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“I AM A FREE HUMAN BEING WITH AN INDEPENDENT WILL”: RESISTING  
THE VICTORIAN PATRIARCHY

by

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## **Dedication**

For my daughter, Ruqayya Talha Ijaz. Never let anyone tell you the sky is the limit. Reach beyond the sky and let your faith guide you every step of the way.

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## ABSTRACT

### “I AM A FREE HUMAN BEING WITH AN INDEPENDENT WILL”: RESISTING THE VICTORIAN PATRIARCHY

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Victorian authors Wilkie Collins, Anne Brontë, and Charlotte Brontë create female characters in their novels who resist the Victorian patriarchal culture through their speech, behavior, and writing. Although female characters in all three novels use speech, behavior, and writing to resist the patriarchal culture, I argue that writing is the most effective form of resistance. In a culture bent on suppressing women’s spoken voices, writing grants the female characters in these novels a platform, albeit a risky one, to voice their thoughts regarding society’s customs, laws, and structure, without concern for social propriety. Drawing from Victorian era conduct manuals and twentieth- and twenty-first-century feminist literary criticism, I argue that Marian Holcombe, in Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*, Helen Huntington, in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and Jane Eyre, in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, all work to resist subjugation by the Victorian

patriarchal culture through their writings. In addition to these three Victorian texts, I analyze two characters from two European texts: Corinne, in Germaine de Staël's novel, *Corinne, or Italy*, and Nora, in Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*, to reiterate the prevalence of the struggle for female liberation and society's unwelcoming reception of dominant females. Collectively, these works of fiction demonstrate women's resistance to the pervasive patriarchal culture in the nineteenth century. While the female characters in all of these texts demonstrate resistance, only Helen Huntingdon and Jane Eyre achieve unrestricted liberation. Through Corinne's, Marian's, Helen's, and Jane's writings, readers are made aware of the double standards in the treatment of men and women, the abuse of power within marriages, and the expectation that women would faithfully follow society's every directive to women. These female characters remind society that women are human beings with independent wills and have the courage to resist an oppressive patriarchy.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
INTRODUCTION: SUBVERTING THE VICTORIAN PATRIARCHY.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: “POWER HOLDS A SMOOTHER LANGUAGE”: WOMEN IN VICTORIAN SOCIETY.....	10
Handbooks .....	11
Academic Essays .....	23
CHAPTER TWO: THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF FEMININITY AND VICTORIAN SOCIETY.....	32
CHAPTER THREE: DEATH, SILENCE, AND UNCERTAINTY: THE COST OF RESISTANCE .....	51
CHAPTER FOUR: WRITING ONESELF TO LIBERATION .....	74
CONCLUSION.....	91
WORKS CITED .....	93

## INTRODUCTION: SUBVERTING THE VICTORIAN PATRIARCHY

In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, a shift in labor occurred from the small-scale, local work place to the industries where men constituted the majority of the work force and women stayed at home to take care of the children.<sup>1</sup> The ruling class, which was largely responsible for developing “state legal systems and other aspects of ideology,” perpetuated this division of spheres—women confined to the private home to take care of the home and children; men in the public work place to support the family and the economy. This division of spheres remained a feature of the rising middle class in the Victorian era (Sacks 220-221). A cult of domesticity worked to confine women to the private sphere and required them to be obedient to their fathers and husbands, to maintain perfect manners and behavior, and to uphold the honor of the family. Victorian writers Wilkie Collins, Charlotte Brontë, and Anne Brontë challenged these social norms by giving their female characters a platform to resist the confines of society through behavior, speech, and writing. Although all three resistance strategies prove subversive to varying degrees, the female characters’ writings, such as diaries and autobiographies, prove to be the most successful means for these characters to gain and ensure liberation from social dominance.

Through conduct manuals and the reinforcement of expectations in social gatherings and literature, women and men knew what behavior was considered proper and improper in their social circles. According to *Habits of Good Society: A Handbook of Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen* (1872), unmarried young women were expected to attend an occasional dinner party, know how to carry conversations (especially if they lacked beauty), have a pleasant disposition, and avoid blatant flirtation with men (95).

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<sup>1</sup> See Karen Sack, “Engels Revisited: Women, the Organization of Production, and Private Property.”

The bachelor, however, had very few limits: “[h]e [could] choose his own society, go anywhere, do anything, be early or late, gay or retired, mingle with men or with ladies,” as long as he did not engage in behavior that went against the social code (93). With little room for error, a woman was expected to be obedient and respectful before and during marriage. A young married lady was expected to have left behind frivolous conversation, forgotten flirtation, and learned to talk on many subjects because of her husband (96). Married men had more freedoms than married women, but they were expected to refrain from their bachelor indulgences of over drinking and flirtation and to attend to their obligations at home. An obvious discrepancy exists between society’s expectations of young women and young men. It appears that young married and unmarried women are held to a higher standard than men; any form of resistance or disregard of those expectations would more highly compromise a woman’s reputation.

Through social means such as popular literature, verbal expectations, advertisements, and gossip, society worked to convince women that what it required of them was for their own good because it led to suitable marriages and happy families. Bordo states that these social forces created a culture which dictated and controlled every aspect of a woman’s life, including her body, makeup, diet, dress, and speech (166). Novels preceding the Victorian era helped to prefigure the socially appropriate behaviors, including the consequences of attempting to contest those behaviors. Germaine de Staël’s 1807 novel, *Corinne, or Italy* suggests that vocal and outgoing women were destined to suffer and die heartbroken. Similarly, Jane Austen’s novels suggest to the reader that happy endings come with following proper etiquette. Victorian authors and readers inherited the message that a man would be excused for inappropriate behavior, while a woman would not, and that a woman would endure some lasting form of consequence if she strayed from the etiquettes and social codes outlined by society.

Corinne, in Staël's *Corinne, or Italy* (1807); Marian Holcombe, in Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860); and Nora, in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), are female characters that resist social restraints through their writing, behavior, and speech, and, to the reader, each of these lead female characters has a disconcerting end. Corinne, a vibrant, outgoing, intelligent young woman finds herself at a crossroad in marrying the man she loves or holding on to her independence, talents, and fame. Corinne decides to give up her career and independence for marriage, but the patriarchal institution of marriage holds a firm grasp on her lover's heart, and her lover chooses to adhere to a socially accepted union. This betrayal brings upon Corinne's death. Marian Holcombe is also a free-spirited, independent woman whose behaviors align more with codes of masculinity than with codes of femininity. She speaks freely, and she is one of the few prominent female characters whose writing the readers witness. However, as the novel progresses, Marian's writing is hijacked by Count Fosco, one of the male antagonists, and is mediated by Hartright, the male protagonist. The only dialogue the reader receives is through Hartright who appears to allow the story to end with Marian's declaration of Hartright's son as the heir to Limmeridge. Thus, although Marian ends the story, she ends it on Hartright's terms, and the reader receives her voice only through his narration. By allowing a male character to hijack Marian's writing mid-way through the novel and, at the end, depicting Marian as the nanny figure to Hartright's child, Collins writes out Marian's resistance and "masculinity," replacing it with the conventional domestic role of a nurturing female figure. Lastly, Nora is a woman oppressed by a rule-following, condescending, overbearing, and miserly husband who constantly keeps her under control by inquiring about how much money she spends, chiding her for eating too many sweets, and treating her like a delicate little girl with the inability to reason and take charge of her affairs. Her resistance to Helmer's control begins when she breaks the law by borrowing

money to help him recover from an illness and it ends when she leaves the marriage. As Nora slams the door behind her, she leaves behind society's and her husband's measurements of success: home, children, and husband. Each of these female characters demonstrates assertive behaviors, but their behavior and speech are not transformative enough for them to achieve liberation or even maintain their own voice without being cast out or silenced.

For this thesis, I pose the question: Which of the three strategies—speech, writing, and behavior—were female characters successful in using to liberate themselves from the confines of society, where the heroines resisted the patriarchy but ended up not subservient to their husbands, dead, or left to the unknown? Although all three strategies create resistance to the patriarchal culture of that particular society, writing appears to be the most effective. Staël, Collins, Ibsen, and the Brontës each explore the strategy of liberating women through writing. However, although writing seems a more effective strategy because it gives women the ability to write without concern for social propriety and its existence is ensured for generations to come, only Anne and Charlotte Brontës' female characters successfully liberate themselves through their writing. Staël's, Collins', and Ibsen's heroines, however, leave the reader doubtful of the extent of their liberation. This difference in the endings of texts with female characters who use writing as a form of resistance can be attributed to whether or not the female protagonist has a deep emotional attachment to a male character. Helen, Jane, and Marian are independent from such attachments and are able to resist the oppressive culture without fear of losing anything in the process. Although Helen and Jane do love someone, their mind, body, and soul is not completely tied to the person, as we see with Corinne. Both Helen and Jane step away from their beloveds when a moral issue stands in the way. Marian is only partially liberated because her voice is hijacked and Walter narrates over her. Nora gains

independence at the end of the novel when she breaks free from her relationship with her husband. However, she leaves the audience perplexed with her ending, asking whether it was a decision she could endure.

Anne and Charlotte Brontë's female protagonists, respectively Helen Huntingdon from *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and Jane Eyre from *Jane Eyre* (1847), resist their husbands', and former employer's in Jane Eyre's case, name calling and controlling behavior through writing and reveal their true feelings about their treatment. Through their writing, the reader can witness the domestic scene from the eyes of a woman who observes a man's attempt to suppress her. While these female characters exhibit proper mannerisms in public, in writing they unveil the oppressive domestication inflicted by their husbands. By writing their account of events, Helen and Jane allow generations of readers to bear witness to what takes place within the private sphere of Victorian homes, a space otherwise hidden from the public eye. However, Anne Brontë, like Wilkie Collins, complicates her narrative by taking away the female character's voice while delivering it through a male narrator, leaving only Charlotte Brontë's narrative as one not filtered through the male gaze.

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *The Woman in White* have female characters that write, but their private texts are mediated by the male gaze of a male narrator or central character. Through this gaze, the male narrator and central male characters control and manipulate how much of the text to relay to the audience. Gilbert, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, relates parts of Helen's diary to the reader that he considers important to her story and his purpose. Similarly, Marian Holcombe's writing in *The Woman in White* is sandwiched between the male characters' narratives and the male protagonists only narrate what they find important. Gilbert and Gubar state that what the reader experiences is the tension of female characters and female authors writing their way through a system

that is “overtly and covertly patriarchal” (46). Not only is the system patriarchal, but, according to Gilbert and Gubar, male sexuality is also “the essence of literary power” (4). To build on this, I argue that writing becomes a testament to manliness: to take away a man’s writing is to take away his masculinity. From the novels, it seems that when the narrative is controlled by a male narrator or protagonist, there is an attempt by them to reinforce their own masculinity and male dominance by reasserting control over the narrative when it is threatened by female authorship.

Staël, Collins, Ibsen, Anne Brontë, and Charlotte Brontë, explore the three possible forms of women’s social resistance, demonstrating the power of social opposition through female agency within their texts. Even in the texts that do not have an empowering ending for women, these authors challenge the literary and social conventions of the time through their dominant female characters. These authors propose that three methods exist to fight the cult of domesticity: behavior, speech, and writing. I argue that writing is the most effective form of resistance. Once women write away the veil that covers the private sphere, they begin to change the social conventions that define them, even though they often face resistance when they do so.

Chapter one introduces the social expectation of women in the Victorian era and the boundaries enforced on their behavior, speech, and writing. It explores some of the primary social texts of the time that helped create the culture of the subservient female in the Victorian era. I specifically focus on two Victorian era handbooks and two academic essays: *The Habits of Good Society: A Handbook of Etiquette for Ladies and Gentleman* by author unknown, *Mrs. Beeton’s Household Management: A Guide To Cookery in All Branches: Daily Duties, Menu Making, Mistress & Servant, Home Doctor, Hostess & Guest, Sick Nursing, Marketing, the Nursery, Trussing & Carving, Home Lawyer* by Mrs. Beeton, John Ruskin’s *Of Queens’ Gardens*, and John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of*

*Women*. These texts outline the expected behavior of men and women, the differences in the education system and general social expectations for men and women, and the social factors that pressure women into the roles that readers read some defy within literature.

Chapter two discusses the theoretical and social texts that critique Victorian society, creating a lens through which I analyze the novels. Some of the texts that I explore are Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere's *Women, Culture, and Society*, and Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran's *Women in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*. These texts provide an analysis of why society imposed such set social and gender traditions, and they give a critical framework for discussing the implications of women's writing and of dominant female characters within the novels.

Chapter three analyzes how female characters across nineteenth-century European texts counter a sexist society through their behavior and speech. I analyze the following characters and texts in this chapter: Corinne, in *Corinne, or Italy* by Germaine de Staël; Marian Holcombe, in *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins; and Nora, in *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen. I also explore how the female characters in these texts are not quite liberated from the patriarchal society that suffocates them. Corinne dies, Marian's voice is silenced, and Nora's future remains largely uncertain. Staël's *Corinne, or Italy* is from the Romantic Era (late 1700s-early 1800s), a period when imagination, emotion, feeling, God, and nature took center stage in literature, music, and other arts (White). *Corinne, or Italy* is a significant precursor for a study of Victorian writers because Germaine de Staël, a female writer and literary theorist, creates a dominant female character as the voice of Rome, and, Corinne, through her behavior, speech, and writing, at least initially, transcends social restraints on female voices. Wilkie Collins' *The*

*Woman in White* was considered the “keystone” of the genre of sensational novels and, according to Edmund Yates, was “a book that at once placed the author in the front rank of European novelists” (*Woman in White* xx). Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* serves as a new kind of domestic theatre in the late nineteenth century and provides a progressive resolution to the problem of female domesticity and subservience to the male head of the household. The three texts provide a trajectory of shifting consequences for women who attempt to resist social norms: Corinne dies from a broken heart; Marian Holcombe remains single and left to take care of the domestic tasks of her sister’s home; and Nora shuts the door as she walks away from her husband and children, leaving behind everything that has thus far defined her. To any reader cheering on the female protagonists, it is unsettling to see each text come to an unsatisfactory—or at least uncertain end. Nevertheless, these protagonists show each reader that, regardless of the way the texts end, the female characters’ resistance allows them to live a life they control, however short of a time that control lasts.

Chapter four analyzes the success and failure of Staël’s, Collins’, and Ibsen’s texts in liberating female characters against an analysis of the success of Anne and Charlotte Brontës’ female characters who write themselves out of social expectations and suppression. I explore how each text works with its female character’s writing but focus primarily in Chapter four on Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. In this chapter, I argue that writing is the only form of resistance that truly liberates the female characters because, through it, the heroines can candidly write their thoughts, feelings, and criticism of the society they live in and expose the flaws of that society. Writing is also the only form of resistance amongst the three that endures even after the individual has passed. Diaries, letters, and autobiographies become

everlasting windows into the intimate lives of characters and, by extension, into the realities of Victorian homes.

## CHAPTER ONE: “POWER HOLDS A SMOOTHER LANGUAGE”: WOMEN IN VICTORIAN SOCIETY

Handbooks and academic essays allow contemporary readers to understand the Victorian era’s customs, traditions, social etiquette, political climate, and, most importantly for this chapter, proscription of and resistance to gender roles. During Victoria’s reign, a shift occurred from the more aggressive Regency customs—masculinity characterized by showing less restraint with one’s hands, tongue, and stomach—to an emphasis on modesty, genteel character, mannerisms, and chivalry.<sup>1</sup> Handbooks such as *The Habits of Good Society: A Handbook of Etiquettes for Ladies and Gentleman* (1859) and *Mrs. Beeton’s Household Management: A Guide to Cookery in All Branches: Daily Duties, Menu Making, Mistress & Servant, Home Doctor, Hostess & Guest, Sick Nursing, Marketing, the Nursery, Trussing & Carving, Home Lawyer* (1907) promoted the impression that only a woman could create domestic happiness. Such domesticity was believed to ensure a healthy, moral society and to provide a foundation for control of the spaces and roles women occupied.

Academic lectures and essays, such as John Ruskin’s *Of Queens’ Gardens* (1864) and John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869) reveal two competing narratives about women’s roles in mid- to late-Victorian England. Ruskin argued that a woman’s sole function was to protect the home—and, by extension, society—while Mill argued that society had unjustly confined half the population, restricting their social and intellectual freedom. Victorian-era handbooks and academic essays played a central role in shaping the patriarchal culture that restricted women to the home, convincing readers that success and responsibility lay in domestic happiness. Fiction writers of the Victorian

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<sup>1</sup> See Lisa Surridge, “From Regency Violence to Victorian Feminism: *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.” *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction*.

era confronted these various ideologies and social expectations; through their decisions about how their heroines would function in their social and cultural settings, Staël, Collins, the Brontës, and Ibsen critique the social beliefs and expectations of their time.

### **Handbooks**

Texts written in the Victorian era give readers an understanding of the prevalent culture, and how certain traditions and values became essential elements of society. In *The Habits of Good Society: A Handbook of Etiquettes for Ladies and Gentleman* (1859), the unknown author prefaces the work by emphasizing the value of manners and good conduct, as well as the religious and social duty to adhere to them. According to the author, good manners align closely with good Christian morals; good manners and morals have a spiritual basis, coming from Christ. Cultivating such manners is thus a social and religious duty that ladies and gentlemen should perform in order to “make [themselves] better in every respect than [they] [are]; to render [themselves] agreeable to every one with whom [they] [have] to do; and to improve, if necessary, the society in which [they] [are] placed” (26). Thus, it becomes a lady’s and gentleman’s duty to improve themselves and their society through good social manners.

