George Eliot's identity rested solely on what he had produced in print. However, Marian Lewes's past would taint any future publication. Furthermore, Blackwood's insistence implied "there was something tainted, embarrassing, wrong with the name Marian Evans Lewes" (Hughes 208). Indeed, Blackwood was not the only one to imply this fear. Barbara Bodichon, the first of Marian's friends to recognize her in Eliot's writing, wrote to implore silence as well. She confirms that

all the literary men were certain it was Marian Lewes ... that they did not much like saying so because it would do so much harm ... From their way of talking it

was evident they thought you would do the book more harm than the book would do you good in public opinion. (*Letters*, 3: 104)

The *real* author of *Scenes* and *Adam Bede* was too morally corrupt to show her face in order to defend the slander thrown heavily on George Eliot.

In addition to the question of authority, Eliot was also accused of writing “portraits,” which caused her to reveal her real name. The accusation that Eliot was simply writing portraits cut more deeply than the misguided speculation regarding identity. Eliot’s brand of fiction, established in the first paragraphs of “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton” took years to construct. If it were proven that Eliot was a simple portrait writer, her participation in the literary revolution, her work in the *Westminster Review*, and her come to fiction moment would have all been negated. The revelation of authorship could save Eliot from the Liggins affair, but could only damage his position further with respects to Gwyther’s claims. In the end, the Liggins affair fails to muster the evidence needed to prosecute George Eliot, but not before the Marian and her supporters used her true identity as support against them. However, in remedying the Gwyther issue, George Eliot had to admit to writing portraits.<sup>16</sup> Marian Lewes had been “outed.” Her secret fulfilled its threat—the sexual identity of the author was now available for public consumption. Her family and friends were now privy to her life as an author, which added to the tally of secrets she had kept from them. More importantly, her brand of fiction revealed little more than a collection of childhood stories with the names and places changed, but not much more. The experience left Marian drained and weary of her “friends.” Chapman and Spencer had all betrayed her by revealing Eliot’s true identity long before Gwyther and Liggins. Blackwood did not stand in her corner, nor did he fight to defend his most popular author.

In response, Marian Evans began to sign her letters to John Blackwood with her illegal married name<sup>17</sup>. She forced Blackwood to recognize the woman behind the pseudonym. His response to the change in signature was disappointment. She even had to write to him during the negotiations for *The Mill on the Floss* “I am induced to ask you whether you still wish to remain my publishers, or whether the removal of my incognito has caused a change in your views on that point” (Haight 232-3). Blackwood did remain her publisher, but the relations were quite strained.

Perhaps the greatest effect of the scandal came in the form of Marian’s personal relationship to her own fiction. She writes to Barbara Bodichon that she feels “the influence of talking about my books even to you [...] has been so bad to me that I should like to be able to keep silence concerning them for evermore” (*Letters*, 3: 99). And in the wake of the loss of her incognito, she writes to Charles Bray “it is happy for me that I never expected any gratification of a personal kind from my authorship. The worst of all this is that it nauseates me—chills me and discourages me in my work” (*Letters*, 2: 157). Her depression results in a self-imposed silence—a mandate that no dialogue concerning her work would be permissible. Bodenheimer suggests the refusal to discuss her writings arises out of a “perception of disloyalty to a private or sacred relationship. Because of her horrified reaction to having been recognized despite the anonymity of her narratives, Eliot’s books became personal secrets not to be violated even in the sanctuary of her home” (145). Marian’s understanding of the sacred and of the secret plays a large role in her fiction style. Betrayal of the sacred and the desire to conceal and reveal the secret become predominate themes in her fiction after *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*. Whether Eliot’s characters search for the truth of secrets, as in Causabon’s *Key to all Mythologies* and Lydgate’s investigation into “primary tissues,” or they are forced to participate

in a communal secret, as in the unspoken pact made between Bulstrode and Lydgate over the death of John Raffles her narratives show a keen interest in the narrative of secret. Eliot also guides readers with the narrative of Mr. Featherstone's secret will – a plot line that drives the entire first two thirds of *The Mill on the Floss*.

Eliot's development of the narrative secret has the aura of eroticism. In each of these cases, the secret is tied to the pleasure one receives in using the secret in order to wield power over another. Causabon's *Keys to all Mythologies* has a direct tie to his ability to control Dorothea. In her relentless pursuit to help her husband finish his research, she becomes the agile and competent extension of his weak and impotent self. Lydgate's desire to analyze the primary tissues of human flesh links medical science to the communal fear of body tampering. Rosamond's disgust over her husband's interest gives voice to the prevalent concern over the boundaries of medical research. Bulstrode's secret must remain hush-hush so that he can maintain his position of authority as a town elder. The secret he works to conceal concerns his previous unscrupulous employment and his purposeful failure to "find" Will Ladislav in order to uncover his parentage and financial security. Mr. Featherstone's secret will is a source of great sexual tension between himself and Jenny Garth.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie retreats to a secret space above the family's living quarters in order to vent her frustrations. Her secret meetings with Philip Wakem in the Red Deeps foreshadow the communal mistrust shadowing Maggie in the last volume. Both of these secrets work to connect violence (turned inward) and sexual energy, a theme that Eliot revisits in the chapters that chronicle Stephen Guest and Maggie's love affair. Similarly, *Romola's* entire narrative structure depends on the secret and the positioning of the revelatory events throughout the text. For Tito, his secret marriage to Tessa and his secret parentage allow him to

simultaneously exert power over a simple woman who gives him pleasure (Tessa) and an intellectual woman who gives him power (Romola). In these three examples, Eliot forces the reader to comply with the process of the secret. The reader is part of the community holding the secret, but yet must wait for the novel to reveal the truth and consequences of the secret.

## II. The Erotic Secret and the Process of Becoming

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, 1858, Marian Lewes writes to Charles Bray “there is no undertaking more fruitful of absurd mistakes than that of ‘guessing’ at authorship, and as I have never communicated to any one so much as an *intention* of a literary kind, there can be none but imaginary data for such guesses” (Haight 186). Marian Lewes had, by this time, authored *Scenes of Clerical Life* and was in the midst of writing her first full-length novel, *Adam Bede*. The strong admonishment sent to the Bray household (Cara Bray and Sara Hennell would have most certainly read this epistolary tongue-lashing) is interesting on several levels. This letter appears to forget the damage Miss Evans did to the long-lasting Coventry friendships during her “elopement” with Lewes on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1854. Marian made a habit out of concealing (especially from Cara and Sara) the more intimate and lascivious portions of her life. This letter equates the hush-hush policy she instituted during her sexual impropriety with Lewes with her role as the author of fiction. Marian’s desire to construct a secret to safeguard both her sexual practices and her identity as an author illuminates a parallel between the sexual body and authorial body. What about authorship is tantamount to the sexual body and its practices? Is authorship, in Marian Lewes’ case, improper, lascivious, sexually gratifying, and an identity that could elicit punishment? Finally, what gratification does the creator receive when she oscillates between concealing and revealing the information contained within the secret?

The pleasure/pain nexus is a key component of the dialectic of the “erotic secret.” The letter I reference above does not only insist on Marian’s innocence where authorship is concerned, but also points to its very real possibility:

If I withhold anything from my friends which it would gratify them to know you will believe, I hope, that I have good reasons for doing so, and I am sure those friends will understand me when I ask them to further my object—which is not a whim but a question of solid interest—by complete silence.

Marian almost dares her friends to ferret out her secret. The negation (the silence she requests) articulates her authorial identity. Negation, therefore, becomes a coveted position in that it neither confirms nor denies the existence of George Eliot. The ambiguity opens a pleasurable field of play. The fear of being unmasked—of removing the cloak of George Eliot to reveal Marian Lewes—exists simultaneously with the desire to be known as an author. However, Marian Lewes understands the peril that lies outside her world of newly formed authorial power made possible by the creation of George Eliot. As George Eliot, she has an authoritative and masculine hand able to command her reading public and demand inclusion in the literary and critical intelligentsia. Her “anxiety to do what is in itself worth doing and by that honest means, to win very necessary profit” fuels the continued obligation to set rumors aright. She ends the letter with the conciliatory assurance that

‘there is nothing hidden that shall not be revealed’—in due time. But till that time comes—till I tell you myself ‘This is the work of my hand and brain’—don’t believe anything on the subject. There is no one who is in the least likely to know what I can, could, should or would write.

The revelation here is not the calling forth of the truth in order to insist on its continued concealment, but rather the revelation that it will be by the hand and voice of Marian Evans alone that will, in due time, expose the fact behind the fiction. The right of exposure belongs to Marian Evans, and she means to make it clear; George Eliot is *her* creation and *her* fiction.

Secrets carry a threat: revelation. The seriousness of Marian's personal transgressions precipitated the need for the secret, but her desire to clear her good name in the face of such erroneous accusations became a driving force that countered the advice given by her publisher. As the writer of two successful works of fiction, George Eliot understood the peril that awaited the revelation. However, Marian Evans also took immense pleasure in another's recognition of George Eliot as a woman. Charles Dickens's desires to address the writer of "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton" and "Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story" as a woman because he sees in the fiction "such womanly touches" and if "they originated with no woman, I believe that no man ever before had the art of making himself, mentally, so like a woman, since the world began." Charles Dickens continues with claiming he has no "vulgar" intentions with regards to the revelation of Eliot's "secret," and that the knowledge of the author's sex is "of great interest" and not a "mere curiosity." He cordially invites George Eliot to "show me the face of the man or woman who has written so charmingly" as the moment "would be a very memorable occasion" for the seasoned writer.<sup>18</sup> Marian Evans is quick to point out how painful her incognito remains in the face of such high praise:

There can hardly be any climax of approbation for me after this and I am so deeply moved by the finely-felt and finely expressed sympathy of the letter, that the iron mask of my incognito seems quite painful in forbidding me to tell



Dickens how thoroughly his generous impulse has been appreciated. (*Letters*, 2: 424)

The language in these two letters is highly erotic. Dickens wishes to denude the cross-dressing writer and Evans expresses her reaction to his “impulse” as a “climax.” Underlying the pleasure she experiences as George Eliot is an equal pleasure she holsters to reveal Marian Evans.

The erotic secret allays her fear of the lack of serious critical interest her fiction would generate if it sold under her illegal married name: Marian Evans Lewes. The erotic nature of the secret distinguishes her pseudonymity from that of Charlotte Brontë. Currer Bell did not originate in the mind of a writer seeking to hide her scandalous life, but rather he rose out of Brontë’s desire to be a part of the literary intelligentsia. Marian Evans had been an active member of this “all boys club” and enjoyed a privileged position in a life among men years before her urge to write fiction. The impetus behind Marian Lewes’s construction of the male pseudonym is to mask her tainted feminine sexuality rather than to give her entrée. Charlotte Brontë’s fear is that the act of writing will automatically call her right to femininity into question, whereas Marian Evans Lewes’s femininity calls into question her ability to write.

The issue for the later author is not femininity as much as it is the actions of the proper feminine figure in Victorian society. As Marian creates George, she develops a relationship with her other self—a relationship that simultaneously taunts her, provides a safe harbor for her, and threatens to annihilate her. If she were to “keep her secret” during the slanderous accusations that faced Eliot the writer, she would be vanquished and sentenced as a fraud. However, the popularity of both of her initial works of fiction was in large part due to the success of the secret—who is this George Eliot? The critical and economical successes of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* hinged on their communal moral instruction, which could not have come

from the pen of the sexually tainted, morally impure, and socially exiled Marian Evans Lewes.

Her ambivalence toward the secret finds clear parallel in Jacques Derrida's *A Taste for the Secret*:

I have a taste for the secret, it clearly has to do with not-belonging; I have an impulse of fear or terror in the face of a political space, for example, a public space that makes no room for the secret. (Derrida and Feraris 59).

The notion of belonging and secret in Derrida outlines a crucial connection for Eliot studies. The public and political space of Victorian England was ruled by the paternal figures of Scott, Carlyle, Thackeray, and Dickens. Edging out a place next to these fathers of Victorian writing was difficult, especially for a female writer who did not possess “bold and masculine understandings” and who was not a man “possessed of a thorough knowledge of the mental and physical wants of the people—men imbued with a high spirit, of undaunted courage, seeking not reputation by [his] productions, but wishing to instruct promoting virtue and happiness among the people” (qtd in Easley 17). The standard definition of the Victorian enterprise of “[reestablishing] a sense of ethical responsibility in the literary marketplace, thereby reinstilling moral values in the process of literary production” (16) did not include women, especially not the likes of Marian Evans Lewes. The secret, as Derrida artfully puts it, rises out of a sense of not-belonging. However, the secret can not play in the public space as a *secret*, but rather as an *absence*. The secret is hidden, masked, unmarked, and deliberately constructed to lead those who seek it astray. The keeper of the secret must continually work to keep its status concealed. As Derrida points out, the moment one belongs to the public or political space, “the fact of avowing one’s belonging, of putting in common—be it family, nation, tongue—spells the loss of the secret” (59).

Moreover, the secret cannot speak for itself. Its existence remains unchanged until forces outside of it change its status. That is, the secret lies outside the chain of public signification. It is the one thing that eschews meaning through presence. The secret need not exchange being for meaning nor does it need to “identify [itself] in language” by “losing [itself] like an object” (*Function and Field of Speech* 86). There is no a priori to the secret *until* the fact of the secret’s existence is known to the public. Lacan explains in “Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious” that the “structure of the signifying chain discloses the possibility I have [...] to use it in order to signify *something quite other* than what it says” (155). The secret mimics the structure of the signifying chain as it evades its detection and subscription. The secret divulges a possibility of meaning in the search for what is “true.” However, the secret can remain entirely undetected; and, therefore outside of the signifying chain all together. The secret is an unuttered utterance—the possibility of an utterance kept in check by its keeper. But, the secret is always in danger of being uttered and, hence, it always threatens its keeper. The secret can become problematic in that “everywhere that a response and a responsibility are required, the right to a secret becomes conditional” (“An Oblique Offering” 21).

Everyone has a “taste for the secret.” Derrida discusses this taste as his own personal desire to keep secrets and to live in a world where secrets are not called to speak of themselves in the public space. However, I believe the “taste for the secret” goes beyond one’s personal desire to construct and conceal them. The public, and in this case, the reading Victorian public, has a taste for secrets. They salivate at the thought of the secret. Relentless and unyielding, the public will ferret out a kernel of information if they perceive this information to be hidden from them for some reason. Perhaps because the novel’s form is one that seeks to reveal, from its beginning to its end, a series of events, feelings, characters, and motivations in order to produce a fictitious

truth, that the notion of a secret authorship is so unbearable to the Victorian reading public. Or, perhaps the critical attention placed on the novel to represent what is “real” in order to provide moral, ethical, and social instruction placed those authors who desired to hide behind a secret in a precarious position. The rise in journalism during the Victorian period also cultivated a “type” of reader who became accustomed reading the revelations of court proceedings, gossip columns, and opinion pieces. Whatever the reason, George Eliot’s secret identity overshadowed the production of his early works. This insatiable desire to *know* and to reveal created a need to work actively at concealment; and, therefore lead to the complex construction and relationship between Marian Evans Lewes and George Eliot.

The desire to penetrate what is secret has a strong rooting in the Victorian Novel. Since the novel reflected contemporary discourse, it is no surprise that the Victorian novel became of forum for the discourse of sexuality. As Michel Foucault argues in *History of Sexuality* Victorian sexuality discourse was predicated on the very desire to speak the unspeakable. As Foucault puts it: an “imperative was established: not only will [people] confess to acts contravening the law, but [they] will seek to transform [their] desire, [their] every desire, into discourse” (21). By contrast, however, Marian Lewes had a taste for the secret in order to conceal her socially unacceptable sexual life. The production of this secret was George Eliot. While the use of the erotic secret was not Marian’s alone, the novel’s dependence on secret allotted the writer a space to explore and then extrapolate a power derived from the secret. This drive was so strong that even after the publication of *Adam Bede*, when the secret was out in the open and part of the public space, Marian Evans Lewes continued to publish her works under the pseudonym. George Eliot was not just a name and Marian could not just casually dismiss him. George Eliot had become a fixture of Victorian publishing—a brand, let’s say. Blackwood could

continue to publish the works of George Eliot without having to confront the reality of the cross-dressing Marian Lewes. The literary intelligentsia could keep to the task of discussing the aesthetics of fiction without including the more scandalous and seething stories of the author. More importantly, the continuity presented by George Eliot allowed all of the men in Marian's life to interact with her, speak about her, discuss her works, and include her within the fold of Victorian literary culture as a man, not as a woman. The secret, once exposed, threatened to erase Marian; however, the George Eliot brand remained alive and well in order to save her.

The Victorian imperative to have sexuality enter discourse and to normalize and regulate it through definition meant a woman writer's sexuality would always be part of her public writing. How could Marian circumvent this process of normative behavior? As a woman, she had very little power over her own sexual body (and it was this very power that she aimed to exert, which cut her from her family and London society to begin with). But, as a man, she could be part of the medical, legal, philosophical, psychological and familial discourses that aimed to fix sexuality as a subject to be examined, defined, and punished. As Foucault suggests, she was able to play within the "double impetus: pleasure and power. The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it" (Foucault 45). Furthermore, she harnessed the "power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting" (Foucault 45). Marian's dirty little secret certainly allowed her access to the world of fiction; but, more importantly, it granted her an authority to experience both pleasure and power.

As George Eliot sat at his writing table in camisoles and petticoats, he wrote under the influence of a masculine power that permitted the creation of and participation within discourse. Indeed, his omniscient narrators question, monitor, watch, and spy on the actions of his characters. In the end, the fiction also works to alter the behaviors and understandings of the reading community. Simultaneously, Marian Lewes sat at the same writing table in bloomers and petticoats and experienced the effusive pleasure in evading the masculine power and the pleasure in showing off her ability to do so. Marian cannot do away with George Eliot even after the revelation of her secret. Her fiction—the impetus behind it—depends upon the triangulation.

The novel relies heavily upon the notion of confession. Like an investigator, the reader pulls from the novel bits of information needed to put together the fiction. The author, in writing the novel, follows a narrative arc in which each piece of the fiction works to reveal the finale. What secret lies beneath this story? How can we figure it, fix it, and interpret its meaning? The novel begins with a promise to end. The novel is complete only through the process of reading. Foucault explains that there was a “metamorphosis in literature: we have passed from a pleasure to be recounted and heard” to “a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage” (59). The novel is an act of confession. It works to hide the truth only to reveal the truth. The act of confessing the secret is a grand gesture on which the novel depends. For the perception of the secret builds a perception in the reader that what is being concealed is worth the delay and deferment presented by the novel’s structure. And, since it is worth the wait, it must be a truthful representation of life, emotion, knowledge, understanding, etc. So, what is finally revealed by the end of the novel is never really questioned as truth or fiction—it is always understood as a fictive representation of truth. The structure of

the novel is one of castration: it repeats the structure withholding the truth in order to reveal it. The novel plays within the binary: absence/presence. The structure of the novel and its relationship with the reader yields the means necessary for Marian to reposition her sexuality. Marian Evans Lewes cannot participate in the process of castrative writing (since all acts of writing are acts of castration, a point I argued in the first chapter) without first repositioning her sexuality. To become an agent of her own castration—a process that has already been enacted upon her by the various establishments of Victorian Society (the legal, educational, medical, and professional establishments that champion masculinity over femininity and that work to fix the feminine in the position of the weaker and malleable sex), she must subvert the locus of this castration (her femininity). George Eliot serves as the conduit through which she can evade castration and become the hand that castrates (a position of agency and power). Moreover, her development of the secret and her play within the process of concealing and revealing the secret further accentuates her desire to experience and re-experience the process of self-castration. Finally, her novels exhibit a clear preoccupation with the secret, in which the narrator acts as the revelatory and alternating conciliatory voice that perpetuates the various secrets and confessions in her fiction. Tito's hidden father and secret illegal marriage to Tessa in *Romola*, Maggie's secretive rendezvous with Philip in the Red Deeps and her hidden chamber in the attic where she vents her female frustrations in *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch*'s community of secrets and Casaubon's relentless pursuit of the *Keys to all Mythologies*, Daniel Deronda's hidden Jewish lineage and Gwendolen's many secretive meetings in *Daniel Deronda* all point to an insistence on the secret as a way to create and sustain the narrative structure. In all of these texts the narrator becomes the extended hand of the castrator.

In Charlotte Brontë's works of castration fiction, the author uses a first-person female narrator. By contrast, George Eliot's narrators are in the third person, omniscient form and are decidedly male. Additionally, these narrators play an active part in the community in which they narrate. For example, in "Janet's Repentance", the third and final story in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, the narrator reminisces of a time when he blushed at the thought that "Miss Landor was laughing at me, because I was appearing in coat-tails for the first time" and that the prayer service was often inaudible, but as his "mother observer, that was of no consequence in the prayers, since every one had a prayer-book" (205). The narrator recalls a time before the time presented in the story. In doing so, he not only establishes himself as a male member of the community, but one whose family has a long standing in Milby society and, therefore, an expert on the ways of thinking and acting in this small town. Of course, the narrator's specific presence in the text often problematizes his omniscience. For instance, the narrator is privy to the conversations at the Red Lion, he sees and comments on the abuse Janet suffers at the hands of her drunk and aggressive husband Robert Dempster, he is present during Janet's most intimate moments with her husband, friends, and savior, Mr. Tryan, and is even lingering during the "ladies party" in Chapter three. The narrator must be both visibly present (as in the church scene I quoted earlier) and invisibly present (or visibly absent) in the examples I list here. The narrator's position must be seen and unseen: or, as Roland Barthes puts it in *Lover's Discourse* "the hiding must be seen: *I want you to know that I am hiding something from you*, that is the active paradox I must resolve: *at once and the same time* it must be known and not known" (42-43). The speaking figure leads the reader through the text while at the same time hiding in the text. The hiding is understood and at times interrupted by the narrator's insistence on being



visible. It is not enough to present an omniscient male figure as the narrator; the figure must also threaten the text through his ability to appear and disappear from the community.

This type of narrator offers a different form of narrative castration than the one I argued existed in Brontë's texts. The omniscient narrator that is both present and absent from the text is also the voice of moral authority, judgment, ridicule, punishment, sympathy, humor, and compassion. He comments on women's education: "it is surprising that young ladies should not be thought competent to the same curriculum as young gentlemen" (234) while also taking the opportunity to criticize women's false hearts: "poor women's hearts! Heaven forbid that I should laugh at you, and make cheap jests on your susceptibility towards the clerical sex, as if it had nothing deeper or more lovely in it than the mere vulgar angling for a husband" (223). The judgment and ridicule women face at the hand of this narrator is often countered by his softer side:

this tenderness of the son for the mother was hardly more than a nucleus of healthy life in an organ hardening by disease, because the man who was linked in this way with an innocent past, had become callous in worldliness, fevered by sensuality, enslaved to chance impulses; pretty, because it showed how hard it is to kill the deep-down fibrous roots of human love and goodness—how the man from whom we make it our pride to shrink, has yet close brotherhood with us through some of our most sacred feelings. (245)

This man, Robert Dempster, is one of "us" as the narrator claims. The male voice works extremely hard to present this picture of a kind and gentle man who walks with his mother into the morning sunshine. The narrative works to mitigate Dempster's cruelty, his vileness and his corrupt business practices. Without a vast reservoir of redeemable value in this character, the

narrator elaborates upon a simple act of kindness toward his mother. This effort to elicit sympathy smacks against the narrator's earlier description of Dempster's actions toward Janet:

He laid his hand with a firm grip on her shoulder, turned her round, and pushed her slowly before him along the passage and through the dining-room door which stood open on their left hand. There was a portrait of Janet's mother, a grey-haired, dark-eyed old woman, in neatly-fluted cap, hanging over the mantelpiece. Surely the aged eyes take on a look of anguish as they see Janet—not trembling, no! it would be better if she had trembled—standing stupidly unmoved in her great beauty, while the heavy arm is lifted to strike her. (231-2)

The contrasting views are meant to elicit sympathy from the reader—sympathy for both Janet and for Dempster. As the narrator puts it, Dempster suffers from a disease and Janet stands stupidly awaiting her “punishment” for being slow to answer her husband's pounding at the front door. Neither of them carries the full responsibility of their situation.

