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Knox, Marisa

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Identification Crises: Victorian Women and Wayward Reading

By

Marisa Knox

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Committee in Charge:

Professor Ian Duncan, Chair
Professor Catherine Gallagher
Professor Carla Hesse

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Abstract

Identification Crises: Victorian Women and Wayward Reading

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Marisa Knox

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In the Victorian period, no assumption about female reading generated more ambivalence and anxiety than the supposedly feminine facility for identifying with fictional characters and plots. Simultaneously, no assumption about women's reading seemed to be more axiomatic. Conservatives and radicals, feminists and anti-feminists, artists and scientists, and novelists and critics throughout the long nineteenth century believed implicitly in women's essential tendency to internalize textual perspectives to their detriment. My dissertation re-thinks the discourse of "crisis" over women's literary identification in opposition to increasing representation of what I call "wayward reading," in which women approached identification as a flexible capacity instead of an emotional compulsion. I argue that the constant anxiety expressed by Victorian writers about women's absorption in literature helped to reify irrational and involuntary identification as the feminine norm, even while accounts of women's elective reading response defied this narrative.

This study analyzes and contextualizes three major types of deliberately wayward reading in the Victorian era, which challenge the premises of gendered identification that often obtain in criticism and pedagogy today. The first chapter explores the imaginative license granted to women readers, as opposed to women writers, to identify with male subjects. While such literary identification with men was believed to bolster women's marital and relational sympathies, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* depicts an artistic form of masculine identification that, unlike marriage, preserves the integrity of female subjectivity. The second chapter examines the multiple crises prompted by the sensation genre about the representation of female characters, which mirror contemporary concerns about the representation of women sought by the burgeoning women's suffrage movement. I contend that the sensation novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon do not exploit the reader's "feminine" nerves, but rather facilitate morally conscious, elective identification. By the *fin de siècle*, a new crisis emerged over the possibility of women's under-identification with literature as a result of their increased access to higher education and professionalization. George Gissing's *New Grub Street* and *The Odd Women*, as well as the New Woman novels of Charlotte Riddell, Mary Cholmondeley, and George Paston, all engage with the concept of female literary detachment as a kind of morbid pathology: a trope that demonstrates how necessary emotional identification was and is for defining femininity.

The concluding chapter of the dissertation applies these examples of wayward reading and the empirical research of recent cognitive poetics and psychology studies to pedagogy, in order to recuperate identification as a learning technology in the modern classroom. I argue that understanding these historical contexts of reading response provides students with awareness of the flexibility of their own interpretive skills—their own capacity for wayward identifications—as well as a new way of examining the representation of reading in nineteenth-century literature.

Dedicated to the memory of my mother and perpetual inspiration, Valentina Palacios Knox
(December 12, 1949-September 28, 2009).

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Introduction

I therefore presume to tell your ladyship, with great confidence, that your writers have instituted a world of their own, and that nothing is more different from a human being, than heroes or heroines.¹

One never reads except by identification. But what kind? When I say identification, I do not say loss of self. I become, I inhabit. I enter. Inhabiting someone at that moment I can feel myself traversed by that person's initiatives and actions.²

Identification has a bad reputation. It's a messy term with overlapping meanings across multiple disciplines and fields: aesthetic and ethical philosophy, psychology, cognitive science, film and media studies, and literature. Even within literary studies, it has a plethora of definitions. Sometimes it's anathema to literary criticism, modified by derogatory words like "unsophisticated" and "naïve,"³ or more perniciously, "imperialistic and narcissistic."⁴ Occasionally it's edified by association with sympathy, as in "sympathetic identification," but then any distinctions between identification and sympathy dissolve into generalized emotional response. This dissertation provides an explanatory history for one broad strain of identification's representation as a gendered reading response, and traces an alternative history of identification as a deliberate, "wayward" practice.

The kind of identification I refer to in the dissertation title is actually secondary among definitions of "identification," the primary being the act of recognition ("Can you identify the suspect?"). This secondary definition is either explicitly or implicitly reflexive: the "state of being or feeling oneself to be closely associated with a person, group, etc., in emotions, interests, or actions; the process of becoming associated in this way."⁵ Many of the distinctions of identification in media studies describe the motivation for the association between identifier and identificand: attraction to or affective reaction to a character (parasocial interaction, e.g. "I love Heathcliff"), affinity (similarity identification, e.g., "I am like Heathcliff") with a character, or admiration for a character (wishful or aspirational identification, e.g., "I wish I were like Heathcliff").⁶ Sometimes these motivations coincide, sometimes not. Our "favorite" characters are not always those who bear resemblance to our past or imagined future selves.

The nature of the identificand is also heterogeneous. A reader claiming to identify with a character, Deirdre Lynch observes, blurs "crucial distinctions between a reader's empathy with who a character is and her empathy with what the character feels or does."⁷ The question is, do we identify with our sense of a character's *character* (which we might love, or admire, or see as similar to our own), or with a character's *position* or *perspective* in the text (which we might have experienced in our past or are merely able to imagine)? Relatedly, is identification a "feeling" or perception of association, or the participatory *act* of associating oneself imaginatively with a subject? If identification is an act, do we project ourselves with our own personal characteristics into a subject's position ("I am imagining myself in Heathcliff's shoes"), or are we momentarily suspending our own self-awareness to internalize the character's perspective ("I am Heathcliff")?

The sheer variety of phenomena attributed to "identification" has prompted criticism of the term itself as a meaningful signifier. Communication scholar Martin J. Barker disparages its "eel-like quality," and complains, "What is distinctive about 'identification' is its persistence,

and its hardly questioned status...It is just too convenient.”⁸ While “identification” both as concept and term has often been “questioned,” Barker is right to decry casual critical usage of the word as “little more than a synonym for ‘feeling engaged.’” Perhaps given my own orientation in literary studies, I am more comfortable with the slippery qualities of identification, seeing ambiguity in terms of multiplicity instead of obscurity. A recent cognitive science study of the phenomenon likewise hypothesizes that “thinking about identification as a monolithic concept may be misleading. Instead, identification is much more likely to comprise a complex of emotional and cognitive reactions and processes, any one of which may or may not occur in any given instance.”⁹ While I will delve further into the empirical research for how and why we identify in the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I also must acknowledge that the types of “association” between readers and texts are infinitely idiosyncratic.

Nevertheless, I contend that the existence of different kinds of identification does not negate the common underlying concept, though Barker, as well as film theorists like Noel Carroll, contests the accuracy of the *idea* as well as the terminology for describing aesthetic reception.¹⁰ At the same time, I do think it essential to distinguish the different strands of identification involved in reading, since, as Barker argues, “we may have here a concept that *benefits by remaining unclear*,” and has done so in the past in order to reinforce the ideology of “audiences’ *vulnerability*.”¹¹ My dissertation aims to expose the specific historical and cultural reasoning behind the complex rhetoric of identification, while addressing the above questions about its phenomenological aspects as a reading process.

A Very Brief History of Modern Identification

Identification with literature famously became a pathology in the early seventeenth century with Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, the first part of which spawned a counterfeit sequel as well as less brazen imitations like Charles Sorel’s *Le Berger extravagant*. Joseph Harris notes that *Don Quixote* and *Le Berger*’s *Lysis*, and, I would add, *Arabella*, the eponymous *Female Quixote* of the eighteenth century, are all eventually able to emerge from their insane or merely misguided literary identifications, whereas “the fate of *Emma Bovary* two centuries later reflects rather less optimism about the possibility of delineating an untrammelled ‘true self’ from the precedents set by fictional intertexts.”¹² Harris charts the “prehistory” of identification in the early Modern period, particularly as theorized in the writings of Pierre Corneille about audience “intérêt.”¹³ Corneille begins to consider pity instead of fear (Aristotle’s *Poetics* described the latter, not the former, as the feeling for “someone like us”) as a source of identification. This represents a shift from the “classical” model of identification described by Alain Ménéil as a process of rational, self-interested analogy (e.g., “the character is afraid in this situation; how would *I* avoid this outcome if I were in the same situation?”) toward emotional involvement on the character’s behalf through the vehicle of pity.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau originated the psychological, self-reflexive usage of the word “identification” in his “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality” in 1754.¹⁴ Rousseau uses “s’identifier” to denote a spontaneous mental activity that produces pity: “En effet, le commiseration sera d’autant plus énergique que l’animal spectateur s’identifiera plus intimement avec l’animal souffrant. Or il est évident que cette identification a dû être infiniment plus étroite dans l’état de Nature que dans l’état de raisonnement.”¹⁵ Identification as conceptualized by Rousseau is a natural capacity that is mitigated, not cultivated, by the reason, which engenders “l’amour-propre” that he opposes to identificatory sympathy. Rousseau thus defines identification as a primal impulse suppressed by philosophers and their ilk but still alive among

the presumably less civilized; according to Rousseau, “c’est la canaille, ce sont les femmes des halles qui séparent les combattants, et qui empêchent les honnêtes gens de s’entr’égorgé” in a riot or street brawl.

That this generalization soon proved inaccurate during the French Revolution exposes its inherent inconsistency. Rousseau evokes the tears of “les plus dépravées” at the theater for those characters whom they would victimize in reality as evidence of the human reserve of “la pitié naturelle” that is otherwise overwhelmed by the cruel imperatives of civilization.¹⁶ Yet the fact that this seemingly natural reaction is aroused by a cultural production and artificial construct instead of through interaction with actual persons betrays the slippage in Rousseau’s own equation of aesthetic identification and human sympathy. His paradigm of identification also betrays fissures in the connection between identification and imitation upon which the classical model of exemplum literature relies: identification with an artistic representation does not necessarily conduce to emulative behavior.

Still, the influence of the exemplum was perceived as ever greater in the eighteenth century because of literature’s progression from romance to realism. Samuel Johnson explained in a 1750 *Rambler* article:

[W]hen an adventurer is levelled with the rest of the world, and acts in such scenes of the universal drama, as may be the lot of any other man; young spectators fix their eyes upon him with closer attention, and hope, by observing his behaviour and success, to regulate their own practices, when they shall be engaged in the like part.

For this reason, these familiar histories may perhaps be made of greater use than the solemnities of professed morality, and convey the knowledge of vice and virtue with more efficacy than axioms and definitions. But if the power of example is so great as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will, care ought to be taken, that, when the choice is unrestrained, the best examples only should be exhibited; and that which is likely to operate most strongly, should not be mischievous and uncertain in its effects.¹⁷

At the same time that Johnson trumpets the increased effectiveness of literature for the purposes of moral didacticism, he also expresses wariness of its ability to circumvent rational consciousness, memory and will, “by a kind of violence.” Yet he does not oppose the use of similarity identification for stealthy indoctrination, but rather stresses the moral responsibility of authors—as opposed to readers—in furnishing worthy examples and demonstrating restraint in their own choices.

David Hume called “sympathy” the “chief sense of moral distinction,” and agreed with Johnson that it was more likely to occur with those who resemble us.¹⁸ Hume also adds “contiguity,” including consanguinity and acquaintance, as another contributing factor for sympathy, for “The stronger the relation is betwixt ourselves and any object, the more easily does the imagination make the transition, and convey to the related idea the vivacity of conception, with which we always form the idea of our own person.”¹⁹ The lesser the distance between the identifiand and ourselves, the easier the imaginative migration of their emotions to our minds: “the passions and sentiments of others” translate to “*our* mind as mere ideas, and are conceiv’d to belong to another person,” but are then “converted into the very impressions they represent, and that the passions arise in conformity to the images we form of them.”²⁰ In order to *feel* sympathy, as opposed to merely understanding the emotions of others, their emotions must

become our own property; for, as Hume explains, “Ourself is always intimately present to us.”²¹ Catherine Gallagher applies Hume’s theory to the new status of fictional characters, nobodies, as “uniquely suitable objects of compassion. Because they were conjectural, suppositional identities *belonging* to no one, they could be universally appropriated. A story about nobody was nobody’s story and hence could be entered, occupied, identified with by anybody.”²² For this purpose, characters are superior to other people, who obstruct our sympathies with their infinite particularity, which resists absorption into our intimately present selves. Other people have an inconvenient habit of intruding themselves upon one’s consciousness, whereas fictional characters seemingly can be stretched to fit human outlines. What Gallagher’s account of Hume calls “naïve identification” with literature is “ultimately egotistical”: sympathy with “nobodies” is really sympathy with ourselves, at the expense of actual “somebodies.”²³

Adam Smith’s treatment of sympathy, which begins his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, does not distinguish between “those heroes of tragedy or romance who interest us” and our “faithful friends” in eliciting our “fellow-feeling.”²⁴ D. Rae Greiner argues that Smith’s notion of sympathy avoids complete “fusion of self with other” (or Humean appropriation of other into self) and instead accomplishes “fellow-feeling” through a process of thinking about others: “imaginatively tracing their mental movements, reflecting upon the situations that give rise to their emotions, gauging the appropriateness of their feelings to their expressive contexts.”²⁵ Smith even conceives of a different species of “conditional sympathy,” a kind of shortcut to understanding someone’s feelings without actually imagining experiencing those feelings. In both types of sympathy, as Greiner observes, Smith “stresses the approximate likeness of my feelings and others’—not their interchangeability,” and thus preserves the boundaries between self and other.²⁶ Sympathizing in this manner, one need neither become passively absorbed, nor rapaciously absorb another into oneself.

Greiner connects Smith’s ideas of distanced sympathy to the ethical project of nineteenth-century realist fiction. George Eliot, who in her religious young womanhood concluded that “novels and romances” were “pernicious,” and she would “carry to [her] grave the mental diseases with which they have contaminated her,” would eventually proclaim fiction’s power to cultivate sympathy and thereby justify the penetrating influence warned against by Johnson.²⁷ She was continuing a pattern set in the eighteenth century, whereby “each generation of writers felt called upon to reform the genre...by encouraging an affective pulsation between identification with fictional characters and withdrawal from them, between emotional investment and divestment...to encourage new forms of identification that would annul the consequences of past overidentification.”²⁸ Gallagher cites the writings of Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth as originary examples of the ongoing recuperation of literary identification, which always seems to operate through a refining process in which excessive “overidentification” is separated from the morally redeemable and potentially redemptive qualities of rational sympathy. Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, for example, while containing a female quixote who must be educated out of the misapprehensions engendered by Radcliffian romances, also launches a spirited defense of the novel, citing Burney and Edgeworth’s works as exemplars. By the beginning of the Victorian era, the novel in general (as opposed to certain genres) was no longer in need of vindication, except among some very strict evangelicals,²⁹ and yet it secured its safe cultural berth through the ritual abjection of “bad” forms of identification. The continual injunctions against these types of identification in the nineteenth century worked to establish them as the normal, if not normative, practices of reading for women.

Donna Quixote and Gendered Overidentification

From Plato onward, emotionalism, overabsorption, passivity, and narcissism had been feared as the effects of literary identification. But beginning in the eighteenth century and established in the nineteenth century, these disparate effects were consolidated under the label of “feminine” reading. Robert Uphaus traces concerns about women’s vulnerability to identification with literature back to the seventeenth century, when Anglican minister Richard Allestree’s 1675 *The Ladies Calling* observed that “reading Romances, which seems now to be thought the peculiar and only becoming study of young Ladies,” exposes them to “amorous Passions” that are “apt to insinuate themselves into their unwary Readers, and by an unhappy inversion, a copy shall produce an Original.”³⁰ In the eighteenth century, the naïve woman seduced by literature—first romances, then novels—becomes, as Ina Ferris notes, a “trope” and a cliché. Ferris argues that the young female reader “came to function metonymically” for all new readers trying to access a new “culture of literacy.”³¹ The heroine of *The Female Quixote* follows her namesake of La Mancha in mistaking romances for reality, although Clara Reeve’s account of the book in *The Progress of Romance* as well as Henry Fielding’s contemporary review observe that romances were already passé reading material.³² But in spite of the generic anachronism, Fielding finds *The Female Quixote* to possess greater verisimilitude than *Don Quixote* in its female subject:

...as we are to grant in both Performances, that the Head of a very sensible Person is entirely subverted by reading Romances, this Concession seems to me more easy to be granted in the Case of a young Lady than of an old Gentleman To say Truth, I make no Doubt but that most young Women . . . in the same Situation, and with the same Studies, would be able to make a large Progress in the same Follies.

Fielding interprets the book as specifically directed at women by Lennox, “to expose all those Vices and Follies in her Sex which are chiefly predominant in Our Days.”

Although seemingly “there was hardly any crime, sin, or personalized catastrophe that injudicious reading was not held to cause directly or indirectly,” the focus of cultural anxiety had begun to shift from the more general perils of reading to its most likely victims: women.³³ In the constant association of women with misreading, delusive identification with fiction became less an amusing aberration than a vice or folly endemic to femininity. The ubiquity of this assumption is reflected in the ominous claim of Maria and Richard Edgeworth in *Practical Education*: “We know, from common experience, the effects which are produced upon the female mind by immoderate novel reading.”³⁴

The indictment of women’s identification rested on essentialist ideas of feminine emotionalism. Hume expressed great faith in women’s perspicuity in reading, except for “books of gallantry and devotion,” because, “as the fair sex have a great share of the tender and amorous disposition, it perverts their judgment on this occasion, and makes them be easily affected, even by what has no propriety in the expression or nature in the sentiment.”³⁵ Female emotions were characterized as especially liable to aestheticization, or enjoyment of feeling for feeling’s sake. The Edgeworths condemned “sentimental stories and books of mere entertainment” that cultivated this feminine preference for fictional over real objects:

...the species of reading to which we object, has an effect directly opposite to what it is intended to produce. It diminishes, instead of increasing, the sensibility of the heart; a combination of romantic imagery, is requisite to act upon the associations of sentimental people, and they are virtuous only when virtue is in

perfectly good taste...the imagination, which has been accustomed to this delicacy in fictitious narrations, revolts from the disgusting circumstances which attend real poverty, disease and misery; the emotions of pity, and the exertions of benevolence, are consequently repressed precisely at the time when they are necessary to humanity.³⁶

Adam Smith also observed a tendency of women's sensibility to diverge from ethical behavior. He distinguished "humanity" as a female virtue which, in opposition to male "generosity," "consists merely in the exquisite fellow-feeling" of the spectator and necessitates "no self-denial, no self-command, no great exertion of the sense of propriety."³⁷ This feminine "fellow-feeling" is fundamentally a sort of "selfishness," as Mary Wollstonecraft claimed in response, while acknowledging it as the "natural consequence of confined views."³⁸ According to Smith's conception of sympathy, the spectator feels him or herself in the *situation* of other people instead of feeling *with* the other people themselves, whose experience is ultimately unknowable; while masculine generosity spurs external action, feminine "humanity" is passively directed inward to the confined, knowable self.

Women's affective absorption in literature was not alarming because it deprived women of agency, but because it inflated their self-importance and sowed dissatisfaction. According to Laurie Langbauer, "One of the things male contemporaries of Lennox objected to about female quixotes was their pride, which prompted disobedience to fathers and imperiousness with lovers."³⁹ The female desires fed by fiction were supposed to have real-world consequences for men. The doctor who "cures" Arabella in *The Female Quixote* worries that she might have provoked men to violence by following the romantic example of a "haughty beauty, who sits a calm spectatress of the ruin and desolation, bloodshed and misery, incited by herself."⁴⁰ He then warns her, "It is impossible to read these tales without lessening part of that humility, which, by preserving in us a sense of our alliance with all human nature, keeps us awake to tenderness and sympathy, or without impairing that compassion which is implanted in us as an incentive of acts of kindness." Rather than quixotically transforming peasants into Dulcineas, female literary identification was thought to promote awareness of and unhappiness with the distinctions between fiction and life. The Edgeworths blame "Sentimental authors" for creating the expectation of coincident virtue and grace, and then "we are disappointed, almost disgusted, when we find virtue unadorned."⁴¹ Hortensius in Clara Reeve's *The Progress of Romance* complains that "A young woman is taught to expect adventures and intrigues...If a plain man addresses her in rational terms and pays her the greatest of compliments,--that of desiring to spend his life with her,--that is not sufficient, her vanity is disappointed, she expects to meet a Hero in Romance."⁴² The greatest folly of the female quixote is not tilting at windmills, but rejecting suitable marriage partners.

But affective identification was not to be quashed entirely, especially since it had come to define femininity. It would have to be channeled according to an external standard of propriety, which women could not be relied upon to possess. As the Edgeworths advised for girls' education, "peculiar caution is necessary to manage female sensibility."⁴³ If women lacked self-control in their identifications, their identifications *could* and perhaps *should* control them. In *The Progress of Romance*, Euphrasia argues that the new species of sentimental novel could steer identification in the right direction. When Hortensius bemoans the fact that women are writing copious letters in imitation of Samuel Richardson's epistolary heroines, Euphrasia replies, "Let the young girls bear the faults of the letters they write, let them copy Richardson, as often as they please, and it will be owing to the defects of their understandings, or judgments, if

they do not improve by him. We could not say as much of the reading Ladies of the last age” who perused “French and Spanish Romances, and the writings of Mrs. Behn, Mrs. Manly, and Mrs. Heywood [sic].”⁴⁴ Richardson takes up the writerly task assigned by Johnson of providing salutary examples for moral identification, as Euphrosia declares, “I should want no other criterion of a *good* or *bad* heart, than the manner in which a young person was affected, by reading *Pamela*.”⁴⁵ Literary identification with novels of courtship, unlike romances, could even prepare women for the affective investments of marriage instead of dooming them to dissatisfaction.⁴⁶

Discourse on the right and wrong ways for women to read continued to proliferate in the nineteenth century. The effects of identification were taken to be longer-lasting and wider-ranging in both benefits and perils. The crises that continually flared up about women’s reading over the course of the century helped to entrench passive, affective, misguided, egoistic identification as a typically female practice. As Ferris argues, the naïve female reader was transformed at this time from a trope to a seemingly pervasive reality. This codification of gendered reading styles (part of a larger rigidifying of gender categories)⁴⁷ was bolstered by medical and scientific studies that implied that women’s reading disposition was intrinsic, not encultured. Women were “naturally” supposed “to find it far easier than a man would do to identify with characters and incidents from her reading material.”⁴⁸ Eliot could make grand claims for the sympathy inspired by art, and also retain the “mental diseases” of the books that plagued her youthful mind: “When I was quite a little child I could not be satisfied with the things around me; I was constantly living in a world of my own creation, and was quite contented to have no companions that I might be left to my own musings and imagine scenes in which I was the chief actress.”⁴⁹

Eliot experienced identification as a withdrawal from reality into narcissistic fantasy. A new type of identification crisis arose over the course of the nineteenth century, however, in which readerly identifications could not be confined to the realm of romantic reverie. John Ruskin speaks in the gravest terms of the “sore temptation of novel-reading” for girls, which “we should dread.”⁵⁰ Even “the best romance becomes dangerous, if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act.” Ruskin sounds the familiar notes about identification with fiction fermenting discontent, but the “morbid thirst” for action being frustrated no longer threatened women’s further retreat into private life. Instead, it prompted incursions into new arenas beyond the “Queen’s gardens.” By 1894, a famous *Punch* cartoon depicts a bespectacled “Donna Quixote” (apparently half-Italian, half-Spanish) sitting ramrod straight, in a wide masculine stance, with a book brandished in one hand and a key in another. The accompanying verse explains:

You yearn—indefinitely—to Advance!
 You shake your latch-key like a lance!
 And shout, “In spite of babies, bonnets, tea,
 Creation’s heir, I must, I will be—Free!”

Donna Quixote is surrounded by New Woman books, including works by Mona Caird and Henrik Ibsen, but also the specters of various monsters she must vanquish, such as the dragon of decorum, the windmill of marriage laws, and a giant’s head labeled “Tyrant Man.” She is not languidly immersed in a fictional trance, but instead ready to do battle with real political and social concerns (however illusory *Punch* finds them). This type of identification with literature, which promotes action in addition to or even instead of emotion, is what I will call

“wayward reading,” because it strongly deviated from what “feminine identification” was assumed to be.

The idea that women are essentially inclined to be more empathetic, in life and fiction, has retained its currency in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from Carol Gilligan’s theory of a female “ethic of care” and description of women’s “narrative” view of moral dilemmas to the most recent empathy studies, which result in women reporting higher levels of cognitive and affective empathy.⁵¹ The negatives of this association have remained in circulation as well. In 1945, Edgar Bley, while advocating for identification’s recognition in education, expresses the old fear that certain types of wishful identification were ruining women for marriage:

The easy books, in which the identification is effortless and complete, achieve their ease through a wish-fulfilment structure. The reader identifies himself with a character that is neither real nor representative. Examples are obvious. The women’s magazines--from the love pulps to the slick ‘home-maker’s’ sheets--and the rental-library novels harp on one theme: every woman is beautiful, she is either rich or she will marry a rich man, and she will live happily ever after. The implication is always that marriage settles everything. The consequence of all this is our high divorce rate, the prevalence of neurotic wives, and the general scarcity of rich, happy marriages. The young wives are secretly dissatisfied with their husbands from the beginning, since they are not sufficiently handsome, wealthy, or socially successful.⁵²

Bley moves from a universal male reader to women as the “obvious” examples for misapplication of popular fiction to life. Female readers’ discontent was apparently responsible for the collapse of the social fabric. For a much more recent example, women’s appetite for the “Twilight” series of books is often attributed to ease of identification and wish fulfillment for “love that has been denied to them” in reality.⁵³

The stereotype of women’s readerly identification as a symptom of self-involvement also refuses to die. Suzanne Keen sees that phenomenon in her own surveys of English students in *Empathy and the Novel*; the empathetic reactions to texts demonstrated more consistently by her female students in no way formed a direct indicator of potential compassionate action. The critic Rachel Brownstein’s *Becoming a Heroine* assumes as its central premise that women of the late twentieth century readily identify with nineteenth-century heroines, having drawn upon her personal experience as well as Sigmund Freud’s “On Narcissism” to reaffirm the narcissistic tendencies of women to recognize and adore themselves in idealized fictional form.

Identification Crises

Modern critiques of identification, as dissimilar and occasionally inconsistent as they are, possess forebears in the Victorian era’s explicit disapproval and tacit endorsement of stereotypically female reading practices. Within literary criticism, genres and modes of response associated with women, such as the American sentimental tradition, have continually been dismissed.⁵⁴ Identification’s feminine connotation of spontaneous emotional response placed it in opposition to reasoned and deliberate analysis.⁵⁵ While some critics such as Janice Radway and Sally Mitchell expose the culturally constructed associations between feminized sentimentalism and devalued, “popular” literary culture, others disavowed any claim to an objectivity of their own.⁵⁶ Feminist criticism of the 1980s often predicated itself upon the situatedness of the female or female-sympathetic reader in approaching texts, whether in “conversation” with a female author or in an “emancipatory struggle” with a male author.⁵⁷

Instead of reading “like” a woman—passively and irrationally—they would read consciously “as” women.⁵⁸ Identity politics and cultural studies initially defined themselves in opposition to the privileging of detachment, which was seen as the province of elitist groups.⁵⁹

Identification’s number-one place in Michael Warner’s roster of “uncritical” reading attitudes (“identification, self-forgetfulness, reverie, sentimentality, enthusiasm, literalism, aversion, distraction”) owes itself to its association with emotional response (e.g., sentimentality and enthusiasm).⁶⁰ The classical opposition between reason and passion, however much empirical research confirms that emotion is inseparable from cognition, is still axiomatic. Although affect now constitutes its own field in literary scholarship, it retains its connection to the fallacies abjured by New Criticism. For W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, emotional response cannot lead one through inductive reasoning toward its textual cause; instead, it is a distraction from the text itself, in which no emotion inheres, into the irrelevant relativism of personal psychology.⁶¹ Certainly, if one were to imagine oneself undergoing the same tribulations as a character’s, as opposed to imagining oneself as the character undergoing those tribulations, one’s “personal distress” is liable to make one avoid the source instead of engage with it.⁶² Wimsatt and Beardsley see emotional identification with literature as a movement *away* from the text instead of a self-forgetful immersion within it. Emotion is personal and self-interested, but reason somehow is not. Reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss, however, saw identification with a text as a movement *away* from self and the rest of the world toward the kind of critical neutrality that Wimsatt and Beardsley prize: “One’s disposition to enjoy an aesthetic object presupposes the negation of everyday life. The acting subject must first become a spectator, listener, viewer, or reader in order to achieve that attitude of disinterested approval which enables him to reify the object of aesthetic awareness and so allows him to identify himself with what is being presented, or with the hero.”⁶³ For Jauss, objectivity and identification are not mutually exclusive practices, but rather sequential phases in the process of reading both receptively and actively.

The Kantian position of “disinterested approval” that Jauss sees as a prerequisite for identification received its own critique from Marxists who located ideology *within* the imaginary space of the text as well as the “everyday life” from which the identifier dissociates.⁶⁴ Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey translated Louis Althusser’s concept of “interpellation” of subjects by state apparatuses to the mechanism by which “the ideological effects of literature . . . materialize via an identification process between the reader or the audience and the hero or anti-hero, the simultaneous constitution of the fictive ‘consciousness’ of the character with the ideological ‘consciousness’ of the reader.” While sustaining the illusion of a reader’s inviolate individuality, literary identification achieves the “reproduction, as dominant, of the ideology of the dominant class” within him or her.⁶⁵ As in the psychoanalytic model, which I will describe below, the reader’s subjectivity is constructed by identifications, but the process is not only unconscious but passive. The alternative aesthetic, Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdung* or “alienation effect,” forces a similarly passive reader into self-conscious distance.⁶⁶

Yet passivity is part of the ideology inculcated by hegemonic identification and condemned by these theorists. Literary escapism either lulls the reader into an apathetic complacency, or it exhausts his or her emotional resources at the expense of the outside world.⁶⁷ In both circumstances, identification disables the reader from addressing the systematic injustices being perpetrated outside the reading bubble. We are oblivious, self-satisfied, or emotionally exhausted by identifying with fictional characters. Even though “the very imaginative labor” of engaging with texts is fundamentally and morally different from helping actual people, somehow

these activities draw from the same reserve of energy.⁶⁸ Mary Catherine Harrison calls this the “zero sum game” theory of imagination, which she counters with the research of social psychologist C. Daniel Batson on empathy’s positive influence on altruistic attitudes (if not actual behavior).⁶⁹

There is also a species of identification conceptualized as active, but perniciously so. In this variety, the reader identifies in order to colonize the experience of others and aggrandize the self.⁷⁰ The aggression of such identification lies in its suppression of the identificand’s difference—either by ignoring it or replacing it with the image of the egoistic identifier. As a result, as Regenia Gagnier rejoins to Rorty’s claims for expanded empathy from literary engagement: “what ‘we’ get from literature is not an expanded ‘we’ but more of the same old ‘us.’”⁷¹

Identifying identification

In contrast with Gagnier’s account, the definition of identification that has the most empirical support is that of media scholar Jonathan Cohen, who describes it as “internalizing a point of view rather than a process of projecting one’s own identity onto someone or something else.”⁷² Identification is thus distinct from what philosopher Peter Goldie calls “in-his-shoes imagining,” which “involves the narrator having a mixture of my own characterization and some of his.”⁷³ Cohen locates identification in the process of adopting a character or narrator’s perspective, instead of adopting a perspective *on* or *about* a character or narrator, which would necessitate a distanced stance: “To compare one’s self, or to feel close to a character, one must be positioned outside the text as a spectator, rather than imagining one’s self inside a textual reality.”⁷⁴ Regarding identification as a kind of active metaphor instead of a simile relieves it of the resemblance requirement; that is, the identificand need not initially remind the identifier of him or herself. While similarity can motivate identification, identification does not depend on similarity to occur, nor does it consist of a perception of similarity. Without the similarity requirement, possibilities for identification expand to include that which is not immediately recognizable or self-referential.

Critics of identification often overstate its all-absorbing power, even though it is temporary and, according to John Frow, “typically diffuse.”⁷⁵ The array of possible identifications in a text corresponds with the flexibility of identification, both in terms of its objects and its degree. Reader-response theorist Wolfgang Iser’s notion of the reader’s “wandering viewpoint” among the perspectives offered by a text captures the sheer multiplicity of identifications commonly experienced by an engaged reader. Identification is often represented as one end of a scale of involvement, with spectatorship on the other end. At the optimal aesthetic midpoint proposed by Thomas Scheff, “the reader both experiences emotions, and can reflect upon them, in order to assimilate their meanings.”⁷⁶ Cognitive scientist Keith Oatley sees identification as part of a fluctuating reading experience, where we continually “move in and out along the continuum of emotional distance.”⁷⁷ Other empirical research suggests that reader involvement with and distance from fictional characters can occur simultaneously, or “in parallel.”⁷⁸ As philosopher Amy Coplan explains, our brains are capable of multi-tasking, and identification is no exception: “In the process of empathy, the empathizer simulates the target’s experiences without losing the ability to simultaneously experience his or her own separate thoughts, emotions, and desires.”⁷⁹

Identification and self-consciousness are therefore not mutually exclusive. Or, if we take Oatley’s view, we alternate between these different positions in rapid succession instead of

becoming “lost” in “complete absorption, or a trance-like state.”⁸⁰ Iser theorized that reading is a continual process of “selection” among “textual perspectives.”⁸¹ Yet even those who see identification as an active process often question whether it can be “conscious and controllable.”⁸² Elaine Scarry distinguishes the “voluntary” daydream from the “steady stream of erased imperatives” that the literary reader presumably obeys in order to simulate perception.⁸³ Narratologist Patrick O’Neill counters that the reader, “both implied and real” must be “an ‘agent’ of focalization” because “she has to decide” where that focalization should be directed in the text.⁸⁴ Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon, on the basis of psychological experiments, allow the reader even more discretion in that “the agent of focalization should properly be understood as being a construction in the mind of the reader,” not the text, which provides the foundation.⁸⁵ Where the text does not explicitly narrate a certain perspective, readers are capable of deliberately creating one.

Identification is perhaps most in need of clarification in terms of its distinction from sympathy and empathy, with which it is often used interchangeably. Sympathy and empathy are already confusingly related, since “empathy” is a relatively recent coinage for a concept that would have been conflated with sympathy in prior centuries. Psychologist Edward Titchener translated *Einfühlung* from Theodor Lipps’s *Aesthetik* into “empathy,” which he defined as “*the ‘feeling’ of our own concernment in the imagined situation.*”⁸⁶ Sympathy was then able to be distinguished from empathy as a seemingly more distanced form of emotional response that does not internalize the other’s state of mind. In a dramatically ironic scenario, for example, the sympathizer might see a character oblivious to a looming tragedy and fear for him, even though the character experiences no anxiety. Sympathy might also involve a species of in-his-shoes imagining. Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* famously and vividly illustrates the projective nature of sympathy with “the imaginary resentment which in fancy we lend to the dead, who is no longer capable of feeling that or any other human sentiment. But as we put ourselves in his situation, as we enter, as it were, into his body, and in our imaginations, in some measure, animate anew the deformed and mangled carcass of the slain, when we bring home in this manner his case to our own bosoms, we feel...an illusive sympathy with him.”⁸⁷ Identifying or empathizing with a corpse, on the other hand, would be more difficult, if not outright impossible, unless the corpse were supernaturally sentient. Otherwise, one would have to paradoxically think oneself into non-thinking, feel oneself into non-feeling.

Empathy, which relies on the adoption of another’s perspective, is a form of identification, but not all identification involves empathy. Empathy etymologically and connotatively contains *pathos*, feeling or emotion. Identification, however, is more capacious, encompassing the internalization of rational and emotional points of view, thinking and feeling (physically and psychologically).⁸⁸ At least at first encounter with a subject, it is usually easier for one to experience non-affective identification before one is able to feel empathy.⁸⁹

Pointing out the non-congruence of identification with empathy relieves it of empathy’s burden of ethicality or non-ethicality, which sympathy shares. Empathy was originally used in an aesthetic as opposed to interpersonal context, but now along with sympathy it is used to justify engagement with fiction as a pathway either to or from human interaction. That is, empathy and sympathy with characters are often analogized to empathy and sympathy with actual people in order to try to explain the “paradox of fiction”: why we care about fictional constructs *as though* they were real.⁹⁰ Those fictional constructs are also often seen as a kind of training ground for moral behavior in the real world. Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty are recent proponents of this storied idea, which was famously championed by Eliot in “The Natural History of German

Life,” as well as the nineteenth-century American sentimental novel.⁹¹ Leaving aside the philosophical debate as to whether the emotions we feel for fictions are *real* emotions,⁹² the primary beneficiaries of those emotions are not real and not capable of reciprocating. The cognitive processes for understanding theory of mind for both characters and people are similar, but not identical.⁹³ Empathetic and sympathetic responses to art are “pre-ethical,” not in themselves ethical, behavior,⁹⁴ and their tendency to promote such behavior (necessarily subsequent to the moment of reading) has not been substantiated.⁹⁵ Furthermore, the nature of aesthetic response is itself unpredictable, especially given the mobility of identification. As Nussbaum herself observes, we can empathize with immoral characters doing immoral things.⁹⁶

Freud put forward identification as a more “scientific” account of self-other relations, without the normative connotations of sympathy.⁹⁷ Psychoanalytic identification is a process of internalization, “whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other,” but instead of occupying a temporary vantage point, the subject “is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified.”⁹⁸ Identification is thus the crucial, but complex mechanism by which *identity*, including gender identity, is formed. As Eve Sedgwick explains, “To identify *as* must always include multiple processes of identification *with*. It also involves identification *as* against.”⁹⁹ Freud’s account of identification as an aesthetic response, however, is more simplistic, consisting of wishful identification from “a poor wretch to whom nothing of importance can happen” who can “*identify himself* with the hero” in a play.¹⁰⁰ While psychoanalytic theory has expanded its conception of aesthetic identification as more “multi-faceted” in its engagement,¹⁰¹ “the unconscious plays a formative role” in its primary model of identification.¹⁰² The emphasis on the unconscious in psychoanalytic theory departs most radically from the volitional capacity of aesthetic identification I described above. Unconscious identification’s evasion of “rational scrutiny” helps “make it something to be feared.”¹⁰³ Although what Harris refers to as “psychoanalysis’s theoretical stranglehold on identification” has begun to relent,¹⁰⁴ the idea of identification as a subconscious incorporation of an external model has much deeper historical roots, which form the basis of persistent critical problems with identification, particularly in literary studies.¹⁰⁵

Wayward Identification

The binary terms often used by critics to designate different methods of reading are not so subtly indicative of familiar gender typologies: disinterested vs. narcissistic, active vs. passive, dominant vs. submissive, rational vs. emotional. The extremes, as usual, of reader types are unhappy, veering on a Victorian spectrum between *Vanity Fair*’s sneering Jones at his club underlining the book’s “foolish twaddling” and Amelia Sedley crying “over the end of a novel were it ever so stupid.”¹⁰⁶ Kate Flint, for instance, argues in “Women, Men and the Reading of *Vanity Fair*” that Thackeray’s apostrophes to the reader privilege the “masculine,” detached reader over the “feminine” reader who becomes emotionally involved with books.¹⁰⁷ This, however, does not entirely explain the contemporary popularity of Becky Sharp, who ends the first chapter by tossing a book (Johnson’s *Dictionary*, to be just) out of a carriage window, or the classification of Amelia as an unsympathetic heroine by certain women readers depicted by the author as the serialization progressed.¹⁰⁸ Reader response to and within this Victorian novel and others does not adhere so strictly to our own expectations of nineteenth-century gender ideology, which I argue are based on the predominant discourse of crisis around female literary identification. Wayward identification, however, has been largely overlooked.

I use the term “wayward,” meaning “capriciously wilful; conforming to no fixed rule or principle of conduct; erratic” to denote the simultaneously deliberate and unpredictably multi-directional nature of this kind of identification.¹⁰⁹ It’s also a way of categorizing a type of reading that is individually particular and subjective, without falling into the relativism of infinite reader standpoints.¹¹⁰ I define wayward reading as the active practice of conscious, elective identification with literature, which in itself departs from beliefs about feminine reading conditioned and reinforced by the anxious rhetoric of female quixotism.