The concept that good manners directly reflect a person’s Christian faith becomes an essential point of the text, as the author encourages men and women to adopt certain roles and responsibilities. John Tosh, author of *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2005), states that since class position was gradually fading as a marker of good society, other characteristics became essential markers of social status (83). The author of *Habits of Good Society* lists these characteristics as: upstanding “moral character, a polished education, a perfect command of temper, good breeding, delicate feeling, good manners, good habits, and a good bearing” (65). Through the claim

that Christianity is the religion of “civilization and society” (*Habits of Good Society* 84), the author of the handbook intertwines the laws of Christianity with those of Victorian society. Thus, while man-made laws are imperfect, they are, the author argues, founded in the spirit of religion. Through the handbook’s emphasis on moral and Christian duty, the author forces readers to recognize that, should they stray from the habits he describes, they would essentially disrupt the moral stability of society.

The belief that all laws exist to ensure social harmony empowers those in authority to make rules and, subsequently, to oppress others, such as women and people of lower social class. Identifying himself as an older bachelor, the author of the handbook writes, while sitting in a social club, without notifying the reader of how he comes to determine the certain social norms he dictates. Due to his lack of experience and limited exposure to women and the lives of married men, he appears to draw rules and generalizations through observation. If, as the author states, a great number of society’s laws are founded on “very good and very Christian considerations,” the question arises as to whether distinctions between men and women come from Christianity or from the English patriarchy’s social interest in maintaining power and control over the behavior of men and women (*Habits of Good Society* 87). One important example of this ambiguity is found in the roles and responsibilities of the four main segments of English society: the paterfamilias; the matron; the young man; and the young lady. This section will primarily focus on the young man and young lady, as the author’s delineation of the manners, rules of conduct, and social expectations for young men and women reveals a contradiction between expected behavior and reality.

In Victorian society, a young married man carried a higher status than a bachelor, requiring him to adopt a calmer, more sober, and less playful—although not less lively—demeanor (*Habits of Good Society* 72). In his bachelor days, the young married man

would have had permission to live “as irresponsibl[y] as a butterfly,” to “choose his own society, go anywhere, do anything, be early or late, gay or retired, mingle with men or with ladies, smoke or not, wear a beard or cut it off, and, if he likes, part his hair down the middle” (74). However, according to the author—who has never been married but confesses to having “been once or twice *very near it*”—a wife’s companionship is sufficient compensation for these bachelor gayeties because “that little baby-face of hers, that pouts so prettily for a kiss when [the young married man] come[s] home, is worth a hundred dozens of champagne, a thousand boxes of Hudson’s best, and a score of the longest runs after Reynard” (73, emphasis added). Tosh disputes this claim, stating that, in reality, the Victorian home held an ambiguous place in society; men had a space which shielded them from the outside world yet also put them in the precarious situation of appearing effeminate (71). To avoid seeming or becoming too engrossed in his children and wife, a married man sought homosocial company—the company of other men—to maintain appearances. According to Tosh, contrary to the claims of the handbook’s author, whatever satisfaction men found with the baby-face of their wives was insufficient to overcome their desire for the activities of their bachelor days (71). This discrepancy between the claims of the handbook’s author and Tosh shows that, although society theoretically promoted a certain ideal of contentment through marriage, in reality, transitioning from single to married life was a complex process. These complexities are not accounted for by the author of *Habits of Good Society*. According to Lydia Murdoch, author of *Daily Life of Victorian Women* (2013), guidebooks often implied that social class and roles were clearly defined (213). Readers may better grasp the complexity of social etiquette through other literature—such as novels and scholarly essays—because these forms present a particular rather than a general portrait of human behavior, especially when literary characters behave in ways contrary to social expectations.

Various scholars note the inconsistency in this era between the ideal and the real in accounts of expectations of young married and unmarried men, and the author of the handbook appears to contradict himself on this topic. Young unmarried men seem to have countless freedoms, yet society expects them to attentively observe the laws of etiquette because they have no excuse for failing to do so (*Habits of Good Society* 75). According to the author of *Habits of Good Society*, the young bachelor lives two conflicting lives. On the one hand, society leaves little room for him to make mistakes; on the other hand, the bachelor seems to have no responsibilities except to be as “irresponsible as a butterfly” (74). Some texts, such as *Habits of Good Society*, argue that high expectations discourage irresponsibility; however, as numerous novels illustrate, high expectations often lead to irresponsibility. It is therefore questionable whether the handbook author feels that society holds high expectations of young bachelors; whether his portrait of the young bachelor, “as irresponsible as a butterfly,” is merely an exaggerated stereotype; or whether Victorian society claimed to have high expectations but did not enforce them. If the latter is the case, this constitutes hypocrisy regarding expectations for men and women, since young women—whether married or unmarried—were afforded no such leniency.

While it seems that young bachelors could or, at least, often did get away with irresponsibility, the lives of young unmarried women were more restricted, and their marriage prospects and future reputation were usually at stake. Expected to please everyone, unmarried women were under pressure to maintain the perfect image in society. Unlike young bachelors, who could attend parties as they wished or fill any seat left empty at a dinner table, it was considered improper decorum for young women to “frequent dinner-parties too much … and in all cases she must consider modesty the prettiest ornament she can wear” (*Habits of Good Society* 75). Modesty, beauty, and wit

do not appear essential for the impression young bachelors make on society. A young woman relied on beauty and wit to make her presence agreeable and to procure a husband, for if “she lacks beauty, she will not succeed without conversational powers; if she has beauty, she will soon find out that wit is a powerful rival”; for a woman with both, “*all men are her slaves*” (75-76, emphasis added). The admonishment that young women “must, however, have a smile as well, for every person and every occasion” (76) further demonstrates how a woman was to present herself regardless of how she actually felt. Again, the question arises: how can the author make such sure claims that “to [the young lady] the ball is a *real delight*, and the evening party *much more amusing* than to any one else” (*Habits of Good Society* 75, emphasis added), when she is expected to smile at every person and every occasion? How can the author truly know whether a woman delights in a certain occasion, when society has already dictated that the young lady smile wherever she goes? Such ambiguity allows the author, at several points in the handbook, to make general claims about what women find pleasing, thereby undermining his reliability as a narrator to contemporary readers as well as female readers of his time.

According to *Habits of Good Society*, young married women were favored companions for intellectual people—who, due to women’s lack of access to education, were mostly men—because of their maturity in conversation and their marital status. The author argues that a young married woman, influenced by her husband to have “left off nonsense, and forgotten flirtation,” has gained “from the companionship of her husband a certain strength of mind, which … enables her to broach almost any subject with a man” (76). The author also assumes that, under the mindful watch of her husband, the young married woman became more intelligent—thus crediting all of her intellectual accomplishments to her husband.

Young bachelors enjoyed a wide range of social activities—including balls, dinners, courting, flirting, and clubs—and society largely allowed them to do as they pleased, as long as they remained agreeable and did not harm anyone. The young married man was expected to disregard most of these freedoms for a more sober life and to seek fulfillment through a happy wife and home rather than through drinking, clubs, and dinner parties, although he did engage in other social activities, such as balls, visits from friends, and hunting. Conversely, young single and married women appear to have enjoyed few differences in their freedoms, except that the latter were able to engage in activities without “fear of remark” and were perceived as more intellectually capable (*Habits of Good Society*, 96). In this framework, what differentiates the young married woman from her single counterpart—aside from marital status—is the tutelage and maturity she has received from her husband. Thus, the author does not give women credit for their natural intellects. This divergence of expectations on the basis of gender appears consistently throughout the texts discussed in this thesis: Victorian women were subject to far more social scrutiny than Victorian men, were expected to keep their homes in order and their husbands happy, and were not generally considered capable of intellectual growth unless under the guidance of their husbands.

Under the guise of maintaining social harmony and fulfilling one’s Christian duty, the author of the handbook dictates how men and women must behave in public, as well as what steps they must take to maintain proper etiquette in more personal areas, such as their dress and accomplishments. While the author emphasizes these rules as important aspects of social and religious duty, a common theme emerging from the prescription of personal etiquette is that women’s dress and accomplishments are primarily intended to please men. This theme reveals the rift between the author’s stated purpose for such etiquette (i.e. social harmony) and its lived patriarchal consequences (i.e. control over an

aspect of a woman's life). Victorian society utilized both sacred and social rules to dictate most aspects of women's lives: their morals, their beauty, their hygiene, their dress, and their accomplishments.

The subject of dress accounts for an extensive section of the handbook, and, while the author enumerates proper dress etiquette, he also reinforces patriarchal control by suggesting a budget for women's clothing and emphasizing its importance in relation to men. For men, the author cautions that "a man of limited means [should not] aspire to a fashionable appearance" because it falsifies his status and means (134). He offers women, however, clothing budgets based on their marital status and social class; the source or justification for such budgets remains unclear and are apparently arbitrarily set by the author or society. According to the author, restricting the money a woman can spend on her clothing ensures that her indulgence does not negatively affect her laboring husband and also does not further burden an already busy tailor. However, the discrepancies between the author's expectations and women's reality are clear. As Murdoch notes, English women were expected "to expend great amounts of time, money, and effort in selecting appropriate attire for specific settings," and women of both the upper and middle classes changed clothes several times a day (116). The author's proposition that women should not spend more than a certain amount of money on clothes—despite social expectations that proscribed different dresses for balls, evening parties, picnics, and walks—demonstrates his disassociation from women's material lives. The author does not directly state that a woman's spending on dresses should be controlled to further the suffocating patriarchal culture, but the suggestion is present in the pretense that controlling a woman's spending will maintain spousal and social harmony.

The author of *Habits of Good Society* further emphasizes that women, while maintaining modesty, should dress to please the judgment of men. He contends that

fashions “of male attire [were] restricted … by the common sense of men who [knew] that dress ought to be convenient as well as elegant;” however, women, according to the author, “[had] no higher mission than that of pleasing the senses rather than the judgment of men,” leading women to accept and adopt fashions more readily than “the stronger sex” (108). Several aspects of this claim are problematic. First, according to the author and, by extension society, a woman should dress to please men—the “stronger sex”—rather than to please herself. Second, the author does not define the “judgment of men.” The ambiguity of the “judgment of men” leaves the reader to assume that a woman should dress to please men and their tastes, as is the motivation for many of women’s functions. The author states that indifference and inattention to dress show “pedantry, self-righteousness, or indolence,” which he sees as signs of defect in a woman (160); furthermore, he notes that “a love of dress is *natural* in woman” and that society decorates its “receiving rooms with natural flowers” and makes the tables “gorgeous, or at all events seemly, with silver, glass, and china” (161). The author argues that wives—especially as their beauty deteriorates—should strive to appear as attractive as the furniture and decorations around them because their dressing up gives pleasure to others. Once again, the author reminds the reader of the strict balance Victorian society expected a woman to uphold: while women should dress to outshine the ornate decorations surrounding them in their homes, they should also refrain from spending too much. While women should dress to please the judgment of men, they should not spend too much because it might take away from the poor whom their husband’s charity supports. As the author previously argued, social rules exist to create harmony between people; women should dress the way they are instructed to in order to prevent conflict between husband and wife, tailor and husband, and the lower and upper classes. In this framework, women’s dress does not simply cover their bodies; it affects everyone around them.

The *Habits of Good Society* makes clear that, like a woman's clothing, a woman's accomplishments were acquired for the purpose of captivating a man—importantly, a man with a taste for talent. According to the author, men strive towards certain accomplishments in order to "keep a friend, to make an enemy, and to charm a woman," but women accrue certain achievements "to surpass a rival and to captivate a man of more taste than heart," primarily for the purpose of marriage (188). Perhaps to mollify any objections people might have to these motivations, the author of the handbook states that, although worldly pursuits provide sufficient reason for both genders to acquire such accomplishments, there are higher goals at stake: namely, "giving pleasure to our fellow-creatures in some form or other, and ... increasing the general harmony of society" (188). The author's argument that accomplishments primarily give pleasure and create harmony reiterates the sentiment that, although some rules are arbitrary, all rules create harmony within society. However, earlier sections of the handbook suggest another motive for such rules. The need to acquire certain skills to captivate men reinforces the idea that a woman's success—even in the realm of the arts—lies in male pleasure. According to the author, every man should try to be accomplished in the study of art, "both for his own sake and that of those around him" (161); however, women's accomplishments in music and art fulfill her mission "to make life less burdensome to man, to soothe and comfort him, to raise him from his petty cares to happier thoughts, to purer imaginings, towards heaven itself" (190). Therefore, the author implicitly argues that if a woman chooses not to seek artistic accomplishment, she deprives the man in her life of those heavenly comforts.

*The Habits of Good Society* paints a detailed picture of the different behavioral standards for men and women in Victorian society. The author's generalizations about women, such as their love for dancing and clothing, raise questions about his credibility

as an accurate observer. While he claims that the rules of etiquette are intended to help men and women fulfill their social and religious responsibilities, he frequently notes that a woman's primary purpose in every aspect of life should be to please her husband and those around her, as well as to establish domestic happiness—all with a smile.

Questioning the author's credibility, therefore, leads one to question the rules and restrictions placed on women by a male-dominated Victorian society and government that enforced laws that placed women in an inferior social, economic, and political position relative to men. The author provides a glimpse into the way a Victorian woman's life is dictated, and, although he claims the etiquettes are determined based on religious injunctions and maintaining harmony amongst people, it is quite clear that men decided what and how women should love and that this decision was based on men's observations and the underlying need to control women's lives. Women, in essence, are to love everything, even playing the dutiful wife with her doll-face prepared for her husband, and, because she smiles at everything, according to the author, she must love what she does. From the handbook, the reader observes that a man's judgment and approval dictate a woman's behavior and demeanor and that beauty takes precedence over all other aspects of a woman's life because it enhances everything else she does. Further, although men enjoy a woman's ability to converse, men are also credited, by the author, for developing such an ability in the sex they deem weaker. A woman, therefore, must not exist outside the will of a man, as her life is intricately tied to the lord and master of the home, whether her father or husband.

Handbooks such as *Habits of Good Society* clearly demonstrate the dictates of Victorian society—especially as perceived by an older bachelor sitting in a club—required women to embrace a submissive and obedient demeanor and to avoid any activity that detracted from their physical beauty. While *Mrs. Beeton's Household*

*Management* does not focus on the habits of men and women, it does emphasize a woman's ability to make her home a place of comfort, peace, and order. In the original preface, Isabella Beeton writes that "men are now so well served out of doors...that, to compete with the attractions of these places, a mistress must be thoroughly acquainted with the theory and practice of cookery, as well as all other arts of making and keeping a comfortable home" (1). Thus, from the beginning, the handbook advances the theme that a woman's job was to keep her home comfortable so that her husband would want to come home rather than be served at "clubs, hotels, and restaurants" (Beeton 1). This fear that men will seek relief elsewhere if the home is not welcoming seems to originate from society's desire for women to stay at home and direct their energy in making themselves, their children, and their homes appealing to their husbands. If they do not, the consequence is that their husbands will spend less time at home and the nuclear family unit will suffer. The editor of the new 1906 edition writes a preface that reiterates Mrs. Beeton's original sentiments by claiming that, in every English-speaking country, *Mrs. Beeton's Household Management* "has appeared amongst the wedding presents of a bride ... and thousands of grateful letters testify that it has proved the most useful gift of all" (v). The fact that Mrs. Beeton wrote this handbook was said to prove that she "must have been the finest *housekeeper* in the world. Therefore, Mr. Beeton must have been the *happiest* and most *comfortable* man" (v, emphasis added). Thus, a strong correlation was believed to exist between a woman's good housekeeping skills—not, notably, whether she is a good wife or mother—and the comfort and happiness of her husband.

In the first chapter of *Mrs. Beeton's Household Management*, "The Mistress," Mrs. Beeton highlights the importance of fulfilling one's role as an efficient housewife and mistress in order to teach women how to create an atmosphere of bliss and contentment for the family. She compares the mistress of the house to an army general or

business manager, whose spirit infuses everything in the home because it directly affects the “happiness, comfort, and prosperity of the whole family” (9). Mrs. Beeton places sole responsibility for the family’s social well-being on the woman, even in situations where she is not to blame. To support her argument, she quotes Oliver Goldsmith, author of *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766): “[T]he modest virgin, the prudent wife, and the careful matron are much more serviceable in life than petticoated philosophers, blustering heroines, or virago queans” (9) because, Goldsmith explains, “she who makes her husband and her children happy is a much greater character than ladies described in romances, whose whole occupation is to murder mankind with shafts from the quiver of their eyes” (9). Thus, Mrs. Beeton emphasizes that, unlike philosophers, heroines, or viragos—whose dispositions render them unfit for the role of a good wife—a “modest,” “prudent,” and “careful” woman’s duty lies in her ability to serve in the home.

However, making household cares the sole focus of one’s thoughts did present some dangers: Mrs. Beeton writes that, although a “woman’s home should be first and foremost in her life,” if she lets it occupy her entire mind, she “is apt to become narrow in her interests and sympathies, a condition not conducive to domestic happiness” (10). In other words, a woman solely occupied by household affairs would lack the intellectual development needed to be an agreeable companion for her husband. Thus, Mrs. Beeton reinforces themes from *Habits of Good Society* whereby a woman’s ability to create domestic happiness depends in part on her ability to engage in conversation, and to gain the confidence and approval of her husband.

Handbooks such as *Habits of Good Society* and Isabella Beeton’s *Household Management*, which were often present in the average Victorian home, give a clear account of Victorian society’s expectations of men and women. Clearly, women did not become “naturally” obedient and caring by their own inclination or because they were

required to do so by laws and religious injunctions; rather, handbooks and other popular materials reiterated expected behavior from a very young age, creating the impression that “good,” “modest,” “agreeable” women could fulfill the role of homemaker, mother, and wife.