The castrating narrator occupies a position that permits his observance of the private and public spheres. He is a part of the community and a part from the community at the same time. From this vantage point, the male narrator can offer insight into the private lives of the characters while setting the stage for the events that occur in a more public space. In his telling of the narrative, the male figure becomes the phallus of the text: he is the source of the textual production. Unlike the female first-person narration in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, this narrator does not bear the mark of castration, and therefore does not seek textual space to displace it. Rather, the male omniscient narrator wields the threat of castration as is *his* right. His decisions as the storyteller are directly linked to the unyielding power he has over the development of the narrative. Many critics label Eliot's narrator the *author/god*, and to some extent I agree with this

assignation. For instance, the proem to *Romola* presents a narrator that descends upon the text. From his viewpoint high above time and space he comments on the physical and topographical changes, but comments that “the great river-courses which have shaped the lives of men have hardly changed; and those other streams, the life currents that ebb and flow in human hearts, pulsate to the same great need, the same great loves and terrors” (1). The narrator in *Romola* gives the reader a bird’s-eye-view that transcends time and space. His power is omnipotent, and his ability to order and reorder the linear structure of the text illustrates the level at which Marian understood the role of the narrator as authoritative and patriarchal.

The positioning of the narrator simultaneously within and outside of the community and at the same time human and spirit-like adds to the speaker’s ethos and his access to the *truth*. Josie Billington argues that many critics find this type of narrator in a realist text “unacceptable” in that “the intrusive comments of the author-narrator in a novel like *Middlemarch*, is that these comments and judgments constitute an attempt [...] to persuade the reader that there *is* a final, single and knowable truth or reality to which the author has privileged access” (14). The privileged access to which Billington refers is nothing more than the signification of the phallus and the patriarchal supremacy that was typical of Victorian legal and cultural discourse. The guiding voice in *Middlemarch* is cautious and exacting. The thoughts and experiences the narrator offers in relation to the characters “exist only externally from the characters themselves” (Billington 14) and create a dialogue that cannot participate in the *reality* of the text. For instance: internal struggles of Bullstrode, Casaubon’s feelings of inadequacy, Rosamond’s expectations of marital life, Farebrother’s unfulfilled sexual desires, and Dorothea’s depreciated respect for her husband are all moments that the narrator postures as critical; however, “the critical event in the scene is really a non-event, something that doesn’t happen” and the absence

of this event “by definition, is not tangible; it is not realizable by the characters themselves” (21-22). The narrator not only demonstrates a privileged access to this information, but he calls it forth in order to create an event—a textual production. The characters remain unaware of the internal events of other characters; however, the reader must include the set of circumstances provided as part of the novel’s textual body. The power of the Eliot’s omniscient male narrator<sup>19</sup> rests in his ability to make textual production (textual body) out of absence. Linguistically, this process can only be enacted by the male voice, as it is the only voice capable of signification. Marian Evans Lewes castrates her femininity and her authorial presence in order to create a figure that can grant the female mind access to the omnipotent power of creating presence out of absence. While the process of self-castration serves to remind her of the woman writer’s position outside the text or within the margins of the text, the very act of re-experiencing the act of castration permits the possibility of agency.

The narrative structure of Eliot’s fiction not only granted access to a restricted masculine domain, but it also “allowed the woman writer privileged insight into the complex processes of justification and rationalization through which the masculine world-view is engendered and sustained” (Tang 240). As a male author, Eliot inserts himself in the development of the changing discourses of the Victorian period. His texts avoid the discussion of Marian’s sexuality or *her* body, and focus on the shift from imaginative play and tangible actualization of the discourses that regulated sexual normative behavior. Her dirty little secret and continued use of George Eliot as the narrator of her fictions allotted a space for sexual play with the female body. As the male gazer on the textual presentation of the female characters the reader encounters in Eliot’s oeuvre, the narrator provides details on the feminine physique, the erect and small frame, the large and robust curves of the older women’s bodies, the exotic beauty, the young tender

skin, the transfixing female stare, and countless other sexually charged descriptions. Marian's gaze could be construed as homoerotic if not refracted through the prism of the male narrator's view. More than just a mask or a veil meant to obscure Marian's femininity, the male narrator opens an entire field of play—a possible sexual revolution of sorts. Marian's process of self-castration through male pseudonymity eliminates femininity from the process of textual production only to reintroduce the existence of femininity as a creation of the male author. Marian does not write the feminine body. Eliot does. And in his doing so, she is given freedom to experience the sexual pleasure derived from the male subjugation of the female body.

### **III. Pollian: The Vengeful Author/God**

The relationship between author and character constitutes the final stage of Marian Evans Lewes' process of self-castration through fiction writing. Much has been written on the level of violence that exists in the Eliot's texts, especially the homicidal fantasies and the suicidal desires of her female characters<sup>20</sup>. The level of aggression and violence operating in Eliot's fiction is certainly hard to miss. Eliot's narratives deal with physical abuse, homicide, the unnatural desire to experiment on dead bodies, alcoholism, infanticide, suicide, incest, abandonment, familial and communal rejection, and death<sup>21</sup>. All of Eliot's female protagonists experience some form of violence and many of them enact violence (or think of enacting violence) on others in the text. More importantly, the female characters are often subjugated to a violence turned inward—violence at their own hands. Through the purported male author and the male narrator of Marian's fiction, the female characters are punished and ultimately submit to the patriarchal rule that governs Eliot's fiction. Mark Mossman argues the endgame to Eliot's fiction involves a reinstatement of moral certitude and that the author's "attempt to strike a balance, to be

simultaneously authentic or realistic and pedagogical or moral in her fiction, creates a number of tensions and anxieties that surface in all of her narratives” (10). For Mossman, the process of striking this balance and remaining an “advocate of quiet political process and slow social development” comes at the price of “violence and desire, temptation and harsh punishment” (10). Janet in “Janet’s Repentance”, Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*, Dorothea and Rosamond in *Middlemarch*, Romola in *Romola*, and Gwendolen in *Daniel Deronda* all have the propensity toward violence and they are the target of severe punishment. While it may be more convenient to view these women as a construction of the male narrator, it is the vengeful female author/god who purposefully creates feminine bodies in order to mutilate, annihilate, erase, and destroy, or in order to recover and redeem them.

During her Coventry days when the letters between Cara Bray and Sara Hennell were frequent and illustrative of a close friendship, Marian Evans signed herself as *Pollian*. This early pseudonym is most interesting in that it means the angel of destruction. Marian takes her pseudonym from *Apollyon*, which in Greek means “destroyer.” As a fiction writer, Marian reserves the right to create and destroy; however, critical attention must be devoted to her targeting of the female body as her focus of authorial vengeance. My claim here is that the violence enacted upon the female body serves as an extension of Marian’s self-castration process; and, that this violence works to grant agency to both the author and the female characters. Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert discuss Eliot’s use of violence in her fiction in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They claim Eliot “becomes entangled in contradictions that she can only resolve through acts of vengeance against her own characters” and the preoccupation with death and destruction is a “means of obtaining power” (479, 485). I claim Eliot uses violence not as a means of negotiating complex narrative contradictions, but rather as a way to create such

contradictions in the text. Not all of the acts of aggression “reveal a striking pattern of authorial vengeance in the service of female submission” (484). As a matter of fact, many of the female characters summon rage and aggression at the moment when their survival in the text is most in danger. The processes of female self-castration within Eliot’s novels do not follow a pattern at all. Each of the characters mentioned above work through the medium of violence and self-castration for various purposes. Maggie does not survive, whereas Janet thrives at the end of the text. Dorothea Brooke finds freedom, whereas Rosamond Vincy Lydgate does not. Romola’s position as the care-giver of her husband’s illegitimate children could be read as a compromise, or one could read her and Tessa’s ending as a vision of the matriarchal world—full of power and possibility. Gwendolen’s ending presents a complex double reading: she is a representation of female submission or the heroine that restores the Grandcourt estate to its rightful (female) owners. Each of these women arrives at their textual ending as products of authorial vengeance.

Janet Dempster, one of Eliot’s earliest creations, suffers at the heavy and brutal hand of her husband. Imprisoned by her marriage (a reoccurring theme in Eliot’s literature), Janet seeks relief from the domestic abuse by turning to alcohol, because “when a woman can’t think of her husband coming home without trembling, it’s enough to make her drink something to blunt her feelings” (222). Janet’s addiction to alcohol is so strong by the time the narrator introduces the reader to her unpleasant life, that when she does vow to quit, she experiences severe physical withdrawal symptoms. Her major transgression, according to the narrator, is the fact that she is not a mother. Janet’s position as a maternal and domestic failure only highlights her actions as self-destructive. The height of this aggression turned inward comes in her attempts at suicide: “I can’t kill myself; I’ve tried; but I can’t leave this world and go to another. There may be no pity for me there, as there is none here” (282). Her daily struggle against the “wild beast within four

walls” (283) etches out an existence of constant fear and the hope that Dempster may, one day, fulfill his threat to kill her. In the face of such threats, Janet resigns herself to “let him. Life was as hideous as death. For years she had been rushing on to some unknown but certain horror; and now she was close upon it. She was almost glad” (284).

The details of Janet as a “gypsy” wife and failed matriarch illustrate Eliot’s desire to focus punishment and redemption on Janet’s body. The text concerns itself with Janet’s physical location. Janet is at the top of the stairs when Dempster can’t find his keys, he throws her out of the house (almost naked) during a drunken rage, the house servants are terrified when they find their mistress “missing” and they fear their master locked her body in the closet. In addition to these examples of Janet’s physical positioning in the text, the descriptions of Dempster’s abuse highlight the narrator’s concern with Janet’s body. The narrator divulges Janet’s history through communal descriptions of her physical appearance: “she comes to me sometimes, poor thing, looking so strange, anybody passing her in the street may see plain enough what’s the matter” (221). In Janet Dempster’s case, she is ultimately redeemed: she is saved by Mr. Tryan, then comes to the aid of her husband in his final hour of need, and closes the text as a mother and grandmother. Janet’s body is the focus of her own privation and self-destruction, as well as of her husband’s punishment. And, it is with Janet’s body that the process of redemption and repentance must begin. One of Eliot’s earliest self-castrating figures learns to harness the rage against her own body and the rage against her husband and channel it into a more productive manner: the work of Mr. Tyran, serving the poor, and motherhood.

In contrast to Janet Dempster, Maggie Tulliver does not fair well at the end of her textual life. The level of aggression (outward and inward) reveals Marian’s own rage against her brother Isaac and against the destructive power of community and gossip. But before Maggie learns the



hard lesson at the hands of St. Ogg's moral standards and wicked tongues, she exhibits in her youth an interest in violence as a useful expression of feminine angst. In Tom's absence, "she had an occasional fit of fondness" toward her doll that she would "[lavish] so many warm kisses on it that the waxen cheeks had a wasted unhealthy appearance" (18). Referred to as a fit in this third chapter, the reader soon becomes accustomed to various forms of Maggie's internal angst reflected as outward physical "fits" of rage. Maggie's propensity to displace her anger on inanimate objects is just one form of aggression we see from the small child. The doll's wasted appearance (a result of too much love—a violent love of sorts) suffers further when later, "listening with parted lips, while she held her doll topsy-turvy, and crushed its nose against the wood of the chair" she comes to understand Tom will be leaving the house in pursuit of an education (something she is painfully denied). However, the trials experienced by the domesticated downstairs doll pale in comparison to the fetish she keeps in the attic.

This attic was Maggie's favourite retreat on a wet day, when the weather was not too cold; here she fretted out all her ill-humours, and talked aloud to the worm-eaten floors and here she kept a Fetish which she punished for all her misfortunes. This was the trunk of a large wooden doll, which once stared with the roundest of eyes above the reddest of cheeks; but was now entirely defaced by a long career of vicarious suffering. Three nails driven into the head commemorated as many crises in Maggie's nine years of earthly struggle; that luxury of vengeance having been suggested to her by the picture of Jael destroying Sisera in the old Bible.

(25)

Maggie's retreat represents a *room of her own*, in a sense. It is in the attic, with the worm-eaten floors and the mutilated doll that Maggie can enact vengeance. The pleasure she experiences

during these episodes is reinforced by the fact that this is her favorite “retreat” and the punishment she levies displaces the punishment she incurs downstairs. Maggie’s pleasure in exacting pain mimics the author/god’s pleasure in creating characters in order to punish them. The power Maggie feels in the attic is a mirrored reflection of the power Marian feels at her writing table. Of course, the Fetish can only serve its purpose for a short period. After she performs other acts of aggression (killing Tom’s rabbits, taking the larger slice of cake, and running away to be the Queen of the gypsies) Maggie must learn how to direct that violence inward. Her first form of bodily mutilation comes when, after hours of ridicule and admonishment from her aunts and mother, she cuts her own hair. After the deed, Maggie is left with “that bitter sense of the irrevocable which was almost an everyday experience of her small soul” (55). But it was this moment of defiance, this act of “passionate impulse” that produces a feeling of power. The episode allows her to experience a brief “flush of anger, which gave her a transient power of defiance” (58) and ultimately results in the “delicious words of tenderness” from her father. Maggie finds reward in her inward gesture of violence, and realizes a great source of power comes from the redirecting of aggression. Maggie’s approach as young adult is to continue this inward aggression, sacrifice, and privation. It is through this process of self-castration and feminine mutilation that Maggie suffers in order to gain power. I read Maggie’s death at the end of the text as a moment of sacrifice in order to find peace and contentment with her brother, Tom. Marian is able to create a character who carries the mark of castration through the text. Marian’s desire to punish Maggie intensifies until the author/god erases her from the text all together. In this erasure, Marian experiences pleasure as the castrator and the annihilator—as Pollian.

Not only are these women castrated by Marian herself, but also by the narrator, other characters in the text, and by their own hands. When the characters initiate the process of self-castration, their survival is the eventual result; with the exception of Maggie Tulliver.<sup>22</sup>

Dorothea Brooke (*Middlemarch*) and Gwendolen Harleth (*Daniel Deronda*) use the process of self-castration to survive within the narrative. Reimer argues that “Gwendolen’s violent resentment against her family (in a rage she strangles her sister’s canary) seems out of proportion for a favoured child, unless one considers the early sexual violence for which she was singled out” (39). The sexual violence Reimer claims is the incest she suffered at the hands of her step-father, Captain Davilow. Reimer provides a mountain of textual evidence to support this claim, and points out clues such as Gwendolen’s aversion to the sexual advances of her male suitors and the connection Gwendolen makes in her mind between her wedding night and the memory of her step-father. Reimer also discusses Gwendolen’s inability to sleep alone and the fact that there is always a little bed or couch in her mother’s room for her (even in adulthood). If the claim of sexual violence is true, Gwendolen’s actions of outward and inward violence provide a therapeutic remedy to her damaged psycho-sexual development. In this case, Eliot creates a character who is stunted by sexual violation. The initial bodily punishment is finally worked out through the violent aggression she enacts upon others in the text, culminating in the death of her husband. She admits to Daniel that she had already killed Grandcourt repeatedly in her thoughts before the actual deed. Eliot marks Gwendolen with the hand of punishment from the first time readers set eyes on her by defining her entrance into the text as something that must “play out” and will show “development and catastrophe [...] measured by nothing clumsier than the moment-hand” (11). The text spends much of its first part characterizing Gwendolen as a woman whose “self-control [guarded her] from penitential humiliation” and that she contains

more “fire and will in her than ever, but there was more calculation underneath it” (25). The calculation is extremely important to the application of self-castration theory. Gwendolen is not a passive character, and the punishment she doles and the punishment she experiences are a direct result of careful self-management. The narrator characterizes his heroine as a “princess in exile” who rules over her “domestic empire” (41) and by the close of chapter four he defines Gwendolen as a paradoxical figure:

However, she had the charm, and those who feared her were also fond of her; the fear and the fondness being perhaps both heightened by what may be called the iridescence of her character—the play of various, nay, contrary tendencies. [...] We cannot speak a loyal word and be meanly silent, we cannot kill and not kill in the same moment; but a moment is room wide enough for the loyal and mean desire, for the outlash of a murderous thought and the sharp backward stroke of repentance. (41-42)

Like the play with presence and absence, Gwendolen constructs identity through binary oppositions. The narrator alludes to MacBeth in this quote, “[f]or MacBeth’s rhetoric about the impossibility of being many opposite things in the same moment [...]” (42) to further drive home his insistence that Gwendolen’s opposition to herself is both inwardly aggressive and outwardly dangerous.

Gwendolen’s notions of femininity are tied to tragedy. She thinks “a higher voice is more tragic: it is more feminine; and the more feminine a woman is, the more tragic it seems when she does desperate actions” (54). As the novel progresses, Gwendolen’s actions become more desperate, leading to the loss of Gwendolen’s femininity through acts of desperation. A loss of femininity is key to the theory of self-castration. As Marian works to erase femininity in

order to survive as an author, she creates a character who also must erase femininity in order to survive in the text. Gwendolen's inspired rendering of Hermione during the tableau scene represents an early example of her initial fear and subsequent desire to control the feminine body. As Klesmer pounds on the piano during production, his "thunderous chords" encourages the panel hiding a picture of a "dead face" and "fleeing figure" to open (60). Gwendolen lets out a "piercing cry" and a marbled expression "terrifying in its terror" (61). Her reaction, like that resulting from an "electric charge," is most interesting when considered under the lens of feminine erasure. The corpse that confronts Gwendolen (the dead face in the painting) reminds her of bodily punishment. The textual death that awaits her must be circumvented by a methodical act of erasure. The "soul of Fear [that] had entered" during that moment connects art and femininity with the terrifying. In order to eschew the terrifying (the tragedy of femininity), Gwendolen must learn how to erase her feminine body. She must learn how to turn aggression against herself in order to gain power.

Gwendolen's source of power comes in the pleasure of refusal. The first two books of *Daniel Deronda* cut a haughty and commanding figure for Gwendolen. However, by the end of the third book, Gwendolen's knowledge of her self-worth shifts. The narrator calls this state Gwendolen's "condition" (290). He dictates all of the revelations made to Gwendolen: she is not an artist, she is not remarkable, she can't support herself through talent, she must be submissive, she must work as a governess, she must "keep her thoughts to herself" (290), the reader must imagine Gwendolen as "one who had been made to believe in his own divinity finding all homage withdrawn, and himself to perform a miracle that would recall the homage and restore his own confidence" (290). Even at this crushing realization, Gwendolen finds power in the process of negation: "'Very well; and I wish to have the pleasure of refusing him'" (295). She

refuses the offers of other men and she initially refuses Grandcourt – the refusal termed as “inspiring” (299). As a way to save herself from a life as a governess, she refuses to take the position and marries Grandcourt. The narrator classifies her married life and submission to Grandcourt’s mastery as “the practical submission which hid her constructive rebellion” (604). Eliot sketches a feminine character who understands the art of submission gives way to a concealment of inward rebellion. This inward rebellion rattles Gwendolen’s frame of mind and often leads to a “[growing] self-dread which urged her to flee from the pursuing images wrought by her pent-up impulse[s]” (673). Without outward expression, the inward rebellion (the internalization of aggressive impulses) leads to a break in her frame of mind. The narrator asks if Gwendolen is mad when she reads a letter from Lydia Glasher and holds Grandcourt’s marital gift of diamonds in her hands: “the sight of him brought a new nervous shock, and Gwendolen screamed again and again with hysterical violence” (359). This hysteria finds an echo in Gwendolen’s state of mind after the death of her husband: “was she in a state of delirium into which there entered a sense of concealment and necessity for self-repression” (698)? She blames herself and cites her murderous thoughts as evidence for her evil. Gwendolen turns the aggression she felt for Grandcourt inward at the very moment she finds relief from his oppression. Despite the narrator’s continual judgment of Gwendolen and almost obsessive compulsion to detail her vanity and her faults, she survives at the end of the text (where Grandcourt does not). Marian Lewes constructs a character who manipulates others with her femininity, is severely punished for her vanity, but survives the text by turning aggression inward in order to erase femininity. Gwendolen’s self-castration leads to the restoration of feminine authority over the Grandcourt property.

In comparison to Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda*, Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* represents a different variation of the female self-castrator. She is the sacrificing St. Theresa, “foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed” (4). Dorothea sacrifices her “plan drawing” to devote herself entirely to the studies of her husband and his pursuit of *The Key to all Mythologies*. Her notions of marriage are traditional and she prefers to “have all those matters decided for [her]” (75). The narrator carefully crafts the reader’s understanding of Dorothea’s character by stating:

her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there; she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects; likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractions, and then to incur martyrdom after all in a quarter where she had not sought it. (8)

This lofty conception of Dorothea’s world continually butts up against the will of the text through the marriage plot. Like most of Eliot’s female characters, Dorothea “suffers” from the disease of intensity. The will of the text (and the *wills* presented in the text: Casaubon’s will dictating the terms of Dorothea’s future marriage and Peter Featherstone’s will) forces the female characters to choose between a life given over to intensity and the subjugation of intensity. For Dorothea, the narrator defines this subjugation as a “martyrdom.” Dorothea’s first instance of self-castration comes in the form of the erasure of this theoretical mind and a quieting of the yearning for a “lofty conception of the world.” At the end of the book, Dorothea’s proclamation to Will that “I shall have a little kingdom then, where I shall give laws” (367)

comes to fruition and illustrates the power a woman can have through an initial process of self-castration. Dorothea finds power in her submission and, as the narrator points out, “all active thought with which she had before been representing to herself [...] all this vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power” (788). While Dorothea does not embody the violent female character, her devotion to privation in the service of others serves to thwart her planned trajectory. The death of Casaubon and her marriage to Ladislav, while presenting her with financial limitations, is ultimately a reward for her process of self-castration.

Conversely, Eliot offers a more violent trajectory of Rosamond Vincy Lydgate’s process of female self-castration. The narrator clearly favors the feminine shadow cast by Dorothea. In his descriptions of Rosamond, the reader imagines a haughty, manipulative, irresponsible, and shallow woman. Readers can find a clear comparison between Rosamond Vincy and Gwendolen Harleth. Like Gwendolen, Rosamond uses marriage as a way to lift her socio-economic standing. Both Gwendolen and Rosamond feel threatened by the union, as Rosamond realizes it had “fulfilled none of her hopes, and had been quite spoiled for her imagination” (752). Unlike Dorothea, Rosamond’s visions of marriage are quite fantastic and unrealistic. Rosamond’s desire not to serve but to be served, does not serve her well in the end. According to the narrator, “Rosamond’s discontent in her marriage was due the conditions of marriage itself, to its demand for self-suppression and tolerance” (753) and she sought out ways to use her aspects of femininity (crying, beauty, and fits of madness) as a way to control those around her. Unlike Dorothea, Rosamond’s lofty conception of the world has more to do with controlling others (Lydgate in particular) than it does with being controlled. Eliot highlights Rosamond’s propensity toward a violence turned inward in two specific moments.