Wayward reading owes much to feminist and queer theories of strategically deviant reading: the “resisting reader,” polar reading, oppositional reading, errant reading, disidentification, and cross-identification.¹¹¹ Judith Fetterley’s “resisting reader,” for example, takes a feminist standpoint that refuses to adopt the chauvinist perspectives of male narrators, authors, or characters.¹¹² Disidentification and cross-identification similarly involve “a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere,” but also a “contribut[ion] to the function of a counterpublic sphere”¹¹³ through deliberate performance of “nonlinear and nonnormative modes of identification.”¹¹⁴ Lesley Goodman’s idea of “rebellious identification,” though less overtly political, entails affective identification with characters that defies perceived authorial intent. It seems to me that “rebellious” in this case is a misnomer, since Goodman contends that identifying with the ostensibly unsympathetic Arabella in *Jude the Obscure* is “choosing the possibility of choice” among “the series of possible positions and perspectives that texts make available to readers and that readers bring to texts.”¹¹⁵ Selecting amongst an array of choices offered by the text hardly seems like a rebellious act, especially from a modern reader. In the Victorian period, however, women choosing identifications—however ideologically conservative their objects or texts—was wayward in relation to the rule of “feminine reading.”

My project thus posits a “willful and instrumental subject,” who, according to Judith Butler’s disavowal of the same, “seems to be quite opposed” to being culturally determined, “its existence [] already decided by gender.”¹¹⁶ Yet I am interested in how that subject is culturally determined, especially through its identifications with literature, which can be conscious and voluntary, temporary or intermittent as well as permanent. However personal and private one’s identifications, interaction with texts is participation in a larger cultural dialogue, and for Victorian women it constitutes a potential counterpublic.¹¹⁷ Along with Lois McNay, I wish to explore the possibilities for active “self-interpretation” within the discursive framework, instead of the “subjection” of the subject to discursive formation.¹¹⁸

While literary theorists have often speculated on the effects of literary identification, empirical studies are adducing evidence of narratives’ influence on our character and beliefs through simulation of other perspectives.¹¹⁹ Cognitive psychologist Keith Oatley has conducted numerous experiments on identification, which he calls “one of the functions of fiction,” and describes as “inviting” as opposed to manipulating or coercing the reader into “changes of selfhood.”¹²⁰ Such changes can “accumulate, and the reader can become more flexible” the more he or she reads; that is, the habitual reader is better able to adapt to his or her reading.¹²¹

Habitually wayward readers, conscious of their adaptations, can collectively form a “nexus of practice” within a “discourse community.”¹²² Though Terry Lovell reminds us that “individual agency is not necessarily aligned with resistance,” nor is resistance in itself always “effective,” I argue that literary identification in the Victorian period could and did unite women in imaginative affiliations that they translated into political participation and social activism. However much the domestic novel established subjectivity in that age as emphatically feminine, domestic, and non-political,¹²³ the expansiveness of identification allowed for a way out into the

world. For women readers in the nineteenth century, identification could operate in “liberatory or life-enhancing,” as well as conservative or hegemonic ways.¹²⁴

My next three dissertation chapters explore different ways in which women in the Victorian era approached identification as a flexible capacity instead of an emotional compulsion. I examine wayward reading both intratextually (the portrayal of characters identifying within narratives) and extratextually (the ways in which narratives solicit readers’ identification). Each chapter places examples of wayward reading within the context of culturally generated “crises” about identification that through sheer iteration served to naturalize modes of “feminine reading.” These crises of quixotism coincide with monumental historical changes taking place in the legal, political, educational, and professional status of women: changes that identification helped women to imagine and then enact.

“Masculine Identification and Marital Dissolution” uses Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* as a focal text to contrast the criticism leveled in the Victorian period against women authors who deployed conventionally masculine styles or subject matter with the comparatively fluid identification across gender lines expected of women as *readers*. In conduct guides and Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies* lectures, women were exhorted from girlhood to prepare for the experience of absorbing themselves into their husbands’ identities by exercising their readerly sympathies with male characters and masculine activities. Written during the debates surrounding the reform of marriage law that would continue through the end of the century, and published on the eve of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, *Aurora Leigh* depicts a different kind of identification that does not involve the complete dissolution of self. Instead of identifying herself with her future husband, an action she associates with self-erasure, Aurora models an identification with male poetic muses that allows her to maintain her integrity as an artistic subject.

“Novels without Heroines: Sensation and Misidentification,” examines the genre of sensation fiction amidst concurrent efforts to introduce women’s suffrage into the Ballot Act of 1872. Sensation novels inspired much critical hand-wringing through their depiction of antiheroines and villainesses who supposedly imperiled the morality and femininity of the female reader who identified with them, seemingly against her will. Recent critics such as D. A. Miller also tend to accept sensation’s self-advertisement as eliciting a reflexive, psychosomatic response from its female readers. I depart from such readings in my analysis of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s novels, which finds that the most offensive aspect of sensation fiction was the self-consciousness it encouraged in its readers by prompting their awareness of and resistance to the narrative’s ostensibly prescribed affinities. Braddon’s narrative technique of withholding total access to the consciousness of her various anti-heroines in *Lady Audley’s Secret*, *Aurora Floyd*, and *John Marchmont’s Legacy* encourages a readerly dynamic that does not discourage identification with morally dubious characters but continually thwarts complete absorption within them. In *The Doctor’s Wife*, Braddon revises *Madame Bovary* in order to emphasize the possibility of elective identification, as her heroine Isabel imagines herself as a diverse retinue of literary and historical figures, from Shakespeare to Dickens, and still maintains her moral independence. I thus contend that sensation fiction caused a scandal not because it corrupted impressionable female readers with its content, but rather because it challenged the idea of women’s automatized emotionalism and promoted their rational and ethical autonomy, directly opposing the premises held by the anti-suffragists.

After more than a century of overt concern with the management of wayward female identification, a new cultural anxiety developed about the woman who under-identifies, that is,

refuses or is simply incapable of a feminine standard of emotional identification with literature. My fourth chapter, “‘The Valley of the Shadow of Books’: The Morbidity of Female Detachment,” focuses on the expression of this anxiety in the New Woman novels of the *fin de siècle* and George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* and *The Odd Women*. Across a wide range of sources, from medical treatises to humor magazines, Victorian commentators blamed women’s apparent detachment from literary identification on the professionalization of reading, and attributed its symptoms to a kind of sickness or blighted fertility. Modern feminist critics in turn have largely reiterated a late Victorian rhetoric of morbidity and sterility in characterizing these female novelists’ dearth of aesthetic creativity in fictionalizing their own experience. The still-pervasive pathologization of women’s possible dissociation from emotional investment in literature indicates the usefulness of the idea of readerly identification in fortifying the boundaries of gender categories.

The concluding chapter of the dissertation, “The New Crisis: Can We Teach Identification?” applies these historical examples of wayward reading to pedagogical praxis. It examines recent psychological studies of how modern readers self-report their identificatory experiences, and how such readers’ interpretation of these experiences remains conditioned by originally Victorian rhetoric and assumptions. The chapter closes with examples and suggestions of ways in which to counter these embedded expectations of identification, especially in surmounting stereotypes of gendered response, through teaching students to deploy “wayward identification” deliberately as a critical method and a way into the text that they can direct themselves.

¹ Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote; or, The Adventures of Arabella* (London: C. Cooke, 1820), 2:265.

² Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), 148.

³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002), 116.

⁴ Elin Diamond, “The Violence of ‘We’: Politicizing Identification,” in *Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2007), 403.

⁵ *OED Online*, s. v. “identification, n.,” accessed April 6, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/90995?redirectedFrom=identification>

⁶ Reception theorist Hans Jauss named several categories of identification possible with a literary hero: “admiring,” “associative,” “cathartic,” “sympathetic,” and “ironic.” Hans Robert Jauss, “Levels of Identification of Hero and Audience,” trans. Benjamin Bennett and Helga Bennett, *New Literary History* 5, no. 2 (1974): 297.

⁷ Deidre Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 10.

⁸ Martin J. Barker, “The Lord of the Rings and ‘Identification’: A Critical Encounter.” *European Journal of Communication* 20, no. 3 (2005): 375, 358.

⁹ Maria Kotovych, Peter Dixon, Marisa Bortolussi, and Mark Holden, “Textual Determinants of a Component of Literary Identification,” *Scientific Study of Literature* 1, no. 2 (2011).

¹⁰ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 95-6.

¹¹ Barker, 354. Barker refers specifically to the reaction to nineteenth-century “penny dreadfuls” as an example.

¹² Joseph Harris, “Introduction,” *Nottingham French Studies* 47, no. 3 (2008): 7. Still, Don Quixote only regains his grasp on reality on his deathbed. He re-enters the “real” world only when he is about to leave it for the next world.

¹³ Harris, “Corneille and Audience Identification,” *The Modern Language Review* 104, no. 3 (2009): 660.

¹⁴ Harris points out, however, that the active sense of “s’identifier” did not appear in the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* until 1835, where it was used as a poetic recommendation: ‘Un poete doit s’identifier avec les personnages qu’ il fait agir et parler.’” Harris, “Introduction,” 4.

¹⁵ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Political Writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, ed. C. E. Vaughan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 1:162.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁷ Samuel Johnson, *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Dearborn, 1834), 1:18.

¹⁸ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning Into Moral Subjects; and Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (London: Longmans, 1909) 2:371, 112.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

²² Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 168.

²³ *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁴ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments; or, An Essay Towards an Analysis of the Principles by Which Men Naturally Judge Concerning the Conduct and Character, First of Their Neighbors, and Afterwards of Themselves* (London: Strahan, 1774), 4.

²⁵ D. Rae Greiner, “Thinking of Me Thinking of You: Sympathy Versus Empathy in the Realist Novel,” *Victorian Studies* 53, no. 3 (2011): 419.

²⁶ Smith, 19; Greiner, 419.

²⁷ George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon Sherman Haight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 1:22.

²⁸ Gallagher, xvii-xviii.

²⁹ William B. Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684-1750* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998), 14.

³⁰ Robert W. Uphaus, “Jane Austen and Female Reading,” *Studies in the Novel* 19, no. 3 (1987): 336; Richard Allestree, *The Ladies Calling, by the Author of The Whole Duty of Man*, 5th ed. (Oxford, 1675), 164-65. Allestree’s account anticipates Hume’s contagion model of sympathy.

³¹ Ina Ferris, “From Trope to Code: The Novel and the Rhetoric of Gender in Nineteenth-Century Critical Discourse,” in *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History, and the Politics of Gender*, ed. Linda Shires (New York: Routledge, 1992), 20. See also Ann Jones, *Ideas and Innovations: Best Sellers of Jane Austen’s Age* (New York: AMS Press, 1986), 27.

³² Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance and The History of Charoba, Queen of Aegypt* (New York: The Facsimile Text Society, 1930) 2:6; [Henry Fielding], "Proceedings of the Censorial Court of Enquiry," *The Covent-Garden Journal* 1, no. 14 (April 20, 1752): 55.

³³ Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 8.

³⁴ Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Practical Education* (Boston: S. H. Parker, 1823), 213.

³⁵ Hume, "Of Essay Writing," in *Philosophical Works of David Hume*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: A. Black and W. Tait, 1826), 551-52.

³⁶ Edgeworth and Edgeworth, 213.

³⁷ Smith, 274.

³⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (New York: A. J. Matsell, 1833), 207.

³⁹ Laurie Langbauer, "Romance Revised: Charlotte Lennox's 'The Female Quixote.'" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 18, no. 1 (October 1, 1984): 47.

⁴⁰ Lennox, 266.

⁴¹ Edgeworth and Edgeworth, 191-92.

⁴² Reeve, 78. Johnson also writes of an "Imperia," who, "having spent the early part of her life in the perusal of romances, brought with her into the gay world all the pride of Cleopatra; expected nothing less than vows, altars, sacrifices." Johnson, 1:181-82.

⁴³ Edgeworth and Edgeworth, 191.

⁴⁴ Reeve, 138. "For Reeve, Richardson reorients the spontaneous reader identification that worried the moral critics of the novel. In her view, none had demonstrated more clearly than Richardson had a morally improving emulation could be promoted." William Warner, 13.

⁴⁵ Reeve, 135.

⁴⁶ "Learning to hold and release nobody's sentiments by reading fiction, therefore, could easily have helped women conform their emotional lives to the exigencies of property exchange. The marriageable woman could then become an abstract variable, an emotional potential who occupied many different, but never quite 'real,' sentimental states in turn." Gallagher, 194.

⁴⁷ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: a Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 21; Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), 57.

⁴⁸ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 38. See also Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

⁴⁹ Eliot, 22.

⁵⁰ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (New York: Wiley, 1872), 100.

⁵¹ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 74, 19; P. C. Vitz, "The Use of Stories in Moral Development. New Psychological Reasons for an Old Education Method," *The American Psychologist* 45, no. 6 (1990): 714; Darrick Jolliffe and David P. Farrington, "Development and Validation of the Basic Empathy Scale," *Journal of Adolescence* 29, no. 4 (August 2006): 589-611.

⁵² Edgar S. Bley, "Identification: A Key to Literature," *The English Journal* 34, no. 1 (1945): 28-29.

⁵³ Jennifer Milone and Glen O. Gabbard, "Shedding Light on Women's Response to 'Twilight,'" *Academic Psychiatry* 35.6 (2011): 414.

⁵⁴ Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), 123.

⁵⁵ Suzanne Clark, *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991), 2; Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 31-2.

⁵⁶ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of Carolina Press, 1991); Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class, and Women's Reading, 1835-1880* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green Univ. Popular Press, 1981).

⁵⁷ Patrocínio P. Schweickart and Elizabeth A. Flynn, "Introduction," in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Reading, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. P, 1986), xiv.

⁵⁸ See Anne G. Berggren, "Reading Like a Woman," in *Reading Sites: Social Difference and Reader Response*, ed. Patrocínio P. Schweickart and Elizabeth A. Flynn (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2004), 166-88.

⁵⁹ See Amanda Anderson, *Powers of Distance* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press), 7.

⁶⁰ Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15.

⁶¹ W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and M. C. Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy." *The Sewanee Review* 57, no. 1 (1949): 31-55. See also Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 130-31, 144.

⁶² C. Daniel Batson, Shannon Early, and Giovanni Salvarani, "Perspective Taking: Imagining How Another Feels Versus Imaging How You Would Feel," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23, no. 7 (July 1, 1997): 751-758; and Keen, "Theory of Narrative Empathy," *Narrative* 14, no. 3 (2006): 208.

⁶³ Jauss, 286. See also Georges Poulet, "The Phenomenology of Reading," in *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001), 1320-1333.

⁶⁴ John Frow thought Jauss "remarkably unsuspecting of the 'imaginary,' and [he] shows remarkable faith in the possibility of shedding ideological interests; but this of course is precisely the ideological work done by the concept: represent the possibility of movement to a domain beyond ideology." Frow, "Spectacle Binding: On Character," *Poetics Today* 7, no. 2 (1986): 239.

⁶⁵ Etienne Balibar and Pierre Machery, "On Literature as an Ideological Form," in *Untying the Text: A Post-structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (London: Routledge, 1981), 90, 93.

⁶⁶ Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effect in Chinese Acting," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 91-99. See also Victor Shklovsky on *ostraneniye*, or defamiliarization by the text. Lee Thomas Lemon and Marion J. Reis, eds., *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1965), 4.

⁶⁷ See Geoffrey Hartman on "compassion fatigue" as a result of overidentifying with victims. Hartman, "Tele-Suffering and Testimony in the Dot-Com Era," in *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 122. Hartman also sees self-destructive or aggressive emotions as a result of overidentification.

⁶⁸ Elaine Scarry, "The Difficulty of Imagining Other Persons," in *Human Rights in Political Transitions: Gettysburg to Bosnia*, ed. Carla Hesse and Robert Post (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 287.

⁶⁹ Mary-Catherine Harrison, "The Paradox of Fiction and the Ethics of Empathy: Reconceiving Dickens's Realism," *Narrative* 16, no. 3 (2008): 260. See also Batson.

⁷⁰ Susan David Bernstein, "Promiscuous Reading: The Problem of Identification and Anne Frank's Diary," in *Witnessing the Disaster: Essays on Representation and the Holocaust*, ed. Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 150; Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (Florence: Routledge, 1999), 164, 185; Claudia Eppert, "Entertaining History: (Un)heroic Identifications, Apt Pupils, and an Ethical Imagination," *New German Critique* no. 86 (2002): 79, 81-2; and Doris Sommer, "Resistant Texts and Incompetent Readers," *Latin American Literary Review* 20, no. 40 (1992): 105-6.

⁷¹ Regenia Gagnier, *Subjectivities A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 136.

⁷² Jonathan Cohen, "Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters," *Mass Communication and Society* 4, no. 3 (2001): 252.

⁷³ Peter Goldie, "How We Think of Others' Emotions," *Mind & Language* 14, no. 4 (1999): 397.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 253-54.

⁷⁵ John Frow, "Spectacle Binding: On Character," *Poetics Today* 7, no. 2 (1986): 239.

⁷⁶ Keith Oatley, "Meetings of Minds: Dialogue, Sympathy, and Identification, in Reading Fiction," *Poetics* 26, no. 5 (1999): 446.

⁷⁷ Oatley, "Emotions and the Story Worlds of Fiction," in *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations*, ed. Melanie C. Green, Jeffrey J. Strange, and Timothy C. Brock (Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 64.

⁷⁸ Johan F. Hoorn and Elly A. Konijn, "Perceiving and Experiencing Fictional Characters: An Integrative Account," *Japanese Psychological Research* 45, no. 4 (2003): 258.

⁷⁹ Amy Coplan, "Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62, no. 2 (2004): 144.

⁸⁰ David S. Miall, "Foregrounding and Feeling in Response to Literary Narrative," in Sonia Zyngier, et al., eds., *Directions in Empirical Literary Studies: In Honor of Willie Van Peer* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2008), 99, 2008.

⁸¹ Iser, 126.

⁸² Nurit Tal-Or and Jonathan Cohen, "Understanding Audience Involvement: Conceptualizing and Manipulating Identification and Transportation," *Poetics* 38, no. 4 (August 2010): 404.

⁸³ Elaine Scarry, "On Vivacity: The Difference Between Daydreaming and Imagining-Under-Authorial-Instruction," *Representations* 52 (1995): 18, 20.

⁸⁴ Patrick O'Neill, "Points of Origin: On Focalization in Narrative," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/ Revue Canadienne De Littérature Comparée* 19, no. 3 (1992): 345.

⁸⁵ Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon, *Psychonarratology: Foundations for the Empirical Study of Literary Response* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 176.

⁸⁶ Edward Bradford Titchener, *A Beginner's Psychology* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 198.

⁸⁷ Smith, 117.

⁸⁸ Coplan, 156; Goldie, 409; Suzanne Keen, "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," *Narrative* 14, no. 3 (2006): 213-14; and Miall, 93.

⁸⁹ Rebecca M. Chory-Assad and Vincent Cicchirillo, "Empathy and Affective Orientation as Predictors of Identification with Television Characters," *Communication Research Reports* 22, no. 2 (2005): 151-153.

⁹⁰ Robert J. Yanal, *Paradoxes of Emotion and Fiction* (Univ. Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1999). Literary critics Lisa Zunshine and Blakey Vermeule attribute this tendency to the social and evolutionary imperatives of mind reading. That is, reading fiction approximates and draws upon our evolved capacity to assess the intentions of other people. See Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2006), 10; Vermeule, *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2010), xiii, 9.

⁹¹ See Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995) and *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁹² See for example, Susan L. Feagin, "Imagining Emotions and Appreciating Fiction," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (1988): 493; and Kendall Walton, in *Emotion and the Arts*, ed. Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 38.

⁹³ Cynthia Hoffner and Joanne Cantor, "Perceiving and Responding to Mass Media Characters," in *Responding to the Screen: Reception and Reaction Processes*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, 64-5. Hillsdale, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991

⁹⁴ Jemeljan Hakemulder, *Moral Laboratory: Experiments Examining the Effects of Reading Literature on Social Perception and Moral Self-Concept* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2000), 14.

⁹⁵ Coplan, 146; Hakemulder, 36; Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁹⁶ Nussbaum, *Upheavals*, 302. Nussbaum's notion of rational sympathy, on the other hand, entails taking a position of judgment outside of the character.

⁹⁷ Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 4

⁹⁸ Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), 206.

⁹⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 61.

¹⁰⁰ Freud, "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage," 1904, 122.

¹⁰¹ Anders Pettersson, *Verbal Art: a Philosophy of Literature and Literary Experience* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 192.

¹⁰² Fuss, 9.

¹⁰³ Diamond, 405.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Harris, "Introduction," *Nottingham French Studies* 47, no. 3 (2008): 12.

¹⁰⁵ Film studies, heavily indebted to psychoanalytic criticism, has embraced identification, mostly as a visual or technological phenomenon. Oatley contends that film lends itself less to audience identification as opposed to distanced spectatorship. Keen, however, points out that the differences between cinematic and literary identification have not been

systematically studied. Oatley, "Meetings of Minds," 445; Keen, "Theory of Narrative Empathy," 228.

¹⁰⁶ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (New York: Norton, 1994), 6, 5.

¹⁰⁷ Kate Flint, "Women, Men and the Reading of *Vanity Fair*," in *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, ed. James Raven, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), 246-62.

¹⁰⁸ Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 115; 245. See also Annie Swan, *Courtship and Marriage and the Gentle Art of Home-Making* (London: Hutchinson & Company, 1894), 25 for an unflattering opinion of Amelia.

¹⁰⁹ *OED Online*, "wayward, adj.," accessed April 17, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/226525?rskey=IuH8vl&result=2&isAdvanced=false> ().

¹¹⁰ Susan Hekman, "Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited," *Signs* 22, no. 2 (January 1997): 359.

¹¹¹ Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978); Jean E. Kennard, "Ourself behind Ourself: A Theory for Lesbian Readers," in Flynn and Schweickart, *Gender and Reading*, 63-80; Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991); Yung-hsing Wu, "Academic Disidentifications," *Profession* (2004): 115.

¹¹² See also Berggren.

¹¹³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999), 7. See also Lauren Berlant, "The Female Complaint," *Social Text* no. 19/20 (1988): 237-259; Chris Straayer, "The Hypothetical Lesbian Heroine," in *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1996), 9-22.

¹¹⁴ Sedgwick, "Across Gender, Across Sexuality: Willa Cather and Others," in *Displacing Homophobia: Gay Male Perspectives in Literature and Culture*, ed. Ronald R. Butters, John M. Clum, and Michael Moon (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1989), 65.

¹¹⁵ Lesley Goodman, "Rebellious Identification, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Arabella," *Narrative* 18, no. 2 (2010): 173, 174. Catherine Stimpson likewise writes of the way in which one part of *Little Women* "encourages rebellion," against Alcott's "constrictive maneuvers," allowing criminal "recidivists of reading" to return to those "naughtier" sections of the text. Catharine R. Stimpson, "Reading for Love: Canons, Paracanons, and Whistling Jo March," *New Literary History* 21, no. 4 (1990): 969.

¹¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), ix.

¹¹⁷ Glenn Hendler defines a "counterpublic" as marked by status attributes other than those possessed by members of the hegemonic bourgeois public, that is, a public of noncitizens or of those excluded from any of the perquisites of citizenship." Glenn Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001), 16.

¹¹⁸ Lois McNay, "Agency, Anticipation and Indeterminacy in Feminist Theory," *Feminist Theory* 4, no. 2 (2003): 147.

¹¹⁹ See Markus Appel, "A Story About a Stupid Person Can Make You Act Stupid (or Smart): Behavioral Assimilation (and Contrast) as Narrative Impact." *Media Psychology* 14, no. 2 (2011): 144-167; Maja Djikic, Keith Oatley, Sara Zoeterman, and Jordan B. Peterson, "On

Being Moved by Art: How Reading Fiction Transforms the Self,” *Creativity Research Journal* 21, no. 1 (2009): 24–29; Jemeljan Hakemulder, “Imagining What Could Happen: Effects of Taking the Role of a Character on Social Cognition,” in Zyngier, et al., *Directions in Empirical Literary Studies*, 139-54; Don Kuiken, Leah Phillips, Michelle Gregus, David S. Miall, Mark Verbitsky, and Anna Tonkonogy, “Locating Self-Modifying Feelings Within Literary Reading,” *Discourse Processes* 38, no. 2 (2004): 267–286; Raymond Mar, Maja Djikic, and Keith Oatley, “Effects of Reading on Knowledge, Social Ability, and Selfhood,” in Zyngier, et. al., *Directions in Empirical Literary Studies*, 127-37.

¹²⁰ Keith Oatley, *The Passionate Muse: Exploring Emotion in Stories* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 124.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹²² Peter Stockwell, *Texture: a Cognitive Aesthetics of Reading* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2009), 155.

¹²³ See Armstrong.

¹²⁴ Laura Morgan Green, *Literary Identification from Charlotte Brontë to Tsitsi Dangarembga* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2012), 41.

Masculine Identification and Marital Dissolution

Within Victorian novels, female characters often and unashamedly identify with male figures. *Little Women*'s Jo March goes so far as to call herself the "man of the family" in addition to assuming masculine roles in amateur theatricals as well as supporting her family through writing.¹ When Jo laments, "It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like boys' games and work and manners!" the complaint is less a repudiation of her own female body (especially given her mournful sacrifice of her long hair) or evidence of sexual confusion than a desire for the accoutrements, activities, and privileges of men. Her more feminine sisters are equally eager participants in the Pickwick Club, in which they assume the roles of its gentlemen members and only reluctantly accept an actual male (Laurie) into their ranks as the valet, Sam Weller. In Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, the eponymous character not only christens herself Captain Keeldar, but also is referred to as her own (non-existent) brother and treated as such by the conservative Reverend Helstone without any sense of impropriety; indeed, his easy complicity with her drag performance is attributed to her feminine charm. Shirley reasons, like Jo, that her financial responsibilities justify her masculine praenomen and assertive personality: "They gave me a man's name; I hold a man's position: it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood."² At the same time, suffragist Millicent Fawcett in an article on "The Emancipation of Women" refutes the idea that women enacting masculine roles have contempt for their own sex as opposed to the limits imposed on it, even though "masculine egoism" supposes erroneously that "because many of us wish women to have greater freedom in the matter of education, employments, and civil and political rights, we therefore wish them to be like men."³

The popularity of tomboyish heroines such as Jo, Shirley, and Charlotte Yonge's Ethel May, and even the ultimately conventional fates of these characters as matriarchs or caretakers, indicate a surprising degree of comfort in Victorian audiences with women occasionally adopting masculine behavior or playing with masculine personae. Even that "*anima virilis in corpore muliebri inclusa*," Marian Halcombe of *The Woman in White*, who does depreciate her gender outright and is described as masculine in face and attitude, still caused Wilkie Collins to be besieged with letters from men desirous of meeting and marrying her real-life original.⁴ Although we see the obvious limits to this flirtation with masculinity in such heroines' traditionally feminine plot trajectories, the fact that such characters are allowed to alternate between "masculine" and "feminine" attitudes—rather than being labeled *avant la lettre* as something akin to neutered Woolfian androgynes—speaks to the amount of imaginative identificatory freedom allotted to girls and women to cross and re-cross gender lines.⁵ Jo March cries over Yonge's *Heir of Redclyffe* (a book famously appealing to both genders) and Shirley Keeldar also identifies with the archetypal female, Eve.⁶ While Jo, Shirley, Ethel, and *The Mill on the Floss*'s Maggie Tulliver are occasionally rebuked for unladylike behavior in their youth, none of them are doomed to lack of appeal for the "opposite" sex. On the contrary, women were continually exhorted to exercise their powers of identification to better understand and accommodate the men in their lives who would represent them in the public sphere. Femininity itself was conceptualized as the ability to identify with men.

John Ruskin, whose "Gems" of thought were trumpeted by the same feminist publication, *Woman's Herald*, which advertised Mill's *On the Subjection of Women*, proclaimed in *Sesame and Lilies* that "you may chisel a boy into shape, as you would a rock, or hammer him into it, if he be of a better kind, as you would a piece of bronze. But you cannot hammer a girl into anything. She grows as a flower does."⁷ Despite the handy essentialism of this proverb and

its organic imagery, the endorsement of this stance by the liberal *Woman's Herald* is unsurprising given the amount of latitude it provides girls in terms of self-education and the selection of possible identities available to an impressionable sex on which, nevertheless, no permanent imprints can be made. Masculinity, however, has to be constructed by a rather violent external force with artificial materials incapable of the natural flexibility with which femininity was supposedly endowed. Thus boys could—and did—admit to falling in love with certain heroines, as D. H. Lawrence did with Maggie Tulliver, or various men did with Marian Halcombe, and yet male readers' confessions of identification with these female characters are almost impossible to find.⁸ Men could love women, but were not expected to identify with them. Consequently within family and marriage the onus of empathy went only in one direction: from women to men. Mary Poovey argues that domestic ideology supported the idea of a "representative Englishman, with whom everyone could identify, even if one's interests were thereby obliterated and not served."⁹ Women were thus encouraged to identify with and thereby rely upon their "representative Englishman," whether a male relative, a husband, or the fictional male character.

This chapter will demonstrate how both fictional and nonfictional women availed themselves of the opportunity to identify with male characters or ostensibly "male"-oriented plots. Though the identification of women with the men in their lives was supposed to be a domestic virtue that cultivated a union of interest between women and their male representatives, the temporary assumption of fictional male perspectives could not help but broaden the scope of women's considerations beyond their male relations. The necessary abstraction involved in identification with fictional characters could create affinities not between women and men, but between women readers and male subject positions or behaviors. Having been invited to enjoy vicariously the pursuits and rights of men, women in nineteenth-century England, instead of being appeased with virtual participation and the prerogative of feminine influence, began to agitate for changes in the marriage laws that might render them the same privileges that they were asked only to imagine.

The first section of the chapter will argue that readerly, as opposed to writerly, identification with masculinity was seen as much less problematic for Victorian women because its forays into male experience were supposedly strictly imaginative. Women writers, on the other hand, were not only imagining being men, but also enacting a man's professional role. While women authors flourished in this period, those who identified themselves as female were repeatedly censured for illicit (and unconvincing) trespassing when it came to the depiction of male subjectivities. Women's readerly identification was justified by its portrayal as a feminine virtue of empathy that fortified relationships with men: brothers, fathers, and eventually husbands.

The second section of the chapter examines how girls' evident tastes for "boys' books" and the volumes of their fathers' libraries were attributed to sisterly and filial sympathy. These books supposedly allowed women to participate in their male family members' activities by proxy, and not by active imitation, and thereby to prepare for identification with their husbands. In addition to fictional examples, this section will also draw from the accounts of reading response in the autobiographies of women who ultimately became literary professionals, political activists, and educators. While these memoirs often follow to some extent what Linda Peterson identifies as a "relational narrative pattern" in Victorian women's autobiography, wherein women articulate the development of their own sense of self as dependent upon their

relationships with others, they also point to other reasons than connection with male relatives and prospective husbands for their excursions into imaginary masculinity.¹⁰

The final section of the chapter will compare the legal concept of “coverture,” under which a woman is officially identified with her husband, with the readerly practice of masculine identification. The chapter’s focal text, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s verse-novel *Aurora Leigh*, was written in the years leading up to the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, and directly alludes to the contemporary debates surrounding marriage reform. Barrett Browning’s heroine is a reader of literature who seeks inspiration for her own writing through identification with male authors and male subjects. In our own time, critics have argued that Aurora’s masculine sources of identification and inspiration are temporary obstacles to her self-affirmation as a female artist. This chapter will contend that Aurora’s deliberate fluctuations across the boundaries of gender identification, both as reader and writer, maintain the integrity of her female subjectivity. Aurora, however, far from effacing herself, undertakes an active, “elective affinity” with her father through his literary legacy as well as with her male muses of poetry. This strategy of masculine identification as an active aesthetic choice enables rather than represses Aurora’s poetic self-expression. Ultimately, the novel-poem that narrates the development of a female subject culminating in her prospective marriage promotes an emphatically *literary* as opposed to marital mode of identification with masculinity.

Falsetto Muscularity

Aurora Leigh demonstrated widespread appeal at the time of its publication. The first edition sold out within two weeks, and its critical reception was, if not uniformly positive, nearly so in its admiration for the scope of the endeavor. Admirers of *Aurora Leigh* tended to see it as a harmonious marriage of the masculine domain of poetry and the feminine domain of the domestic novel. Alongside the encomia of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Ruskin, Leigh Hunt praised the poem for its “combination of masculine power with feminine tenderness.”¹¹ Lord Bulwer-Lytton, in a letter to Barrett Browning, confessed, “I feel at every page, as I read your book, the deep truth of that assertion of Strabo’s... ‘To be a good poet one must first be a good man.’”¹² Lytton elects not to paraphrase his translation of Strabo’s aphorism so as to acknowledge Barrett Browning’s gender; he includes her, instead, within the ostensibly universal category of the male poet. At the same time, the quotation directly aligns the quality of the poem with its author’s identity. It seemed that Victorian critics like Lytton could neither avoid defining the aesthetic value of *Aurora Leigh* in gendered terms nor yet decide to which gender its hybrid form belonged.

Bulwer Lytton demonstrates the confusion of categorization that Barrett Browning’s “novel-poem” presented for its first readers.¹³ Some reviewers expressed discomfort with Browning’s application of epic form to novelistic concerns, the appropriation of “Milton’s organ...to play polkas in May-Fair drawing rooms.”¹⁴ Writing in the *Westminster Review*, George Eliot applauded “Mrs. Browning [for being], perhaps, the first woman who has produced a work which exhibits all the peculiar powers without the negations of her sex.”¹⁵ But a review in the very next issue countered, “Mrs. Browning seems at once proud and ashamed of her womanhood. She protests, not unjustly, against the practice of judging artists by their sex; but she takes the wrong means to prove her manhood.”¹⁶ Some critics viewed Barrett Browning’s attempt to transcend the categories of “masculine” and “feminine” through their aesthetic union as a female author’s usurpation of the universal position of the male subject.¹⁷

Though the *Dublin University Magazine* went so far as to condemn Barrett Browning as “unfeminine in thought” and the book as “a closed volume for [Barrett Browning’s] own sex,” such criticisms were not necessarily injurious to the work’s artistic reputation, as Barrett Browning was aware.¹⁸ As a child, Barrett Browning announced her ambition to be “the feminine of Homer.”¹⁹ In adulthood she notoriously claimed in a letter to her future critic Chorley that she could not locate for herself a feminine tradition from which to draw inspiration for her particular poetic practice: “I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none.”²⁰ Her following sentence is not as widely quoted: “It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you—witness my reverent love of the grandfathers!” Despite having written an obituary for the prolific poetess Felicia Hemans, Barrett Browning set herself apart from any matriarchal poetic lineage as a preemptive strike against such critics as the one in the *Saturday Review* who assumed that “women, in writing poetry, draw their style from other women, and thus miss that largeness and universality which alone compels attention, and preserves a work through all changes of sentiment and opinion.”²¹ The *Saturday Review* distinguishes Barrett Browning for at least attempting objectivity, but judges her to have succeeded only “partially.” To be labeled as a women’s poet (that is, a poet for women) would deprive her work of both expressive individuality and universal relevance (that is, relevance to men). According to this stereotype, women could only be partial poets; the *gestalt* of the poetic form eluded the “poetess” with the addition of the feminine suffix. In the case of *Aurora Leigh*, both the content and the form of a woman’s poetry could be deemed inappropriate, and perhaps worse, aesthetically incomplete.

As Barrett Browning paid homage to her literary “grandfathers,” her poet heroine Aurora identifies her artistic self with men even while she advocates the rights of women. She does not care to exercise her feminine “influence,” the special capacity attributed to women in the nineteenth century at the expense of official political “power.”²² As when, in the recurrent breast imagery in the poem, she wants not to nurse, but to suck from the paps of poetic inspiration, Aurora prefers to reverse the traditional gender dynamic and be *influenced* -- as male poets supposedly are by their muses -- by those male writers that she claims as hers: “My own best poets, am I one with you, / That thus I love you, –or but one through love?” (1.880-81).²³ Aurora desires to merge her identity into “one” with her predecessors, among whom she names Byron, Pope, and Keats. Her chicken-or-egg question—whether inspiration follows from her receptivity to these muses or whether she is receptive because already inspired—presupposes the role of her own agency in loving poetry. The fact that she can even question the nature of the afflatus forestalls the kind of forcible penetration by a literary patriarch that Susan Gubar describes as “the terror of inspiration” for female writers, which encompasses a “fear of being entered, deflowered, possessed, taken, had, broken, ravished—all words which illustrate the pain of the passive self where boundaries are being violated.”²⁴

Even when Aurora does position herself as passive, being “ravished” artistically, she still compares herself to a male figure: Ganymede, plucked by Zeus to serve and drink divine nectar with the gods (1.927). Beverly Taylor notes Aurora’s tendency to identify with masculine mythological analogues like Ganymede, Pygmalion and even Jove, but sees Aurora’s reverence for the male literary tradition as an impediment to her growth as a female poet.²⁵ As a teenager, Aurora’s confidence in her own status within the pantheon is still tentative:

Such ups and downs
Have poets.
Am I such indeed? The name

Is royal, and to sign it like a queen,
Is what I dare not... (1.933-936)

It is therefore not surprising that Aurora is afraid to “sign it like a queen;” since she acknowledges no female poets to whom she could be the successor—as Barrett Browning herself bemoaned her lack of models for the poetic vocation—she regards marking her poetry with a feminine signature as a risk she is not yet ready to take.

Using the female signature would subject Aurora’s poetry to the depreciative label of what her cousin Romney condescendingly calls “woman’s verses” and herself to the conventional feminine identity that she refuses (2.831). *Aurora Leigh* itself, despite its generally positive reception, was still vulnerable to this type of criticism *a priori* on the basis of Barrett Browning’s gender. Refuting Barrett Browning’s attempt to evade the gendered constraints of the genre through her creation of the hybrid form of the verse-novel, the poet Sydney Dobell, while praising “poetry such as Shakespeare’s sister might have written, if he had had a twin,” felt compelled to conclude, “I hold it to be no poem—for no woman (not even such a ‘large-brained woman and large-hearted man’ as Mrs. Browning, who has occurred but once since literature began, and will not come again for a millennium or two) can create one.”²⁶ Dobell even wrote a sonnet addressed “To the Authoress of ‘Aurora Leigh’” that casts her as a mere amanuensis for Shakespeare, “with her dear sex / In his voice, (a king’s words writ out by the queen).”²⁷ *Aurora Leigh* was said to demonstrate “the authority of a prophetess, the grace of a muse, the prodigality of a queen,” even though Aurora the character repeatedly shies away from these categories. She distinguishes herself from the feminine role of inspirational catalyst, saying of herself and her poetic fellows together, “We call the Muse” (980).²⁸ Even as she self-deprecatingly concludes, “what effete results / From virile efforts!” she sets herself among the “virile” who incidentally create “effete” art, rather than among the feminine who ape masculinity (984-85). Although she does not redefine these gendered aesthetic terms, she implies that “virile” and “effete” characteristics can exist simultaneously in poets, regardless of their sex.

Though Aurora, like Barrett Browning, acknowledges no female poets to whom she could be the successor, elements of *Aurora Leigh* draw from a heritage of women’s novels, most obviously *Jane Eyre* as well as *Corinne* and *Ruth*, whose characters Dorothy Mermin calls the “aunts and cousins at least, if not grandmothers” of Barrett Browning’s.²⁹ For Barrett Browning to own these female relations, however, is to invite the kind of condescension visited upon the limitations of the feminized novel form along with the non-poetic poetess. The prolific reviewer E. S. Dallas lamented the phenomenon by which the “great public figure withers” in the novel from the domesticating influence of women authors treating traditionally feminine subjects.³⁰ Critic Richard Holt Hutton, in an 1858 review of the novels of “Authoress” Dinah Mulock Craik, expands upon his subject to distinguish the category of “feminine” novelists from their masculine brethren by “the complete *insulation* of the interests of the feminine novelists in the story they are telling.” Women novelists “*believe* so much more intensely in their own stories” and thus “never carry you beyond the tale they are telling; they are a great deal too much interested in it.”³¹ Hutton’s repetition of these “in”-ward prefixes (insulation, interest, intensity) as modifiers for female novelists signals his own belief in the inscribed nature of the feminine imagination; these authoresses are not so much actively creating as immersing themselves within an anomalously preexisting story. But not only are feminine novelists interested themselves, they are the cause of interestedness in others: in their fictions “the interest is the more intense” for male and female reader alike, and “You are more identified with the story, more immediately

oppressed by the perplexities which arise; while, at the same time, they are associated with a less extensive range of interests.”³²

Anticipating Matthew Arnold’s advocacy of critical “disinterestedness,” for seeing “the object as it really is,” Hutton sees feminine fiction by contrast as projecting a claustrophobic subjectivity that threatens to absorb the common reader as it presumably has absorbed its female creator away from independent objectivity. As Hutton implies throughout his article, such an “extension” of sympathies would in actuality be a contraction of the man into the woman’s narrow worldview, even more so when the hypothetical identification occurs not necessarily with the general story, but specifically with a female character. Walter Bagehot, in accusing women novelists of being jealous of their own characters, asserted the perspective of the male reader as emphatically nonidentificatory with either the female author or character as subjects: “the purchaser of a novel is a victim on finding that he has only to peruse a narrative of the conduct and sentiments of an ugly lady.”³³ Even Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope were not exempt from reviewers’ criticism for catering too much to feminine concerns (but not necessarily for ineptitude in portraying them).³⁴ Although the integrity of male selfhood—unlike the female, a category that seems to deconstruct itself—was supposed to be strong enough to withstand such temptations, men were hardly encouraged to identify with “feminine” plots or fictional women.