### **Academic Essays**

While handbooks provide a glimpse into how average Victorian people and homes were expected to function, academic essays and lectures also illuminate some of the social changes taking place in Victorian society, as well as the reasoning behind certain social norms. Two essays with opposing viewpoints—John Ruskin’s *Of Queens’ Gardens* and John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1865 and 1869, respectively—became central to debates over women’s rights, with one affirming and the other challenging the norms of English society at that time. Ruskin, in a lecture later published as an essay, justifies the treatment of women in English society, while Mill argues that society’s treatment of women is rooted in the masculine desire to control women. Men’s desire to control is obscured by arguments that a woman’s roles and responsibilities are natural to her sex and part of Christian teaching. In her article, “The Debate over Women: Ruskin vs. Mill,” Kate Millet writes that Mill and Ruskin have differing views on the sexual politics of the time; Mill confronts the reality of those politics as a vehicle for societal oppression of women, while Ruskin regards them as a romantic ideal (121). Mill and Ruskin’s essays discuss the challenges that female writers faced, as well as the significance of the female characters’ resistance to the dominant patriarchal culture demonstrated in novels of the period.

The first point of contention between Ruskin and Mill concerns Victorian society’s definition of a woman’s duty. Ruskin argues that a woman’s responsibility lay

in being man's helpmate, a role which granted her "queenly" power in her household and over her sphere (3). By giving women the title of "queen" and referring to their roles as wife and mother as their power, Ruskin depicts a narrative of women's oppression as one of women's elevation. A woman, he writes, "is not to guide, nor even to think for herself. The man is always to be the wiser; he is to be the thinker, the ruler, the superior in knowledge and discretion, as in power" (16). Thus, Ruskin understands intelligence, reason, and power as antithetical to the nature of women, arguing that, while women should not remain "shadows or slaves of man," they also must not guide or think for themselves because it infringes on the responsibility of men (16). Ruskin justifies his belief that a woman cannot be superior to a man by stating that nature has not meant for her to take on such a role, however capable she might actually be (20). Mill does not remark on a woman's duty; instead, he argues that social roles and responsibilities are not determined by nature but by the patriarchal desire to control women.

Mill and Ruskin debate the roles and responsibilities of women as well as whether nature endows women with the gifts of obedience, beauty, and tenderness, or whether society nurtures those qualities into fruition. Mill maintains that the censorship of women's activities, literature, education, and behavior is the source of their submissive behavior and that this censorship comes from the male desire to hold power over a certain group of people (28). Society, Mill claims, oversteps "the proper bounds of authority to fix beforehand, on some general presumption, that certain persons are not fit to do certain things" (33). On the basis of those presumptions, society dictates a woman's entire life, including her manners, dress, hygiene, and accomplishments. According to Mill, men make assumptions about women's thoughts and feelings either through observation of their wives or through amatory relations with women (43). Both Ruskin and the narrator of *Habits of Good Society* are examples of men whose assumptions about women reveal

their lack of interaction with them. Mill suggests however, that the idea that women's nature is to guide men and provide a morally upright and comfortable home is a notion concocted by men to suppress women. Mill argues that, from a young age, women perceive that "meekness, submissiveness, and resignations of all individual will into the hands of man" made them attractive and that men continued to reinforce that belief through education and through generalizations about women (28). By telling women what they qualified for based on assumptions about their nature, Mill argues that, men deprived women of their freedom of individual choice to confirm or deny such assumptions. The nature of women thus becomes "eminently artificial" because it results from a "forced repression in some direction, unnatural stimulation in others" (39). Mill asks, if a woman can wear the royal crown, then could she be unable to handle tasks of finance, administration, and trade? To this question, Ruskin's responds that a woman's job is to rule, not to fight, and to delegate tasks requiring any form of invention or creation to men.

Ruskin maintains that although women should focus on their homes and children, no superior sex exists because nature endows each gender with specific qualities which the other does not possess. Each completes the other, so the "happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give" (20). Ruskin writes that the different characteristics of each gender account for the social rules and laws imposed on women; he believes that those character differences come from nature, not from the social environment. On the one hand, he writes, man's "power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest" (Ruskin 20). On the other hand, women's power "is for rule" (accounting for the reign of Queen Victoria and other English queens before her), "not

for battle—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the quality in things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is Praise,” and, by keeping to her home, she ensures her protection from all “danger and temptation” (21). From Ruskin’s outline of men and women’s responsibility, it appears that men play an active role in society and women play a passive one. Men make the rules and women implement what they are told, including their role in society, habits, and character. Ruskin believes that a man guards the woman from the world of temptation, failure, and error by keeping her in his house and telling her she rules it as a queen. The nature of the home becomes a “place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division” because the woman who keeps to it safeguards the home from any corrupt influence from the outside (Ruskin 21). Again and again, Ruskin emphasizes a woman’s role as mother, wife, homemaker, and moral compass. After Ruskin categorizes these differences between men and women, the reader can easily ascertain that the woman’s place and power is the home and its caretaking.

Conversely, Mill argues that nature does not dictate male or female roles in relation to society and that no one can conclude a man or woman’s natural function because it is impossible to separate their actual nature from social influence. In other words, Mill claims, no one can know the true nature of the two sexes “as long as they have only been seen in their present relation to another one,” where women must focus on pleasing men and taking care of the home and men must work outside of the home (39). According to Mill’s logic, there is some truth to Ruskin’s claim that it is part of a woman’s nature to be an obedient wife and a caring mother but only because society has perpetuated this centuries-old notion through education.

For both Ruskin and Mill, education was the vehicle for improving people's ability to fulfill their social roles and responsibilities. Women's education was designed to foster homemaking skills and qualities such as obedience in serving the social agenda of those in power. After establishing a woman's place and power, Ruskin claims "we ask, [w]hat kind of education is to fit her for [her place and power]," and, thus, the "first of our duties to her ... is to secure for her such physical training and exercise as may confirm her health, and perfect her beauty" (23-24). The ambiguous "we" then shifts to "you," a presumably male audience whom Ruskin instructs to first "mould her physical frame, and then, as the strength she gains will permit you, to fill and temper her mind with all knowledge and thoughts which tend to confirm its natural instincts of justice, and refine its natural tact of love" (25-26). Men were thus encouraged to take control over the women in their lives so that women could understand and aid in the work of men (25-26). In women's education, qualities of ambition, intellect, and growth in personal character were overshadowed by a focus on increasing her efficiency as a homemaker and her ability to support male ambition and intellect. Ruskin writes that, morally, a woman "must be enduringly, incorruptibly good" in order to create a morally upright atmosphere in the home; intellectually, a woman must be wise, not for her personal growth but "that she may never fail from his side" (23). Every form of education was to enhance a woman's obedience, subjection, and tenderness.

In the Victorian era, women's education of the type described by Ruskin was primarily delivered and received through literary forms such as novels, handbooks, and essays that women could access. Such literature aimed to instill the belief that ideal women embodied selflessness, morality, and obedience. From a young age, women received messages—modeled by their mothers—that their duty was "to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections"

(Mill 27). Mill argues that it is this inculcated control over women's thoughts and feelings that allows men to hold them in "subjection, by representing to them meekness, submissiveness, and resignation of all individual will into the hands of a man, as an essential part of sexual attractiveness" (28). Thus, a woman must adopt these characteristics of meekness and submissiveness in order to procure a good husband.

This subjection of women to men's control and desires is readily apparent in *The Habits of Good Society*, which maintains that a woman's intellect, supposedly acquired through her husband, makes her pleasurable company for men; that her accomplishments, including music and art, are a means of making the home peaceful and shielding men from the world's troubles; and that her choice of dress is a means of pleasing men and upholding social morality. However, both Ruskin and the author of the handbook do not directly claim that women should seek male pleasure; rather, they propagate these patriarchal views in the name of bettering society and fulfilling their Christian duty. Nevertheless, as Mill argues, "power holds a smoother language, and whomsoever it oppresses, always pretends to do so for their own good" (93). When Victorian society forbade women from participating in a particular activity, "it is thought necessary to say, and desirable to believe, that they are incapable of doing it, and that they depart from their real path of success and happiness when they aspire to it" (Mill 93). Until women realized that they could venture away from the roles deemed acceptable by patriarchal Victorian society confined them to, they were confined to becoming morally upstanding, obedient, and selfless queens made to complete man.

While handbooks focused on the particulars of Victorian culture, rules of etiquette, and daily life, Ruskin and Mill's academic essays provide a theoretical and analytical picture of Victorian debates over women's rights, roles, and responsibilities. Ruskin's essay reinforces the patriarchal norm in which women were confined to the

home, as well as the belief that women's roles and responsibilities reflected the way God created men and women differently. His work illuminates the beliefs that motivated the laws, rules of etiquette, and social expectations for men and women in the Victorian era. Conversely, Mill highlights the gender inequality in Victorian society by questioning the foundations of sexist beliefs and attacking inequality in education, marriage, gender expectations, social institutions, and government. According to Mill, society falsely perpetuated the patriarchal argument that women were incapable of certain tasks for which nature has not equipped them. Rather, he argues, the only reason those tasks are not taken up by women is because women are prevented from doing so.

One such task was professional writing. Victorian society, especially male writers, tended to assume that women were incapable of producing texts worthy of publication. When women took steps to pursue writing careers, male writers and critics sought to oppress female writers and shame them into believing such pursuits made them irresponsible mothers and wives. As a counterpoint to Ruskin's belief—shared by many people of that era—Victorian writers, both male and female, wrote about women who resisted the cultural norms of the society. To liberate Victorian women from an education designed to subjugate them, male and female writers provided an alternative social lens by equipping their female characters with methods of resistance, including speech, behavior, and writing. These activities demonstrated women's capabilities in areas formerly restricted to men. When Victorian writers presented alternatives to domestic life and to the docile, maternal, and angelic female figure, they advanced Mill's claim that women were willing servants of the domestic sphere only because it was the only way of life available to them.

With the growing number of published female writers and the introduction of female characters that contest English patriarchal norms, Victorian authors began to

navigate the socially and culturally charged politics surrounding the topic of women. When female writers published novels and both male and female writers introduced female characters that defied patriarchal norms, people found themselves questioning, fighting, or accepting what they knew to be normal. Mill's essay forces current audiences, as it did Victorian audiences, to examine inconsistencies in society's expectations of women; writers such as Staël, Collins, the Brontës, and Ibsen incorporated those inconsistencies into their work, advocating through their texts liberation for steadfast, talented, intelligent, and independent women.

*The Handbook for Good Society*, *Mrs. Beeton's Household Management*, John Ruskin's *Of Queens' Gardens* and John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* are only a few examples of non-fiction Victorian era texts that played a central role in shaping or responding to the patriarchal culture that subjected women and counseled that women's responsibility lay in the creation of domestic happiness. When analyzing novels and plays written in the Victorian era, especially those written by women or that portray a strong female protagonist, it is imperative to keep these handbooks and essays in mind. They allow the reader to understand the challenges that female writers faced in this period: a male-dominated literary field; constant criticism from both men and women, because a woman was not believed to possess the intellectual and creative capacity to write material worthy of publication; and a highly androcentric set of cultural beliefs about women and their roles. The texts discussed in this chapter provide context for the methods women used to resist patriarchal culture: a Victorian woman could speak out against the subjugation of her sex; act out against social expectations for women; or write against female subjection through novels, diaries, autobiographies, or letters. Each form of resistance had varying consequences, but, as Mill indicates, until men and women adopt

roles beyond those proscribed to them, patriarchal cycles will continue, never giving way to the opportunity for advancing civilization.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF FEMININITY AND VICTORIAN SOCIETY

Victorian era handbooks, etiquette manuals, and essays on women's education and roles perpetuated an idealistic image of a tender, loving, and morally pure woman, whose sole purpose in life was to promote comfort, love, and respect in the domestic sphere. Modern day theorists and critics have examined how nineteenth-century literature, social expectations, and social change have influenced the behavior of women and women's writing. Critics and theorists, including Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, Sherry B. Ortner, Judith Butler, Susan Bordo, Elaine Showalter, Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Linda H. Peterson have identified reasons for women's historical subjugation, analyzing how nineteenth-century patriarchal culture used literature and authorship to subjugate women. In this chapter, I focus first on the theories of gender roles; second, on the idea of gender as a performance; and, finally, on gender in authorship.

The scholars mentioned here, in addition to others, provide critical context and support for my argument that the patriarchal values present in Victorian society inspired female authors to create female characters in true-to-life roles. These characters frequently navigate their way through English patriarchal norms only to discover two options: either accept the impossibility of escaping the patriarchal web intricately woven around them or maintain outward conformity and resist the patriarchy through their private writings. The critical literature on these topics reiterates the extreme difficulty of entirely rejecting the social confines placed on these authors and their heroines; this theoretic groundwork allows me to explore, in later chapters, the skills with which nineteenth-century authors equipped their female heroines as a means of countering patriarchal subjection.

From the 1970s to today, women have seen several political changes in areas of education and employment. Feminist theorists have grappled with these changes. Both writing in the 1970s, Rosaldo and Ortner attempt to explain why, for centuries, various civilizations, including American and European, women held a lower social position than men, negatively affecting women's freedom to take part in educational and occupational opportunities. Both critics published during the 1970s as America and the United Kingdom passed legislations making it illegal to discriminate against women in employment and education. Women took to the work place, and their role as solely mothers and wives began to shift. In 1969, in *Bowe v. Colgate-Palmolive Company*, the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that women who met physical requirements could work in many jobs previously only available to men. In 1971, in *Reed v. Reed*, the U.S. Supreme Court declared women as "persons," making it unconstitutional for companies to hire certain job positions based on sex. In 1970, the Parliament of the United Kingdom passed the Equal Pay Act to ensure men and women were treated equally in terms of pay and the conditions of the workplace. Five years later, the Parliament passed The Sex Discrimination Act 1975 to protect men and women from discrimination in several areas, including employment and education. Thus, Rosaldo and Ortner witnessed a shift in society's outlook of women. In their writings, both critics piece together the treatment of women by various civilizations over the centuries to conclude that women's status in the social, gender hierarchy comes about from society's association of women with nature and women's biological and physiological link with reproduction and child-rearing.

To understand why male and female writers in the Victorian era depicted a spectrum of types of female characters with varying endings, it is important to understand the historical subjugation of women by ancient and contemporary cultures. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, in her article "Women, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical

Overview” (1974), argues that, despite variation in sex roles across different cultures and traditions around the world, one common strand exists between them all: women’s activities and roles are always valued less than men’s. Often, biological factors seem to explain why this is so, but Rosaldo argues that this hierarchy stems from differences in human experience. Based on observations of numerous cultures—including the New Guinea Arapesh, indigenous peoples in the Philippines, a few indigenous people in early Europe, and aboriginal groups in Australia—Rosaldo determines that, due to the differing experiences in the lives of men and women, women—regardless of age, temperament, social importance, or power—are not granted the recognized and respected authority automatically given to men. Men become the “locus of cultural value,” so that whichever activities are “exclusively and predominantly male” become “overwhelmingly and morally important” (20-21). For example, Rosaldo demonstrates that, in New Guinea, the yams grown by men are considered “the prestige food, the food one distributes at feasts,” whereas the sweet potatoes grown by women hold no particular distinction (20). Similarly, she shows that, in the linguistic practices of the Merina tribe in Madagascar, women are direct and assertive, while men “are masters of an allusive, formal style in public speech” (20). Within the tribe, Rosaldo notes, women are characterized as the “cultural idiots … said to not know the subtleties of polite language” (20). Whatever the cultural practice, Rosaldo establishes that activities carried out by men are held in a higher social esteem. She views the varying human experience between men and women as the reason men have more authority, beginning with the fact that, in most traditional societies, the majority of a woman’s adult life is spent “giving birth to and raising children,” which “leads to a differentiation of domestic and public spheres” (23). Thus, a woman’s social role is limited by her biological functions and her intelligence and creativity becomes irrelevant to the conversation of gender roles and responsibilities.

In Europe, by at least the early eighteenth century, society was beginning to articulate this division of spheres. Critics, sociologists, and psychoanalysts have argued that the ideology of separate gender spheres in Western culture evolved for various reasons, including a woman's ability to lactate and a woman's reproductive functions. Later in the nineteenth century, the rise of industrialization and Christian evangelical religion furthered the development of separate spheres. In Western Europe, the doctrine of separate spheres began in the early eighteenth century, reaching its apex around 1850; this set of ideas suggested that men and women inhabited different roles in society. Susie L. Steinbach, in her book *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, states that men took a more dominant role in the public arena, whereas women oversaw domestic life, and the central goal of society was to create a safe and morally elevated domestic space (165). Rosaldo defines the domestic realm as the institutions and activities that revolve around mothers and their children, whereas the public realm "refers to activities, institutions, and forms of association that link, rank, organize, or subsume particular mother-child groups" (23). According to Nancy Chodorow, a sociologist and psychoanalyst, the probable justification for confining women to the domestic space was the fact of women's lactation, which provided a patriarchal society with a convenient reason to isolate mothers in the home (46). Thus, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, social critics, religious figures, and moralists typically saw a woman's social position as a mother and wife as her domestic responsibilities, whereas a man's activities outside the home (such as military service, economics, and politics) facilitated his social dominance. The ideology of separate spheres, according to Steinbach, arose partially in response to both industrialization and Evangelical Christianity, of which the latter "elevated women as the moral and spiritual center of their families"; thus, to maintain those moral standards and

raise good families women were forced into domestic exclusion (168). Rosaldo argues that separating women from public life based on the idea that it was their nature to stay home illustrates how the “cultural notions of the female often gravitate around natural or biological characteristics: fertility, maternity, sex, and menstrual blood … defined almost exclusively in terms of their sexual functions” (31). Confining women to the home, then, provided men with greater opportunities to engage in society and public life. Rosaldo further observes that the distinction between public and domestic roles affected the differing personality development of girls and boys (25). Girls inherited an ideology of female domesticity, caretaking, and child-rearing because they remained with their mothers from birth till marriage, while boys were required to prove their masculinity, and in the process, to achieve their status as separate from the women in the home.