As the wife to a medical doctor whose work focuses on the discovery of “primitive tissue” by applying the “threads of investigation” through a “diligent application” of the scalpel and the microscope, Rosamond’s body endures strict social, moral, and medical observation. Her attempts to avoid these types of surveillance illustrate her intense desire to enact the process of violent self-castration in order to gain authority in the text. Paradoxically, Rosamond calls attention to her body in her various endeavors to illicit male attention. While Rosamond thrusts her feminine form into the textual spotlight, she simultaneously seeks to diminish her femininity. For example, Lydgate forbids Rosamond from riding, an exercise she enjoys and covets more because it has brought her closer to Captain Lydgate. However, Lydgate’s will has less to do with the connection Rosamond hoped to forge with the Quallingham family and more to do with his fear over her medical “condition.” Lydgate fears the excessive exercise would result in a miscarriage. However, Rosamond acts against Lydgate’s medical mandate because she “had that victorious obstinacy which never wastes its energy in impetuous resistance” (585). Rosamond, indeed, loses the baby and Lydgate realizes a “sense of his powerlessness over [her]” (586). Against the medical advice of her husband, and the knowledge that such activities, in her case, could lead to the loss of her baby, Rosamond does what she was not to do. Her actions illustrate a desire to strip that which would define her as a woman (a mother) in order to maintain control over her body. She is willing to enact violence upon her “tissue” in order to annihilate the body that could be analyzed, governed, and surveyed.

Rosamond skirts any possibility of submission. Lydgate cannot reason with her and cannot “conquer her assent” (660). The narrator claims Lydgate wants to “smash and grind some object on which he could at least produce and impression, or else to tell her brutally that he was master, and she must obey” (660). However, since Rosamond has worked continually to

maintain control of her body, her malleability is out of reach. The final act of Rosamond's power comes in an unlikely form – she holds the key to Dorothea's happiness, but must sacrifice her own in granting it to another. Inspired by the “novelty of pain” and later in a fit of fainting, she throws “herself on the bed with her clothes on, and [laid] in apparent torpor, as she had done once before on a memorable day of grief” (the loss of her furniture to the creditors) (780).

Through the process of self-induced trauma, Rosamond recovers her character in the eyes of the narrator and community of readers. She clears up the confusion between Dorothea and Will and paves the way for their eventual happiness. The inward violence, the fits of nervousness, the obstinacy, the failure to succumb to the mastery of her husband serves a greater good. It allows Marian to create a character she can severely punish, and in the act of punishment the author can relive the process of castration while enacting it upon her textual creations.

All of Eliot's female characters suffer, they inflict pain upon the others and upon their own bodies, they sacrifice, and they are punished. The vengeful author/god uses the creation of each character in order to mimic and displace the pain she feels as a castrated being and, through this process of displacement, she is able to gain agency. The female characters in Eliot's texts also operate within the process of self-abasement. This process, as I have argued in this chapter and in the first, actually enables some female Victorian writers agency. Marian's textual productions represent her understanding of self-castration as an avenue toward (feminine) authorial power.

### Chapter Three

#### *The Mother's Knife: Dickens and Female Violence*

*The writer is someone who plays with his mother's body [...] in order to glorify it, to embellish it, or in order to dismember it, or take it to the limit of what can be known about the body [...] (Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, 37)*

Charles Dickens's concern with the disruption and degradation of the Victorian "angel in the house" has its genesis in his relationships with the women in his life. Dickens's obsession with the feminine body and the limits of control over feminine power through textual creation pervades the plot lines of his novels. The major variant between the female writers who use castration as a means towards agency and Dickens is that the female writers employ the process of self-castration to foster identity whereas Dickens's literature operates under a fear of castration, ultimately silencing the fear in order to return civilization to its "appropriate" male/female power relationship. While Brontë and Eliot are creating female characters who successfully gain agency through a process of self-castration, Dickens creates female characters who self-castrate *and* castrate others. While Jane and Lucy prosper through self-initiated castration, Dickens's characters pervert authority, unleash authoritative vengeance, and seek to use their power to destroy others in the text. While George Eliot reenacts the process of castration in order to harness the power by possessing the authority over her own "lack," Dickens works to punish these powerful, castrating women by silencing them through textual annihilation.

Dickens's castrating female characters are not on the periphery, but rather integral and necessary to the plot development. The "good" angels, those Dickens rewards in the end, are often minor in comparison to vengeful and demonic egos he presents as their antitheses. These plots arise out of his intense castration anxiety borne of his fear of domestic feminine perversion, which, in his view, would disrupt the legitimate and national political narratives of middle-class domestic harmony. Dickens uses the image of the grotesque, over-sexed, de-feminized, and brutal avenging woman as a way to create a language of violence. His use of narrative as a way to access the oedipal desire to return to the mother allows him, as the quote that leads this section exemplifies a desire to "play with his mother's body [...] in order to glorify it, to embellish it, or in order to dismember it, or take it to the limit of what can be known about the body" (Barthes 37). His primal desire to return to the mother does not arise from his desire to return harmoniously to the body from which he came, but rather it is a desire of revenge, in which he returns to the body to annihilate it. Furthermore, his desire to return to the mother rises out of a castration anxiety that can only be relieved by the punishment of the female characters who threaten the Victorian male.

As a male author during the rise of critical esteem for the novel genre, Dickens enjoyed certain privileges and defined his project in different terms than female writers like Brontë and Eliot. Unlike these women, he did not need to use a pseudonym after he became established. Although the early signature of Boz was initially used in the 1830s publications of his *Sketches*, by the end of 1834, when "The Boarding-House—No. II" was published in the *Monthly Magazine* "the previous stories had been sufficiently successful to make anonymity as self-protection unnecessary" (Kaplan 63). Unlike Brontë and Eliot, Dickens's ethos as a male writer underwrote a presumed authority on the subject of authorship. Furthermore, the project of

authorship reform during the 1830s, championed by Thomas Carlyle, lead to a linkage of the aesthetic improvement of written production to domestic and nationalistic improvement.<sup>23</sup>

According to Alexis Easley in *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media 1830-1870*, “Carlyle’s project – along with many other critics of the 1830s -- was to reestablish a sense of ethical responsibility in the literary marketplace, thereby reinstilling moral values in the process of literary production” (16). The fact that this “project” established the early Victorian notion of novel writing, and the fact that the growing circle of literary critics in the 1830s and early 1840s were exclusionary to women authors is not a coincidence. Female authorship carried a taint and was seen as something better suited for the realm of sentimental fiction (hence, the need for Currer Bell and George Eliot). Since the role of the novel changed and it had, by this time, become a conduit for moral instruction and political transformation, the author of such productions must carry with him the presumption of authority through his ability to “communicate across class boundaries by virtue of his masculinity—defined as his breadth of knowledge, courage, and disinterestedness” (Easley 17). So, the exigency varies drastically between Brontë and Eliot and Dickens. Where the two female writers work to conceal their femininity in hopes of entering the literary intelligentsia Dickens, by virtue of his sex, does not share their anxiety. Since Dickens comes to the writing table with masculine ethos in his hand, he can write in order to initiate national reform policies—policies that included education, criminal and prostitution rehabilitation, and adequate housing for the poor. These “projects” receive attention in his novels and magazine publications and coincide with his real-life work with Miss Coutts.<sup>24</sup>

However, the exigency for Brontë and Eliot resides in the internal desire to lend voice and agency to the female body. Their political aspirations are overshadowed by their prevailing

drive to use the process of writing as a way to discover their own identity. The process of self-fashioning, the power their characters gain through the process of self-castration, is influential and frightening to a writer like Dickens, who envisions a stable English society: separate feminine and masculine roles. In reading the narratives of power through castration and threat in the novels of Brontë and Eliot, Dickens recognized the work of these two novelists as a potential threat to the more politically minded, and critically sanctioned work of the Victorian male writers.

The letters of George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, and Charles Dickens illustrate authorial interest in each other's works. Although Dickens's incoming correspondence suffered the fate of a backyard bonfire in which his sons Henry and Plorn "gleefully carried one basket after another from his study" (Kaplan 17) to the fire their father had built for their ill-fated depository, biographers have been able to pull together some of his outgoing letters to John Forster (who later became Dickens biographer), Wilkie Collins, William Makepeace Thackeray, and George Eliot, just to name a few. Brontë, beginning her writing career during Dickens's publication of *Dombey and Son* (1848); and her writing of *Villette* during the monthly installment publications of *Bleak House* (1852), was clearly reading Dickens, as indicated by a letter to George Smith on March 11, 1852. It is safe to assume that Dickens read the publications of the geographically isolated and mysterious Currer Bell, as her correspondence with male members (Lewes and Thackeray) of the growing London literary circle, of which Dickens was an avid member, illustrates her "inclusion" if not in body, then as a subject of their critical discussions. Dickens's erotically charged epistolary relationship with George Eliot depicts his interest in and reverence for the budding author. In his January 18, 1858 letter to the author of "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton" and "Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story", Dickens invites the writer to "show me

the face of the man or woman who has written so charmingly.”<sup>25</sup> As I discussed in my previous chapter, the correspondence is erotically charged in that Dickens asks the writer to step outside of the secret she has carefully constructed out of her need for authorial and personal protection. His desire to denude the masculine writer plays into his fantasy to call forth the body in order to gaze upon it. He claims his motives are not “vulgar” and not a “mere curiosity.” What the letter does illustrate is Dickens’s preoccupation with power and female sexuality and how women gain power through textual reproduction.

### **I. Monsters in His House: Dickens and the Genesis of Sexual Dysfunction**

For Charles Dickens, the woman who wields the greatest threat is the one who tries to emasculate him. Elizabeth Dickens, Charles Dickens’s mother, serves as the origin of Dickens’s dysfunctional sexual identity. While there is little direct evidence to support the “abandonment” Dickens proffers as the mode of his childhood upbringing, it is clear he felt abandoned by his mother. The Dickens family struggled through periods of financial instability, which ultimately resulted in Dickens’s class humiliation. Elizabeth Dickens was far from the “angel in the house,” an image of woman that Dickens would later insist upon in both his personal life and literary productions. Mrs. Dickens did not manage the home, she did not look after her children’s best interests, she did not shower them with love and attention, and she often withdrew any form of nurturing affection from those who sought it. While his father John Dickens ran up debts, Elizabeth did nothing to economize the household. In February 1824, John Dickens was imprisoned because of an outstanding forty pound debt to the family’s baker. After the debt was paid, and John was released from prison, Elizabeth committed the ultimate sin: she insisted on Charles’s continued employment in the blacking factory. This transgression,

one for which Elizabeth never received forgiveness, forged a strong notion in Charles's young mind that a mother's role was to protect and nurture, not to deprive and humiliate. As Fred Kaplan points out, writing became "one way out of the blacking factory, one way to go back even further into childhood and into the myth of the blameless mother, whom he would have much preferred to the mother he had" (65).

In 1830, Charles met Maria Beadnell. He was looking for a woman that stood in great contrast to his neglectful mother, a woman who "would nurture and support him, who would be good, beautiful, and morally elevated genius of his aspirations" (Kaplan 50-51). The love-struck eighteen-year-old found his "judgment was significantly off-target" as Maria turned out to be "too much like his mother, self-involved and emotionally frivolous" (51). So, his first attempt to replace his mother with a sexual and companionate partner failed. His attempts to court her were met with cold rebuke.<sup>26</sup> The relationship between Maria and Charles would later find a place in his literature: Estella and Pip in *Great Expectations*.

Out of the despair and humiliation of the neglect of his mother and rebuke by Maria Beadnell comes Dickens's intense desire to fulfill the projection of Victorian masculine identity. He needed to marry, which necessitated finding a woman whom he could control. In 1835 he met Catherine Hogarth, whom he envisioned as the patriarchal middle-class home where "marriage to an amiable, conventional, sweet-tempered, and domestic woman, would cooperate with his desires to be master of his own home (Kaplan 67). Nonetheless, The relationship between Dickens and Catherine was always mediated, in a sense, by a third party. In the early days of their marriage, Mary Hogarth, Catherine's younger sister, lived with the Dickenses and became the domestic companion to both husband and wife. His sexual life with Catherine produced ten children (and at least three failed pregnancies) and provided the "necessary



foundations of his adult self-definition [of] a successful member of the middle-class community” (Kaplan 162). Yet the efforts he made to ensure his place in the middle-class ideal, his union with Catherine never fit fully into the image of womanhood he had created and insisted upon. The triangulation between Charles, Catherine, and Mary came closer to the ideal middle-class relationship in that “the faultless Mary [was] a better mother, a better sister and a better Catherine, an alternate Catherine, a completion of Catherine, adding insight, sympathy and intelligent understanding (94). However, the family bliss received a horrendous shock with the death of Mary Hogarth in 1837. Dying in Dickens’s arms, he removed the ring from her finger and wore it from that point on. As David Holbrook points out in “Dickens’s Own Relationships with Women”, the death weighed heavily on Dickens’s psyche and when Mary died, “[he] bought a double plot in Kensal Green cemetery, hoping to be buried alongside her when he died” (168).

The disruption of the marital triangulation did not last long. After Mary’s death, Catherine’s sister Georgina moved in with the family. With Dickens’s commercial success and popularity as a novelist, minor actor, critic, editor, and publisher, the family did not need to worry about finances. Dickens had successfully pulled himself from the depths of class humiliation; however, his private life and relationship with Catherine remained tenuous. An unfulfilled marital satisfaction often lead Dickens to invest in inappropriate and insensitive relationships with other women. But “while Dickens knew women in the flesh, he spent a lifetime trying to ‘find’ her in art,” (Holbrook 167) and his fictional creations portray a clear interest in using his art to manufacture the pain he received by women and the pleasure he experienced in punishing them. By 1858, his marriage with Catherine ended – the two remained married but lived separately. In a letter to Forster, Dickens claims “I must do *something*, or I

shall wear my heart away. I can see no better thing to do that is half so hopeful in itself, or half so well suited to my restless state” (qtd in Kaplan 384). The pain exhibited by this letter in the shadow of his separation from Catherine depicts a man searching for a way to *survive*. Just as he saw his mother as a woman who threatened his given right to survive in the world, Catherine had taken on this role and threatened to “wear his heart away.” Although modifications to the Divorce laws by this time had made it somewhat easier to lawfully sever marital ties, Dickens could not risk the damage that a divorce might levy on his public image.

Dickens’s bond with Ellen Ternan, a stage actress whom he met in 1857 during the stage production of *Frozen Deeps*, precipitated a change in Dickens’s relations with women. The separation allowed Dickens to expunge the Monsters from his Gad’s Hill house (Catherine returned to the Hogarth home). Georgina Hogarth remained with Dickens at Gad’s Hill Place and fulfilled the role of the domestic (non-sexual) angel.<sup>27</sup> With Georgina as the keeper of the domestic sphere and as mother of the Dickens children and Ellen Ternan and her mother and sister in a house in Slough, Dickens effectively split the companionate and sexual components of his life. By eradicating the monsters from his house, he is able to keep the threatening women at bay. For Dickens the woman who possesses the strongest threat is the one who works to emasculate him through her neglect and abandonment (Elizabeth Dickens), rebuke and humiliation (Maria Beadnell), failure to understand and support his intellect and inability to nurture his children (Catherine), and capacity to rule him through her sexual maturity (Ellen Ternan). With all of these women safely in their place, Dickens’s home represents middle-class domestic harmony, with Georgina at the helm.

## II. Oedipal Perversions and Castration Anxiety

Dickens's fiction, specifically the novels *Bleak House*, *The Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations*, enacts the desire to return to the mother in order to manipulate ("play with") her body, "in order to glorify it, to embellish it, or in order to dismember it" (Barthes 37). Barthes asks in *The Pleasure of the Text*: "Doesn't every narrative lead back to Oedipus? Isn't storytelling always a way of searching for one's origin, speaking one's conflicts with the Law, entering into the dialectic of tenderness and hatred" (47)? If the exigency for writing is inextricably linked to the desire for origin, what can be said of the desire to return in order to annihilate? What sort of "self" rises out of this journey toward committing ruin and annihilation? Writing is, as Barthes elucidates, a project of the Oedipal desire to return to the mother and, as he further points out, once the author arrives at the door housing maternal sexuality and the place of his origin, he can choose to glorify it or disfigure it. Writing is always, therefore, a desire to obtain origin, which means that it is also a libidinal drive towards death.<sup>28</sup> Hence, the maternal organ/origin represents a threat of being consumed, one that entices with a promise of self-realization while simultaneously terrorizes the author's process of self-actualization. For Dickens, origin equals threat. However, he displaces the traditional locus of threat, shifting it from the paternal to maternal order.

In the traditional (Freudian) psychoanalytic oedipal complex, the fear of castration arises from the child's threat to the paternal order. The father, once he acknowledges the child's desire to satiate a libidinal desire to return to the mother, recapitulates his paternal dominance through the threat of castration. At both the psychoanalytic (Freud) and linguistic (Lacan) levels, the law of the father bars the completion of return to the mother and imposes the following threat narrative: I will castrate you, as I have your mother, and thwart your desire for self-identity. In

Dickens's literature, however, it appears the traditional understanding of the oedipal complex suffers from a perversion of threat origin. Whereas the paternal order looms large over the libidinal desires of "normal" sexual function, Dickens exchanges the paternal threat for the maternal one. While the desire to return remains the same, the threat one encounters at the precipice is not the hand of the father, but rather the cruel and emasculating hand of the mother.

This, of course, must mean that the mother has appropriated the phallus. Perhaps the mother has already castrated the father (in the case of Mrs. Joe and Joe Gargery in *Great Expectations*). Perhaps the mother wields the threat of the phallus by the concealment of a determinant secret that results in a sexual body that carries an immoral and aberrant taint (as in the case of Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*). The maternal figure may have obtained the phallus by reinscribing the role of mother and she rears her offspring to entice and then emasculate all those who hope to domesticate her (Miss Havisham and Estella in *Great Expectations*). Or, finally, perhaps the maternal figure is no mother at all, but rather a blood thirsty and cruel punisher who perverts the domestic activities of knitting and the feminine qualities of beauty (Madame Defarge in *Tale of Two Cities*). In each of these novels, it is clear Dickens fears the powerful sexual female and that his notion of this female is one based on the perversion of the oedipal complex. Dickens eroticizes these women, depicting them in terms of male libidinal desire, but it is "sexual maturity in the [women] that is so dangerous." As Holbrook suggests, "adult sexuality" is the "menace, threatening murder and confusion, because out of this dark, unconscious realm arise the fantasies of infant fears of dangerous voracious appetite" (170).

Dickens's fiction exemplifies a tie between social structuring and libidinal desires. I interpret his obsession with the link between community and sexuality as process writing, which enables him to purge his fictive worlds of the frightening concoction of sex and community in

order to return them to the Victorian period's more traditional model. In his real life, Dickens worked to separate the domestic and sexual spheres. He quenched his strongest passions and elicit sexual appetite *outside* of the home. He obsessively guarded the hearth and ensured the harmony and sanctity of that sphere by having Mary and Georgina, two women who did not pose a sexual threat, rule it with their pure, angelic hands. Dickens's sexual desires remained far away from the sacred home. Some only came to fruition in his mind, like his sexual fantasies of Queen Victoria.<sup>29</sup> Other sexual fantasies came closer to physical actualization, as in the case of Augusta de la Rue, who became his "patient" and was periodically (often late at night and without the presence of her husband or any other attendant) mesmerized by Dickens in his attempt to cure her of her bodily ailments. Instead of conflating and living within the competing dynamic of the pleasure and reality principles, Dickens chooses to separate the two, so that each would not suffer the influence of the other. It is in Dickens's literature that readers observe the strict labor of narrator to delineate between the pure and domestic woman and the foul and vengeful and castrating one. Once he makes this line clear, the plot abandons the story of the "good" woman and concerns itself with the tainted one. In doing so, Dickens enables the narrator (an extension of himself) to work through the oedipal perversion, thus dispelling the fear of castration through narrative annihilation. Dickens's "deep unconscious fear of women" and his "dread of sexuality in women impels the need to control women, and to oblige her to seek 'repentance,' to make massive reparation and be submissive" (Holbrook 176). Where as Jane Eyre and Lucy Snow enact a process of self-castration in order to gain agency and power in their narratives, Dickens's characters enter the text with their powers securely holstered. Where as George Eliot seeks to use the process of self-castration as a way to re-experience her own castrative moments in order to gain a vengeful upper hand and relive the moment of castrative

power over her textual productions, Dickens rescues the power of castration from the hands of women and places it safely in the male narrator's grip. The punishments (deaths, living deaths, and narrative deaths) of Miss Havisham, Molly, Estella, and Mrs. Joe in *Great Expectations* and Lady Dedlock and Esther Summerson in *Bleak House* and Madame Defarge in *Tale of Two Cities* exemplifies this author's will over women who seek power through self-castration and use that power to instill (through the perversion of the oedipal desire) castration anxiety and actual emasculation over the men in the novels.

### III. Violent Signification: A Linguistic Impossibility?

In addition to the perversion of the locus of castration anxiety, the powerful female also disrupts the meaning derived from what Ferdinand de Saussure calls the *sign*. With the two principles of the sign, the *signifier* and the *signified*, Saussure charts the linguistic process of marking (signifier) to concept (signified) to the referent or image (sign) that has an arbitrary association to the markings on the page or the sound-image produced by those marks.<sup>30</sup> While the association between the marks on the page and the sound-image and the sign is always, in Saussurean linguistics, arbitrary and conventional, the Victorian period's obsession with classification portrays a societal (and, perhaps aesthetic) push toward "fixed" meaning. As the nineteenth century progressed, the medical profession's curiosity about the female body shows a clear indication of a desire to know or to figure her out. Additionally, the female mind became a preoccupation of many writers during this time period, which points to a drive (by the medical, literary, and legal professions) to explore the limits of the female body and mind in order to have an concrete knowledge of their constitution. Furthermore, the legal and educational systems worked hard to pin women down, in a sense, to govern marriage and divorce, child custody

issues, property ownership, and proper feminine decorum while setting standards for appropriate feminine activities, dress, hygiene, etc. Coventry Patmore's poem, "The Angel in the House" did as much to fix the meaning of the ideal woman in the Victorian period as the medical, legal, educational, and social systems. The angel in the house has a clear sign in Victorian fiction – its status is not arbitrary, but carefully and methodically fixed. Certainly for Dickens's the image ideal of the "proper" Victorian woman came easily to his mind. His literature is full of the recognizable figure and represents the period's insistence on making the definition of woman less arbitrary and more stable.

Despite the Saussurean notion of arbitrary meaning in the sign, the concentrated efforts during the nineteenth century to explore her, define her, and fix her in a linguistic certitude highlights an important message for Dickensian readers: a fear that woman can exist in the slippage between arbitrary and fixed meaning; a fear that woman can subvert the efforts of social systems in order to make her image meaningless (without a fixed meaning in Victorian society)—or worse beyond linguistical representation at all (without an ideal image in Victorian society). Woman, therefore, could mean the submissive help mate who manages the home and nurtures her husband and children, or woman could mean the cruel and neglecting figure opposed to the patriarchal rule. The second of these signs emasculates and damages the Victorian masculine ego-ideal. Dickens's literature presents a forum for which the grotesque woman (grotesque in her arbitrary meaning) suffers harsh punishment in order to reinstate the fixed image of Victorian femininity (and, hence provide for the growth of masculine identity as well).