Hence the temptation for women writers of poetry as well as fiction to identify themselves in the literary marketplace as men. Elaine Showalter has demonstrated that male pseudonyms originally protected published women authors from the taint of masculine professionalism.³⁵ The Victorian trend of women writers identifying themselves on a professional and public level as male by signing under a man’s name was not merely a convenient deceptive armor for femininity to enter the public sphere and maintain a measure of privacy as well as purity from commercialism: it also expanded the imaginative landscape within which the writer could wander without censure. While Barrett Browning never wrote under a male pen name herself, she was nevertheless still accused of putting on “the gait and the garb of man, but the stride and strut betray her.”³⁶ Despite Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s praise for *Aurora Leigh*, he later warned his sister Christina against the “falsetto muscularity” of “the Barrett-Browning style,” thereby connoting an incongruous combination of a deceptively feminine voice with an underlying—and threatening—masculine power.³⁷ Even without disguise, the poetess and authoress could still be accused of merely mimicking the poet and the author.

After her identity as Marian Evans was revealed, George Eliot continued to publish under her male *nom de plume* for the rest of her career and embrace the flexibility of an androgynous persona (her publisher, John Blackwood, alternated between masculine and feminine pronouns when referring to her in correspondence). Ironically, however, even her ability to depict *women* accurately was then challenged, given her apparently outsized accomplishments. Richard Simpson theorized in 1863 that Eliot’s notions of gender dynamics might be distorted because she was too specialized a breed of female, having assumed the active role of a male professional:

It is natural that the authoress should make her women act male parts, and give her men something of a feminine character. Though she ought to be able to draw women in herself, for the simple fact that she is a woman, yet she may be too separated from the ordinary life of her sex to be a good judge of its relations...She gives us her view of woman’s vocation, and paints things as they ought to be, not as they are. Women work more by influence than force, by example than reasoning, by silence than speech: the authoress grasps at direct power through reasoning and speech. Having thus taken up the male position, the male ideal

becomes hers, —the ideal of power, —which interpreted by her feminine heart and intellect, means the supremacy of passion in the affairs of the world.³⁸

At the same time, imaginative incursions into *male* mentality and physicality by female authors were often derided in aesthetic and moral terms by critics who assumed that male authors were able to render faithful portraits of women without indecent trespassing. Despite Eliot's almost mystical status as a hybrid figure of "feminine heart and intellect" and powerful "male position," her right to intrude even speculatively into the male psyche was still questionable. A critic at the *Saturday Review*, after categorizing Eliot as "the third female novelist" equivalent to Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, nevertheless implied that she had stepped a little beyond the appropriate bounds of her gender: "we are not sure that it is quite consistent with feminine delicacy to lay so much stress on the bodily feelings of the other sex...she lets her fancy run on things which are not wrong, but are better omitted from the scope of female meditation."³⁹ William Thackeray, on rejecting Barrett Browning's poem "Lord Walter's Wife" for *Cornhill Magazine*, explained that "In your poem you know there is an account of unlawful passion felt by a man for a woman—and though you write pure doctrine and real modesty and pure ethics, I am sure our readers would make an outcry" at reading of a man's attempted seduction of his friend's wife from "one of the best wives, mothers, women in the world."⁴⁰ Coventry Patmore expressed disbelief at *Aurora Leigh*, which he claimed was a "strange book for a modest, sensible little woman like Mrs. Browning to have written."⁴¹ The content of Barrett Browning's poetry was thus ineluctably associated with and constrained by her identity as a woman—and a moral, modest woman at that—in a way that men's writing was not.

Charlotte Brontë, who originally published under an ambiguously gendered pseudonym, pillories these double standards for male and female authors in a dialogue from *Shirley* where Shirley proclaims, "if I gave my real opinion of some first-rate female characters in first-rate works, where should I be? Dead under a cairn of avenging stones in half an hour." Caroline Helstone teasingly takes up the theme by conceding, "after all, authors' heroines are almost as good as authoresses' heroes," only to have Shirley respond, "Not at all: women read men more truly than men read women. I'll prove that in a magazine paper some day when I've time; only it will never be inserted: it will be 'declined with thanks,' and left for me at the publisher's," perhaps a punishment worse than the adulteress's death sentence Shirley mentions above. Brontë is in effect satirizing the fact that she can only voice the idea that women might be able to represent men through a fictional heroine, because it would not be credible—or immune from moral and aesthetic backlash—in any other form. Interestingly, the art of writing characters with verisimilitude is translated by Shirley into an act of reading, a field in which she feels women have the obvious advantage: "women read men more truly than men read women."

Brotherly Love and Father's Library

Even though reading appears to be a more passive occupation than writing, the woman reader was granted much more imaginative license than the woman author to slip into male clothes without fear of personal exposure, admonition, or ridicule. Victorian female readers often articulated their identification with male characters and figures. Social reformer Octavia Hill endeavored to share her own vicarious pleasure in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* with her friend Mary Harris in 1856 by asking her to "imagine how I delight in the athletic games, and try to feel how I prize the book."⁴² M. Carey Thomas, the future president of Bryn Mawr, recalled that as a teenager she "read herself as literary heroine and hero respectively" of *Little Women* and Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*.⁴³

When girls experienced and enacted masculine identification in their reading, they were not necessarily rebelling against conventional gender roles, but rather following the suggestions of numerous advice manuals and other improving literature. Sarah Stickney Ellis, the prolific authority on English femininity, prescribed a course of identification for the ideal “youthful reader” in *Daughters of England*, who is “in reality associating herself with a being of the highest order of mind, seeing with the eyes of the author, breathing his atmosphere, thinking his thoughts, and imbibing, through a thousand indirect channels, the very essence of his genius.”⁴⁴ John Ruskin’s “Of Queen’s Gardens” lecture similarly promotes identification as the mechanism by which women ought to interact with texts and in so doing collaborate with male authors:

... it is not the object of education to turn a woman into a dictionary; but it is deeply necessary that she should be taught to enter with her whole personality into the history she reads; to picture the passages of it vitally in her own bright imagination; to apprehend, with her fine instincts, the pathetic circumstances and dramatic relations, which the historian too often only eclipses by his reasoning, and disconnects by his arrangement: it is for her to trace the hidden equities of divine reward, and catch sight, through the darkness, of the fateful threads of woven fire that connect error with its retribution. But, chiefly of all, she is to be taught to extend the limits of her sympathy with respect to that history which is being for ever determined, as the moments pass in which she draws her peaceful breath.⁴⁵

Ruskin thus justifies women’s readerly identification with male figures and authors as a preparatory exercise for cultivating sympathy with the world at large. Ellis similarly correlates a “love of poetry” with the true “woman, who, in her inexhaustible sympathies, can live only in the existence of another, and whose very smiles and tears are not exclusively her own.”⁴⁶ Women should thus be trained (even though it was supposed to be their natural instinct) through literature to identify with others in general, and men in particular. As Ruskin argued, in agreement with Ellis, “a girl’s education should be nearly, in its course and material of study, the same as a boy’s; but quite differently directed... a woman ought to know the same language, or science, only so far as may enable her to sympathise in her husband’s pleasures, and in those of his best friends.”⁴⁷ Through such identificatory training, a woman could derive understanding of the pursuits or “pleasures” of her spouse or male relatives in which she could not directly participate.

The early education of middle- and upper-class brothers and sisters was not divided until brothers discarded their petticoats, assumed trousers, and went to school outside the home; until the latter part of the century girls remained in their petticoats and were educated largely at home with the exception of the special ladies’ finishing schools frequently parodied and disparaged in novels such as *Vanity Fair* and *Middlemarch*. Claudia Nelson and Catherine Robson have both written on how the Victorian girl became emblematic of the childhood ideal, perhaps because her upbringing seemed to prevent any major developments or changes that would mark the transition to adulthood, which became by default the male province.⁴⁸ The mutual identification by female and male siblings encouraged by early childhood was therefore untenable, as girls were suspended in immaturity.

In the late nineteenth century, left behind by her brother’s physical growth, the author Eleanor Farjeon remembers sobbing, “My brother’s clothes won’t fit me” in despair at the first differentiation between herself and her brother, Harry. She finds another source of connection with her beloved brother, however, as she relates in a dissociated third-person narrative memoir, “For if ever sister longed for identity with her brother, Nellie did. And if she could not wear

Harry's clothes, at least she could wear his wishes and his thoughts."⁴⁹ What wearing the costume of Harry entailed was actually role-playing various literary characters, in a game the two siblings devised called "TAR" for "Tessy and Ralph" from the play *The Babes*; the assumed identities of Harry and Eleanor would be assigned by Harry with no regard for gender distinctions—he was Tessy and Eleanor was Ralph. In *The Three Musketeers*, Eleanor confirms another affinity with a male character with conspicuously masculine qualities and habits:

Oh, *which* of these wonderful men will I be? I cannot ever hope to be D'Artagnan. I am Porthos. I love him more than anyone I am. I love boasting like him, and being vain like him, and stupid like him, and making love like him, and having an enormous appetite like him, and being the third-best fencer in the world, and the very strongest man...At last I am one thing in TAR that is The Most.⁵⁰

While Eleanor's brother acts as casting director for his and Eleanor's imaginative enactments, he cannot control the direction and degree of Eleanor's identification. Her wistfulness at seldom being "The Most" at anything as well as her preference for Porthos' identity over "anyone I am" suggests a feeling of feminine inadequacy that hardly suggests belief in the worthiness of the Victorian girl archetype, but rather disengagement from it through literary identification with male attributes and activities.⁵¹

In 1860's *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot provided a contrasting example of both femininity and masculinity being possibly temporary positions, not defined by essential traits, but rather by power relations: Tom Tulliver, usually confident and stereotypically male in his predilections, flounders in his misguided academic studies and becomes "more like a girl than he had ever been in his life before," especially in contrast to his sister Maggie's natural, untutored skill with Latin—including the lesson Tom is supposed to learn about masculine nouns with tricky feminine endings in the *Eton Grammar*.⁵² In the novel femininity for men is constituted not by inherent weakness of mind, but instead a temporary condition of depressed self-esteem.

Inversely, then, momentary mental forays into masculine roles might elevate a girl's aspirations. Thomas imagined herself as one of Carlyle's heroes, and Hill read with her sister the *Lives of Great Men*.⁵³ Charlotte Brontë, with her father's full encouragement, identified with the Duke of Wellington, whom she wrote about with her siblings in their "Young Men" plays.⁵⁴ Catherine Maria Sedgwick advised in *Means and Ends; or Self-training*, directed at young girls, that "[m]any have been stimulated to magnanimity and disinterestedness by the memoirs of Collingwood," the admiral second-in-command to Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar.⁵⁵ M.A. Stodart, giving her *Hints on Reading: To a Young Lady*, asserts the universally inspiring nature of such accounts:

...we feel the truth of the beautiful line; "Homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto" [I am a man, I think that nothing human is strange to me]. Well do I remember the exquisite delight which, in early childhood, I derived from Plutarch, and from Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, and I would give something for the fresh, vigorous enjoyment which, on the first perusal of these books, seemed to arouse all my faculties.⁵⁶

Stodart simultaneously recounts her own personal affinity with biography and presumes the same response from her female readers: identification with great men of history and letters. Even the anonymous author of a conduct guide for girls becomes carried away in a grand rhetorical catalogue of historical figures with whom identification is presumed:

Do we not feel a noble impulse when we see von Winkelried gathering a sheaf of hostile spears in bosom so as to open for his countrymen a path through enemy's

ranks? Are we not conscious of a new inspiration when we stand by Leonidas and his Three Hundred in clash of arms at Thermopylae? Are not our higher feelings stirred when we see the small English fleet of Howard, Drake and Frobisher gallantly advancing to the attack of the galleons and galleasses of the Spanish Armada? Can we look on unmoved when Pym rises among the Commons of England and demands the impeachment of the haughty Strafford? Or when Mary Queen of Scots stands in her blood red robe on the scaffold of Fotheringay, do not our pulses throb and hearts beat?⁵⁷

The author employs an exhortatory first-person plural voice in recounting this astonishing list of martial and political tableaux. The stance is emphatically undistanced; the assumption is that “we” *cannot* merely “look on unmoved” but instead feel susceptible to the “impulse,” “inspiration,” and “higher feelings” that also motivated heroic men; the one female representative of history is no less vividly depicted, although distinguished by her position of victimhood. By contrast, the book’s later injunction for girls to first seek out “the biographies of good wives, good sisters, good mothers, good daughters” appears perfunctory in its relative lack of enthusiasm as well as accompanying imagery.⁵⁸

Although collected stories of female role models—legends of good women—date back to Ovid’s *Heroides* and continued to be published in great numbers throughout the Victorian period, such implicit invitations to identify with masculine figures and activities provide a marked contrast to the presumed feminine reception of didactic texts earlier in the nineteenth century. Elizabeth Penrose’s popular *History* books for children written under the name of a “Mrs. Markham,” for example, consist of a mother impassively synopsisizing and helpfully judging the moral inferiority of prior historical periods and then answering the questions of her children, two boys who solicited their mother’s teaching on the subject in the first place and a girl, Mary, who serves as a frivolous foil to her brothers, primarily interested in what people were wearing. The following exchange is typical:

MARY. I wish, mamma, there were not so many shocking stories in history.

MRS. M. History is, indeed, a sad catalogue of human miseries, and one is glad to turn from the horrors of war and bloodshed to the tranquillity of private life. Shall I tell you something, of the domestic habits of the English in the fifteenth century?

MARY. Oh do, mamma; I shall like that very much.⁵⁹

Despite the mother’s displayed knowledge of history, she still operates under the assumption that her daughter will only identify with and by extension enjoy the elements of history that form a direct parallel with her own experience; for her own part Mrs. Markham dutifully recites historical vignettes to supplement the education of her boys with paltry display of relish for the subject. She does not admit to imagining herself in the place of Mary, Queen of Scots, and much less Leonidas.

While the mother was most commonly responsible for children’s early education, a common explanation in nineteenth-century fiction for masculine literary proclivities in female characters—often expressed in a taste for the classics—was the influence of the father, metonymized by his library. Heroines of novels often find themselves turned “loose,” according to Ruskin’s recommendation in *Sesame and Lilies*, in the “old library” devoid of frivolous magazines and romances, or even the novels to which the effeminate Waverley and David Copperfield fall prey. Showalter notes the prevalence in biographies of Victorian women writers,

which include Barrett Browning, of “identification with, and dependence upon, the father; and either loss of, or alienation from, the mother.”⁶⁰ Likewise, the intellectual nature of heroines is almost invariably attributed to some sort of patrimony, whether from genetic inheritance of cleverness, such as with Maggie Tulliver and *The Daisy Chain*’s Ethel May, or direct teaching, as with Elizabeth Gaskell’s eponymous Cousin Phillis or Eliot’s Romola. Men were therefore not only thought to be the beneficiaries of, but also the prime causes of masculine identification by women.

As they cannot follow their fathers into a profession or public status, however, none of these female characters regard the paternal heritage as an example from which they cannot diverge. While Showalter invokes Romola’s stewardship of her father’s library as a symbol of female homage to the male intellect, Romola sacrifices the library, though involuntarily, and ultimately uses her classical education by her father to instruct in turn her dead husband’s illegitimate son.⁶¹ Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh has an intimate but irreverent relationship to her paternal literary legacy:

Books, books, books!
I had found the secret of a garret-room
Piled high with cases in my father’s name;
Piled high, packed large,—where, creeping in and out
Among the giant fossils of my past,
Like some small nimble mouse between the ribs
Of a mastodon, I nibbled here and there
At this or that box, pulling through the gap,
In heats of terror, haste, victorious joy,
The first book first. (832-841)

Slipping into the relics of her “father’s name” (a temporary alternative to the “royal name” of the queen), Aurora is able to consume literary material at her own will. Aurora is no female Quixote or even a female Waverley, seduced by romances into delusive worldviews. As “small” as she is in proportion to the mastodon, she presents her “nimble” movement through her father’s library as a series of adventures without any anxiety of influence from “giant fossils” of the past, what Angela Leighton deems “the long shadow of the Father Muse.”⁶² Unlike Waverley or David Copperfield, she consumes literature—in an almost parasitical fashion—but is not consumed by it; her own personality is never willingly subsumed by the subjects of her self-directed and indiscriminate reading, when she admittedly “read books bad and good – some bad and good at once” (I.779).

The freedom with which Aurora treats literature as a playground is itself another paternal legacy. While Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s father, “WHOSE ADMONITIONS GUIDED MY YOUTHFUL MUSE EVEN FROM HER EARLIEST INFANCY,” as she wrote in the dedication of her first printed work, *The Battle of Marathon*, exerted a very forceful influence upon her artistic beginnings, her protagonist Aurora enjoys a more informal and less restrictive education from her father while he is alive.⁶³ The father who uncoincidentally taught Aurora “the trick of Greek and Latin” uses the same tactic “as did the women formerly / By young Achilles” and “wrapt his little daughter in his large / Man’s doublet, careless did it fit or no” (I.714, 723-24, 727-28). Her father’s carelessness as to the costume of gender extends to Aurora’s own allusion, in which she is Achilles, a Greek warrior disguised in girl’s clothing in addition to being a girl enveloped in a man’s garment.⁶⁴ The gender division of Aurora’s education is still observed, however, in the mode of didacticism; Aurora’s father passes on his masculinity,

whereas her aunt prescribes “a score of books on womanhood” (1.427) and a regimen of needlepoint. Whether by genetics or education, the motif of transmission of stereotypically masculine characteristics from father to daughter simultaneously reinforces and questions the aptness of a binary gender ideology.

In actual girls’ accounts of their reading, their enjoyment of “boys’ books” in addition to or even instead of the “mental pabulum” prescribed for girls, which the Cheltenham Ladies’ College headmistress Lillian M. Faithfull asserted no boy could stomach, seems less predicated on sisterly sympathy or fatherly influence than deliberate identification with stories of adventure, sports, and schoolboy loyalties.⁶⁵ Kate Flint characterizes this mode of identification with male figures as the absorption of an “idealized, reassuring image of patriarchal society,” a way for girls and women not only to establish connections with male relatives but also to placate those cheering on the sidelines in reality with vicarious literary activity and adventure.⁶⁶ Yet, as evinced by Farjeon’s dismay at the discrepancy between her own capabilities and those of a musketeer, such participation by proxy was as likely to stimulate as to mollify desires for venturing beyond the Ruskinian “Queens’ Gardens” to the “Kings’ Treasuries.” The theoretical solution to this problem would be an indissoluble union of the sexes: marriage, which, according to Margaret Oliphant, “is like dying—as distinct, as irrevocable, as complete.”⁶⁷ As girls were thought to exercise their capacity for sympathizing with male family members through literary identification, marriage would be the culminating act of masculine identification for which they had been primed.

The Solution and Dissolution of Marriage

In the 1856 essay on “The Laws concerning Women” quoted above, Oliphant defined the marriage sacrament as an equivalent mutual merger of man and wife that nullified the possibility of divergent interests. She ridiculed the idea that a woman’s identity could be fully absorbed by her husband:

Mighty indeed must be the Titanic current of that soul which could receive one whole human being, full of thoughts[,] affections, and emotions, into its tide and yet remain uncoloured and unchanged. There is no such monster of a man, and no such nonentity of a woman, in ordinary life. Which of us does not carry our wife’s thoughts in our brain, and our wife’s likings in our heart, with the most innocent unconsciousness that they are not our own original property?⁶⁸

Yet in this anonymous article Oliphant adopts the male perspective of a husband, if not necessarily *her* husband, and voices *his* thoughts about “our wife”—the collective wife of man, presumably—thoughts that might be the “original property” of the wife, but were transferred over seamlessly to his ownership after marriage. In her defense of men’s ability to identify with women—an ability that she argues renders the legal protection of wives’ persons and assets from husbands both unnecessary and detrimental to domestic unity—Oliphant undermines her argument by displaying only her own identification with men and thereby reiterates on a psychological level the laws in question that transformed a married woman’s original property into her husband’s.

Oliphant was responding to a contemporary legislative debate that had been catalyzed by the very public divorce and tireless advocacy of Caroline Norton, who that same year described the state of affairs between a married couple in her *Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth’s Marriage and Divorce Bill*: “As *her* husband, he has the right to all that is hers: as *his* wife she has no right to anything that is his.”⁶⁹ Very little had changed materially for wives

and husbands since William Blackstone articulated the common law in his *Commentaries of 1765*:

By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she performs every thing; and is therefore called in our law-french a *feme- covert*...For this reason, a man cannot grant anything to his wife, or enter into a covenant with her: for the grant would be to suppose her separate existence; and to covenant with her, would be only to covenant with himself.⁷⁰

Thus in coverture the woman's status was inseparable from but unequal to that of her husband; the oneness of the couple did not comprise a marriage of halves but rather the envelopment and subsequent effacement of a smaller part by a greater one. The wife's "separate existence" was a legal fallacy.

The Divorce Reform and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 struck a significant blow against the principle of coverture, at least in terms of its irrevocability, by allowing women the right to sue for divorce as well as to keep property and earnings gained after separation; husbands, however, were granted the right to divorce wives for adultery whereas women had to prove instead their husbands' cruelty, desertion, or incest. The Married Women's Property Committee, formed by Barbara Leigh Smith, Bessie Rayner Parks, and Mary Howitt in 1855, had circulated petitions and submitted tens of thousands of signatures (some of which were collected by Barrett Browning herself) to Parliament in support of the reform, but the patent double standard of the new law regarding the grounds of divorce signified that the debate over women's rights in marriage and beyond was only in its beginning stages.⁷¹

In 1858, William Roscoe contended that any additional political concessions to women were gratuitous, since the "sincere desires of any large number of the real women in this country necessarily secure immediate attention, and certainly exercise at least their full share of influence over the action of the men. For women to say they are unrepresented, is as if the sugar in the tea should complain that it was not tasted."⁷² Roscoe's simile illustrates the very act of absorption described in Blackstone's account of coverture (and dismissed as mere semantics by Oliphant): the man is the solvent into which the woman is absorbed, and marriage is the solution for the problem of representation, because husbands and fathers as heads of households represent the women in their lives in the public sphere. Oliphant would concur with Roscoe that on the basis of physical and emotional proximity men are the appropriate representatives for women: "There is no man in existence so utterly separated from one-half of his fellow creatures as to be able to legislate against them in the interests of his own sex."⁷³

Roscoe also invokes the idea of "influence"—the feminine "sugar" that sweetens the tea—frequently broached at the time as the woman's equivalent of power. Thus Alice Vavasor in Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* agrees to marry her politically ambitious cousin George because "[s]he was not so far advanced as to think that women should be lawyers and doctors, or to wish that she might have the privilege of the franchise for herself; but she had undoubtedly a hankering after some second-hand political manoeuvring."⁷⁴ Whereas under coverture men absorbed the material property of their wives, influence ostensibly allowed wives some access to their husband's mental property. This imagery of female influx is similar to the phenomenon of readerly identification in which the supposed fluidity of the feminine psyche permits women to enter the minds of fictional males who are both *represented* and their *representatives* on the page. The complementary forces of identification and influence would theoretically more than

compensate for lack of representation: they would actually accommodate women to the practice of representation by men—even for single or “superfluous” women who had no direct delegates.

Rachel Ablow’s account of marital sympathy in Victorian novels aligns the notion of male sympathy with susceptibility to “feminine influence” and by implication with the egocentric variety of identification, whereby the husband sees his better self reflected on the surface of his “better half,” while ignoring the existence of the better half’s own interiority.⁷⁵ While Ablow characterizes this discourse as a strategy to maintain conventional gender roles—with the wife as the husband’s moral center, the guardian of the “private” sphere—the dynamic of female identification that allows for imaginative mobility into the public sphere was also used as an inspiration instead of a substitute for activity outside the realm of novels. Married women, as we have seen, were just as likely, if not more so, to be advocates for progressive and political causes, including women’s rights within and outside of marriages. As Cobbe noted when discussing the problem of “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?” what women were trained to be attracted to in men could be just as attractive in themselves, for themselves: “A woman naturally admires power, force, grandeur. It is these qualities, then, which we shall see more and more appearing as the spontaneous genius of woman asserts itself.”⁷⁶

For Aurora, then, the assertion and development of her “spontaneous genius”—the *Künstlerroman*—must precede the marriage plot. While David Copperfield can pursue his *Bildung* and marital bliss in parallel plot lines, *Aurora Leigh* aims to reconcile the seemingly opposing narrative trajectories of what Mermin calls the “creating of an indissoluble identity” for Aurora as a gendered subject and artist, and the submergence of identity that marriage supposedly requires.⁷⁷ Aurora herself offers up a disparaging version of the familiar conceit of nuptial bliss as female dissolution, “where we yearn to lose ourselves / And melt like white pearls in another’s wine,” which sounds almost identical to “another swine” before whom the bride might cast her worth in pearls (5.1078-79). Either way, the wife’s identity and her assets are no longer her own.

Aurora Leigh combines its high-flown musings about the nature of poetic inspiration with discussion of very topical political concerns: prostitution, socialism, and of course the marriage laws. The discourse of men on these subjects is captured without Aurora’s narrative commentary as she eavesdrops upon the conversation of a young German student and Sir Blaise Delorme, who debate contemporary mores while ogling Lady Waldemar. Sir Blaise opines that “sexual prejudice / And marriage-law dissolved” would amount to “A general concubinage expressed / In a universal pruriency” (5.724-27). His conservative stance decries not only an imagined regression toward less civilized sexual practice, but also an intolerable dissolution of the *male* civilized subject that would follow from the breakdown of the distinctions between genders erected by custom and by law, which would in turn result in indiscriminate “general” and “universal” baseness.⁷⁸

Despite its varied subject matter and hybrid form, *Aurora Leigh* is to some extent sympathetic to the reactionary views of Sir Blaise in its thematic resistance to the idea of unrestricted mixture—whether through the absorption of the female into marriage, the horrors of sexual intercourse outside of wedlock that Sir Blaise fears and Marian Erle suffers during her rape, and the prospect of marriage between classes that causes a “hideous interfusion” of the poor and diseased into Pimlico (4.547). When Barrett Browning first began conceptualizing *Aurora Leigh*, she announced her intention of “running into the midst of our conventions, & rushing into drawing-rooms & the like ‘where angels fear to tread’; —& so, meeting face to face & without mask, the Humanity of the age.”⁷⁹ Humanity in *Aurora Leigh*, however, is rather

narrowly confined to that class existing in “drawing-rooms & the like.” Aurora ultimately befriends the lower-class Marian, but they hardly meet on equal grounds, and the kiss of Marian’s baby—the product of her rape—is as fearsomely invasive as it is beautiful for Aurora:

The whole child’s face at once
Dissolved on mine, —as if a nosegay burst
Its string with the weight of roses overblown,
And dropt upon me. Surely I should be glad... (7.949-52).

The baby represents the potential result of a certain kind of marriage that Aurora rejects throughout the verse-novel; motherhood is yet another stage in female identity’s dissolution—the mutual absorption in this case of the woman and child, who is not a meticulous work of art but rather a spontaneous overflow of sensuality, “roses overblown,” barely contained by the blank verse meter. The “nosegay,” a collection of flowers intended for aromatic appeal, is a recurrent trope in *Aurora Leigh*, which, like its heroine, “use[s] the woman’s figures naturally” and subversively, often side by side with masculine imagery (8.1131). The selective process of making a nosegay, whether the material comprises flowers, human beings, or words—as in the original sense of an anthology—creates an artificial means of imposing unity through proximity without committing the violence of complete, “hideous interfusion.”

Romney Leigh, Aurora’s cousin, apostrophizes her as his “flower” in a note to Aurora following his first rejected proposal to her and dismissal of her poetic vocation. He wants Aurora’s essence to infuse his own life, but only within the domestic sphere. As a concession he urges her:

Write woman’s verses and dream woman’s dreams;
But let me feel your perfume in my home,
To make my sabbath after working-days;
Bloom out your youth beside me, —be my wife. (2.831-34)

Aurora’s responsibility would be to suffuse Romney’s domestic life with a kind of holiness ironically unavailable in the public sphere where he passes his “working-days” devoted to activism on behalf of the poor. Aurora’s occupation of “woman’s verses,” belittled by the impersonally gendered qualification as well as its pairing with “woman’s dreams,” is represented as irrelevant and extrinsic to the uxorial atmosphere Aurora will create in Romney’s home through marriage.

Romney’s figuration of Aurora’s feminine influence as a kind of spiritualizing floral fragrance adheres to contemporary cosmetic trends, which differentiated sharply between men and women as (respectively) the subjects and objects of olfactory perception. Perfume had only relatively recently undergone the gender divide in which “sweet, floral blends,” connoting both fertility and delicacy, became exclusively feminine territory, while male use suffered a general decline.⁸⁰ As Janice Carlisle notes in her study of the sense of smell in novels of the 1860s, floral scents advertised the availability of middle-class women in the marriage marketplace. Moreover, the physically protean form of fragrance itself, as Carlisle observes, felicitously “spiritualizes or literally seems to disembodify what it also necessarily recognizes as indisputably material.”⁸¹ As a recurring conceit in *Aurora Leigh*, fragrance symbolizes the simultaneously miscible and marked qualities of fluid feminine identity.

Scent, a mixture itself, can trespass beyond prescribed material boundaries and yet retain its distinctiveness. A different perfume of Aurora’s from the one Romney sought in the marital home follows him beyond the hearth:

For none of all your words will let me go;
 Like sweet verbena which, being brushed against,
 Will hold us three hours after by the smell,
 In spite of long walks upon windy hills.
 But these words dealt in sharper perfume, —these
 Were ever on me, stinging through my dreams,
 And saying themselves for ever o'er my acts
 Like some unhappy verdict. (8.438-45)

Her words have the integrity to cling to Romney's consciousness and repeat themselves without becoming lost; Aurora's identity, her essence, is inseparable from her words, and thus in spite of its mobility, does not evanesce even as it penetrates Romney's conscious and unconscious mind. Nor does Romney claim her words and thoughts as his own property, unlike Oliphant's portrayal of the unwitting husband ventriloquizing the wife, but rather incorporates her ideas into his self-judgment while still attributing them to her. Romney thus moves beyond his vision of Aurora as the modern, domestic "Muse" described by Isaac Disraeli, the "wife who reanimates the drooping genius of her husband and a mother who is inspired by the ambition of beholding her sons eminent."⁸²

Aurora herself, as discussed earlier, does not fear the dissolution of self in identification with men as mentors or muses, such as her "own best poets" with whom she from the beginning actively seeks oneness:

Does all this smell of thyme about my feet
 Conclude my visit to your holy hill
 In personal presence, or but testify
 The rustling of your vesture through my dreams
 With influent odours? When my joy and pain,
 My thought and aspiration, like the stops
 Of pipe or flute, are absolutely dumb
 If not melodious, do you play on me,
 My pipers, —and if, sooth, you did not blow,
 Would not sound come? or is the music mine,
 As a man's voice or breath is called his own,
 Inbreathed by the Life-breather? (1.883-94)

Instead of being the vehicle for Romney's moral transcendence via her sanctifying incense in the home, Aurora aspires to an aesthetic transcendence that is dependent upon her receptivity to the "influent odours" of literal inspiration. While Bina Freiwald contends that Aurora's desire to merge her own identity with that of her male influences is fundamentally at odds with *Aurora Leigh's* commitment to representing a model of female genius, Aurora's structuring of her own inspiration as a series of questions for these poets denotes active subjectivity.⁸³ She is not merely invoking muses, but interrogating their contributions, and concluding with a reference to her own voice that shapes the breath with which she is inspired by her literary predecessors, "As a man's voice or breath is called his own." She models an identification that is flexible, not straightforward submission or narcissistic imposition, but still creatively fruitful.

How, then, does the reader reconcile what Herbert Tucker calls this "reconception of identity as a dynamically interactive process" analogous to that of "chemical solutions," with the union of Aurora and Romney at the denouement of the poem?⁸⁴ Many critics giving credence to Aurora's proclamation, "O Art, my Art, thou'rt much, but Love is more!" (9.657) agree with

Deirdre David that the verse-novel ultimately betrays its own ambitions by evolving into a “form-giving epithalamium for...essentialist sexual politics.”⁸⁵ However inferior, “Art,” not “Love” is apostrophized as Aurora’s possession. Moreover, the nosegay poem *Aurora Leigh* is the only product we know to issue from the merger of love between Romney and Aurora, not a biological child. Love is deferred and contained, whereas art—the poem—is profligate, trespassing beyond generic categorization, while still shying away from marrying its distinctive parts into a cohesive whole: *Aurora Leigh* is a novel, but it is bound up with the rhythm of verse; its alternate registers of lyric exaltation and catty high society chatter lie side by side rather than fused into a completely unified form.

The critical impulse tends toward imposing some kind of “solution” upon the problems of *Aurora Leigh*, but *Aurora Leigh* is emphatically not a solution in any sense of the word, and does not believe in a solution-based approach to artistic or social problems (as demonstrated by the failure of Romney’s socialist project as well as his averted marriage to Marian as a political statement). *Aurora Leigh* is, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have noted, built instead upon “compromise” between the artist’s desire (of both Barrett Browning and Aurora) to expand past the limits of convention and a woman’s prevailing fear of societal and individual dissolution.⁸⁶ Such a compromise prevents any complete resolution of opposed binaries, even the “fusion of individuality and care for others” that Christine Sutphin argues is achieved by Aurora at last.⁸⁷ The union of Aurora and Romney, which the latter compares to both a “Sweet shadow-rose” and a “human, vital, fructuous rose,” only to be reminded by Aurora that “this very social rose smelt ill” in comparison with the “Flower of Heaven” (9.884-97), is yet another imperfect pairing, and not a true mixture combining diverse elements, since it is the inbred coupling of Leigh with Leigh. Aurora and Romney’s relatively loose ties of kinship thus preclude the necessity of union through the dissolution of one or both parties; the identities of husband and wife are therefore connected but discrete.

Still, the influence of Aurora’s writing has infiltrated the minds of other women, other potential wives, as the artist Vincent Carrington tells Aurora about his fiancée, Kate Ward, “She has your books by heart more than my words, / And quotes you up against me” (VII.603-604). Kate furthermore insists that in Vincent’s portrait of her she hold Aurora’s book instead of his palette as the more felicitous emblem of her identity. Literature has preemptively intervened in the complete marriage of their minds, as Aurora’s powerfully persistent words are positioned by Kate “against” Vincent’s. Barrett Browning thereby depicts the possibility of readerly identification as affirmation of self that stands as a bulwark against the pernicious self-effacement possible in marriage.

Despite Barrett Browning’s own prediction that her poem would “be shoved away from the reading of young girls” for its scandalous content, by the turn of the century *Aurora Leigh* had become associated with the less-than-redoubtable tastes of “immature femininity.”⁸⁸ Many women testified to an early identification with the heroine. The feminist author Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, recalling reading *Aurora Leigh* at sixteen, claimed that Barrett Browning thus “revealed to me my own nature.”⁸⁹ Honor Sharpe, the novelist heroine of *Under My Own Roof*, also speaks of a strong emotional affiliation with Aurora: “Through how many foggy places in my life that book had helped me! I had often said, with white lips, ‘We’ll live, Aurora! We’ll be strong. The dogs are on us—but we will not die.’”⁹⁰ The words quoted by Honor are spoken by the character Aurora herself in the first person plural, as though she were encouraging the kind of collective feminine identification that spawned the Aurora Leigh Clubs for girls listed in New York Public Library bulletins in the early twentieth century.⁹¹ Ironically, then, the work that Barrett Browning

referred to several times as her own version of Byron's scandalous *Don Juan*, which she had been forbidden from reading by her father as a child, was ultimately heralded as a pristine text for a young female readership.⁹²

While Virginia Woolf argued that in spite of *Aurora Leigh's* novelistic pretensions, "The poem becomes one long soliloquy, and the only character that is known to us and the only story told us are the character and story of Aurora Leigh herself," the poem's influence on its Victorian readers surpasses that of the character, both on an individual and a social level.⁹³ Susan B. Anthony presented her own "read & re-read" copy of the book to the United States Congressional Library in 1902, "With the hope that Women may more & more be like 'Aurora Leigh,'" while the journalist and crusader against child prostitution William Thomas Stead opined that "Mill on the Subjection of Woman had, I think, much less influence than Mrs. Browning's 'Aurora Leigh.'" ⁹⁴

Aurora Leigh's own history of reception from an aspirationally masculine poem to an inspirational resource for women demonstrates not only the inherent heterogeneity of the verse-novel, but also the flexibility of identification depicted therein. *Aurora Leigh* models female readerly identification without employing the tropes of female quixotism: the complete absorption of self within or else the narcissistic projection of self upon literature. Rather, Aurora experiences literary influence deliberately as both subject and object, but without assigning each position a gender and thus not undergoing the "fusion" of gendered perspectives that Woolf describes, following Coleridge, as the ideal of the "androgynous mind" in a "fully fertilised" state.⁹⁶ *Aurora Leigh* resists perfect fusion, and the sexual but static paradigm of creativity it denotes, in favor of representing artistry through the "woman's figure" of fluctuating gender identification, which is never fixed and thus never neutralized.

¹ Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1880), 4.

² Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 172.

³ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, "The Emancipation of Women," *Fortnightly Review* 50 (1891): 675.

⁴ D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988) 180; Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins: A Biography* (London: The Bodley Head, 1954), 151.

⁵ "...it is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly." Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1989), 104.

⁶ Nicola Diane Thompson, *Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1996), 75.

⁷ Seth Koven, "How the Victorians Read *Sesame and Lilies*," in John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. Deborah Nord (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2002), 174; Ruskin, 101-2.

⁸ [Jessie Chambers], *D. H. Lawrence: A Personal Record* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), 98.

⁹ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988) 80, 9.

¹⁰ Linda Peterson, *The Traditions of Victorian Women's Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1999), 26.

¹¹ Leigh Hunt, "Aurora Leigh: An Unpublished Letter from Leigh Hunt," *Cornhill Magazine* 76 (1897): 739. See also Rossetti to William Allingham, 18 December 1857, in *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Allingham 1854-1870*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (New

York: Stokes, 1987), 189; John Ruskin to Robert Browning, 27 November 1856, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, (London: Allen, 1903-12) 36:247.

¹² Lytton to Mrs. Browning, 26 December 1856, in *Personal and Literary Letters of Robert, First Earl of Lytton*, ed. Lady Betty Balfour, (London: Longmans, 1906) 1:84.

¹³ Elizabeth Barrett Barrett to Robert Browning, 27 February 1845, in Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1845-1846* (London: Smith, Elder, 1899), 1:29.

¹⁴ [H. F. Chorley], review of *Aurora Leigh*, by Barrett Browning, *The Athenaeum* 1517 (1856): 1425.

¹⁵ [George Eliot], "Belles Lettres," *Westminster Review* 67 (1857): 306.

¹⁶ [John Nichol], review of *Aurora Leigh*, by Barrett Browning, *Westminster Review* 68 (1857): 221.

¹⁷ For extensive discussion of how *Aurora Leigh*'s generic mixture is complicit with its subversion of traditional gender categories, see Dorothy Mermin, "Genre and Gender in *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Newsletter* 69 (1986): 7-11; Marjorie Stone, "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: The Princess and *Aurora Leigh*," *Victorian Poetry* 25.2 (1987): 101-127; and Alison Case, "'My Broken Tale': Gender and Narration in *Aurora Leigh*," in *Plotting Women: Gender and Narration in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1999), 107-24.

¹⁸ Unsigned review of *Aurora Leigh*, by Barrett Browning, *Dublin University Magazine* 49 (1857): 470. Terry Lovell, among others, has contended that higher literary status in the Victorian period was awarded not necessarily to male *authors*, but to those writers whose *audience* was perceived to be predominantly male. See Lovell, *Consuming Fiction* (London: Verso, 1987), 83.