For all women and girls, sexuality was also considered a potential factor in their becoming “dangerous, dirty, and polluting, as something to be set apart” (Rosaldo 32). While a woman did not appear dangerous in her conventional roles, many cultures viewed women as manipulative and dangerous, especially when menstruating, unable to give birth, or widowed—inadvertently granting women a type of power. For example, the emergence of female writers in nineteenth-century England led to the notion of “writing women”—those who used written language to advance their own agendas—as anomalies. Women’s desire to write, publish, and express intellectual power threatened the fabric of the patriarchal society, and men responded in literature by illustrating female writers as unattractive and unorthodox. By participating in the business of writing, female writers posed a sexual threat to men’s masculinity, and, to warn women away from advancing their writing habits into careers, both male and female critics degraded female writers as dangerous to the order of society and as polluting the family structure.

When a woman diverted from her natural role, society would target her as an anomaly because the woman was engaging in activities not natural to her disposition and infringing on male territory. Sherry B. Ortner, in her article “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” (1972), claims that women are universally considered subordinate to men because they appear to exhibit biological, social, and psychological qualities that align them more closely with nature. She argues, however, that while women do appear this way, their function in the home is far more influential in society than they are given credit for. Ortner defines culture both as the “process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence” and as the attempt “to assert control over nature” (72). Thus, a distinction exists between nature and culture and by products produced naturally (i.e. children) compared to products of human invention. Ortner further maintains that most societies create a culture to “transcend,” and become superior to, nature (73). Paying particular attention to the roles played by the physiological, social, and psychological aspects of women’s lives in their lower social status, Ortner concludes that, although women have the same intellectual capabilities as men and are capable of participating in cultural aspects of society, their capabilities are devalued because society sees them as “less transcendental of nature than men” (73). Furthermore, women’s intellect, work, and creativity are undermined because they are viewed as less cultured than those of men, due to women’s limited exposure to the world outside of their home.

First, Ortner notes that women’s physiology is intimately connected to reproduction and, because women produce naturally (i.e. children), while men produce artificially (e.g. inventions and technology), women appear closer to nature (75). Using Simone de Beauvoir’s data from her book *The Second Sex*, Ortner concludes from Beauvoir’s review of the female “physiological structure, development, and functions”

that women are more “enslaved” to nature than men because of their natural functions (Ortner 74). On the one hand, Beauvoir argues, women’s bodies, anatomy, and physiological functions are primarily oriented towards reproduction: uteruses, ovaries, breasts, menstruation, and pregnancy exist either for producing a baby or for its care after birth. Men, on the other hand, are not destined for a “mere” reproductive existence but can “assert [their] creativity externally … through the medium of technology and symbols,” creating “relatively lasting, eternal, transcendental objects, while the woman creates only perishables—human beings” (Ortner 75). Thus, according to Ortner, society claims that, unlike women, men use the human mind to produce objects and ideas that transcend nature, such as railroads, cars, telescopes, mathematics, medicine, and surgical instruments.

Second, Ortner argues that women’s physiological functions—creating children naturally in the womb—tend to limit their social mobility, often confining them to the home. She notes that a woman’s confinement to the “domestic family context” is primarily motivated by the fact that infants are dependent on their mothers for nourishment and that the physiological process of lactation is an important feature of childrearing. Not biologically or socially restricted by these duties of childcare, men are not immersed in such familial responsibilities; instead, they become a part of the interfamilial aspects of culture, adopting the responsibility of being “proprietors of religion, ritual, politics, and other realms of cultural thought and action” (Ortner 79). According to Ortner, Victorian society did not consider a boy to be “of age” until his father encultured him in masculine accomplishments. However, Ortner rejects the notion that women’s social roles have little importance in the socialization of her children, arguing that women are, in fact, “the primary agent[s]” of their children’s socialization (79). A mother is tasked with teaching her children proper manners and conduct, so that

the children can become contributing members in society. However, little value is placed on a woman's socialization of her children. Instead, only when men socialize their sons from boys into young men are the boys considered to have officially become part of the more refined and cultured public realm. According to Ortner, this implies that the boys' "entrée into the realm of fully human (social, cultural) status can be accomplished only by men" (80). As with the raising of children, society does not give women credit for their social function, demeaning women's social position to mere child rearing and crediting men with socializing and other higher-order cultural values. For example, Ortner notes that cooking is a task considered domestic rather than cultural when carried out by women, while men adopt the role of chef in restaurant cooking or authentic, traditional culinary tasks. Thus, a woman's performance of this task is deemed menial, while a man's is sophisticated, artistic, and cultural.

Finally, Ortner notes that, pan-culturally, women are assumed to have a different psychological structure than men; however, she argues that genetic factors do not cause the difference but, instead, that psychological differences arise from the social structure that has confined women to child-rearing. Ortner identifies two dimensions of psychological processing: relative concreteness versus relative abstractness, and relative subjectivity versus relative objectivity. Citing Rae Carlson's study, "Sex Differences in Ego Functioning: Exploratory Studies of Agency and Communion" (1971) and Nancy Chodorow's article "Family Structure and Feminine Personality" (1974), Ortner concludes that, pan-culturally, women are perceived to demonstrate concrete and subjective thinking while men demonstrate abstract and objective thinking (81). According to Ortner, the feminine personality, therefore, universally tends to focus on "concrete feelings, things, and people," rather than on "abstract entities" and "represent[s] experiences in relatively interpersonal, subjective, and immediate ways"

(81). A woman's domestic training as a young girl—and later, as an adult—structures her psyche this way. Women, Ortner argues, develop a psyche closely attached to the people and responsibilities in their domestic surroundings, whereas boys, after a certain age, shift to a masculine identity that requires a more abstract and objective psychological structure because of their dealings in politics, business, and the social world beyond their household (82). John Stuart Mill makes the same argument, as seen in the previous chapter, that selective education and restricted exposure to the outside played a profound role in the domestication of women. Thus, society closely links a woman's thoughts and personalities to people and objects she finds near her, such as her children, whereas men become closely associated with cultural institutions and forums.

While Ortner and Rosaldo conclude that men subjugate women in part due to their biological functions, Judith Butler critiques the essence of gender itself, arguing in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that gender itself is neither true nor false but performed through various acts and gestures dictated by social norms. According to Butler, the body functions as a passive object or canvas upon which culture is created through repeated action. By requiring adherence to certain cultural standards, societies dictate and enforce the performance of gender and sexuality. Thus, on the surface, people may appear to be heterosexually oriented in their adherence to socially dictated gender norms and repetition of certain associated behaviors (2528). However, the performance of repeated behaviors does not mean that one internalizes or identifies with them.

Butler further states that the body performs gender externally through acts and gestures that make the person seem as though they are internalizing the actions they perform. She cites Foucault's argument, in his work *Discipline and Punish*, that the soul is hidden within and separated from the body. According to Foucault, the law tries to assure internalization by affecting the soul to change; however, the law measures the

incorporation of certain values through a series of behaviors, which are not necessarily internalized (Butler 2547). In other words, a liar might be assumed to have internalized the value of speaking the truth, when, in fact, he only performs truthfulness to abide by the law, while internally remaining a liar. This means that, while gender is performed externally through certain repetitive actions, the person does not necessarily internalize those values and behaviors. Butler uses the example of drag performance to demonstrate the complexity of gender and performance, arguing that drag “plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (Butler 2549). During the performance, the audience is in the presence of three dimensions of gender and sexuality: “anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance,” meaning that “if the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance” (2550). Drag performance thus reveals the performative and imitative nature of gender, especially in a society where gender is regulated through heterosexual notions of gender and sexuality. Thus, gender cannot be confined by the male/female binary because it lacks an essence and remains open to interpretation in its infinite ways of performance (2551).

Butler’s argument significantly aids in understanding female characters in Victorian novels because of the way some female characters are crafted to defy social norms assumed to be *natural* for their biologically assigned sex. These resilient, rational, and vocal female characters clearly stand out against their meek, obedient, and angelic counterparts. Thinking of all gender as performative allows us to understand female characters who seem outwardly submissive but inwardly resilient as, perhaps, externally

performing culture but not internalizing the gender role and gestures society imposes upon them.

When a person is not, in essence, any gender, society instills in a person certain values, traditions, beliefs, traits, and gender norms through various means, including literature, law, and religion. Building on Butler's argument about gender as a performance, Susan Bordo, in her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993), argues that the body is separate from the true self and that women's bodies in particular are viewed as passive objects upon which a network of practices and institutions dictates certain values. She maintains that society's web of images, literature, advertisements, and discussions about the ideal woman are the root cause of the various disorders that plague women—specifically, hysteria in the nineteenth century and anorexia and bulimia in the twentieth century (Bordo 169). These disorders, Bordo suggests, arise as women try to fit into the confining roles society has established. Nineteenth-century society characterized the Victorian "lady," a term used for a Victorian woman of any class, as delicate, sexually passive, and emotional. This characterization led to the "lady" developing hysteria and agoraphobia—with delicate of nerves, and unable to breathe through her corset, she might be forced to spend the majority of her time inside away from people (Bordo 169). Bordo analyzes medical documents, advertisements, court cases, and writings by critics and anthropologists including Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas, and Elaine Showalter, to provide a thorough picture of the stress placed on a woman's body in a world bent on dictating it.

In keeping with Butler, Bordo argues that culture dictates that the body behave in a certain way. She argues that culture teaches "women to be insecure bodies, constantly monitoring themselves for signs of imperfection" and constantly worrying about necessary improvements (57). Similarly, contemporary culture also teaches women (and

men) how “to see” slender, thinner, and fairer bodies as beautiful and representative of ideal femininity (57). Thus, the body, according to Bordo, becomes a “direct locus of social control” (165). Culture—the customs, beliefs, and values of an era—has, through certain rules, routines, and practices, pushed the body to achieve what is culturally acceptable and favorable. In the nineteenth century, the image of a slim waist and delicate body was perpetuated to keep women indoors; indeed, to achieve this image, women restricted their eating habits, wore corsets, and reduced their mobility. Society used these standards of beauty, perfection, and delicacy to dictate the ideal woman’s body, the methods of achieving such a body, and the social implications of accomplishing the task.

Patriarchal ideology and the subjection of women through power, religion, and law create a culture that not only affects every woman within it but affects how female writers write female characters and represent women in their texts. Elaine Showalter, in her article “Women Writers and the Double Standard” (1971), argues that female writers in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England confronted various obstacles to their writing, including critics of both genders, the presumption that writing is a masculine field, and the assumption of women’s biological weakness. Showalter supports her argument by analyzing the writings of various female writers, including the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and how those issues they faced affected their writings as women and writers. Many of these obstacles stemmed from the perception that women were first and foremost mothers, so becoming professional writers meant they were not fulfilling their first duty. According to Showalter, because women were perceived in relation to their biological disposition of motherhood, wifely duties, and menstruation, Victorian critics and writers did not believe that the writing of male and female authors was comparable (328). Due to these notions of inferiority projected onto women, Showalter claims that female writers faced a

constant battle between literary creativity and biological creativity (i.e. reproducing). Other women, such as leading woman's suffrage activist and social reformer Frances Power Cobbe, also criticized female writers, arguing that a mother should be so immersed in raising her family that she has no time for tasks such as writing (Showalter 333). Childless women confronted even greater criticism of their pursuit of authorship because of their inability to carry out the very function for which Nature supposedly created them.

Not only were female writers perceived to be neglecting their biological and cultural duties, critics also continued to remind them of their supposed intellectual inferiority. Showalter cites George Henry Lewes, who emphasizes in his article, "The Lady Novelists" (1852), that "the masculine spirit is intellectual, and the feminine spirit emotional" (340). He accuses women of being unable to produce writing at an intellectual level because their talents lay in "refinement, tact, and the ability to observe precisely, present female character effectively, deal knowledgably with details of dress, housekeeping, and illness ... and most important, edify the morally needy" (340). Society, especially men, Showalter argues, tended to assert that women lacked originality, education, the ability to "comprehend abstract thought," logic, humor, and the ability to portray male characters (340). The imbalance between men's and women's experience in the area of originality, education, and style was assumed to mark women as inferior writers. To protect themselves against such judgment, many female writers resorted to using male pseudonyms to avoid criticism based on their sex rather than their work. Even then, critics often praised the text when published under a male pseudonym and "correct[ed]" this to a barrage of unsubstantiated criticism when the work's female authorship was later revealed. Showalter's thorough examination of the double standards that existed in Victorian society applied to male and female writers emphasizes the

insecurity male authors felt and the many hurdles that women faced in their efforts to establish a literary legacy.

Showalter shows that men believed that writing was an indicator of their masculinity, and, when women expressed interest in becoming published authors, male authors felt insecure about their writing careers and masculinity. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), further Showalter's arguments about the male author's insecurity, arguing that the authorial anxiety eighteenth and nineteenth-century female writers felt when trying to write and publish came from society's established belief that the pen of authorship represented an extension of a man's inherent masculinity. In Chapter One of the book, Gilbert and Gubar explore the correlation of authorship and paternity. Various nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first-century authors and scholars—including Gerard Manley Hopkins, Norman O. Brown, and Edward Said—have remarked on the Victorian correlation drawn between authorship and paternity. Poets and novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth century also make it clear that the pen was an extension of the author and so a metaphor of the penis. The pen of authorship becomes directly correlated with masculinity, and, due to this correlation between masculinity and authorship, female literary power could not exist, as female authors did not have a penis. Thus, “[W]riting, reading, and thinking” were considered “by definition male activities … not only alien but also inimical to ‘female characteristics’” (Gilbert and Gubar 8). Gilbert and Gubar cite several authors, including Anne Finch, Jane Austen, and Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, to demonstrate the influence of male authorship and authority on female writers.

Gilbert and Gubar further show that, to establish a literary footprint, women had to transcend the extreme images male writers had imprinted on women—those of the

angel and the monster. Multiple poets, including Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, depict these conflicting images of ghost, fiend, angel, and fairy in their poems. The image of a woman as an angel, specifically an angel of the home, is present throughout a range of male-authored texts, including those by Dante, Milton, Goethe, Eichner, Patmore, and Makarie (Gilbert and Gubar 21). In these works, women are depicted as having “no story of [their] own but gives ‘advice and consolation’ to others, listens, smiles, sympathizes”; they demonstrate a persona of “grace, gentleness, simplicity, and nobility” in these texts (22). However, like Rosaldo, Gilbert and Gubar argue that independent women were social anomalies, and, because men felt anxious about female autonomy and authorship, they created the “antithetical mirror image of an angel”—the monster (28). Women could be portrayed as angels, monsters, or as monsters inside the bodies of angels. Surrounded by male voices influencing women’s self-perception—their image, thoughts, and social role—female writers had to free both their reflections in the mirror and their inner voices from male influence to become independent of such control.

While in their first chapter, Gilbert and Gubar discuss the pen of authorship as a metaphor for a man’s penis, signifying patriarchy and ownership of literature, Chapter Two focuses on women artists escaping the “infections”—female manipulation, hysteria, and angel/monster imagery—that male authors have projected onto female characters in their writings and, by extension, onto real women. Gilbert and Gubar cite Harold Bloom’s theory in literary psychohistory that an artist—for Bloom, this means a male artist—fears that his work will not supersede his predecessors and, thus that, to become a successful writer or poet, a man must “somehow invalidat[e] his poetic father” (47). Gilbert and Gubar argue that Bloom’s theory becomes problematic because many female writers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not have the corresponding

predecessors to invalidate. Thus, female writers felt the anxiety of influence as well as the anxiety of authorship, because they needed not only to supersede male authors but also to overcome the image of themselves as unable to write due to their sex (49).

As previously discussed, through literature, male writers imposed social boundaries on women within which they must live and which define their sex. These included the typifying characteristics of beauty, domesticity, obedience, childrearing, and moral purity, as well as the opposite characteristics of witchcraft, manipulation, and independence (Gilbert and Gubar 54). These expectations contributed to the development of agoraphobia and hysteria in eighteenth and nineteenth-century women. For female artists to succeed in the world of literature, Gilbert and Gubar maintain, they were required, first, to face the anxiety of authorship, while always being cognizant of the fact that men had claimed authorship as part of their masculinity; second, to overcome the biological and psychological images of themselves created through the male gaze; and third, to simultaneously confront and subvert the patriarchal literary traditions that dictate the way literature should be written. Through writing and authorship, Gilbert and Gubar assert, a woman discovers her true story, the depth of her confinement in space made and dictated by men, and her identity between angel and monster (85).