Woman's resistance to a "fixing" in language must first occur at the linguistic level and, therefore, this resistance operates within a structure of violence. Lady Dedlock, Miss Havisham,

Molly, Estella, Mrs. Joe, and Madame Defarge are grotesque representations of femininity and in their perversion of the feminine ideal, they are violent, sexually irregular, unforgiving, unsympathetic and vengeful characters. Dickens's preoccupation with violence and his ability to express violence in language leads to narratives that are always on the verge of a linguistic rupture. In these moments, the language cannot fully represent the violence Dickens intends. Instead, Dickens must use an unstructured structure. The narratives in *Bleak House*, *Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations* are most compelling when they stretch the limits of linguistic signification—when, through a process of mimesis, the language slips in order to lend meaning through the slippage instead of through the marks on the page. To put it more clearly, Dickens must imitate through language the violence that resists linguistical structuring. This imitation takes shape because of his use of ellipses, dashes, fragment sentences, and tense shifts. The manner of the narrative appears “frantic” on the page so that the *way* Dickens writes lends the meaning to *what* he intends. To speak violence is to give structure (through the narrative) to a physical act that is innately unstructured. Take the following excerpt from *Great Expectations* as an example of this linguistic failure. Pip has just confronted Miss Havisham and forced her to recognize her cruel manipulation of Estella and him. After he secures financial support for Herbert, elicits a woeful “O! What have I done! What have I done” (394) from the wasted woman, Pip “could look upon her without compassion, seeing her punishment in the ruin she was, in her profound unfitness for this earth” and take his leave of her, “the vanity of remorse, the vanity of unworthiness” (394). When Pip returns to assure himself of Miss Havisham's safety, he witnesses a “great flaming light spring up” and Miss Havisham coming toward him in a “shrieking” “whirl” of fire (397).



That I got them off, closed with her, threw her down, and got them over her; that I dragged the great cloth from the table for the same purpose, and with it dragged down the heap of rottenness in the midst, and all the ugly things that sheltered there; that we were on the ground struggling like desperate enemies, and that the closer I covered her, the more wildly she shrieked and tried to free herself; that this occurred I knew through the result, but not through anything I felt, or thought, or knew I did. I knew nothing until I knew that we were on the floor by the great table [...] Then, I looked round and saw the disturbed beetles and spiders running away over the floor, and the servants coming in with breathless cries at the door. I still held her forcibly down with all my strength, like a prisoner who might escape; and I doubt if I even knew who she was, or why we had struggled, or that she had been in flames, or that the flames were out [...] (397)

The retelling of the violent interaction between Pip and Miss Havisham has an immediacy about it but must reside in the past tense. So, with all this time having passed by, Pip is still unable to fully express the moment of his violent attempt to save her. The incoherent sentence structure, with the succession of subordinating conjunctions leads the reader through a series of actions that even the narrator fails to understand then or now: “I knew nothing” and “not through anything I felt, or thought, or knew I did.” Additionally, the faulty syntax works to obscure the subject of the sentence, which further highlights language’s rupture and inability to signify *violence*. Pip confuses the actions of rescue and the actions of violence: “I still held her forcibly down with all my strength, like a prisoner who might escape” and Miss Havisham “shrieked” and they struggled like “desperate enemies.” Curt Hartog argues in his article “The Rape of Miss Havisham” that the scene illustrates “a rich nexus of psychological intentions, the core being a

symbolic revenge—rape—aimed at violating and degrading Woman in order to free the self from fixation” (259). By conflating the language of eroticism and the language of violence, Dickens sets up a system in which the signification of violence and erotic desires are co-dependent.

Another example of this linguistic co-dependency occurs in the description of Mrs. Joe’s brutal attack. After Mrs. Joe makes clear her desire to be Orlick’s “master” and his response to her display of authority by claiming “I’d hold you, if you was my wife. I hold you under the pump, and choke it out of you” (111 and 112) Pip and Joe find Mrs. Joe on the kitchen floor “lying without sense or movement [...] knocked down by a tremendous blow on the back of the head” (117). The result of this blow to the head is Mrs. Joe’s inability to be on the ram-page from that day forward and, more significantly, her loss of signification all together. The “gloomy aberration of mind,” (120) imbecility, and communication through “mysterious” signs that would appear on her slate (121) indicate a failure of language to speak of violence. The curious “T” Mrs. Joe traces on the slate does not stand for toast, or tar, or tub (121), but is rather a pictorial representation of a hammer. In the retelling of violence, language falters and becomes abstract and beyond all signification. In fact, Pip never actually narrates the moment of his sister’s attack; the reader pulls together a notion of its brutality by scattered clues: his sister’s condition, the discarded weapon and, later, the brutal nature of her attacker, Orlick. Just as in the moment of Pip’s “saving” the burning Miss Havisham, Dickens imbues the language of violence with eroticism. Pip “lustily” calls the word hammer in his sister’s ear, to which she enthusiastically “hammer[s] on the table” to express “a qualified assent” (121). When Pip summons Orlick to the kitchen in hopes his sister will denounce him as her attacker, Mrs. Joe expresses an “anxiety to be on good terms with him” and was “much pleased by his being at length produced.” At her motioning, Orlick is offered a drink and she “showed every possible

desire to conciliate him”(122). The hammer, an obvious phallic symbol stands to represent Orlick (the man with power over her) and, therefore has further meaning as the transfer of power (from Mrs. Joe to her “master”). Mrs. Joe receives a sensation of pleasure in calling him to stand before her, as Pip notes: “After that day, a day rarely passed without her drawing the hammer on her slate” (122). Conflating violence and desire, Dickens points an inability to separate the two. And, if the two stand together in the field of signification, Dickens, in order to rid the text of one, must rid the text of the other.

In *Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens’s conflation of eroticism and violence can be clearly noted when...

There could not be fewer than five hundred people, and they were dancing like five thousand demons. There was not other music than their own singing. They danced to the popular Revolution song, keeping a ferocious time that was like a gnashing of teeth in unison. Men and women danced together, women danced together [...] they advanced, retreated, struck at one another’s hands, clutched one another’s heads, spun round alone, caught one another and spun around in pairs, until many of them dropped [...] then the ring broke, and in separate rings of two and four they turned and turned until they all stopped at once, began again, struck, clutched, and tore [...] No fight could have been half so terrible as this dance.

(288-89)

The men and women in this “healthy pastime changed into a means of angering the blood and bewildering the senses” (289) gnash their teeth, strike, clutch and tear. Dickens calls the Carmagnole “warped and perverted” and the language here works to support my argument: Dickens confuses the language of violence and the language of eroticism (bodies clutching and

tearing at each other) to such an extent that the two languages become one in the same. In this process of conflation, the author has no choice but to extinguish both narratives of eroticism and desire. Dickens's insistence in the conflation throughout his oeuvre serves a grand reformatory purpose: by linking violence and erotic sexuality, Dickens is able to control the two parts of the dangerous feminine ideal and expel them from his textual productions. In order to excise the grotesque female, he must go further than narrating her propensities towards violence (an inaccessible process given the difficulty of language to fully represent the narrative of violence). Dickens must bring the feminine form—the body—center stage as a way to show how violence disfigures the feminine body. Once the body appears in the text, Dickens can play with it, recover it, mutilate it, dismember it, and erase it.

#### **IV. *Rewarding the Present Body and Absent Voice: Esther's Narrative in Bleak House***

Is the first number of *Bleak House* generally admired? I liked the Chancery part, but when it passes into the autobiographic form, and the young woman who announces that she is not “bright” begins her history, it seems to me too often weak and twaddling; an amiable nature is caricatured, not faithfully rendered, in Miss Esther Summerson.<sup>31</sup>

Charlotte Brontë read the first number of *Bleak House* while meditating and completing *Villette*. The contrast between Lucy Snow, who Matthew Arnold characterized as having “hunger, rage, and rebellion” and Esther Summerson, who Brontë calls “weak and twaddling” alludes to a fundamental difference in the two works. Dickens does not see the aim of the female autobiography as a process toward agency (as I argue it is in Brontë's texts *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*). Rather, Esther's narrative elevates her speaking self while simultaneously threatening

to destroy her because it is a narrative that undergoes the editing and reshaping (the castration) of the third-person companion narrator. What perhaps annoyed Charlotte Brontë in the “caricatured” rendition of an “amiable” Esther, who works to present her own history, is the fact that she never fully utilizes the power narrative affords her. However, Dickens’s mind does not bend easily to the aim of individual (feminist) reform. As the novel depicts, his overarching goal in *Bleak House* remains tied to his notions of social and domestic reform. The women characters in *Bleak House*, especially Esther Summerson and Lady Dedlock, understand the urge toward obscurity and self-effacement, not as a way to agency, but rather, as a way to survive through compliance. Furthermore, Esther and Lady Dedlock suffer from the narrative’s insistence that their bodies take center stage. Esther’s narrative calls forth the body she is at pains to reveal. The third-person omniscient and parts of Esther’s first-person narrative call forth the sexually tainted body of Lady Dedlock, which, once denuded of the fashionable clothing, reveals her sexual secret and ultimately leads to her death.<sup>32</sup>

Women in *Bleak House*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations*, represent the greatest threat to the Victorian masculine ego-ideal. By their failure to regulate the home, by their participation in traditionally masculine activities, and by their inability to remain sexually pure, they threaten to contaminate the domestic sphere and its inhabitants. *Bleak House*, specifically, presents the problematic issues of female sexual impropriety, philanthropy, and illegitimacy. In the more comic pages of the novel, Dickens chastises the female philanthropist: the woman who devotes herself wholly to causes beyond her own home—beyond her own nation, in fact. Timothy Crens argues that in *Bleak House* Dickens symbolizes his notions of national reform and that “Mrs. Jellyby reveals how Dickens adapts contemporary material to construct an ideological nexus of gender and empire” (123). Mrs. Jellyby’s home is “not only

very untidy, but very dirty,” and the home is without hot water and “they couldn’t find the kettle, and the boiler was out of order” (53 and 55). To add to the exasperated state of the home, the Jellyby kids are unkempt, wild, “jaded and unhealthy looking” (53). The moments in the narrative that include the plot lines of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle serve as instruction and forewarning: when a woman steps outside of her appropriate role, she threatens the familial structure. Esther serves as a model of feminine correctness. The homes she visits are immediately influenced by her womanly (and motherly) presence. The two Bleak Houses in the novel represent Esther’s ability to resurrect the domestic sphere. Esther transforms John Jarndyce’s Bleak House with her sense of duty and her basket of keys and is rewarded with her own new Bleak House at the conclusion of the novel.

*Bleak House’s* dual narrator works on the present/absent continuum. Esther’s body is certainly present in the text, whereas her voice remains malleable, edited, and sometimes absent altogether. Esther’s narrative provides little agency in that it can’t stand on its own. Her narrative only gains substance through the power of another narrative voice – an omniscient and unseen male voice. Esther Summerson symbolizes what Dickens sees as the domestic potential for self-castrating women. She stands in direct contrast to the other major female character in the novel, Lady Dedlock, Esther’s mother. Esther’s self-depravation and narrative timidity is compensated by the novel’s end – she marries Woodcourt and through this marriage she erases the illegitimacy that plagued her since birth. Esther’s first contribution to the novel highlights her inability to signify: “Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers. The time will come – and soon enough – when you will understand this better, and will feel it too, as no one save a woman can” (30). Esther’s position in the novel reflects her position in society. Her illegitimacy affords her few rights in the legal and social systems. In the same way, Esther’s

narrative gains significance only when paired with the third-person omniscient narrator's presence. Esther's narrative remains in the past, whereas the third-person's narration commands the present tense. Esther's narrative focuses on her personal development, whereas the other narrative takes the reader to Chancery and beyond. The third-person narration compels meaning from the text – he is the weaver who pulls together Esther's narrative and the plot lines of all the other characters. Esther's narrative cannot stand alone. Her narrative remains illegitimate without the other. Furthermore, the novel forges Esther's identity not through the work of her own narrative, but through the unspoken dialectic between the two. Therefore, Esther's history and her part in the novel can only be revealed when the companion narrative provides the necessary material. Esther, then, must write herself into the text in hopes that the companionate material will then bring forth signification. Esther cannot signify on her own. While her narration exists, it only gains its meaning through its inclusion with the third-person omniscient narrator. Unlike Lucy Snow and Jane Eyre, she does not harness the potential power of self-castration.

What Esther's narrative does is bring her body into the text. While the third-person omniscient narrator remains unseen and body-less, Esther's narratives bring her body to the page. Beth Newman explains this narrative distinction by asserting "Esther, as the writer of her story, is associated with the production of the text" and, therefore, "her voice is assigned a source in a specific body as the omniscient narrator's is not" (80). The problem here is that while Esther must present her body through narration, her textual production remains meaningless until an affirmation by an absent body. As Esther writes, she enacts a process of self-castration that is further complicated by the absent presence of the third-person narrator. The third-person narrator thwarts her will to power, which Esther should gain through the process of self-castration. As

Newman asserts, Esther's narrative is attached to a "specific body," and, therefore, her narrative depends upon her body's physical location in the text. Esther's narrative works to write her body as text. Esther's body becomes textual production. At the level of textual production, the female body can be reformed, reshaped, and recovered (from illegitimacy to the Angel of Bleak House). A clear example of how Esther narrates her body comes in Chapter 35 when she narrates her reaction to the small pox scars that mark her face. By writing her body in this chapter she makes it accessible to narrative annihilation. If her body equals textual production, and her narrative only gains meaning through the process of another's narrative work, then she does not own the signification of her own body. Esther's narrative gives over her body to another authority (the authority of the omniscient narrator). And under the rule of that authority (in Dickensian literature), feminine bodily production can be reformed.

The threat of the feminine body occupies Dickensian literature. If, as Newman points out "within every woman lies a source of pollution comparable to the ones being addressed by mid-century sanitary reformers, among whom we may count Dickens," (85) then Esther's process of narrative self-castration works to fulfill the masculine desire to find her and fix her. Since female bodies "contain a festering pool of corruption analogous to the standing pools and open sewers in Tom-All-Alone's," (85) the major contribution Esther makes to the novel is a way to combat this threat. Her present body, a body present in the production of the text and once established there, inaccessible to Esther herself, tenders a unique opportunity to use narrative in the service of social domestic management. While the structure of the dual narrative positions Esther's body in a space inaccessible to her – the text, which is dominated and regulated by the masculine omniscient narrator – the accessibility of her body to the authoritative male narrator provides the means in which woman can be more appropriately restored. Lady Dedlock



represents the deviant sexual female, which cannot be restored and must be erased. Her body carries sexual taint into the household and disrupts its order while threatening to dislocate the meaning of Esther's narrative and the overarching Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce plotline. Lady Dedlock, as Richard Gaughan asserts, "is an expert user of her language" and "her very aptitude of using her language requires a self-annihilation that results in powerlessness" (84). What Gaughan points to here is that in Lady Dedlock's case, her expertise in language also leads to her inability to escape the system. As an "expert user" she enjoys the "highest privileges of rank," but "to succeed she must so completely identify herself with the 'language' of social conventions," (84) which she cannot because of her inability to construct an identity based on the Victorian notion of femininity. In contrast to her daughter, Lady Dedlock has the power to signify within language (she has acquired the phallus). Lady Dedlock holds the secret to Esther's paternity and she is, ultimately, the missing link in the resolution of the Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce case. The power she assumes under the command of language, however, simultaneously threatens to destroy her. The entire plot of *Bleak House* hinges on Lady Dedlock's demise. The presence of Esther's narrated history reveals the sexually tainted body of Chesney Wold. All of the narratives seek to bring forth Lady Dedlock's body in order to assign to it an exacting punishment. The sexual taint represented by Lady Dedlock's unnarrated past threatens to destroy the domestic harmony that remains the narrative goal of both *Bleak House* narrators. Since Lady Dedlock remains the ultimate threat to the resolution of the *Bleak House* narratives, her demise is necessary. However, the cruelty of her demise seems disproportionate to her crime (fearing Sir Leichester's reaction to her sexual impropriety and fearing she will be accused of murdering Tulkinghorn, she flees her home and dies of "exposure" on the grave-yard heap in Tom-All-Alone's). Dickens's insistence on cruel punishments for the emasculating

women in his texts further accentuates his use of literature as a way to work through the fear of castrating women and the threat they pose to Victorian masculinity.

**V. “A grand woman, a frightfully grand woman!” Sign Confusion and Female Violence in *A Tale of Two Cities***

Dickens’s fear of the castrating female develops more intensely in his later novels. In his earlier works, including *Bleak House*, the threat of castration can be easily quelled through turns in the narrative technique. Furthermore, in characters like Lady Dedlock, while memorable and essential to the plot, remain in the periphery and turn over the text to their more angelic sister characters. In *A Tale of Two Cities* Madame Defarge’s demise comes at the conclusion of a fierce struggle. Miss Pross, representing English superiority over the cruel and vengeance-minded foreigner, releases the hold Madame Defarge has over the narrative in order to allow the narrative to document the actions of Sydney Carton – the text’s hero. Linda Lewis highlights this point by stating “Madame Defarge herself is a spy, instigator, orator, and renegade soldier who takes control of her marriage, of the Revolution, and of the direction of the narrative” (32). The narrative must annihilate Madame Defarge in order to save it from the vengeance of this female castrator.

The history of Madame Defarge’s castration process begins with the rape of her sister by the Marquis Evrémonde. The entire thrust of the novel lies in this violent sexual act, in that this act supplies the motive for Madame Defarge’s revenge. Interestingly, the reader is not given this bit of information until the reading of Dr. Manette’s letter during Charles Darnay’s second trial. By keeping this information hidden, the narrative represses the origin of Madame Defarge’s desire in order to initially convey the notion that her violence is a part of her non-humaness or

tainted femininity. However, for Madame Defarge, in her desire to avenge her sister's victimization at the hand of this one aristocratic family, she conflates the actions of one into the actions of all. This process of conflation serves to fuel her vengeance as it supplies her with a never-ending stock of people on whom to enact and reenact the pleasure she receives in administering pain. Madame Defarge's mode of self-castration relies on her continual self-infliction of psychological trauma. By locating the source of her (and her family's) brutal humiliation at the moments when reason (the more level-headed and kind-hearted voice of her husband) tries to persuade her to grant clemency (in the case of Charles Darnay), or to sympathize with a feminine pleading (when Lucie asks in vain for her reconsideration) she operates as an automaton. The self-castration process that leads her to agency is – this defeminizing and dehumanizing process – therefore, turned outward. Once she gains the agency, she uses her power to castrate others. This turn represents Dickens's fear that women who cultivate a femininity through violence will use this perversion of femininity to emasculate the Victorian male. To further accentuate this point, Kucich explains that Dickens "emphasiz[ed] the 'unnatural' and 'non-human' element in the revolutionaries' passion" and he "made their spokesperson a woman, since in Dickens's world, the supreme disruption of normal expectations about human nature is an absence of tenderness in woman" (139). But Madame Defarge goes beyond what John Kucich terms an "absence of tenderness." Nothing quenches her vengeance. In the case of Madame Defarge, her acts of castration, those that emasculate her husband, her aristocratic victims, and the masculine efforts of the text, develop through her ability to control language and subvert the Victorian intention to fix feminine signification. Madame Defarge gains power through her ability to restructure language by first eliminating her ability to *be* signified (self-castration) and then creating a language over which she has ultimate authority.

While Lucie remains the typical Victorian feminine ideal, Madame Defarge must work to gain power through her disruption of linguistic authority. The inability for women to signify within the function of language leaves little room for agency. In order to appropriate the phallus—the Lacanian locus of signification—Madame Defarge must work to reinvent a language that can allow for feminine signification. Additionally, violence, as I have argued in the third section of this chapter, resists the structure of language. Violence, when represented on the page, finds meaning through the slippage of language. Therefore, the language of violence and the language of feminine agency are similar in that they cannot be represented in the fullest extent in the available linguistic system. So, for Madame Defarge, her first act of castration disrupts the system of normative interpretation. For instance, in chapter sixteen, “Still Knitting”, of the second book, Madame Defarge sat “in her usual place” in the Defarge’s wine-shop. As she “knit[ed] away assiduously” a “rose lay beside her” on the counter (186). The rose in this case indicates the presence of a spy in the wine shop. When Madame Defarge places the rose in her hair, those patrons who come to gather in this “safe” place know that there is an enemy among them. As Madame knits, she senses a new “figure entering the door” and “the moment [she] took up the rose, the customers ceased talking and began gradually to drop out of the wine-shop” (186-7). A rose in a woman’s headdress carries the suggestion of feminine beauty. In fact, one could argue the rose in Madame Defarge’s head works to entice the gaze to recognize her beauty but to define it as something quite different—to define it as the potential for violence. Of course, this sign confusion pales in comparison to the “pastime” in which she engages throughout the novel. The sign confusion Dickens depicts here emphasizes the instability that exists in a language that represents the feminine desire toward violence. While language remains a system that bars feminine signification and while it continues to fail in its ability to represent

violence, Madame Defarge exploits the instability of the sign in order to create the possibility for feminine signification.

Madame Defarge's knitting represents one of the clearest examples of linguistic sign confusion. The knitting described in *A Tale of Two Cities* also illustrates the difficulty in a systematic representation of feminine violence. The "register" of names painfully knitted by Madame Defarge's fingers functions as a way for her to work through her vengeance. Indecipherable to all others except to the keeper of the register, the feminine production lists all of the names that the Revolutionaries will kill and also details the manner in which the ill-fated will be killed. Madame Defarge knits in "her own stitches and her own symbols" a death catalog that would be "easier for the weakest poltroon that lives, to erase himself from existence, than to erase one letter of his name or crimes from the knitted register of Madame Defarge" (179). Through the disruption of language, Madame Defarge obtains the phallus and recreates a system in which she controls meaning. Since all beings enter the system of language as subjects, but through the process of signification create an ability to exist, Madame Defarge fashions a system in which she controls the ability to exist and in which she controls the ability to signify. As her "vicious" fingers knit the fates of the men in the text, her shroud signifies her ability to create a system of language in which she can signify and in which she can castrate others. Dickens works to compare the traditional act of knitting (a feminine and domestic activity) with violence: "[...] not knitting to-day. Madame's resolute right hand was occupied with an axe, in place of the usual softer implements, and in her girdle were a pistol and a cruel knife" (223). To the Victorian masculine ego-ideal, the castrating woman threatens through her ability to subvert traditional systems in order to gain power. She then employs the agency she gains from this process of subversion to enact castration upon the male counterparts in the text. The Victorian

male, in Dickens's body of work suffers from a castration anxiety that can only be relieved by the harsh punishment of the violent female characters. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the threat of the castrating woman (Madame Defarge) comes close to actualization (she knits Charles Darnay's name in her register), and Dickens does not spare the reader the details of her blood thirst: "[she] was so close to him when he dropped dead under it, that suddenly animated, she put her foot upon his neck, and with her cruel knife – long ready – hewed off his head" (229). This decapitation – this castration – represents the visage of untamed violent feminine desire.

Of course, Dickens must first make the gruesome Madame Defarge appealing to his readers. The author's preoccupation with her beauty highlights the propensity for woman to entice in order to entrap. Dickens describes her "carelessly worn" robe, her "dark hair" which looked "rich under her coarse red hat." He claims the pistol she carries lies "hidden in her bosom," which insinuates a fear that the violent female lies in wait—that she attracts in order to destroy. Dickens describes the flies that flock to the "glutinous little glasses near madame" and perish at the bottom of them, giving no recognized warning to the other flies that came to meet a similar fate. Like the flies in this wine-shop that are attracted to the sweet drops of wine left in unclean glasses, men are also enticed to come near Madame. Dickens takes several opportunities to portray the villainess as beautiful and in "presenting Madame Defarge, [he] repeatedly foregrounds her body, detailing her clothes and what lies beneath: the knife at her girdle, the heart under her [robe], the pistol 'lying hidden in her bosom,' and the sharpened dagger 'hidden at her waist'" (Black 94). In bringing Madame Defarge's body to the forefront of the text, Dickens conflates pleasure with pain. The erotic gaze that depicts Madame Defarge simultaneously points to her threat to castrate.