¹⁹ Barrett Browning, in Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Brownings' Correspondence*, eds. Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson (Winfield: Wedgestone, 1984), 1: 361. In this childhood essay, Barrett Browning describes a semi-fictionalized version of herself: "Beth was a poet herself—& there was the reigning thought—No woman was ever before such a poet as she w.^d be. As Homer was among men, so w.^d she be among women."

²⁰ Barrett Browning to Chorley, 7 January 1845, in *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Frederic George Kenyon (New York: Macmillan, 1899), 232.

²¹ "Poetesses," *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, and Art* 25, no. 656 (1868): 679.

²² See for example Henry Thomas Buckle, "The Influence of Women on the Progress of Knowledge," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, 57 (1858): 399; Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England, Their Position in Society, Character and Responsibilities* (London: Fisher, 1842) 3.

²³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Margaret Reynolds, Norton Critical Editions (New York: Norton, 1996). All subsequent citations refer to this edition.

²⁴ Susan Gubar, "The Blank Page and Female Creativity," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 302.

²⁵ Beverly Taylor, "'School-Miss Alfred' and 'Materfamilias': Female Sexuality and Poetic Voice in *The Princess and Aurora Leigh*," in *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*, eds. Anthony H. Harrison and Beverly Taylor (De Kalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1994), 17-18.

²⁶ Dobell to M—, 10 January 1857, in Dobell, *The Life and Letters of Sydney Dobell*, ed. E[mily] J[olly] (London, 1878), 2:66-7. Dobell is quoting Barrett Browning's own epithet for George Sand in "To George Sand: A Desire."

²⁷ Dobell, *Poems* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1860), 184

²⁸ While Joyce Zonana, arguing for Aurora's redefinition of the Muse as embodied in her own subjectivity, claims that Aurora "does not contradict" those who address her thus, Aurora does disclaim the titles of muse and prophetic, which tend to be given to her by untrustworthy characters. The villainous Lady Waldemar, for example, introduces herself to Aurora by asking, "Is this...the Muse?" which Aurora vehemently denies, "No sibyl even" (III.363). Zonana, "The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Feminist Poetics," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 8, no. 2 (1989): 250.

²⁹ Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), 185.

³⁰ E. S. Dallas, *The Gay Science* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1866), 2:299.

³¹ [Richard Holt Hutton], "Novels by the Authoress of *John Halifax*," *North British Review* 29 (1858): 468-70.

³² *Ibid.*, 469-70

³³ [Walter Bagehot], "The Waverley Novels" *The National Review* 6 (1858): 460.

³⁴ See Thompson, 75.

³⁵ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977) 19.

³⁶ Unsigned review of *Aurora Leigh*, in *Dublin University Magazine*, 470.

³⁷ Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Christina Rossetti, 3 December 1875, in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family-Letters* (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1895), 2:323.

³⁸ [Richard Simpson], "George Eliot's Novels," *Home and Foreign Review*, 3 (1863): 541.

³⁹ Unsigned review of *The Mill on the Floss*, by George Eliot, *Saturday Review* 9 (April 14, 1860): 470, 471.

⁴⁰ Thackeray, *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1945), 4:226.

⁴¹ Patmore to Allingham, 18 February 1857, in *Memoirs and Correspondence of Coventry Patmore*, ed. Basil Champneys (London: Bell and Sons, 1900), 2:185.

⁴² Hill, *Life of Octavia Hill, As Told in Her Letters*, ed. C. Edmund Maurice (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 90.

⁴³ Barbara Sicherman, "Reading and Middle-Class Identity in Victorian America," in *Reading Acts: U. S. Readers' Interactions with Literature, 1800-1950*, ed. Barbara Ryan and Amy M. Thomas (Knoxville: The Univ. of Tennessee Press, 2002), 150.

⁴⁴ Ellis, 31.

⁴⁵ Ruskin, 81

⁴⁶ Ellis, 133.

⁴⁷ Ruskin, 82.

⁴⁸ See Claudia Nelson, *Boys Will Be Girls: The Feminine Ethic and British Children's Fiction, 1857-1917* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1991); Catherine Robson, *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentleman* (Princeton.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001)

⁴⁹ Eleanor Farjeon, *A Nursery in the Nineties* (London: V. Gollancz, 1935), 204-205

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁵¹ Elaine Showalter describes the Brontë sisters as adopting male personas in their childhood play similarly as a way to “represent everything in their personalities that transcended the cramping feminine ideal.” Showalter, 58.

⁵² George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 153.

⁵³ Hill, 105.

⁵⁴ See Juliet Barker, *The Brontës: A Life in Letters* (Woodstock: Overlook, 2002), 10-12 *passim*.

⁵⁵ [Catharine Maria Sedgwick], *Means and Ends, or Self-Training* (Boston: Marsh, Capen, Lyon & Webb, 1839), 245.

⁵⁶ M. A. Stodart, *Hints on Reading: Addressed to a Young Lady* (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1839), 28-9.

⁵⁷ *Girls and Their Ways: A Book for and About Girls, by One Who Knows Them* (London: John Hogg, 1881), 178.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁵⁹ Mrs. Markham, *A History of England from the First Invasion by the Romans to the End of the Reign of George III* (London: John Murray, 1823), 1:325-26.

⁶⁰ Showalter, 61.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶² Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1982), 140.

⁶³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Mrs. Browning's Complete Poetical Works* (New York: Crowell, 1887), 521.

⁶⁴ Inattention to what is fitting allows *Aurora Leigh* to be lauded^{by} writer and reformer Frances Power Cobbe as “perhaps the least ‘Angelical’ poem in the language,” which “bears the relation to *Psyche* that a chiselled steel corslet does to a silk boddice with lace trimmings.” *Aurora Leigh* is thus analogized as another masculine, and moreover martial, costume for its authoress to assume at will. Cobbe, “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?” *Fraser's Magazine* 66 (1862): 602.

⁶⁵ Lillian M. Faithfull, *In the House of My Pilgrimage* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1925), 33-34.

⁶⁶ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 203.

⁶⁷ [Margaret Oliphant], “The Laws Concerning Women,” *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 79 (April 1856): 380.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 381.

⁶⁹ The Hon. Mrs. Norton, *A Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth's Marriage and Divorce Bill* (London: Longman, 1856), 13.

⁷⁰ William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 16th ed. (London: A. Strahan, 1825), 1:441-442.

⁷¹ Dorothy M. Stetson, *A Woman's Issue: The Politics of Family Law Reform in England* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1982), 61.

⁷² [William Roscoe], "Woman," *National Review* 7 (1858): 361.

⁷³ Oliphant, 380.

⁷⁴ Anthony Trollope, *Can You Forgive Her?* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), 111.

⁷⁵ Rachel Ablow, *The Marriage of the Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2007), 3-4.

⁷⁶ Cobbe, 605.

⁷⁷ Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 200.

⁷⁸ This was a view that would be confirmed by Victorian evolutionary anthropologists such as Sir John Lubbock (*The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man*, 1870) and J. F. McLennan (*Primitive Marriage*, 1865), "an apologia for the Victorian double standard," according to Andrew Paul Lyons and Harriet Lyons, *Irregular Connections: A History of Anthropology and Sexuality* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2004), 78.

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Robert Browning, 27 February 1845, in *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Browning*, 1:32.

⁸⁰ "The typing of perfumes as frivolous, for one, made them suitable only for 'frivolous creatures,' and in nineteenth-century society that meant women." Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London: Routledge, 1997), 83.

⁸¹ Janice Carlisle, *Common Scents Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 47.

⁸² Isaac Disraeli, *The Literary Character; or the History of Men of Genius*, ed. B. Disraeli (London: Warne, 1867), 208.

⁸³ Bina Freiwald, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*: Transcendentalism and the Female Subject," in *Proceedings of the Xth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, eds. Anna Balakian and James J. Wilhelm (New York: Garland, 1985), 2: 415.

⁸⁴ Herbert F. Tucker, "Aurora Leigh: Epic Solutions to Novel Ends," in *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, ed. Alison Booth (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1993), 75-6.

⁸⁵ Deirdre David, "Woman's Art as Servant of Patriarchy: The Vision of *Aurora Leigh*," in *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987), 157.

⁸⁶ "...it embodies what may well have been the most reasonable compromise between assertion and submission that a sane and worldly woman poet could achieve in the nineteenth century." Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), 575.

⁸⁷ Christine Sutphin, "Revising Old Scripts: The Fusion of Independence and Intimacy in *Aurora Leigh*," *Browning Institute Studies* 15 (1987): 44.

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Arabella Barrett, 4 October 1856, in *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Her Sister Arabella*, ed. Scott Lewis (Waco: Wedgstone Press, 2002), 2:258; “A One-Sided Correspondence,” in *The Overland Monthly* 5 (1885): 404.

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Chapters from a Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896), 64.

⁹⁰ Adelaide Louise Rouse, *Under My Own Roof* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1902) 148, 30.

⁹¹ See for example New York Public Library, *Bulletin* 24 (New York: Readex, 1920) 184.

⁹² Elizabeth Barrett to Mary Russell Mitford, 30 December 1844, in Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in *Brownings' Correspondence*, 9:304; Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Arabella Barrett, 4 October 1856, in *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Her Sister Arabella*, 2:257; Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Isa Blagden, 20 October 1856, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 335.

⁹³ Woolf, *Second Common Reader*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt, 1986), 212.

⁹⁴ Margaret Reynolds, preface to *Aurora Leigh*, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, vii.

⁹⁵ *Books Which Have Influenced Me* (New York: J. Pott, 1887), 35.

⁹⁶ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 98.

Novels without Heroines: Sensation and Misidentification

“So they devised a new term, and discovered a new mare's-nest, and told a new lie, and found the realisation of all their wishes in ‘Sensationalism.’”¹

The genre of sensation fiction was far from narrowly defined in the Victorian era. In 1863, *Punch* published a prospectus for a certain *Sensation Times* that satirized the apparent goals of sensation fiction: “namely, Harrowing the Mind, Making the Flesh Creep, Causing the Hair to Stand on End, Giving Shocks to the Nervous System, Destroying Conventional Moralities, and generally Unfitting the Public for the Prosaic Avocations of Life.”² “Sensation” here and elsewhere tended to refer both to the content of the literature and to the projected reaction of its audience. Because the genre was largely associated with its consumption, the formal characteristics of sensational texts themselves that elicited that response are more difficult to delineate. Today’s readers might be surprised to find that some George Eliot novels provoked more than one comparison to those of Mary Elizabeth Braddon.³ The defenders and practitioners of sensation often renounced its status as a new or particular genre, comparing its plots to those of Shakespeare, Dickens, Tennyson, and Sir Walter Scott, in containing the “vivid, and nervous, and forcible, and graphic, and true” in opposition “to the calmly dull, to the tranquilly inane, to the timorously decorous, to the sweetly stupid.”⁴ To its detractors, “sensation” was a synonym for “lowest common denominator,” a combination of effects calculated to sell to as many people as possible. In 1862, *Temple Bar*, which serialized Braddon’s works (she would later become its editor), pronounced sensation’s object to be “intensely commercial. It appeals not to the sympathies of the educated few but to those of the general public; and the definite purpose of its followers is to make money.”⁵ The *Edinburgh Review* claimed in 1864 that “Two or three years ago nobody would have known what was meant by a Sensation Novel,” but that now the term “has been adopted as the regular commercial name for a particular product of industry for which there is just now a brisk demand.”⁶ Despite its being “a particular product,” the article describes the sensation novel in the most general of economic terms, as supply for an impersonal “demand.”

To create this “craving” among “all classes of society,” sensation almost necessarily encompassed a variety of styles, plots, and characterizations.⁷ Indeed, “sensation” emerged as a category for works that could not fit neatly into other categories. As Alfred Austin lamented in an article on “Our Novelists: the Sensation School,” “they represent life neither as it is nor as it ought to be; and, therefore, while they fail to instruct, they do not even attempt to elevate. In a word, they are neither exact nor exalting.”⁸ Because sensation did not meet the requirements of either realism or idealism, it was defined by many of its detractors through its lack instead of its substance, as “aesthetically inferior, and by implication morally questionable,” according to Ann Cvetkovich.⁹ The heterogeneity of its style was read as insufficiency, or corruption of the prevalent modes of literature.¹⁰ Sally Shuttleworth argues that sensation’s “indiscretions” of plots involving criminal activity, which were hardly novel, “might have been forgiven if the novels had not also violated the sacred tenets of realism.”¹¹ The fact that popular novels were being held to those standards, however, indicates that even if the contents were nothing new, their cultural significance was.¹²

“Sensation” was cause and effect. It was psychological and physiological. It was morally neutral, or beneficial, or detrimental. The generic confusion and contradictions that sensation presented to Victorians extend to almost every other aspect of the fiction’s reception, including

its gendering. Sensation was supposed to be universally appealing, but at the same time oriented toward female readers. It was deemed a feminine genre, but it promoted unfeminine behavior, capitalizing on stereotypically feminine passivity and credulity while representing seemingly incredible female activity.

Many of the distinctive facets of sensation were and are contestable, but beyond asserting its flexible quality as a genre, this chapter argues that this quality—and not merely the prominence of its immoral female protagonists—prompted a crisis about the perils of female readers' misidentification. Focusing on the extremely popular novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, I locate the problem of sensation in the way that it refuses to fix the reader's affinities; sensation did not so much encourage total identification with villains or antiheroines as much as solicit the reader's choices among multiple possible perspectives. Opposing the model of sensation as a "nervous" form of readerly identification and therefore a stereotypically feminine mode of reception, posited by Victorian critics and elaborated upon by recent scholars such as Shuttleworth and D. A. Miller, this chapter suggests a different paradigm of consciously interrogative reading.¹³ I contend that sensation fiction, rather than blatantly subverting societal mores, called upon its readers to decide upon their own balance of abstract ethical standards with individual proclivities and self-interest. In this way, it anticipated the process of political election during the "exciting infant years" of the women's suffrage movement in Great Britain.¹⁴

Crisis of Gender

Sensation fiction's strong associations with female authors, female readers, and female characters garnered intense scrutiny for its effects on a gender characterized by its vulnerability. Lyn Pykett primarily attributes the crises surrounding sensation to its gynocentrism: "Many, perhaps most, of the reviewers' objections to the genre, and their anxieties about it, derive from their perception of it as a form written by women, about women and, on the whole, for women."¹⁵ Sensation's plots offended the more stringent standards of decency for female authors. *The Spectator* pronounced the "moral" of Braddon's *Dead Sea Fruit* to be "good enough" and yet at the same time found fault with the "half-cynical acquiescence in immorality which is especially unbecoming to a woman's pen"; the content of the story was proper until considered in the light of its author's gender.¹⁶ And yet women also seemed to have a special power for portraying their own immorality, according to clergyman Francis Paget, who fulminated in the afterword to *Lucretia*, his parody of sensation novels, "No *man* would have dared to write and publish such books as some of these are: no man *could* have written such delineations of female passion."¹⁷ These female-penned portraits of female passion also explicitly catered to a susceptible feminine audience. A number of sensation novels directly addressed or assumed a woman reader, as the narrator of Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* apostrophizes: "Oh, reader, believe me! Lady—wife—mother! should you ever be tempted to abandon your home, so will you wake."¹⁸ Braddon herself said that she had learned to write for "the Circulating Library and the young lady readers who are its chief supporters."¹⁹ As the prolific novelist and critic Margaret Oliphant summarized the problem, female authorship of such deeds made them more credible than sensational, and therefore more amenable to identification: "this new and disgusting picture of what professes to be the female heart, comes from the hands of women, and is tacitly accepted by them as real."²⁰

Critic E. S. Dallas, among others, attributed sensation's plots and characterizations to the "increased feminine influence in our literature."²¹ Female protagonists, along with women writers, were nothing new in the age of "domestic fiction," but the sensation novel

contextualized these characters differently. Instead of representing interiority, the women as well as the men of sensation novels engaged in a “life of action,” which Dallas disputed on the aesthetic grounds of verisimilitude as “a false position.” The female activity that drove sensation easily and necessarily devolved into female immorality. Sensation’s ostensible focus on women necessarily corrupted their character by forcing them out of feminine supporting roles, as Dallas explained, shifting from aesthetic to moral terms, “The very prominence of the position which women occupy in recent fiction leads by a natural process to their appearing in a light which is not good. This is what is called sensation.”²²

What seemed to confuse and alarm Dallas further was that the result of this feminized influence was “a display of what in women is most unfeminine. One is reminded of the famous fact that the first record of feminine conduct in the world’s history is unfeminine. Eve is said to have eaten the apple in a masculine lust of power—to be as the gods; Adam is a feminine weakness of affection for the mate who offered it.”²³ Dallas thus betrays how flexible in application such conceptions of “masculine” and “feminine”—ambition versus sentiment—were, and thereby undermines their validity as standards for what was natural or unnatural, real or sensational. As sensation itself was difficult to define, so, increasingly, was femininity.²⁴

Critic Alfred Austin, who allowed his animus toward sensation novels to intrude into a review of Swinburne’s poetry, likewise bemoaned the growing trend where “the heroines of novels have been more important than the heroes; and when they were not actually intended to be such by their author or authoress, they have been determinedly invested with more interest by the general public.”²⁵ Even more disturbing to Austin appears to be sensation’s readers’ ability to decide where to “invest” their attention, particularly in the direction of female characters who, with the readers, seem to have more agency than the hapless “author or authoress.” Oliphant was also particularly exercised by the idea that her fellow women, by not contesting their portrayal in sensation novels, were actively and deliberately identifying with fictional antiheroines:

Nasty thoughts, ugly suggestions, an imagination which prefers the unclean, is almost more appalling than the facts of actual depravity, because it has no excuse of sudden passion or temptation, and no visible boundary. It is a shame to women so to write; and it is a shame to the women who read and accept as a true representation of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshly inclinations herein attributed to them. Their patronage of such books is in reality an adoption and acceptance of them. It may be done in carelessness, it may be done in that mere desire for something startling which the monotony of ordinary life is apt to produce; but it is debasing to everybody concerned.²⁶

Oliphant thus describes reading the sensation novel as a particular kind of contract between author, text, and female reader, whereby women select representatives of themselves. Women engaged in “actual depravity” upsets her less than women choosing their “patronage” as readers without a “visible boundary” for others to police.

The distrust of female reading agency expressed by Austin and Oliphant belies the accounts of sensation by Victorian and modern critics as a fundamentally passive and therefore feminine mode of reception.²⁷ Literary scholars have seized upon the addictive or appetitive metaphors exploited by sensation’s critics to account for its appeal (“the public craving for its favourite food,” as Margaret Oliphant put it).²⁸ But whereas Cvetkovich, for example, writes that *feeling* itself was put on trial by these critics, I contend that the “prospect of a reader reduced to a body reacting instinctively to a text” was not so ominous when that reaction seemed to promote a traditionally domestic or law-abiding ideology.²⁹ That is, a female reader’s presumably

instinctive identification with an antiheroine was defensible and even useful as long as the character is ultimately reformed or expelled from the narrative.

Crisis of Character

As we have seen with the “female Quixote,” the “crisis” of women being manipulated by their reading was not unique to this genre. Sensation was simply the newest and most effective package for a potentially harmful message that women readers might absorb. A critic denouncing the “False Morality of Lady Novelists” explained that “novels constitute a principal part of the reading of women, who are always impressionable, in whom at all times the emotional element is more awake and more powerful than the critical, whose feelings are more easily aroused and whose estimates are more easily influenced than ours.”³⁰ Such critics found women’s “feelings” and “estimates” to be “matters of special and preeminent concern” not merely in and of themselves, but because they might not exploit women’s passivity so much as spark their activity through the impulse of emulation. The *New Review* rather absurdly worried that *Lady Audley’s Secret* “may serve as a kind of bigamy-made-easy to young ladies with good looks, bad hearts, and absent husbands.”³¹ The *Spectator*, however, countered that “no one will be inclined to follow the example of Lady Audley, who accompanies her to her final doom in the Belgian madhouse.”³²

Women’s impressionability was thus not problematic *in itself* when it was being capitalized upon to reaffirm normative values, through the mechanism of the cautionary tale. Some critics, including one at the conservative *Saturday Review*, argued that Braddon indirectly reinforced moral standards by punishing her “female demons” in her denouements: “No half-educated men or women who are eaten up with a passion for novel-reading shut up their book with the conviction on their minds that moral obliquities pay.”³³ This view of sensation as indoctrinating women and other “half-educated” persons against criminality and deviance accords with Miller’s idea of the novel’s disciplinary function, and with other recent critics’ assessments of the genre based on its endings, in which the villainess or antiheroine is, if not dead, “safely relocated within patriarchal institutions of female reform,” the prison, the madhouse, or the happy marriage.³⁴

The end did not always justify the means, though, for other Victorian critics of sensation who viewed the charm of the antiheroine as the bait for a moral trap, instead of a moral lesson. These critics tended to complain that their sympathies were being coerced as readers to align with evil over good. Reviewing Braddon’s *Aurora Floyd*, *Fraser’s Magazine* asserted that the writer is able to enlist readers’ emotional allegiance to Aurora “in spite of our better judgment,” because the book’s “sympathy is all on the side of the bigamist...in short, we are perfectly aware that she is very far from being what she ought to be, and yet we cannot resist the wonderful fascination which she exercises over everybody who crosses her path.”³⁵ *The North British Review* claimed that Braddon teaches her readers “to sympathize with murderers.” As for the ostensible heroes and heroines, “We can hardly sympathize with fools when their own folly is the cause of their misfortunes. Miss Braddon renders all those who are not wicked so utterly ridiculous, that we are tempted to infer she designed to show how mistaken a thing is probity or goodness.”³⁶ Oliphant, who described identification with the position of the male protagonist of Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* as inevitable and universal (“Few readers will be able to resist the mysterious thrill of this sudden touch. The sensation is distinct and indisputable”), tellingly objects to the manipulation of *East Lynne*’s readers to side with the fallen heroine:

From first to last it is she alone in whom the reader feels any interest. Her virtuous rival we should like to bundle to the door and be rid of, anyhow. The Magdalen herself, who is only moderately interesting while she is good, becomes, as soon as she is a Magdalen, doubly a heroine. It is evident that nohow, except by her wickedness and sufferings, could she have gained so strong a hold upon our sympathies. This is dangerous and foolish work, as well as false, both to Art and Nature.³⁷

The *Contemporary Review* went so far as to accuse Braddon of “artistic atheism,” by “studiously, and of set purpose, seek[ing] to awaken our sympathies for certain types of character by involving us in such circumstances as tend to set us in active opposition to some conventional moral regards.”³⁸

The idea of the author coercing readerly sympathy for certain favored characters, subjugating the reader’s reason or morality, provided a catchall explanation for any idiosyncratic response to sensation texts. Even while Oliphant and the *North British Review* claimed that sensation novels skewed the audience’s favor toward the wicked and away from the foolish victims, another reviewer reproached Braddon for making him empathize against his will with the heroine, Mary—not the antiheroine, Olivia—of *John Marchmont’s Legacy* (1864):

Few novelists possess the power of swaying the sympathies of their readers to the extent to which Miss Braddon possesses it...Miss Braddon loves Mary Marchmont, pities her weakness, feels the hopelessness of contending against its fatal influence, follows the villainous machinations to which the gentle orphan girl is made a victim with keen distress and indignation, hunts her enemy to his doom with a righteous anger which betrays her into an exaggerated catastrophe, and throws a pathetic, poetical interest around the shrinking, nerveless figure of the wretched heiress. The reader is forced to follow her in those vaticinations [sic] of feeling. In vain he remonstrates with himself, and argues that Mary Marchmont was too weak and silly to be really interesting; she *is* really interesting, and no argument weighs against Miss Braddon's determination that her readers shall find her so.³⁹

Attributing the origin of his emotional response toward the novel to its author, the reviewer simultaneously presents himself as resistant, but ultimately powerless against the feelings—love, pity, “righteous anger”—etc. to which he assumes the author herself is subject.

Yet despite this critical narrative of almost absolute textual power to compel the audience’s sympathy, in however perverse or irrational a direction, the object of that sympathy or identification was by no means clearly and stably delineated. Taking the opposing side of the argument on the same grounds, *The Christian Remembrancer* called Olivia Marchmont, the tormentor of Mary, “one of Braddon’s favourites,” whereas her “odious females are all remarkable for conformity to the respectable type.”⁴⁰ Sympathy and identification were not always predictable, and sensation especially seemed to confound assumptions, so much so that two critics could disagree entirely on the intended protagonist. More than a decade earlier in *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray had dramatized the ways in which a reading public can rebel against a narrative’s perceived designation of a proper heroine, in juxtaposing the comparative charm of Becky Sharp with the milksop Amelia Sedley.⁴¹ Theatrical dramatizations of *East Lynne* similarly produced boos for the unimpeachable heroine Barbara and cheers for the “Magdalen” Isabel.⁴² Such heterogeneous reactions mirrored the heterogeneity of sensation’s female characters, whose crimes could range from mere unconventionality to mortal sin, from following

the horse races to attempting murder. As my own chapter has alternated between referring to heroines, antiheroines, and villainesses, the lines of demarcation between these types of characters were no longer entirely obvious.

Winifred Hughes, one of the recent critics who see sensation as essentially subversive, writes that the ousting of the heroine from her symbolic position of moral anchor indicated that “The one island of security and certitude remaining in a tumultuous age has been invaded and despoiled.”⁴³ Yet the alteration of the heroine in the sensation novel was not merely a matter of ambiguous morality, but what Victorian critics saw as a devaluation of character as literary form. The divided focus of sensation novels on multiple characters, out of whom it was difficult for the reader to extract one obvious object for identification, prompted these critics to say that character itself was being sacrificed on the altar of plot and spectacle. Such complaints often equated “character” with the traditionally central figures of hero and heroine, which the sensation novel displaced and diluted. Dallas blamed sensation for “the withering of the individual as an exceptional hero, and his growth as a multiplicand unit.”⁴⁴ Poet Robert Buchanan, who estimated that “feminine hands” were responsible for “[a]t least two-thirds of all the novels published nowadays,” explained that “the novel contains no longer a hero and a heroine, but a cluster of heroes and heroines, painted from nature with attention even to the slightest peculiarity in an eyebrow.”⁴⁵ Panoramic views of society, along with characters’ criminal behavior, were hardly unique within Victorian literature, but sensation appeared to be distinctly less concerned with individual interiority as a standard for character representation— and more concerned with the realism of externality, the quirk of the eyebrow.

Braddon’s particular attention to characters’ physical and ornamental attributes inspired much derision (W. Fraser Rae, for example, satirized Braddon’s obsession with “the great hair question”)⁴⁶ because it seemed to conceal a void of subjectivity that the author must therefore be incapable of depicting. Henry James described Lady Audley as a sort of a facsimile of a character (and thus in a way a facsimile of a facsimile of a person) consisting merely of surface elements: “Of course Lady Audley is a nonentity, without a heart, a soul, a reason. But what we may call the small change for these facts— her eyes, her hair, her mouth, her dresses, her bedroom furniture, her little words and deeds — are so lavishly bestowed that she successfully maintains a kind of half illusion.”⁴⁷ Braddon herself must have absorbed some of this criticism, admitting in an 1865 letter to Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton that “I am impressed too much by externals and in thinking of any of my characters I see their attitudes—the scenery & atmosphere about them—every detail of pictorial effect—and perhaps forget altogether the subjective side of the question.”⁴⁸ She thus positioned herself, as she was accused of positioning her reader, as a passive spectator of her own narrative, instead of an omniscient creator.

Braddon’s self-deprecation was to some extent a defense, however, against the idea that she manipulated her characters as well as her readers so as to deprive them of even the semblance of free will. Austin’s critique of sensation revolves upon this point of the author’s limitless power in inverse relation to the characters’ self-control:

In fact, these sensational characters are nothing but puppets, which, as in a Punch-and-Judy show, we know by their dress or distinguish by their speech. Puppets, however, hung with characteristics have this advantage over genuine characters, that the wire-man below—that is to say, the writer—can make them do anything he likes, without disturbing the credulity of the average reader, or transmuting his gape into a stare.⁴⁹

According to Austin's analogy, "genuine characters" have some measure of autonomy independent from the will of their author to "make them do anything he likes." Or, such characters (and presumably their author) serve another, superior master: a standard of realism higher than mere credibility for "the average reader."

This standard of realistic character hinges on the idea of moral agency and its ramifications. While Victorian critics condemned the sensation heroine for engaging in masculine activities, they did not interpret her behavior as a deliberate choice, but rather a submission to emotion, instinct, fate, or—extradiegetically—the contingencies of the plot. Since the "characters in general are written for the story, and not the story for the characters," according to such criticisms, they move "whether the movement be absurd or not."⁵⁰ The characters are thus passively buffeted around by external events or unaccountable internal urges. *The Contemporary Review* condemned the degradation of classical heroism by which *hamartia* became "individuals placed in doubtful circumstances, who fall into falsely tragical positions because of their weakness, and their want of that will in which lies the very root of heroic action."⁵¹ *The New Review* grouped sensation heroines by their lack of characteristics other than emotion: "There is no play of motives, no exhibition of traits in any one of these ladies. Each of them is simply an embodied passion—love, hate, revenge, the thirst for wealth and splendour, or what not."⁵² Similarly, *The Christian Remembrance* indicted the sensation heroine not for any coldly calculated crimes, but for her lack of rational self-possession:

The heroine of this class of novel is charming because she is undisciplined, and the victim of impulse; because she has never known restraint or has cast it aside, because in all these respects she is below the thoroughly trained and tried woman. This lower level, this drop from the empire of reason and self-control, is to be traced throughout this class of literature, which is a consistent appeal to the animal part of our nature.⁵³

Though *The New Review* claimed that sensational characters were "deficient in all those qualities in virtue of which we make personal friends or enemies of fictitious characters," *The Christian Remembrancer* tried to explain why, if the actions of these characters were so unrealistic, their motivations so opaque, and their situations so contingent, readers could be so absorbed by them.⁵⁴ Either readers lacked self-control and recognized their animalistic selves within sensational characters, or sensational characters' lack of self-control inspired emulative reading behavior, in which reason was sacrificed for instinctive gratification. According to this logic, passive characters begot passive readers, or at least encouraged a particularly passive reading style.

Sensation's cipher-like characters thereby did not exclude the possible occurrence of identification. As Catherine Gallagher has argued with regard to fiction, "it is easier to identify with nobody's story and share nobody's sentiments than to identify with anybody else's story and share anybody else's sentiments."⁵⁵ A character's lack of completely human particularity allows for greater flexibility for the reader to insert himself within it. In the case of sensation (according to its critics), its characters' empty outlines with marked physical features and uncertain psychological traits and motivations created inviting fictional carapaces for readers to inhabit. But, since a reader's identification was not compelled by a specific emotional affinity or explicitly anchored to any particular character, it necessitated a choice—or more aptly, choices, because the sensation novel's "breathless rapidity of movement" solicited fluctuating response.⁵⁶ Braddon's most famous sensation novels stage, but do not determine, the numerous shifting possibilities of readerly identification within her narratives.

Sensational Misidentification in *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*

Braddon was of course not the only prominent writer of sensation novels, but she was a pioneer and a personal emblem for the genre. In speaking of Braddon's career, James cast the author as a kind of recklessly driven sensation heroine: "Miss Braddon accordingly resorted to extreme measures, and created the sensation novel. It is to this audacity, this courage of despair, as manifested in her later works, that we have given the name of pluck."⁵⁷ W. Fraser Rae attributed to Braddon an extraordinary ability to insinuate the "stories of blood and lust, of atrocious crimes and hardened criminals" customarily beloved by a lower-class audience into more socially and intellectually respectable circles.⁵⁸ To Rae, Braddon's books are deceptive social climbers, masking their low origins with an unaccented style and upmarket medium of publication. Braddon's past as an actress and her present as the companion of the married John Maxwell created an additional context of scandal for reviewers to filter into their assessments of her novels. Rae speculated about the creator of *Aurora Floyd*, "An authoress who could make one of her sex play the chief part in such a scene, is evidently acquainted with a very low type of female character, or else incapable of depicting that which she knows to be true."⁵⁹ Notoriety, however, is another word for popularity, and the connotations of promiscuity that attached to Braddon's public persona applied just as fittingly to her readership. The *Dublin University Magazine* reviewer affirmed Braddon's undeniable ubiquity in sweeping terms:

Everyone who reads novels at all has read Miss Braddon's novels; however their appreciation of them may vary... It is, if not a proveable, at least not a rash assertion, that no English novelist, with the exception of Mr. Charles Dickens, has so completely gained and so indisputably kept the public attention and favour as Miss Braddon.⁶⁰

Ironically, the technique that enabled Braddon to capture and hold readers' attention involved continual shifts of readerly perspective cued by the narrative's own shiftiness. Neither the narrator nor any of the main characters in her sensation novels offer a consistent or comfortable vehicle for identification. Early in *Lady Audley's Secret*, before any murder has been attempted, the narrator muses both conversationally and ominously:

We hear every day of murders committed in the country. Brutal and treacherous murders; slow, protracted agonies from poisons administered by some kindred hand; sudden and violent deaths by cruel blows, inflicted with a stake cut from some spreading oak, whose very shadow promised—peace. In the county of which I write, I have been shown a meadow in which, on a quiet summer Sunday evening, a young farmer murdered the girl who had loved and trusted him; and yet even now, with the stain of that foul deed upon it, the aspect of the spot is—peace. No crime has ever been committed in the worst rookeries about Seven Dials that has not been also done in the face of that sweet rustic calm which still, in spite of all, we look on with a tender, half-mournful yearning, and associate with—peace.⁶¹

The narrator ratchets up suspense by including the audience, "we," in her knowledge of the world as fundamentally bloody and chaotic, with a seemingly infinite number of crimes and tragedies buried beneath misleading surfaces. Patrick Brantlinger calls this technique of Braddon's "key jingling," in which "the narrator, even while foreshadowing with fatalistic implications, ceases to convey all information and begins to disguise much of it as hints, clues, hiatuses."⁶² The narrator also humanizes herself enough to trouble the idea of her omniscience. While able to enter the minds of the characters throughout *Lady Audley's Secret*, the narrator

occasionally retreats into uncertainty, as when she speculates about the motives of Sir Michael Audley: “I do not think that throughout his courtship the baronet once calculated upon his wealth or position as a strong reason for his success” (7). The ontological status of the narrator is itself a mystery, and one that calls attention to itself. Undoubtedly the narrator’s alternation between coy reticence and human doubt is designed to tantalize the reader, but the result is not necessarily the indiscriminate devouring of pages. If the narrator has, at Brantlinger asserts, relinquished “authority or at least innocence, becoming a figure no longer to be trusted,” the reader has all the more responsibility to pay suspicious attention to every last detail.⁶³

The previously unalert Robert Audley warns Lady Audley, and the reader, that everything is potential evidence, and the consequences of relaxing one’s focus are life and death: Upon what infinitesimal trifles may sometimes hang the whole secret of some wicked mystery, inexplicable heretofore to the wisest upon the earth! A scrap of paper; a shred of some torn garment; the button off a coat; a word dropped incautiously from the over-cautious lips of guilt; the fragment of a letter; the shutting or opening of a door; a shadow on a window-blind; the accuracy of a moment; a thousand circumstances so slight as to be forgotten by the criminal, but links of steel in the wonderful chain forged by the science of the detective officer; and lo! the gallows is built up; the solemn bell tolls through the dismal grey of the early morning; the drop creaks under the guilty feet; and the penalty of crime is paid. (119-20)

Here Robert Audley all but utters “J’accuse” to Lady Audley in the first of the book’s three volumes; he continues to insinuate her guilt at various points in the novel, rehearsing their final confrontation. His numerous pointed lectures to Lady Audley and her involuntary but obvious emotional reactions confirming Robert’s words disrupt the reader’s alignment with him as the amateur detective. He offers threats instead of resolutions, whereas Lady Audley’s guilt is painfully transparent. The reader may find her sympathetically legible under attack; she is no diabolical mastermind, but a susceptible human being.

Robert Audley does not even emerge as a possible protagonist until chapter four, but we have known Lucy Audley from the very first chapter, in which she refuses to pretend to love Michael Audley, but confesses outright, “I *cannot* be disinterested; I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance” (11). Although Lucy conceals her prior marriage to Talboys, she is emotionally quite candid with her rich suitor. We are privy in the same chapter to her conversation with herself as she considers the souvenirs she has retained of her previous marriage and abandoned child, “No more dependence, no more drudgery, no more humiliations...every trace of the old life melted away—every clue to identity buried and forgotten—except these, except these” (12). Even though the novel goes on in large part to follow Robert’s perspective in unraveling Lady Audley’s various secrets, we still sporadically witness Lady Audley’s private moments, and in a sequence of chapters following a more definitive clash with Robert, hear her soliloquize extensively on the state of mind that motivates her to attempt murder once again:

Perhaps it would be wiser in me to run away, to take this man's warning, and escape out of his power for ever. If I were to run away and disappear — as George Talboys disappeared. But where could I go? What would become of me? I have no money: my jewels are not worth a couple of hundred pounds, now that I have got rid of the best part of them. What could I do? I must go back to the old life, the old, hard, cruel, wretched life — the life of poverty, and humiliation, and

vexation, and discontent. I should have to go back and wear myself out in that long struggle, and die — as my mother died, perhaps. (316)

We are present with Lady Audley during her act of arson, as we were not during her scene with Talboys, and are thus uncomfortably complicit with her actions, which are far from mysterious. Though the narrator moralistically condemns Lady Audley's enthrallment by "Vanity, Selfishness and Ambition" (297), she or he also expounds upon the pain endured by Lady Audley at this moment: "She suffered agonies that would fill closely printed volumes, bulky with a thousand pages, in that one horrible night. She underwent volumes of anguish, and doubt, and perplexity. Sometimes repeating the same chapters of her torments over and over again. Sometimes hurrying through a thousand pages of her misery without one pause, without one moment of breathing time" (314). Lady Audley being figured as a reader implies that she is multiplying her sorrows by experiencing them vicariously, staging the very act of identification that a sympathetic reader might feel for her position as a victim as well as a criminal.

Yet through most of the novel we do view Lady Audley at a distance, as the beautiful enigma whose exact actions with Talboys are unknown to us. *Aurora Floyd* includes similar lacunae in which Aurora's marriage to the groom Conyers and his subsequent murder are narratively elided so as to stoke the reader's suspicions. Indeed, we are encouraged to infer that Aurora is responsible for the murder.⁶⁴ We are granted much more time with the ultimately innocent (of murder, if not bigamy) Aurora than Lady Audley, but Hughes contends that these gaps in our total knowledge of the heroine's experience create an audience of distanced spectators: "Aurora Floyd can be allowed to perform her histrionics for a couple of volumes without our knowing why; what is at the root of them, or becoming in any way involved."⁶⁵ Other critics have also argued for the sensation novel's promotion of voyeuristic response from readers at the expense of identification. Cvetkovich, for instance, maintains that female readers looking to Lady Audley for the vicarious pleasure of revolt would have to reckon with the novel's constant positioning of Lady Audley as the "object of the male viewer's voyeurism," in part because "the narrative rarely provides access to Lady Audley's inner life or point of view."⁶⁶

While I have contested the idea that Lady Audley's mental processes are so opaque, or even that opacity would necessarily prevent identification, she is certainly more exhaustively described in terms of her exterior than her interior. Even within one of the chapters where the narrator shares Lady Audley's feelings and thoughts at length, he or she also pauses to enumerate the gorgeous and costly items in her room in great detail, among which, "My lady's fairy-like embroideries of lace and muslin, rainbow-hued silks, and delicately-tinted wools littered the luxurious apartment; while the looking-glasses, cunningly placed at angles and opposite corners by an artistic upholsterer, multiplied my lady's image, and in that image reflected the most beautiful object in the enchanted chamber" (294-95). This passage, along with many others in the novel, directly emphasizes Lady Audley's status as a "beautiful object" for visual consumption instead of a dynamic actor. She is certainly an object of romantic desire for Sir Michael Audley and George Talboys—who both fall in love with her at first glance—as well as detective desire for Robert Audley. But the reader's vantage point for Lady Audley is necessarily verbal, not visual, and thus however minutely her appearance is described, its beauty cannot make the reader sensorially susceptible. Instead, we see that Lady Audley, far from being a stationary object, is motivated to action through her desire for the other beautiful things in the room, so much so that she tries to carry them with her to the insane asylum. Even more crucially, we also see the refractions of Lady Audley's image throughout the book, the ways in which other characters

along with the narrator perceive her and create a variety of portraits, from a child to a siren to a madwoman.