The first two chapters in *The Madwoman in the Attic* allow the reader to understand the struggles faced by female writers and how those struggles manifested in the literature they wrote. For my purpose, these two chapters, as well as Elaine Showalter's article, help explain the anxiety of authorship that female characters face within the novels I analyze. The anxiety female characters overcame through writing made writing a more powerful form of rebellion than behavioral or verbal defiance of social norms. Bordo's and Butler's work, which follows upon Gilbert, Gubar, and Showalter's, reaffirms the theory that Victorian women were performing social roles

defined by the values and customs of the period. Nineteenth-century women were socially obligated to fulfill domestic roles as mothers, daughters, and wives; those who rejected these roles (as professional writers were believed to do) faced heavy criticism. Female authorial anxiety evolved because men attributed authorship directly to masculinity, believing themselves to be women's intellectual superiors, especially in originality and creativity. Women were also reminded, through literature, handbooks, laws, and traditions, that their place in society was within the home; and women who adhered to social norms were portrayed as angels, while those who did not were seen as monsters. Butler and Bordo affirm these anxieties through their criticism of the concept of gender itself, and they provide a foundation for my conclusion that female writers in the Victorian era resisted this expected female performance and forced readers to acknowledge them as intellectual, creative, and original human beings.

While Gilbert, Gubar, and Showalter present the anxieties of female authorship by citing the written work of those women, Linda H. Peterson facilitates an intimate understanding of the way male authorship affected female writers and their images both during their lives and after death. In Chapter Four of her book *Becoming a Woman of Letters* (2009), Peterson deconstructs Elizabeth Gaskell's portrayal of Charlotte Brontë in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, arguing that the parallel life Gaskell ascribes to Brontë perpetuates a dominating cluster of myths of the model Victorian woman as both a successful author and a dutiful woman. Peterson dissects Gaskell's methodology in compiling the biography and highlights how Gaskell separated Brontë's life into two separate spheres of writing, or authorship, and household duties. Knowing that society considered literary production a male enterprise, we see that, as female writers faced criticism for supposedly abandoning their domestic duties, they often found themselves directly associated with the characters in their novels. At various points in her writing

career, Brontë was criticized for being “unfeminine” and “unchristian,” but Gaskell attempts to redeem Brontë’s reputation as both an accomplished writer and an accomplished woman by focusing on Brontë’s caretaking of her father, her emotional closeness to her sisters, and her marriage to Reverend Nicholls (137). According to Peterson, Gaskell portrays Charlotte as a dutiful daughter and wife, while also “diminish[ing] the view that Brontë, like the heroines of her novels, was overly and obsessively concerned with romantic love” (137). Peterson argues that, in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell “creates a mid-Victorian model of the woman artist as one more concerned with artistic expression than with professionalism, a woman who both fulfills her ‘quiet regular duties’ and expresses her ‘splendid talents,’ making Charlotte Brontë both virtuous and talented” (148). However, in order to illustrate this portrayal, Gaskell represents Brontë’s writing talent as “not unfeminine or unwomanly, but ungendered, unsought, and God-given”; she does not associate Brontë’s writing with professionalism but, according to Peterson, attributes Brontë’s genius to her duty and responsibility (142). Gaskell’s portrayal of Brontë’s writing as a vocation and responsibility elevates Brontë’s authorship to a calling of higher purpose, discouraging gender-based evaluation of her work. According to Peterson, when Gaskell attempts to ungender Brontë’s authorship, she removes Brontë from the confinement of gender and downplays the fact that she was a woman *and* a literary genius. Gaskell’s biographical portrayal of Brontë illustrates the criticism female writers received for attempting to become professional authors and the demand to develop two distinct spheres in their lives—dutiful homemaker and accomplished writer.

Although the latter half of the nineteenth century saw a shift in attitudes toward professional female writers, the patriarchal culture of the Victorian era continued to dominate women’s images, dictate their social and biological roles, and determine their

success or failure as writers. Women in general faced numerous obstacles in gaining respect as people whose social function extended beyond reproduction and child-rearing. Female writers had to surmount an almost impossible weight of masculine authority and presumptions of female inferiority.

Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, Sherry B. Ortner, Judith Butler, Susan Bordo, Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Elaine Showalter, and Linda H. Peterson provide a range of criticism of Victorian social and cultural norms, equipping me with the theoretical basis to analyze how female characters in the works of Germaine de Staël, Wilkie Collins, Charlotte Brontë, Anne Brontë, and Henrik Ibsen conform and deviate from images of the ideal women, and how those conformities and deviations became significant to the creation of a new female image.

## CHAPTER THREE: DEATH, SILENCE, AND UNCERTAINTY: THE COST OF RESISTANCE

Through handbooks and essays, Victorian society prescribed a woman's social position and responsibilities. These texts allow readers to appreciate what male and female writers in the Victorian era were attempting to convey about women through female characters in their texts. Writers could use the behavior, treatment, and language of female protagonists to either resist or conform to the social norms of their work's intended audience. Through their novels and plays, Victorian writers compel their audience to reflect on whether women should live obedient and domestic lives to uphold social morality and the family structure or whether women should resist a suffocating patriarchal culture. In Germaine de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy* (1807), Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860), and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), three female characters, from three nineteenth-century European texts from different national traditions—respectively, an early-century French Romantic novel, a mid-century British Victorian serial sensational novel, and a late-century Norwegian play—exhibit resistance to the social customs of their time, yet each female character meets an unsatisfying end through death, silence and spinsterhood, or an otherwise uncertain future. These writers, through their texts, explore and critique the various forms of resistance available to women of that era. Within the texts, female characters' resistance manifests itself through three forms: speech, writing, and action. Here, I argue that female characters who successfully resist the patriarchal culture have an enduring impact on their readers and improve in their quality of life at the end of the novel. However, it is also evident from these texts that even if a female character faces an unsatisfactory end her writing endures after the written events transpires. In these three texts, speech and action fail as forms of resistance because, although the female characters' resistance is powerful, in two out of

three cases, a male character either hijacks the narrative or leaves the female character in a subordinate position.

Each female character partly to fully fails to liberate herself from the patriarchal norms. For example, in *Corinne, or Italy*, Corinne's talents of improvisation and music are her means of resisting the English patriarchal culture that had once confined her, yet the love of an Englishman and her attempt to perform to English society's expectations cause her to give up these talents and lead to her rapid physical and mental decline.

Similarly, in *The Woman in White*, Marian's mannerisms and outspoken defiance define her resistance, but she is slowly written out of the narrative through the masculine desire to control the narrative. In *A Doll's House*, Nora performs the role of a perfect wife, but, although she decides she wants to live outside the confines of her protective home and leaves her husband and children, Ibsen leaves the audience at a loss about Nora's future, thereby neither entirely liberating nor confining her, but leaving her to the mercy of a world with few rights for women.

Germaine de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy* is a representative Romantic Era text, and incorporates the conventions of the time in that it privileges qualities of imagination, emotions, and nostalgia; however, the novel is also exceptional for its central focus on a dominant female character. *Corinne, or Italy* tells the story of a young, half-English, half-Italian woman who falls in love with an Englishman, Lord Oswald Nelvil. Corinne's passion for the arts, history, and culture of Italy draw Oswald to her while also creating in him the conflict between his love for Corinne and his duty to his dead father to marry Lucile, a traditional, obedient, and dutiful English girl. He marries Lucile and his choice leads to Corinne's tragic death.

Staël chooses a dominant female character as the voice and image of Italy, and, at least initially, through her behavior, speech, and writing, Corinne transcends social

restraints on female voices. Corinne uses all three forms of resistance to defy the English patriarchal culture she once lived in, one to which her beloved wants her to return—one that expects her to be angelic, obedient, and passive. However, her resistance is undermined by the male protagonist in the text, and her resistance weakens with the passage of time.

Corinne's talents and independent character are welcomed in Italian society, but English society attempts to suppress such a character because her love for music, art, and composition goes against the English norms. Her success and recognized authority in Italy is based on her gifts for "painting, music, oratory, and dancing," through which, according to Prince Castel-Forte, "Corinne was always herself, not restricting herself to a particular style or particular rules, but expressing in a variety of ways the same powerful imagination, the same fascination of the arts in their various forms" (Staël 27). Half-Italian and half-English, her genius, imagination, and beauty make her the image of Italy but, simultaneously, place her at odds with the image of the ideal English woman. Taking Oswald out to see Rome, inviting guests over to her home to have discussions or improvise on certain topics, speaking publically, and acting in plays are all acceptable behaviors for Corinne in Italy, but these behaviors breech the more conservative culture in England. The same forms of resistance—writing, speech, and performance—that liberate Corinne from the confines of Italy's patriarchal culture have no place in proper English society. As Corinne's father gently reminds her, "everything that attracts attention arouses envy, and you would not find it at all possible to get married if people thought you had tastes foreign to our ways" (244). To her stepmother and father, Corinne's talents pose an obstacle to her ability to achieve true domestic happiness—society's ultimate measure of success. The restrictive English culture puts up a stronger resistance against her unfeminine talents, preventing her from expressing her authentic

self and making it difficult for Oswald to love her without betraying his nationalistic pride in the idea of an archetypal meek, submissive, and innocent English woman.

Oswald's desire for Corinne to emulate "proper" English women puts a strain on Corinne's ability to fully express her talents. Throughout the novel, Oswald silently admits to his prejudice against Italian women, thinking them "passionate but fickle, incapable of experiencing deep, permanent affection," and standing in opposition to his upbringing as a British man (Stael 35). He sees his own country as a haven "of modesty and sensitivity" and believes that love can only exist alongside domestic happiness, where men are the protectors and women are the protected (95, 97). At several points, when his jealousy is sparked by the public's show of love and admiration for Corinne and the ease with which she displays her talents, Oswald accuses her of being a person "with deep feelings but frivolous tastes," a "proud soul [that] makes [her] independent and yet ... enslaved by the need for distractions," "capable of loving one man alone, but" needing them all, and, worse, a "sorceress who alternately makes people anxious and reassures them, who appears sublime and suddenly disappears from the sphere where [she is] alone to mingle with the crowd" (97-98). Here, Oswald mentally and emotionally abuses Corinne for wanting to express her talents.

Not surprisingly, Oswald sounds much like his father. Oswald's father once wrote a letter to Corinne's father warning him not to allow Oswald to marry Corinne because her gifts were bound to arouse in her the need "to please, to charm, to attract attention" which would prevent her from being happy with the English "domestic habits" (317). Lucile, however, charms Oswald's father because of "the most touching modesty in her features, in the expression of her face, in the sound of her voice. She is the kind of truly English woman who will make [his] son happy" (318-319). Both Oswald and his father view Corinne's outgoing, talented, and charming personality as a form of disloyalty to

English tradition. Oswald's reference to Corinne as a "sorceress" and his father's reference to her as "charming" shift the personal responsibility of Oswald's desires onto Corinne.

While Corinne openly refutes Oswald's criticism of Italy, his disappointment that she does not act like the ideal English woman depresses Corinne, and hampers her ability to be her true, unrestrained, and authentic self. To alleviate Oswald's discomfort with the Italian customs and traditions, Corinne compromises by frequently reassuring Oswald of her fidelity to him, primarily by focusing her attention on him when she displays any of her talents and by dismissing the applause she receives from the Italian people. To please Oswald and his wish that she be less outgoing, Corinne slowly isolates herself from the people who inspire her improvisations, and her oratory becomes more restrained. After Corinne hands Oswald the story of her past and sees him troubled by the narrative, her "exceptional ability in using language" falters and she "hesitate[s] in her choice of words and she sometimes use[s] an expression totally unconnected with what she mean[s] to say" (268). She tells Oswald that her "ambition used to be to win the applause even of those who were indifferent," but "now [she] [does] not care about anything, and it is not happiness which has freed [her] from these empty pleasures, it is a complete loss of heart" (268). Corinne's eloquence, her taste for intellectual conversations, and her love for culture, history, and the arts fall apart because her love for Oswald is tied to his restrictive English patriarchal beliefs and obsession with his father's disapproval of marriage to Corinne.

Oswald's indecision over whether to marry Corinne or fulfill his father's wishes so distresses Corinne that she becomes unable to hide her feelings from tainting her improvisations. During Oswald's last days in Italy, Corinne improvises for the locals and, in that improvisation, the reader can tell the difference in Corinne as she was before she

met Oswald and as she is at this point. In the reader's first encounter with Corinne at the Capitol, she is described to be "initially overcome by a great feeling of shyness and it was in a trembling voice that she asked for the subject that had been set for her," but she improvises with a "moving, sensitive voice, singing in the stately, resonant Italian language" (28, 33). Here, Corinne is confident in her talents and stable in her heart and mind; although she displays some shyness, she never doubts her abilities. However, after Corinne comes to terms with the possibility of marrying Oswald and having to sacrifice her talents, her improvisation takes a different turn. When the people at Cape Miseno ask Corinne to improvise on the memories aroused by the places around them, Corinne tunes "her lyre and, in a *faltering* voice, beg[ins]," trying to "contain her *distress*" and "at least for a moment to *rise above her personal situation*" (233, emphasis added). The narrator comments that the "Neapolitans noticed the somber tone of Corinne's poetry with surprise" and would have "preferred her verses to be inspired by a less sad tendency" (238). Corinne's inspiring, moving, stately voice becomes "faltering" and "distress[ed]," and her sorrows pull her down from her pedestal. Corinne's love for Oswald and distress at the possibility of losing him do not detract from the beauty and harmony of the language of her poetry, but they do noticeably impact her strong, "sensitive," and "moving" voice. Thus, Corinne begins to take on the fragile, docile, and submissive traits typical of an English woman.

Corinne's inability to resist the English patriarchal culture she had once escaped is apparent from her inability to speak to Oswald at the end of the novel. Excelling in the field of improvisational oratory but weakened by her failing health and a broken heart, Corinne employs a young girl to recite her final song. Corinne's charm, her voice, and her emotions are silenced and must instead be represented by a young girl. Before her death, Corinne speaks only to Lucile and to the priest who fulfilled her religious

obligations; however, when Oswald barges into the room, unable to control himself, “[s]he want[s] to speak but [is] not strong enough,” so she raises her “eyes to heaven” and weakly points to the cloud covered moon—the same one they saw in Naples that she took to be a bad omen—and dies (Staël 404). Corinne’s ability to speak—her talent and primary form of resistance—dies before she does. Although her silence throws Oswald into a state of despair, her primary form of resistance against the English patriarchal culture and her transcendence as an independent and intelligent woman are weakened. Her resistance fails because of Oswald’s betrayal of her love and his inability to take as his wife a woman who was willing to renounce her resistance in exchange for his love.

Through this novel, Staël—according to Sanja Bahun, in her article “The Dialectics of Madame de Staël (on *Corinne, or Italy*)”—seems to comment on the dominance of patriarchal culture and the infinite possibilities that are lost to women because they either choose, or must conform to, institutions such as marriage. (1). Corinne is not limited to a certain type of genre or style in her improvisation; she excels in speaking, acting, languages, and history. Her talents are fostered by her ability to ignore any laid-back societal or gender-based restriction on her performance life while in Italy. However, once Corinne steps onto English soil, where she is restricted to writing alone—a form of expression she finds more limiting—her ability to use her talents to communicate dwindles until she decides to return to Italy, leaving Oswald behind with the final written words, “You are free” (Staël 363). Her attempt to perform the role of a typical English woman strips her of her individuality and her voice.

It is difficult to sympathize with Oswald, as his inability to overcome his country’s expectations illustrates his weakness and the novel appears to reward him for keeping to his father’s and nation’s wishes. Ellen Peel, in her article “Contradictions of Form and Feminism in *Corinne ou l’Italie*,” writes that, “because of the patriarchy’s

strength and his own weakness, Oswald tends to not act as an individual but as an agent of that institution” (284). Peel’s interpretation of Oswald conveys the power of the institution of patriarchy to condemn an independent, resilient, talented, and intelligent woman—who does not conform to the image of the obedient, domestic, and angelic wife or lady—to a life without love. The patriarchal institution erodes Corinne’s physical self, her genius, her verbal eloquence, and her spirit of improvisation. Although people fear for Oswald’s sanity after Corinne’s death, his duty to Corinne’s memory and his family bring him out of isolation to become a “model of the purest and most orderly domestic life” (Staël 404). He survives his emotional turmoil, accomplishing precisely what society and his father expect: an ideal domestic life for himself and his family, which he could not have done with Corinne. While the novel kills off Corinne, Staël refuses to come to a conclusion on Oswald, writing, “But did he forgive himself for his past behaviour? Was he consoled by society’s approval? Was he content with the common lot after what he had lost? I do not know, and, on that matter, I want neither to blame nor to absolve him” (404). Outwardly, his conformity with English social expectations ensures his success, while Corinne’s resistance ensures her death. Thus, the novel socially rewards Oswald for his compliance and punishes Corinne for her resistance, but the narrator seems to indicate that Oswald never forgave himself for his behavior towards Corinne.

Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* also explores the conventional, dualistic images of women as angels and monsters and the control exerted by male narrators over women’s voices within the text. In the novel, Walter Hartright, the male protagonist, travels from London to tutor two young women, Laura and Marian, in art at their home in Limmeridge. On his journey, he meets a peculiar young woman named Anne Catherick. She is dressed all in white, and Walter later discovers that she has escaped the mental

asylum. Anne continues to reappear to him and his two students on several occasions. While at Limmeridge, Walter and Laura fall deeply in love, but Walter is soon told that Laura is engaged to a Sir Percival and soon to be married. Sir Percival, with the help of Count Fosco, turns out to be a man bent on robbing Laura of her fortunes through deceit, abuse, and staged death. Count Fosco and Sir Percival use Anne, Laura's illegitimate, paternal half-sister, who closely resembles Laura, to fake Laura's death and gain access to her money. However, Walter and Marian see through the plot and seek to reestablish Laura's name and expose Sir Percival and Count Fosco. The novel tells the same story from various perspectives in order to legally establish the crimes of Fosco and Percival for a judge and restore Laura's true identity. Walter's narrative takes center stage, both at the beginning and the end of the novel. Other narratives include Marian's diary, the doctor's statement, Count Fosco's letter, Laura's uncle's statement, and the statements of various servants.