## VI: Thwarting Expectations: The Violent Female's Failure to Underwrite Victorian Masculinity

Dickens's *Great Expectations* illustrates the realization of castration anxiety. Each of the central female characters in this novel thwart Pip's expectations. While the novel's plot seems to focus on the Pip's economic desires (and how they relate to his social ones), it is also clear that Mrs. Joe, Miss Havisham, and Estella stunt his narrative progress. As Kathleen Sell argues, Pip's narrative is a narrative of shame, which "stems from his desire to abandon the world of masculine bonding and labor at the forge" and, thus, his "desires for class mobility and for Estella involve a shift from homosocial to heterosexual bonds" (204). As Sell continues to argue in "The Narrator's Shame: Masculine Identity in *Great Expectations*" "it is through Estella that his failure of identity is connected to the failure of the feminine in the novel that threatens to undermine the possibility of the masculine identity" (211). If the feminine failure threatens (or, more accurately, in the case of Pip fulfills this threat) to undermine Victorian masculine identity, then the threat is a threat of castration by the feminine hand. The women in *Great Expectations*, those that are most central to the plot (Mrs. Joe, Miss Havisham, and Estella) pervert the traditional locus of castration anxiety in that they work to castrate their femininity in order to gain traditional masculine power. Once they have obtained this power (the point at which Pip introduces the reader to them) they levy the threat of castration upon Pip, thus thwarting his *expectations* of masculine identity. Each of these characters must be tamed, punished, or annihilated.

Mrs. Joe stands in for Pip's dead mother. Pip's growth process is initially stunted by his domestic atmosphere—an atmosphere wholly dictated by Mrs. Joe's ram-pages and by her

“tickler.” In the earliest descriptions of Mrs. Joe, Pip says she “almost always wore a coarse apron, fastened over her figure behind with two loops, and having a square impregnable bib in front, that was stuck full of pins and needles” (8). Dickens presents the maternal figure as “impregnable” and further depicts her understanding of motherhood as a burden. The pins stuck in bosom are a representation of her sadomasochism. The pins remind her of the “pain” she must suffer as a domestic servant while they also indicate to others her ability to master pain in order to rule the home. Mrs. Joe is “destructive primarily because [she denies] motherhood, and since Dickens equates motherhood with feminine identity, this denial becomes an irreparable breach, a violation of self and gender that eventually results in disaster (Hartog 248). Furthermore, Mrs. Joe appropriates the phallus and levies harsh punishment to all of those who stand in opposition to her will. Pip documents her physical abuse toward himself and toward her emasculated husband, Joe: “By this time, my sister was quite desperate, so she pounced on Joe, and, taking him by the two whiskers, knocked his head for a little while against the wall behind him” (11-12). Her rampaging often leads to Pip’s punishment with tar-water or, worse even, beatings administered by Mrs. Joe’s phallic possession, the Tickler. Pip’s fear of Mrs. Joe sends him to search for a maternal figure, which he finds in Joe. Mrs. Joe’s threat of castration effectually castrates Joe and makes him the maternal source for Pip’s expectation of nurture. In order for Pip’s narrative to move past the forge in order to escape the eventual castration awaiting him by the hand of his sister, Mrs. Joe must be punished. The textual punishment, as I have argued, is severe. Orlick attacks Mrs. Joe, leaving her unable to speak, use Tickler, and “destined never to be on the Rampage again, while she was wife of Joe” (117).

Miss Havisham’s threat to Pip’s textual productive desire (his masculine desire to secure financial stability in order to marry and fulfill the Victorian ego-image) may be less physical, but



remains more central to the text's plot. As Pip's earliest "benefactor," she lures him to her house of ruin in order to set the stage for Estella's repeated rebuke. Another sadomasochist, Havisham enjoys the scene she sets in her ill-lit drawing room. As she positions shiny jewelry on Estella's bosom, Pip fixes her as the pinnacle of masculine desire. In addition to her desire for Estella to break men's hearts, Miss Havisham represents the tainted mother. Both Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham lack biological children, which in part makes up for their aberrant feminine sexuality. However, in the case of Miss Havisham, she is a "mother;" she adopts Estella because she wants to "save her from misery like [her] own. At first [she] meant no more" (395). However, her desire to have someone to love turned into a craving to "take an impressionable child to mould into the form that her wild resentment, spurned affection, and wounded pride' could use to quench her desire for vengeance. (394). Dickens reminds the reader of the taint of aberrant female sexuality: her yellow wedding gown, her tattered stockings, the beetle-infested cake, and her "diseased mind" (394). Miss Havisham must be annihilated from the text in order for Pip to prosper as the narrator of his identity.

While Estella's work in the beginning mirrors the desires of her adoptive mother, the second (and published) ending to the text suggests her repentant state, which may indicate a possibility for redemption. Like Molly, Jagger's housekeeper, Estella can be tamed. Before she is tamed, however, she must suffer on the same level as Mrs. Joe and Miss Havisham. Since the "failure of feminine identity leads inevitably to the failure of masculine identity" (Hartog 253), Pip's bildungsroman depends upon Estella's feminine recuperation. However, Estella must first suffer. She must first confront her maker and confront her destiny to lack a capacity of love. She must marry Bentley Drummel and be physically abused by his hand. It is only after the text

punishes Estella that she can rise from the ashes of Satis House and walk hand in hand with Pip, with “the shadow of no parting from her” (479).

Dickens’s novels present an opportunity to uncover a clear masculine anxiety. The textual production works to allay this fear of castration in order to rebuild society in the visage of the harmonic middle-class domestic ideal. Women play a central role in this image they support the very existence and prosperity of Victorian masculinity. If textual productions offer female authors a way to harness power through a process of self-castration, these same productions open the field to the existence of women who seek to castrate men. Dickensian female characters pervert the locus of castration anxiety from father to mother, they re-write systems of language and confuse fixed signification, and, finally, they seek to destroy the possibility for masculine identity. However threatening these women are to Dickens’s male characters (and to Dickens himself) the text provides the space for reconstruction and social improvement.

## Chapter Four

### *Irresponsible: The Incessant Work of Self-Murder in Margaret Oliphant's Fiction and Autobiography*

*I have written because it gave me pleasure, because it came natural to me, because it was like talking or breathing, besides the big fact that it was necessary for me to work for my children. That, however, was not the first motive... (The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant 48)*

Margaret Oliphant's literary production stands in great contrast to that of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens. Her inclusion in this dissertation, especially as a final chapter, represents a variant of self-castration crucial to the understanding of this process as a product of Victorian print culture. The theory of self-castration is evident in the more highly-regarded work of the previous three authors, and a discussion of self-castration in conjunction with the "second-class" work of a "general utility writer" such as Oliphant, demonstrates the theory's persistence in Victorian literary history. While very few of Oliphant's contemporaries viewed her as an "artist," and while she remains, despite a recent interest in her work and life, an author absent from the cannon, her literary output alone offers opportunities for critical investigation. As her autobiography notes, Oliphant's impetus to write was both pleasure and need, factors that brought both Brontë and Eliot to the table as well. Additionally, she claims writing was like "talking or breathing," which signifies her understanding of the writing process as part of her – part of her life, part of her body, part of her being. The conflation of "being" and "writing" is key to the arguments I proffer in the Brontë and Eliot chapters; and in this small way, I use the conflation as a means to tie the three authors together. However, beyond this

meager thread tying the three women together, Oliphant's oeuvre stands in a looming shadow cast by the other two – a shadow she often recognized and, sometimes, embraced. An investigation into Oliphant's public and private life reveals an author who purposely castrates herself from the realm of the "artist." Her writing rises out of a need to satiate her natural desires to write as well as her domestic obligation to support her family. Oliphant's *Autobiography* indicates the writer was aware of her position outside of what was thought of as "artistic" or aesthetic writing. Oliphant's process of self-castration, one that involves cutting herself from the aesthetics of writing for the more practical efforts to support her domestic sphere, does result in obtaining authority. However removed she was from the likes of Brontë and Eliot, her fiction offers a method of self-castration in which the characters cut themselves out of the line of signification in an effort to articulate that which resists articulation, that which remains unuttered. Oliphant provides access to the unwritten (the unuttered) as a way to afford access to a Victorian subtext of gender power relations. Oliphant's texts demonstrate a Victorian female author's ability to use methods of self-castration to articulate the unuttered, thereby authorizing those bodies, spaces, and notions which are traditionally marginalized by Victorian culture.

### **I. The Thread That Binds Them and the Line That Divides Them: Oliphant, Brontë, and Eliot**

While the *value* of critical estimation of Brontë and Eliot's literary production outweighs that of Oliphant, it is not the only point of departure when comparing these three women. Oliphant did not grow up motherless, as did the other two. In fact, Oliphant's mother first introduced her to *Blackwood's* and she encouraged her daughter to publish. Oliphant did not hide her employment from her family (Eliot kept her publishing secret from her siblings and

Brontë did not consult her father in the initial stages of her writing), and she was encouraged to write as a means to financial support and security. The strong matriarchal support allowed her the domestic space to write. She often wrote right at the kitchen table, she wrote her first novel while tending to her sick mother, and she used the family's living space – the drawing room – as her “office.” As a mother, Oliphant realized that “her talent, rather than being seen as a selfish threat to maternity, could be employed as an important contribution to the family budget” moreover, she was “never made to feel that authorship was unbecoming in a woman, or might bring disgrace upon the family name” (Jay, *Fiction to Herself* 15, 241). Aside from her reviews in *Blackwood's* (and early novels published under her brother, Willie's, name), Oliphant did not publish anonymously and she was “inclined to be resentful of Blackwood's ‘fondness’ for publishing her anonymously” (243). These somewhat elementary differences cast a mold of a self-assured writer with a great deal of familial support. However, it is the aesthetic differences between Oliphant and the women possessing literary genius during the Victorian period that creates the chasm most noticeable when comparing them.

In an autobiographical mood of retrospective contemplation, Oliphant admits that her prolific literary production is something she is “so far from being proud of” that she “should like at least half of them forgotten” (Oliphant, *Autobiography and Letters* 5). In thinking of George Eliot, she is thrust into a mode of “involuntary confession” and proclaims “How I have been handicapped in life! Should I have done better if I had been kept, like her, in a mental greenhouse and taken care of” (5)? The “mental greenhouse” she purports as the source of a cultivation of genius ties in quite nicely to Eliot's own “aim to be like plants in the chamber of sickness, dispensing purifying air even in a region that turns all pale its verdure and cramps its instinctive propensity to expand” (Haight 15-16). While Eliot seems to see the cultivation

process as limiting, cramping the “instinctive propensity to expand,” she also envisions the process as a way toward purification: writing equals influence and power. In a similar way, Oliphant wonders if a “mental greenhouse” would have helped to direct her energies and given her the time needed for “curious freedom” (6). Oliphant was not cultivated, she was not pruned and shaped into an author as she imagines the process of Eliot’s *becoming*. “Curious freedom!” she exclaims, “I have never known what it was. I have always had to think of other people, and to plan everything—for my own pleasure, it is true, very often, but always in subjection to the necessity which bound me to them” (6). Eliot’s process of becoming is ushered in by the vehicle of curiosity. Without restraint, and in Eliot’s case, with the cultivation of curiosity, the aesthetic author can *become*. Interestingly, Oliphant here binds pleasure and subjectification, an element of female self-castration that propels women authors to a platform of power. For Eliot and Brontë, a careful construction of their own subjectification in the process of writing results in a *pleasure* to make the cut of castration on their own terms. This, in turn, grants them power and agency over their own femininity and entices them to return to the process in order to recapitulate the pleasurable experience of castrative cutting. However, the endgame is not the same for the three women. While Eliot’s books, in Oliphant’s own words, are the “object of a kind of worship” and, while Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* was written with “wonderfully vivid perceptions” and the “eyes of a genius” that has found no match in the novels of other Victorian women, Oliphant’s novels did not and do not receive the same critical acclaim (Oliphant, *The Literature of the Last Fifty Years* 416, 418).

While Oliphant scoffs at the notion of separating the process of writing from domestic enterprise, she admits to being envious of George Eliot and is “tempted to begin writing by George Eliot’s life—with that curious kind of self-compassion which one cannot get clear of”

(*Autobiography and Letters* 4). However, Oliphant flips from reverence to jabbing at Eliot's man-made space for genius cultivation in the *Edinburgh Review* when she visualizes her contemporary in a "reverential circle that gathered round her in her own house, agape for every precious word that might fall from her mouth." She goes on to describe this greenhouse as a "carefully regulated atmosphere into which nothing from the outer world save the most delicate incense with just the flavour that suited her, was allowed to enter;" complete with "the ever-watchful guardian [Lewes] who preserved her from any unnecessary contact." The conclusion she draws from the meticulous cultivation of Eliot at this point is that these controls are "curious accessories little habitual to the possessors of literary genius".<sup>33</sup> The line of demarcation separating these two authors begins in their understanding of writing: Eliot's genius necessitated the break from domestic constraints, whereas Oliphant refused to divide herself. Oliphant's writing reflects her insistence on her role as a mother, provider, and domestic ruler. She could not imagine herself living the "self-restrained life which the greater artist imposes on himself" (*Autobiography and Letters* 7). She recognized the cost of "incessant work" was that "no one will even mention me in the same breath with George Eliot. And that is just" (7).

After Margaret Oliphant's death in 1897, Henry James wrote of her

[Oliphant] practised [criticism], as she practised everything, on such an inordinate scale that her biographer, if there is to be one, will have no small task in the mere drafting of lists of her contributions [...] She wrought in "Blackwood" for years, anonymously and profusely; no writer of the day found a *porte-voix* nearer to hand or used it with easier personal latitude and comfort. I should almost suppose in fact that no woman had ever, for half a century, had her personal "say" so publicly and irresponsibly. (James 452-453)

As a representative contemporary view of the life and literary output of this woman, James notes her prolific writing, which he later calls her “uncontrolled flood of fiction.” He defines her contributions to *Blackwood’s* and other magazines like *Macmillian’s*, *The St. James Gazette*, and the *Edinburgh Review*, to name a few, “irresponsible.” James makes a distinction between the “artist” and a writer by claiming Oliphant was irresponsible because of her prolificacy.

Furthermore, the term strikes me as damning in the sense that it implies the responsibility rests in Blackwood’s hands, or to put it more clearly, Oliphant should have had the benefit of a sort of patriarchal control over her “criticism.” The revered author has very little positive reaction to Oliphant’s fiction writing, as he claims *Kirsteen* “strikes me as missed, dropped out without a thought, that the wonder is all the greater of the fact that in spite of it the book does in a manner scramble over its course and throw up a strong air” (455). In other words, the book manages to “scramble” or to etch itself out, *in spite* of an author “whose eggs are not all in one basket, nor all her imagination in service at once” (455). The positive critique of *Kirsteen’s* ability to “throw up a strong air” is baffling as it implies the novel can *do* or *represent*, in James’s estimation, what the author herself is incapable of doing. In H. Montgomery Hyde’s *Henry James At Home* (1969), James is still fuming over the thought of Oliphant and *Kirsteen* and her vast output in *Blackwoods*. After reading twenty pages of her last novel, he was confirmed his belief

that the poor soul had a simply *feminine* conception of literature: such slipshod, imperfect, halting, faltering, peeping, down-at-heel work – buffeting along like a ragged creature in a high wind, and just struggling to the goal, and falling in a quivering mass of faintness and fatuity. (110)

This simply *feminine* conception of literature cannot in any case equate to the more masculine enterprise of art. By the end of James’s rant, he reduces Oliphant to a “ragged creature” and a



“quivering mass” which represents his desire to castrate not only her femininity – to criticize the “feminine conception of literature,” but also to erase her femininity altogether: from woman to creature to mass. The issue here is that James attempts to criticize Oliphant within the lens of the Victorian “artist,” a light in which she did not position herself. Oliphant’s positions her literature within the domestic sphere and uses her inclusion in the Victorian publishing circle as a way to sustain her domestic desires. In a final and dramatic end to this conversation, James states “Yes, no doubt she was a gallant woman – though with no species of wisdom – but an artist, an artist!” Hyde concludes by telling us James “held his hands up and stared woefully at me...” (110). The passion through which James conveys his disdain for a woman who is no “artist” overpowers the realization that she did not consider her literature as art, but rather as commodity. A useful comparison here would be that of Oliphant and Charles Dickens. Both authors were prolific in their literary output. However, critics universally categorize Dickens as an artist. Perhaps the issue here is that literary prostitution only garners such damning classification when women guide the pen that leads to over production. And, if this is the case, textual production is linked to sexual production – a woman who is over-sexed or over-texted is cannot be classified as an artist, but rather as a [publishing] whore.

The life of an artist and the “art for art’s sake” movement did not motivate Oliphant. In fact, when she reviewed James’s *A Literary Life* in *Blackwood’s* in 1889, she claims his art is “conspicuous as art” and that while his skill “makes a graceful something out of nothing” his “pleasure in these processes manifestly surpasses his pleasure in either the character or the story he undertakes to elucidate” (830). Oliphant disagreed with the tendency of the Victorian and late 19<sup>th</sup> century author to focus intently on process, which may be why her popularity quickly faded after her death – she suffered at the hands of a changing marketplace and an evolving atmosphere

of writing as art. James, as many critics after Oliphant's death, chooses to review her work as the work of a late-century author, which she wasn't. He also chooses to compare her to the terms defining the "artist," which will always put her writing at a severe disadvantage.

Virginia Woolf similarly uses Oliphant's writing as a way to discuss early 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism. This, of course, is unfair as Oliphant did not consider herself a feminist nor a "New Woman." Her views on feminism and the "Woman Question" were, for most of her life, traditional. In *Three Guineas* Woolf asks "But how far did she protect culture and intellectual liberty" (109)? She writes of Oliphant's *Autobiography*,

examine your own mind, and ask yourself whether that reading has led you to respect disinterested culture and intellectual liberty. Has it on the contrary smeared your mind and dejected your imagination, and led you to deplore the fact that Mrs. Oliphant sold her brain, her very admirable brain, prostituted her culture and enslaved her intellectual liberty in order that she might earn her living and educate her children. (109-110)

The notion of "disinterested culture" would have been foreign to Oliphant who saw her "culture" as part and parcel of the domestic sphere. Additionally, Woolf equates Oliphant's prostituted brain as one devoid of "intellectual liberty." While Oliphant would agree to Woolf's assignation that her work provided the means to educate her children, she would not have understood this process as an intellectual slavery. By contrast, Oliphant was given great leeway by her editors to write on various political topics and her fiction exhibits a progression in thought toward more "radical" feminist viewpoints—those Woolf later espouses in her own writing. While there are clear representations of women who succeeded by separating themselves from domestic responsibilities and enterprises (George Eliot and Harriet Martineau being two she knew of),

Oliphant chose to entwine her writing self with her domestic endeavors. Woolf's aim here misses the mark in that it calls on her readers to view Oliphant through the lens of a post-Victorian culture. While her *Autobiography* does illustrate her understanding of "making pennyworths" (*Autobiography* 140) of herself, she never would have equated the act of publishing to prostitution. Furthermore, writing was the very activity that granted her financial freedom and a "room of her own," over which she ruled by and supported by her own hand. While Oliphant recognized "that I must resign myself to do second-class work all my life from lack of time to do myself full justice" (qtd in Dinnage 247), she also notes that "I did with much labour what I thought the best, and there is only a *might have been* on the other side" (*Autobiography and Letters* 7).

## II. "An army of logic in an unreasonable world": Oliphant and Feminism

What the theory of female self-castration offers in the case of Margaret Oliphant is a way to equate her labor to female enterprise. This enterprise not only constructs the author as a subject (most pointedly in her *Autobiography*) but also allows her the space to reshape her desire to govern her home, manage her financial security, and provide for her family in the absence of patriarchal authority. Her views on the "Woman Question" changed by the end of her life and career, but even in her earliest responses to John Stuart Mill's publications on the advancements for women's rights, one can clearly see a brand of feminism taking root. Merryn Williams notes in her essay "Feminist or Antifeminist" that "it is more helpful and fairer to see her as one of the long and honorable line of women who were known in England between the wars as the Old Feminists" (179). The Old Feminists, according to Williams, did not concern themselves with questions of biology (though they may write about them), but rather "asked that men and women

be equal before the law and that no persons should be forbidden to make their contribution because they were the ‘wrong’ sex” (179). Oliphant’s many reviews and essays on the “Woman Question”, which were published by her traditionally-thinking editor, John Blackwood, show her desire for equality while simultaneously highlighting her insistence that women do not need men (the law) to grant women power – a very feminist viewpoint, indeed. In Margaret Oliphant’s case, the law did not prohibit her from managing her household and her own finances or educating her children, nor did the law prohibit her from earning her own living or from expressing in print her opinions on political and cultural issues.

A discussion of “feminism” and Margaret Oliphant will most often situate the latter as a conservative who was not in rhythm with the strong procession toward women’s suffrage during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Her prose writing in *Blackwood’s* certainly goes a long way in supporting this criticism. However, her later works, especially her novels in the *Chronicles of Carlingford* series as well as her later short fiction show that “she identified herself with most of the views of her more radical female contemporaries” (Clarke 40). In *Pheobe Junior: A Last Chronicle of Carlingford* (1876), Oliphant “represents domesticity as something like a neglected but rightful sinecure, a professional holding rather than a paid job” and in doing so she presents a model of domesticity that “departs from conventional representations of the separate spheres” (Cohen 99). The feminist claim made by this novel comes forth in the comparison of work outside the home and domestic enterprise. As Cohen further asserts “for Oliphant, the absence of the wage clouds the home’s visibility as a workplace” (105) and, therefore, relegates the home and the female director of the home into the second-class position. *Pheobe Junior* presents a mode in which Oliphant “confronts the question of how middle-class women are to make a living when their menfolk fail them” (101). In addition to Oliphant’s

discussion of the domestic sphere in her early novels, Oliphant's short story, "The Wedding Tour", which was posthumously published in 1898, chronicles the process of feminine empowerment. Janey, "a very lonely little girl, without parents, almost without relations" (403) marries Mr. Rosendale, a man senior to her in age and in financial wealth, but below her in looks and taste. Since Janey had never been loved, the thought of marriage with a man who was in love with her provided the willingness for the match despite the lack of "any very strong impulse on her own part toward him" (405-406). Of course, what Janey realizes during her wedding tour reflects the fear, which was exhibited in the novels and short stories of the Victorian period, that women marry in order to ensure financial security and, in doing so, they engage in a form of prostitution – the exchange of their bodies for recompense in the form of familial, financial, and political (through male representation) legitimacy. Janey does not love Rosendale, and Rosendale does not love Janey. His love extended only to the pleasure she could give him: "When he was not telling her that she was a little beauty, or admiring her pretty hair, her pretty eyes, the softness of her skin, and the smallness of her waist, he had nothing to say" (406). During the seven days of her wedding tour, Janey "shrank in disgust, almost in terror" at her husband's [sexual] advances. The issue presented in "A Story of a Wedding Tour" is not radical or revolutionary; however, the narrative solution to Janey's predicament – a threat to her desire for independence – involves Janey's erasure. Janey, when presented an opportunity to "lose" her husband during a train stop in France, carefully plots her escape from Mr. Rosendale by taking a short train to St. Honorat. Here she creates a new life, built upon her newly spun history – her husband died at sea. Janey's move toward empowerment grew from her understanding that "if ever her power [her beauty and ability to sexually please him] ceased, which it was sure to do [...] she would be to him less than nothing" (411). In order to escape this fate, Janey reinvents

her feminine trajectory. After making to move toward independence, Janey looks in the mirror to see an image “full of life, and meaning, and energy, and strength [...] the real woman, whom nobody had ever seen before” (412). Oliphant describes Janey’s journey into oblivion, into the unknown as the opportunity to “cut herself off as by the Fury shears from everything,” which would lead to other’s desires to “punish, to shake her little fragile person to pieces, to make her suffer” (414). Janey’s journey toward reinvention rises out of a commitment to survival. Janey uses a process of self-castration – a cutting – in order to exert her will to live independently. In the end of the story, Oliphant seems to punish Janey by making her “no less than the murderer of her husband,” (424) the story exemplifies the late Victorian feminist notion that women, who lack companionate and reciprocal sexual relationships fare better by being financially independent and in a position to live unmarried and to support themselves. Marriage, then, is not the only alternative for women and, certainly, loveless marriages force women to exert their independence at the severe cost of both men and women.