Multiple views of a mysterious antiheroine recur in Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*, where Talbot Bulstrode begins to fall in love with Aurora while simultaneously denying that he is doing so:

I cannot help admiring this extraordinary girl. She is like Mrs. Nisbett in her zenith of fame and beauty; she is like Cleopatra sailing down the Cydnus; she is like Nell Gwynne selling oranges; she is like Lola Montes giving battle to the Bavarian students; she is like Charlotte Corday with the knife in her hand, standing behind the friend of the people in his bath; she is like everything that is beautiful, and strange, and wicked and unwomanly, and bewitching; and she is just the sort of creature that many a fool would fall in love with.⁶⁷

This is a literally voyeuristic scene, in which we regard the heroine through a male character's eyes, and yet his gaze cannot fix her in place. While this succession of historical women might seem like slight variations on a similar type, performers and political actors who flout a traditional feminine ideal through aggressive behavior, the sheer profusion of female figures from ancient Egypt to the nineteenth century reflects the range of interpretations the reader as well as the characters in the novel can have of Aurora. Bulstrode himself will occupy a gamut of positions relative to Aurora that alternately build and frustrate the audience's expectations: he abhors her, falls in love with her, has his trust in her broken, finds contentment in marrying another woman, and then helps Aurora after she marries another man.

The combination of multiple, changing perspectives on the central antiheroine from other characters and the partial access to her interiority provided by the narrative—alternately revealing and concealing her subjectivity—explains why literary scholars are able to argue convincingly on either side that the reader necessarily does or does not identify with her. Pykett acknowledges the reader's fluctuating position in Braddon's novels:

The reader, by turns, recognises herself in the heroine and views the action through her eyes; is made into a spectator of the heroine, who becomes the fetishised object of her gaze; is addressed by the narrator, or co-opted to a narrative perspective which involves a moral judgment of the heroine. As a consequence of these shifting perspectives the female reader has the complex narrative pleasure (simultaneously or by turns) of spectating and participating in an exciting deviance, and in the moral judgment of that deviance, as well as spectating and participating in the punitive social and emotional consequences of transgression.⁶⁸

What is implicit in Pykett's phrasing in terms of alternatives, "simultaneously or by turns," is that the "complex narrative pleasure" offered by Braddon's novels is not automatic; though Pykett says the female reader is passively "made...addressed...co-opted" to occupy certain vantage points, the reader is also constantly making choices as to their degree of distance or identification. Through these perspectival shifts and thematic emphasis on the instability of identity, Braddon stimulates awareness of the processes of reading and identification instead of merely manipulating them.

Shuttleworth demonstrates how the sensation genre, as opposed to realism, disrupts the idea of the "unified," continuous self, but she views its effect on the reader as a surrender to "feminine 'sensation' at the expense of 'masculine reason': "The reader is not placed in a position of calm knowledge superior to that of the characters but is rather continually startled by

events and actions into states of extreme sensation.”⁶⁹ While sensation by no means grants the reader a sense of mastery over its plots and characters, I contend that through its many fundamental uncertainties it encourages the reader’s autonomy. Even when Braddon explicitly places her reader in the text, as in the opening lines in second person of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, she leaves room for infinite points of departure: “It lay down in a hollow, rich with fine old timber and luxuriant pastures; and you came upon it through an avenue of limes, bordered on either side by meadows, over the high hedges of which the cattle looked inquisitively at you as you passed, wondering, perhaps, what you wanted; for there was no thoroughfare, and unless you were going to the Court you had no business there at all” (1). The audacious vagueness of using an indefinite pronoun without an antecedent as the very first word of the novel, along with the hesitancy of “perhaps,” imply that while the narrator is inviting the reader into the setting, his or her reaction is independent and not entirely predictable. Even the cattle are wont to speculate.

This maneuvering of the reader into the narrative does not attempt to assign or influence her emotional response in the same way that, for example, George Eliot does in her first novel, *Adam Bede*, which at least one reviewer considered the sensational precursor to *Lady Audley’s Secret*.⁷⁰ The narrator of *Adam Bede* positions himself as an advocate for his characters against the anticipated objections of his prudish “lady readers.”⁷¹ For the somewhat worldly but hardly licentious rector Mr. Irwine, the narrator “must plead” with “affectionate partiality,” and reiterates that “with [Irwine] I desire you to be in perfect charity, far as he may be from satisfying your demands on the clerical character.”⁷² By introducing imaginary straw women to take protest at a relatively inoffensive character, the narrator aligns the ideal reader with his or her seemingly more reasonable, tolerant, and even pleasurable perspective of “delicious sympathy.” In so doing, he or she also attempts to forestall more justifiable outrage later on in the novel when one of the female protagonists, Hetty Sorrell, finds herself pregnant out of wedlock and attempts infanticide.⁷³ Before Hetty is put on trial, the reader has already heard persuasive personal testimony from the narrator on her behalf: “My heart bleeds for her.”⁷⁴ The narrator prods the reader into compassion by modeling the appropriate response to *Adam Bede*’s characters, while the readers who potentially resist such emotional alignments are, interestingly enough, gendered female.

In Braddon’s novels, the reader is prompted to imagine, certainly to speculate, but not necessarily to feel a certain way—whether emotional sentiment or psychosomatic sensation. The *New Review* subsequently criticized Braddon in 1863 for her *inability* to completely absorb readers within her narratives:

In reading a novel of the one stamp, you never lose your self-consciousness or faculty of criticism. In the other you constantly do lose them, surrendering yourself at moments to a kind of dream, in which the fiction seems reality. Now, to this description of influence over the minds of her readers Miss Braddon has never yet attained. There is not a single scene in any one of her novels which, to use a phrase often very much misapplied, you thoroughly “enter into.” You view them all from the outside, as it were, in a friendly and interested mood, but not in the temper of a participator. You are master of yourself and of the story throughout, instead of being mastered by it. This defect alone is, of course, sufficient to exclude Miss Braddon from the highest rank of novel writers.⁷⁵

In complete contradiction of the cliché of the sensation novel’s haplessly compelled reader, *The New Review* dismisses Braddon’s novels for their failure to bring about total identification. Instead, the reader retains agency, self-awareness, and rationality. While the engagement of

readers' "faculty of criticism" is usually the criterion for higher literary status, to this Victorian reviewer it is a "defect" in Braddon's fiction because it is accompanied by "self-consciousness."

Although the *New Review* does not employ gendered terms in its critique, "self-consciousness" tended to describe a feminine propensity, one that Eliza Lynn Linton argued was becoming especially aggravated in her "Girl of the Period" articles in the *Saturday Review*:

The main characteristic of these women is self-consciousness. They live before a moral mirror, and pass their time in attitudinizing to what they think the best advantage. They can do nothing simply, nothing spontaneously and without the fullest consciousness as to how they do it, and how they look while they are doing it. In every action of their lives they see themselves as pictures, as characters in a novel, as impersonations of poetic images or thoughts.⁷⁶

Linton's affected women do not immerse themselves in literature through simple and spontaneous identification, but rather project themselves narcissistically into flattering tableaux. Pykett observes that Linton's article "seeks to delimit and control the feminine by ridiculing women's autonomous development of their socially assigned gender roles."⁷⁷ What is ironic, however, is that Linton is not lamenting women's uncontrollability (as she would do in her "Wild Woman" articles of 1891) but rather the phenomenon of women regulating their own behavior. Nina Auerbach has described the fluidity of womanhood as a concept in the Victorian period, connoting both "uncontrolled silliness" and "disruptive capacity for boundless transformation."⁷⁸ The difference between the ridiculous and the dangerous aspects of protean womanhood was the degree of deliberateness involved, whether or not women transformed themselves. In this respect, the female readers Linton mentions—including readers of sensation—diverge from the female characters in Braddon's sensation novels, who are often afraid to examine themselves directly in any "moral mirror."

Lady Audley, for instance, is described above as passively "reflected" and "multiplied" by the looking-glasses in her chamber, as well as in her portrait. She has a tenuous grasp of her own identity, whose every mutation can be explained—though hardly satisfactorily—as madness. Before deciding to murder Robert Audley, she tries to understand her degree of culpability: "'Have I ever been really *wicked*, I wonder?' she mused. 'My worst wickednesses have been the result of wild impulses, and not of deeply-laid plots. I am not like the women I have read of, who have lain night after night in the horrible dark and stillness, planning out treacherous deeds, and arranging every circumstance of an appointed crime'" (297). Lady Audley's endeavor to read herself in comparison with textual figures (it is unclear whether she refers to fiction or nonfiction) falls short of a convincing analysis because it is too externally directed, like a defense to an imaginary jury that she lacks premeditation, even as she is about to plan a crime. She is unable to face and recognize herself in the female criminals she has read about, to identify even temporarily with a wicked woman in order to choose another path.

Elective Identification in *The Doctor's Wife*

A deliberate departure from Braddon's previous novels, *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) portrays a female character who uses literary identification in order to stake out an independent morality for herself. In *The Doctor's Wife*, Braddon not only revised *Madame Bovary* (before it was translated into English) for a British audience, she was also trying to revise her own storytelling practices. To Bulwer Lytton, her frequent correspondent and mentor, she wrote, "I have thought very much over what you said in your last letter with regard to a novel in which the story arises naturally out of the characters of the actors in it, as contrasted with a novel in which

the actors are only marionettes, the slaves of the story...I have done my best with *this* book, & the writing of it has been a labour of love...the most conscientious book I have done.”⁷⁹ She excised sex and suicide from the plot to narrate an entirely emotional affair between the married Isabel Gilbert and Roland Lansdell. Although a murder occurs, it is almost incidental, and the heroine is obviously blameless.

The narrator proclaims near the end of the book, “This is *not* a sensation novel. I write here what I know to be the truth.”⁸⁰ Sensation is mostly confined to the fictional realm within *The Doctor’s Wife*, as the trade of the cheerfully normal author and secondary character Sigismund Smith, who treats his own lurid creations as absurdities. Neither is sensation the cause of our female quixote’s romantic delusions; Braddon takes care to emphasize that Isabel is “corrupted” by reputable literature:

She left the Albany-Road seminary in her sixteenth year, and set to work to educate herself by means of the nearest circulating library. She did not feed upon the garbage, but settled at once upon the highest blossoms in the flower-garden of fiction, and read her favourite novels over and over again, and wrote little extracts of her own choosing in penny account-books, usually employed for the entry of butcher's meat and grocery. (28)

Isabel reads fiction in the opposite of an undisciplined manner, as part of a methodical project of *Bildung*, guided by her own respectable aesthetic discernment.

Yet the reader’s own relationship with Isabel is at least initially one of knowledgeable distance. In order for a quixotic plot to work, the audience must be aware of an absolute distinction between fiction and reality to appreciate the folly of the heroine. The reader is made to feel wiser and more sophisticated in comparison with Isabel’s misguided identifications, and thus cannot entirely identify with her, even though we are given total access to her thoughts and fantasies. In an unpublished essay on the French Naturalists, Braddon described Flaubert as the “physiologist, the analytical student, the vivisectionist,” who “[i]n cold blood and with a passionless pen traces the degradation of a selfish young woman.”⁸¹ Deviating partially from what she perceives as the harshness of his example (unaware of his rumored exclamation of identification, “Madame Bovary, c’est moi, d’après moi”), Braddon’s narrator sympathetically patronizes Isabel:

She was very wicked, she was very foolish, very childish. All her life she had played with her heroines and heroes as other children play with their dolls. Now Edith Dombey was the favourite, and now dark-eyed Zuleika, kneeling forever at Selim’s feet. Left quite to herself through all her idle girlhood, this foolish child had fed upon three-volume novels and sentimental poetry... (184)

The narrator’s arch disapproval distances the reader from Isabel, but from a vantage of embarrassing recognition instead of complete difference. Isabel is “childish” rather than mad; she could be the reader at an earlier stage of development.

Without varying our access to Isabel’s mind as in the sensation novels, Braddon’s narrative allows for varied degrees of identification with Isabel, from reproof to condescension to complete empathy. As an example of the latter, “an Irish lady” very affected by the trials of Isabel and Roland wrote Braddon a fan letter during the serialization of *The Doctor’s Wife* to declare, “I am so *sorry* for Roland and Isabel but I am sure you are right, and it would never do to sacrifice public opinion for the sake of ideal characters, though you make them so *real*, one feels sure they are living and loving and suffering somewhere.”⁸² Readers’ potential kinship with

Isabel is emphasized by the narrator's direct apostrophe to her heroine when she decides to marry George Gilbert:

Alas, poor Izzie! and are all your fancies, all the pretty stories woven out of your novels, all your long day-dreams about Marie Antoinette and Charlotte Corday, Edith Dombey and Ernest Maltravers,—all your foolish pictures of a modern Byron, fever-stricken at Missolonghi, and tended by you; a new Napoleon, exiled to St. Helena, and followed, perhaps liberated, by you,—are they all come to this? Are none of the wonderful things that happen to women ever to happen to you? Are you never to be Charlotte Corday, and die for your country? Are you never to wear ruby velvet, and diamonds in your hair, and to lure some recreant Carker to a foreign hostelry, and there denounce and scorn him? Are all the pages of the great book of life to be closed upon you—you, who seem to yourself predestined, by reason of so many dreams and fancies, to such a wonderful existence? Is all the mystic cloudland of your dreams to collapse and shrivel into this,—a commonplace square-built cottage at Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne, with a commonplace country surgeon for your husband? (78-9)

While we certainly approach Isabel's "foolish" fantasies with the heavy literary irony of the narrator's "Alas, poor Izzie!", the repeated emphasis of "you" and rhetorical questions interpellate those of us who are well-read enough to be able to identify her revered historical and literary figures, perhaps after having identified *with* them ourselves. The fluctuations of Izzie's fantasies, between actual and fictional women, from queens to assassins to rebellious wives, and the various ways she interprets them, make it more difficult for the reader to fix his or her perspective of her.

The male protagonists of *The Doctor's Wife* tend to misidentify Isabel according to their projections of desire. Roland, supposedly more sophisticated than Isabel, underestimates her sense of propriety because of her romantic reading material and thus imagines her as "a Byronic adulteress ready to throw over all social restraint."⁸³ Before marrying Isabel, George, who is not a novel reader, nevertheless "pictured Miss Sleaford the heroine of such a domestic story as this, and had no power to divine that there was any incongruity in the fancy; no fineness of ear to discover the dissonant interval between the heroine and the story" (78). Isabel is much better attuned to that "dissonant interval" between fiction and reality with regard to her prospective husband:

Oh, if he had only been like Edgar Ravenswood! The poor, childish, dissatisfied heart was always wishing that he could be something different from what he was. Perhaps during all that engagement the girl never once saw her lover really as he was. She dressed him up in her own fancies, and deluded herself by imaginary resemblances between him and the heroes in her books. If he was abrupt and disagreeable in his manner to her, he was Rochester; and she was Jane Eyre, tender and submissive. If he was cold, he was Dombey; and she feasted on her own pride, and scorned him, and made much of one of the orphans during an entire afternoon. If he was clumsy and stupid, he was Rawdon Crawley; and she patronised him, and laughed at him, and taunted him with little scraps of French with the Albany-Road accent, and played off all green-eyed Becky's prettiest airs upon him. But in spite of all this the young man's sober common-sense exercised a beneficial influence upon her; and by and by, when the three volumes of courtship had been prolonged to the uttermost, and the last inevitable chapter was

close at hand, she had grown to think affectionately of her promised husband, and was determined to be very good and obedient to him when she became his wife.
(102)

The contrary-to-fact exclamation that begins this paragraph displays Isabel's awareness of George's prosaic qualities, and how much of her tendency toward romanticization is a deliberate method of coping with his flaws. Whereas Isabel acts many roles both to complement her future husband and satisfy herself, Natalie and Ronald Schroeder note that George's dream of a domestic Isabel is more sinisterly coercive as well as misguided, since "his imperturbable masculine arrogance presumes to define the terms of Isabel's existence, and with his project to reinvent her, he undertakes to eradicate her unique or sole self."⁸⁴ Isabel's literary fantasies enable her flexible obedience, without provoking her to actually change their subjects; George and Roland, however, attempt (and ultimately fail) to impose their own respective visions of Isabel—housewife and adulteress—upon her.

Though Isabel is not as deluded as her husband and aspiring lover, in her imaginative role-playing she certainly resembles the "affected" women that Linton catalogued with disgust:

If they give you a glass of water, or take your cup from you, they are Youth and Beauty ministering to Strength or Age, as the case may be; if they bring you a photographic album, they are Titian's Daughter carrying her casket, a trifle modernized; if they hold a child in their arms, they are Madonnas, and look unutterable maternal love though they never saw the little creature before, and care for it no more than for the puppy in the mews.⁸⁵

Linton's examples illustrate not only female self-consciousness, but also insincerity while performing traditionally feminine acts of service and care. Such self-sacrifice is tainted by self-satisfaction, the possibility of a woman thinking of herself and others simultaneously. The unnatural way in which Isabel and Linton's affected women are able to derive pleasure from their duties exposes those duties as potentially unsatisfying and therefore in need of transformation. The delights of imaginative recourse imply an underlying discontent or even resentment.

An essay on "The Effect of Novel-Reading on Young Girls" in *The Spectator* pondered this argument as an inevitable reaction to *The Doctor's Wife*. The article positions "mothers" as the primary advocates against female fiction-reading who are cannily using a new platform of attack:

They do not argue that novel-reading perverts, or defiles, or destroys the imagination, but that it cultivates it too much, that it gives the girls two lives to lead at once, both, perhaps, equally good, and both in themselves pure enough, but sure to jar against one another. Their daughters, they say, are to marry plain, decent people, with just enough money to get along with, and the novels make them long for inaccessible heroes, people of boundless wealth and heroic horsemanship, perfect natures and an irresistible smile (there is a run on smiles!) till they hate the thought of life with that struggling doctor, or rising lawyer, or pre-occupied man of commerce.⁸⁶

The *Spectator* writer is not referring exclusively, if at all, to the genre of sensation here, but to all fiction's capacity to depict impossible ideals. "[E]ducated men" are less susceptible to quixotism because "They read many books, and see many people, and rub sharply against life's corners till their imaginations, even if affected by what they read,—a doubtful point after thirty,— are held under sharp curb and rein. Sir James Mackintosh was not the worse judge, but the better, for

dreaming all day at intervals that he was Emperor of Constantinople.”⁸⁷ Ultimately, the writer concludes that *more* reading in a variety of genres helps temper the effects of obsessive reading since “Any exclusive system of reading is injurious to a half-disciplined mind.” In the case of women, such a course of reading provides simulacra of “life’s corners” from which they are protected, beyond the one decision of whether to tie oneself to the doctor, lawyer, or man of commerce. Even in fantasies, the *Spectator* surmises, women are only interested in selecting romantic partners.

But Isabel, in spite of her attraction to Roland, is not so limited in her imaginary desires as to construct them entirely upon choosing a hero. Nor is she interested only in happy wish fulfillment or ideal representations of herself, such as the apotheosis of “Youth and Beauty” to which Linton alludes. She repeatedly pictures herself not as the saintly Florence Dombey, but as Edith Dombey, an unhappily married woman who appears to compromise herself with another man. Isabel is also particularly obsessed with the French Revolution, described ironically by the narrator as “one of [her] pet oases in the history of the universe. A wonderful period, in which a quiet country-bred young woman had only to make her way up to Paris and assassinate a tyrant, and, lo, she became ‘a feature’ throughout all time” (185). Though her simultaneous allegiances with Queen Marie Antoinette, the Girondist Charlotte Corday, and Napoleon Bonaparte (not to mention Becky Sharp) resist any ideological coherence, Isabel’s special fixation on Corday—“a quiet country-bred young woman” like herself—indicates her longing to have a larger impact on the world, to be an actor on the national stage.⁸⁸ Isabel’s identification with Corday’s bloody act and bloody end is thus not devoid of political resonance. While Isabel is not one of Braddon’s murderous or violent women, like Lucy Audley or Aurora Floyd, she aspires to revolutionary action on behalf of a noble cause, if she could find one.

What Isabel *can* do is negotiate between the multiple identities available to her, and ultimately choose to emulate or diverge from them in order to act ethically. She can decide to align herself with more virtuous (albeit tragic) heroines, thinking to herself, “No, she wasn’t a bit like Edith Dombey; she was more like Juliet, or Desdemona” (155). The *Spectator*’s question as to whether “this habit of dwelling in two worlds, this widening of the chasm which must always exist between the inner and outer life, between Jean as she appears to her Maker, and Jean as she appears to her friends, *is* altogether innocuous?” drastically simplifies Isabel’s infinite array of imagined affinities. It also reveals an interesting equation between imagination and interiority, or even the soul (“Jean as she appears to her Maker”), whereas the ‘real word’ is merely external perception of one’s affect. Isabel is suspected of infidelity by her friends, but the same subjectivity that indulges in illicit fantasy is able to regulate her moral behavior so that she does not even consider being physically unfaithful: “Mrs. Gilbert was strictly punctilious with herself, even in the matter of her thoughts. She only thought of what *might* have happened if Mr. Lansdell had met her long ago before her marriage” (156). She consigns Roland, like one of her fictional and historical heroes and heroines, to an alternate universe of past probability.

Some modern critics, like Wolff, see Isabel’s restraint as a fainthearted and unconvincing concession to Victorian prudery.⁸⁹ *The Doctor’s Wife* was nevertheless still scandalous by association with *Madame Bovary*. Isabel’s adherence to a courtly form of love could seem like the sophistic rationalization of an immoral mind, given to still-illicit covetousness if not outright adultery. Mansel portrayed the book as an insidious trap for ignorant women: “We have ourselves seen an English translation of one of the worst of those French novels devoted to the worship of Baal-Peor and the recommendation of adultery, lying for sale at a London railway-stall, and offered as a respectable book to unsuspecting ladies.”⁹⁰ Braddon herself alluded to the

“hideous immorality” of *Madame Bovary* and confessed to Lytton, “I do dread the things that will be said of ‘The Doctor’s Wife,’ but I can most solemnly vouch for the purity of my intention which was to show the fatal error of an inconsiderate marriage.”⁹¹ Crucially, Braddon identifies a marriage—not indiscriminate reading or extramarital fantasy—as the main “error,” if not the sin, of the novel.

And Isabel learns from that error. After her husband and Roland die in quick succession, the latter having left her his fortune, she ends the book as a philanthropist with no intention of remarrying, “constant to the memory of sorrow” (402). The *London Review*, misperceiving Braddon’s intent, concluded that she had undermined her own moral by rewarding Isabel for her dalliance: “The first two volumes in vain warn young ladies against yielding themselves to sentimentality and becoming enamoured of fascinating heroes, seeing that the third volume shows them that such conduct may result in their becoming millionaires.”⁹² Isabel is actually rewarded with financial independence for her *moral* independence, enough to make her a proto-Dorothea Brooke interested primarily in building cottages and schools, having passed into a “higher region” of altruistic existence (402). Her widowhood and money tie Isabel to the role of Lady Bountiful and thus discourage any truly revolutionary behavior of a kind to match her declaration of mental autonomy during her marriage: “She was a very good wife, very gentle and obedient; and she fancied she had a right to furnish the secret chambers of her mind according to her own pleasure” (183). The summit of Isabel’s rebelliousness was consciously creating this virtual “room of [her] own” through reading.

Sensation and Suffrage

The heyday of the sensation genre also witnessed the rise of the suffragist movement in advance of the imminent 1867 reform bill and 1872 Ballot Act. In suffragist Millicent Garrett Fawcett’s account, “The women’s suffrage question in 1860 was on the point of entering a new phase—the phase of practical politics. Parliamentary Reform was again before the country; the principles of representation were constantly discussed in newspapers, and in every social circle where intelligent men and women met.”⁹³ The “Ladies’ Petition” with 1,499 signatures brought by Elizabeth Garrett and Emily Davies to the House of Commons in 1866 initiated the first women’s suffrage organizations to have “lasting effects.”⁹⁴ Garrett and Davies, along with Barbara Leigh Bodichon, Bessie Rayner Parkes, and Emily Faithfull, were members of the Langham Place circle, a center of feminist activity that included the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women and produced *The English Woman’s Journal*. Braddon was not a member of the movement,⁹⁵ but her books were allied in the public mind with the suffragists’ cause. *The New Review*’s essay on “Miss Braddon” concluded: “novels like Miss Braddon’s, dissertations like Miss Bessie Parkes’s, and laudable attempts at self-support like Miss Faithfull’s, admit of being all regarded as various manifestations of one comprehensive idea, that idea being nothing more or less than the complete equalization of the two sexes.”⁹⁶ While Braddon’s novels did not overtly advocate female suffrage, the debates surrounding the suffrage movement echoed the points of crisis about the impact of sensation fiction on women. Sensation and suffrage were both seen as alarming, unrealistic, and immoral attempts for women to represent themselves.

Dallas and other critics disparaged sensation’s heroines on the basis of realism: the active women represented by sensation were not representative of “real” women. Suffrage itself revolved upon the question of whether “real” women needed or desired direct representation in the political arena. Professor Charles Babington wrote to Lydia Becker that he would not add his

name to the suffrage petition, as she requested, “until I find some considerable number [of women] in favour of the plan” and urged her instead to “return to the gentle science of botany,” on which she had written a book three years earlier, so that “I may have the opportunity of helping you in it.”⁹⁷ Dallas questioned the “prominence” of women in the sensation novel, whose centrality necessarily put them in “a light which is not good.” Bodichon maintained that both single and married women needed visibility, not another kind of coverture, in order to protect their rights: “under a representative government, any class which is not represented is likely to be neglected. Proverbially, what is out of sight is out of mind, and the theory that women, as such, are bound to keep out of sight, finds its most emphatic expression in the denial of the right to vote.”⁹⁸ Ironically, the problem of women not being distinctly represented had already led to confusing ambiguities of official language regarding gender, since women were included in the definition of “men” for the purposes of taxation, but not for the franchise; judges decided that they could “assume from the context” whenever “only men were intended.”⁹⁹

Women’s supposed emotional susceptibility inspired critiques of the sensation novels that addressed them, and also was a time-worn rationale for prohibiting them from voting. After Jacob Bright’s Women’s Disabilities Bill, which aimed to give women the vote by including them under masculine language, was defeated in Parliament for the second time, Fawcett declared “that if the domination of sentiment was to be considered a positive bar to the exercise of political functions, many members of parliament certainly had no right to occupy their seats” and alluded to Oxford M.P. Vernon Harcourt, who said “that he was going to vote against the Bill, though he knew all the reasons were in favour of its principle, because his feelings were against it.”¹⁰⁰ The false crisis of women’s oversensitivity continually provoked protestations on the grounds of *men’s* violated sensibility and strong emotional response. In the parliamentary debates for the Women’s Disabilities Removal Bill in 1872, Alexander Beresford-Hope, invokes the inevitably irrational behavior of men under women’s sway:

It was well that in a large portion of humankind the heart should rule the head, but to give that portion an independent and directly appreciable control of politics would lead to a reckless expenditure on philanthropic schemes and to wars for ideas. A Parliament in which woman’s influence prevailed would be impulsively ready to risk claims and back up assertions which would be ever on the verge of culminating in bloodshed for the sake of honour and mistaken chivalry.¹⁰¹

Mere accountability to women would render the government a romantic or sensational space, provoking recklessness and violence through emotional manipulation; paraphrasing Dallas on sensation, feminine influence would inspire “most unfeminine” behavior.

The moral influence of women on politics was the crux of the suffrage debates. Suffragists considered the moral, as well as emotional, quarantine of political rights from women absurd as well as insulting. Frances Power Cobbe highlighted the low company with which women were categorized: “To a woman herself who is aware that she has never committed a crime; who fondly believes that she is not an idiot; and who is alas! only too sure she is no longer a minor,— there naturally appears some incongruity in placing her, for such important purposes, in an association wherein otherwise she would scarcely be likely to find herself.”¹⁰² While politicized women were in danger of becoming criminalized, tempted like the sensational antiheroine by Eve’s lust for power, women were already being treated as criminals in their disenfranchisement. In the same paragraph in which Oliphant denounced women “who accept [sensation heroines] as a true representation of themselves,” she nevertheless conceded that “[w]omen’s rights and women’s duties have had enough discussion, perhaps even from the

ridiculous point of view” because “there can be no possible doubt that the wickedness of man is less ruinous, less disastrous to the world in general, than the wickedness of woman. That is the climax of all misfortunes to the race.”¹⁰³

Some supporters of women’s suffrage took the opposite essentialist tack, that women’s greater natural morality would sanctify politics. Francis Newman, the younger brother of the Cardinal, generalized that “Women, as a sex, are far less criminal and more self-denying than men” and “look on all political measures chiefly from their moral side, and in administration think more than men of the moral questions.”¹⁰⁴ Charles Kingsley championed women as the superior spiritual checks to male license:

Might not... their purity and earnestness help to make what is now called politics somewhat more pure, somewhat more earnest? Might not the presence of the voting power of a few virtuous, experienced, well-educated women, keep candidates, for very shame, from saying and doing things from which they do not shrink, before a crowd of men who are, on the average, neither virtuous, experienced, or well-educated, by wholesome dread of that most terrible of all earthly punishments—at least in the eyes of a manly man—the fine scorn of a noble woman? Might not the intervention of a few women who are living according to the eternal laws of God, help to infuse some slightly stronger tincture of those eternal laws into our legislators and their legislation?¹⁰⁵

Kingsley imagines women—albeit a select group—as a discriminating audience of censors providing legislative oversight.

But the women-as-moral-guarantors platform could easily be reversed by opponents of suffrage to decry politics’ unholy influence on women’s inherent—but vulnerable—purity. Some politicians reversed their favorable position on suffrage because of the debates over repealing the Contagious Diseases Act of 1866, which necessarily discussed prostitution and sexually-transmitted diseases. In 1877, M.P. Robert William Hanbury, who had previously voted for women’s suffrage, said he would switch against it because of “the course which had been adopted by those ladies, who, acting, doubtless, from very high motives, had taken part in an agitation on a subject to which he would not further allude, but which was one which he believed women ought never to touch upon in public.”¹⁰⁶ As with sensation novels—including works such as *The Heavenly Twins*, in which venereal disease is a central plot—the mere discourse of licentiousness was held to taint women’s imagination.

The sensation novelist character Sigismund Smythe [*sic*] returns in Braddon’s *The Lady’s Mile* to satirize the hypocrisies of moralists with regard to women and sensation, though his effective double standards apply as well to the arguments against women’s franchise. He explains that “critics inform me that my fictions are demoralising. As a writer and a ratepayer I believe in my fictions; but as a husband I defer to the critics, and forbid my wife to read my novels” because he does not want her to know “the depths of infamy which the human mind, for an adequate consideration, can fathom.”¹⁰⁷ But despite his wife’s hitherto unpolluted innocence, Sigismund also anticipates that she could easily be infected by sensational reading and become herself an effective author of depravities: “If you read my books you’ll make suggestions, and if you make suggestions I shall hate you, and the better your suggestions are the more I shall hate you.”

Capitalizing on the prevalent idea of women’s impressionability, proponents of women’s suffrage also employed a constructionist approach in order to argue for the *positive* moral influence of politics upon women instead of vice versa. Newman predicted women would be

mentally enriched by taking on an active role in the state, instead of “a mass of female intellect” being put to “waste” in pursuits such as “the theatre and opera...the ball rooms, the novels and sensational literature.”¹⁰⁸ Bodichon agreed that “Reading, without a purpose, does not come to much” in terms of spurring “energetic action,” but championed the franchise for widening the female sphere of concern beyond the strictly (and selfishly) personal: “I know no better means at this present time, of counteracting the tendency to prefer narrow private ends to the public good, than this of giving to all women, duly qualified, a direct and conscious participation in political affairs.”¹⁰⁹

Such “direct and conscious participation,” was anathema to a common idea of femininity, questioned by educator Maria Grey: “if we enquire what is their view of what a lady should do, we find it very often resolves into this: — that she should do nothing, and do it gracefully.”¹¹⁰ She suspected that the label “unfeminine” was “used to frighten us off the ground where our presence would be inconvenient,” thereby leading to women’s inaction. Seemingly natural womanliness was deemed incredibly susceptible to external manipulation, but the prospect of women taking action was far more alarming than their vulnerable passivity.

Braddon’s sensation novels, however removed from overt political engagement, depicted the reverberations of women’s choices outside of a localized, often domestic realm. In describing Aurora Floyd, she creates a reversed image of the Dorothea Brooke type who “lived faithfully a hidden life” of “unhistoric acts”:

I feel that there is much need of apology for her. Her own hands had sown the dragon’s teeth, from whose evil seed had sprung up armed men, strong enough to rend and devour her. But then, if she had been faultless, she could not have been the heroine of this story; for I think some wise man of old remarked, that the perfect women were those who left no histories behind them, but went through life upon such a tranquil course of quiet well-doing as left no footprints in the sands of time; only mute records hidden here and there, deep in the grateful hearts of those who had been blest by them. (477)

According to the narrator’s definition, sensation heroines need to be antiheroines in order for their actions to be narratable; indeed, the narrative is their defense, if not their absolution. *Aurora Floyd* explicitly assigns responsibility to Aurora for her misfortunes; she is not the victim of fate, but the flawed classical hero, analogous to Cadmus or Jason, who “sow[s] the dragon’s teeth” and reaps the consequences of her moral choices. In a 1909 article on “The Woman I Remember,” Braddon scathingly recalled the female paragons of a half-century ago as comparative non-entities, the Agnes Wickfields or “your Amelia Sedley,” who “was a kind of State prisoner in the custody of her parents. She could go nowhere, see no one, spend nothing, read nothing, think of nothing, without their supervision and approval. The more colourless her mind, the duller her instincts, the nearer she came to the ideal young lady, the girl whom everybody described as ‘nice.’”¹¹¹

The existence and popularity of Becky Sharp in the literary universe Braddon describes, as well as her own representations of non-“nice” women in sensation fiction, provided a less circumscribed set of options for female readers with which to temporarily misidentify or purposively identify themselves and at least imagine choosing other roles to someday enact. Sensation literature might have provided an intellectual distraction from politics and other “real-world” concerns, but it also depicted women who could not be distracted from action—who had to make crucial moral decisions to drive the plot forward. The female reader of sensation novels could thereby rehearse the process of selecting her aptest representative, even as she must also

acknowledge limits to the power of individual choice, as the women's suffrage movement began to splinter in the 1870s because of differing points of view on the most effective path to progress.

¹ [George Augustus Sala], "On the 'Sensational' in Literature and Art," *Belgravia* 4 (1867): 456.

² "Prospectus of a New Journal," *Punch, or the London Charivari* 44 (1863): 193.

³ Many articles juxtaposed the "sensation" caused by *Lady Audley's Secret* with the subject matter of *Adam Bede*. See "The Popular Novels of the Year," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 68 (1863): 257. *Contemporary Review* directly analogized *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Felix Holt: The Radical* in terms of its female characters: "Miss Braddon and George Eliot join hands, Lady Audley and Mrs. Transome being true twin-sisters of fiction." H. A. Page, "The Morality of Literary Art," *Contemporary Review* 5, (1868): 178.

⁴ Sala, 457-58. "The Sensational Williams" writes a mock-review of *Macbeth* from the point of view of a sensation critic. *All the Year Round* 11 (1864):15-16. Sheridan LeFanu's postscript for *Uncle Silas* decries "the promiscuous application of the term 'sensation' and claims the same standards of 'construction and morality' as the 'unapproachable 'Waverly Novels.'" LeFanu, "A Postscript," *Dublin University Magazine* 64 (1864): 679-80. Anthony Trollope's *Autobiography* claims that "A good novel should be both" realistic and sensational, and uses *Jane Eyre*, as well as Scott's and William Makepeace Thackeray's novels as examples. Trollope, *An Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1883), 2:42.

⁵ R[obert] W. B[uchanan], "Society's Looking-Glass," *Temple Bar* 6 (1862): 136-37.

⁶ Unsigned review of *The Queen's English*, in *Edinburgh Review* 120 (1864): 28.

⁷ [Henry Mansel], "Sensation Novels," *Quarterly Review* 113 (1863): 505.

⁸ [Alfred Austin], "Our Novels: The Sensation School," *Temple Bar* 29 (1870): 424.

⁹ Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 17.

¹⁰ Winifred Hughes contends, sensation attempted a combination of the two modes, the "violent yoking of romance and realism," seemingly distorting both. Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), 16.

¹¹ Sally Shuttleworth, "'Preaching to the Nerves': Psychological Disorder in Sensation Fiction," in *A Question of Identity*, ed. Marina Benjamin (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 194.

¹² What distinguished sensation fiction from the Gothic and Newgate novels that preceded it, according to Sally Mitchell, is "the serious critical attention paid to the kind of novel which we have for the past hundred years considered a sub-species... Sensation novels were reviewed in respectable quarterlies and denounced from the pulpit." Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class, and Women's Reading, 1835-1880* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), 73.

¹³ Miller writes of sensation as a kind of nervous transmission from female character to feminized reader: "Our first sensation coincides with—is positively triggered by—the novel's originary account of sensation. Fantasmatically, then, we 'catch' sensation from the neuropathic body of the Woman who, no longer confined or controlled in an asylum, is free to make our bodies resonate with—like—hers." D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 153. Shuttleworth likewise describes sensation novels "situating their

readers in the feminine position of nervousness while inviting vicarious, sensual participation.” Shuttleworth, 195.

¹⁴ Sophia Van Wingerden, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866-1928* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 22-23.

¹⁵ Lyn Pykett, *The “Improper” Feminine: the Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), 32.

¹⁶ Unsigned review of *Dead Sea Fruit*, by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Spectator* 41 (August 29, 1868): 1028.

¹⁷ Paget, *Lucretia; or the Heroine of the Nineteenth Century: A Correspondence Sensational and Sentimental* (London: Masters, 1868), 305, quoted in Jennifer Carnell, *The Literary Lives of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (Hastings: Sensation Press, 2000), 167.

¹⁸ Mrs. Henry Wood, *East Lynne* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1861), 2:116. “M.E. Braddon’s and Ellen Wood’s narrators in particular often use a woman-to-woman address, and assume or invoke a shared feminine experience. Although this was a common feature of women’s fiction it was a particular source of anxiety to reviewers of the sensation novel because of the ‘fast’ nature of its main characters and situations, and because of the particular type of female experience which it represented.” Pykett, 32-33.

¹⁹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, in Robert Lee Wolff, “Devoted Disciple: The Letters of Mary Elizabeth Braddon to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1862-1873,” *Harvard Library Bulletin* 22 (1974): 157.

²⁰ [Margaret Oliphant], “Novels,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 102 (1867): 260.

²¹ Dallas, *The Gay Science* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1866), 298.

²² Dallas, 297.

²³ *Ibid.*, 298.

²⁴ I agree with Pykett that the simultaneously feminine and unfeminine categorizations of the sensation novel reflect a genuine “crisis of definition, a panic over the instability of gender norms and categories.” Pykett, 67.

²⁵ [Alfred Austin], “The Poetry of the Period: Mr. Swinburne,” *Temple Bar* 26 (1869): 464.

²⁶ [Oliphant], 275.

²⁷ Pykett notes that “appetitive consumption, marked the sensation novel as a feminine form, irrespective of the gender of the particular sensation author.” Pykett, 31. Miller sees the feminizing power of the sensation novel as affecting, with different results, both the male and female reader: “For the same sensation effects that ‘feminize’ the male reading body also... ‘feminize’ the female: with the difference that this feminization is construed in the one case to threaten sexual identity and in the other to confirm it.” Miller, 185.

²⁸ [Oliphant], 260.

²⁹ Cvetkovich, 20.

³⁰ [W. R. Greg], “False Morality of Lady Novelists,” *The National Review* 8 (1859): 146. He goes on to compare the vulnerability of women’s minds to that of children or tired men.

³¹ “The Morality of Modern Novels,” *The New Review* 1 (1863), quoted in Andrew Maunder, *Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), 23.

³² “Sensational Novels,” *Spectator* 41 (1868): 932.

³³ “Novel-Reading,” *Saturday Review* 23 (1867): 197.

³⁴ Heather L. Braun, "Idle Vampires and Decadent Maidens: Sensation, the Supernatural, and Mary E. Braddon's Disappointing *Femme Fatales*," in *Antifeminism and the Victorian Novel: Re-reading Nineteenth-Century Women Writers*, ed. Tamara Wagner (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2009), 236.

³⁵ "Popular Novels of the Year," *Fraser's*, 259. The author of the review also confesses to being "a little in love with" Aurora, moving from sympathy to attraction in a move characteristic of male reviewers shying away from the possibility of identifying with female characters (see Chapter 1). *Ibid.*, 260.