More openly critical of the stereotypical English woman than Corinne, Marian Holcombe, the heroine in *The Woman in White*, verbally and physically resists the patriarchal norms that dictate women's and girls' behavior and attitudes, and her first resistance to the male gaze is with her body. When Walter Hartright sees Marian's figure from the back, he is struck "by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude. Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat ... her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays," but when she turns towards him, he is taken aback by her dark color and masculine facial features (Collins 34). Yan Shu-chuan, in his article "Freak Shows, Monstrous Women, and the Missing Link: Reading Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*," claims that Marian's hybrid appearance of feminine and masculine aspects touches upon Victorian society's

“preoccup[ation] with the perfect human form” and that anyone “who deviated from this ideal image was regarded monstrous or freakish” (142). This anomaly pits Marian against the ideal female image of her blonde, blue-eyed, reserved, and innocent half-sister Laura. Marian describes herself as dark, ugly, crabbed, and odd, and describes Laura as fair, pretty, sweet-tempered, and charming, illustrating the dichotomy of women as angels or monsters.

For Walter, this contradiction in figure and face is startling; however, he grows fond of Marian as soon as they begin to talk. Her self-reliance, determination, and independence are refreshing traits that allow her to take strong, decisive steps to assist Laura’s case against Sir Percival and Count Fosco. Through the course of the novel, Marian finds the letter that provides information about Anne Catherick’s identity, breaks Walter and Laura apart due to Laura’s previous engagement, physically and verbally protects Laura from Sir Percival, writes to her lawyer when in need of advice, and finds and frees Laura from the mental asylum when no one believes her doubts of Laura’s death.

Unlike Corinne’s, Marian’s resistance to social expectations of female behavior does not deteriorate because of a man she loves, but it does gradually fade due to male intrusions that replace her voice with their own. Marian’s strength is not confined to her disregard for the patriarchal norms laid out for women; her strongest and most tireless resistance is exemplified in her writing, which reveals her strength of character, her impeccable memory, and her endurance in fighting against injustice. Her diary is presented as one of the narratives used as evidence to reveal the crimes of Count Fosco and Sir Percival, and is the only narrative by a major female character taken into evidence. However, her diary is controlled by the male gaze, as it is sandwiched between Walter’s narratives and hijacked by Count Fosco.

Marian's diary entries narrate the events from the time of Walter's departure from Limmeridge to her discovery of Count Fosco and Sir Percival's scheme of taking Laura's money. One's diary is an extension of oneself, a place where one writes one's thoughts knowing it could be read with or without the writer's permission. After Marian climbs the roof during a rain storm and eavesdrops on the two villainous characters, she falls ill and her diary is left open to the hands of the Count. After reading Marian's diary, Count Fosco chooses to leave the diary with a postscript, praising the diary as a "stupendous effort" and the writer as having "the discretion, the rare courage, the wonderful power of memory, the accurate observation of character, the easy grace of style," and "the charming outbursts of womanly feeling" (336). Count Fosco could have destroyed the diary and eliminated the possibility of it being used as evidence against the Count and Sir Percival. Instead, Count Fosco breeches Marian's private thoughts—and, by extension, her body—and leaves his mark behind to remind her of her vulnerability.

After Marian's voice is hijacked by Count Fosco, the reader is granted no further access to her private thoughts, and it is never discussed whether she has willingly given Walter permission to present her private diary to the public. Walter decides which parts of her diary are used and never gives Marian another chance to narrate through her own voice. Instead, he states that, when it comes to her and Laura's narratives, he shall relate "not in the words (often interrupted, often inevitably confused) of the speakers themselves, but in the words of the brief, plain, studiously simple abstract which [he] committed to writing for [his] own guidance . . . so the tangled web will be most speedily and most intelligibly unrolled" (Collins 414). In her article "Making the Case: Detection and Confession in *Lady Audley's Secret* and *The Woman in White*," Anne-Marie Dunbar argues that Walter's account is by no means brief, plain, or simple; he merely wishes to control the narrative and shape it to serve his own ends (102). Walter grants the reader

access to Marian's perspective but later robs them of that access. Furthermore, Laura is granted no platform from which to describe her own version of events, despite being the central figure in Walter's quest.

Marian's resistance to the patriarchal social norms that dictate women's behavior wanes when her voice, conveyed to the audience through her diary, is stolen from her. Some scholars have concluded that the loss of her voice is the consequence of her attempts to eavesdrop and take risks unbecoming of a Victorian woman. Anne Gaylin, in her article "The Madwoman outside the Attic: Eavesdropping and Narrative Agency in *The Woman in White*," states that Marian's eavesdropping "incurs punishment of both her physical and textual bodies, for in divesting herself of her womanly garments and leaving the domestic space, she has allowed herself to be exposed to the elements and exposed as a woman transgressing boundaries of 'appropriate' behavior" (317). Marian develops a fever from being outside in the rain and beyond the walls that serve to protect her sex from the harsh world. Immediately following the incident of her eavesdropping, Marian writes in her diary: "My head—I am sadly afraid of my head. I can write, but the lines all run together. I see the words" and, from that place, the entry "in the Diary ceases to be legible. The two or three lines which follow, contain fragments of words only, mingled with blots and scratches of the pen" (Collins 336-337). Marian's writing becomes incoherent as she becomes physically too ill to write, speak, or control her own faculties. She is then left at the mercy of those she least trusts. After recovering, Marian is never again granted her own space in the narrative; whether or not she continues writing in her diary is undisclosed, although it is mentioned that she refers to her diary at various points to recall particulars of the past.

As the novel's plot progresses, Walter observes that Marian's spirits and charismatic character returns, but it is clear that, despite her recovery, Walter controls her

movements and narrative. He continues to govern how and when she will take certain actions, and, unless there is no time for consultation, Marian is not allowed to act on her own will. While Marian appears to regain her former confidence, vigor, and emotional stability in the second half of the narrative, she is kept indoors just like the other women in the novel, though still given more authority than any of them. Throughout the second half of the narrative, Walter seeks Marian's support and advice, yet she is a captive in her own home, caring for her younger sister. The novel that initially extended Marian's narrative space and mobility is eventually "contained and enclosed in reassuring, conventional, patriarchal structures, structures that confirm the normative gender ideology of the novel's conventional readers" (Gaylin 305). In the second half of the narrative, Marian begins to conform to gendered conventions. She no longer openly criticizes the female sex for their weaknesses or for emotional displays, such as crying; she stays at home to look after Laura, and she actively tries to mellow her own temper. While there are instances when Marian attempts to convince Walter to accept her help in risky situations, he redirects her to safer and more domestic tasks, such as remaining with her sister in bed while he confronts Fosco. Thus, while Marian does recover some of her vigor, as Walter observes, it is more subtly expressed, and, while Walter claims to allow Marian to end the story, he actually reserves the final word for himself in his commentary following her final statement. The woman whom BriAnne Kuhn, in her article "Equal Partnerships: Ideal Androgynous Marriages in *Jane Eyre* and *The Woman in White*," says "represents 'anima virilis in corpore muliebri inclusa': a man's spirit imprisoned in a female body," ends the narrative by taking domestic charge of the heir of Limmeridge (12). This heroine, who has the second longest narrative besides the narrator's, is written into a tidy ending of familial responsibility and submission that ends her resistance.

Similarly, Mrs. Catherick, Anne Catherick's mother—the second most resilient female character in the novel—voices her narrative by writing an anonymous letter to Walter clearing up the story which smeared her name in her community. When Walter receives the letter, it is “neither dated, nor signed; and the handwriting [is] palpably disguised,” but he knows it is from Mrs. Catherick (Collins 528). Walter disregards her wishes to have the letter remain anonymous, first, by narrating the letter to the reader and, second, by keeping the letter for his future use. In the letter, Mrs. Catherick relays her determination “not to acknowledge having written it” and destroying any evidence in the fire (539). “No names are mentioned,” no signature attached,” “the handwriting is disguised throughout, and [she] mean[s] to deliver the letter [her]self, under circumstances which will prevent all fear of its being traced to [her] house” (539). Mrs. Catherick takes drastic measures to ensure that the writer of the letter remains unknown and to advance her hard-won reputation in town, yet Walter betrays this anonymity by making the letter public record, just as he makes Marian’s private diary public. While his “first impulse, after reading Mrs. Catherick’s extraordinary narrative, was to destroy it,” a “consideration suggested itself, which warned [him] to wait a little” (540). As Marian’s role is limited to the domestic sphere and her writing used for Walter’s personal agenda, Mrs. Catherick’s voice is also silenced and remains at Walter’s disposal.

Neither Laura nor Anne—key characters around which the plot revolves—is ever granted an opportunity to speak for herself because of what appears to be Walter’s mistrust of their emotional stability; he perceives them as being too fragile and unreliable to narrate their own stories. Anne is affected by mental illness and dies before Walter compiles the various accounts; as for Laura, “at the slightest reference to that time [before her confinement], she changed and trembled still; her words became confused; her memory wandered and lost itself as helplessly as ever” (Collins 556). Camelia

Raghinaru, in her article “(Ir)Rationalizing the Female Body in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*,” states that “sensation fiction portrays Victorian women as child-like, incapable of self-government, and in need of regimented normalization. A whole arsenal is mobilized toward the reinforcement of a certain type of gender performance” (9).

Walter treats Laura like a child, deciding how she should occupy her time and what information she is told regarding the case against Sir Percival; he also controls her narrative by speaking on her behalf. Rachel Ablow, in her article “Good Vibrations: The Sensationalization of Masculinity,” argues that, through his marriage, Walter not only attains the ability to speak for his wife, he “will be the *only* person with that ability,” and much “therefore rests on Walter’s ability to identify Laura’s thoughts, needs, and interests” (167). Due to the close physical resemblance and relationship between Laura and Anne, this argument could also be extended to Anne, as Walter takes control over both their narratives. Thus, it seems apparent that it is not Laura’s fragility that results in her inability to overcome the trauma of her past but Walter’s lack of confidence in her ability to handle that trauma.

Corinne and Marian resist the patriarchal norms of their society by refusing to perform their gender roles and by choosing—before they are written out of their respective novels—to live as women in possession of their own actions and talents. Nora, in Henrik Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House*, however, resists the gender stereotypes of a woman in the 1870s through her performance; apparently obedient, doting, and meek, she appears to fulfill the roles considered natural and respectable for a wife and mother. *A Doll’s House* is a play about how a woman, Nora, appears to strive for a perfect family while keeping a secret—her criminal offense of forgery—at the risk of being discovered by her husband. Her husband’s eventual discovery of the offense and his disgust with

Nora open her eyes to the real state of her marriage and family, propelling her to leave her home behind in search of her individuality.

Nora conforms to the patriarchal culture by playing the “perfect” wife who loves her husband, plays with her children, and, most importantly, saves her morally upstanding husband, Helmer, from his illness. While Nora’s love for Helmer, her home, and her children seems to be quite genuine—if not excessive—Toril Moi writes, in her essay “First and Foremost a Human Being”: Idealism, Theatre, and Gender in *A Doll’s House*, that both Nora and Helmer spend most of the play “acting out their own cliché idealist scripts” of what an ideal man and woman, as husband and wife, are like (263). According to Moi, Nora plays the helpless, sacrificing, and loving woman, while Helmer plays the heroic, masculine, and moral man. Through their role play, Ibsen creates a metatheatrical element to the entire play until the theatrical mask is ripped off at the end.

Nora performs to the gendered expectations by consciously playing her husband’s obedient and naïve wife, but, behind his back, she makes decisions that trespass against the period’s social conventions. She plays his “skylark,” “squirrel,” “singing bird,” and “pet,” while also resisting her husband’s control through small acts of disobedience such as eating macaroons and the more serious acts of forging her father’s signature on a loan agreement and walking out of her home (Ibsen 2-3). When Nora eats macaroons and is then confronted by her husband, she denies doing so, claiming she “would never dream of doing anything [he] didn’t want [her] to do” (5). With this statement, Nora demonstrates a split between her performance as a perfect wife and her silent resistance as an individual. While claiming never to act against her husband’s wishes, Nora’s actions show her as resisting the very performance she puts on for her husband, neighbors, children, and friends.

Nora's greatest transgression against gender norms is her forgery of her father's signature and her effort to secretly pay off the loan to Krogstad, from whom she borrows money for the trip to Italy. I argue, however, that Nora does not purposefully transgress in order to resist gender rules but out of a genuine desire to help her ailing husband. In her situation, forging a signature seemed the only way to save her husband's life. By writing her father's name, Nora commits, and commits herself to, a crime, ironically saving her husband's life through a means which has the potential of ruining their "happy home," not in the least because of her husband's masculine pride in owing his wife money (15). Earlier in the play, Mrs. Linde, an old friend of Nora, reminds her that "a wife can't borrow without her husband's consent," yet Nora, who says Helmer would never give consent, has transgressed the social and gender norms by signing without her husband's consent and forging the signature of another man (14). However, her motive for forging the signature seems quite clear, as she appears dumfounded when Krogstad tells her of her crime. Nora assumes that her motive would be taken into account, and she questions the fairness of the law: "Isn't a daughter entitled to try and save her father from worry and anxiety on his deathbed? Isn't a wife entitled to save her husband's life?" (29). The word "entitled" seems to suggest that Nora believes she has the right to save the men in her life, making their well-being her responsibility. Having established that Nora performs a certain role in front of others, it important to note that, when she is alone after Krogstad gives her the news of her crime, she first defiantly tosses her head and declares the whole thing to be rubbish but then, after thinking about it again, concludes she committed the deed for love. Her behavior, when she is alone, shows her genuine concern for her family.

Nora does not seem to perform her love for her home and her desire for a happy family; it is ignorance, childlike behavior, and dependence on Helmer that she performs.

Her transgression of signing the loan document forces her to perform meekness to avoid the possibilities of Helmer's discovery of the loan and of the loss of the happy home she desires. For example, she must play his pet and distract him from thinking about the letters in the mailbox. When Krogstad drops the letter with Nora's forged signature in the mailbox and Nora knows Helmer will check the mail, she distracts Helmer by pleading that he teach her the tarantella because she "just can't get anywhere without [his] help" (57). Her transgression, done in the name of love and her ideal image of a perfect, happy home, causes her to perform the perfect wife for her husband and to feign stupidity despite being well aware of her capabilities.

Nora's performance and resistance occur simultaneously, and the scene in which she dances the tarantella demonstrates this dual expression that only the play's audience can perceive because it is the only entity that truly knows both her public and private life. Nora dances the tarantella to postpone the moment Helmer looks at the letters and discovers Nora's secret. The dance is also an expression of Nora's authentic self—of the fear and anxiety that grips her. Her violent dancing and wild, untamed hair allows the audience to see Nora as no longer simply dancing to keep Helmer occupied but as expressing her humanity and her struggle to "make her existence *heard*, to make it *count*" (Moi 269). It is the one time that Nora does not seem to hear Helmer, who "stands by the stove giving her repeated directions as she dances" (Ibsen 59). While her dance is seen by Dr. Rank and Helmer as a mere performance, the audience sees Nora's suffering and the dual existence of her outward performance and her expression of the inner fear that controls her.

The final act uncovers the meta-acting that dominates the play, yet Nora's final act of resistance cannot be interpreted as entirely liberating. The forgery and Helmer's condescending treatment of Nora, bring about both the deterioration of her family and her

final assertion that she wishes to be an individual human being, not a doll, mother, or wife. Anne M. Mazur, in her article “Victorian Women, the Home Theatre, and the Cultural Potency of *A Doll’s House*,” states that “Nora is a type of actress, going in and out of her character as Helmer’s little spendthrift and ‘squirrel,’” and dancing the tarantella seems finally to allow her to tap into her inner resistance which enables “the final, rational Nora to justify her exit from the home” (17). The key to Nora’s departure is her rejection of the roles she has played and is expected to play according to “what most people say, [and] with what it says in books,” which is that she must be a dutiful wife and mother in order to maintain a happy home (Ibsen 82). According to Moi, Nora’s separation of those roles from that of an individual demonstrate that, in order for her to be a human being and an individual, she cannot only be a mother and a wife (275). Limited to these roles, Nora’s existence relies on her relationship with others, as Helmer’s wife, the mother of her children, and her father’s daughter. To forge her own, individual existence, Nora must separate from those that define her. Moi refers to Hegel’s conservative theory of women and their role in family and marriage, which argues that words like “wife, daughter, sister, mother (and husband, son, brother, father) are, as it were, generic terms. They refer not to this or that individual person, but to a role or function” (276). A man, “[t]hrough his interaction with other men outside the family … gains concrete individuality,” while women “never really become self-conscious, concrete individual[s]” because they are confined to the home and have limited interaction with people and events outside the family (Moi 276). Hegel also believed that women had no need for education, arguing that they could not be intellectuals due to their inability to think outside of the home and that, “because women’s position in the family makes them incapable of relating to the universal, they will always be unreliable and disloyal citizens of the state” (Moi 277). Moi demonstrates that, before the play’s final

act, Nora exemplifies the Hegelian woman—“flighty, irresponsible, caring only for her family’s interests” with no accountability to the law (277). By the end of the play, she is calm and collected and rejects her Hegelian role as daughter, wife, and mother, instead choosing to discover her individuality. This choice necessitates that she leave her home, directly engage with society, and acquire an education.