Another example of Oliphant’s progress toward more feminist writing appears in the pages of *Hester* (1883). Published toward the end of the Victorian period, the novel provides a discourse on the role of the female by portraying a struggle between the domestic matriarch and the “manly” and powerful woman. The novel also offers an investigation into competing feminine spheres emerging toward the end of the century. Oliphant creates three female characters for reader’s investigative evidence: Mrs. John Vernon, Miss Catherine Vernon, and Hester Vernon. Kin to each other, the dynamics between the three women point to Oliphant’s developing notions on feminism and the Woman Question, which developed out of her evolving definition of woman. These developing notions involve women’s political and financial power, their social appropriateness, their dependence on marriage to “good” husbands, and the question

of masculine performativity. Free from any feminist radicalism, *Hester* illuminates women's craving for power and the limitations "masculine" power places on feminine desire. While the novel's ending does not successfully position the women characters within the structure of masculine power, it does shed light on an arena of feminine power by exposing the need for female rebellion and domestic connection.

The town of Redborough is a feminine enclave of sorts. The men of this town are all ineffectual and weak, which leads to their destructive natures. With the exception of Mr. Rule (the head clerk at Vernon's Bank), whose greatest strength is his ability to appeal to Catherine Vernon during times of great trouble, the men in Redborough, and the Vernon men especially, cannot compete with the intelligence, determination, and financial power of Catherine Vernon. Catherine Vernon, jilted in youth by her cousin, John Vernon, saves Vernon Bank in the opening chapters of the novel. While John Vernon speculates with the Bank's money and leave the country in disgrace, Catherine, with a face "of a soldier springing instantly to the alert, rallying all his resources at the first word of danger" (18-19) deals with the Bank's creditors and competitors to ensure there will not be a run on the Bank. Her reward? Catherine becomes the head of Vernon's Bank and, effectually, the key figure of the town: "the people spoke of her, as they sometimes do of a very popular man, by her Christian name" and "her name was put to everything. Catherine Street, Catherine Square, Catherine places without number" (23). While initially Catherine's power appears as a feminine sort of power, especially in contrast with the more daring actions of John Vernon's speculation, what she does once she gains power moves outside of a traditional feminine power definition. Catherine's ability to save the bank indicates her power comes from responsibility, endurance, and a desire to nurture. However, Catherine's rise to power comes at the expense of her cousin, John Vernon, and as his replacement on the

throne of Vernon's Bank, she uses the position to exact her revenge against him for choosing a prettier, more ignorant, and more innocent bride, Lucy Westwood (Mrs. John Vernon).

Catherine's power shifts from that of passivity to that of threat.

Let me leave a moment the discussion of Catherine for one of Mrs. John Vernon. While Catherine represents a sort of "new woman" with respects to her masculine traits and her position outside the traditional feminine role, Mrs. John Vernon stands in direct contrast as a "terrible muddle of ignorance and innocence" (13). As the wife of the most prominent and respected member of the community, Mrs. John Vernon throws herself head-long into the role of the traditional "angel of the house." She admits to knowing nothing about the business that affords such beautiful furniture, clothing, jewelry, social status and, in her mind the most important symbol of success, the White House. She claims knowledge of such affairs is beneath women. And, so, it is no surprise that when the Bank needed saving, she ran to her "pretty ornamental desk and opened it nervously" to produce twenty pounds (14). As Mr. John Vernon's wife, she met up with her disgraced husband in France while the Redborough town continued to prosper under Catherine Vernon's rule.

Oliphant describes Mrs. John as childish and weak, but she also calls on the reader to sympathize with her. Upon her return to Redborough to live in the Vernonry (a house divided into several living quarters, furnished and amply supplied by the benevolence of Catherine Vernon for her "kin" and dependents) the reader can't help but feel sorry for the woman who, through her appropriate Victorian feminine ignorance, was subjected to the downfall of her husband and compelled to live in an almshouse of sorts with a verandah view of her old White House. Furthermore, the hatred Catherine feels for her rival in love oscillates between obvious and outward actions of contempt and more tempered discussions of disapproval – all of which go



unnoticed by the sweet-tempered and beautiful Mrs. John. Oliphant does not espouse the traditional feminine role in her portrayal of Mrs. John Vernon. As a foil to the novel's stronger-willed female character, Oliphant uses Mrs. John to highlight Catherine's emotional and feminine deficiencies.

In comparison to the traditional feminine character of Mrs. John, Catherine Vernon represents a kind of "new woman" in that she is unmarried, she is not a mother, and she derives her power from the masculine realm of business. The men in the novel all owe their high-ranking positions, their daily bread, and their domestic situations to the benevolence of Miss Catherine Vernon. In this way, she compensates for the lack of love and companionship by creating an atmosphere in which all must depend on her and respect her outwardly (while most of them deny her respect in their callous gossip behind her back). Often forgotten as a "lady," Catherine commands her post like a soldier and keeps a vigilant watch over the town through the Grange window. Always the subject of every conversation at the Vernonry, a continual threat to Hester and her mother, and a constant reminder to Edward of his lack of freedom, Catherine's influence is omnipotent. The "rich woman who had them all in her power" displays no "respect for weakness" (61) becomes integral to the development of every story in the text. Catherine appears as the most triumphant representation of female power; however, her lack of femininity assures her eventual downfall. Since Catherine's power grows out of its opposition to her rivals (Hester and Edward) and to her feminine foils (Ellen, Mrs. John, and the Ridgeway-Vernon sisters) and to the weak men that remain a constant threat to the Bank (Harry, Edward, and Algy) her position of power relies upon the unstable and threatening relationships in which it opposes. While her supremacy in the town has no intellectual equal, it fails in the face of Edward's betrayal and Hester's rebellion. Therefore, Catherine's power is incomplete in that it rises out of

her erasure of the feminine and her insistence on replacing the feminine with the masculine. Catherine uses her money (gained through her masculine intelligence) to fill the void left by unfulfilled feminine desires. She has no children, but she “adopts” Edward Vernon as her own. She could not overcome her earliest rival in love, Mrs. John Vernon, so she works to place her in the lowest, most demeaning, and most dependent position she can so that Mrs. John can serve as a constant reminder of Catherine’s initial failure and, more importantly, as her successful revenge. Here Catherine uses the pain/pleasure complex to remind herself of her early castration (at the hands of John Vernon) and inspire her to continue as one who rules through the threat of castration. Catherine’s power is that of a “woman who while she gave with one hand closed a grasp of iron upon the people obliged to her with the other [...] the picture of the tyrannical, narrow despot, exacting, remorseless, descending to the lowest details, which a woman, when endued with irresponsible power, was understood to make” (282). As the narrator points out here, her power is not a “womanly power” and it is because of her inability to be both powerful and feminine that she ultimately fails in the end of the novel. Catherine dies with Hester, her greatest rival, by her side. She has been betrayed by her most beloved “son,” Edward, and she and the rest of the Vernons are in financial ruin. She cannot save Vernon’s Bank from Edward’s illegal speculation in the Stock Trade (as she did twenty years earlier) because she failed as a woman. Catherine’s failure, in Oliphant’s opinion, comes at the price of exchanging the feminine for an exclusive right to the masculine. Since Catherine’s power rises out of relationships of opposition, she invests little time in cultivating domestic harmony. Her most prized relationship (Edward) is in reality a fraudulent relationship in that Edward despises her and seeks her ruin. Her most significant rival, Hester, becomes her strongest ally as she concedes

“I think you and I have hated each other because we were meant to love each other, child” (442).

Oliphant uses Catherine as an example of a threat to femininity and domestic discord.

Hester remains the most promising feminist character in the text. Hester’s character takes shape through her persistent opposition to both Catherine Vernon and her mother Mrs. John Vernon. Hester despises aspects of both of these women. She is ashamed of her mother’s imbecility and ignorance. She detests Catherine’s condescension and mock benevolence. Developing through competing feelings of “passion and pain” (38) Hester’s opposition, as Catherine classifies it, is “a firm, healthy, instinctive opposition, without any cause for it [...] it must have been born in her, don’t you see? for she didn’t know me, never set eyes on me. The little wild cat! She felt in every nerve of her that we were in opposition, she and I” (40-41). However, Hester does not develop through the same relational opposition that serves Catherine Vernon. Where Catherine depends upon opposition to define her status in the community, Hester creates opposition in order to maintain an outsider classification. Hester desires to be a “heroine” and thinks that “her readiness, her devotion, her power of doing everything that mortal woman had ever done before her” (73) will eventually release her and her mother from the bondage of her father’s crimes and shame, and their dependency on Catherine Vernon’s condescending benevolence. While her mother claims she is a “perverse girl” and Catherine calls her ungrateful and a “little spite-fire, a little tiger-cat” (97,39) Hester’s textual development rises out of the possibility of being a heroine: a savior who uses *feminine* power, mixed with the “spirit of a revolutionary” (124) to become the heroine of her story. While Catherine, “with all of these advantages, instinctively looked upon [Hester] as a rival power” (257), Hester refuses to recognize Catherine in the same way. Instead, Hester uses the feminine powers of pride, refusal, compassion (especially in relation to old Captain Morgan, his wife, and her mother) and most

importantly “self-ridicule” and “self-disgust” (284) to sustain her status as heroine in the text. And, while she does not give over to the “sort of unfeminine turn of mind” (291) that propels Catherine, she is quick witted and has the mind of a Vernon, as Mr. Rule defines it. Hester desires to “have it in her power to do something [...] to have the golden opportunity – the occasion to do a heroic deed” (300) and, in the end of the novel she is given that opportunity. While she does not save the bank as Catherine did in years before her time, she does come to the aid of the woman who hated her, who gained utmost pleasure at her pain. In aiding Catherine, she uses her feminine traits of compassion and forgiveness, foresight, strength to gain the esteem and gratitude of her enemy: “They tell me you wanted to do something like what I had done [...] a few year’s work, and you would be an excellent man of business; but it can’t be” (454). In the last moments of the novel, Catherine realizes the limits to masculine power when they are obtained by the erasure of feminine qualities. Oliphant rewards Hester’s rebellion and pride by giving her what is truly the aim of the Oliphantian feminism: choice – “What can a young woman desire more than to have such a possibility of choice?” (456).

While publishing with *Blackwood’s*, whose editorial board held strong conservative views, she was given ample opportunity (and an irresponsible megaphone, according to James) to discuss the Woman Question. This engagement alone sets her apart from Brontë and Eliot, who remained all but silent on the issues of marriage and divorce as far as the Victorian print is concerned. While Brontë, and, especially Eliot, indicate in their letters a desire for female autonomy, their novels continue to supply the only public versions of their feminist inclinations. Also considering the fact that Eliot supplies readers with a “masculine success story [...] both in the single-mindedness with which the writing was pursued, and the critical acclaim and reputation which ensued” (Shattock 165) it would be difficult to champion Eliot as a placard-

holding “suffragette” when she clearly desired to maintain a separation between her *masculine* world as an author, and her *feminine* one. What readers can clearly see in Oliphant, in addition to her engagement with the issue of women’s rights, is her progression, by the end of her career, toward a more feminist-leaning frame of mind. As Clarke points out that in “many of Oliphant’s novels there is a note of raw, bitter protest—in particular protest against the injustices inflicted upon women by men” and that her increased radical-ness led her to “[come] out very firmly in favor of the franchise for women householders—who have no available man to represent their political views” (44). Clarke uses Oliphant’s 1884 letter to *The Spectator* as proof of her change of heart/mind.<sup>34</sup> In a letter to the editor of *The Spectator*, Oliphant argues the disadvantage and even complete inability for some women to be indirectly represented by men. She identifies herself as a member of the class of “women-householders” and asks

by whom are we to be indirectly represented? By our servants, if we are rich enough to have them, – by our green-grocers, or any stray man whom we may be able to persuade into adopting our opinions? [...] And pray tell me in what respect it would be better for me to borrow a share in a man for political purposes than to have a vote of my own? (1437)

However retarded the process toward a more progressive feminist thought may have been in the case of Oliphant, it is clear that the discussion of women’s rights and the Woman Question was one in which she was willing to engage. Previous to the 1884 letter to the editor printed in *The Spectator*, in 1866, Oliphant writes to Blackwood regarding the suffragists. She claims the literature aiming to satirize the suffragists and the feminist movement is “nonsense” and has “brought me round to the conviction that however indifferent I may be personally to political privileges the system which supposes me incapable of forming a reasonable opinion of public

matters is very far from a perfect one” (qtd in Williams 166). Margaret Oliphant’s prose writing represents a journey toward an accepting and even progressive feminist position.

In 1858, Oliphant writes “The Condition of Women” for *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Review*. Perhaps one of the most damaging pieces of proof indicating her Tory conservatism, the article claims that the subject of women’s rights does not “make up a case so universal as we are called upon to believe [it] to be” (141). The article goes on to claim “God has ordained visibly, by all the arrangements of nature and providence, one sphere and kind of work for a man and another for a woman” (145). Aside from the arguably obvious anti-suffrage sentiments in “Conditions,” Oliphant works to formulate a concern at the root of modern feminism: universalization. While Oliphant agreed with the notion of separate spheres—women’s power rests in the home—she also notes that “the rules of civilisation are hard, and conventional life is cruel; but the injury does not limit itself by an arbitrary law of sex, or imaginary line of demarcation between men and women” (143). What Oliphant digs at in this article is the notion that the hardships of a cruel life are not unequally distributed to women, but rather that men and women are faced with the “bondage of society,” and with “false individual pride” (144). The universalizing of all women as women who suffer social injustices based on their sex can only lead to a simple and foolish conclusion: that a “little watchmaking, bookkeeping, or jewellery, additional thereto, would be a very inadequate remedy” (146). She resists the act of giving over to the philosophers, suffragettes, and policy makers the power to locate difference in biology. This “arbitrary law of sex” and “imaginary line of demarcation” remains, in her argument, in the field of the abstract. Once moved from the abstract, she satirically argues, what would women have to show for their troubles? The ability to make watches and keep accounts? Is watchmaking and

laboring in the fields worth the price of erasing the arbitrary differences and replacing them with an acknowledgement of biological ones?

Oliphant further asserts her “brand” of feminism in the 1866 article “The Great Unrepresented.” The article was written in reaction to a petition submitted to Parliament by John Stuart Mill. The petition requests householders be granted the right to vote. Mill presented the petition on behalf of several women, who Oliphant points out are merely a group of twenty prominent women. Oliphant was in the group of women to whom Mill hoped to bestow the right. She begins the article (anonymously published, as most of her reviews in *Blackwood’s*) with “[the] present writer has the disadvantage of being a woman. It is a dreadful confession to put at the beginning of a page; and yet it is not an unmitigated misfortune” (367). Tongue in cheek, she criticizes Mill’s “folly of wisdom” (369) and points to the fact that the petition in no means aims to grant the liberty of the vote on women, universally, but rather on those few who have “withered on the stalk, or taken many a buffet of the world; who are respectable, but no longer charming; whose hair is growing grey” (370). These grey-haired women “do not share his opinions, nor even enter into his processes of thought” and they do not see themselves in any way as *unrepresented*, as some of them are even “admitted the honour of inscribing our opinions in the pages of *Maga*” (368, 367). While claiming the argument presented in the petition to be of sound logic, she also claims that the “army of logic” seeks to do battle with an “unreasonable practical world” (369). What most recent feminist critics have failed to recognize in this article is Oliphant’s fierce resistance to a bestowal of rights. The “fairy gift of the philosopher” (374) is nothing more than a right fought for and given at the hands of men. She more pointedly remarks that women do not need the benevolence, as it is not women, universally, who “ask for any compensation or make any outcry about our deficiencies” (371).

There is an obvious celebration of femininity (a celebration of female power in the realm of domestic enterprise) in Oliphant's words that feminist critics tend to ignore. Her fear is that the new legislation will "[classify] us and [give] us a new place in creation [and make] us out to be something less than women, something almost man" (371). Her novels and short fiction illustrate a disheartened view of men; and, in her own life, men had done very little except drain her financially, fail to live up to their talents, and die leaving her with debts to be paid.<sup>35</sup> So the desire to be *like men* would not have entered into any process toward authority, as it did in the case of George Eliot. This notion finds an echo in "Two Ladies"<sup>36</sup> when she uses history to support the ability of women to provide for themselves, in the absence of formal laws permitting them to do so: "whenever it has been necessary, women *have* toiled, have earned money, have got their living and the living of those dependent upon them, in total indifference to all theory" (206). While her view on the feminist issues continually changed, her resistance to fixing or defining the feminine experience held strong. Three years after the publication of "The Great Unrepresented," in a response to Mill's *Subjection of Women*, Oliphant relaxes her earlier views on the vote and equates marriage laws to humiliation, clarifying her previous position by claiming the Married Women's Property act prevented a dishonorable man from snatching the "bread out of her mouth and the children out of her arms."<sup>37</sup> Margaret Oliphant's feminism blends the roles of a mother with the role of women in the profession of letters. Journalism and novel writing was something she could do at her kitchen table and "provided the ultimate solution for women who needed or sought financial independence but who at the same time refused to compromise their domestic responsibilities and roles" (Shattock 176). The army of logic can't possibly make headway in an unreasonable world, and Oliphant uses her powers of intellect to level the playing field, in a way. While her novels carry significantly less weight than



Charlotte Brontë's and George Eliot's, and while her contemporaries often rolled their eyes as they read her anonymous reviews of their own works, Oliphant uses the Victorian print media as a way to develop feminine power.

### III. "The Terrible Instrument of Self-Murder": Castrating the *Self* Through

#### Autobiography

By the time Oliphant writes her review of Harriet Martineau's autobiography in 1877, she had already begun the process of her own "instrument of self-murder"—her autobiography—("Harriet Martineau" 472), with her first entry in 1864.<sup>38</sup> While the Martineau review illustrates Oliphant's concerns over the process of autobiographical writing, it also highlights her development of a theory of autobiography. Oliphant claims biography is "dangerous" as it is produced after the subject's death and renders the subject "helpless" and without recourse against partiality and the art of "habitual desecration" (472). However, her initial commentaries on autobiography do not fare better as she calls this form a "more fatal art [in comparison to biography], more radical in its operation, and infinitely more murderous, against which nothing can defend" (472). Why would Margaret Oliphant engage in a process of self-murder as she calls it, self-castration to use my term? What would be the benefit to entering in a process of self-indulgent portrait writing? Oliphant wonders at the publication timing of Martineau's *Autobiography* and her comments on it reveals her suspicion of the form itself:

The fact that a woman had thought it fit and becoming to leave her own account of herself in an editor's drawer for some twenty years, ready for the moment when death might overtake her, was itself a curious evidence of the high weight

she attached to it and her anxiety to make the world aware of her own deliberate judgment upon her own character. (473)

Oliphant did not agree with the notion of life writing as an attempt to place the writer in the continuum of history. Her reviews on Martineau's and Trollope's autobiographies illustrate her resistance to a type of "masculine" memoir, the form most popular in the Victorian period. As Linda Peterson points out, "Martineau conceived her life in typically masculine terms of personal progress and professional success, whereas Oliphant espoused a more feminine and familial approach" (263). In the same vein of argument, I assert Oliphant's rejection of masculine autobiography rests in the form's overt process of fictionalization. While Oliphant's *Autobiography* results in fictionalizing Margaret Oliphant, her style of writing indicates her desire to use the form as a way to "argue against a conception of the woman writer that achieves its professionalism by breaking with domesticity" (Peterson 267). Her reluctance to define autobiographical writing as a process devoid of the conflation of professional aims and domestic responsibilities results in the production of what may be defined as "feminine autobiography," while other more aesthetically sensitive products tend to focus on the professional career in distinction from the domestic life. Liz Stanley explains the difference between masculine and feminine autobiography by stating "men's narratives are linear, chronological and coherent whereas women's are discontinuous, digressive, [and] fragmented" (92). Given this description, one can certainly define Oliphant's *Autobiography* as "feminine." However, Oliphant would have considered her writing feminine in a more fundamental or traditional manner: she did not distinguish between her life as a woman, mother, and provider from that as a professional writer. As a matter of fact, the two are inextricably linked. Therefore, the process of autobiographical self-castration works on two levels in the case of Margaret Oliphant. On the one hand it serves

to castrate the artist by producing a feminine product disinterested in the development of the anonymous artist. On the other hand, autobiographical writing forces Oliphant to place her self on the page, to recognize the self on the page, and to separate herself from the self on the page. In other words, Oliphant's process of autobiographical writing is more than fictionalizing the self as most critics indicate, but rather she engages in a *formulation* of the self as a subject and puts distance between the self written and the self writing. However, the autobiography is not a form that defines itself on the distance between the two selves, but rather, depends upon a production that merges the written self and the self that writes.

While Margaret Oliphant's life predates the writings of Jacques Lacan and his theory of the "Mirror Stage," discussing the creation of autobiography under a lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis provides a crucial key to the understanding of autobiographical writing and self-castration. Oliphant would not have discussed the process of life writing as a process of forming the *I*, but she did understand the notion of creating fiction of her own life, which while lacking Lacanian theoretical terms, does not differ greatly from what the psychoanalytic theorist details in the first chapter of *Ecrits*. Autobiography demands the writer place the self in the line of subjectification, much in the same manner as the infant reflecting "upon the startling spectacle" of itself in the mirror (1). The mirror stage works as a "coming-into-being" process in which the "*I* is precipitated in the primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject"(2). An important element of the mirror stage is its "exteriority" which fixes the subject in *there* in the mirror and "symbolizes the mental permanence of the *I*, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination" (2). In the same manner, the autobiography calls on the writer to create the figure of the "being" on the page. Once the being comes into existence through discourse, its

previously fragmented body is solidified through subjectification in language. Like the notion of fragmentation before *Gestalt* in the mirror stage, the author writing an autobiography composes from a state of fragmentation. The arrangement of the autobiography lends structure to a previously hidden or unrevealed body. When Oliphant places her life as the subject of her writing, she must then encounter the reflection resulting from the autobiographical reflection and conclude “there I am, there on the page, not here in the flesh, but there in the production of me, is me.” Therefore, it is only in the production of the self on the page that the subject *becomes* a self.

The fragmentary existence gives way to a developed being through the process of autobiographical writing. As in Lacan’s discussion of the mirror stage, the reflection proffered by the text is one of “alienating identity” (4). The autobiography represents only that which is *narrated*, those aspects of the author’s life that he or she chooses to conceal, downplay, exaggerate, etc. are the only aspects used in the creation of the autobiographical self. So, the reflection may be an image completely alien to the actual life experience. The author must confront, in a mighty battle of the self, the image in the mirror in order to assert a sense of autonomy over that which has now become a record of “history.” The “self-murder,” as Oliphant describes it in the review of Harriet Martineau, is violent in that it positions the historical self in opposition to the actual self. And, while the author maintains control over the record of life during the writing process, once the record reaches the publisher, there is nothing the author can do to combat the “harsh judgments” and “habitual desecration” (“Harriet Martineau” 472) that often follows the autobiography’s publication.