³⁶ [W. Fraser Rae], "Sensation Novelists: Miss Braddon," *North British Review* 43 (1865): 202-3.

³⁷ [Oliphant], "Sensation Novels," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 91 (1862): 571, 567.

³⁸ Page, 178.

³⁹ "Miss Braddon's Novels," *Dublin University Magazine* 75 (1870): 442.

⁴⁰ "Our Female Sensation Novelists," *Christian Remembrancer* 46 (1864): 231-32.

⁴¹ The narrator begs the question by defending Amelia from the attacks of imagined female readers: "We don't care a fig for her...she is *fade* and insipid." Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (New York: Norton, 1994), 115. Becky, however, belongs more to a picaresque tradition of antiheroine. Even Oliphant approved of her insofar as the "fun in her surmounted the depravity." Oliphant, "Novels," 271.

⁴² Pamela K. Gilbert, "Feminism and the Canon: Recovery and Reconsideration of Popular Novelists," in Wagner, *Antifeminism and the Victorian Novel*, 31.

⁴³ Hughes, 45.

⁴⁴ Dallas, 287.

⁴⁵ B[uchanan], 135-36, 133.

⁴⁶ [Rae], 100.

⁴⁷ Henry James, "Miss Braddon," in *Notes and Reviews* (Cambridge: Dunster House, 1921): 113.

⁴⁸ Braddon to Bulwer-Lytton, in Wolff, 34.

⁴⁹ [Austin], "Our Novels," 420.

⁵⁰ "Miss Braddon," *New Review* 2 (1863): 568; George Henry Lewes, "Farewell Causerie," *Fortnightly Review* 6 (1866): 894.

⁵¹ Page, 178.

⁵² "Miss Braddon," *New Review*, 568.

⁵³ "Our Female Sensation Novelists," *Christian Remembrancer*, 212.

⁵⁴ "Miss Braddon," *New Review*, 568.

⁵⁵ Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 172.

⁵⁶ Lewes, 894.

⁵⁷ James, 109.

⁵⁸ "To Miss Braddon belongs the credit of having penned similar stories in easy and correct English, and published them in three volumes in place of issuing them in penny numbers. She may boast, without fear of contradiction, of having temporarily succeeded in making the literature of the Kitchen the favourite reading of the Drawing-room." [Rae], 105.

⁵⁹ [Rae], 98.

⁶⁰ "Miss Braddon's Novels," *Dublin University Magazine*, 436.

⁶¹ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 1. All subsequent references to this edition will be in parentheses.

⁶² Patrick Brantlinger, "What Is 'Sensational' About the 'Sensation Novel'?" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37 (1982): 14.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁴ "Readers who have witnessed Conyers's bribing scenes and know that (like Madeline Smith) Aurora has a motive are encouraged to believe, as they are with Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House* (1853), that she is the murderer." Andrew Mangham, *Violent Women and Sensation Fiction: Crime, Medicine and Victorian Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 69.

⁶⁵ Hughes, 26.

⁶⁶ Cvetkovich, 49, 48.

⁶⁷ Braddon, *Aurora Floyd* (Peterborough: Broadview, 1988), 93. All subsequent references will be to this edition and in parentheses.

⁶⁸ Pykett, 80-81.

⁶⁹ Shuttleworth, 222, 195.

⁷⁰ "Since *Adam Bede*, perhaps no book has made so sudden and decided 'a sensation' as *Lady Audley*; and this was followed up very shortly by *Aurora Floyd*, which has even surpassed, though not eclipsed the fame of the former work." "Popular Novels of the Year," *Fraser's*, 257.

⁷¹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (London: Penguin, 1985), 177.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 70, 181.

⁷³ The reader might already have been prepared to sympathize with Hetty by the precedent of Effie Deans in *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*. I am grateful to Ian Duncan for alerting me to this parallel.

⁷⁴ Eliot, 391.

⁷⁵ "Miss Braddon," *New Review*, 566-67.

⁷⁶ [Elizabeth Lynn Linton], "Feminine Affectations," *Saturday Review* 25 (1868): 776.

⁷⁷ Pykett, 71.

⁷⁸ Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), 55.

⁷⁹ See Wolff, 19, 22.

⁸⁰ Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 358. All future references to this edition will be in parentheses.

⁸¹ See Wolff, *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (New York: Garland, 1979), 318.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 164.

⁸³ Gilbert, 187.

⁸⁴ Natalie and Ronald A. Schroeder, *From Sensation to Society: Representations of Marriage in the Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, 1862-1866* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2006), 168.

⁸⁵ [Linton], 90.

⁸⁶ "The Effect of Novel-Reading on Girls," *The Spectator* 37 (1864): 1208.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 1209.

⁸⁸ Mary Elizabeth Braddon seems to have been personally intrigued by her as well, since Corday is not only mentioned in *The Doctor's Wife* and *Aurora Floyd*, as quoted above, but in

John Marchmont's Legacy, Under the Red Flag, The One Thing Needful, Sir Jasper's Tenant, The Captain of the Vulture, and Only a Clod (twice). In the wake of the revolution, Corday "became a symbol of women's activism, viewed alternatively as adorable or detestable," depending on one's political affiliation.

⁸⁹ "Victorian English convention made it impossible for Isabel to follow Emma's example, to run off with Lansdell, or to have an affair with him. This forced MEB into inconsistencies, as she labored so conscientiously to portray real character." Wolff, *Sensational Victorian*, 163.

⁹⁰ [Mansel], 486.

⁹¹ Wolff, "Devoted Disciple," 22-23.

⁹² Unsigned review of *The Doctor's Wife*, by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *London Review* 9 (October 22, 1864): 464.

⁹³ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, *Women's Suffrage: A Short History of a Great Movement* (New York: Source Book Press, 1970), 15.

⁹⁴ See Van Wingerden, 22-23, 3.

⁹⁵ In 1909, Braddon wrote a satirical article about the "The Woman I Remember" from the 1850s, who, "if she had been given a vote [] would have sold it for a pair of Houbigant's gloves, or a bottle of Patchouli from Atkinson's. Braddon, "The Woman I Remember," in *The Press Album*, ed. Thomas Catling (London: John Murray, 1909), 3.

⁹⁶ "Miss Braddon," *New Review*, 565-66.

⁹⁷ Letter from Charles C. Babington to Lydia Becker, 5 April 1867, quoted in Van Wingerden, 45. Becker instead gave two lectures in 1868 and 1869 at the British Association for the Advancement of Science that drew on her botanical research to conclude that essential intellectual differences between men and women were negligible. See Susan David Bernstein, "'Supposed Differences': Lydia Becker and Victorian Women's Participation in the BAAS," *Repositioning Victorian Sciences: Shifting Centres in Nineteenth-century Scientific Thinking*, ed. David Clifford, Elisabeth Wadge, Alex Warwick, and Martin Mills (London: Anthem Press, 2006).

⁹⁸ Mrs. Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, *Reasons for the Enfranchisement of Women* (London: 1866), 3.

⁹⁹ Van Wingerden, 20.

¹⁰⁰ "Meeting at Hanover Square Rooms," *Women's Suffrage Journal* 3 (1872): 91.

¹⁰¹ Great Britain, "Women's Disabilities Removal Bill," *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 3d ser., vol. 211 (May 1, 1872): 60.

¹⁰² Frances Power Cobbe, *Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors. Is the Classification Sound?: A Discussion on the Laws Concerning the Property of Married Women* (Manchester: A. Ireland and co., 1869), 5.

¹⁰³ [Oliphant], "Novels," 275

¹⁰⁴ Francis W. Newman, *A Lecture on Women's Suffrage, Delivered in the Guildhall, Bath, on January 28th, 1870, His Worship the Mayor Presiding* (Bristol, I. Arrowsmith, 1870), 5, 8.

¹⁰⁵ Charles Kingsley, "Women and Politics." *Macmillan's* 20 (1869): 557-58.

¹⁰⁶ Great Britain, "Women's Disabilities Removal Bill," *Hansard's*, 3d ser., vol. 234 (June 6, 1877): 1364.

¹⁰⁷ Braddon, *The Lady's Mile* (Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz, 1866), 2:319.

¹⁰⁸ Newman, 9

¹⁰⁹ Bodichon, 8, 7.

¹¹⁰ Mrs. William Grey, *Is the Exercise of the Suffrage Unfeminine?* (London: London National Society for Women's Suffrage, 1870), 9-10.

¹¹¹ Braddon, "The Woman I Remember," 4.

‘The Valley of the Shadow of Books’: The Morbidity of Female Detachment

In an 1891 essay, Oscar Wilde repudiated the current usage of “morbid” as an appropriate word for literary content:

It is, of course, a ridiculous word to apply to a work of art. For what is morbidity but a mood of emotion or a mode of thought that one cannot express? The public are all morbid, because they never can find expression for anything. *The artist is never morbid. He expresses everything.* He stands outside his subject, and through its medium produces incomparable and artistic effects.¹

Wilde was responding to critiques of his own work using the term that, according to John Stokes, had “by the end of the century achieved the definitive status of a cliché just toppling into parody” in its promiscuous application to Decadents, New Women writers, homosexuals, and social deviants of all sorts who undermined the narrative of progress.² Wilde rejects the application of a label that denotes disease and connotes death to the fundamental vitality of art, in which all inspirations find fruition. At the same time, however, Wilde argues that a certain kind of aesthetic detachment is the source of this transcendent creativity, in which the artist transforms his material by “stand[ing] outside of” it.

Arthur Waugh also defined true literary artistry as a stance of detachment, echoing Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

It is only when we regard life with the untrammelled view of the impartial spectator, when we pierce below the substance for its animating idea, that we approximate to the artistic temperament. It is unmanly, it is effeminate, it is inartistic to gloat over pleasure, to revel in immoderation, to become passion’s slave; and literature demands as much calmness of judgment, as much reticence, as life itself.³

According to Waugh, the “untrammelled view of the impartial spectator” is not merely the capacity for criticism, for “[seeing] the object as in itself it really is” in Arnoldian terms. While Waugh sees detachment as a kind of balancing force of “reticence,” in contrast with Wilde’s vision of total expression, he also equates it, like Wilde, with an “animating idea,” with “life itself,” the creative force of artistry. He also characterizes such detachment as a masculine skill and privilege in opposition to “effeminate” feeling.

As Amanda Anderson has noted, Victorians often demonstrated a general ambivalence toward detachment, especially in its connection with the forces of modernization. It was, in any case, “almost impossible for Victorians to imagine a positive, and disinterestedly critical, conception of feminine detachment.”⁴ Instead, as we have seen, women’s affective identification with literature was assumed to take place and in many ways encouraged, in spite of the problems—physical and otherwise—associated with the traditionally feminine model of emotional reading untempered by rationality and rigor. In the lectures that formed *Sesame and Lilies*, John Ruskin championed the emotional acuity of the girl reader, who “should be taught to enter with her whole personality into the history she reads,” and her responsibility to “apprehend, with her fine instincts, the pathetic circumstances and dramatic relations” that the male historian “too often only eclipses by his reasoning, and disconnects by his arrangement.”⁵ Since a woman’s paramount role throughout the Victorian period was to bear and raise children, she was believed to have an essential disposition toward “identification with others” for the benefit of her offspring; the naturally feminine tendency to identify was then thought to spill over into her “processes of reading.”⁶

What has been less discussed in current Victorian studies is the converse proposition, which, I argue, gained force in the *fin de siècle*: that women's *not* being able to identify with the subjects of literature could be symptomatic of mental and even physiological barrenness. By the end of the nineteenth century, increasing numbers of professional literary women were defying the idea of a natural propensity for identification, but in consequence their status as women became questionable. While prominent physicians like Silas Weir Mitchell (now notorious for his prescription of a rest cure for Charlotte Perkins Gilman) continued to express concern over the self-destructive "emotional stimulus which women carry into all forms of work," the prospect of emotional *absence* in such work was beginning to appear even more alarming, because more disruptive to the ideology of essential gender difference.⁷ In order for womanhood to continue to be defined by affective response, female literary detachment had to become a disorder, instead of the fruitful aesthetic stance described by Wilde and Waugh. As women's passionate literary response had often been correlated with sickness or blighted fertility throughout the nineteenth century, the dispassionate response attributed to female literary scholars, professionals, and artists acquired the label of morbidity.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the much-debated repercussions of women's entrance into higher education, which shifted the focus of concern from the traditional bugbear of the novel to the methodology of reading systematically, rigorously, and purposefully. Proponents and opponents of female higher education shared a common preoccupation with the potential ramifications of disciplined reading on the health of the female body and mind, and in consequence on the institution of the family. For the opponents, however, a woman's physical and psychological health was most faithfully represented not by her personal wellbeing but her ability to marry and propagate the race. Celibacy and sterility connoted a kind of living death; and since higher education was believed by many physicians and scientists to vitiate female romantic desire and reproductive energy, the extensive reading required at a university acquired morbid associations.

These associations also clustered around the increasing number of female professionals and their attitudes toward reading. In the second and third parts of this chapter, George Gissing's novels *New Grub Street* (1891) and *The Odd Women* (1893) provide a clear basis for comparison between the genders through wide-ranging treatment of professions at the turn of the century. In *New Grub Street*, Gissing marks a gendered divide between creative vitality and morbid professionalism. Contradicting Wilde's definition, the morbid literary woman Marian Yule cannot attain the status of artist *because* of her detachment. While Gissing's male writers are by no means immune to the modern problems of alienation and mechanization, they either thrive upon soulless careerism or ascend posthumously to a realm of artistic fulfillment. None of these male characters finds his masculinity imperiled by literary labor. In contrast, Marian explicitly connects the loss of her femininity with her emotional dissociation from the texts about which she reads and writes.

In *The Odd Women* Gissing departs from his own narrative of the morbid professional woman in *New Grub Street*. In the character of Rhoda Nunn, Gissing attempts to portray a woman who abjures literary identification and still finds emotional and creative satisfaction in her vocation. Yet in *fin-de-siècle* and current reactions to the novel, Rhoda's deliberate divestment from the marriage plot elicits for her the same tragic categorization as the unhappy, jilted Marian. Rhoda's mission of creating new versions of herself, an entire class of self-replicating "odd women" is critically figured as a barren substitute for "natural" forms of creation and procreation.

In dramatizing the lives of professional women, *New Grub Street* and *The Odd Women* both evoke women's emotional detachment from literature as pathology. But while *New Grub Street* establishes the morbid woman as a new "type" emergent in the literary field, *The Odd Women* reassesses the professional woman as a potentially transformative, as well as productive, force. The prominence of the morbid female archetype nevertheless shaped the reception of *The Odd Women*'s Rhoda Nunn, along with the writer heroines of "New Woman" novels, as emotionally and therefore creatively sterile.

In the final section of the chapter, I analyze the New Woman novels of Charlotte Riddell, Mary Cholmondeley, and George Paston (the pen name of Emily Morse Symonds), which all depict female authors who achieve a professional status that invariably compromises their ability to maintain domestic happiness; their literary careers ultimately correlate with the absence or loss of husbands and children, the attendant guarantors of the individual woman's womanliness. Thus even professional literary women themselves reflected this new, but pervasive fin-de-siècle anxiety about women's supposed under-identification as a pernicious side effect of the systematization of reading in higher education and the professions.

Literary Nunneries

The phenomenon of the sensation novel in the 1860s and 1870s was only the most recent example, according to Victorian critics, of the female body's special vulnerability to the manipulations of literature. Novels and romances, the usual sources of quixotism, were continually associated with psychosomatic ailments, since they educated

...emotions of the same morbid description which, when habitually indulged in, exert a disastrous influence on the nervous system, sufficient to explain that frequency of hysteria and nervous diseases which we find amongst women of the higher classes. Si votre fille lit des romans à dix ans, elle aura des vapeurs à vingt.⁸

Here Dr. Edward Tilt provides a direct, though insidiously protracted, sequence of cause and effect between a girl's consumption of novels and a woman's weakened constitution. The conservative *Saturday Review* also noted that a "moral morbidity" develops in "girls with talent" instead of the more salutary "intellectual fever" which their male counterparts experience; young women's implicit frustration then "finds vent in hymns, and it turns in the end to novels."⁹ In her 1886 lecture to women interested in schooling their children at home, pioneering educator Charlotte Mason cautioned that "the girl who sits for hours poring over a novel to the damage of her eyes, her brain, and her general nervous system, is guilty of a lesser fault of the nature of suicide."¹⁰ The "moral morbidity" of fanatical devotion to fiction irresistibly compels its subject toward self-destructive absorption in fantasy.

While some, like Mason, prescribed more intellectually rigorous courses of reading to counteract these dangerous tendencies,¹¹ systematic study was also thought to contain its own, possibly more detrimental, side effects. In 1839, physiologist Alexander Walker articulated the widespread opinion that women's intellectual labor exacted a toll upon their reproductive systems:

...it is well known that, when women are capable of some degree of mental exertion, this, by directing the blood towards the brain, makes it a centre of activity at the expense of the vital organs which are much more important to them; and, if the latter suffer from the activity of the former, their chief value as

women is destroyed. Science can never form a compensation to them for the deterioration of their vital system and their natural attractions.¹²

Herbert Spencer put it more bluntly in *The Principles of Biology* in 1864: “absolute or relative infertility is generally produced in women by mental labor carried to excess.”¹³ Since women continued increasingly to pursue such labor in higher education and the professions,¹⁴ Spencer’s maxim continued to be cited in books, medical journals, and more broadly-circulated periodicals such as *Popular Science Monthly* up to and after the turn of the century.¹⁵ Dr. William Withers Moore, for example, quoted the same passage in an address on “The Higher Education of Women” upon assuming the presidency of the British Medical Association in 1886. Moore also alluded with approbation to another doctor who, drawing the same conclusion as Spencer, devised a counterintuitive solution to the problem of women’s diversion of energy to intellectual pursuits, perhaps inspired by *Jane Eyre*: “When I see a girl under twelve with a book in her hand, I always feel an inclination to throw it at her head.”¹⁶

The fact that Moore chose this topic for his first Presidential Address indicates how seriously it was taken by the medical community. As an official address, it was widely excerpted and summarized.¹⁷ Moore’s speech also prompted reactions both supportive and outraged from a lay audience. While the suffragist Millicent Garrett Fawcett accused him of trying to “popularize the old fallacy that the only proper object in life is for women to become wives and mothers,” *Punch* made the same point more sympathetically in verse: “Women should be wives and mothers / That’s their duty, so he said; / Not competing with their brothers, / Reading with an aching head.”¹⁸ Martha Vicinus’s study of the first group of female college students in England documents the many claims of opponents that higher education for women could cause “infertility, brain damage, or a mental breakdown,” as well as headaches.¹⁹ Dr. Robert T. Edes also remarked on women’s liability to overstrain themselves in study “with a peculiar feminine sort of obstinacy which, in a better cause, and reasonably directed, would demand admiration rather than pity.”²⁰ To some extent, the very state of illness *per se* was gendered feminine, since, “Woman... is physiologically other than man and no education can change her. No one knows woman who does not know sick woman. She takes to being a patient naturally and comfortably, although if long ill she warps morally.”²¹ Thus, women were “naturally” disposed to overextend themselves, but, according to doctors like Edes, could do so beneficially in service of “a better cause” than their own education, “reasonably directed” by someone other than themselves.

Those who advocated higher education for women adopted the same strategy as their opponents in focusing on the propensity of women’s bodies and minds toward invalidism, while attributing the causes elsewhere. Louise Phillips, along with the pioneering doctor Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, made the counter-claim that zealous scholarly reading was surely the lesser of numerous evils threatening young womanhood, such as attending balls:

One would naturally suppose that it was less harmful to burn the midnight oil poring over books, seated in an easy position, and dressed in loose clothes, than to consume the midnight gas, clothed in uncomfortable garments, becoming overheated by the exertion and excitement of dancing, eating all sorts of indigestible things at an unseasonable hour, and seeking rest when one should be arising. Doubtless there are many things fully as injurious to health as obtaining the higher education.²²

In 1895, the physician Grace Preston went so far as to conclude from the most recent studies that “the average college graduate has rather better health than the average woman who has not taken a degree.” In particular, women who attended college enjoyed better mental health:

Contrary to the prophecy of twenty years ago, college education has been proven to have a restraining influence upon the emotions, and to check rather than favor the development of hysteria. Training of intellect is accompanied by discipline of feelings and increase of will power. College life partly by means of brain work and nervous strain, has been the very means, in some instances, for transforming a weak and sentimental girl into a woman of earnest thought and action. Hysteria, even in its mildest manifestations, is almost unknown in college history. The atmosphere is hostile to it, and chokes it out in its incipency.²³

Preston saw higher education as the cure for the feminine malady of hysteria, but with the violence of her strangulation metaphor, she gestures to the underlying horror with which opponents might regard the metamorphosis of the conventionally “weak and sentimental girl” into a woman in control of her emotions.

Moreover, Preston and Phillips' arguments both rest on the idea that the health and stability of an individual girl is of primary concern, whereas other commentators armed with scientific findings and statistics could form more alarming conjectures about the future of the species. As psychologist G. Stanley Hall soberly concluded when looking at the current rates of marriage and natality, “if we apply these tests higher education for women must be more severely judged.”²⁴ Dr. Moore cited a gynecologist who blamed “overpressure in education” for the “destruction of sensuality of a proper and commendable kind, and its consequent personal and social evils.”²⁵ In Eliza Lynn Linton's widely discussed and reprinted 1886 essay in *Popular Science* opposing “The Higher Education of Women,” she agrees with Moore and enumerates fourteen like-minded “medical men as safer guides than girls ambitious for their own distinction, or women ambitious for their sex.”²⁶ Linton summarized the testimony of these doctors against the effects of higher education on women with maternal aspirations as “all hurtful to the unborn child. They tend to bring on premature birth; and if not this, then they create sickly offspring, whom the mother cannot nourish when they are born.”²⁷ The *Journal of Education* satirically suggested that Linton's article was in fact recommending “literary nunneries, whose students shall be bound to vows of celibacy” instead of going forth to produce a “puny race.”²⁸ Yet the *Journal* mocked a position of increasing currency with a public now conscious of itself as a biological species in a struggle for survival.²⁹ Thanks to the dissemination of Spencer's ideas as well as Charles Darwin's, even a novelist like Grant Allen could credibly contend in *Popular Science Monthly* that competitive or demanding “brain-work” was not merely responsible for exhausting and thereby slowly killing individual women; it could be threatening the evolutionary future of humankind.³⁰ The *Saturday Review* attributed this view to “Science” itself: “Science is insisting that she must not be educated like man, under the deplorable penalty of the ruin of the race. Learned woman will not be a mother at all, or, if a mother, her infants will be rickety.”³¹

Responding to women's incursions into the literary profession as well as into institutions of secondary and tertiary education in the late nineteenth century, Linton openly declared that a “girl is something more than an individual; she is the potential mother of a race; and the last is greater and more important than the first.”³² Again we see the effacing ideology of female identification, whereby a woman was expected to conform her own interests to those of another party, expanded now from a woman's husband and home to the entire human “family.” Linton had no objection to women who study “in their own homes” and read “with more deliberation,

not spurred by emulation nor driven by competition.”³³ Reversing traditional associations of women’s private reading with idleness and self-isolation, Linton argued that a woman is supposed to read privately, not publicly, and for nebulously altruistic instead of personal objectives.³⁴ Even at women’s colleges, suffragist Millicent Garrett Fawcett noted that students frequently and “seriously debated whether or not higher education tends to make women selfish.”³⁵

Higher education was justified by its proponents—as well as pilloried by its antagonists—in terms of feminine familial influence. An educated woman should be the true “helpmeet of her husband,” responsible for “forming the tastes and guiding the minds of her children at a time of life when these are most pliable, and under circumstances of influence such as can never again be reproduced.”³⁶ An article in the *Nation* suggested that divorce rates were increasing in America because of the gap in education between husbands and wives, leaving “woman in a hobble; for, if she be uneducated and wedded, she will promptly be divorced, whereas, if she is educated and wedded, she will not be a joyful mother of children,” because of her stunted reproductive capacity.³⁷ Pitting moral arguments against these “scientific” warnings in “A Conservative Plea for the Higher Education of Women,” the Reverend J. B. Mayor emphasized on “the influence of a mother over sons”:

I say (what will perhaps startle some, but I believe it to be strictly true) that the reason why so many men are utterly without thought, so many are immoral, so many are infidels, is because their mothers were—not infidels, not immoral, but—uneducated. Or, to put the same thing less harshly, I believe, if all mothers were, what some mothers are, as wise as they are good, it would tend more to the regeneration of the world than any other conceivable change.³⁸

Instead of correlating the physical defects of men with intellectual strain in their mothers, Mayor argues that a mother's intellectual fitness carries moral benefits into the next generation. Yet the mechanism of moral evolution or “regeneration,” as opposed to the degeneration that opponents threatened would be a result of higher education for women, is still the same: men are the objects and active carriers of women's influence into the world.³⁹

Moreover, women's influence itself was supposed to be authorized and directed by men. Evolutionary biologist George Romanes, after reminiscing about the ridicule he and his fellow Cantabrigians visited on the first female undergraduates at Girton and Newnham, acknowledges, in 1887, “whether we like it or not, the woman's movement is upon us; and what we have now to do is to guide the flood into what seem likely to prove the most beneficial channels. What are these channels?”⁴⁰ Romanes simultaneously admits a loss of control, “whether we like it or not,” and presumes that “we” (by implication men like Romanes and his schoolfellows) still bear responsibility for conducting the undisciplined “flood” of women's ambitions into fitting “channels.” The education of women could be justified as long as it was complementary to and collaborative with the aims of the men in their lives, not in competition with them.

Morbidity and *New Grub Street*

In the late nineteenth century, literary men and women were increasingly vying for success on the same professional terrain. The number of women with literary careers, especially print journalism, rose exponentially.⁴¹ This battle for territory in the literary field was waged in the popular imagination in the space of the public library. The snooty narrator of Edmund Kersey’s “Romance of the Public Library,” who explicitly bemoans the results of the Education Act,⁴² heaps particular scorn on the women readers who are “hardest of all to deal with”:

...especially those who were forced by necessity or misguided ambition to seek their living by devilling up matter for authors, scholars, writers of leading articles, and others. In consequence of their misfortunes they had to work for others, and by virtue of their sex they thought that the officials ought to work for them. A knotty point or a difficult question meant to them nothing more arduous than ten minutes' talk with an official, by preference the sub-librarian, but to him it meant a great deal more, amounting in some cases to the waste of a whole afternoon.⁴³

The problem with these lady readers, according to Kersey's narrator, is that their labor is neither laborious nor creative; they are not the "authors, scholars, writers of leading articles," nor are they shouldering the weight of research that is delegated to the beleaguered sub-librarian. The narrator mocks a woman "copying and making extracts" from various references for a male historian friend of his for saying she is "employed in what *she* called *research*." The work of selective reading and transcribing is merely the performance of research instead of authentic immersion in it, according to the narrator. Rather than subsuming themselves in their reading, as they were supposed to, such women researchers were thought to use their reading to assert themselves, to the inconvenience of men and their work. Such complaints against women's reading room behavior became so commonplace that the *Saturday Review* published an article cataloguing them, while still concluding that most female patrons "are just as serious readers, and as industrious and quiet grubbers in the past, as any man can be."⁴⁴

Eliza Lynn Linton, one of the first women admitted as a reader to the British Museum Reading Room in the mid-nineteenth century, dramatized this perception of a weighted competition between the sexes by describing the ideal female library patron in her 1885 novel, *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland*:

She was one of the vanguard of the independent women; but she did her life's work without blare or bluster, or help from the outside; and without that weakness of her sex which makes them cry out when they are hustled in the crowd they have voluntarily joined — which makes them think themselves aggrieved because they are not aided by the men to whom they have placed themselves in opposition and rivalry.⁴⁵

According to this description, a woman library-goer who did not draw attention to herself in some way was a rarity. As Ruth Hoberman writes of the Reading Room, its "very centrality and conspicuousness made it also a public stage, an opportunity for women to dramatize their entry into— or rejection of— public life."⁴⁶ Hence even diffident young ladies could not avoid being recognized, as Marian Yule is by Jasper Milvain in *New Grub Street*, as fellow sojourners "under the great dome."⁴⁷ Before even speaking with Marian, Milvain is able to assess her immediately as "[a] good example of the modern literary girl... [with a] very delicate, pure complexion, though morbid" (46).

Marian's morbidity marks her as a part of a new social category, one that manifests itself in deleterious bodily symptoms. G. Stanley Hall, the late Victorian medical authority on adolescence, would certainly agree with Milvain's evaluation of Marian:

Bookishness is probably a bad sign in a girl; it suggests artificiality, pedantry, the lugging of dead knowledge. Mere learning is not the ideal, and prodigies of scholarship are always morbid. The rule should be...not to overburden the soul with the impedimenta of libraries and records of what is afar off in time or zest.⁴⁸

Marian's own association of literature with a kind of cancer or living death, "a morbid excrescence upon human life," and her vision of herself along with the other readers in the British Library Reading Room as "hapless flies caught in a huge web, its nucleus the great circle of the Catalogue," confirms the perception of her type as a doomed specimen (204, 138). She is not merely pitied by others, but identifies herself as the female victim of, rather than an assertive competitor within, the literary field.

The woman as library nuisance was being authoritatively recast as a library casualty. In *New Grub Street*, Milvain is unaffected by the Reading Room environment, whereas Marian feels herself poisoned by the "warm, headachy air" of the "valley of books" (137). She "always" leaves her work at the library "faint with weariness and hunger" (115). Marian's emotional as well as physical discomfort in the Reading Room anticipates the response of Modernist women writers such as Virginia Woolf, who, as Hoberman discusses in juxtaposition with the New Women, recorded their "alienation" from an institution that "threaten[ed] to crush women with the weight of its male-oriented knowledge."⁴⁹ The difference between Marian and Woolf, however, is that Marian's alienating burden does not derive from her feeling excluded as a woman, but rather from her too-easy assimilation into the masculine world as a result of her labor. In an 1894 interview with Linton, the author Mrs. Alec Tweedie boasted that "the struggle of fifty years ago to gain that admission [to the Reading Room] is of the past, and to-day almost more women are to be found at the desks than men. No one now denies their right of admission: they can work in peace unheeded."⁵⁰ Gissing, however, portrays Marian's unremarkable enculturation within the male preserve of the library as less of a triumph of progress than a tragedy of entrapment.

Marian herself is keenly aware that her Reading Room existence has deprived her of her womanhood, as defined in terms of marriage and fertility, and arrested her in a kind of sickly adolescence. Milvain, who has broken an engagement with Marian, concurs when he tells his wife Amy, "My dearest, you are a perfect woman, and poor Marian was only a clever school-girl. Do you know, I never could help imagining that she had ink-stains on her fingers...for I knew how fearfully hard she worked" (550). Marian is thus tainted in her former fiancé's mind by her labor in his own profession, and eulogized in the past tense as a perennial "school-girl" in unflattering contrast to the fully developed Amy, whose only work is to support her husband's professional literary ambitions. Amy's own leisurely reading preferences are for periodical summaries of the social sciences; she was "a typical woman of the new time, the woman who has developed concurrently with journalistic enterprise" (398). In consciously selecting digested reading material "alien to Reardon's sympathies," which are inclined toward ancient classics and the literary novel, Amy identifies herself with a medium directly aligned with the *métier* of her second, striving husband (397). *New Grub Street* concludes with the triumphant song of Amy, while even though we have continually been privy to Marian's thoughts, our last account of her is secondhand, from the man who has discarded her and thus excluded her from the reproductive economy. Marian has not died, but instead "suffered much all the winter from attacks of nervous disorder, and by no effort of will could she produce enough literary work" for her livelihood after her father's demise; ultimately she ceases all creative production and becomes a librarian's assistant, presumably still caught in the "web," perpetually moribund, in the valley of the shadow of books (542). The state of morbidity exists in an imperfect tense, where Marian is left at the end of the novel, not dead, nor really existing, as her life is narrated from a distance, instead of through the free indirect discourse that has voiced Marian's thoughts throughout the text and now abandons her.

Yet Marian is not the victim of a quixotic emotional investment in literature, or *Bovarysme*, like the heroines who preceded her. Instead, she is the victim of an affective detachment from literature, which results from her professionalized relation to it. We glimpse the moment in which Marian's "natural" interest in literature as a girl is capitalized on and converted to productive labor: "From the nursery her talk was of books, and at the age of twelve she was already able to give her father some assistance as an amanuensis" (125). As a woman, Marian is still working for her father, researching and even ghostwriting some of the material he submits for publication. In consequence, she is no longer able to express herself according to gendered expectations through the medium of literature, either in reading or writing. As she tells her father, "I am afraid...I haven't so much sympathy with literary undertakings as you would like me to have" (348). Ironically, it is because of these undertakings that she has lost the literary "sympathy" that defined her childhood. Even though her father wonders "whether it would not be advantageous to let the girl sign these compositions," Marian has no ambition to claim her work for herself—because to her it is emphatically only work, completely depersonalized (111). Both her father and Milvain encourage her to try writing fiction and take on romantic subject matter, but Marian simply cannot infuse her literary work with the emotion that she feels in her attachment to Milvain. Nor can she approach this work with the sort of cheerful but cold-blooded detachment that Milvain possesses. She retains her feminine capacity for sensibility, but it is tragically frustrated instead of fulfilled by literature.

Instead of suffering from the feminine propensity for readerly identification, Marian suffers from its lack. She feels no kinship with the "French Authoresses of the Seventeenth Century" about whom she is writing; the original bluestockings, such as Mademoiselle de Scudéry, Madame de Lambert, and Madame de Sevigné, are remote to Marian because they wrote for creative pleasure, not subsistence:

To write—was not that the joy and the privilege of one who had an urgent message for the world? Her father, she knew well, had no such message; he had abandoned all thought of original production, and only wrote about writing. She herself would throw away her pen with joy but for the need of earning money. And all these people about her, what aim had they save to make new books out of those already existing, that yet newer books might in turn be made out of theirs? This huge library, growing into unwieldiness, threatening to become a trackless desert of print—how intolerably it weighed upon the spirit! (137-38)

Unlike the seventeenth-century *Précieuses*, famous for their multi-volume romances, Marian shrinks from contributing to the proliferation of books that surround her in the circular library. She does not think in terms of content or any quality that might distinguish one from another, but instead sees all of them as materially identical and inexorably self-reproducing through the media of uninspired amanuenses like herself. She is simultaneously a worker on a literary assembly line and its product.

The paradox of Marian is that she perceives herself as part of a class, surrounded by "all these people" pursuing the same end, and yet she feels no emotional solidarity with her fellow laborers. According to John Goode, "the Gissing character has no access to typicality" (135), but Marian's problem is that she is part of a type, and the similarity of others forms no basis for sympathy or connection, but rather represents their inhuman non-particularity. Marian forms a stark contrast to the reported experiences of similarly situated female writers at the *fin de siècle* described by Susan David Bernstein. Karl Marx's daughters Jenny and Laura performed the same function as Marian for their father at the British Reading Room in the 1860s, and his

daughter Eleanor earned money by researching and writing pamphlets for Frederick Furnivall's various literary societies.⁵¹ According to Eleanor, "After all work is the chief thing. To me at least it is a necessity. That is why I love even my dull museum drudgery." For Marx, as well as her friends Clementina Black and Amy Levy, the Reading Room "facilitated productive encounters" of both the professional and social variety. Even in the midst of "drudgery," the Reading Room for these women was hardly the sterile, isolating chamber that Gissing depicts.

Although the beleaguered novelist Edwin Reardon does not visit the Reading Room in *New Grub Street*, he does share Marian's literary malaise to some extent. The pressure of having to make a living for his family from his pen blights Reardon's creativity. Both Marian and Edwin are continually labeled by others as "morbid" because they are trapped in a mechanized mode of literary production that neither can abide. When Reardon discusses his new novel, with which he is dissatisfied, Gissing describes him as "talking like an automaton. It seemed to him that he turned screws and pressed levers for the utterance of his next words" (181). Marian is similarly conscious of her own dehumanization: "She was not a woman, but a mere machine for reading and writing" (136-37). Nevertheless, while Reardon may speak "like" a machine, Marian is entirely metaphorized into one. Indeed, Marian's characterization of herself as a "literary machine" repeats itself rather mechanically throughout the novel.⁵²

The difference between Marian and Reardon is that Reardon's professional woes do not impinge upon his affective relationship with literature. When he and his wife Amy separate, Reardon cannot part with certain beloved books, despite his straitened circumstances:

He stood before his bookshelves and began to pick out the volumes which he would take away with him. Just a few, the indispensable companions of a bookish man who still clings to life—his Homer, his Shakespeare.

The rest must be sold. (255)

Gissing contrasts Reardon's chilly interactions with his spouse with this poignant depiction of books as "companions" and sources of "life." Such literature remains inviolate from economic contingencies, though Reardon's marriage does not. In Gissing's *Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, which Gissing called "much more an aspiration than a memory," the eponymous diarist speaks similarly of his miserable living and working conditions: "Yes, 'literary work' was done at that filthy deal table, on which, by the by, lay my Homer, my Shakespeare, and the few other books I then possessed."⁵³ Ryecroft depicts his hack "literary work" as a profane activity in proximity to Homer and Shakespeare. This recurring allusion in Gissing's writing emphasizes the sacred importance he placed on maintaining an emotional connection with literature, unsullied by the detached exertions of "literary work."

Despite, or more likely because of, their alienation from the market, Reardon and his fellow author Harold Biffen are able to achieve sublimity through literature. As the narrator of *New Grub Street* says of Reardon:

...there are less fortunate beings whom the vehemence of their revolt against fate strengthens to endure in suffering. These latter are rather imaginative than passionate; the stages of their woe impress them as the acts of a drama, which they cannot bring themselves to cut short, so various are the possibilities of its dark motive. (373)

Reardon's characterization in *New Grub Street* echoes Biffen's complaint about Zola, that even in so-called realistic fiction there is always the grandeur of the "drama," the magnification of "misery" that makes it artistic. Reardon's angst is still an "imaginative" and creative response to a "dark motive." Like Wilde's artist, he is able to adopt a kind of objectivity by positioning

himself “outside his subject” and thus making it productive—of “incomparable and artistic effects”—without becoming entirely mechanized himself. Eitan Bar-Yosef has called *New Grub Street* a “suicidal” novel that depicts the impossibility of its own existence in the current literary market, and yet Reardon and the literal suicide Biffen even at the last find solace in identification with literature despite their struggles with writing for the modern public.⁵⁴ Both men die reciting Prospero’s words from *The Tempest*: “We are such stuff as dreams are made on...” (490, 529). Reardon’s and Biffen’s works also survive them, and therefore they are not truly morbid according to both Wilde’s definition and Gissing’s conception of the artist. Reardon and Biffen are notable exceptions to Goode’s observation that “[l]iterature is never fully represented as a mode of social communication” in *New Grub Street*, since the great works they have read form a common language and final bond between them.⁵⁵ Neither do the men have to question their own masculinity, whereas Marian is wretchedly aware of losing her womanly attributes, forced to trade the reproduction of children for the creatively barren “desert of print.”

Marian’s dissociation from literature also therefore forecloses potential homosocial bonds as well as romantic fulfillment. Once she is entombed in the library, she loses touch with her only friend, Jasper’s sister and aspiring writer Dora Milvain. The reader is nonetheless given a small glimpse of hope for literary women in the character of Dora. While her sister Maud abandons literary pursuits as soon as she marries well, Dora continues writing for a publication entitled *The English Girl* even after she becomes the comfortably situated Mrs. Whelpdale. She also retains her femininity: “Mrs. Whelpdale affected no literary slovenliness; she was dressed in light colours, and looked so lovely that even Jasper paused on the threshold with a smile of admiration” (544).

Perhaps because Dora’s subject matter and audience are designated as immature and female, her status as a writer does not taint her womanliness as Marian’s did when writing for her father’s prospective readers; indeed, Dora’s writing for girls is portrayed as a virtually maternal influence. Whelpdale with characteristic enthusiasm claims that she has founded a “new genre” and objects to Milvain’s undermining of Dora’s story, “How can it be called a humble line of work to provide reading, which is at once intellectual and moving and exquisitely pure, for the most important part of the population—the educated and refined young people who are just passing from girlhood to womanhood?” (495). Yet Milvain’s demurrals and Whelpdale’s own admission that “the stationer thinks I purchase [*The English Girl*] for a sister” imply that “the most important part of the population” is still a rather limited niche. Whelpdale is himself a writer, and yet the prospect of any rivalry between the two spouses is never broached. The narrator describes one of Dora’s pieces as a “very pretty tale,” a characterization that could never be applied to the works of tortured artists Reardon and Biffen (or intellectual grinds like Marian), and thus casts Dora and her works as aesthetically insignificant, though more amenable to domestic bliss (544).