While Nora seems to succeed in her ultimate resistance against the patriarchal culture that had thus far defined her life, the degree to which her resistance translates to liberation is unclear. From an escape perspective, her resistance is successful in that she does leave her husband and children, by physically removing herself from the roles she felt both suffocated her individuality and fed into the doll narrative. The problem with assessing her resistance lies in the uncertainty in which the play leaves both Nora and the audience. Joan Templeton, in her article “The *Doll House* Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen” (1989), argues that, due to the uncertainty surrounding the consequences of her exit, many critics have debated whether the play has a feminist ending or a comedic one (29). There is no proper closure or satisfaction in Nora’s leaving because the audience does not know whether she survives, regrets leaving and returns as she was, or comes back a changed woman. At face value, however, Nora has achieved liberation from the confines of a patriarchal marriage, and her departure empowers many real women to imitate her example. However, the reality of Nora finding happiness in a world dominated by men like Helmer seems unlikely. Although her departure creates a dramatic exit, it enters her into a realm of uncertainty and resists closure. Her resistance risks not being measured as completely successful because there is no way of knowing whether her refusal truly liberates her from the shackles of a patriarchal society or only becomes a reminder of why her place is within the home.

Primarily through speech and behavior, Corinne, Marian, and Nora all attempt to resist the patriarchal culture that dominates their lives, but their resistance partly fails as it results in their literal or figurative death or uncertain future. While Corinne and Marian resist patriarchy by performing against the gender norm and Nora performs to the gender norm in order to resist it, all three female characters demonstrate that such resistance is only powerful as long as they are able to continue the resistance. Once their resistance is breached by men, the female characters lose the resistance and their individuality. Each female protagonist utilizes multiple forms of resistance. Corinne's primary form of resistance is through her outgoing personality and her oratory skills; Marian's is her dominating and aggressive personality as well as her diary; Nora's is her performance as a dutiful wife and mother. Although Corinne dies, her letters and her short autobiography remain as a window into her life and her struggle to overcome the oppressive English patriarchal culture. The reader's first introduction to Marian is through the male gaze and her strength of character is further developed through her diary. Although her writing is hijacked by Count Fosco and controlled by Walter, it remains an authentic representation of her voice. Thus, while she becomes confined to the home and her future is resigned to being her nephew's caretaker, Marian's resistance is forever documented which makes her resistance both successful and unsuccessful. Her writing succeeds in preserving her resistance, while her outgoing personality conforms to the stereotypical gender role she once resisted. As for Nora, her forgery is a form of writing, and the discovery of the deed becomes the catalyst through which she finds the courage to leave her home behind. However, the forgery is performed not as an intentional act of resistance but out of genuine love and concern for her ailing husband. This intention is apparent in her reaction to the crime and her fear of having committed a deed that would "corrupt [her] children" and "poison [her] home" (34). Nora's performative resistance is partly

unsuccessful because, while it has an unquestionable impact on her, her family, and the audience, it leaves the audience unsure of her future quality of life and of whether she will truly be able to live independently or will always be tied to someone else.

Marian and Corinne write extensively in the novel and although they are silenced, their writings remain an integral part of their resistance. Corinne writes to counter Oswald's allegations against Italy, its people, and Corinne's unorthodox and unfeminine ways. At times, Corinne and Oswald communicate through letters, and on several occasions, Oswald airs his grievances regarding Corinne's behavior or Italy's relaxed social customs. On one occasion, when Oswald complains that Italian "men are worth much less than the women, for they have the women's faults as well as their own," citing Italy's "most vulgar tastes and the most miserable neglect of domestic life," and the prescription of Italy's "rites and customs" which "are all prescribed in advance" and in which "grief and passionate love have no part to play" (97). Corinne pointedly responds to each of Oswald's criticisms with eloquence, knowledge, and without outright disrespect of English customs. She proudly assumes the duty of defending Italy and its people, stating that "Italians are sincere and loyal in personal relationships," are not influenced by "pride or vanity" (implying that the English are), that Italy is the "one, of all those countries, in which women's happiness is best fostered," and "is one of the countries in the world where the most good nature is to be found" (100-101). Corinne communicates back and forth with Oswald many times in the novel, and each letter is proof of her fortitude, knowledge, and independence. Corinne also writes of her past, illuminating the measures she took to conform to English society and her inability to do so. Corinne's short autobiography serves the same function as Marian's diary, Jane Eyre's autobiography, and Helen Huntington's diary: to record the struggle of being a strong, talented, intelligent, and independent woman in an oppressive, male-dominated

society. Unfortunately, like her improvisation, Corinne's writing begins to fail as her mind and heart begin to succumb to the grief of a broken heart.

With regards to Marian's diary, some entries are provided to the reader, but the Count hijacks Marian's voice, and the remainder of the novel is filtered through Walter's narrative. Marian's voice is affected by the male gaze and so is her personality. In the beginning Marian is head-strong, independent, outspoken, and passionate. Towards the end, Marian has learned to master patience and is assertive but less passionate. Throughout the second half of the novel, Marian stays at home to babysit her half-sister, and the novel ends with her as the caretaker of her nephew, the heir to Limmeridge. Thus, Marian's resistance is a partial success—her voice remains, but she fades into the background.

A successful resistance incorporates two factors: first, that it is enduring in its impact, and second, that there is some form of achievement or betterment in one's quality of life. Corinne dies, Marian becomes a silent caretaker, and Nora steps into the unknown. While their endings are unsatisfactory, their resistance endures through writing. Within these texts, any written form of resistance remains successful in its ongoing impact on the contemporary reader and generations of readers to come. Records of female resistance—whether through diaries, letters, or autobiographies, ensures access to those narratives in the future, even if the record is controlled or hijacked by male narrators or other characters. Through writing, female characters can ensure that their resistance, their anger, their opinions, and their thoughts are documented, recoverable by appropriate and inappropriate audiences, and passed on. Even though Corinne and Marian are removed from center stage, their words are witness to their resistance.

## CHAPTER FOUR: WRITING ONESELF TO LIBERATION

In the previous chapter, we saw that female characters who resisted the norms of patriarchal society through writing, speech, and behavior failed to liberate themselves entirely, arriving at unsatisfactory or unfamiliar ends. However, as Marian's diary entries in *The Woman in White* and Corinne's letters and written personal history in *Corinne, or Italy* demonstrate, writing has a powerful effect on the narrative by giving women a platform to make their voices heard and record their resistance for future generations of readers. Although Marian's and Corinne's voices are silenced, their written voices remain intact. Through Marian's and Corinne's writings, the reader gleans intimate details of the gender inequalities present within that society.

Anne and Charlotte Brontë also address the issue of gender inequality through their fictional writings in an era which, while making strides, deprived women of financial independence and ease of access to rights, including divorce and management of property. Through their female characters' diaries, letters, or autobiographies, the Brontës demonstrate the power of women's writing in countering the verbal suppression imposed on them by their surrounding culture. In Anne Brontë's novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), male lovers deliberately belittle their beloveds by using pet names and, at times, resort to either emotional or physical manipulation through abuse or destructive behaviors like drinking and womanizing. Through the writings of Helen Huntingdon and Jane Eyre, Ruskin's ideal Victorian family and the handbooks' peaceful, domestic abode are exposed for their true colors; these female characters, through their writings, shed light on the uncomfortable truth of what domestication of women looks like in a patriarchal society. In these texts, men use condescending rhetoric towards women, verbally and physically abuse them, and, at times, lie and are unfaithful to them. Both heroines' writings represent a

successful resistance that forever captures the genuine feelings of middle class women under the oppressive patriarchal structure. Although Jane writes her autobiography several years after the written events have transpired, she recreates conversations and events to demonstrate her strength and independent will in the face of emotional and physical tests. Helen and Jane maintain a patient and respectful outward composure while they record the emotional and physical abuse their lovers inflicted upon them; the feelings of joy, frustration, love, and hate towards their lovers; and the strides the heroines take to remain in control of their thoughts and behavior.

Socially, young women in the Victorian era were expected to be obedient and respectful to their husbands, and the male protagonists of the Brontës' novels make certain to remind the heroines of the behavior expected of them. According to Bordo, to control women and assure they fit the mold created for them by patriarchal elements, society often shapes the female body and attitude through the disciplining of every aspect of a woman's life—body, makeup, diet, and dress (165). However, to enact control over a woman's body and self-image, society must first convince women to believe that it has their best interests in mind. This normalization is accomplished through the repetition of expectations in both oral form (e.g. verbal instruction in how to behave) and physical (e.g. handbooks, pictures, film, advertisements). In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Jane Eyre*, both Arthur and Rochester verbally and emotionally manipulate the heroines into conforming to their expected roles as women in Victorian society. In *Wildfell Hall*, for example, the reader observes that, where a male character might express his frustrations to his wife, the wife is expected to remain quiet and refrain from talking back. Arthur Huntingdon repeatedly voices the expectations of a "proper wife": obedience, submissiveness, tolerance, and unconditional loyalty. At one point, he tells Helen that a wife's promise is to honor and obey her husband without attempting to "hector over

[him], and threaten and accuse [him]" (*TWH* 199). A woman's nature was, according to Arthur, to "be constant—to love one and one only, blindly, tenderly, and for ever" (199). In *Jane Eyre*, when Jane decides to leave Rochester, he expects Jane to "give [him] her love...nobly, generously," despite the fact he tried to marry her while already married to Bertha (*JE* 272). Here, too, the expectation is that a woman would give of herself selflessly and whole-heartedly. However, while Helen and Jane perform acts of moral uprightness and loyalty, their writings depict both their conflicting feelings about the men they love and their resolution to stand firm on their core values of truth, compassion, and spirituality.

Victorian literature perpetuated the notion of women as being either angels or monsters, and it was a means by which society attempted to control a woman's image and dictate her role. The Victorian obsession with angels originated from the idea that women were morally superior to men while, simultaneously, capable of becoming monsters through manipulative, promiscuous, and independent behavior. According to Gilbert and Gubar, male authors often used the angel and monster dichotomy to categorize women and possess them more thoroughly; thus, in order for female writers to prosper, it was necessary for them to kill the angel and monster image (17). Helen and Jane resist the angel role their lovers prescribe to them, while exposing their lovers as monstrous men bent on having their way. Both novels include the pet names "angel" and "girl," indicating the widespread normalization of using such pet names when addressing women. Huntingdon, Hargrave, and Gilbert, in *Wildfell Hall*, and Rochester, in *Jane Eyre*, all use the term "angel" to label women. Moreover, the pet names "angel," "girl," and "child" do not appear in isolation; they are often preceded by adjectives or possessive pronouns. For example, Huntingdon calls Helen his "sweet angel" (*TWH* 124) and "my immaculate angel" (375), Gilbert calls Helen "my darling angel" (413), and Hargrave

calls her “my angel” (303). The addition of the possessive pronoun emphasizes that the woman is not just any angel but *their* angel. Repeatedly calling their beloveds *angel* serves to remind these women of expectations about their innocence and purity, as well as of the expectation that women will not feel any anger, hate, or frustration. Fed up with Arthur’s “injustice, his selfishness and hopeless depravity,” Helen claims she is “no angel and [her] corruption rises against it” (*TWH* 227). While Helen deals with Arthur patiently, she spills her internal conflict and dismissal of the angelic image onto the pages of her diary. Likewise, right before Rochester proposes to Jane, when he pleads with her to not struggle “like a wild, frantic bird,” Jane responds, “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will” (*JE* 216). Later, when Rochester calls Jane his comforting angel, she responds, saying: “I am not an angel,” and “I will not be one until I die” (220). Whether or not Helen and Jane express their feelings publicly, they openly write of those feelings, declaring outright that they are not angels but human beings with an independent will, thereby challenging the imposed image of angels and monsters.

Just as the pet name “angel” places the responsibility of purity and morality upon the woman, the term “girl” and other similarly belittling terms promote the idea that women are weak, childish, and dependent. Huntingdon refers to Helen as “good girl” (*TWH* 182), “my girl” (218), and “silly girl” (207), and Rochester calls Jane “little girl” (*JE* 115), “little sunny-faced girl” (220), and “good little girl” (224). Neither Helen nor Jane is a “little girl,” as they have reached the age of eighteen. Neither of the heroines behaves like a little girl, yet their male counterparts find “girl” and “child” fitting names to call them. Not only does this use of pet names belittle the young women; it shows the male characters’ desire to possess them as well through the frequent use of the pronoun “my.” Jane’s autobiography illustrates Rochester’s perception of her as meek, simple, and

inhuman. He calls her intimate names such as “little girl,” “neophyte,” “sententious sage,” and “bird,” all the while occasionally maintaining some formality by going back to “Miss Eyre” (*JE* 112-118). As the two become more familiar, Rochester becomes more possessive and demeaning, calling Jane “my pet lamb,” “my little friend,” “elf,” “child,” “little sceptic,” “little niggard,” and “simpleton” (184-185, 192, 208, 217). During their engagement, Rochester continues to call Jane by possessive pet names as well as names with ‘little’ at the beginning. For example, when Jane accepts his proposal, he calls her “my little wife”; the next day, he addresses her as “my pale, *little elf*,” “my mustard-seed,” and “*little sunny-faced girl*” (*JE* 220, emphasis added). Each name refers to a small object emphasizing Jane’s petite feminine figure and her insignificance as an adult. According to Judith Wylie, in her article “Incarnate Crimes: Masculine Gendering and the Double in *Jane Eyre*,” Jane does not appeal to Rochester in her sexuality but in her lack of “womanly appearances: she is small and childlike” and wears plain Quakerish clothes, and Rochester calls her by these names because he does not see her as a woman but as a young girl (62). Her sexuality is not a threat compared to the once “tall, dark, and majestic” Bertha (*JE* 260), his mistress Celine Varens whom he calls a “Gallic sylph” (120), or the beautiful Blanche Ingram to whom he refers as “a strapper—a real strapper ... big, brown, and buxom” (187). However, the more Rochester becomes familiar with Jane, the more he is attracted to her, and his desire for a more intimate relationship grows stronger. At the end of the novel, when Jane and Rochester meet at Ferndean, Rochester never uses the adjective “little”; although Rochester continues to call her “my darling,” “my fairy,” and “my skylark,” he never says “little” (372, 374). Based on Wylie’s assertion, we might say that, once Rochester sees Jane as an intellectual and sexual woman, she ceases to be “little.”

Calling female significant others “children,” “girls,” or other diminutive names is not unique to the Brontës’ novels and is found in *Corinne, or Italy*, when Oswald describes Lucile; in *The Woman in White*, when Walter talks about Laura; and in *A Doll’s House*, when Helmer refers to Nora as a “child,” “little woman,” and “little Nora,” among the many other belittling pet names (Ibsen 5, 32, 36). The normalizing of such pet names demonstrates that this is an apparently accepted or, at least, conventional form of affection between lovers. Men are portrayed as dominant, possessive, and hyper masculine, while women are portrayed as meek and helpless. These opposing personality traits allow men to dominate women.

As Rochester and Arthur attempt to mold Jane and Helen into the role of an angelic, innocent, and meek woman through repeated associations with these images and qualities, they also attempt to shame them into foregoing their resoluteness by calling them monstrous pet names. However, this tactic backfires, and Jane’s and Helen’s writings prove their clarity, resolve, and respectful behavior in the face of the male characters’ efforts at control. After their engagement, Jane implores Rochester to allow everything to remain as usual, including their intimacy, her dress, and her occupation as governess. When Jane resists Rochester’s kisses and caresses, he resorts to vulgar pet names and violent behavior. Rochester tells her “‘it is your time now, little tyrant, but it will be mine presently: and when once I have fairly seized you, to have and to hold, I’ll just—figuratively speaking—attach you to a chain like this’ (touching his watch-guard)” (231). Rochester thinks he can exercise complete control over Jane after marriage because she will become his to have and to do with as he pleases. He then calls her a “capricious witch,” “a little bungler,” “thing,” “provoking puppet,” “malicious elf,” “sprite,” and “changeling,” thereby reinforcing the Victorian dichotomy of angel and monster (231-234). The abuse escalates from verbal to physical as Rochester begins to

demonstrate violent behavior: for, instead of caresses, Jane “got grimaces; for a pressure of the hand, a pinch on the arm; for a kiss on the cheek, a severe tweak of the ear” (234). In response to Rochester’s behavior, Jane remains resolute in her plan to keep him in check and not allow any improper affection before marriage. Jane’s emotional control when Rochester behaves ungentlemanly towards her momentarily gives her the upper hand in the relationship, compelling Rochester to resort to violence. Using these names, Rochester belittles Jane and attempts to cast a negative light on her character. However, Rochester’s exercise of such language to punish Jane ironically does the opposite. By trying to belittle her to make her seem inferior, Rochester proves his lack of culture and knowledge. Jane distinguishes herself through elevated language as she continues to refer to Rochester as “Mr. Rochester,” “master,” or “sir.” She does not call him by any pet names and rarely calls him by his first name.

Similarly, Arthur addresses Helen with vicious pet names in order to demean her and impugn her as a disobedient wife. These names included “vixen,” “slut,” “she tiger,” “hag,” and “witch” (*TWH* 133, 180, 217, 361). A vixen, for example, is a she-fox but also an ill-tempered, quarrelsome woman (OED). Arthur uses this pet name when Helen tries to break free from his grasp as he blocks her from getting a candle. When she makes desperate attempts to escape his grasp and cries “and I *will* go!,” Arthur remarks, “go then, you vixen,” all the while showing himself as the ill-tempered and querulous party in the relationship (*TWH* 133). He also calls her a “witch” when he receives letters from friends who are upset at his engagement, implying that Helen had bewitched him into the relationship (155). During the Victorian era, there was a shift in the definition of witches. Maureen Moran, in her article “‘Light No Smithfield Fires’: Some Victorian Attitudes to Witchcraft,” writes that someone who was called a witch was either a woman who asserted sexual and independent power over men or a woman who had fallen in society

and needed a man to bring her back into its fold (128). In the context Arthur uses “witch,” Helen seems to fall into the first category. By calling Helen a “witch,” Arthur claims that he committed himself to the relationship not of his own will but because he had no control over his actions in response to the charming Helen. The pattern issuing from these malicious pet names is thus that, whenever Helen challenges Arthur’s orders or wishes, he uses hateful pet names, indicating Helen’s disobedience and Arthur’s displeasure with his wife.