Furthermore, if the page symbolizes the only real construction of identity, then the process of autobiographical writing forfeits the actual self for the pleasure and authority in

creating the self. This process of self-murder, or self-castration, allows the author to experience, by her own hand, the process of self-annihilation as it allows for the construction of identity (a phallogentric process wrapped in the symbolic order). The author of autobiography also has control over what is not said, what is absent, the “gaps,” or what is unseen. Between the author at the table and the constructed identity on the page lies a space of differentiation. While the autobiography becomes a record of history, what is left unuttered remains outside of the textual production of the self. These unutterances provide a trace between the page and the author, but it is within this distance that the author wields her greatest authority. If the autobiography represents a record of life (the conclusion of the autobiography, while prior to the actual death of the author, effectually ends the author’s record of life – a printed death), then the author thrusts herself into the continuum of historical record while controlling the image extended by the text. Therefore, autobiography, in stark contrast to biography, allows the writer to experience the process of alienation while simultaneously subverting the process of subjectification.

In my earlier discussions on Brontë and Eliot, I discuss the process of castration through their fictive autobiographies. Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* as well as portions of Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss* reflect these authors’ attempts to experience self-castration by permitting a space for the creation of character upon which they enact castration. In this method Brontë and Eliot are able to experience the dual pain and pleasure complex that rises out of making and bearing the castrative mark. What these characters provide these two authors is a “safe” fictive distance. What a discussion of Oliphant’s *Autobiography* offers is an extension of the discussion of agency through self-castration. The *Autobiography* does not operate (on the surface) from a fictive distance. Brontë and Eliot use fiction as a mediator in their processes of self-castration. Oliphant experiences castration more immediately. In comparing Oliphant’s non-fiction writing

to the fiction writing of Brontë and Eliot, I must first assert that the *Autobiography* is, indeed, a fiction. The “real” autobiography rests in the unseen and unuttered “gaps.” In *Mrs. Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself* Elisabeth Jay claims

in a very important sense Mrs. Oliphant’s life became a fiction to herself. When she came to write the story of her own life she was very well aware that it was a story she was telling and that this required *literary* decisions and deliberate choices of telling moments and particular emphasis. (25, my emphasis)

The “literary” choices Oliphant makes when constructing her autobiography are similar to those choices Brontë and Eliot made when constructing semi-autobiographical novels. Therefore, discussing the autobiography as a fiction allows me to argue the immediacy of Oliphant’s self-castration process. Finally, autobiographical writing figures into the “history” of Victorian England much in the same manner as fiction. In “Absolute Commonplaces: Oliphant’s Theory of Autobiography” Laurie Langbauer examines the connection between Oliphant, autobiography, authority, and history. She claims that “ordinary details [...] constitute the form of autobiography [...] they are the vehicle that carries whatever meaning resides in our sense of ourselves, and resides in history itself” (126) and she further suggests that the constructing of the self out of “every day records” is a process of “[turning] themselves into that which is subject to such institutions and nations” (126-127). So, the construction of identity through the record of daily life is, in fact, a reflection of Victorian culture and, therefore, represents the production of the self in historical context. Just as fiction reflects the social, institutional, legal, and cultural ideologies of the times, autobiographical writing figures the subject within the discourse of history by *narrating* (fictionalizing) the every-day existence of the subject (character) at a particular moment in time. Not only does autobiography allow for the self-authorization granted

by fiction writers, the author becomes part of the register of history in much the same way that Jane Eyre commented upon the great danger of “surplus women” and the deplorable conditions of the governess.

The intent of the *Autobiography*, as Oliphant originally envisioned it, was to leave a record for her boys. However, by the time Oliphant concludes her narrative, both of her sons had died.<sup>39</sup> The shift in audience would have eliminated the need for the autobiography. I argue that this shift in audience formulates the first level of self-castration for Oliphant. In a letter to Blackwood in 1894, Oliphant claims the “character may be changed now, but it will be more adapted perhaps for the public” (*Autobiography and Letters* 417). This shift from a memoir for her sons to a “book not without interest” that can, if she finishes it, “be calculated upon” to highlight the change from life writing to autobiographical writing. The difference here is that the former does not find exigency in the world of publication. By 1894, Oliphant writes her biography in order to obtain financial security for her remaining dependents. The tone of the narrative voice denotes Oliphant’s change in audience, as she laments “how strange it is to me to write all this, with the effort of making light reading of it, and putting in anecdotes that will do to quote in the papers and make the book sell” (*Autobiography* 140). In her effort, she realizes the process of fictionalizing herself requires that she reconstruct her life in a manner appropriate for the publishing market. Her disgust with this process is clear: “when I wrote it for Cecco to read it was all very different, but now I am doing it consciously for the public [and] I feel all this to be so vulgar, so common, so unnecessary, as if I were making pennyworths of myself” (140). This type of publication prostitution (as Woolf terms it in *Three Guineas*) places Oliphant as the subject of textual production.

Nonetheless, Oliphant continues her autobiographical writing with the revised audience in mind in order to use the process of self-murder to develop a constructed public identity and to experience the pleasure and pain of identity-making through the process of self-castration. The first half of the *Autobiography* oscillates between memoir, journal writing, and life writing in a process that allows her to work through the pain of losing her daughter Maggie and her son Cyril. In the earliest sections she claims: “Here is the worst of all. I am alone. I am a woman. I have nobody to stand between me and the roughest edge of grief” (*Autobiography* 42). The *Autobiography* serves a purpose. It is the process by which she can share the “pang” and it is something that can help “bear the loss” (42). Oliphant viewed the process of writing as a process natural to her constitution, so the fact that she would turn to writing during her moment of grief highlights her understanding of writing as a process to obtain pleasure from reconstructing pain. The first part of the autobiography indicates her inability to separate her life from her life as an author. She states “for the writing ran through everything” (66) and that she continues as a “sort of machine, so little out of order, able to endure all things, always fit for work” as if to say that the work made her fit for life. The *Autobiography* works as a sort of therapy.

However, when her audience shifts, from family to public, the narrative takes on a more concrete and linear structure, a more masculine structure. In January 1891, she begins the serious work of the “pitiful little record of my life” (*Autobiography* 101) and the business of chronology, coherent narrative structure, and the tedious process of remembering names, places, and events dominate the narrative aim of the autobiographical writing. While the discussions of Frank Oliphant’s death in Rome are repeated here (101-121) she does so by paying attention to chronology starting with “We began our housekeeping in Harrington Square” to “When I thus began the world anew I had for all my fortune about £1000 of debt, a small insurance of, I think,



£200 on Frank's life, [...] and my own faculties, such as they were, to make our living and pay off our burdens" (101, 121). This linear structure, an indication that she understood her work would be edited, diverts drastically from the earlier *musings*, which Elisabeth Jay includes in the most recent edition of the autobiography, *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*:

By then the perfect number, and oh my firstborn, my only daughter, my Maggie.  
How He sows children broadcast about this world, how they swarm untaught,  
uncared for by the score in these Italian villages, living in beggary and  
wretchedness. Oh my Lord why didst thou grudge me the one blossom of  
womankind that I thought my own. (42)

The lament, the prayerful sorrow, and the inward reflections<sup>40</sup> give way to more traditional form of creating the subject for the public eyes. The objective view fades as the subjective view gains steam in her desire to finish a *book* that might be calculated upon. The process of self-castration rises out of the shift in audience and, therefore the shift in purpose for the work: memoir to *book*.

However, the shift does not alienate the subject entirely. Instead, it allows Oliphant to fictionalize her life through the text in order to gain mastery over it. What the *Autobiography* offers her is a way to use writing as a process to re-experience the pain of loss while simultaneously using the process of writing to create a therapeutic dialogue between herself, the woman all alone, and the text. She explains she "wrote almost eagerly at first because the utterance was something like crying; it relieved me and exhausted me and exhaustion is a great blessing when trouble is great" (44). By comparing the process of writing to the guttural expenditure of crying, she highlights her emotional and bodily tie to the creation of textual experience. Furthermore, she was able to reconstruct her story and, in doing so, creates an authoritative text – one that is both authoritative and authorizing. The process of self-castration

in this autobiographical “fiction” is more primary, or more immediate, than the fictive autobiographical writings of Brontë (*Jane Eyre* and *Villette*) and Eliot (*The Mill on the Floss*). Brontë and Eliot use the process of writing to create characters, much like themselves, in order to initiate the process of self-castration within the text. This allows them to experience the pleasure of making the cut while experiencing the pain of castration. However, in these two cases, Brontë and Eliot are able to castrate and be castrated (at their own hands) from a fictive (safe) distance. The characters they create bear the brunt of the process of castration. These two authors can always “hide,” in a sense, behind their fictive creations, and it is a matter of interpretation that realizes the connection between Maggie and George Eliot, and Lucy and/or Jane and Charlotte Brontë. The autobiography does not offer such fictive distance and, hence, the self-castration process is more immediate and, arguably, more risky. While the *Autobiography* works to fictionalize Oliphant’s identity, it does not make a clear cut between the self on the page and the actual self in real life. The fiction she creates in autobiographical writing will always point directly to the author and, therefore, her self-castration process through autobiography is not conducted through the conduit of character-making.

In many sentences throughout the *Autobiography*, Oliphant forces the reader to recognize the process of autobiographical writing. This meta-autobiography underscores the text’s authority as well as its inability to construct authority. In February 1885, Oliphant writes “Twenty-one years have passed since I wrote what is on the opposite page” (*Autobiography* 47), which stresses the notion that there is a gap between life and fiction. In the later pages, Oliphant claims she will commence with “a little try at the autobiography” (53) and exclaims “Let me be done with this—I wonder if I will ever have time to put a few autobiographical bits down before I die” (52). She often circles back over previous utterances of events. For example, she

discusses the death of her husband Frank Oliphant in conjunction with the details of her children's deaths and then, in the entry dated January 18, 1891, she starts her story anew with a more detailed description of Frank's death in Rome (101-121). The autobiography cannot help commenting upon the process of autobiographical writing, and Oliphant makes this dialogue clear when she muses "Alas—is it not yesterday? Life is full of dreadful repetitions" (69). Additionally, there are several moments where she *invites* outside editing. She says she can't remember names or certain details, she says "I think" it was "Zaidee" (77) and in parenthesis, she questions "(what was the date?)" (67). The autobiography also points to the impossibility of reconstruction: "But in six months or so things changed. It is not a matter into which I can enter here" (70) and her assertion that she will "resume the thread of my poor life—in this book I mean" (96) as if to say that the thread of life in books is incomplete when compared to the tapestry of real life. As a final example of meta-autobiography, Oliphant's ending "And now here I am alone/I cannot write any more" (203) was not a death-bed utterance, but rather, as Jay explains in the *Introduction* to her edited version of Oliphant's autobiography, a commentary on "that [which] could not be written [including] the disappointing trajectories of her sons' adult lives, so obstinately resistant to writerly reconstruction" (23). The process of writing gives Oliphant the tools she needs to initiate self-castration in order to gain authority over her textual representation by limiting the proffered reconstruction. The gaps that remain unuttered are part of the *unseen* – positioned in a space outside of the text and outside of the editor's purview.

Oliphant had good reason to fear the editing process. As an author, she did not edit her own work carefully. As an autobiographer, she did not edit her story, but rather left it in fragments to be collected and assembled. In "Freed by Necessity, Trapped by the Market: The Editing of Oliphant's *Autobiography*," Elizabeth Jay points out that "when her literary executors

came to publish her autobiography, [...] they recorded that ‘a great disappointment befell them. It had no beginning; scraps had been written at long intervals and by no means consecutively’” (135). Oliphant’s original editor, Mrs. Harry Coghill, worked to reproduce the autobiography so that it fit the mold of the traditional (masculine) form. The fragments and scraps of paper Oliphant left to her niece represented a writing process that was often abandoned and then reclaimed, not cohesive, at many times rambling, and missing the last twenty years of her life. As Elisabeth Jay’s introduction to the most recent form of the *Autobiography* notes, the editorial cuts “amounted to well over a quarter of the original manuscript” and were showed a concern for the Victorian “womanly image” (13). Also eliminated from the 1899 publication were the internal dialogues that preceded the deaths of Oliphant’s children. The autobiography was deconstructed and then reshaped so that it mirrored the more traditional format of the Victorian autobiography. Unfortunately, this editorial castration results in a text devoid of “feminine” writing. The 1899 text does not resemble the aim of Oliphantian writing, which was to show how writing ran through her life and was invested in and a product of her domestic responsibilities. Elisabeth Jay’s restructured text maintains Oliphant’s original inserts, formatting, and chronology. What readers now see is that the fragmentary writing reflects the fragmentary life of the Victorian female author.

#### **IV. Resisting Articulation: “Stories of the Seen and Unseen”**

During the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the periodical press expanded and, with it, the need for print articles. While the periodical press featured reviews, politically-bent essays, and serialized novels, it also became a popular venue for the short story. Of course, the term “short story” has become retroactively applied to the tales popular during this time period. Victorian

authors did not sit down to write a “short story” as modern critics would define it now; but, authors did find the production of these short tales lucrative in that with little effort and less editorial intervention they could fill a need for short pieces geared toward the every-day reader. Furthermore, as was the case with most magazines including *Blackwoods*, short stories were usually published anonymously. This anonymous publication presented authors with an opportunity to dabble in the less artistic enterprise of story telling without much critical damage to their reputation as a novel writer. The genre of “sketches,” as they were called in the Victorian period, was often thought of as “feminine” and the work most appealing and suited to women authors. Abandoning the development of character for the clear outline of plot and climax, the short story requests little of its readers as the moral or theme is “communicated to the reader through inference or through a narrator’s penetration of the mind and his report of what is there” (Marler 154). This “casual reader,” as Marler calls him, gains pleasure “from his recognition of the triumph of a simple, ideal order along with the confirmation of his middle-class values” (156). While a novel’s audience was also the middle-class and aimed to reaffirm its value system and social structure, the form developed this system of reaffirmation through the psychological development of its characters. The psychological development of say *Jane Eyre* or *Maggie Tulliver*, or *Esther Summerson* requires the reader invest a great deal of time and concentrated energy to see the novel through. The short story, however, requires no such stamina, and in its brevity represents a castrated product of the more critically dominating form.

One can then argue that authors writing sketches for quick pay did so with little attention to their possible impact on the literary community as a whole. The Victorian press did not spend much time, if any, reviewing short stories (unless, of course, Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life* could be classified as such, which most contemporary and modern critics do not) and, instead, focused

on the aesthetic and theoretical development of the novel. Being a product of Victorian culture, the short story does offer a way to analyze the way in which female self-castration grants power to its author. Margaret Oliphant's "Tales of the Seen and Unseen" represent the author's desire to move beyond the limitations of language to a space, a gap, perhaps, that resists articulation in an effort to subvert the system of signification (a phallogentric system in which women cannot signify, cannot *mean*). By narrating the gap – that which is unseen or unuttered – Oliphant, in a proto-modernist move, expands the boundaries established by the system of patriarchal language in order to explore the invisible and unmapped space outside of language.

In *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Foucault works to link madness with the system of language. He claims

Language is the first and last structure of madness, its constituent form; on language are based all the cycles in which madness articulates its nature [and in] the movement of passion which persists until it breaks and turns against itself, the sudden appearance of the image, and the agitations of the body which were invisible concomitants—all this, even as we were trying to reconstruct it, was already secretly animated by this language. (100)

It is within the system of language that one finds the possibility of madness – its base form. What Foucault's quote indicates here is the possibility of a "break," a rupture in language that allows for the articulation of that which resists articulation (in this case, the break lends structure to madness). Like Foucault's interest in the fissures that exists in language, Oliphant's stories of the seen and unseen are concerned with the gap between what is visible and what remains invisible and how language attempts to articulate this gap and the spatial movement between the two sides of the spectrum. Each of these stories discusses "madness" as a possible scientific

diagnosis for the characters who are driven to initiate dialogue with the unseen. As Foucault theorizes, language forms the base of madness and it is within the system of language that madness forms and within madness “we discover the hidden perfection of language” (95). If then, as Foucault supposes, there remains a link between madness and language, then what lies outside of language – that which resists articulation – can also resist the slippage into madness. The short stories in this collection focus on the threat of madness, which figures into nineteenth-century discourse as a “feminine” malady and, therefore, perpetuates the notion that women (and, more specifically women authors and professionals) risk their mental stability by endeavoring to enter a world in which their place or position remains ambiguous. In “The Library Window” (1896), the unnamed narrator illustrates the impossibility of entering into the educated and literary world of her imagined specter – the man who sits writing at his desk. Oliphant places her young narrator in the position of the “withdrawn” “spectator of all the varied story out of doors” (1). Within the deep recess of the window seat, the female narrator occupies the space between the street (active life) and the domicile (the proper feminine sphere). When the party in doors suggests the library window opposite to her recess of refuge is merely a painted image, she directs her gaze upon the edifice in hopes of figuring out the mystery. Despite the logical evidence to suggest the window is merely painted for the purpose of aesthetic symmetry, “it is just a very dead thing without any reflection in it,” “the thud of the stone upon the window, and its descent strait down,” and “The window! Ah, you’ve been taken in with what appears outside. It was put there to be in uniformity with the window on the stair” (3, 13, 18), the female narrator insists on her earlier visions of the library window with the man inside writing, always writing.

Tamar Heller suggests “the guiding images of ‘The Library Window’ are windows and their frames, spaces that permit access between spheres – a permeability emphasized by the female gaze of the narrator, whose voyeurism connects the domesticity of the aunt’s house and the male learning of the college library” (24). The windows (the deep recess of the aunt’s home and the library window across the street) represent space and the possibility of access, but the library window is merely a figment of the excited brain. In the last pages of the short story, the young woman has a nervous breakdown in her attempt to articulate what she has seen. So what can be made of the fact that the library window is just mortar and paint—an illusion? Much like the tension that exists in Oliphant’s *Autobiography*, the tension in “The Library Window” highlights the space in between what is narrated and what cannot be uttered. When the narrator sees her male author at the writing desk, her heart beats, she starts, and experiences the thrill of anticipating “movement in the silent space” (9). Later she claims her “heart gave a great jump” and that her “heart was in her mouth” (12) all metaphors meant to describe the physiological and internal changes – that which cannot be seen and that which cannot be accurately described in language. The narration attempts to bring what is invisible to light and what is unuttered to sound. But, in articulating that which resists language, the narrator writes her body, and in doing so uses the space between the seen and the unseen to gain agency. After the disappearance of her vision of masculine/patriarchal authority, she claims her “heart was so content, and [she] was so worn out and satisfied” (19). While the story illustrates the fear or anxiety women have with authorial production,<sup>41</sup> it also sketches a possibility for female agency through the ability to write the unseen (be it the body or the man behind the painted window). While the story highlights the difficulties women have in entering the literary world, it is, in fact, a feminine narration. The



text grants agency to those who choose to initiate a dialogue with the gap between what is seen and unseen – a gap that is generally unmapped, untouched, and ungendered.

Oliphant's short stories investigate the powerlessness of language when it is faced with the project of narrating the unseen. In "The Secret Chamber" (1876), Oliphant highlights Lindores's inability to speak: "he could not hear himself speak a word as he stood convulsed, struggling with dry lips and choking voice" (8). The narrator refers to Earl Robert's (the undead character living in the secret chamber) language as a "kind of utterance," and details his ability to read Lindores's mind – supplying narration where the text cannot. Lindores's journey into the secret room mimics the journey into a womb – a pre-linguistic space. Earl Robert derives his power from his use of a system outside of the linguistic order: spells, magic, and illusion. In this secret chamber Lindores finds his body "separate from him, more frightened than he was [...] his limbs shook with fear and weakness, almost refusing to obey the action of his will" (11). In "The Portrait" (1894), Oliphant presses the matter further with a more obvious commentary on the inability of language to signify the realm of the unseen. Phil understands emotions go "deeper than words" (9) can express. When he first encounters the unseen, Phil is "aware this language is figurative, and that the heart cannot leap" and when he tries to define the physiological experiences, he could not "feel any meaning in it, any suggestion, any moral impression" (9). The struggle Phil has in narrating his movement between the seen and unseen leaves him ill-equipped: "I am quite aware of the confusion of the metaphor; the reality was just so" and he is restricted by language and "obliged to use these metaphors" (9, 16). However, in each of these stories, the protagonist is able to survive and even prosper by having participated in the process of articulating that which resists articulation. In the very moment when language breaks down, there is a space where the body, in its primitive and most base form, can exist

outside of the social and cultural restrictions enacted through the process of linguistic signification. While other characters in these stories look to assign a malaise, fever, “scientific explanation” or “human agency” (“The Open Door” 10, 25) to the physical and mental reaction to the unseen, the encounter remains outside of the realm of language and, therefore cannot be articulated or explained by scientific or medical discourse.

What remains a common thread between the tales of the seen and unseen is Oliphant’s creation of setting. She spends a great deal of time introducing the reader to the location (usually Scotland) and to the house. The encounter with the unseen takes place in a particular room of the house or component of the house. What is interesting here is that Oliphant, in her attempt to highlight the inability of discourse to map the space between, provides the reader a detailed “map” or an architectural graph of the place in which maps, graphs, systems, and charts fail to be useful. Much like her tenuous relationship with autobiographical writing, Oliphant seems to point the reader to a larger issue of language and publication. The language authors must use to map the domestic, sexual, internal, life of women and the language that must be used to graph the feminine body always places the feminine in the realm of fiction. Oliphant’s greatest contribution, it seems to me, in her short story writing, is that it unveils a realm which has remain unscripted and which resists the patriarchal system of signification. It is here in this fertile ground that the work of feminist writing can (and does in the case of the New Women writers) begin to reconstruct the woman author through the process of female self-castration.

## Conclusion

Even as a student in my earliest encounters with Victorian literature, I was struck by the text's insistence on *limitations*. As I developed a larger critical lexicon, I learned to reexamine these limitations and, in doing so, realized the boundaries in Victorian literature were often linked to bodily, sexual, and linguistic limitations. It also puzzled me to find that the novel, in its aim to discover new spaces of discourse, often worked to reaffirm traditional notions of society, gender, and culture. However, the novel genre in other cases became a stage for writers interested in challenging the political and cultural mandates of the Victorian period. The novel, therefore, became a space of complex manipulation and subversion. Recent critical interpretations of Victorian texts train readers to root out more radical ideologies. And, in doing so, these interpretations permit a way to recover the feminine body and to investigate the ways in which Victorian authors use language to subvert traditional masculine authority.

While I agree the Victorian texts should be viewed as an exercise in cultural destabilization, my overarching argument relies on the author's use of the text as not just a mere product of subversive desires, but rather as a method through which she can gain agency. The process of writing itself is a process of self-castration. And, as an author encounters the writing process, she does so understanding that the process will render her castrated. As an author writes, she realizes the separation between the self writing and the self on the page. With every pen stroke, the author leaves herself on the page. The self on the page is no longer the speaking, breathing, writing self, and becomes the subjected self. The process of subjectification, as explained Jacques Lacan, is a process of cutting the speaking self (the self in the flesh) from the

self that is subject through language. Therefore, the writing process forces the author to develop through a mandated castration process. Furthermore, entrance into the publishing arena requires the author to offer up her textual body to the procedures of editing and criticism. Another layer of castration through writing, the author must castrate herself through the writing process and then endure further castration efforts at the hands of her editors and critics. While editorial changes constitute outside castration, female authors also conduct modes of editorial self-castration when they comply with their editors' requests and when they self-edit before sending their work to their publishers.