An Odd Heroine

Characters like Marian Yule embodied *fin-de-siècle* anxiety about women who approached literature as a profession instead of a passion. Grant Allen echoed Marian’s self-assessment when he denounced higher education for women in the *Fortnightly Review* (and was republished in *Popular Science Monthly*): “In one word, emancipate woman (if woman will let you, which is more than doubtful) but leave her woman still, not a dulled and spiritless epicene automaton.”⁵⁶ Yet two years after *New Grub Street*, Gissing created a more robust vision of female professionalism in *The Odd Women*, the novel that David Grylls calls “the high-water

mark of his sympathy for the female cause.”⁵⁷ Though the oddness of the eponymous women refers to their singleness as well as their singularity, thus continuing the trope of career women compelled to embrace a celibate lifestyle, *The Odd Women* locates morbidity within the older model of female quixotism that absorbs women within romantic fictions. The character Rhoda Nunn, a typist, educator, and aspiring editor of a woman’s paper, blames the moral degradation of a former acolyte on literary identification:

All her spare time was given to novel-reading. If every novelist could be strangled and thrown into the sea we should have some chance of reforming women. The girl's nature was corrupted with sentimentality, like that of all but every woman who is intelligent enough to read what is called the best fiction, but not intelligent enough to understand its vice. Love—love—love; a sickening sameness of vulgarity. What is more vulgar than the ideal of novelists? They won't represent the actual world; it would be too dull for their readers.... This Miss Royston—when she rushed off to perdition, ten to one she had in mind some idiot heroine of a book.⁵⁸

The conventions of the sentimental genre encourage unthinking, emulative identification with artificial characters; the “sickening sameness” of its artificial plots reproduces a “sickening sameness” in the women who mechanically, and often fatally, conform to these misleading examples.

The plot of *The Odd Women* repeatedly corroborates Rhoda's argument. Miss Royston commits suicide. Monica Madden, after marrying an older man for decidedly unsentimental reasons, begins to imagine another “type of man correspondent to her natural sympathies...She found a suggestion of him in books; and in actual life, already, perhaps something more than a suggestion” (226). Monica's preference for cheap yellow-back novels over her husband's recommendations of Ruskin and Scott helps form the romantic delusions that lead to her misguided dalliance with a hero manqué in order to escape her claustrophobic marriage. Monica's sister Virginia finds a retreat from her meager existence in novels and alcohol. The addictions enable each other, allowing for private indulgence: “To sit comfortably at home, the bottle beside her and a novel on her lap, was an avoidance of the worst shame attaching to this vice” (333-34). Her older sister Alice represents Virginia’s detachment from the world into fiction as a sickness commensurate with her dipsomania: “Her life has been so dreadfully unhealthy. She seems to have become weak-minded. All her old interests have gone; she reads nothing but novels, day after day” (340). *The Odd Women* ends with Virginia away at a rehabilitative institution, though with some promise of her being able to open a school with her elder sister Alice, an idea first suggested by Rhoda. Monica is dead, after giving birth to a daughter. Yet fiction per se is not responsible for these women’s falls into moral turpitude, mental stagnation, and physical disintegration, but rather their inability to detach themselves from it critically, much less artistically. Certainly they are not reading anything akin to Gissing’s novels.

Just as *The Odd Women* itself, according to Deirdre David, is “in part, the fictive response to all the vapid mush fed to poorly educated, confused women” against which Rhoda rails, Rhoda acknowledges her own responsibility as a positive, “real” role model to counterbalance both the idiot heroines of fiction and the social stereotype of the odd “feeble, purposeless, hopeless woman; type of a whole class; living only to deteriorate” (322).⁵⁹ Rhoda is conscious about her status as an alternative heroine—as opposed to the typical novelistic heroine—to the young women in her circle: “My work is to help those women who, by sheer

necessity, must live alone, — women whom vulgar opinion ridicules. How can I help them so effectually as by living among them, one of them, and showing that my life is anything but weariness and lamentation? I am fitted for this” (204). Rhoda tacitly encourages young women to copy *her* example as they copy text. When her prospective suitor, Everard Barfoot, asks her condescendingly, “What *is* your work? Copying with a type-machine and teaching others to do the same— isn't that it?” Rhoda replies, “The work by which I earn money, yes. But if it were no more than that—” before he interrupts her (203). Clearly Rhoda imbues her profession with a symbolic value that transcends monetary or practical concerns. While Karen Chase argues that Rhoda never “sobs for meaning” in her “strictly professional” clerical work, she is by no means emotionally detached from what she sees as a means of women's salvation.⁶⁰

Despite the fact that Rhoda's work literally and figuratively involves “copying” or replication, she does not cast herself or her pupils as automatons. Instead, she and her colleague Mary Barfoot view themselves as fervent evangelists for the work of “winning souls, propagating a new religion, purifying the earth!” (115). As Susan Colón has noted, Rhoda and Mary possess an “otherworldly and ascetic vocational motivation” in contrast with the strictly mercenary approach the novel ascribes to most of its male characters.⁶¹ More specifically, Rhoda and Mary are invigorated by the *newness* of their enterprise; instead of representing horrific bodily and aesthetic sterility, female professionalization manifests itself as spiritual rebirth.

While Rhoda is bodily as well as mentally “fitted” for the professional life, her romantic life has a disastrous effect upon her wellbeing and even her identity. Everard's pursuit of her is incited by his desire to test her singularity, symbolized by her detachment: “Had she, or not, a vein of sentiment in her character? Was it impossible to move her as other women are moved?” (142). During their abortive engagement, Rhoda becomes her own cautionary tale, bearing upon her person the demoralizing effects of the “sickening sameness” of love. In a novel where most of the women succumb to illness at one point or other, the normally aggressively healthy Rhoda is physically affected by her relationship with Everard—in which they are both constantly battling for control—with “sunken cheeks” as well as a “state of mind” that “resembled that of the ascetic who has arrived at a morbid delight in self-torture” (311). Once Rhoda definitively rejects Everard, her strength returns, and in the final chapter of the novel her enterprise continues to “flourish like the green bay tree” with the imminent prospect of publishing a newspaper for women (370). She and Miss Barfoot were “never in such health and spirits” (371). Identifying with romantic narratives, not careers, renders women into automatons of a manufactured sentimentality in *The Odd Women*.

Gissing himself claimed that he supported female emancipation as a solution to the problem of companionship for *men*. His famous letter advocating “sexual anarchy” to his friend Eduard Bertz was sent after Bertz read and complimented *The Odd Women*; Gissing explained his rationale: “I am convinced there will be no social peace until women are intellectually trained very much as men are. More than half the misery of life is due to the ignorance and childishness of women.”⁶² Gissing seemingly alludes here to his own personal suffering as a result of marrying two uneducated women, but his novel avoids using the intellectual woman as a marital reward. As Grylls notes, *The Odd Women*'s narrative seems more pessimistic about the odds of success for heterosexual relationships than for the happiness of unmarried women.⁶³ While Gissing was characteristically ambivalent about women's ideal position in society, his openness to the possibility of single women's professional fulfillment is evident in his lifelong friendship with and admiration for civil servant Clara Collet. Although Gissing wrote *The Odd Women* shortly before he met Collet, he had already favorably cited her sociological research on

women's employment ("Obviously a woman of brains") in a letter to his sister.⁶⁴ Gissing's initial assessment of Collet was also at least partly owing to her appreciation of his works, on which she lectured to the Ethical Society. In writing *The Odd Women*, I would argue, Gissing is not merely concerned with women's intellectual status as potential marriage partners, but as a receptive audience, like Collet, for his own literary genre of realism.

The finale of *The Odd Women* certainly does not offer any neat resolution. The reader cannot be sure whether or not Virginia will be rehabilitated, whether she and Alice will actually set up a school and sustain themselves, and whether the nameless baby daughter that takes after Monica will become a "brave woman," as Rhoda commands (370). The woman's newspaper that Rhoda and her colleagues are about to publish is also still nameless. These various lacunae together represent the gap between the fictional women's "ideal" ambitions and the real status of women at the time the novel was written, a future that was yet to be determined. But in a novel of naturalist bleakness, where the odds have certainly been against odd women (of the five Madden sisters in the first chapter, only two are alive in the last), the undeniable health of Rhoda and her cause in the closing pages, in a chapter entitled "A New Beginning," defies morbid associations.

Moreover, Gissing continually conveys Rhoda's capacity for emotion, thereby refuting the equivalence of womanliness with reproduction, and professionalism with alienation. Rhoda's repeated exclamation of pity for Monica's baby, "Poor little child! Dear little child!" (370) at the end of *The Odd Women* is not a neutral response, nor is it the "impersonal" solidarity with which Nina Auerbach characterizes "sisterhood" in the novel.⁶⁵ Her final address to Monica's child demonstrates Rhoda's capacity for sympathy that does not involve romantic or familial love, as well as her vital connection to the next generation. The biological mother has died, but Rhoda remains a fertile source of inspiration for other women, old and newborn.

Yet nineteenth-century critics of *The Odd Women* tended to regard Rhoda as a portrait of an impossible ideal inevitably thwarted. While one contemporary reviewer, bemoaning the fact the book was "neglected" only three years after its publication, hailed Gissing's heroine as an unexpected deviation from "the same cold, theoretical female we have all grown so weary of," others perceived her ostensible thriving as in fact a miserable failure, a Pyrrhic victory.⁶⁶ *The Academy's* reviewer claimed, "one feels that Mr. Gissing has deliberately denied to her the success which she ought to have had."⁶⁷ Because Rhoda ultimately withholds herself from the "success" of a traditional romantic or familial plot, *The Literary World* similarly viewed Rhoda as left "in the end chagrined, disappointed, and with a loss of self-respect."⁶⁸ Even the feminist Clementina Black protested that the "natural end" to Rhoda's storyline "would be a real marriage—that is to say, an equal union." Black believed that Gissing had betrayed Rhoda's character—making her "an ungenerous, a selfish, and especially an undisciplined woman"—in order to avoid giving her a "conventional 'happy ending.'"⁶⁹ In these critics' eyes, Rhoda is a victim, instead of an exemplar with whom women should or even could identify, and thus worthy of neglect.

Gissing anticipates the ambiguous critical response to Rhoda as an unalienated professional woman in Mary Barfoot's speech on "Woman as an invader": "I am glad that I can show girls the way to a career which my opponents call unwomanly.... A womanly occupation means, practically, an occupation that a man disdains" (152). Even though Rhoda is if anything a kind of surrogate Madonna figure in the final tableau of *The Odd Women*, her commitment to her profession renders her, if not positively masculine, certainly "unwomanly," even according to recent criticism of the novel. David and Chase among other critics have claimed that the ending

of *The Odd Women* undermines Rhoda's apparent fulfillment and confidence in her own future as well as that of womankind.⁷⁰ Coral Lansbury further contends that Rhoda is “left as an emotional and social neuter,” a truly nun-like Nunn.⁷¹ Instead of accepting Rhoda's embrace of fruitful detachment, modern readers of *The Odd Women* persist in seeing her professional triumph in late-Victorian terms of emotional as well as physical barrenness.

The Impossible New Woman

The critical reaction to Rhoda and the denouement of *The Odd Women* then and now resembles the reception of New Woman novels in which nineteenth-century women fictionalized their own experiences of authorship. Sarah Grand, the novelist who first coined the term “new woman,” defined her—as a person instead of a character type—in terms of her detached position, “sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy.”⁷² In contrast with the Brontëan model of the woman writer consumed by literature, the New Women novelists as well as journalists were often portrayed by critics as ambitious but uninspired hacks, copyists capable only of a self-reflexive, literal brand of realism as they depicted the careers of female artists like themselves. Although Gissing also fictionalized his own struggles within the literary profession, his work was taken to be part of what Anderson calls the respected “practice of critical detachment through the mode of realism, which aspired to a systematic representation of social life.”⁷³ The literary New Women, on the other hand, were seen as fundamentally uncreative in transcribing their own lives and thereby making copies solely of themselves. In an 1894 article, for example, the mountaineer Hugh E. M. Stutfield criticizes “the lady writer” for “forever examining her mental self in the looking-glass” and “relating [her] own mental experiences...without any attempt at concealment.”⁷⁴ She became the emotionally devoid descendant of the “Silly Lady Novelists” that George Eliot had excoriated in 1856 for being simultaneously prolific and infertile, recirculating already-written narratives instead of creating new material.⁷⁵ Gaye Tuchman and Nina Fortin, as well as many other critics, have argued that the 1880s and '90s accelerated a centuries-old trend whereby the number of professional literary women became inversely proportionate to their prestige; women's writing came to be associated with the mercenary toil of New Grub Street instead of artistic endeavor.⁷⁶

New Woman novelists trying to establish themselves as artists also had to contend with the scientific corroboration provided by evolutionary biologists such as W. K. Brooks to what he acknowledged was a “conservative or old-fashioned view of the subject... what many will call the ‘male’ view of women.”⁷⁷ In two articles published in consecutive issues of *Popular Science Monthly*, Brooks confirmed the modern relevance of William Lecky's assertion in *The History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* that women were mentally incapable of original artistic genius such as Handel's or Shakespeare's, though they might naturally excel “as conversationalists, as actresses, and as novelists.”⁷⁸ Arguing from an evolutionary standpoint, Brooks reaches the same conclusion of essential sexual difference, contrasting the “originating or progressive power of the male mind” and its “ability to pursue original trains of abstract thought, to reach the great generalizations of science, and to give rise to the new creations of poetry and art” with the female mind as an acquisitive but immobile “storehouse filled with the instincts, habits, intuitions, and laws of conduct which have been gained by past experience.”⁷⁹ Brooks's method involved extrapolating the potential of female and male brains from the respective roles of the “conservative” ovum and the male genetic material that is responsible for the “progressive

or variable factor in the process of evolution of the race as well as in the reproduction of the individual.”⁸⁰ In other words, the originality of the female mind is limited by the female body’s maternal disposition. A female novelist could thus achieve worldly success merely by representing her own “storehouse” of knowledge, but her work would not be genius. If it even approached such heights, her status as a woman—especially in its maternal offices—was threatened. As Penny Boumelha has observed, in comparing *fin-de-siècle* representations of the benighted “woman of genius” with the accumulative “woman of Grub Street,” the literary woman tended to find either her artistic integrity or her femininity (and sometimes both) “compromised” by professional success.⁸¹

New Woman novelists such as Charlotte Riddell, George Paston, and Mary Cholmondeley tried to portray realistically the challenges facing women with literary ambitions at this period of time (and which they themselves had experienced) without consigning their female protagonists to Brontëan self-immolation or marketplace corruption. Since Riddell’s *A Struggle for Fame* (1883), Paston’s *A Writer of Books* (1898), and Cholmondeley’s *Red Pottage* (1899) all feature the pursuit of a heroine’s literary career as a major plotline, the trajectories of these fictional female authors’ careers cannot, of course, run entirely smoothly. But each of these heroines achieves a measure of literary success without serious artistic compromise, and none of them succumb to death from the exigencies of their livelihood. While they sometimes face hostile or indifferent reception from the marketplace, all of these characters suffer most, however, from the morbid effects of literary labor on their private lives; these heroines are ultimately survivors, but their families—the customary beneficiaries of women’s influence—are inevitably and irrevocably disrupted by novel’s end.⁸²

In Riddell’s semi-autobiographical *Struggle for Fame*, the author Glenarva Westley’s professional breakthroughs coincide with the deaths of her father and husband. Since this character is alive—and refuses to remarry—at the end of *A Struggle for Fame*, however, Linda Peterson contends that Riddell is consciously painting a new portrait of the woman artist refusing to encumber herself further with domestic ties and thus resisting the fatal end of the *Life of Charlotte Brontë* paradigm.⁸³ Indeed, a contemporary review of *A Struggle for Fame* in the *Spectator* commended the refreshing absence of a conventional romantic plot in Riddell’s novel: “the relief has been great at finding a novel in which the characters do not devote their whole energies to making love, or having it made to them; in which men and women can be heartily in love, and yet go about their daily work like rational beings, and we may add, like real people.”⁸⁴ Yet Peterson acknowledges that “the question whether the life of the woman author must inevitably produce tragic death” is still heavily begged by the novel.⁸⁵ Glenarva responds in an allegorical register to her husband’s demise as a fated tragedy: “Lord! what was this? She knew—she knew! Once again FAME had crossed the threshold hand-in-hand with DEATH!”⁸⁶ At this point, however, and in explicit contrast with the attitude of fellow author Barney Kelly, Glenarva’s initial ambition has already been sublimated into the desire to aid her family: “She valued fame merely for the sake of the only man, besides her father, she had ever cared for.”⁸⁷ While the novel makes clear that Glenarva continues to produce literature to support herself, the childless author is represented as merely biding time until her own death approaches. The very last line of the novel has a rejected suitor picturing her in elegiac terms, “Glen in her trailing black garments, with the sluggish river to her left hand and the darksome pine-woods to the right, with the sun westering behind the spot where she stood calmly waiting, with knowledge, but without fear, for the coming of that night which must preface the dawning of God’s Eternal Day.”⁸⁸ Glenarva is not only already arrayed in widow’s mourning, but surrounded by natural

symbols of waning vitality. Like Marian Yule at the end of *New Grub Street*, she exists passively in a state of suspended morbidity.

Hester Gresley, one of the heroines of Mary Cholmondeley's 1899 bestseller *Red Pottage*, is another writer whose devotion to the literary nunnery exacts a seemingly fatal toll. Cholmondeley, who had hitherto written potboilers, set out to write a serious novel portraying a woman devoted to literature as an artistic endeavor, far removed from Grub Street. Hester professes the social realism of her novels' content, but her own writing process corresponds with that of the romanticized woman of genius. Hester falls ill from intensive labor on her second novel, which she writes in virtual isolation amid uncongenial relatives. When her minister brother burns the only copy of her completed novel out of misguided moral outrage, Hester suffers a kind of fit and lashes out at her favorite young nephew, whom she then feverishly believes she killed. Hester develops a morbid state of mind, according to the Wildean definition, which arises from her creativity being thwarted. Instead of directly harming herself or her family as a result of her professional absorption, she *believes* that she has done so once her work is ruined. Her unsympathetic sister-in-law, perhaps correctly identifying the disease but not its origin, diagnoses Hester's illness as "only hysteria, which girls get when they are disappointed at not marrying, and are not so young as they were"⁸⁹ While Hester deliberately remains single (as Cholmondeley herself was, though not by choice), she still internalizes the perception that a woman who identifies herself exclusively with her writing must destroy either herself or her family.⁹⁰

Perhaps the most lighthearted depiction of a female author in a New Woman novel, George Paston's heroine Cosima Chudleigh attains literary success without much attendant personal angst in *A Writer of Books*. Cosima literally grows up in a library, which her father curates, and becomes a regular worker at the British Museum Reading Room. Paston emphasizes how Cosima's literary environment has shaped her development, in that her "solitary studies and the atmosphere of the library so wrought upon her growing mind that in time books became to her the realities of life, and human beings merely the shadows."⁹¹ Cosima's delayed emotional maturity is treated comically, rather than tragically. Her lesser degree of quixotism does not make her a victim; instead, she benignly instrumentalizes others in service of her art. Her acceptance of a proposal has no romantic premise, but is primarily based on the potential benefits of the union in terms of acquiring necessary worldly wisdom (if not emotional experience) for her authorial vocation:

If, however, she were to resolve never to marry until she fell passionately in love, it seemed likely that she would be doomed to remain a spinster all her life, and so lose an experience that must be valuable to any woman, and practically indispensable to a novelist. Of course, it would be unfair to marry a man merely for the sake of gaining "copy," but there were many other excellent reasons why she should hesitate before refusing Tom's offer.⁹²

While Cosima initially identifies more with heroines like Lucy Snowe, Elizabeth Bennet, and Maggie Tulliver than actual people, she eventually forms close friendships with other literary types, and falls in love with another author—while already trapped in the loveless marriage. The plot then becomes more conventionally lugubrious, as Cosima suffers a miscarriage, learns that her husband has been unfaithful to her, separates from him *and* declines to pursue a relationship with the man whom she does love. Yet Paston refuses to leave her romantically thwarted heroine lachrymose and passive: "Her love was as true and as strong, though her suffering was considerably less, because, instead of saturating her pillow with useless tears, or consuming her

heart in vain regrets, she was already beginning to think seriously about her next book.”⁹³ Cosima’s romantic disappointment enriches her work, and her work is presented as a healthy sublimation of the emotions she is ultimately capable of possessing.

A Writer of Books was Paston’s last novel, though she continued her literary career, mainly as a biographer. Perhaps she was discouraged by reviews such as the *Academy*’s, which claimed that the author herself was too detached from her story, which she was merely using as the most convenient medium to disseminate her political point of view:

...[S]he is not primarily interested in fiction. It happens to be the accepted vehicle for thought, and so she uses it—and uses it very cleverly. But she does not, we think, care for it... What does interest “George Paston” is the question of “woman’s rights”—the inequality of women with men before the law and before social custom. The existing condition of affairs, whether right or wrong, arouses—not her indignation, for she is too serene to be actively indignant, but—a certain calm, mordant bitterness of spirit, a bitterness which is coldly resentful against men, and which despises women while it pities them.⁹⁴

Even though the indefinite, generic title of her novel, like *A Struggle for Fame*, would seem designed to attract an audience of both genders, Paston’s narration is deemed too colored by personal grievance while simultaneously “too cold” in the “contemporary masculine eyes” of the same reviewer; it puts both men and women at a disdainful distance. Likewise, Riddell’s heroine Glenarva “fails to fascinate” or provoke any sympathy for her troubles from the critic James Ashcroft Noble; his review of the novel does not even include her name, while mentioning various other male characters.⁹⁵ Though female literary professionals still experience emotional identification *within* New Woman novels, the genre according to these reviewers seems to resist the *reader’s* identification with the protagonists. Ironically, then, the more personal the female writers’ work, the more impersonal was the response.

The broader implications of these books—their appeals outside the literary realm for other kinds of enfranchisement—are even now viewed as creating an emotional distance between them and their readers. Flint argues that the “relatively downbeat endings” of the New Woman novels prevent “total identification with the central character,” and instead stimulate the reader’s critical apparatus toward understanding the social, political, and economic factors that forestall the protagonists’ fulfillment.⁹⁶ More damningly, Elaine Showalter, echoing Paston’s reviewer above, contends that such “feminist” novels have low canonical status today because they produced “rhetoric,” as opposed to art, and that “all the feminists had but one story to tell, and exhausted themselves in narration.”⁹⁷ Molly Youngkin and Ann Ardis have since argued convincingly for the New Women writers as important (if unacknowledged) precursors to Modernism in their emphasis on subjective consciousness.⁹⁸ But the figure of the professional New Woman within these novels seems to be detached from the affective embrace of her audience inasmuch as she loses or outright rejects marital or familial attachments.

Whether directly represented or received as such, female literary professionals at the *fin de siècle* had become ineluctably associated with morbid sterility. Although the trope of women’s emotional overinvolvement with literature continued to be prominent in the later nineteenth century, the very same cautionary rhetoric of sickness and morbidity once aimed at women’s “natural” overidentification with literature was now leveled against their underidentification. Professional literary women were deemed either incapable of feeling the traditionally feminine identification with literature, or of eliciting that type of identification from readers. *New Grub Street* adheres to this narrative of nullification in the slow withering of

Marian Yule's potential for sexual or artistic productivity along with her literary sympathy amongst the library catalogues. Without allowing her the artistic dignity of death or the valedictory Shakespearean quotation granted to Reardon and Biffen, Gissing conspicuously severs Marian's internal discourse from the reader, thereby silencing her last vestige of self-expression. In *The Odd Women's* Rhoda and her professional circle, Gissing begins to envision the creative possibilities of women's professional detachment, creating an ideal audience of discriminating readers, and perhaps writers, of his brand of realism. Yet as the female authors of New Women novels that portrayed the vagaries of the literary market were charged with the inability to create anything truly new, much less sympathetic, Rhoda and her enterprise became emblematic of the same kind of futility to readers inclined to fit her into the literary pattern of the morbid female professional.

The troubled response to women's possible dissociation from emotional identification with literature, as well as its continuing pervasiveness, indicates the usefulness of the idea of readerly identification in fortifying the boundaries of gender categorization. Not only were *fin-de-siècle* women trespassing into new, traditionally male realms, but also a seemingly male mentality was infiltrating women. As women had been defined by their inherent susceptibility, they were pronounced more vulnerable to external conditioning, even to the extent of becoming—paradoxically and pathologically—insusceptible.

Perhaps the only escape for female literary professionals from accusations of morbid detachment was the embrace of another kind of detachment: a Modernist detachment from gender itself. Instead of using "Anonymous" as a mask for feminine identity, writers such as Woolf would explore the idea of femininity as another kind of mask to lay aside at will, or a subject which they could, as true Wildean artists, stand outside of and thus vitally transform. As Woolf explained with heavy irony in her advocacy of a new kind of androgynous voice for women writers in *A Room of One's Own*, "It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice in any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death."⁹⁹

¹ Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," *Fortnightly Review* 55 (1891): 307. Wilde also used the epigram "No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything" in his Preface to the second edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published in April 1891.

² John Stokes, *In the Nineties* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), 26.

³ Arthur Waugh, "Reticence in Literature," *The Yellow Book* 1 (1894): 210.

⁴ Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), 47.

⁵ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2002), 81.

⁶ Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 56-7.

⁷ S. Weir Mitchell, *Doctor and Patient* (Philadelphia: Lipincott, 1901), 152.

⁸ Edward John Tilt, *Elements of Health, and Principles of Female Hygiene* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1853), 219.

⁹ "Women's Heroines," *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 23 (March 2, 1867): 260.

¹⁰ Charlotte M. Mason, *Home Education: A Course of Lectures to Ladies* (London: Kegan Paul, 1896), 279.

¹¹ Dr. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson likewise contended, “From the purely physiological point of view it is difficult to believe that study, much more serious than that usually pursued by young women, would do a girl's health as much harm as a life directly calculated to over-stimulate the emotional instincts, and to weaken the guiding and controlling forces which these instincts so imperatively need. The stimulus found in novel-reading, in the theatre and ball-room, the excitement which attends a premature entry into society, the competition of vanity and frivolity,—these involve far more real danger to the health of young women than the competition for knowledge, or for scientific or literary honour, ever has done, or is ever likely to do.” Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, “Sex in Mind and Education: A Reply,” *The Fortnightly Review* 21 (1874): 590.

¹² Alexander Walker, *Woman Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity and Divorce* (Hartford: Silus Andrus and Son, 1840), 58-9.

¹³ Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology* (New York: Appleton, 1891), 3:485.

¹⁴ Bedford College for Women was founded in 1849; Girton and Newnham Colleges at Cambridge in 1869 and 1871 respectively; Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville Colleges at Oxford in 1878 and 1879. The University of London opened degrees to women in 1878.

¹⁵ See for example Ely Van de Warker, “The Relations of Women to the Professions and Skilled Labor,” *Popular Science Monthly* 6 (1875): 458; “Collegiate Training of Women,” *Medical Record: A Weekly Journal of Medicine and Surgery* 66 (1904): 17; Robert Sellers, “The Cause of Insanity in Women,” *Texas State Journal of Medicine* 3 (1908): 304.

¹⁶ Moore, William Withers, “The Higher Education of Women,” British Medical Association 54th Annual Meeting Presidential Address, *Gaillard's Medical Journal* 43 (1886): 412.

¹⁷ See for example *The Lancet* 2 (1886): 314-15; *The Chemist and Druggist* 29 (1886): 196; *The Pharmaceutical Journal* 17 (1886): 356; and *Medical Record* 30 (1886): 187-88.

¹⁸ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, “The Use of Higher Education to Women,” *Contemporary Review* 50 (1886): 720; “A Daring Doctor,” *Punch* 91 (1886): 105. For other direct responses to Moore's speech from a range of periodicals, see for example “A Bad Look-Out,” *Saturday Review* 62 (1886): 214-15; Lucy M. Hall, “Higher Education of Women and the Family,” *Popular Science Monthly* 30 (1886): 612-18; “Higher Education of Women,” *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 7.6 (1886): 267-69; “London Letter,” *Science* 8, no. 188 (1886): 228-29; and “The Higher Education of Women,” *The Academy: A Journal of Secondary Education* 1 (1886): 297-99.

¹⁹ Martha Vicinus, “‘One Life to Stand beside Me’: Emotional Conflicts in First-Generation College Women in England,” *Feminist Studies* 8.3 (1982): 607. See also Joan N. Burstyn, “Education and Sex: The Medical Case against Higher Education for Women in England, 1870-1900,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 117.2 (1973): 79-89.

²⁰ Robert T. Edes, “High-Pressure Education; Its Effects,” *Medical and Surgical Reports* 3 (1880): 187.

²¹ G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education* (New York: Appleton, 1905), 2:575.

²² Louise Phillips, "The Higher Education of Woman," *The Current* 9 (1887): 197. *Popular Science* writer Alice B. Tweedy offered similar testimony in 1890: "In the schools which she has attended, the majority of earnest students were in uniformly good health; a minority were delicate before beginning study. The most frequent examples of ill health were found among those who made a pretense of study and eagerly pursued social excitements." Alice B. Tweedy, "Is Education Opposed to Motherhood?" *The Popular Science Monthly* 36 (1890): 759.

²³ Grace Preston, "The Influence of College Life on the Health of Women," *Medical Communications* 16 (1895): 170; 182-83.

²⁴ G. Stanley Hall, 589.

²⁵ Moore, 411.

²⁶ Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Higher Education of Women," *Popular Science* 30 (1886): 178.

²⁷ Linton, 173. Linton herself was an autodidact, which she wryly described as "having a dunce for a schoolmaster," yet she opposed advanced education for women as "mental corruption under the guise of knowledge," promoting "unnatural sentiments concerning marriage and maternity." Mrs. Alec Tweedie, "A Chat with Mrs. Lynn Linton," *Temple Bar* 102 (1894): 356, 360.

²⁸ "Occasional Notes," *Journal of Education* 8 (1886): 443.

²⁹ Spencer coined the term "survival of the fittest" in 1864 in *The Principles of Biology*.

³⁰ Tweedy attempted to debunk the evolutionary basis for Allen's thesis a few months later in the same magazine: "It is strange that powerful heredity and palpable causes of race deterioration should be ignored by physiologists in order to throw the *onus* of this accusation upon mental culture. Insurance tables are made out more scientifically than this forecast of a girl's future. If in education, or in the industrial independence of women, there existed any tendency toward infertility, it would be barely discoverable in our generation, little more so in the next, and possibly in the third generation something might be ascertained from careful statistics following Mr. Galton's method. Nature does not retrograde so rapidly. There is nothing to warrant the assumption that four years of altered food, training, or environment, not interfering with good physical condition, could obliterate an instinct or function. Investigation corroborates this. Even in England, we learn that infertility and higher education are not synonymous terms." Tweedy, 758.

³¹ "Ladies in Libraries," *The Saturday Review* 62 (August 14, 1886): 212. This article appeared in the same issue as the response to Dr. Moore's address on women's higher education cited above.

³² Linton, 177.

³³ *Ibid.*, 169. The novelist Ouida also opposed higher education for women on the grounds that it perverted through systematization what should be an emotional, even religious inclination: "The college education may have excellencies for men in its *frottement*, its preparation for the world, its rough destruction of personal conceit; but for women it can only be hardening and deforming. If study be delightful to a woman, she will find her way to it as the hart to water brooks." Ouida, "The New Woman," *North American Review* 158 (May 1894): 615.

³⁴ Consider by contrast Linton's account of her own professional triumph, a positive notice of her novel that prompts an impulsive departure from the domestic hearth:

“That *Times* review changed the whole aspect of life for me. I seemed to walk on air; I felt stifled with joy when I read it; and unable to remain in the house, I dressed and went for a long and rapid walk. I could not stay still; I had to do something. Even now I remember how different Oxford Street appeared from what it had ever seemed before. I still see the glow of that sunset down the Bayswater Road—a sunset in my mind that has never been surpassed. It was the first taste of success, and oh, how sweet the draught!” Tweedie, 357.

³⁵ Fawcett, 720.

³⁶ George J. Romanes, “Mental Differences between Men and Women,” *Nineteenth Century* 21 (1887): 668.

³⁷ “Ladies in Libraries,” *Saturday Review*, 212.

³⁸ Rev. J. B. Mayor, “A Conservative Plea for the Higher Education of Women,” *Victoria* 20 (1872): 446.

³⁹ Moore, arguing against higher education, speaks of “how much the marvellous material owed to its marvellous manipulation” in the example of Goethe and his mother. Still, he questions rhetorically, “What if Goethe's mother had never married? Would she have written ‘Faust’?” His implied assumption is that she would not. Moore, 409.

⁴⁰ Romanes, 666-67.

⁴¹ Although its practitioners constantly represented the field of journalism as overcrowded, the market for periodicals had expanded in relation to a steady rise in potential readership among the working classes, maintained by Forster's 1870 Education Act, as well as the ever-growing middle-class population. See Barbara Onslow, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 15-16 and Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, 2nd ed. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 171. Technological innovations in printing as well as the repeal of the newspaper stamp tax in 1855 and the paper duty of 1861 enabled cheaper and easier distribution of periodicals to keep pace with the enlargement of the reading public. See Altick, 357. A greater number of educated women were available in turn to supply the demand for copy from an increasingly literate nation

⁴² Journalist Mowbray Morris, among others, observed this phenomenon with some consternation: “I may (as an old man) be permitted to doubt whether the great spread of education our age has seen has not somewhat lowered the standard of what in my time was meant by what you now call culture. But I cannot doubt that there are a far greater number of people existing now who know something about many things, and can turn that knowledge to account, than were in the world when I was young. There are many more people in search of a livelihood, womenfolk especially; and... the pen is an instrument that can be employed for that purpose.” [Mowbray Morris], “The Profession of Letters,” *Macmillan's* 56 (1887): 308.

⁴³ Edmund Kersey, “A Romance of the Public Library,” *Belgravia* 68 (1889), 36.

⁴⁴ “Ladies in Libraries,” 213.

⁴⁵ E[liza] Lynn Linton, *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland* (London: Bentley, 1885), 253.

⁴⁶ Ruth Hoberman, “Women in the British Museum Reading Room during the Late-Nineteenth and Early- Twentieth Centuries: From Quasi- to Counterpublic,” *Feminist Studies* 28.3 (2002): 495.

⁴⁷ George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (London: Penguin, 1985), 50. All further references to *New Grub Street* are to this edition and appear in the text.

⁴⁸ G. Stanley Hall, 640.

⁴⁹ Hoberman, 492.

⁵⁰ Tweedie, 358.

⁵¹ Susan David Bernstein, "Radical Readers at the British Museum: Eleanor Marx, Clementina Black, Amy Levy," *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 3.2 (2007).

⁵² "A few days ago her startled eyes had caught an advertisement in the newspaper, headed 'Literary Machine'; had it then been invented at last, some automaton to supply the place of such poor creatures as herself, to turn out books and articles?...A machine has no business to refuse its duty" (138); "She did her best...to convert herself into the literary machine which it was her hope would some day be invented for construction in a less sensitive material than human tissue" (505).

⁵³ Austin Harrison, "George Gissing," *The Nineteenth Century and After* 60 (1906): 463; Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1903), 25.

⁵⁴ See Eitan Bar-Yosef, "'Let Me Die with the Philistines': Gissing's Suicidal Realism," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 14, no. 3 (2003).

⁵⁵ John Goode, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction* (London: Vision Press, 1978), 118.

⁵⁶ Grant Allen, "Plain Words on the Woman Question," *The Popular Science Monthly* 36 (1889): 456.

⁵⁷ Grylls, *The Paradox of Gissing* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 162.

⁵⁸ Gissing, *The Odd Women* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 67-8. All further references to *The Odd Women* are to this edition and appear in the text.

⁵⁹ Deirdre David, "Ideologies of Patriarchy, Feminism, and Fiction in *The Odd Women*," *Feminist Studies* 10, no. 1 (1984): 132.

⁶⁰ Karen Chase, "The Literal Heroine: A Study of Gissing's *The Odd Women*," *Criticism* 26.3 (1984): 234.

⁶¹ Susan Colón, "Professionalism and Domesticity in George Gissing's *The Odd Women*," *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920* 44, no. 4 (2001): 452.

⁶² George Gissing to Eduard Bertz, 2 June 1893, in Gissing, *The Letters of George Gissing to Eduard Bertz, 1887-1903*, ed. Arthur C. Young (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1961), 171.

⁶³ Grylls, 177.

⁶⁴ George Gissing, *Collected Letters, 1892-1895*, eds. Paul F. Mattheisen, Arthur C. Young, and Pierre Coustillas (Athens: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1994) 5:28.

⁶⁵ Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), 147.

⁶⁶ Annie Nathan Meyer, "Neglected Books: II. Mr. Gissing's 'The Odd Women,'" *The Bookman* 3 (1896) 49.

⁶⁷ George Cotterell, "New Novels," *The Academy* 43 (1893): 542.

⁶⁸ Unsigned review of *The Odd Women*, *The Literary World* 24 (1893): 178.

⁶⁹ Clementina Black, Review of *The Odd Women*, *Illustrated London News* (August 5, 1893): 155, quoted in Arlene Young, ed., *The Odd Women*, by George Gissing (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1998), 338-39.

⁷⁰ See David; Chase.

⁷¹ Coral Lansbury, "Gissing and the Female Surrogate," *Gissing Newsletter* 15, no. 1 (1979): 15.

⁷² Sarah Grand, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," *North American Review* 158 (1894): 271.

⁷³ Amanda Anderson, 45.

⁷⁴ Hugh E. M. Stutfield, "The Psychology of Feminism," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 161 (1897): 105, 112.

⁷⁵ Gallagher, "George Eliot and *Daniel Deronda*: The Prostitute and the Jewish Question," in *Sex, Politics, and Science in the English Novel*, ed. Ruth Bernard Yeazell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), 44.

⁷⁶ Gaye Tuchman, with Nina E. Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), passim. See also Penny Boumelha, "The Woman of Genius and the Woman of Grub Street: Figures of the Female Writer in British *Fin-de-Siècle* Fiction," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 40.2 (1997): 177; Lyn Pykett, *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992); Talia Schaeffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2000); and Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977). More recently, Linda Peterson has complicated this account, noting the distinguished career of Alice Meynell, who skillfully positioned herself as the consummate woman of letters in writing both poetry and critical essays. In comparison with Charlotte Riddell and Mary Cholmondeley, whom Peterson also examines, Meynell seems to be the exception that proves the rule. See Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and the Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009).

⁷⁷ W. K. Brooks, "The Condition of Women from a Zoölogical Point of View," *Popular Science Monthly* 15 (1879): 349.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 354.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 155, 154.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁸¹ Boumelha, 170.

⁸² Another prominent theme in New Women novels, such as Sarah Grand's *Heavenly Twins* and Frances Brooke's *A Superfluous Woman*, is the sexual transmission of disease from husbands to wives, and from wives to children; in these cases, only the wives and children are portrayed as victims suffering from the effects of such diseases: insanity, deformity, and death. Flint notes that unsympathetic reviews of New Woman fiction, such as Stutfield's, deemed these plots emanations of a "morbid" female mentality instead of reflections of a social reality, thus displacing the onus once again onto "the unhealthy condition of womanhood itself." Flint, 298.

⁸³ Peterson, 169.

⁸⁴ Unsigned review of *A Struggle for Fame*, *The Spectator* 56 (1883): 1285.

⁸⁵ Peterson, 167.

⁸⁶ Mrs. J. H. [Charlotte] Riddell, *A Struggle for Fame* (London: Bentley and Son, 1883), 3:346.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 358.

⁸⁹ Mary Cholmondeley, *Red Pottage* (New York: Harper, 1900), 374.

⁹⁰ Hester also explicitly analogizes her lost book to a dead child—with the difference that a child could be spiritually redeemed: “There is the resurrection of the body for the children of the body, but there is no resurrection that I ever heard of for the children of the brain.” *Ibid.*, 334. In her formulation, the book is mortal, not the human being.

⁹¹ George Paston, *A Writer of Books* (New York: Appleton, 1899), 7.