Helen’s resistance—by writing in her diary—to Arthur’s attempts to domesticate her, signifies her ability to be unaffected by the pet names he calls her. Although Arthur tries to belittle and dominate Helen with both affectionate and pejorative pet names, Helen fights against the derogatory rhetoric by demonstrating rationality, emotional stability, and, most of all, control over how she addresses her husband. When she discovers Arthur’s infidelity, she confronts him and tells herself, “I must see Arthur tonight, and speak to him; but I would do it calmly: there should be no scene—nothing to complain or to boast of to his companions—nothing to laugh at with his lady love” (259). Helen does not stoop to call Arthur pet names aloud and continues to address him respectfully as “Mr. Huntingdon,” “sir,” and “Arthur.” Whenever he flies into a fit of passion over her “hectoring” him or her attempts to improve his character, she responds in a calm and collected manner. Hysteria and lack of rationality—characteristics perceived as essential facts of women’s natures—are exhibited by Arthur, not by Helen. Helen proves to have the wisdom and the control not to allow her abusive husband to break her.

Like Helen, Jane also demonstrate resistance to the patriarchal culture of society by maintaining a composed demeanor while putting to paper her critical outlook at Rochester’s use of physical force, along with other behaviors and mannerisms. Rochester,

as mentioned previously, physically abuses Jane through a variety of small gestures, including pinching her and tweaking her ear. When Jane stands her ground to leave him, Rochester more violently seizes her arm, grasps her waist, and holds her with a painful grip; grinding his teeth, he says, ““never was anything at once so frail and so indomitable. A mere reed she feels in my hand!” (and he shook [her] with the force of his hold.) ‘I could bend her with my finger and thumb: and what good would it do if I bent, if I uptore, if I crushed her?”” (*JE* 271). However, Jane relays to the reader that, while she was physically “powerless as stubble exposed to the draught and glow of a furnace—mentally, [she] still possessed [her] soul” and, after he releases her, Jane retires to the door to “elude his sorrow” (*JE* 271). Although Jane writes while removed from the incident, it is vivid enough for her to recall her physical and emotional exhaustion at the time. During this event, Jane was able to keep possession of her senses while the male figure in the situation lost his.

Helen’s diary likewise provides evidence of Arthur’s physically abusive treatment towards Helen and of her strength of character within the relationship. Lisa Surridge, in her book *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction*, points out that Arthur’s violent backlash comes in response to Helen’s attempt to reform him and that such behavior was typical of a man reared in the time of the Regency era (1820-1830), where indulgences in alcohol, gambling, and even violence were presumed manly (75). While not explicitly stated in the novel, one can infer from the violent language, social indulgences, and cruel treatment of animals that abuse occurred in the home as well. According to Surridge, there is a clear correlation between animal abuse and domestic abuse, and she argues that Helen’s narrations of animal abuse, especially Arthur’s abuse of their pet dogs indicates physical and emotional abuse towards Helen (76). When Arthur throws a book at his spaniel, Dash, he injures Helen. Although the wound happens

accidentally, Surridge interprets the incident as an equation between Helen and the spaniel because they have the same abuser, and, most importantly, spaniels “are traditionally associated with the ‘feminine’ qualities of gentleness, submission, subservience—and a willingness to be beaten” (Surridge 77). There is a similar depiction of abuse in *The Woman in White*, where Sir Percival openly abuses both his spaniels and Laura, all which is permanently recorded in Marian’s diary. Helen’s “moral independence” and selfhood seems to incite in Arthur the need to use violence to subjugate his wife (Surridge 90). However, his efforts fail: the more Arthur acts out, the more unwavering Helen becomes in her refusal to succumb to the hypocritical social standards of a dutiful wife while her husband breaks every moral code.

While expected to smile in all they do and be obedient housewives who wait on their husbands, Jane and Helen demonstrate their inward resistance through writing. The female heroines show resistance to the patriarchal culture by writing about their feelings and about the habits and behaviors of the people around them, including those of the main male characters. One of the key windows these written texts provide into the thoughts of Jane and Helen is the writers’ view of the male characters as well as of those that associate with them. To Jane, Rochester’s face gave her great joy, but she could not forget his faults, as “[h]e was proud, sardonic, harsh to inferiority of every description,” and moody, and “his moodiness, his harshness, and his former faults” were associated with “cruel cross of fate” (125). Jane describes Rochester as “naturally a man of better tendencies, higher principles, and purer tastes than such as circumstances had developed, education instilled, or destiny encouraged” and as someone who, from her companionship, would perhaps become the man he could be (125). Helen also initially shares similar sentiments about Arthur, describing him as someone who would not “commonly [be] called a *bad* man: he has many good qualities; but he is a man without

self-restraint or lofty aspirations—a lover of pleasure, given up to animal enjoyments: he is not a bad husband, but his notions of matrimonial duties and comforts are not [her] notions” (*TWH* 206). She believes that his bad habits are due to the friends he keeps and his indulgent upbringing, and she wishes that her efforts would rid him of these negative qualities. However, while she resolves to “shut [her] eyes against the past and future,” “to love him when [she] can; to smile (if possible) when he smiles, be cheerful when he is cheerful, and pleased when he is agreeable … to bear with him, to excuse him, and forgive him,” as well as to do all in her power to save him from falling deeper into sin, his drinking habits and long days away from home aggravate her (228). Unfortunately, Helen absolves Arthur’s conduct by blaming other factors as causes of his behavior, including her inability to guide him. Helen must suppress her rage and frustration in order to be the wife she is expected to be and expects herself to be; instead of openly venting her anger and frustration, she uses her diary as a means of expressing those feelings.

Helen’s diary becomes a window into the ugly reality of abusive Victorian marriages and the Victorian laws that made it nearly impossible for women to escape such marriages. According to N.M. Jacobs, author of “Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” “in writing down her experience, [Helen] affirms its reality; by making visible the invisible, speaking her forbidden rage, she breaks out of her emotional prison” (213). In Helen’s case, by offering her diary to Gilbert, she provides society the opportunity to acknowledge the realities within Victorian homes and marriages that were too uncomfortable to discuss. Jacobs states that “reviewers attacked *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* on the grounds not of untruthfulness but of an unpleasant excess of truth, often using terms such as “morbid” and “unhealthy” to imply pathological interest on the part of the author” in experiences that should be ignored instead of written about (206). Contrary to the happily ever after endings of other

novels, Helen's diary gives Victorian readers a disappointing story of life after a seemingly happy marriage ceremony. Laura, in *The Woman in White*, also experiences and escapes an abusive marriage, only the reader never knows her account of the marriage except what Marian narrates. From *Wildfell Hall*, readers experience a firsthand account of a toxic marriage and both the means by which Helen escapes and her quality of life afterwards. This written dimension reveals a complex dynamic between the hidden and communicated thoughts concerning what is socially acceptable and desirable to disclose.

Although in direct speech Helen never speaks hatefully towards Arthur, this is not the case in writing. Helen uses the terms “villain” and “wretch” to describe Arthur in her diary, expressing feelings about her spouse that would be socially unacceptable to verbally or publicly express (*TWH* 295). In her diary, after Arthur’s return from London, Helen exclaims that she is “tired out with his injustice, his selfishness, and hopeless depravity,” and she discusses his hypocritical nature (226). She does speak these concerns to Arthur but in a milder manner than when she writes; it is only in writing that she releases her true feelings. What she expresses through writing and not through speech is her hatred towards her husband. In her diary she writes, “I hate him—I hate him!” (263). About his friend, Mr. Hargrave, she expresses the desire to “snub him” for annoying her “all day long with his serious, sympathizing, and (as *he* thinks) unobtrusive politeness” (263). She describes the society of her neighbors at Wildfell Hall as “unnecessary” and their “curiosity annoy[ing] and alarm[ing]” (335). In writing, Helen provides an unfiltered account of her thoughts of society and especially of the male figures around her, allowing the reader access to a woman’s perspective on topics about which she is always expected, by society, to express pleasure, including people’s companionship, her husband, her husband’s activities, and marriage. By equipping Helen

with the power of writing, Anne Brontë gives Helen a form of resistance that, even though Arthur reads Helen's diary without her permission, she continues to utilize to resist her oppressive husband and document her mistreatment. Her oppression finds liberation in her departure from his grasp through writing.

Jane's writing aims at the same effect of creating, among her readers, the awareness of the power and endurance of a woman's writing. As an autobiography structured completely from Jane's perspective, Brontë's framing gives Jane's words even greater power because Jane is in control of her narrative from the first word to the last, unlike Helen's which are narrated to the reader through Gilbert. Joan D. Peters states in her article, "Finding a Voice: Towards a Woman's Discourse of Dialogue in the Narration of *Jane Eyre*," that, "with the gift of speech, Jane is also given her story, for as she comes to understand the power of human utterance to represent human reality, so she is enabled to tell her life, to say to us, in effect, listen to my words, Reader—for the truth is in them" (218). Jane's autobiography presents to the reader what middle class women socially, physically, and mentally needed and desired. In her autobiography, Jane states that "[w]omen are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel ... they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation ... and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings" (93). She states that women should not be laughed at or condemned if they express the desire to seek knowledge or actively learn more than society expects them to know (93). Jane criticizes the Victorian culture that perpetuates domestic idleness in women and passionately states her belief that women are more than homemakers, wives, and mothers. When given the opportunity to become somewhat familiar with the Ingoldsby, she comments on the shallowness of society; through the Reeds and Lowood school, she points out the hypocrisy towards the

less fortunate; through Rochester and St. John, she illustrates the use of patriarchal superiority to dictate a woman's marriage and purpose in life. Thus, Jane uses her autobiography to pass commentary on society and express the needs and desires of women from a woman's perspective.

Helen and Jane's writings not only indicate their thoughts but the actions they took to counter the oppression they experienced. Jane stands up to Rochester when she feels he assumes her to be a plain girl with no feelings, she engages in battles of wits with him, she refuses his affections after they are engaged to be married, and she runs away when Rochester attempts to make her his mistress. Helen tries to correct Arthur's immoral manners through spiritual guidance and love; she slowly rids her son of the bad habits of drinking and foul language that Arthur and his friends teach him; and she paints to make enough money to run away from Arthur and maintain an income when living in Wildfell Hall. Both women demonstrate resilience when facing their companions, and they leave the men in their lives when they reach a crossroad between protecting themselves and giving into the indulgences of those companions. As a side note, Nora's departure from her home is not the same as Jane and Helen's. Nora chooses to leave to establish an identity for herself, while Jane and Helen escape due to morally compromising and safety reasons.

When Jane and Helen do return, they have the upper hand in the relationship because of their assertion of independent will as well as Rochester and Huntingdon's weakened state. Jane finds Rochester blind and dependent, awaiting Jane's return; Helen returns to Arthur who, at his deathbed, pleads for her forgiveness and prayers as she exhausts herself taking care of him till his moment of death. She controls the situation, instead of Arthur, whose life lies at her mercy and care. Both women demonstrate authority through both their writing and their actions. Even if only one person ever reads

their account of events, or those events are not acted upon, these diaries forever function as a form of active resistance.

The Brontë sisters' revolutionary genius creates powerful women who not only refuse to succumb to the verbal and physical abuse of their fiancés or husbands but also channel their emotions into written text. That text then exchanges hands, or are published, to cause a ripple in the seemingly unaware society. Helen hands Gilbert Markham her diary to show him “[she] was better than [he thought of her]” and rises from suffering alone to share her suffering at the hands of a cruel man and a hypocritical society that gave him the leeway to mistreat her (109). Unlike Marian’s diary, which may or may not have been shared willingly, Helen gives Gilbert her diary of her own volition after “hastily [tearing] away a few leaves from the end,” aware of the inclusion of intimate details of her life he will read. Gilbert chooses what is important to share and what is not, and, while it means there are parts of the diary we do not have access to, the reader is still aware of Helen’s opinions, feelings, and struggles (*TWH* 109). Similarly, even though Count Fosco hijacks Marian’s diary, her words remain her own. Through him, the diary’s words are amplified as they escape from the confines of its binding into the hands of many readers, and in the process, to us. Jane Eyre’s autobiography offers readers a first-hand account of a poor orphan girl’s journey through a harsh and unforgiving society, and her ultimate triumph as an independent, steadfast, and morally conscious young woman. As Ivan Kreilkamp states in his article, “Unuttered: Withheld Speech and Female Authorship in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*,” Charlotte Brontë uses her authorship to exercise social power, and her work demonstrates that the “interiority of writing therefore provides the means of a new form of publicity—a publicity obtained without showing one’s face or raising one’s voice” but through the medium of print (332). Readers witness true emotions through writing, consequently understanding that a woman exists as more

than a pretty creature who waits on her husband with no thoughts and feelings of her own.

The writings illustrate how previous and subsequent heroines such as Corinne and Marian wrote as independent thinkers, as capable of feeling injustice, love, and misery as any man. Helen's diary and Jane's autobiography expose the rift between social expectations of genders and the actual life lived within Victorian homes. Despite what society expects of Helen, she voices her happiness about Arthur's long departures away from home, her dislike of his friends and drinking habit, her doubts of him being a good father, and, finally, the physical and emotional torture of taking care of him before his death. Jane expresses her opinion of the shallowness of the upper class, the individuality of people regardless of their social position, and the struggle between love and moral duty. Where Arthur and Rochester try to domesticate Helen and Jane through pet names, the heroines resist by criticizing this domestication through their writing.

While I explore three forms of resistance, I argue that writing is the most effective because of its enduring impact for generations of readers. Although Jane, Helen, Corinne, and Marian resist a patriarchal culture through a significant amount of writing, Jane and Helen are the only ones to successfully overcome the oppressive culture. What differentiates Corinne's and Marian's resistance from Jane's and Helen's is the time frame and presentation of each character's writing. It is unclear whether Corinne and Marian allow their writings to be accessible to the public eye. Jane's and Helen's writings, however, are given in order to be read by others. Jane's autobiography is a published text and Helen gives Gilbert permission to tell her story to clear her name. Helen's and Jane's writings withstand time and generations of readers because their writings are preserved and replicated after the written events have passed, making their resistance successful.

Anne and Charlotte Brontë, in their novels *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Jane Eyre*, give a peek into a patriarchal culture that dictated the expected behavior of women. Huntingdon and Rochester verbally and physically manipulate Helen and Jane, and the authors deliberately bring up these manipulations to create an awareness of this treatment of women as acceptable in Victorian society. Through their writings and independent will, Helen Huntingdon and Jane Eyre fight a battle against female subjectivity and resist the expected cultural norm of submission and obedience. Their writings are not full of tedious details of dress and drama but convey a tale of heartbreak, resilience, and independence in both mind and body, and, in the end, they are in control of their narrative instead of men controlling their narrative.

## CONCLUSION

In Victorian fiction, writing is a form of resistance that gives women a voice in a society that does not. As previous chapters indicate, women were expected to raise morally upright and socially responsible children, keep the home a place of comfort for their families, wait upon their husbands, and, with a smile and happy demeanor, keep up with the social customs of dances, parties, and home visits. The female characters I have analyzed in this thesis attempt to resist the patriarchal culture in at least one of these three forms: speech, behavior, and writing. While all three enable the female characters to affect the environment around them, writing proves to have the strongest and longest lasting impact on society by documenting resistance and empowering those who read it. Resisting the patriarchy through writing allows women to document and expose Victorian society for what it is towards women: hypocritical, prejudiced, and subjugating. Those female characters that resisted the patriarchal norms of Victorian society through speech and behavior faced death, marginalization, or removal. Those who resisted primarily through writing established a permanent record of their resistance, in their own words, and, for the most part, ended their stories rising above the patriarchal culture that attempts to subjugate them. Although it is easy to draw a straight line between successful and unsuccessful instances of resistance, there is a lot of complexity in measuring success. While writing this thesis, I have concluded that, despite a female character's ending, writing is the most effective form of resistance. Corinne, Marian, Nora, and Helen are forced to give their private writings to the public for various reasons, including to provide evidence for a crime, to clarify some misunderstanding, or to divulge their past. Whether anyone reads these writings or not, these female characters succeed in their resistance because they have documented the reality of their lives: their fears, hopes, joys, and thoughts.

There are several approaches I can expand and focus on in future papers for closer reading. One approach I could take is taking one author, such as Charlotte Brontë or Wilkie Collins, reading all of their novels and analyzing how various female characters function within their novels and what the social implications are of their behavior, speech, and/or writing. Focusing on one author will help determine what specific social aspects certain writers were trying to tackle and the various ways they attempted to challenge them through their female characters. Another approach that could extend beyond the Victorian era would be to take an original Victorian text and a modern adaptation and compare and contrast the depiction of the female characters and their function within the novels and society at large. Looking at a certain social issue or resistance strategy and taking texts from various time periods would be another potential topic for future research. For example, I could take the idea of female characters writing themselves out of social constraints and analyze texts from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries that use that particular resistance strategy. Taking texts across time would provide a wealth of particular detail that would contribute to an understanding of the different approaches the writers would take across genres, literary movements, and social movements. The various approaches I can take with Victorian texts to further analyze for female resistance provide the opportunity to determine the power of women writing in fictional settings and their influence on real women's narrative.

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