What purpose does this self-castration process serve? It is clear in reading the fiction of the Victorian period, the biographies of the authors, and their own letters that the female authors of the time period understand their own "lacking" position. In the case of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Margaret Oliphant the authors indicate in their personal letters a desire to be viewed on equal terms as their male counterparts. As I have detailed in both of the Brontë and Eliot chapters, the fear of being counted as a "woman writer" is intense. The intense fear leads to their careful construction of Currer Bell and George Eliot. These constructed male figures serve as a way to evade the feminine classification of their work. Their authorial creations constitute a form of female self-castration and, this self-castration allows them to enter the literary intelligentsia as an *author* rather than as a woman. During the writing process, female authors permit themselves an opportunity to experience their own castration, but with a twist. The castration process they endure at the level of the writing process is one initiated and guided by their own hand. So, the female author understands her position in Victorian culture as one that relegates her to the position of "lack," and the writing process grants her access to the origin of this lack. By becoming an author, the female writer stands in as the castrator and employs the

tools of castration upon her own authorial and textual bodies. She overturns the masculine position of castrator – the figure of power – and dons the cloak of one who castrates. The transference of power sets in motion the ability to understand herself as both castrated being and castrating power. As self-castration develops through the production of the text, the author re-experiences her original castration. The writing process mimetically recapitulates the origin of female castration. The author can re-experience the pain of the initial cut of castration, but since the cut is made by her own hand, she subverts masculine authority over her own body by placing the knife in her own hand. The cut she makes is a cut she makes upon herself. She owns her castration experience.

The power she gains over her own body constitutes the first stage of agency through self-castration. As a figure who manipulates the tools of castration, the female author gains mastery over these tools and, in re-experiencing the pain of her own castration, she also recognizes the pleasure in making the cut. As a castrator, the female author wields her power over her textual creations. Why don't the female characters in Victorian fiction ever "win" in the end? Why are they often stunted, compromised, or deceased? The familiar motif of female compromise and destruction often leads readers to surmise Victorian fiction reinforces traditional roles of feminine appropriateness be it the cultural limitations placed upon their sexuality, independence, production in the workplace, or identity creation. However, if readers view the trajectory of the female characters as one conflated with the will to power of their creator, they could interpret the character's inability to win as the cost incurred by the author's desire to experience the pleasure in making the cut of castration. Armed with the intoxicating pleasure of a reclamation of the castrator position, the female author uses the narrative process to assert and reassert her position of power. Where the real world does not allow for this transference of power, the world of the

text provides the space for the female author to declare her power and to experience the traditionally masculine power position.

The transference of power allowed by the self-castration power only represents one level of a multivariate process. In this level of authorial vengeance, George Eliot employs self-castration as a way to build and then destroy her female characters – to bring them to the brink of possibility only to annihilate them. However, in the case of Charlotte Brontë, her characters mimic their author's rise to power through the process of self-castration. Both Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe construct their narratives by channeling their author's competing desires to self-castrate and to castrate others. Jane and Lucy's use of threat narrative works to erase the textual oppositions to their identity construction. In this form of self-castration, Jane and Lucy mimic their author's desire to castrate and reveal the potential for releasing oneself from limitations placed on sexual identity (Jane) and from the limitations of sexual identity (Lucy). The divergent aspects of Eliot and Brontë's self-castration processes elucidate the process as one that exists on a spectrum. This, of course, is important because it illustrates the process of self-castration as one that not only runs through and comes out of Victorian culture, but also a process that adapts to the differing psychological constitutions of each author.

In viewing the process of self-castration as one that exists on a continuum and as one that continually adapts to those who employ it as a method toward power, one can see the potential threat the process has on the traditional Victorian domestic sphere and on the masculine ego-ideal. Female authors utilize this method in order to gain power in a patriarchal world. Additionally, as in the case of George Eliot, female authors also employ castration as a way to excise femininity all together. The vengeful author/god who employs castration as a vehicle toward power over men and women threatens the stability of Victorian masculinity. Dickens's

literature exhibits a preoccupation with this threat and his texts work to reestablish the patriarchal order by punishing the castrating women who aim to emasculate as a way to gain control. Miss Havisham, Estella, Lady Dedlock, and Madame Defarge are all gross exaggerations of the castrating female. They fix their site on the Victorian male, rendering him a degenerate by placing him outside of the heterosexual aim of production and reproduction. Dickens' literature grows out of his actual relationships with castrating women. The texts offer a space in which he can depict the grotesque female castrator in order to punish and annihilate her and restore the narrative to the traditional vehicle of masculine desire. The fact that Dickens recognizes the threat self-castration poses to the masculine ego-ideal (and, in Dickens' understanding, a threat to the vitality of the nation as a whole) supports my claims that female authors use this process and that it offers real possibilities for agency. If the dissertation extended another chapter or two, further illustration of the threat posed by female self-castration to the sustainability of the Victorian masculine identity can be seen in the texts of Thomas Hardy. Both *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* internalize the fear of female self-castration that has mutated into female castrators. Especially in the case of *Jude the Obscure*, the masculine identity crisis reaches a fevered pitch in the fear that masculinity will be obscured or ushered into oblivion all together at the hands of the grotesque female castrators. So, as the text allows a space to explore the possibilities of agency through textual self-castration, it also points to it as a real threat and allows for a space to combat such threats.

The continuum of female-self castration also allows for authors like Margaret Oliphant to establish identity in a publishing world that does not recognize her status as an "artist." Writing to support her family, Oliphant employs her pen in the efforts to sustain her domestic empire. By conflating domestic necessity with the desires of authorship, Oliphant purposely castrates the

artist in order to survive as a financially independent woman. Her own comparisons of her literature with that of Brontë and Eliot illustrate her understanding of her “lacking” position. She turns this position of lack into a power to create identity through her autobiographical writing. Her most lasting contribution, however, is her attempts (in her short fiction) to provide language for that which resists articulation. If beings are made subject in language (a castrative process), silence or resistance to articulation presents a space within the text to avoid the process of subjectification. The dialogue between what is seen/unseen and uttered/unuttered may, perhaps grant a space where feminine bodies can “be” without having *to be*. This inarticulate space is a precursor to later New Woman literature. For example, Olive Schreiner’s *Story of an African farm* extends this notion of inarticulation as a fertile space of feminine power. Em, the novel’s minor character, survives the text and gains independence and financial power at its close through her ability to resist subjectification in language. By contrast, Lyndall suffers because of her investigative efforts *into* language and the meaning of things. She becomes nothing but subject, and as subject she is easily erased.

What the theory of self-castration offers readers of Victorian literature is a way to explore these texts as more than just exercises in subversion. The texts illustrate a growing belief in the power gained through the sadomasochistic writing process. As active agents of self-castration models, female authors opt to explore and expand the limits of language and narrative. The exploration leads authors to a way to experience both the pain and pleasure of self-castration and to harness the power of their own castration.



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<sup>1</sup> Freud's use of the German terms "fort" and "da" (gone and here) make up a game that pre-linguistic infants enact as part of their negotiation between the pleasure and reality principles. The child throws objects that are attached to a string into the corners of the room. When the object disappears, he exclaims "fort!" When he reels the object back into the crib, he exclaims "da!" In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud uses the fort/da game as an example of a little boy's "great cultural achievement" (14) in that the child creates a game that would allow for the mother's disappearance without his protestation. The child constructs a method that enabled his experience of pleasure in the return of the object.

<sup>2</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1961.

<sup>3</sup> Speaking is a form of castration in that the speaker gives up the right to "be" in exchange for the possibility to "mean." In "Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious" published in *Ecrits: A Selection* (1977) Lacan argues that being "is that which appears in a lightning moment in the void of the verb 'to be' and I said that it poses its question for the subject. What does that mean? It does not pose it before the subject, since the subject cannot come to the place where it is posed, but it poses it *in place* of the subject, that is to say, in that place it poses the question *with* the subject [...]" (168). In order for the speaking subject to *mean*, or grasp a possibility of meaning, it must "fall in!" and "appeal to the power of the image" supplied by the structure of language ("The Freudian Thing" *Ecrits* 138). The exchange of being for meaning is crucial to the subjectivity of the body. The speaking subject must choose to *become* a subject in language – and in doing so, castrates its right to "be" outside of the structure of language. This process is not

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gendered—both men and women are castrated as speaking subjects. However, this theory is problematic for women in that the ability to signify, for Lacan, rests in the hands of he who owns the phallus.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization*. New York: Vintage, 1995. Foucault claims language is “the first and last structure of madness, its constituent form; on language are based all the cycles in which madness articulates its nature” (100).

<sup>5</sup> Warhol, Robyn R. “Double gender, Double Genre in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*.” *SEL* 36 (1996): 857-875. Warhol defines this term as “narrated by the protagonist” and homodiegetic as “told by a figure within the story” (859).

<sup>6</sup> In researching the writings of Charlotte Brontë within the scope of the argument I put forth, I have found that both *The Professor* and *Shirley* fall outside of the research’s purview. While Brontë’s use of the first-person narration in her first novel *The Professor* illustrates interesting parallels to her biography and later writings, the text itself does not open itself to a direct discussion of female self-castration. *The Professor*, in its many failed outings to the publisher’s tables, represents, in my estimation, Brontë’s desire to write from a masculine point of view. Her command of “realism” and “truthfulness” comes under fire and, I suspect, led the author to find a way to write from a woman’s point of view (as a male author). This turn gave Charlotte Brontë stronger control over the hearts and minds of her characters, which is evident in her second run at publishing her work: *Jane Eyre*. Where as *Jane Eyre* appears to be a reaction to the failure she encountered with *The Professor*, *Shirley* appears to be the conscious effort on the author’s part to engage in more “objective” writing. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar assert that *Shirley* aims at “objectivity, balance, restraint by writing a novel of private, lonely struggle in an historical setting with public references” (373). This type of “objective” approach to writing

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may have been brought on by gentle urgings from her friends. Mary Taylor writes in an 1848 letter to Charlotte Brontë that “you are very different from me in having no doctrine to preach. It is impossible to squeeze a moral out of your production.” The friend, who has been busy writing against societal doctrines against women, takes a moment in her letter to chastise Brontë for a failure to consider history and social context in her writing. She continues the letter with a question: “Has the world gone so well with you that you have no protest to make against its absurdities” (*LCB*, Vol. 2 87). Elizabeth Gaskell and Harriet Martineau were both writing novels steeped in historical references and, I believe Brontë tried to emulate this mode of writing as a way to experiment with narrative techniques.

<sup>7</sup> I will use Margaret Smith’s *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: With a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends* 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Patmore, Coventry. “The Angel in the House” (1879). A poem that spurred the notion that women were to assume the role of the domestic angel and that their appropriate station was that of a wife, mother, and directress of the home.

<sup>9</sup> *Edinburgh Review*, January 1850, pp. 153-173.

<sup>10</sup> *LCB*, vol. 2: Letter to W.S. Williams (November 1849). Charlotte explains her fear at losing her ability to walk invisibly through the district.: “During my late visit I have too often had reason—sometimes in a pleasant—sometimes in a painful form <to> <to feel> to fear that I no longer walk invisible [...]” (272).

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<sup>11</sup> Eliot's work on Spinoza's *Ethics*, completed in 1856, did not end as she had hoped. Lewes was originally contracted to write the translation, and he suggested Marian work on it and submit her work under his name. However, "[s]ince 1854, when the arrangement had been mad, Bohn senior had grown lukewarm about publishing Spinoza and used the fact that Lewes had made an oral contract with his son as a justification for renegotiating price" (Hughes 169). Lewes, infuriated by the change of plans insists on the return of his manuscript. Lewes's bravado, evidenced by the letters written to Bohn, effectively ended the negotiations and possible publication of Marian's translation of Spinoza.

<sup>12</sup> Chapters One and Two in *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans, George Eliot: Her Life in Letters* (1994) discusses the shift Marian makes in developing her notion of audience through personal and business correspondence. Specifically, Bodenheimer notes the "appeals to the readers and the sudden shifts of perspective that are so central to the effect of George Eliot's prose originate in this always double activity, in which the writer both immerses herself in writing and assumes the position of a suddenly critical reading audience" (46). Later, in Chapter Four, Bodenheimer suggests "all the participants took pleasure in playing on the boundaries of the fiction. For a while, Marian enjoyed the "prestige" of anonymity and the secret thrill of hearing both Blackwood and Lewes repeat others' opinions and gossip about the stories and their unknown writer." Marian used the letter format to play with the boundaries of "me" and "him," which highlights the author's constant need and desire to shift between the female and male mind when conducting written correspondence (123).

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<sup>13</sup> 1788-1858, one of the most well-known phrenologists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He founded the Edinburgh Phrenological Society, which was the first of its kind. His most influential and popular work is *The Constitution of Man*.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Liggins – After the publication of *Adam Bede*, the rector of Kirby, Reverend H. Anders wrote the following letter. This letter was printed in the London *Times*, April 15, 1859:

Sir, The author of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* is Mr. Joseph Liggins, of Nuncaton, Warwickshire. You may easily satisfy yourself of my correctness by inquiring of any one in that neighborhood. Mr. Liggins himself and the characters whom he paints are as familiar there as the twin spires of Coventry. – Yours obediently, H. Anders, Rector of Kirby. (qtd in Cooke 57-58).

<sup>15</sup> John Gwyther – Curate of Chilvers Coton. The curate recognized himself as Amos Barton in *Scenes*' leading story. Gwyther wrote to Blackwood on this issue. The claims of portrait writing cut to the quick. Marian wrote to Charles and Cara Bray in June 1859 that "there is not a single portrait in the book, nor will there be in any future book of mine. There are *two* portraits in *Clerical Scenes*; but that was my first bit of art, and my hand was not well in – I did not know so well how to manipulate my materials" (*Letters* 3, 99).

<sup>16</sup> Blackwood's letter to John Gwyther on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1859 reads thus:

The author of the "Scenes of Clerical Life" and "Adam Bede" begs me to inform you that he is not eh Rev. W.H. King, but a much younger person, who wrote "Amos Barton" under the impression that the clergyman whose long past trial suggested the groundwork for the story was no longer living, and that the incidents, not only through the license and necessities of artistic writing, but in consequence of the writer's imperfect knowledge, must have been so varied from

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the actual facts, that any one who discerned the core of the truth must also recognize the large amount of arbitrary, imaginative addition.

But for any annoyance, even though it may have been brief and not well-founded, which the appearance of the story may have caused Mr. Gwyther, the writer is sincerely sorry.

<sup>17</sup> Early examples of this name shift (George Eliot to Mary Evans Lewes) are: October 16<sup>th</sup>, 1859, October 28, 1859, and November 30, 1859. Marian's tone changes dramatically in these three examples: from congenial to direct and forceful. It is clear by this point, her need to hide behind George Eliot dissipates when dealing with Blackwood.

<sup>18</sup> Dickens writes to the "Author of The Reverend Amos Barton" on January 18<sup>th</sup>, 1858. He signs the letter as the author's "servant and admirer," which illustrates his high esteem for the author, even though he suspects the author is a woman (*Letters*, 2: 423-424).

<sup>19</sup> I read Eliot's omniscient narrators as male voices. While in the case of "Janet's Repentance" the gender of the omniscient voice is clearly stated, the gender of the narrators in Eliot's other novels is less obvious. Virginia Blain. "Double Vision and the Double Standard in *Bleak House*: A Feminist Perspective. *New*

*Casebooks: Bleak House*. Ed. Jeremy Tambling. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Blain argues "an omniscient narrator was masculine almost by definition [...] there was no model of female omniscience available to Victorian novelists, either in literature or in Heaven" (67). Blain also cites *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. In *The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Gilbert and Gubar point to the exclusive use the male voice behind the Victorian omniscient narrator.

<sup>20</sup>See Elizabeth Ermarth, "Maggie Tulliver's Long Suicide." *SEL*. 14.4 (1974): 587-601; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale UP) 478-

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535; Jane Lupton, "Women Writers and Death by Drowning." *Poetry and Criticism on Literature and the Art*, ed. Burney J. Hollis (Baltimore: Morgan State UP: 1985) 95-101; Mark Mossman, "Violence, Temptation, and Narrative in George Eliot's 'Janet's Repentance'," *Journal of the Short Story in English* 35 (2000) 9-20; Mario Ortiz-Robles, "Local Speech, Global Acts: Performative Violence and the Novelization of the World," *Comparative Literature*. 59.1 (2007): 1-22; Marlene Tromp, *The Private Rod: Marital Violence, Sensation, and the Law in Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Loewen Reimer's article "The Spoiled Child: What Happened to Gwendolen Harleth?" argues the only logical explanation for Gwendolen's behavior is that she is a victim of incest at the hands of her step-father, Captain Davilow.

<sup>22</sup> Maggie's death can be read as a mode of survival. In the conclusion of *Mill on the Floss*, Maggie is reunited with her brother: "but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted: living through again in one supreme moment the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together" (422). Maggie's final moments reunite her with the family who had abandoned her and the final "supreme" moment represents survival through death.

<sup>23</sup> See Alexis Easley, *First-Person Anonymous: Women Writers and the Victorian Print Media, 1830-70* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2004). Easley explains the literary reform project of the early 1800s. She claims "Carlyle's project—along with many other critics of the 1830s—was to reestablish a sense of ethical responsibility in the literary marketplace, thereby reinstilling moral values in the process of literary production" (16). She further asserts that literature "rather than serving as an end in itself, [...] would have a clear moral or economic purpose that would lead to social improvement" (16).

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<sup>24</sup> Tom All Alone's, the slum home of Jo in *Bleak House* is a literary creation based in Dickens's work with Miss Angela Burdett Coutts in their efforts to build working-class housing structures by demolishing existing London slums. As Kaplan details in his biography of Dickens, the housing "emphasiz[ed] the desirability of large multifamily buildings to conserve open space and make sanitary services more practical [...] Dickens outline[d] for Miss Coutts the basis of what became the Nova Scotia Gardens and the Columbia Square Apartment, which were opened in 1862" (262-3). With Miss Coutts's financial backing, Dickens also worked on several other social reform activities: The Administrative Reform Association, and an "asylum" for fallen women "whose purpose would be to help them renounce prostitution" (Kaplan 150). The inmates of this proposed home for fallen women "had to accept their charity in penitence: they must be reeducated and then sent to emigrate—which was a kind of death" (Holbrook 175).

<sup>25</sup> Gordon Haight. *Letters*, 2: 423-424

<sup>26</sup> "While [Maria] and her friends, with a firm grasp of the social reality, enjoyed the teasing badinage of flirtation, [Charles] was able to imitate the style infrequently. Too serious, too much in love, he created in his mind fantasies of marriage [...] With the humiliation of the blacking warehouse fresh in his emotional memory, he was at pains to dress as handsomely as possible. His attractiveness, though, did not prevent his poses and confessions, widely made to friends, family and intended, from becoming the subject of mild ridicule" (Kaplan 52).

<sup>27</sup> Dickens met with fierce public scandal at the hands, he presumed, of the Hogarth family (specifically the Hogarth women). The rumor of an affair with Georgina, his sister-in-law, threatened his public image as it became fodder for newspaper and magazine gossip. When Bradbury and Evans refused to publish in *Punch* a written espousal of the charges levied against him and Georgina, he abruptly fired them as editors and rehired Chapman and Hall. The



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dissolution of the Bradbury and Evans contract effectively closed Dickens's association with *Household Words*, and Dickens began a new magazine (in which he insisted on complete editorial control), *All the Year Round*.

<sup>28</sup> As I argued in the first two chapters, women writers also produce in order to obtain origin. However, in the case of Brontë and Eliot, women writers use writing to return to the origin in order to gain mastery over it. Dickens does not see the maternal origin/organ as a place for regeneration. He desires the return to it in order to annihilate it.

<sup>29</sup> In Chapter four of Kaplan's biography of Dickens, he notes that he "found an extraordinary excitement and special bonding with his bachelor friends [Forster and Maclise] in the fiction that they were all in love [...] with the beautiful queen" (1099-110). The chapter goes on to tell of the erotic jokes and bawdy stories that proved a "satisfying fantasy whose characteristic humor did not disguise the need it served" (110).

<sup>30</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, From "Part One: General Principles." *The Norton Anthology: Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001) 960-977.

<sup>31</sup> Charlotte Brontë to George Smith, March 1852. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*. Vol. 3, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004) 26-27.

<sup>32</sup> In the appearance and textual inscription of the female body, Dickens legitimizes the self-effacing "angel" and victimizes the sexually aberrant "monster" in order to return the familial system and domestic sphere back to a representation of middle-class harmony. The dualism between Angel and Monster has been discussed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Mary Jacobus *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism*, and Nina Auerbach's *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*.

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<sup>33</sup> *Edinburgh Review* (April 1855), 522.

<sup>34</sup> *Spectator* (November 1884), 1437. The Editor's response is as follows: "Every woman, whether married or single, has as much influence on politics—where she has as much knowledge—as any man. There are sons and brothers to represent women, as well as husbands. And women, with the same knowledge, are much more persuasive than men" (1437).

Interestingly, ten years later, Margaret Oliphant was left without a son or a brother or a husband to represent her. After the death of her youngest son, Frank, Oliphant had outlived all her "direct" male relatives, which would leave a woman like her out of the Editor's equation for female representation through a familial and masculine figure.

<sup>35</sup> Oliphant's financial insecurity is most often linked to her dependents. Her husband, Frank Oliphant, died on a trip to Italy, leaving her with young children to support, a baby on the way, and £1000 in debt. Her brother Willie lived off of a stipend sent to him by his sister up until his death. She gave both of her sons expensive educations, which were never fully utilized. She outlived them both. After her sister-in-law's death, her brother Frank and his family lived with her. She supported Frank until his death and continued to support his children leaving her estate to them after her death in 1897.

<sup>36</sup> "Two Ladies" *Blackwoods* (Feb 1879), 206-224. A review of *Memoirs of Anna Jameson* and *Records of a Girlhood* by Fanny Kemble.

<sup>37</sup> *Edinburgh Review* 130 (October 1869), 580.

<sup>38</sup> The first entry in Oliphant's *Autobiography* is dated 1864, from Rome. This entry follows the death of her beloved daughter, Maggie.

<sup>39</sup> Cyril dies in November, 1890. Cecco dies in October 1894. As Elisabeth Jay's introduction to Oliphant's *Autobiography* points out, "Half of the autobiography's mass was in fact composed

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after the death of Cecco, whose loss the final paragraph would appear to make responsible for her future silence” (23).

<sup>40</sup> When I die I know what people will say of me: they will give me credit for courage (which I almost think is not courage but insensibility), and for honesty and honourable dealing; they will say I did my duty with a kind of steadiness, not knowing how I have rebelled and groaned under the rod” (44).

And they had both gone out to the Club at night and I went out wandering across the links in the late twilight, almost dark, towards the sear. How clearly I can see the scene now. I went up round the Club to see if I could get a glimpse of them through the lighted windows, but could not [...] There was a dull sky, hanging low, but away towards the East a hint of clearness, a band of soft yellow light falling into the grey clouds and there came out by moments on the other side the light on the Bell rocks, and another I think at Arbroath. I was very miserable, crying to God for them, both, feeling more miserable almost than I had ever done before—when suddenly there came upon me a great quiet and calm[...]” (93).

<sup>41</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship,” *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984) 51.

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