⁹² *Ibid.* 147. Cosima adopts a similarly scientific view towards another admirer earlier in the novel: “She felt a sort of maternal solicitude for this apparently well-meaning, weak-minded young animal, mingled with genuine gratitude for the information that he had given her. The uncomfortable bachelor lodgings, the conventional circle of acquaintance, the ‘fooling’ of the other fellows, the agreeable variety, sentiment or sensuality apart, of unchaperoned feminine society—yes, it was all quite natural and comprehensible. She was glad that she had made his acquaintance, even though it were in unceremonious fashion; she had not spent an altogether unproductive evening” *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 342.

⁹⁴ “Some Younger Reputations: ‘George Paston,’” *The Academy* 55 (1898): 520.

⁹⁵ James Ashcroft Noble, “New Novels,” *The Academy* 24 (1883): 93.

⁹⁶ Flint, 297.

⁹⁷ Showalter, 193, 215.

⁹⁸ Molly Youngkin, *Feminist Realism at the Fin de Siècle: The Influence of the late-Victorian Woman’s Press on the Development of The Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2007), 8; Ann L. Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1990), 3.

⁹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1981), 174.

The New Gender Crisis: Can We Teach Identification?

The discourse of anxiety that surrounded women's reading in the nineteenth century has shifted direction in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Now the consternation is leveled at boys, and their putative lack of interest in reading. A 2011 essay in the *New York Times* by Robert Lipsyte, a young adult author, asked plaintively, "Boys and Reading: Is There Any Hope?"¹ The most recent report of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009 demonstrated a significant gender gap in literacy in most industrialized countries. The lower performance of male students on PISA correlates with their assessed lower levels of literary engagement, a "measure based on frequency of leisure reading, attitude to reading and diversity of reading materials read."² These numbers could be viewed as part of a larger trend of lower male engagement with education in general,³ resulting in higher female enrollment in tertiary education, which has already prompted forecasts of doom for the comparative socioeconomic status of men that have yet to be fulfilled.⁴ But the subject of reading in particular carries feminine associations that have only solidified since the Victorian era and continue to be culturally bolstered.⁵ The 2000 PISA reveals more specific aspects of female advantages in reading literacy, where the performance gap is especially significant for comprehending continuous narrative texts and applying the skills of reflection and evaluation as opposed to recollection: the kinds of texts and skills required in a typical literature class.⁶ These results culminate a trend of more than a decade, which has provoked discussion of a "boys/literacy crisis" and "moral panic."⁷

Despite the fact that this phenomenon has only lately arisen, as well as evidence that socioeconomic class, race, and ethnicity are often more significant factors,⁸ there has been a rush to attribute the gender gap to essential biological differences.⁹ As women's secondary sexual characteristics were believed by Victorians to limit their capacity for sustained study, male brains are now "scientifically" revealed to impede literary facility.¹⁰ The reductive and otherwise flawed nature of these studies has been demonstrated,¹¹ and yet the way in which they reinforce conventional wisdom allows them to persist in the popular imagination and influence educational policy.

The essentialists have recommended changes in the way literature is taught in order to accommodate boys' "different" learning styles.¹² Such strategies include more obviously "goal-oriented" assignments and short excerpts of reading instead of sustained narratives.¹³ As Beth Howell notes, however, such material is not likely to engage students' interest, much less comprehension: "There is little satisfaction in reading a short passage but never a full novel or story... Without a sense of the whole text pupils cannot explore the relationship between structure and meaning. Also, if pupils can see how a character negotiates a path through a whole story, then they can begin to understand the importance of character development; this has an impact on reading comprehension skills."¹⁴ The implemented reforms have also been criticized for their reinforcement of gender stereotypes and pandering to lowered expectations (the very title of the Ontario Ministry of Education's pamphlet, "Me Read! No Way!" demonstrates the negative assumptions upon which such theories are built).¹⁵ Moreover they seem to be ineffective: the Learning Skills Research Centre in the United Kingdom has empirically refuted gendered learning styles,¹⁶ and as Christine Skelton and Becky Skelton have recently argued, the systematic incorporation of these styles and strategies in Australia and the UK over the past fifteen years has "failed to make any impact on the gender gap."¹⁷

Another, more direct means of reaching out to boys is through content assumed to appeal to those adrift within a feminized literary culture. Lipsyte describes a closed feminine circuit by which women authors write young adult novels, which “are bought by female editors, stocked by female librarians and taught by female teachers.” Michael Kart, a past president of the Young Adult Library Services Association, and an anonymous Harper executive both confirmed to Lipsyte that commercial publishing largely targets girls.

But what content would appeal to boys? The *National Strategy 2011-2010* of Ireland circularly suggests “non-literary texts and other texts in which boys tend to show an interest.”¹⁸ Kart provides more detail: “We need more good works of realistic fiction, nonfiction, graphic novels, on- or offline.” Boys’ preference for nonfiction has become oddly axiomatic,¹⁹ even though empirical studies reveal a greater liking for fiction among both boys and girls.²⁰ Teachers are also advised by English Education professors Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm to cater subject matter to boys’ stereotypical interests: adventure, action, sports, and science fiction. Jon Scieszka, the first National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature in the U.S., uses similar categories to organize recommended books, “books that guys have told us they like,” on his Guysread website, which is designed to “help guys become readers.”²¹ The juxtaposition of his categories, such as “Realistic kids in realistic situations” with “At least one explosion,” nevertheless belies the seemingly monolithic nature of the “guy” demographic, no matter how gender-normative their tastes in liking what other guys tend to like (another closed circuit). But reading only what is easily accessible (Guysread includes the brilliant but textually sparse *Far Side* cartoons by Gary Larsen) and culturally coded as heteronormatively masculine, however, would appear to lead to the narrowing of reading interests, instead of their expansion.

The narrowest self-fulfilling prophecy about boys’ “natural” reading preferences is an insistence on male protagonists. Lipsyte endorses the admittedly well-worn idea: “It’s a cliché but mostly true that while teenage girls will read books about boys, teenage boys will rarely read books with predominately female characters.” He laments, “Editors who ask writers of books for boys to include girl characters — for commercial reasons [i.e., to expand their market] — further blunt the edges” of those books’ attraction for boys. There is a lack of distinction in such discussions of the difference between one’s readiness to read a particular book—the “horizon of expectations” in the Jaussian sense for both the book and one’s own response, based on cultural scripts as well as previous experience—and the actual experience of *reading* the book. Our initial “preferences” are not necessarily predictive of our enjoyment, yet English teachers are often advised to tailor reading lists to the supposedly slender dimensions of male literary identification.²²

While there is certainly truth in the truisms about what many boys wish (or don’t wish) to read, such predilections are inevitably influenced and even constructed by cultural standards of masculinity that impugn the feminine associations of literature.²³ Teachers themselves can reinforce these stereotypical associations through diminished expectations for boys.²⁴ Skelton and Francis examined boys who performed well in English, who tended to be popular enough to perform with impunity a kind of “Renaissance Masculinity...which incorporates, rather than rejects, aspects of femininity.”²⁵ Instead of entering the “crisis” mode that further reifies the gendering of readerly identification, this chapter argues that boys as well as girls should be held to the breadth of this Renaissance standard. Lipsyte contends that identification is crucial for cultivating literacy, as boys will be “inspired by the kind of reading that will prick their dormant empathy, involve them with fictional characters and lead them into deeper engagement with their own lives. This is what turns boys into readers.” But insisting that boys and men can only

identify with boys and men and plots coded masculine does not (and has not) inspired greater literary engagement. As Victorian women could choose to identify in non-stereotypically feminine ways, boys and men can also take agency in wayward reading.

The first part of this chapter surveys empirical research to illustrate what is currently known about the cognitive dynamics of identification, as catalyzed by the text and the reader. Considering the implications of this research, particularly regarding gender, I then present the case for using identification as one among many educational tools in the literature classroom. Finally, I discuss some methods for assigning literary identification, along with the potential pitfalls.

How does identification work?

Cognitive explanations of identification correspond with both narratological and reader-response theories of literature. A text can tend to prompt certain similar reactions, but different personalities inarguably can respond to the same work in different ways.²⁶ In a study purporting to find the textual determinants of identification, the authors admit that the similarity of a given reader to the protagonist and his or her “reading strategy” also affect the occurrence and degree of identification.²⁷

Empirical testing of textual features’ influence on identification both confirms and undermines narrative and stylistic theorists’ assertions about the kinds of texts that secure readers’ alignment. Identification usually takes place in response to narrative and dramatic genres, as opposed to non-narrative genres such as expository texts.²⁸ Narratives often require more processing time,²⁹ which in turn has been correlated with enhanced reader empathy.³⁰ The most crucial aspects of narrative for stimulating identification, according to critical focus, are point of view and representation of character. Literary critics have long thought that the most identificatory point of view is internal focalization, whether described in first person or by a third-person narrator (what Dorrit Cohn calls “psychonarration” of a character’s thoughts and feelings).³¹ Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon’s *Psychonarratology* asserts identification’s relation to “transparency,” when “readers believe that they understand the character and his or her feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.”³² Bortolussi and Dixon based these findings on experiments they conducted with first-person narratives, so their conclusions are necessarily limited in their scope. Willie Van Peer and H. Pander Maat found in their own empirical study that first-person narratives do *not* significantly increase identification with the narrator.³³ As Suzanne Keen cautions, “even traditional novels are complex, polyvocal, and various.”³⁴

Nevertheless, free indirect speech has the most evidentiary support for promoting reader identification.³⁵ Indirection in general seems to stimulate identification more than direct description. Bortolussi and Dixon’s test subjects attributed greater transparency to *less* explicit versions of a narrative that offered little information about the narrator’s state of mind. The implicit version, according to Bortolussi and Dixon, “leads readers to generate a variety of implicatures that are not needed in the explicit version, and, as a consequence, readers have a greater opportunity to attribute their own experience to the narrator. The result is that the narrator’s thoughts and behavior are easier to appreciate and understand.”³⁶ Additional experiments confirmed that readers perceived less transparency in more explicit description from a first-person narrator, as well as less transparency in direct third-person description of a character’s thoughts as opposed to free indirect discourse.³⁷ Even kindergarten students performed better on theory-of-mind testing after reading narratives with mental-state vocabulary removed.³⁸ Adults showed no difference in comprehension after reading a narrative with

described mental states versus the same narrative with only actions.³⁹ What I infer from these studies is not that identification is impossible with characters whose mental states are explicitly described, but rather that it *is* possible, and even probable, with characters, such as non-protagonists, who garner no psychonarration. Direct description of characters' thoughts and feelings actually offers less room for readerly identification.

Maria Kotovych and others argue that character transparency supersedes character ethics as a portal to reader identification.⁴⁰ Different studies have demonstrated some support for "disposition theory," where readers identify with characters whose actions they morally approve, and recoil from those who offend their values.⁴¹ But the perceived realism of these characters is also a factor in identification, and an overabundance of good traits can violate suspension of disbelief enough so that "distance eclipses involvement."⁴² Judgments of the morality or realism of characters are so subjective as to depend heavily on the particular values and aesthetics of the reader as much as particular aspects of the text.

A prevalent reader-centric model of identification is based on similarity to the reader's personality and past experiences. Dolf Zillmann and Joanne Cantor theorize that the affective disposition of audience members helps determine their identification with characters,⁴³ and various studies have confirmed that perceived similarity heavily influences identification.⁴⁴ Elly Konijn and Johan Hoorn speculate that "observers feel attracted to or comfortable with the similarity they perceive in FCs [fictional characters], which supports involvement."⁴⁵ Similarity identification is anything but consistent, however. Rebecca Chory-Assad and Vincent Chichirillo found that while individual differences were significantly predictive of identification, the relationship was still "not particularly strong."⁴⁶ Several studies have noted an evolution in the way individuals identify over time, beginning with similarity identification and moving to wishful identification in childhood,⁴⁷ and then changing again from wishful identification to similarity identification in adolescence.⁴⁸ College students in turn are less likely than high school students to relate their perception of characters to their own self-concept.⁴⁹ The objects of identification also change along with the mechanisms; with maturity we are better able to derive personal resonance from abstract themes in a text as well as specific characters and situations.⁵⁰

Another component of similarity identification is "situational empathy," based on consonance of mood between reader and character, or rhyming of a reader's past experience with the plot of a narrative.⁵¹ Since situational empathy is not allied to a perception of shared character traits, it can easily shift with the movement of the plot, nor does it carry the usually gendered associations of a particular character. The fundamental attribution error by which we ascribe other people's behavior (but not our own) to their disposition and not to the contingencies of their particular situation is just as often applied to characters.⁵² Identification with a character, however, tends to enable the same special consideration of circumstances we grant to our own actions.⁵³ Ironically, we are more likely to view real people as influenced by their *characters* than the fictional characters with whom we align ourselves.

Similarity identification is generally thought to be the foundation of gendered identification, or "gender-matching" (i.e., men identifying with male characters, women identifying with female), along with "categorical identification" based on race, nationality, and other group identifications.⁵⁴ Some studies in the past confirmed a connection between gender of protagonist and gender of child reader in terms of measurable interest in stories, though the relationship was not as emphatic for girls and did not affect comprehension.⁵⁵ Cynthia Hoffner focused more narrowly on wishful identification in a 1996 study, which she expanded upon with Martha Buchanan in 2005. In both studies, children and young adults tended to identify with

their own genders for aspirational personality traits.⁵⁶ The 2005 study revealed, however, that characters' motivations, intentions, and perspectives appealed to boys and girls irrespective of gender, likely because of situational empathy.⁵⁷ Moreover, in the more recent study intelligence was an aspirational trait attributed to both male and female characters, whereas in 1996 intelligence prompted identification with only male characters. Since they used pre-existing characters on television for their experiment, Hoffner and Buchanan acknowledge that their results were very much culturally determined by the roles and writing available for male and female characters, which of course have changed and continue to change over time. Wishful identification itself, which denotes admiration, is likely to adhere more closely to socially inculcated ideals than similarity identification.

A greater number of studies suggest that boys identify with male characters, but not with female, and girls identify with both genders—or, this is what they report of themselves.⁵⁸ Since many media psychology experiments rely on subjects describing their own experiences, these accounts of identification are heavily mediated by shifting cultural expectations over the past few decades. As Mary Ellen Bleakley and others observe, many of these studies involve “students’ answers to direct questions where sex-stereotyping and social desirability response styles could confound the results substantially,” especially when the questions regard general preferences instead of immediate reading experiences.⁵⁹ A 1980 experiment that found gender-matching identification to increase for boys and decrease for girls with age, for example, used plot synopses instead of actual narratives. The conditions of the experiment itself made identification unlikely, and therefore the subjects could draw instead from their “increasing awareness of the advantages and limitations traditionally associated with male and female roles in society.”⁶⁰ Within four years, another study came to the opposite conclusion: the preference of adolescent male readers for male protagonists *decreased* with age.⁶¹ As variable as these research findings are, results that contain no significant gender differences⁶² tend to receive less attention.⁶³

Edith Klemenz-Belgardt’s survey of empirical research notes that response patterns between boys and girls might not be experientially different, but that girls appear much more comfortable verbalizing their reading involvement.⁶⁴ This would explain why self-reporting, when exclusively relied upon by psychology studies, tends to replicate Victorian stereotypes of female facility for identification, based on the larger convention that “females have an advantage in empathy and theory of mind in childhood.”⁶⁵ Keith Oatley’s 1996 study, for example, asked its subjects to mark “E” for emotion and “M” for “memory” while reading stories; girls made significantly more of these marks than boys for both male and female protagonists.⁶⁶ Lilian van der Bolt and Saskia Tellegen found that girls were more likely to refer to emotional gratification as a motivation for reading in the first place, though they were also more likely than boys to be receptive to vicariously unpleasant and neutral experiences.⁶⁷ Els Andringa’s 2004 study resulted in women reporting identification twice as many times as men for the same text, and more connections between the text and their own lives.⁶⁸ While Patrick Hogan and Bortolussi, Dixon, and Paul Sopčák argue persuasively that various methodological flaws and presuppositions of gender difference (as in David Bleich’s 1986 study) undermine the empirical evidence for the effects of gender on reading practices, the majority of the scholarship confirms that identification is still commonly considered the special province of women.⁶⁹

Cognitive models of reader-centric identification do not depend so much on the idiosyncratic histories and psychological or cultural profiles of particular readers, but rather on the agency of readers in general, whose identifications construct the narrative experience. Readers create mental representations of characters’ consciousnesses (the “text world theory”),⁷⁰

run “simulations,”⁷¹ become “participants”⁷² and insist on adopting perspectives within a narrative, even if the text does not explicitly describe them.⁷³ Given evidence of these tendencies, it therefore makes sense for identification to intensify with implicit psychonarration, which would require more reader intervention to “fill in the blanks” of the text.⁷⁴ Identification might seem spontaneous, but through active and habitual simulation of the textual world it becomes part of a “reading strategy.”⁷⁵ While different texts formally solicit identification to different extents, and personal and cultural dispositions inevitably influence reading practice, I argue that this strategic aspect of identification is one that can be incorporated into the learning process and thus engage students’ sense of agency in literary interpretation.

Why should we teach identification as a reading strategy?

Although the case could be—and has been—made for identification’s moral effects (and immoral effects) in cultivating empathy and challenging “out-group” stereotypes,⁷⁶ these effects are ultimately managed by the reader, not imparted by the instructor. Moreover, the effect of readerly identification on actual ethical behavior (as opposed to sympathetic emotion) is inconclusive, according to Suzanne Keen’s *Empathy and the Novel*.⁷⁷ However, encouraging identification can definitely further the fundamental objectives of the literature class: learning to read and write about texts with appreciation and insight.

Identification can be instrumental in forming literary engagement, which is a much better predictor of performance on the PISA test than gender. Numerous studies attest to the contribution of identification to audience enjoyment.⁷⁸ Although the Victorian “identification crisis” depicted literary absorption as the refuge of the young and female, i.e., the irrational, van der Bolt and Tellegen found that mature readers were more likely to experience strong narrative involvement.⁷⁹ Jonathan Cohen and others theorize identification as part of a complex dynamic of “pleasure to be found in negotiation” between absorption and distance.⁸⁰

While identification appeals to students as an accessible approach to literature, it is also instructive. Reader-response theorist Roman Ingarden claimed that empathy with a character aided reader understanding, and cognitive science in recent years has corroborated his hypothesis.⁸¹ David Miall examines affective identification in particular as an activation of self-understanding that facilitates understanding of narratives.⁸² Raymond Mar and Oatley arrive at a similar conclusion, citing a study in which identification with a main character coincided with “increased insight.”⁸³ Several studies construe this kind of readerly empathy as a balance or interplay of affective and cognitive perceptions, such that identification forms an integral part of character comprehension.⁸⁴ An experiment that instructed subjects either to identify with characters or to assume the role of a concerned witness found that identification prompted fresh emotions that reflected the mood of the text, whereas the witnessing standpoint tended to provoke even stronger emotions from the readers’ personal memories.⁸⁵ The seemingly more distanced position of spectatorial sympathy was actually more egocentric and distracting than character identification, which helped readers immerse themselves in the text.

The question of precisely how identification might enable comprehension has also begun to be examined. Deictic shift theory posits that “audience members switch to the time and location of the narrative, and to the subjective world of the characters” in order to understand the text.⁸⁶ Multiple studies have discovered that emotional responses to narratives, including identification, tend to slow down the reading pace and promote more careful processing, as well as better recollection.⁸⁷ Maccoby and Wilson hypothesized in 1957 that identification with a character especially engages an audience’s attention, both to the character itself and the stimuli

that affect that character.⁸⁸ Their theory was borne out by studies that explicitly asked subjects to identify with a particular character, which resulted in greater attentiveness to the causal relations between goals and outcomes for that character, as well as the consistency of his or her behavior.⁸⁹ Media theorist Jèmeljan Hakemulder, commenting on these studies, concluded that “placing themselves in the position of the characters motivated readers to pay more attention to the consequences of being in that position, making them actors in the story rather than observers.”⁹⁰ In this way, identification requires the reader to slow down and focus on particular details.

The powerful effects of identification on reader comprehension also encompass hazards of which the literature instructor is well aware. The possibility of a reader assuming and adhering to the myopic perspective of a single character is quite real, and can distort or foreclose more comprehensive interpretations of a text. A reader’s adoption of a particular point of view can lead to inaccurate recollections of characters outside of their focus.⁹¹ I argue that the way to counter these potential problems of identification is to make identification itself an assignment, an intentional reading strategy to be consciously and diversely deployed. In so doing, students will become aware of the effects certain perspectives have on their interpretations, and can assess their observations from a broader vantage point.

Before discussing methods of teaching identification, however, I must establish that deliberate identification can be taught. This idea runs counter to the dominant definition of identification as an involuntary and spontaneous response, as described in the Introduction. Philosopher Susan Feagin, for example, claims that an “empathetic art emotion” cannot be the result of “too much mental prodding.”⁹² Yet the species of identification that should be sought in the classroom is not necessarily affective. Mar and Oatley contend that identification is “partly innate and partly learned,” engaging immediate emotion but also relying on powers of abstract cognition.⁹³ We already receive an implicit education in identification, which explains its ability to grow and diversify with maturity.⁹⁴ Cupchik explains further that “spontaneous” identification arises from perceived similarity, but that “instructed” identification is also effective in prompting readers to internalize a certain character’s perspective even without an obvious personal connection.⁹⁵ Multiple cognitive psychology studies rely upon this premise, since giving subjects directed choices instead of open-ended responses allows for more specific findings.⁹⁶ Several experiments using instructed identification resulted in readers being able to focus entirely on one character’s viewpoint and temporarily disregard information that the character could not know.⁹⁷ Zillmann speculated that theater would not easily allow for voluntary identification, or role-taking, because “the continual flow of events impairs deliberate response preparations and makes their explicit execution unlikely,” although a viewer who persists in perspective-taking might eventually be able to “apply such considerations effortlessly and habitually.”⁹⁸ Still, the relatively protracted, active, and easily repeated process of reading a text, as opposed to spectating, lends itself to the deliberate adoption of successive perspectives.

How should we teach identification?

The kind of identification that I am proposing we teach does not so much evade potential critical and ethical problems as confront them directly. The main critical problem comprises the supposed reductionism of identification, by which the text is either warped to fit the narrow confines of the average college student’s experience or rejected out of hand for failing to conform to that experience. Mariolina Salvatori bemoans the “often spurious” empathy of identification, which diminishes the “indeterminacy and the dynamism of the literary work.”⁹⁹

Regenia Gagnier likewise describes identification as a kind of intellectual limitation in her Victorian literature students, who “want to ‘identify’ with characters, and the only characters they can identify with are those with subjectivities (introspective, self-conscious, self-interested subjectivities) like their own,” instead of those that challenge the “status quo” of their self-conceptions.¹⁰⁰ Meanwhile, “[a]vant-garde fiction or argumentative texts...are met with resistance,” according to Faye Halpern.¹⁰¹ It seems to me that both easy identification with and “resistance” to texts can be interrogated productively by students. Taking advantage of their “self-conscious” modern subjectivities, they can direct that consciousness towards their own reading response as an object of analysis. Subjecting one’s own reactions to this kind of scrutiny also de-naturalizes and thereby demystifies response to the extent that one can start to determine its causes (both textual and readerly).

Most of the ethical dilemmas posed by identification involve literature that either narrates or describes historical events. Susan David Bernstein, for example, relates the problem of “promiscuous identification” with texts such as Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl* to relaxed “vigilance” over the distinctions between knowledge derived from the text and actual experience.¹⁰² As described in the Introduction, such identifications seem appropriative, colonizing the traumatic lives of others for sympathetic gratification. Laura Green aptly notes that Bernstein’s use of the term “promiscuous” hearkens back to the quixotic narrative of women seduced by books, though in this case the testifying author is the victim of exploitation.¹⁰³ Megan Boler somewhat differently characterizes identification as “passive,” whereas her preferred “testimonial reading” (adapted from Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub) takes action in withdrawing from identification toward self-reflection.¹⁰⁴ What such moral condemnations of identification often ignore is the necessary transience of the reading experience:¹⁰⁵ literary identification (as opposed to the group identifications of identity politics) can only temporarily and imaginarily lay claim to any experience. We may inhabit texts as readers, but we cannot live in them forever, much less privately own them. The rational reader will always return to self-consciousness.

Still, Bernstein’s advocacy of a “dissonant identification” that recognizes the incommensurability of reader and narrative is helpful for thinking generally about a type of engaged reading that does not need to rely on personal “relevance.”¹⁰⁶ I would also embrace Boler’s recommendation of an “active reading practice” to be regarded as a “task.”¹⁰⁷ Divorcing identification from its association with spontaneous sympathy and casting it as a cognitive and controllable process removes the problematic element of self-congratulation that might accompany empathetic response to a text, while still leaving room for personal and emotional resonance.

I propose a two-pronged approach to teaching identification. The first method, in some ways following the approach of Bernstein and Boler, is to interrogate “natural,” spontaneous identifications and in general promote students’ awareness of them. In 1945, Edgar Bley recommended that teachers discuss and promote consciousness of identification early on in the educational process, non-judgmentally asking children how and why they identify and thereby establishing connections with literature and forming habits of analysis. As a result, Bley argues, students might not learn to like reading, but they will at the very least be able to do so “with their eyes open.”¹⁰⁸ Some texts actively solicit such reflectiveness, such as Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which addresses a white audience, “O reader, can you imagine my joy? No, you cannot, unless you have been a slave mother.” As Glen McClish and Jacqueline Bacon observe, Jacobs emphasizes the “tension between identification and difference,” while

asking for recognition of both viewpoints from her reader.¹⁰⁹ With most other texts, lacking such explicit cues, students would be responsible for initiating a similar questioning process.

Mark Bracher, who recommends techniques derived from cognitive psychology for teaching social justice, argues that one can activate “metacognition of one’s information processing by keeping a journal of the thoughts, emotions, and action tendencies that one experiences when encountering both real and fictional subalterns.”¹¹⁰ I suggest that students should use their reading notes as a kind of metacognitive journal, a more precise version of the Oatley study in which “M”s stand for memories, and “E”s for fresh emotions. In particular, students should record when they experience disruptive emotions and thoughts, first of all because these striking moments are often places of difficulty that provoke questions—questions that they might try to answer in an argumentative essay. Second, because the moments that stand out call attention by contrast to the general emotional tenor of their reading experience. They are natural pauses to ask oneself, “What have I been feeling so far while reading, and why does this part cause a different reaction? Have I been identifying with a narrator or character, but am now repelled? Or have I felt distanced and am now involved?”

My first assignment in reading and composition courses is usually for students to choose one such moment in the text and write about their response, trying to puzzle out the triggers in the text for their confusion, surprise, comfort, discomfort, and curiosity. Mar and Oatley, in describing how fiction is often more persuasive than outright polemics, claim that “the simulation demanded by stories leaves few resources for counterarguing.”¹¹¹ Identification thrives on the implicit qualities of narrative, but students need to practice making their own thinking about the text explicitly clear. In order to do so, I believe they should acknowledge and analyze the influence of identification upon their reading experience instead of suppressing it.

The second element of teaching identification is requiring, and then encouraging, students to *choose* their identifications, especially with non-narrated perspectives. Instructing students in deliberate identification can be as simple as giving directions to read a certain passage from an alternative point of view. According to Hakemulder, role-taking instruction engages a reader’s cognition more effectively than taking notes on narrative structure.¹¹² Psychological research also suggests that engaging in “expressive reading” of both narration and dialogue enables immersion within certain points of view.¹¹³ Another technique for catalyzing identification within the classroom is for students to *act* out the roles they are adopting (and then to switch roles to re-enact the same scene). Acting, along with fiction-reading, has been correlated with a higher aptitude for theory of mind,¹¹⁴ and provides another means for students to inhabit the text. This is a common exercise in literature classes on drama, but it can often work just as well for other genres like novels or even a dramatic poem like “My Last Duchess,”¹¹⁵ if only to give students a kinesthetic or audiovisual sense of the story.

Outside of the classroom, the best way for students to demonstrate how they enact identification is with writing. This is hardly a revolutionary practice; in fact it derives from the classical device of *prosopopeia*, in which writers assume the personae of famous fictional and non-fictional figures, as in Ovid’s *Heroides*. Dwight Culler explains that *prosopopeia* was “considered of great importance in the education of an orator, but it also came to be considered valuable in the general literary education of youths,” because it “encouraged the student to realize more vividly the situation in his literary and historical texts.”¹¹⁶ In most of my reading and composition courses, I require at least one written account of a moment or event in the assigned text from the perspective of a character who is not the narrator. If identification is emphasized as a strategy that students can direct themselves, instead of something they are

subject to, they are more likely to become involved readers.¹¹⁷ They still might not be able to answer Hamlet's question, "What is Hecuba to [them]?" But by entering a character's consciousness through impersonating them in writing, they are taking an active, creative role in interpreting the text.

Part of teaching students that they can control identification is emphasizing that they can, and should, *shift* the object of their identification at will. Elise Earthman found that one of the major differences between graduate students in literature and freshmen was that while "graduate students are willing and even pleased to work with differing perspectives in a text, freshmen are generally unable or unwilling to do so," choosing one strong identification and sticking to it.¹¹⁸ The studies of Black, Turner, and Bower, and Rall and Harris cited above demonstrate the importance of not becoming entrenched in one particular perspective lest crucial pieces of information be ignored. Along with being encouraged to identify with characters, students should also be exhorted to roam in their identifications, consciously taking up the "wandering viewpoint" described by Wolfgang Iser as necessary to understanding a text fully.¹¹⁹ Just as some narratives explicitly ask for readers' identification, some texts actively encourage such readerly wandering, such as the sensation novels discussed in Chapter 2. When there are no formal cues, however, wayward identification gives us license to read between the lines.

What happens, for example, when we reset our identification from heroine Emma Woodhouse to Jane Fairfax? Wendy Moffat, in an essay on the pedagogical and political aspects of identifying with Emma, contends that Austen bars our access to Jane's mind "in order to plumb the reader's affection for malicious glamour, to play upon and test the reader's delight in the fantasy of freedom."¹²⁰ By choosing to identify with Jane, however, the reader can test his or her own freedom within Austen's text, to re-read, re-interpret and question the author's own choice of Emma as protagonist, even before the end of the novel prompts a reassessment of Jane, along with various other characters, by both Emma and the reader. Austen's novel thematically depicts the process by which the heroine is forced to confront readerly flaws of misinterpretation, misguided affiliation, and lack of imaginative sympathy. If we identify wholly with Emma, we are, like her, rebuked by Mr. Knightley, and reminded that we have not been reading as well as we should.

Other texts are less, or not at all, explicit in promoting alternative or alternating identifications, which makes deliberately wayward reading all the more productive and potentially revelatory. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for example, derives from a re-reading as well as re-imagining of moments in *Jane Eyre* from Bertha Antoinetta Mason's point of view, to which Brontë gives us no direct access (Bertha's only words are heard indirectly: "she said she'd drain my heart").¹²¹ The Reeds, Helen Burns, Brocklehurst, Mrs. Fairfax, St. John Rivers, and even Adele could also offer different and potentially fascinating vantage points on the events and people depicted by Jane's narrative.

Along with secondary or marginal characters, villains also provide illuminating contrast to protagonists for identification. Charismatic narrator villains like *The Woman in White*'s Count Fosco or *Lolita*'s Humbert Humbert actively solicit the reader's sympathy and try to enlist him or her in "imaginative perpetration," which Claudia Eppert claims "challenge[s] complacency, and taken-for-granted frames of engagement" such as wishful identification with the hero.¹²² Even more challenging to our aesthetics if not our ethics is identification with non-narrating villains, unpleasant characters, like *Passing*'s violently racist John Bellew. The last time I taught Nella Larsen's *Passing*, only one student of mine opted to write an assignment from Bellew's perspective, and she told the class that it was an uncomfortable and disturbing experience.

Nevertheless, identifying with such characters detaches identification from its association with sympathy, allowing the reader to assume a certain perspective without declaring an emotional or personal affinity. What the student (and I) found interesting about her attempt to articulate Bellew's mentality is that he is one of the few characters in *Passing* who is transparent; we can assume that the words he speaks correspond with his thoughts. Though his beliefs are repulsive from the protagonist's standpoint, as well as the student's, writing from his point of view highlighted his apparent authenticity and honesty as the fruits of privilege.

Even the protagonist can offer a new perspective if a story has a third-person narrator. *Passing*, for instance, is written entirely in a limited third-person voice that is confined to the thoughts and actions of main character Irene Redfield, a black woman who can "pass" for white. Translating the free indirect discourse of *Passing* into the direct narration of Irene is usually a revelatory experience for students, who discover that Irene's desires are themselves "passing" under an ostensibly objective narrative voice.

For male readers, identification has been found to change perceptions of the aptness of traditional gender roles, even with a character of their own sex who engages in nontraditional types of behavior.¹²³ The gender stereotype that I most want to challenge through teaching identification is the presumed narrowness of masculine readerly engagement. A male student once asked me after I proctored the final exam of a survey course, "Why should I care about Jane Austen?" It was the wrong time and place to defend Austen's place in the canon or on the curriculum, which is what I believe he was requesting. Why should he value her writing? At the same time, I think he was also assuming that books like *Pride and Prejudice* require an affective investment of caring, the ostensibly feminine mode of identification. To that I might now answer, "You don't have to care," because *caring* is personal, subjective, and difficult if not impossible to force. I am nothing if not a literature enthusiast, but I do not think the expectation of caring—and its seeming contingency on similarity identification—is helpful for students of either gender. Instead, identification should be emphasized as a tool that all students can use, not an automatic or else forever-elusive phenomenon.

Although not obviously wayward, these methods for using identification engage students in the consciously active reading to which women were, and boys are, thought dispositionally averse. Students can talk back to identification, resist and rebel against it for political or subjective reasons, but they can also see it as another possibility for liberatory exploration. For example, Moffat speaks of herself and other feminist readers who "suspend our difficulties with a text's assumptions in order to imagine ourselves in a world where we know ourselves to be uninvited."¹²⁴ This would certainly be true of the wayward Victorian women who identified with male characters and positions, or imagined elective choice in shifting allegiance from character to character, or declared their ability to identify without sentiment.

¹ Robert Lipsyte, "Boys and Reading: Is There Any Hope?" *The New York Times*, August 19, 2011, sec. Books / Sunday Book Review.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/21/books/review/boys-and-reading-is-there-any-hope.html>.

² Rachel Perkins, *Reading Literacy in PISA 2009: A Guide for teachers* (Dublin: Educational Research Centre, 2011), 12.

³ See for example, Ireland and Joint Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills, *Staying in Education: A New Way Forward: School and Out-of-School Factors Protecting Against Early School Leaving* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 2010).

⁴ See Hanna Rosin, *The End of Men: And the Rise of Women* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012); Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); and Richard Whitmire, *Why Boys Fail: Saving Our Sons from an Educational System That's Leaving Them Behind* (New York: American Management Association, 2010).

⁵ Wayne Martino, Michael Kehler, and Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower, *The Problem with Boys' Education: Beyond the Backlash* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm. "Boys and Literacy: Complexity and Multiplicity," in *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research*, ed. Leila Christenbury, Randy Bomer, and Peter Smagorinsky (New York: Guilford Press, 2009), 360-71.

⁶ I. Kirsch, J. de Jong, D. Lafontaine, J. McQueen, J. Mendelovits, and C. Monseur *Reading for Change: Performance and Engagement across Countries: Results from PISA 2000*. (Paris: OECD, 2002); OECD, *Knowledge and skills for life: First results from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2000)*. (Paris: OECD, 2001).

⁷ Leonie Rowan, Michele Knobel, Chris Bigum, and Colin Lankshear, *Boys, Literacies, and Schooling: The Dangerous Territories of Gender-based Literacy Reform* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002), 7, 11; Christine Skelton and Becky Francis, "Successful Boys and Literacy: Are 'Literate Boys' Challenging or Repackaging Hegemonic Masculinity?" *Curriculum Inquiry* 41, no. 4 (2011): 456–479.

⁸ Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), *Deprivation and Education: The Evidence on Pupils in England, Foundation Stage to Key Stage 4*. (London: DCSF, 2009); Department for Education and Skills (DfES), *Gender and Education: The Evidence on Pupils in England* (London: DfES, 2007); Cherry Collins, Jane Kenway, and Julie McLeod, "Gender Debates We Still Have to Have," *Australian Educational Researcher* 27, no. 3 (2000): 37–48; OECD, *Learning for Tomorrow's World: First Results from PISA 2003* (OECD Publishing, 2004), 162.

⁹ See Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens, "With Boys and Girls in Mind," *Educational Leadership* 62, no. 3 (November 2004): 21–26; Leonard Sax, *Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men* (New York: Basic Books, 2009); Peg Tyre, *The Trouble with Boys: A Surprising Report Card on Our Sons, Their Problems at School, and What Parents and Educators Must Do* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008); and Whitmire.

¹⁰ Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference: The Truth About the Male and Female Brain* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003); John G. Geake, *The Brain at School: Educational Neuroscience in the Classroom* (Maidenhead: McGraw Hill, 2009).

¹¹ Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, *The Learning Brain: Lessons for Education* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005); Cordelia Fine, *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference* (New York: Norton & Company, 2011); and Rebecca M. Jordan-Young, *Brain Storm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹² See Canadian Council on Learning, *Why Boys Don't Like to Read: Gender Differences in Reading Achievement* (2009), accessed May 16, 2013, <http://www.ccl->

cca.ca/pdfs/LessonsInLearning/02_18_09-E.pdf; Gurian, *The Minds of Boys: Saving Our Sons from Falling Behind in School and Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005); Sax, *Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know About the Emerging Science of Sex Differences* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006); Michael W. Smith, “Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys”: *Literacy in the Lives of Young Men* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002).

¹³ See Ofsted, *Yes He Can—Schools Where Boys Write Well* (London: Ofsted, 2003); Ontario Ministry of Education, *Me read? No way!* (Toronto: Queens Printer for Ontario, 2004); QCA, *Can Do Better: Raising Boys’ Achievement in English* (London: QCA, 1998); and Smith and Wilhelm.

¹⁴ Beth Howell, “Literacy, Subjectivity and the Gender Divide: ‘the Freedom of Writing Implies the Freedom of the Citizen’ (Sartre, 1948),” *Gender and Education* 20, no. 5 (2008): 511–12.

¹⁵ Bronwyn Davies and Sue Saltmarsh, “Gender Economies: Literacy and the Gendered Production of Neo-liberal Subjectivities,” *Gender and Education* 19, no. 1 (2007): 1–20; Bob Lingard, Wayne Martino, and Martin Mills, *Boys and Schooling* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Martino and Michael Kehler, “Gender-Based Literacy Reform: A Question of Challenging or Recuperating Gender Binaries,” *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de L’éducation* 30, no. 2 (January 2007): 406–431; Martino and M. Pallotta-Chiarolli, eds., *So What’s a Boy?* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003); and Rowan, et al.

¹⁶ Frank Coffield, David Moseley, Elaine Hall, and Kathryn Ecclestone, *Should We Be Using Learning Styles? What Research Has to Say to Practice* (London: Learning and Skills Research Centre, 2004).

¹⁷ See Skelton and Francis.

¹⁸ DES, *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (Dublin: DES, 2011), 51.

¹⁹ See Lipsyte; Colin Noble and Wendy Bradford, *Getting It Right for Boys--and Girls* (London: Routledge, 2000); QCA, 1998; Smith and Wilhelm.

²⁰ Christine Hall and Martin Coles, “Boys, Books and Breaking Boundaries: Developing Literacy in and out of School,” in *What About the Boys?*, ed. Wayne Martino and Bob Meyenn (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001); and Gemma Moss, *Literacy and Gender: Researching Texts, Contexts, and Readers* (London: New York: Routledge, 2007).

²¹ Jon Scieszka, <http://guysread.com/>, accessed May 16, 2013.

²² William G. Brozo, *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader: Engaging Teen and Preteen Boys in Active Literacy* (Newark: International Reading Association, 2002).

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¹¹³ Bourg, et al., 121.

¹¹⁴ Goldstein and Winner, 20.

¹¹⁵ The Duke might be the only speaker, but the Duchess, Frà Pandolf, the Count’s agent, and even “some officious fool” all have roles to play; the cast might even be expanded to include the Count, his daughter, Claus of Innsbruck, and the white mule.

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¹²² Claudia Eppert, “Entertaining History: (Un)heroic Identifications, Apt Pupils, and an Ethical Imagination,” *New German Critique* no. 86 (2002): 93. Of course, *The Woman in White*, the archetype of the sensation novel, already provides the reader with multiple perspectives to counter Fosco’s, so that we are at once complicit with him as well as allied with those victims Marian Halcombe and Walter Hartright, whose narratives dominate (and in Walter’s case, begin and end) the novel.

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